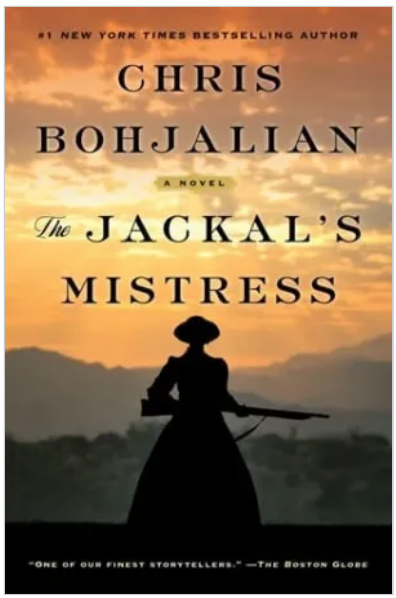

The Jackal’s Mistress

Author: *Chris Bohjalian*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: In this Civil War love story, inspired by a real-life friendship across enemy lines, the wife of a missing Confederate soldier discovers a wounded Yankee officer and must decide what she’s willing to risk for the life of a stranger, from the New York Times bestselling author of such acclaimed historical fiction as Hour of the Witch and The Sandcastle Girls.

Virginia, 1864—Libby Steadman’s husband has been away for so long that she can barely conjure his voice in her dreams. While she longs for him in the night, fearing him dead in a Union prison camp, her days are spent running a gristmill with her teenage niece, a hired hand, and his wife, all the grain they can produce requisitioned by the Confederate Army. It’s an uneasy life in the Shenandoah Valley, the territory frequently changing hands, control swinging back and forth like a pendulum between North and South, and Libby awakens every morning expecting to see her land a battlefield.

And then she finds a gravely injured Union officer left for dead in a neighbor’s house, the bones of his hand and leg shattered. Captain Jonathan Weybridge of the Vermont Brigade is her enemy—but he’s also a human being, and Libby must make a terrible decision: Does she leave him to die alone? Or does she risk treason and try to nurse him back to health? And if she succeeds, does she try to secretly bring him across Union lines, where she might negotiate a trade for news of her own husband?

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She took the carving knife from the pumpkin pine table and pointed it at the stranger, the handle hard in her hand. He was not young: she appraised him to be just the far side of forty, at least a decade and a half her senior. He had deep bags beneath eyes the color of cornflowers and crow's feet around them so dark they looked dug into the skin or drawn with a pencil. Though he was wearing Confederate uniform trousers with suspender buttons inside the waist and a forage cap awash in high-summer dust, she could tell he wasn't part of the Army of the Valley. At least not anymore. He was alone, and when he exhaled, he perfumed the kitchen with the scent of whiskey—which in itself didn't suggest he wasn't a part of the regular army, but it was barely nine in the morning, which did. He had neither pack nor kit. He hadn't a rifle. From the window near the table, she had seen him limping along the path that led to the gristmill, and now here he was. Inside her house. He hadn't knocked. Just climbed the front steps, direly in need of a fresh coat of paint, like so much else around here, and pushed open the front door into the main room and kitchen.

He held up his pistol. "Lady, I don't mean you trouble, and I will only shoot you if you come at me with that knife. I am in no hurry to shoot a pretty girl."

"My man will be back any minute," she said, hating the quiver she heard in her voice.

"No. He won't."

She froze, their eyes locked. Had he killed Joseph? It was possible. Joseph was sixty, at least. He was strong and capable, the reason she could still manage the gristmill and feed herself and her niece and Joseph and his wife. But she couldn't imagine how

Joseph could defend himself against a white man with a gun.

“Are you with John Mosby?” she asked. She believed he probably was, but now had deserted even Mosby’s partisans, or been exiled by them. A brigand or straggler. Or—the term masking the utter reprehensibility of such dereliction and betrayal—a blackberry picker.

“I am.”

“Why aren’t you with them now?”

“Because I’m here,” he said, which wasn’t an answer. Moreover, being with Mosby during daylight was never likely. The guerrillas melted into Northern Virginia during the day, blending in with the community. The Yankees couldn’t defeat Mosby’s Rangers because they couldn’t find them. And you couldn’t beat an enemy you couldn’t see. His eyes moved slowly around the room, pausing at the slab of cooked ham on the table. The meat was a gift from neighbors, the Crawfords, who had killed their last hog before leaving Berryville and heading further south. She hadn’t had ham in months. She hadn’t had meat in months.

“If you go, you can take the ham,” she offered.

“If I go? Now why would I want to go, miss? I think it might be nicer to stay right here, where I won’t get myself kilt. Here, I can avail myself of your company.” Then he smiled, a lopsided grin, and he was upon her, dodging the knife she thrust at him, the blade getting caught in the billowing cotton of his shirt, and he was hurling her to the floor, the back of her head hitting the boards with a thud that stunned her. Left her breathless and dizzy. He tossed the knife toward the unlit lantern that sat by the stove. Then he pinned her neck to the floor with one hand while reaching up and under her dress with the other, his fingers clawing their way through her petticoat and drawers. She tried to roll away, but he was heavy and strong, and it was as if her muscles had

palsied. She wasn't sure where his pistol was now.

And then a shovel slammed down onto the back of his head, the metal blade a paddle, and first he fell onto her, dazed, but he rolled over and bolted upright onto one elbow. There, standing over them, was Joseph, gripping the shovel before him as if it were a musket with a bayonet.

When the intruder saw Joseph, he rubbed the back of his head, saw the blood on his fingers, and said, "Put that down, boy."

"Move away from the lady," Joseph ordered.

"Boy," he said again, the ugly tone of a fallen patriarch, "you just got yourself a noose. Guaranteed. Hitting a white man with that shovel? Yer as good as dead."

The invader was moving his arm now, and she saw the Colt on the floor. Before he could grab it, however, Joseph took the shovel and jabbed the blade as if it was indeed a bayonet into the invader's throat, just below his jaw, thrusting it so hard that he snapped the man's neck, the gash spraying blood onto her face and dress, and sending him onto the wooden floorboards on his back. His eyes were open when she looked down at him, but they fell shut fast and his breathing seemed to stop long before the bleeding.

She had not forgotten her husband's face, the deep cleft in his chin, the eyebrows so pale they disappeared in the long days of summer. She had not forgotten the feel of the stubble on his cheeks or the unexpected softness (and blackness) of the hair on his chest. But the memories were like the steam off the river when the weather changed: real but something she could no longer grasp. If she were a painter, which she was not, how would her portrait of him have differed from the man she married and whom she recalled loving with a fire that would have made her blush if she ever tried to give it words? Once there had been a tintype, taken for no other reason than that all the

men had posed for them when they signed up, including her older brother, but the chemical fixer, potassium cyanide, had been defective and the image had deteriorated days after Peter had left the Valley.

His voice had faded, too. His laugh. She conjured them in her dreams, but when she struggled in daylight to manage a gristmill, work that was never among her labors in even her nightmares, she could not hear him. She remembered his words, but the inflections, the ripples of bemusement that marked them, were out of reach when she was awake.

What remained most real was the feel of his arms around her, the way in bed she would curl into him and he would cradle her, an arm under her knees, her head on his shoulder, and they would talk of tomorrow and children and traveling the Mississippi from Memphis to New Orleans. Perhaps a grand tour that would take them to the ocean, where they would visit Charleston and Savannah. The world was bigger than what had been his father's gristmill or her father's law practice in Charlottesville.

There were days when she supposed she never would see either the calm waters of the Gulf or the waves that she had heard marked the Atlantic, because she feared she would never see Peter Steadman again. Her prayers had been unanswered for so long that she no longer bothered to pray. She categorized this as a personal failing: the Bible was clear. Lamentations. But prayer? She no longer had the time. The world, most days, was a dour place, and if she was going to shoulder these ceaseless burdens, she would do it with ferocity and cracked skin on her fingers, with broken nails and a lower back and shoulders that ached. She would manage.

No cause for alarm.

An expression Libby Steadman's father had used when she was a child. It had comforted her when she was young, though, the truth was, growing up there seldom had been cause for alarm. These days? The last three and a half years? There had only

been cause.

As late as the spring before last, there was a Union garrison no more than four miles away with easily a thousand Yankees. There were another six thousand holed up in forts in nearby Winchester, a town that seemed always to be changing hands, control swaying back and forth like a pendulum. The Yankees left her alone, and the few times she saw Federal soldiers, they were civilized. But until General Ewell sent them all scurrying back to Harper's Ferry, clearing the Northerners out on his way to Pennsylvania in June 1863—routing them over two days and a night—she awoke each morning expecting to see Peter's and her land a battlefield. It never was, thank God. Since then, most days (but not all days) this part of the Valley had been back in Southern control, where it belonged. Still, just last week there had been a skirmish at Smithfield Summit, a hill visible from the village of Berryville.

But that control also meant that her mill had been beholden to the Army of Northern Virginia, and they swallowed whole, a great leviathan, whatever flour she and Joseph could produce. For now, they'd let her keep two plow horses, a cow, and some of their chickens, but it was only a matter of time before they confiscated them, too.

Today she had worked alone inside the gristmill since just after first light, the Opequon River high and loud because of the rains, the air inside—in the shade, amidst the stones, some darker than thunderclouds—cooler than outside. She had spent the last hour downstairs pulling a muculent paste from the turbines, a plaster of leaves and twigs and mud that sluiced its way down the raceway and into the mill, and the sleeves of her dress were wet to her elbows and her fingers were cold. This was not work that she had ever envisioned would be something she could—or would—do. She barely knew how to plant a kitchen garden when she and Peter had wed, and though she approved of his decision to free his family's servants, she was grateful that two had chosen to stay on because she didn't know how else she would have managed when the war had come and Peter had left. The pair, a husband and wife, lived now in what had been the overseer's place, four rooms on two floors. The

overseer had skedaddled as soon as Peter had freed the family servants: Peter had no interest in managing a farm with slave labor. He was confident that with a gristmill in this corner of the Valley, he could make a good living capitalizing on the needs of the neighboring plantations, and no longer have to work to maintain the sprawling fields of corn, barley, and wheat on his family's land. He'd planned to sell the acreage and the six two-room huts—the slave quarters, now empty—but then came the war. After the war, very likely he would.

Assuming he returned, which daily had grown from expectation to chimera.

Now she was beside a first-floor window in the mill, the glass long gone, the revolver clutched in both hands. It was a six-shot .44-caliber Colt that had belonged to one of Mosby's rangers, and it was her freedman, Joseph, who'd killed him with a shovel when the bastard had had her pinned to the floor in the kitchen and was struggling to pull up her dress. That had been a week ago, and ever since then, she and Joseph and Joseph's wife had been expecting either more of Mosby's men or even a detachment from Jubal Early's army to search their property. They wouldn't suppose that she or Joseph had killed the soldier or partisan, at least not at first; they'd be looking for a deserter, assuming either that he was hiding here or that she was harboring him. The trespasser had been alone, but he still could have told someone in which direction he was going or been seen by Libby's nearest neighbors, the Covingtons, a mile and a half to the east on the Berryville Road. She and Joseph had buried the body as deep as they could in the brush at the edge of the south woods, far from the two horses and their last cow, Joseph remarking as they worked that they would actually have been better off if the bluebellies had arrived and there'd been a skirmish with the nearby Confederates: they could have left the corpse among the dead. Let folks assume he had died in battle.

It seemed that moment of reckoning had now arrived. No cause for alarm? Of course, there was. There was always a reason to fret. Even as a little girl, she had thought the idea there was a divine presence guiding the world suspect. This autumn, years into

the war, her husband lost in a Union prison for fifteen months—perhaps, by now, dead—it was clear to her that there wasn't.

As soon as she'd spotted the three cavalry soldiers galloping across the meadow where her own two plow horses were grazing, she'd grabbed the pistol off the ledge. The men were wearing nearly identical gray slouch hats with braiding the color of yellow squash around the crown, but only one was dressed in a full Confederate uniform. The other two could have been farmers with Confederate hats. She was relieved they weren't Federals, but until she knew why they were here, she wasn't about to put down the gun. She didn't figure she could count on the miracle of Joseph appearing out of nowhere a second time and rescuing her. He was in the barn, repairing a wheel on the wagon. Their last wagon. Their only wagon. His wife and the girl, Libby's twelve-year-old niece, were at the house.

The horses stopped outside the building and she listened to the men's conversation.

"Who's running the mill?"

"No idea, sir, since Steadman's in a prison camp somewhere."

"Or dead, in that case."

"Yessir. Very possible in one a them camps."

"Maybe his servants? Maybe his wife?"

"Could be."

"Let's go to the house."

She had heard enough: the last thing she wanted was for them to go to the house.

Joseph's wife and her own niece would be easy pickings if these men were pillagers. And if they were searching for the man Joseph had killed, then she was prepared to lie her way through this if it meant that she could send them on their way. Moreover, at least one of them knew enough about her husband to know he was a soldier who was captured, and that was promising. That gave her some assurance. Perhaps even comfort. She lowered her arms, relaxing, and peered through the empty window frame. "Hello," she said. "I'm Libby Steadman. Do any of you know my husband? Peter Steadman? He was in the Second Virginia. Captured at Gettysburg."

As one, they doffed their hats when they saw her, but it wasn't merely, she knew from experience, because she was a woman. There was a deep reverence for the Second Virginia in the Valley, because it had been part of the famed Stonewall Jackson brigade. Jackson had died from wounds at Chancellorsville in May 1863, shot by Confederate sentries who had mistaken the general and his staff for Union cavalry. While the rest of the South mourned the man, convincing themselves they might have defeated the Yankees two months later at Gettysburg if he'd survived his wounds, all she thought now when she recalled Jackson's death was that, perhaps, her own husband might never have been captured if there had been a better man commanding those boys.

The solider in full uniform continued to hold his hat in his hand as they spoke.

"Ma'am," he said, "I'm a grandson of one of your neighbors, Leveritt Covington. I'm Henry Morgan. Sixth Virginia Cavalry. Colonel Harrison's. I don't know your husband, but my grandfather says mighty kind things about the man."

She studied him: yellowish beard, tall in the saddle, eyes that almost were black. One of the other two was scrutinizing her horses as they grazed in the distance. Morgan had blond hair the same color as hers, and almost as long. These men were definitely regular army, not Mosby's partisans, and she felt a great waterfall of relief. There were people in the Valley who revered John Mosby's men for their daring—their

exploits in the small hours of the morning behind Union lines were legendary—but the one ranger who'd set foot on her land had been a drunk who'd attacked her.

"Have you heard something about him? Please tell me you have. I haven't gotten a letter in months. I don't even know if he's still alive."

"No. I'm sorry. All I know is what my grandfather knows—which is less than you know, I'm sure."

She took this in. "Wait one moment," she said, and she walked from the window to the door, emerging from the cool of the stone building into the sun. "Well. How can I help you?"

"You can begin by taking your finger off the trigger and putting that gun away," said Morgan. "We're not a threat."

She glanced at the pistol, surprised it was still in her hand. She smiled and tucked it into the sash she wore around her waist to keep the dress in place when she worked the mill. She and Joseph had buried the dead man's holster with the corpse. The gun was one thing, but they wanted as little evidence as possible that the fellow had ever been on the property.

"You hoist them bags?" asked one of the other men. There were a dozen bags of flour under an awning that she and Joseph had ground yesterday. An army quartermaster was due tomorrow to retrieve them.

"I can. I do."

"Little thing like you?"

There was something dangerous in the short sentence. She responded with a firmness

she wasn't feeling. "No choice these days. Someone's got to feed the army."

"We thank you," said Morgan.

"Tell me: Why are you here?"

"Union Army's approaching Berryville again," he said. "We're scouting for ground."

She absorbed this. She was relieved they weren't looking for the dead man. But the idea they were reconnoitering this part of the county was ominous. "The battle will be brought…here?"

"Don't know that. And, looking around, don't think so. At least not if we fight where we choose. But I recalled the Covington property runs along the river, like yours, and I wanted to see how far the ridge stretched beside it."

"Not very far. There's just Walker Hill," she said, nodding in that direction.

"No. I expect you'll be lucky. But the Yankees now are different from the Yankees we whipped in these parts last year. There's more of 'em, and they don't just want to fight us. Rumor is, they want to burn this valley down. Turn it all to campfire ash."

"I know. I've heard those rumors."

"Now, the army does need hands. We need all the hands we can get. Even if you do, as you say, lift those bags, you must have help. How many slaves you all have here?"

"None. I have one freedman and his wife. I have my niece. It's just the four of us."

"Freedman. We'll still take him."

“He’s over sixty.”

“If he can help here, he can—”

“And if you take him, Mr.Morgan, it will be that much harder for me to feed you. He runs the wheels, he gets the grain into the hopper and the garner bin up top. You take him, next time your quartermaster comes through, he’ll leave empty-handed.” She hoped that she sounded reasonable, not antagonistic. She did need Joseph. She needed Joseph and Sally and even her niece, Jubilee. She needed everyone. Her husband had freed Joseph and Sally in January 1860, a few months after his father had died and he’d inherited the mill. His father had owned twelve slaves, and Peter had freed them all. Only Joseph and Sally had chosen to remain and be paid whatever wages Peter could provide. She and Peter had married a few months later, just before her twentieth birthday. Then, barely a year after that, had come the war, which led to a deeper, more pronounced level of need: Joseph and Sally were now her family. Since her husband left, she had had almost no one but this older couple with whom to commiserate and, on occasion, to laugh. To play cards with and cook. Her life would have been unbearably lonely without them.

The fellow put his hat back on and rested both hands on the horn of the saddle, digesting what she had said. “It’s Lieutenant Morgan,” he corrected her, his tone colder, and she understood that he had heard mostly antipathy in her response. “Not Mr.Morgan.”

“Lieutenant,” she repeated obligingly.

He stared down at her from his horse, and she was aware, for the first time, that the day was utterly windless. The moment when no one spoke stretched long, a lanky braid. Finally, the lieutenant informed her, “Ma’am, we will be back—when we need something. Or your…freedman. Or those horses. We know where you are.” Then he turned his own horse and spurred it across the field toward the road, his two men

studying her—not leering, this was different, they seemed more puzzled by her presence, as if she were a flower too rare for this valley—for lingering seconds before following him.

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Jonathan Weybridge sat on a camp stool atop the crest of a small hill and watched the elegant tendrils of fog in the ravine, the steepled tips of the fir trees piercing the misty clouds like the finials of a wrought-iron fence. He knew for as long as he lived, whether it was forty more days or forty more years, he would always associate fog with the smoke from Lee's rebel muskets when they'd charged—so many of the advancing Vermonters either green recruits or artillerists pressed into service as infantry—at the Bloody Angle at Spotsylvania back in May. The smoke had wafted above the breastworks, a log wall, and his men had been among those who'd stood at the top firing down at the Confederates, firing off one round, maybe two, before they themselves were shot and fell atop the soon chest-high piles of corpses.

Now the sun was rising over the Blue Ridge Mountains behind him, and the sky before him was growing cobalt. The moon, a scythe that was icicle white, was a fading smile, sardonic and calm. He had a feeling the sun that day would be blistering, and the haze in the valley would burn away before long. Virginia was a hell of a lot hotter than Vermont as fall neared.

But blue skies, despite the scorching heat, would be a welcome relief from the rain. Over the past three days, it had misted, drizzled, sprinkled, and poured. There had been intermittent cloudbursts and steadier showers. Mushrooms had bloomed overnight, carpeting great swaths of the forest and peppering the pasture like throw rugs. His men had dug rifle pits in the muddy clay and slept in soggy tents, the sagging canvas sheets they carried no match for the deluge. Dead wood was spongy and every campfire a trial. Hardtack had turned sodden—which, arguably, was a blessing—sugar melted, and salt dissolved. The uniforms of the pickets always were

damp.

His own uniform had the faint miasma of mold.

But, so far, he had no orders to form his company and march anywhere today, and so perhaps the sun would allow the men to dry off, instead of exhausting them as they plodded southwest into the Shenandoah Valley with really one purpose: Burn the harvest. Commandeer—steal, if he chose not to mince words—and slaughter the livestock. Ensure this valley was no longer a granary for the Confederacy. Still, prior to settling in, his men had had their share of skirmishes and brawls, the butcher's bill always high. They'd been refitted and gotten more men (boys, really) after Spotsylvania in May and Cold Harbor in June, fresh fish with big eyes who had no idea what they were in for. He was supposed to have over one hundred soldiers. Most of the time, including today, it was closer to fifty (the company was always, it seemed, at half strength), the attrition largely wounded and sick, but plenty of men had died, too, some from Minie balls and some from disease. Prior to the rains, often there had been small, violent encounters with a mostly elusive enemy.

He was tired this morning. But he had been tired for weeks. Months. Moroseness was easy—he had seen too much and done too much the last four months—but he fought the desire to succumb. He had men to lead and, back in Vermont, a family to comfort. This war felt interminable, but eventually all things came to an end. He had taught his students how there was never permanence when man was at the center. And for the boys in his company? The boys on both sides? Their lives swayed like plumb bobs between boredom and brutality, between tediousness and terror.

For almost a year, from the time he'd enlisted in the early summer of 1863 until the spring of 1864, he'd served in Washington, the 11th Vermont manning the artillery at the forts around the capital. After the Battle of the Wilderness, however, they'd been pressed into service as infantry, and paid dearly for the relative cushiness and safety of garrison duty with the nightmare of Spotsylvania.

He knew the rebels were poised to the south and west of where he was sitting. Jubal Early's men, a resolute and disciplined army that only this summer had made a dash at Washington and brought Lincoln himself to the breastworks to witness the defense. Mosby's Rangers, too, an undisciplined bevy of marauders. Men, in Weybridge's opinion, either too base or, perhaps, too smart, to care about honor. Or what he would deem honor. He supposed they had a code of some sort. But he had planted the folding chair at the edge of a copse of red oak and chestnut trees, and believed he was all but invisible. He was still within the perimeter of the pickets.

He guessed that he had, at best, fifteen or twenty minutes to scribble a note to his wife. He had carried the stool and folding table here himself because he liked the view. His company's tents were a hundred yards away, stretching along the small, grassy plateau to the northeast. As recently as the summer, cows had grazed there. From this distance, the stench of the regiment almost disappeared. He recalled the joke that scouts shared: you could smell an army before you saw it.

Among the things that had struck him about this part of the country was the remarkable, almost unnatural lack of rocks in the dirt. He'd once heard a tale of a Vermont farmer who, his family thought, had died when a horse had kicked him in the head. His wife was sure he'd stopped breathing when she'd found him in the barn. But abruptly he'd sat up and told her and their teenage sons, who had raced in from the fields when they'd heard their mother crying for help, that he had died, but he was back, and when he was dead he had seen heaven in all its majesty, in all its unimaginable glory. And what, his wife had asked, was heaven like? Flat fields as far as the eye could see, he preached, his voice enraptured, and not a rock or a boulder to hoist from the soil.

Weybridge reckoned the tale was apocryphal. His family didn't own a farm, but he knew how rocky the Green Mountains were, and what an arduous task it was to clear a field and plant anything. He had men in his company who were quite clear about their futures: once the rebels were defeated, they were heading south and west, to

places like Ohio and Tennessee and Kansas, because it was just too damn hard to farm in Vermont. Even if he were a farmer, however, he himself couldn't live here. In the south. It wasn't that he had such fondness for the frigid tundra of Vermont in the winter; it was his anger at a people who enslaved others and who had unleashed such violence on the country and on his company. On the boys they had killed who shouldn't have had to die. On the boys who had lost arms and legs. On the women back home widowed young, the children who lost fathers.

One time he had seen John Brown in Vergennes, a small Vermont city thirteen miles north of Middlebury. Brown and his family would take the ferry from the Adirondacks, where they had a farm, to the Green Mountains. They'd cross Lake Champlain, dock at Panton, and then purchase the provisions and supplies unavailable on the western side of the lake. Weybridge knew that he wasn't far now from the Union garrison at Harper's Ferry, where the abolitionist and his followers had seized the arsenal, holding it for two days before U.S. marines had swooped in and captured him. Brown had been hanged a few miles away in Charles Town six weeks later.

Today he wrote nothing of Brown or the anger in his own heart to his wife. Not this morning. The sky was too blue, and he knew all that Emily was shouldering. Instead he described his view that moment, reassuring her that he was well and his world lately had been calm—wet, yes, but serene. He asked after their boys, three and nearly five, hoping that Caleb, the older of the two, was taking his chores, slight as they were, seriously. Emily was not alone with the children: both her father and his taught at the college, as he himself had up until a year and a half ago, and the houses of the three families stood among the long line of stately Georgians on South Main Street. Both of their mothers were alive and well. Emily had been spared the sadness—death, ubiquitous and adamant—that Weybridge had learned in the war was the true soul of the world. Until he had enlisted, he had been screened from it, too. His letters now had become a facade, because he saw no reason to share the brutality and the toll it was taking on him.

His reservoir pen in his hand, he was picturing her smile those nights she would debate her father about Melville or Dickens, when he heard the footsteps on the forest floor behind him and smelled the coffee. Burnt and nutty and robust. He turned and saw the man he viewed as an adjutant, a lieutenant from Panton. Eustis Marsh was a farmer, a man ten years his senior who teased him as much as he believed he could badger a captain—even one as allegedly good-natured as Weybridge—without getting himself disciplined. The fact that Weybridge was a college boy from Middlebury was a source of unending mirth for Marsh. The soldier had a tin cup of coffee in each hand and gave one to Weybridge. The tin was warm, and the coffee was thick and sweet with brown sugar.

“Fired up the mucket,” Marsh told him, after tossing onto the ground the piece of straw he was chewing.

“Thank you,” Weybridge said. He had lain his pen on the folding table and a great, round splotch of black ink sat like a raindrop on a wooden slat beside the bottle. He raised the cup in a toast.

“Coffee always tastes better when the cavalry ain’t waterin’ their horses upstream.”

“It does.”

“You seen the sutler this morning?”

“I haven’t. Why?”

“He was sellin’ some ink and pens that I think he took off dead fellers. Pens just like that.”

Weybridge held the pen by the barrel and gazed at the beauty of the nib. “I’ve had this one for years.”

“Shoulda figured that,” said the lieutenant. “So, I’ve come to retrieve ya…sir.”

“Oh?”

“Yer too close and too high up. Yer a goddamn target, Captain. Sorry.”

Weybridge wasn’t sure whether Marsh was apologizing for swearing or because he felt bad he was interrupting his captain’s brief moment of pastoral respite: a man writing a letter on a hillside with a table, a stool, and a bottle of ink. There was birdsong.

“Yer gonna get yerself killed,” he continued.

“Only if Early’s pickets have guns that can shoot farther than ours,” Weybridge said to reassure him. “And I am in the woods.”

“Mostly.”

“Precisely.”

“Mostly ain’t totally,” Marsh said. “It only takes one mighty committed sniper to crawl his way through that prickle there and bag himself a captain. Also…”

Weybridge waited, staring up at the lieutenant.

“Think back to when we was manning the cannons in Washington. The johnnies get a couple Napoleons three-quarters or even a mile from here, and you’re in range.”

A mosquito landed on Weybridge’s fingers holding the cup. He flicked it away. A fly had also been drawn to the scent and was buzzing the tin lip. He leaned forward and bowed his head. Was it presumptuous to hope for a little peace? Was it selfish? He

saw that the slit on the side of his left boot had grown a half inch or so the last couple of days. The gash had started when a Minie ball had grazed his leg at the last firefight before the rains had commenced. He'd been ordered to take the ridge where his men were now encamped. He had. They had.

"Whole company would be," Weybridge replied finally.

"We're back a bit. Not sitting like a horseshoe peg they can aim at."

"It would be ironic if I survived the last four months and got killed writing a letter home to my wife," he agreed.

"Careless might be a better word—if ya will forgive me speakin' the truth."

"Lieutenant?" He hoped he had added a hint of good-humored menace to the word.

"Yes, sir?"

"Would you see if I can get a new boot? Today?"

"I told ya: there are some mighty good boots available right now by where them surgeons were workin' before the monsoon."

"It wasn't a monsoon," Weybridge said. What he really wanted to say, but chose not to, was that as much as he needed a new boot, he didn't crave the footwear of a man who had had his leg sawed off like a tree branch. Since he'd enlisted, he had passed too many waist-high piles of amputated limbs—the fingers curled into fists, the shins revealing ivory bones amidst the hardened black, black blood—to ever stick his hand into the glove of a man who no longer had need of it or his foot into the boot of man who could no longer wear one. "And, thank you, I'd prefer a new boot."

“Yer a demandin’ man, Captain.”

“It’s the little things, Lieutenant.”

“I’ll keep workin’ on it, sir.”

“I appreciate that.”

Marsh swallowed the last of his coffee. “One of them shoes and boots in the pile had a piece of paper inside it with the number eighteen written on it.” He sounded rueful.

“I’m not following.”

“Must have been just a boy. Didn’t wanna lie when he enlisted, so when he stood on the paper, he could say, ‘Oh, yeah, I’m over eighteen,’ when they asked. I seen it before. Them’s the kinda young’un, well, you gotta check them cartridge boxes on their belts. Gotta remind them to take good care when loadin’ their rifles.”

“I hope he lived.”

“Me too,” Marsh said, pulling off his cap and wiping a line of sweat from his forehead. “Pair a shoes cost the army one dollar and ninety-eight cents. Sutler will sell ya a pair with holes for half that. Without holes, will cost ya three dollars.”

“And how do you know that?”

“Sutler told me when he was tryin’ to sell me new shoes.” The lieutenant peered into the distance. “And, Captain?”

Weybridge waited.

“Please write yer letter closer to camp. Ya can say the same cuddly things to yer wife when yer back there. I promise: no one’s gonna look over yer shoulder and see what yer cooin’ about.”

The river was called the Opequon, and Weybridge had been told that it flowed into the Potomac. Here it was little more than a creek, perhaps ten or twelve yards at its widest and two or three feet deep, and he wouldn’t have been surprised if he had spotted cattle cooling themselves in water that flowed so slowly it was almost still—except, of course, one army or the other would have commandeered any cows they had found. A half mile south he had seen that the water grew deeper and wider, and the current too fast for cows or even cavalry.

Now his eyes were moving between the two Union artillery batteries on the ridge and the tributary before him, the creek oddly unaffected by the cannons which, one by one, were bringing down the thunder on the woods on the far side of the brook. Gilbert’s Ford, it was called. The water was a flat sheen, brown but streaked with silver from the midday sun, even as case shot and explosive shells splintered the trees on the far side. It had only been hours ago he’d been writing his wife.

The plan, he was told as soon as he had returned to camp, was that once the cannons had softened up the Confederates on the other side, his men, along with three other companies, would slosh through the water and storm into the woods, which were dense by the creek but thinned quickly. There were fields a half mile beyond the Opequon and then a hilltop that overlooked the road to Berryville, which he was to occupy. With artillery atop that ridge, the Union would control that stretch of turnpike.

Waiting for him across the water were remnants of Jubal Early’s army, but the scouts insisted that the Confederates were widely dispersed. After the colonel had given Weybridge the order to form his men, an adjutant had joked that his troops should be more wary of the slippery stones as they waded across the creek than the rebels

waiting for them on the other side. Weybridge hadn't seen the humor. The reconnaissance was that there were only a hundred or so rebels defending the stretch of ground that his and three other Union companies were to capture, but his company was barely half strength, and those other three were dramatically undermanned, too. He wished they were throwing more men into the fight, despite the logistics of concentrating that many soldiers in this hollow.

"Artillery like that don't make me piss my drawers," said Marsh, who seemed ever by his side.

"No?" Weybridge asked.

He smiled darkly. "Now, canister? Them tin cans packed with lead balls? That's a different tune. They'll make me shit."

Marsh was mostly right. Mostly, but not entirely. Yes, charging into canister was deadly. Still, the scent of shattered pine from the forest had wafted up here to the ridge, and Weybridge recalled the times that summer he'd huddled on the ground when Confederate artillery had left his men cowering in small balls, their hands on their ears, as the earth around them had shaken like the world itself was coming apart. He had seen men butchered by shrapnel, killed instantly and killed slowly by weapons fired hundreds of yards away. Man was an animal that broke and bled as easily as pigs and cows, and was no more impressive beneath the skin.

Behind the two of them, the men had formed, awaiting his order to emerge from this copse of chestnut and oak, still leafy and lush in September, and run down the hill, traverse the stream, fight their way through the woods, and then storm the rebels atop the neighboring hummock. His heart was beating hard in his chest, and he was sweating; he had prayed to a God he doubted really existed that this would not be another Bloody Angle or Cold Harbor.

And maybe it wouldn't be. He might not witness another boy from Middlebury, a fellow ten years his junior, swinging his empty musket like a club at a swarm of rebels, some reloading and some trying to spear him with bayonets, before, mercifully, one of those Virginians had put a Minie ball into his skull and finished him off.

But his men would be easy targets as they waded into the water, slowed by the current and the stones, and then when they entered the woods. Through his field glasses, he had seen buckthorn as high as the snowbanks back home in December. And when the survivors emerged from that wood, there was a fence along the crest of the meadow, offering the rebels one last place to make a stand. The Virginians, even if they were outnumbered, had advantages both natural and man-made.

"You know somethin', Captain?"

"I know many things, Lieutenant."

"If there are only a hundred johnnies over there, I'd have preferred we just went in cold. Surprised 'em." He nodded toward the artillery on the ridge. "A couple baby wakers? We know what they can and can't do. Them cannons will weaken their defenses a bit. But not enough. Sir? I'm expectin' one hell of a brawl."

"Perhaps."

"They're just waitin' for us now," the lieutenant continued. "This next hour? Goin' to be fearful ugly. We is just wakin' snakes."

"You never did find me that boot. My wet foot is going to be on your conscience."

"Water was goin' to go over the top, anyway. At least for a step or two. And—well, forgive me, sir—if yer goin' to be so goddamn precious and not wear a dead man's

boot, that's yer decision."

Weybridge glanced at the lieutenant. The man was gazing intently at the woods before them, his eyes squinting as if that would help him see through the smoke. "Fair point, Lieutenant," he agreed. Then he pulled his watch from his uniform jacket pocket. In ten minutes, the artillery would stop, he would command his bugler to signal the attack, the colors would rise up, and the Vermonters would start their advance. He had been assured that there were no rebel batteries on the far side. Marsh didn't need to fear they would be running headfirst into canister.

The men formed their line of battle and began in good order, the colors high, as they emerged from the woods, and there was no fire from the far side of the river. Weybridge could spot the great swaths of fallen trees carved by the bombardment on the other side of the gorge and found himself hoping (though not believing) that the rebels had pulled back. Just ducked and then retreated from the fusillade. Perhaps his boys would make it across the water, through the woods, and then up the steep meadow, and soon their flag would be atop that far hill and the hospital tents would be no more crowded than this morning. It was possible. Anything was possible.

He raised his sword, the grip firm, always surprised at how little it weighed when he pulled it from the scabbard, and yelled for his men to charge, to attack, to give 'em hell.

It was almost exactly when his left foot broke the surface of the Opequon, the water flooding through the hole and filling the boot, that the rebel muskets opened fire. They were hidden by trees that had fallen and trees that had stood the barrage, their evidence the puffs of smoke, darker than the exhalations of snoring farm animals on a frigid morn but reminiscent nonetheless, and the orderly lines began to ripple. Some of the men not yet in the water had stopped to fire back, and some already were hit, slowing or falling, their flesh no match for a Minie ball, but others had splashed into the creek, even a few of the wounded trundling and staggering ahead. He'd placed his

sword back in its scabbard now, and raising his pistol high, he urged his soldiers to keep moving, to advance, as he himself arose on the far side of the water.

Around him, as loud as the rifles and the bullets pinging off the trees, the whistles of the ones flying past, a cacophony he'd heard before and felt in his bones, he heard the grunts and curses of the boys—they would be sobs when this was over, at least for some of them—but their fear usually was lost to the urgency of the moment. You moved ahead because otherwise you would die where you stood. There was no safety in stillness.

Buckthorn stuck into the hole in his boot, pinpricks through his wet sock against his wet skin.

How could he be aware of something so minor?

But he was, even as he was yelling again to move ahead, move on, forward, forward. Beside him was Sergeant Porter, his moustache oiled with blood from a wound on his cheek, pushing aside the brush, and in the hazy maelstrom on his left Weybridge saw one young soldier pausing to aim his rifle and another, bareheaded, firing into the smog, aiming at God alone knew what. Porter yelled for the men to push 'em back, but momentum was hard when there was a steady fire from behind boulders and trees, and you were battling bramble and chokeberry for purchase. Someone else was shouting Give 'em steel!, crying it over and over, Give 'em steel! Eustis Marsh was beside an oak, his body plastered against the trunk, aiming his rifle, but when he fired, it was almost as if Weybridge was suddenly hard of hearing, because he saw the recoil against the lieutenant's shoulder and the smoke from the barrel, but he didn't perceive that particular weapon in the tumult.

No, he was not deaf. It was just one shot in the midst of many, one more pop lost in the uproar.

And then Weybridge was stepping into more muck, sprawl from the Opequon, he supposed, but when he glanced down he saw that his boot was in the stomach—the entrails as pulpy as any slaughtered steer—of a dead man, a rebel eviscerated in the shelling. He yanked his foot up and away, as if his toes had been in boiling water, and drove himself onward, exhorting his men forward, the open eyes of the dead rebel driven deep into his memory like a fence post. To his left, a battle flag fell, but another Vermont boy scooped it up, and Weybridge saw the Confederates rising before him, ghostly in the smoke, but they were turning to run, not fight, and he aimed his pistol at one and…

And chose not to fire. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

Because the rebs were running, their own great red banners of treason billowing in retreat. He knew he had killed men before, even if often he was just shooting through smoke and haze, and he would kill them again.

But then, when he saw Porter was no longer beside him and knew it was likely the sergeant was dying or dead, he did squeeze the trigger on the Colt. One of the rebels collapsed, not dead, not yet, but also not going to kill any more of Weybridge's men this September afternoon, and he ran past the body, the scrub dissipating and opening up, because he had reached the meadow. Grass that was high and still a little damp from the rains, and there was the fence at the top of the hill, where the rebels were going to make a stand.

Which was when he saw that the ridge was no longer held only by infantry. Now there were cannons at the crest, limbers and caissons, and gunners were packing the barrels, and some of the great guns already were firing, and the ground beneath his feet was rippling like waves. Boys near him were soaring, legs and arms pinwheeling amidst dirt and grass that was swirling in the air like fallen leaves in a windstorm, and the blue sky disappeared behind a curtain of smoke and flying earth. He spied one private standing, staring down where once he had had a left arm, his right arm raised,

the hand empty and the fingers splayed like a statue's, and then the body wobbled—but not that right hand—and he collapsed, his remaining arm doing nothing to cushion the fall.

Weybridge felt someone grabbing his sleeve, and it was Marsh.

"The fence, Captain, the fence! That's the ticket!" he was shouting, and just as they were starting toward the line of split rail, there was a massive blast and Marsh was no longer beside him and the air was gone from his lungs and he, too, was above the world. The flight was soundless. The sky was speckled, like a duck, with black dots that he understood were soil. Dirt.

He hit the ground hard, struggling to breathe, aware that his sword and his pistol had vanished, and there was Marsh above him, kneeling, and then the lieutenant's lips were moving and his mouth was open wide—there were his teeth, his tongue—but the planet had gone quiet. Weybridge started to sit up, to try and retrieve his gun, but Marsh held him down, shaking his head, and from the corner of his eye Weybridge saw his own left hand and thought of the Devil, of Satan, because the fingers were a deep red, as if he had dipped them all in a surgeon's bucket of blood.

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The Colt revolver must have weighed a couple of pounds, Libby thought. The stock was walnut. It had six chambers, and the trespasser had brought it fully loaded to the property. It wasn't much of an armory, but it was more than they had before he had appeared in her kitchen. Six shots. She might have practiced shooting if they had had more ammunition. But they didn't.

In the distance, she heard thunder, but she knew it wasn't a storm. The skies were blue. The rains had left yesterday.

"We got no powder and we got no bullets—other than what's in that gun," Joseph was saying. "We need to get both."

The four of them—Libby, her niece Jubilee, and Joseph and Sally—were sitting around the dining room table, having what passed for supper, because they wanted to preserve for the winter what they could from the kitchen garden. Tonight, it was biscuits and okra. Milk for the girl, who looked less and less like a child and more and more like a woman. She would be thirteen in November, and now Libby could see both her own brother, Robert, and her late sister-in-law in the girl's face.

Sometimes, she wondered: what would her parents think of her dining with the Negroes? And she knew the answer.

The pistol sat on the table near the silver candlesticks, which weren't lit because the sun was pouring in through the western windows. She and Joseph had agreed on a story to explain to Jubilee the source of the weapon: a corporal with the

quartermaster, a fellow infatuated with Libby, had wanted her to have it because the fighting had been so fluid lately.

“More ammunition would change nothing,” said Sally. She looked older than she had a month ago. She and Joseph had fought because she didn’t believe her husband should have killed the man. She’d been unnerved by the vein of violence that she hadn’t known had coursed through him—she had supposed him better than other men, constitutionally exempt from the ferocity and viciousness that marked the gender—and worried desperately now for his soul. But Libby maintained, along with Joseph, that he hadn’t had a choice. The marauder was drunk and had this gun. And these were dangerous times. They could hear the artillery right now.

“It might,” Joseph disagreed.

Libby sat upright in her chair. “I’m not sure what we’d do with more ammunition, either. But I do want more, I know that. And I want another gun. A rifle. Something that shoots further than this pistol.”

Sally shook her head. “If the Yankees found a rifle here, they’d think we were hiding Mosby’s men. And if Mosby’s men found it, they’d think—”

“They’d think it was my husband’s and we used it to hunt for food,” said Libby, cutting off the older woman.

“Sorry, ma’am,” said Sally.

Libby gazed down at the tines of her fork, suddenly unable to meet Sally’s eyes. Libby was not fond of the Federals: she was angry that her husband, if he was still alive, was in one of their prison camps. She held a grudge because they couldn’t leave her and her people alone—because they wanted to tell them all what to do. Her brother, an infantry captain, was fighting somewhere to the southeast, near

Petersburg, and had not been in the Valley since May. Moreover, she and her family had never owned a human being, and her husband had set free her father-in-law's servants. She was eating with two of them right now, for God's sake. It didn't seem fair that she and her kin should be punished for the sins of others.

But she saw the stubbornness—the sanctimoniousness and hypocrisy—of her own people as misguided, too. She wouldn't have dared say such a thing aloud, but the abolitionists, even the madmen who breathed fire like John Brown, were right: slavery was a stain on the Confederacy. Independence, and all they had sacrificed across the South, would have been easier if they weren't trying to build a nation where the Negroes were sold like livestock.

Joseph sopped up some of the oil from the okra with a piece of his biscuit. "That depends on what kind of rifle. A carbine? That'd be trouble. That old musket of Peter's? No one would care."

Peter had brought his musket with him when he'd enlisted. He'd expected to be home within months.

"Aunt Libby?"

She turned to Jubilee.

"The Covingtons have bullets," the girl said. "I'm sure of it."

The Covingtons lived down the road. Of course they had bullets, Libby thought. Leveritt Covington was too old to fight, but he had his guns. Shot them a deer last year and sometimes bagged smaller game. He'd used his rifle to put down a horse in June. He lived with his sister, the poor woman mostly bedridden since…since forever. Libby squeezed the girl's hand, the skin still soft and smooth, despite the time she spent now tending to the chickens and milking the cow, and managing with

Sally the garden and the horses.

“They do,” she agreed.

“And I don’t know if Mr.Covington has a Colt, but we know he’s got a pistol,” Joseph observed. “So, he might have ammunition we could use.”

“Maybe I should go for a visit,” Libby said.

It seemed as if the rumbling was starting to slow. That meant that either Virginians were charging now into Yankees, or the Yankees were attacking General Early’s men. They spoke endlessly in these parts about Northerners and Southerners, and she was most assuredly a Southerner. But she also lived in a part of Virginia that was north of Washington, D.C. They were no more than twenty miles south of Harper’s Ferry. (She still recalled the jubilation in Berryville when the rebels hadtaken the armory there at the start of the war, though it had struck her at first as a Pyrrhic victory: when the Yankees had retreated, they’d burned the arsenal, destroying thousands of muskets. Only later would she learn that the Virginia Militia had captured dozens of gun-manufacturing machines that the rebels had then shipped to their own factory in Richmond.) If the Army of Northern Virginia hadn’t left Gettysburg so quickly after their defeat there the July before last, she would have traveled even to Pennsylvania in search of her husband. At first, she had heard he was wounded; only later would she learn he had been wounded and then captured.

“May I come with you?” Jubilee asked.

“No, you may not,” Sally told her.

“It takes over half an hour to walk there. Don’t you want someone to talk to?”

“I’d love your company, Jubilee, but those are cannons we heard,” Libby said to her

niece. “Sally’s right. I’m sorry. I’ll go after Joseph and I’ve finished at the mill—if we don’t hear any more fighting.”

But she wondered if just as she herself needed to learn how to use the pistol, perhaps so might her niece. She had never anticipated that she would want the girl to know how to shoot, but neither had she imagined even four years ago that she would be running a gristmill and, one day, pushing off her the dying man, his blood on her face and dress, who had wanted to rape her.

The sounds of the battle died down, and so Libby set off for the Covingtons’. She and Joseph tacked up the smaller of their two plow horses, a bay named Cinnamon that didn’t mind a saddle. Libby wasn’t a good rider: she hadn’t even been atop a horse until she’d met Peter and come to Berryville. Cinnamon was patient, however, and she was only riding a mile and a half. Usually when she went to town—or the Covingtons—she walked. But after the skirmish that afternoon, she wanted to spend as little time on the road or away from home as possible.

When she arrived, Leveritt Covington greeted her at the door. The man was old enough to be her grandfather. He was in his seventies, but he was still an excellent horseman and, before the war, would travel to Kentucky and Louisiana for the races. He had become a widower the same year as her own father, 1856, but had now outlived her father by two years. His servants were bundling the tall stalks of wheat into sheaves as Libby passed the field, and her mind was calculating when the wagons would arrive at the mill. At…her…mill.

No: at Peter’s mill. Still. Always. She could not allow herself to think otherwise.

Leveritt tolerated her more than other folks in the Valley, and she suspected that was mostly because he was a horndog and thought she was pretty. But she was still both an outsider here in Berryville, and the wife of the man who had freed his servants.

He assumed she was here to discuss his next—and likely last—delivery for the season, but she told him it was something else and he nodded gravely. He didn't invite her inside but, instead, motioned at one of the two rockers on the porch. He had not lost an inch of height to the natural decrepitude that marked most men his age, and still towered above her, but his skin looked as brittle and dry as old newspaper. His hair was no longer as lush and thick as it once was and had rolled back behind his ears, but she had heard stories about how he had never been at a loss for company at night when he would venture outside the Valley to wager on the horses, even well into his sixties. But he had an avuncular relationship to Peter and had always been kind to her, and some men are just—a phrase her father would use—rascals in need of forgiveness. He did not judge sinners such as Covington, which, in hindsight, had caused her on occasion to wonder about her own father's fidelity.

Still, she missed him desperately. She missed her mother. She missed her sister-in-law. The rolls of the absent had grown long, and none of these were casualties from the war. They were merely the dead swallowed by the uncaring earth as it spun.

"The Yankees gave our boys a black eye today," Leveritt was saying, sitting himself once she was settled. "But we fought hard, I hear."

"I heard the cannon fire," she said.

"And you came here anyway? I wish you hadn't, Libby. A woman alone on the road today? No."

"It's a mile and a half, Leveritt. Good Lord, the Yankee army was our neighbor for half this war."

"And not a good one."

"They left me alone."

“The depredations when—if—they return will be very different now. The war has changed: it’s not like it was in 1862. No corncrib or smokehouse is safe. No field will not be burned. You can’t be a lady alone out there, Libby. The Yanks have become a nasty bunch.”

“As have we,” she reminded him.

“If so, it’s only in response to their deviltry. And it’s more the reason you should have stayed off the road.” He tilted back his rocker and added with great solemnity, “Whatever brought you here could have waited.”

She heard movement in the house, and Leveritt stared at her, daring her to react. Footsteps.

“Is that Felicia?” she asked, hoping his sister was—miraculously—up and about.

“No, no. She’s upstairs. Same as ever, I’m sorry to say.”

It could have been his cook and house servant. But there was a challenge to his gaze and she saw in his face the hard shape of his skull, and felt on the breeze a dour hint of something hidden. But she had discovered her own durability these three and a half awful years and asked, “Well, then, do I hear Jessica?” Jessica was the house servant who tended his and his sister’s clothes, fixed their meals, and cleaned their home.

He nodded, a lie of the body. If it were Jessica, he would have had her bring them sweet tea. He would have invited Libby inside.

And those footsteps were heavier than those of the slight woman with infinite energy who maintained this place.

“How is Felicia?” Libby pressed.

“She’s a little more tired than usual. The stress, I suppose, of the proximity of the Federals.”

“It stresses us all,” she agreed politely, playing this game. Because it did not stress them all. Why would Jessica fear the Yankees? Why would any Negro woman? Unlikely. They represented her deliverance. No, those footsteps she had heard—those steps she was hearing—belonged to a man. Or, perhaps, men. In the house right now was one (or more) of Mosby’s guerrillas. It was conceivable that she was near compatriots of the very devil who had attacked her in her own kitchen, and whose body now moldered beneath the dug earth on her own property. Yes, the rangers were viewed as heroes of great courage by many folks in these parts, but since she’d been attacked, the idea that some of them hid by day in private homes felt more reminiscent of cowardice to her. She couldn’t decide whether Leveritt was housing them willingly or because they had given him no choice; they had never approached her, but that was because propriety and decency would have discouraged such a request. Young white men sharing the home of a woman and a nearly adolescent girl while the woman’s husband was in a Union prison camp or had died for the cause? Improper at best, licentious at worst.

“I met your grandson,” she continued. “Henry Morgan.”

“Good lad. Fine horseman. Where did you meet him?”

“He came by the house. Was scouting the ground.”

The older man sat back in his rocker and folded his arms across his chest. “He told me he expects we will not be spared the fighting much longer.” He pointed at the horse and nodded gravely. “You keep your head down, young lady.”

“I have the same fear. I will.”

“Our best hope is their election in November. If Lincoln loses, this war will finally come to an end.”

This was the dream of most women and men in the Valley. She saw it, however, not in the sweep of history, not in the link between secession and independence; rather, it would mean that her husband, if he was still alive, would come back to her.

Inside she heard a cough. A man’s cough. Now there was no doubt that the noise she had heard wasn’t Jessica.

“So, tell me,” he asked, his tone kind, “is there a problem at the mill? Do you and Joseph need help with something? What brings you here?”

Ammunition for that Colt, of course, was the answer.

But Mosby’s men were known for using Colts, usually purloined from the Federals they had captured or killed, often a pair in two holsters. She needed powder, a flask, bullets. It was a most particular ask. And it dawned on her: the only way she would have a Colt was if she had a Yankee’s gun—or the one from a missing guerrilla. Perhaps from the man, now dead, who might very well have been among those billeting at this very house.

She couldn’t ask. She…couldn’t. She glanced down at her fingers and saw a slight tremble. She pressed her nails intoher palm to calm the shudder and steady herself. She steeled herself and met his eyes.

“No,” she said, smiling at him, “the mill is running fine. Joseph and I have it well in hand.”

“Good, good. Joseph is a fine fellow.”

“He is.”

“Then tell me, Libby: What I can do for you?”

She took a breath and gazed out at the wheat. She would play to his ego to get through this. “Tell me more about the election. Tell me more of what your Lieutenant Morgan has seen. Give me reasons to hope as I await Peter’s return.”

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Sound returned slowly, like the emergence from a fever dream. Weybridge heard the pop of rifles. The percussive boom of the Confederate artillery. Then shouts of the Vermonters as they raced toward the fence, and the subsequent, inevitable cries of human beings when their bodies were ruptured by musket fire, wounds far worse than the carbine bullets—at least according to the surgeon Weybridge had befriended at Cold Harbor. The round balls sometimes glance off the bone, he'd said, unlike the conoidal ones. Minie balls? They shatter bone.

And there was the voice of Eustis Marsh, and this was not a memory. The lieutenant was with him now, looking down at him, oddly angelic, speaking, telling him not to move. The air was alive with the smell of burnt powder, and there was that smoke that reminded him of morning mist, a gift of the changing seasons. At home, it foreshadowed the fall, the kaleidoscopic fire in the trees before the leaves fell to the forest floor. The deep red of the maple, the yellow of the alders, the rusty orange of the oak.

"Captain?"

He looked into Marsh's eyes. Then he followed the lieutenant's gaze.

Two fingers on his hand, his left hand, the one redder than wine or the reddest of those autumnal maples, were hanging by threads. But it was when he looked down at his right leg, instinctively aware that something was wrong there more than he was gutted by pain, he grew nauseous: as bad as the wound was to his hand, it was the leg that was going to leave him dead in this meadow beyond the brush. He saw bone,

pulverized pieces from a chess board, each the color of melting candle wax, the fragments and chips amidst a pulpy stew of tendon and muscle and flesh. And there was the blood, a geyser. His heart was pumping his blood into the grass, watering it like the downpours of the past week, and literally killing itself by killing him.

“Cord it, cord it,” he heard himself whispering—Wasn’t he trying to shout? Why was his voice so frail?—but even in the softness there was a panic that was unfamiliar to him. He didn’t usually panic. But he knew that if Marsh didn’t wrap a tourniquet around what remained of his thigh, he’d be dead in minutes.

The lieutenant, however, was a step ahead of him. Wasn’t he always? The farmer, resourceful as ever, was ripping off the shoulder strap from his canteen and using the wool like a rope, pulling it taut around his thigh. Then he took the ramrod from his rifle and twisted the twine tight, not caring in the slightest that for the first time Weybridge was feeling real pain. Had he grimaced? He had, he had. But already the tourniquet was slowing the fountain to a trickle.

“Captain?” Marsh asked. “You with me, sir?”

He nodded. Suddenly he was cold, so very cold, a seeming impossibility in September in the Valley, with the sun high and his uniform heavy as blankets in this heat. Another shell rocked the ground and dirt rained down upon him. Upon Marsh.

“Good Christ, never a litter nearby when ya need one,” Marsh was grumbling. Then, as if talking to himself, he murmured something about dragging him back into the woods, and how it wasn’t going to be pretty.

No. Of course not.

The grass beneath his leg had grown swampy, and Weybridge was feeling weak. Sleep was beckoning, but it wasn’t sleep, it was death. Oh, but to close his eyes

against the pain. To just shut his eyes and slip away…

Marsh tucked his mutilated left hand into his shirt and grabbed him under his arms. Hauled him back off the grass, each step a dagger up Weybridge's leg that made that warm sleep impossible. A knife blade from the heel of his boot up to his hip that elicited gasp after gasp. Blade. In what he was beginning to feel was the delirium of a dying man, the word fashioned for him an image: he was a plowshare and Marsh a plow horse, and together, as he was dragged through the field, his body was cutting furrows, turning the soil and preparing the earth for a new planting.

Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.

They reached the edge of the woods and there two other soldiers from the company lifted him off the ground. One stood between his legs and one, along with Marsh, hoisted him by his upper back and cradled his head. There again were the buckthorn and saplings. He felt his skull in the palm of a man's hand. He was an infant. He might have succumbed to that comfort, but he couldn't. He didn't dare. This was not the start of his life; more likely, it was the very end. He couldn't even imagine how they would cross the Opequon.

And yet behind him life continued. The battle lingered, even as the sound receded or, perhaps, he slipped deeper into whatever was coming next. Heaven? Maybe. There was no hell, not in his cosmology. At least not after life. There was, he had seen, hell aplenty among the living. But heaven was no tangible inevitability, either.

He had lied to his wife, to his parents, and certainly to his small boys about his lack of faith, not wishing to burden them with his skepticism. The college where he taught had been founded to train young men for the ministry, and the evangelical roots there remained strong—and so he lied to other members of the faculty, too. His very presence in the church he attended every Sunday with his family was a charade. Doubt was not his friend, but it had always been his secret companion.

Despite the pain that grew worse with each step, he closed his eyes and the world grew black, the woods muffling the combat, and in his mind he saw his Emily, her moonstone eyes and small, soft lips, and he gave in.

Gave up the ghost.

Even those who did not believe should know the poetry of what King James had wrought.

It was as if he were sinking, sinking, beneath water that could be hot, healing springs.

They had ripped the doors from a rebel house and set them upon hobby horses to fashion a row of makeshift operating tables in the hospital tent. Weybridge stared up at the two surgeons who were examining his hand and his leg. Eyes on one that suggested a frog's. Round spectacles on the other. They were working shirtless, and the blood of other men adorned their arms and chests like war paint. He had no recollection of how he had gotten here from the Opequon, how they had crossed the water, only that the pain now was, for reasons he could not parse, less excruciating. Shock, he supposed. He'd seen enough fighting to know about shock, and he was grateful.

One of the physicians saw he was awake and looked at him in surprise. "Captain," he said deferentially.

"Doctor," he replied, but he was not sure the word was audible. The canvas ceiling was swarming with flies, black dots flailing against the fabric as they attempted to escape. And, yet, if the insects had had the intellect to fly only six or eight feet to the west, they could have fled: someone had cut a hole and created a flap to allow in additional light so the surgeons could see. What was it that Marsh called bugs that big? The word was close, so close. Gallinippers. Weybridge had told the lieutenant that there was no such word, that he'd made it up. Then, the next day, he heard

another soldier use it, slapping a mosquito that seemed the size of an acorn off his bare arm.

His head lolled to the left, and there was a tin pail filled with water and saws, and, near it, another of those piles he had seen too often and come to detest: the mounds of human limbs. The bare feet, the spider-like hands.

On the table beside him—on another door beside him—a soldier was out like a snuffed candle, but Weybridge could hear the bone saw. Another doctor was shearing off the young man's arm above the elbow. Weybridge turned away and there, on rafts of straw just outside the tent, were half-dressed corpses, not yet bloated. He couldn't see their faces, but they were men from either his company or one of the other companies that had crossed the Opequon beside his. They, like him, were Vermonters. Were Vermonters.

He tried to ask if they took the hill, but the words were soft and, he feared, mangled. But a young hospital steward beside the surgeon had understood.

"Oh, Captain, we licked 'em! We got the hill. Them rebels fit like hell, but then they fell back—again," he said. The steward was little more than a boy. His face was but freckles and a teenager's pimples. Still, this was good news. Outside the tent, in the grass beyond the dead, he heard wounded men cursing and groaning.

The surgeon put his knife in his mouth, freeing his hand to feel Weybridge's forehead. Weybridge knew it would be cold and clammy to the touch. Then the physician lifted Weybridge's mangled fingers off his chest, and there was a sudden stiletto of agony up his arm and he grunted, pig-like, a reflex, and the physician was more gentle when he lowered the hand back to the table. Both surgeons leaned over his right leg, one studying the tourniquet Marsh had created from his canteen loop and observing, "Whoever did this saved your life."

Weybridge nodded. The one doctor still had his knife in his mouth. He was a pirate. A bloody, sunburned pirate. Finally, the fellow took the blade from between his teeth and said, “We’re going to give you chloroform.”

“The leg?” Weybridge asked.

The one with the spectacles lowered his ear to Weybridge’s mouth, and Weybridge managed to repeat the two syllables.

“It can’t be saved,” the surgeon told him matter-of-factly, and Weybridge saw in his mind those heaps of bloody flesh, those awful, putrescent piles of limbs. His leg would be among them. He thought of his boot with the hole in it. How he had carried on this morning, as if a boot with a hole were a trial beyond endurance.

“My hand?” he pressed.

“We’ll worry about that later.”

Later. A euphemism. They were unsure it would be an issue that any of them would ever have to deal with.

The orderly handed one of the surgeons a glass bottle with a stopper and a white strip of cloth—a shirt, once—and the physician said, “This is chloroform, Captain. When you wake up, we have opium pills.”

But would he awaken? There was so much he wanted to say, so many things to tell Emily and the boys. He wanted time to stop so he could write or dictate a letter, he needed Emily to know that she was in his thoughts if, indeed, these were his last thoughts. My love is as a fervor, longing.

No, that was wrong. He was off by a word.

His mind flipped the pages of Emily's collection of Shakespeare's sonnets, but he couldn't find the poem, it was gone. And time was the afternoon breeze that was wafting into the tent, and he was weary, wearier than he'd ever been. Already one of the surgeons was reminding the other that because of that very wind, they could not be stingy with the dose. The doctor dunked his hands in a bucket of water and dried them on his pants. And then he was uncorking the beaker and pouring the liquid onto the rag, and Weybridge saw the cloth was about to be draped upon his face and nose, and he took a deep breath, briefly surprised at how little odor there was, but the moment didn't last, because within seconds the world was black and he fell into the deep murk of dreams.

There were climbing roses. This was the first thing he saw. He blinked, and the world came into focus. Not roses. Wallpaper with roses. A curtainless window, the glass intact. A bedroom. Not the one he shared with Emily, not one he had ever seen before.

Outside the window, the sky was pale, overcast. He couldn't tell if it was morning or afternoon.

He felt a straw mattress with his right hand and then the edge of the mattress, and beside that, a hardwood floor. There was no bed, and the room was bereft of furniture. Commandeered as firewood, no doubt. He ran his tongue over his lips, and could feel how badly chapped they were.

He heard the sounds of horses racing past, dozens, and the rattle of cavalry kits.

"Captain?"

The voice was opposite the window, and he rolled his neck. There was a private he didn't recognize sitting with his back to the wall. When they made eye contact, the soldier crabwalked across the wood.

“I see you’re waking up, sir.”

Weybridge nodded, and the private took a pill from his pants pocket and said, “Doctor told me to give you this and some water if you waked up.”

If I waked up…

The words lingered inside him, even as the soldier continued to chatter and uncorked his canteen. The private put the pill in his mouth, supporting his head just enough that he could swallow it with a small gulp of water from the canteen.

“It’s opium, sir.”

Weybridge murmured a one-word question—“Where?”—stretching the single syllable into something like a sigh. His body reeked. He smelled urine and sweat.

“Rebel house. The regimental hospital seemed too far, and the colonel didn’t want a captain out in a tent in the grass. We’re in the nicest bedroom.”

Such were the privileges of being an officer. His head still in the soldier’s palm, he looked down at his body. He was covered by a wool blanket, and for a moment he was confused. There was no protuberant bump where there should have been a right foot. His eyes studied the utter flatness beside his left one, and reality unfolded before him: yes, they had cut off his right leg just above the knee. He remembered his hand, his left hand. He pulled it out from beneath the blanket, an effort that demanded more strength and coordination than he had anticipated, but it was swaddled in gauze, most of it stained yellow and red, and he wondered what was left there.

He mouthed the word water, and the soldier gave him another sip, much of which he coughed back onto his chest and the mattress, and then he lay back and once more his eyes and the young soldier’s met, and then, before he knew it was happening, he was

falling back into the warm embrace of sleep.

In the roiling sights and sounds that swamped his mind, he often lost track of what was real and what was imagined, what was occurring in this bedroom (and outside that window) versus what was but a dream. In his more lucid moments, he wondered if his nightmares might, in fact, have been memories: the sergeant from Burlington yelling that he wanted the field of dead rebels before them to extend all the way to Richmond. The Confederates had their mouths open and their mouths closed, some still had their boots and coats, and others were shoeless and shirtless. Their legs were akimbo, their arms—invariably—were spread wide, as if they were angel wings bearing them skyward to a heaven that he himself was unsure was more than a fairy tale. Their eyes were mostly open, some in resignation and some in surprise.

Sometimes he was back on the mattress on the floor, and that soldier (or someone) was spooning him broth or giving him water. Was that young hospital steward indeed in the room one time (or more, many more times), lifting the blanket and dropping carbolic acid onto the stump (which Weybridge still had not seen), unwrapping and wrapping the gauze and cotton on his left hand? Yes. He was convinced of this. The surgeon with the spectacles, too. Said something about how he wished they had better quarters for him.

He had heard the words infection and gangrene, inflammation, unsure whether the steward or the surgeon was talking to him or to someone else, and while he feared it was his own wounds he was smelling, he detected also in the room the aroma of rosewater, which must have been a delusion.

There was the stench of his own excrement.

There was, occasionally, the sound of muskets and cannon fire.

And horses and humans, of tin kits and wooden wagons.

And the thrum of voices, close but spoken from above the flat surface of a pond, while he was below it.

We can’t take him. Ambulance ride alone will damn well kill him. All we got left are them gutbusters.

Well, he can’t stay here.

Why the hell not? Does it matter if he dies here or Harper’s Ferry? We got to go. Whole goddamn army’s heading deeper into the Valley.

Harper’s Ferry. The Union garrison.

He opened an eye and tried to focus: there was that young soldier who gave him opium and water and broth. Another private beside him, heavier set, his cap still on his head. When they discovered he was watching them—though they couldn’t understand how little he really comprehended through the fever, the miasma of pain, and the medicine they were giving him for that pain—they became silent. Instantly.

“Captain. What do ya need?” one asked.

He shook his head. They couldn’t give him what he needed.

“On that plate? See, there? Them pills? Take one when the pain gets bad, sir. And that there canteen is full.”

His desire to dictate a letter to Emily returned. He curled the fingers of his right hand around an imaginary pencil or quill and mimed the motion of writing. It was an exertion that exhausted him fast, and he tried to blink away the drowsiness. He closed his eyes, telling himself it would be for but a few seconds.

But then there was silence and sleep. More sleep, a magnet that tugged him from the room and the straw mattress that had become his castle keep. More dreams. The whinny of horses. The sound of the drums. A bugle.

When he awoke again—Had it been hours? Days?—he sensed that he was alone. He looked around: he felt more alert than he had since that moment when he was telling Eustis Marsh to cord his thigh, cord it, because it was his only chance.

As he suspected, there was indeed no one there. Not a soul.

“Private?” His voice was a croak. He repeated the word, hoping to sound commanding. It carried into at least the next room, perhaps further, and there was even a hint of an echo.

Which was worrisome. Nothing like having your instincts, when they were harbingers of bad news, corroborated by fact. The house was still. Outside, he heard nothing but birds and what he supposed were squirrels in the tree outside the window. The army was gone, and they had left him here to die—or the private and steward who were supposed to stay with him had chosen to disobey orders from a commanding officer. He envisioned the one or the both of them running like hell down the road to catch up to their company, where, doubtless, they would tell everyone that Captain Weybridge had passed.

Which, actually, was the proper course of action, if he viewed their predicament objectively. Two privates against Mosby’s Rangers in the small hours of the morning? Two privates against a contingent from Virginia’s Sixth Cavalry? Not a chance. He’d heard a rumor that John Mosby and George Custer had actually hanged a few of each other’s captured men, allowing the corpses to dangle from tree limbs like Christmas decorations.

He saw the canteen and the pills and some hardtack.

He stared into the ivory ceiling. He was not angry that the soldiers had left him alone. But neither was he resigned. He was frightened. Death was coming, but it was not here yet, and it seemed clear that he would have to face it alone.

Sitting up was heavy sledding. But he did it, and now his right arm was a buttress. He removed the blanket with one hand, his left still wrapped, and decided he was not yet ready to unravel the dressing on his thigh. His stump. The colors were reminiscent of a child's drawing of a sunset, all streaks of yellow and red. But it was dry. The arterial ligatures had held. The splint was made of two pieces of dark wood, and when he studied them, he decided that once they had been parts of table legs. Sanded and stained.

Even if he unraveled the dressing, however, what would be the point? He had no ticking or bandages to replace the fabric, and he was unsure how he would reset the splint with one hand. He recalled someone tending to the stump and the splint days ago. Or had it been weeks? There were still leaves on that tree outside the window. It was days. Only…days.

His forehead, when he pressed the back of his hand against it, was cool and dry. No fever so, perhaps, no infection. At least not a bad one. Certainly not blood poisoning. Not poisoning in his bones.

He gripped the canteen between his left elbow and his rib cage, pulled out the stopper, and swallowed another pill with some water. He bit into the hardtack.

He waited, but for what he was unsure. He couldn't stay here, but neither could he leave. After all, he couldn't walk. He was not sure how he could even fashion a crutch.

He slept on the mattress on the floor and crawled to the corner by one of the room's two windows to shit and pee, but even those journeys grew infrequent when the

hardtack was gone and the canteen was empty.

And so he made a decision. His only chance at survival was capture, even if that meant the horrors of a Confederate prison camp.

But it was a dice game, because if he were found first by any of Mosby's rangers, they'd likely kill him. So, he needed to be seized by regular army. Early's soldiers.

But even if it were Mosby's guerrillas and they executed him, at least it would be a quick death. Quicker, anyway. Better than this slow hell.

He recalled the expression a West Pointer had told him one night, a phrase the other officer had heard from an ancient French general who'd given a lecture there because, fifty years earlier, the old man had served under Napoleon. The term was the mistress bullet.

A French soldier saves a bullet to kill his mistress? That's despicable, Weybridge had said, disgusted.

No, no, the West Pointer had corrected him, you have it all wrong. The French gave it that name because it was the bullet you saved for yourself when all hope was gone. The last bullet. Death with dignity. This was the bullet that would do for you the things your wife never would: that's why they called it the mistress bullet.

Well, he had no bullet. He had no pistol. And he still hoped not to die, in any event.

And so, if he could find the strength, he resolved that he would go to the other window, the one further from his excrement, and call for help.

Twice at the window he had cried out, his elbows on the sill.

Perhaps a third time. He was unsure.

The efforts had left him exhausted, and he passed out, returned to the reveries and hallucinations that marked his days and nights, and blurred the light and the dark into a morass of dusky, confounding visions. Some of it, he hoped, was the opium, but in his heart he feared it was madness.

And then, a day or so after he had swallowed the last pill, the pain became constant. The dressing on his left hand was long gone, as was his pinky and the ring finger there. The strips of flesh that linked them to his palm had just rotted away, the digits disappearing into the bedding or mattress. The middle finger was badly broken, and if he lived long enough for it to heal, which was unlikely, it would be forever deformed, a finger that hooked away from the thumb like a tree limb stretching for sun.

Sleep was fitful, his pants had grown sodden, the pain was remorseless. If he had a gun, he had now reached the point where he would end it. Why wait for the reaper? His throat was parched, and it hurt like hell the last time he had called from the window. He was no longer sure anymore whether that was yesterday or the day before. Or, perhaps, even the day before that.

Or hours ago. He just didn’t know.

He tried to focus on Emily and on his sons. He envisioned the college and Middlebury. The heart-shaped common. He thought of David Copperfield and decided Charles Dickens was wrong: there was nothing linear about memories. They were a stew and the mind blindly dipped a spoon into them, and whether you came away with potato or meat had nothing to do with the order in which the ingredients were tossed into the pot.

In the night, he heard barred owls, their cries so human: Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you? The owls, he imagined, had the faces of pale old men, their

expressions vivid and bemused. In the day, he heard the caw of crows. There was the crawk of the raven, more guttural than a crow and with a distinct rolling r, and he considered whether the sound was only in his head and he had summoned the raven from Poe. He loved Poe. He might still, if he ever had the chance to read him again.

No, he wouldn't. He wouldn't live to share Poe with his boys.

Nor Dickens.

And the loss left him despairing. His eyes welled, and with his right index finger he caught a few tears and dabbed at his chapped lips, his dry and swollen tongue. Dreams, when they came to him, were cruel, because either they were nightmares—the hail in December was comprised of Minie balls, which he couldn't evade because he had but one leg; the turkey vultures, gliding against sapphire skies, swooped down upon his left hand and gnawed at the fingers that remained—or they were beautiful recollections of Emily or his boys picnicking beside the Otter Creek, which left him equally tortured upon waking.

It was only when he saw the strange woman in the doorway, her face lit by a candle in a lantern, that he knew, finally, the delirium was ending and that he was, finally, dying.

Or, perhaps, had already died.

Death had come not with a hood and a scythe, but with a bonnet and tallow.

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Libby stood alone in the doorway after dark. She smelled the man before she saw him. She smelled the room, malodorous and bog-like. He was a dark mass on the floor, his breathing a wheeze she might have mistaken for a snore were it not so labored and sad.

She knelt before the soldier and brought the light close to his face. When he looked at her, his eyes were those of a wounded horse asking to be shot.

She heard Joseph’s shoes on the hardwood floor behind her. The two of them had come because today Sally had heard a man calling from this bedroom window. The house had gone empty that summer when it was clear to Maude Bingham that neither of her grandsons was ever coming back, and she should wait out the end of the war further from the fighting with her daughter in Richmond. She no longer wanted to manage the place all alone.

But she’d told Libby and Sally before leaving to take whatever vegetables they wanted that were left to ripen in the kitchen garden. (Those were long gone: Jubal Early’s army had taken everything within hours, except for some of the wildflowers, which neither the quartermasters nor any of the soldiers knew how to use.) This afternoon, Sally had walked the two miles to the property to harvest beebalm for the simples she crafted to combat nausea and sore throats, and to infuse the tea that Joseph liked. And though the stranger’s voice was hoarse and small, she’d heard his cries for help. Had the beebalm been even twenty yards further away, she doubted she would have noticed the fellow calling out. But even at a distance, Sally could see the man’s left hand was wounded and the fellow was badly injured. She thought, based

on the uniform shirt, he was a Yankee. She'd come straight home, and the three adults had decided, after some debate in which even Jubilee expressed her opinion, that Libby and Joseph would return to the Bingham place after dark. They all had their reasons, but two were paramount for Libby. There was the practical: he might have a weapon or ammunition. And there was the moral: when her husband had been wounded, she would have wanted someone, even a Northern woman, to provide him kindness and succor. You just can't leave a person to die.

And so here she was. Here they were.

She placed the lantern on the floor.

His sleeves indeed were blue. "You a Yankee?" she asked.

The wounded man nodded, then murmured, "Water. Please."

She could see from his face that either he'd been crying or he was sweating. For his sake, she hoped it was the former. It was chilly tonight, and if he were perspiring, it was probably a fever, and one more reason he was likely to die.

She had filled the wineskin with water before coming here, and now she uncorked it. Holding his head, her fingers lost in his hair, she dribbled a slow stream into his mouth. He coughed some of it back, but nodded in gratitude and, she supposed, because he wanted more. So, she gave him a few more drops and then lay his skull back on the mattress. She ran the lantern over his body to see where he had been wounded, fighting not to look away from his mutilated left hand, the bandages having unraveled and sitting beside the mattress now like a dead animal. She paused the light where his right leg had been amputated. Though he was still wearing his uniform shirt, his pants were folded on the floor a few feet away, where they'd likely been since he'd been brought here, and he was wearing only drawers.

“It’s bad,” Joseph whispered into her ear. “We’ll need the doctor.”

She studied the soldier’s shirt. A patch with two bars on the shoulder. He was a captain. Like her brother and like her husband.

Disgusted, she shook her head. The Northerners had left behind a captain to die, an indignity that infuriated her.

“The man’s an officer and they deserted him,” she told Joseph.

“Crime would be just as awful before God if the man was a private,” Joseph observed.

“Left him to die with no food or water.” The Yankees’ ignominy knew no bounds in her mind. This was a disgrace.

“They left some,” the dying man croaked softly, correcting her.

“How long have you been here?”

He shook his head. He had no idea.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Jonathan Weybridge. Eleventh Vermont Volunteers. Company C…” His voice trailed off.

“I’m Libby Steadman, and this is Joseph. Did they leave you a gun?”

His eyes grew a little wide, but he said nothing.

“I can’t decide if he thinks you wanna shoot him or he wants you to shoot him,” Joseph told her.

She stood and walked slowly around the room with the lantern. There was the empty plate. The empty canteen. His pants. There was the corner of the room that, for a time, he had been using in lieu of a slop jar.

“A gun?” she asked him again.

Once more, he shook his head. She glanced at Joseph, perturbed. She hadn’t realized how badly she wanted another weapon.

“Well, he’ll die if we leave him here,” she said to Joseph. She would not behave with the dishonor of the Northerners who had abandoned him. “So, we have to bring him back.”

“I agree. But he’ll probably die at your home, too—but, at least, he won’t die alone. And maybe Doc Norton—”

“Doc Norton won’t help him.”

“We can ask.”

They could, but she wasn’t sure what good would come from any plea for his help. Jeremiah Norton was closer to Leveritt Covington’s age than hers. He had lost two boys in the war and loathed Abe Lincoln more than Satan—his words. He detested the Union soldiers, and was disgusted by the way they had turned parts of the Valley to ash. She had heard that since his second son’s death at Spotsylvania in May, he’d been drinking more than any man should—though where he found the whiskey these days was a mystery to her.

“I’m guessing no one else knows he’s here,” she told Joseph. “Which is good. He should be easy enough to hide at our house. On our property.”

“No, it won’t be easy,” Joseph corrected her. “He needs medicine we don’t have. And we don’t seem to go very long these days without one of Mosby’s men or an army quartermaster comin’ by.”

She nodded. Harboring a Yankee? If someone found out, they’d hang Joseph and Sally for sure. Who could say what they would do to her and even Jubilee.

And, of course, there was the dead man Joseph had killed buried on their property, the corpse’s existence a reminder that the Northerners did not have a monopoly on roughness and barbarity. Still, they could not compound the Yankees’ crime and go home without this wounded man. She wouldn’t leave him here.

“We live up the road,” she told this Jonathan Weybridge from Vermont. “We’re going to bring you to my husband’s and my house. We have a wagon and a horse. It’s going to hurt when we carry you down the stairs. It’s going to be uncomfortable in the back of the wagon. Do you understand?”

He nodded.

It’s going to be uncomfortable. No. It was going to be excruciating. She thought of all the bags of flour she had lifted the last few years. None of it had prepared her for this.

Libby stared into the sky a few minutes later, the moon so bright it hid the stars that dared try and speckle its halo. Her husband and her brother, if they were still breathing, were seeing the same moon wherever they were.

When Sally had told Joseph and her about the soldier in the window, Libby had figured his wounds must be bad. But she hadn’t expected he would be this close to

death. She'd been caught off guard by the smells and the sights and the sheer weakness of the man. For the amount of pain he had endured and was still experiencing. Now, it all felt beyond her capacity.

She looked into the wagon where they were going to lay this Union captain, wishing she had brought more comforters or pillows. She had thought two of each would be sufficient. She leaned against the side wall, her arms across her chest, disappointed in herself. Thank God, at least it was a four-wheel wagon and not a two-wheel gig. A gig would likely have jostled him to death.

Her eyes fell on the road, and she noticed the trails the wheels had left in the dirt. Tomorrow morning, would anyone notice them and care? Would someone tonight?

She had come out here to assess how they would get the man into the back, and all she had resolved was that she would soon be naught but frustration and anger and regret.

Joseph was motioning to her from the front door, holding the lantern. He had the captain ready to bring down the stairs.

"We won't be able to carry him, but the staircase is wide. He's willin' to try and put weight on his good leg."

"Only leg," she corrected him, a reflex born of gloom.

"He'll wrap an arm around each of our shoulders. I'll take the right, since he's got no leg there."

She agreed and they walked back inside, and she was aware with each step that she had two feet. She became mindful of this reality whenever she saw a soldier who had lost a leg—and she had seen a lot the last three years.

“I reckon the hardest part will be gettin’ him up,” Joseph murmured. “He’s sittin’ now, but even that was a mighty struggle. He ain’t eaten much lately, but he’s still a big man.”

“We’ll have to navigate the stairs in the dark,” she said. “We’ll need both of our hands.”

Joseph put the lantern down in the front hallway near the base of the stairway. “It’ll help some.”

Then they climbed to the second floor and paused before the bedroom. She could see Weybridge sitting upright, his shape silhouetted by the moon. She knelt beside him.

“Do you have a haversack?” she inquired. She hadn’t seen one, but she needed to be sure.

“Gone,” he whispered.

“Is there anything here you want us to bring?”

“My pants.”

“What about a boot? For your left foot?”

“It…”

“Yes?”

“It had a hole in it,” he said, his voice still small, but there was the tiniest hint of levity in the tone, as if he found something about this idea funny.

“So, it’s gone, too?” she pressed.

“Apparently.”

She looked at Joseph and then at the captain. And then, with all the strength she had built at the gristmill since Peter had left for the war—she still couldn’t believe they’d expected he’d be gone but months—she slid underneath his left arm, and when Joseph said, “ready,” she used as much of her legs as she could, but also her back because, it seemed, that was how the body was built, and the man said nothing but she heard the pain in his breathing as she and Joseph got him onto his feet.

No. Onto his foot.

On her twentieth birthday, when she and Peter had been married barely a month, they had gone swimming in a secluded stretch of the Opequon he called the teacups.

“Teacups?” she had asked, after he had broached the idea.

“Giant ones. Smooth as the inside of bowls,” he’d said. “But each has a handle made of rock that juts out toward the riverbank.”

Over millennia too many to count, the current had crafted two, almost identical, stone basins the size of stagecoaches there, and the water swirled into them and it was cool and clean. The two of them were alone, and they dunked one another—he could just touch the bottom of one of the bowls and keep his nose above the surface, she could not—and then warmed themselves on the sun-baked slab of rock between the hollows. He put his shirt beneath her and they made love, and then, as if they were children, they slid back into the water.

For her birthday, he gave her a small gold pin with a garnet, and he gave it to her when they were walking back to the house through the woods. It had been in his

pants pocket all the time.

He had cut his foot on one of the rocks around the teacups that day, but it was only the next morning that he had understood he was going to walk with a limp for a week or two while it healed.

Now, as Libby looked upon the man prostrate in the wagon bed, his chest heaving from the agony and exertion of getting down the stairs and into the cart, she recalled how Peter coped, running the gristmill with a limp. Managing the property with a limp. Because he was on his feet so much, it had taken an extra long time to heal.

But it had healed.

When he had marched off to war, when he had marched across Virginia and Maryland and Pennsylvania, he had been fine.

She climbed onto the bench at the front of the wagon and rested her feet on the toe board.

Joseph sat beside her and took the reins. He wiped the sweat from his brow with the sleeve of his shirt. He was too old for this, she decided. She was, too. Oh, she was barely a third his age, and if she viewed her life solely by the number of days she had walked this earth, she was still young. But the war had aged her. It had aged everyone. And saving this Union soldier from Vermont? She wouldn't be surprised if she had gray in her hair before she turned twenty-five.

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Sally and Jubilee greeted them when the wagon arrived at the house. Sally told the child to wait in the doorframe, but the girl ignored her and the two of them surrounded the wagon.

By the light of her lantern, Sally saw that she was correct: the fellow she had seen in the window that day was indeed a Union soldier. He was a big man with a short, scraggly, unkempt beard the color of molasses. She could tell the beard was new, its growth likely beginning when he had been wounded. His hair, including his beard, was matted like a dying animal that no longer even tried to groom itself. Despite the chill in the night air, he was sweating, and he squinted up at her now with eyes heavy-lidded, mere slits, eyes that were beaten from exhaustion and pain.

Joseph climbed down first and helped Libby to the ground. “The ride nearly killed that man,” he told Sally, pulling her aside and speaking quietly. “I don’t know if he makes it through the night.”

“I see he lost a leg,” she said.

“And a good part of a hand. Couple fingers. He ain’t eaten in days.”

Sally turned to Libby and said, “We got a chicken we could boil.” She wanted to keep this man alive. He was wearing blue so he might be an abolitionist: the worst sort of hellhound in these parts for lots of white people, but not to her. They had five chickens left, all still laying eggs.

Libby met her gaze, and Sally couldn't tell what she was thinking. Then the mistress of the house, still so young in Sally's mind, nodded. "Let's get him inside first."

"Where?"

Libby had been thinking about this all the way here, the reality of what she was doing driven home each time the Yankee gasped or cried out against the agony from the jostling wagon. They couldn't leave him on the first floor. She never knew when either regular army or Mosby's men might ride by. But scaling the stairs would be harder than climbing a mountain. And even the second floor didn't ensure his— their —safety. Still, it was safer than the first floor.

"My room," she said. "My bed."

"Your bed?" Sally asked, incredulous. She could not have heard the woman correctly.

"Yes. Someone comes looking for him? No decent soldier would dare peer into my bedroom."

"A lot of Mosby's men ain't decent," Sally reminded her.

"No," Libby agreed. She knew this firsthand. "But it seems the best of our bad options."

"Where are you gonna sleep?" her niece asked, but Libby could tell from the tone that the girl knew. The child would have a roommate. They would share her small bed.

"Why don't we keep him in the parlor for now?" Joseph suggested. "If he's alive in the morning, we'll get him upstairs then."

Libby paced and found herself staring into the back of the wagon. She could see

through the ticking and bandages that Weybridge's stump had started to bleed. His left hand, too. And so she relented. The parlor was probably a better idea than trying to ascend the stairs after dark with close to two hundred pounds of dying human flesh. They'd get him inside, kill one of their remaining hens, feed him, and see if he made it to sunrise.

In the night, Libby sat on her bed with her bare feet dangling above the floor, the lantern still lit, and wondered what Peter would do—and what he would think of what she was doing now for this Union captain. The moon was close to setting. It was almost four in the morning.

Northern women were supposed to be coarse. She had only met a few, and, in all fairness, they were more judgmental than vulgar. But if Peter had ever been left behind to die in Maryland or Pennsylvania, she believed the women there were enough like her that they would tend to him. Care for him. Nurse him. You couldn't leave a man to die alone.

Peter, she supposed, would expect the same of her in regard to this soldier.

The bleeding from Weybridge's leg and his hand had been easy to stop, once they had him lying quietly on comforters and pillows on the parlor floor. He ate small pieces of the chicken and then bigger bites. She wasn't sure what else she would need to help him heal if he were still alive when she woke up. She wished they had alcohol, both for his pain and for the wounds. They didn't, and she wasn't sure where she could get some.

She brought her right foot up to the mattress and, in the moonlight, stared at her toes and ran her fingers up to her knee, the hem of her shift sliding down to her hip. She was fascinated by the bones and touched them now in ways that she never had before, fascinated by the smallness of the ones in her feet, the roundness of her kneecap, and the way her shin exuded both strength and fragility at once. How did one exist

without those bones? Without half a leg?

But, somehow, men did. Women, too, though she had never seen a woman who was missing a leg.

Of course, women were not subject to the belch of cannons and the horrors of rifles.

Peter had been wounded charging into canister fire. He did not write her that. She learned that from a friend of their family in Staunton who had a cousin in the Second Virginia.

When she had left Weybridge, he'd been asleep. His breathing was less labored. He'd kept down the chicken she had fed him.

She finally concluded that it was more likely than not he would still be alive in the morning.

Which was good.

Mostly.

It would also be the start of myriad complications she had not foreseen when she had awoken some twenty-one hours ago, her life already so much harder than she had imagined when she and Peter had fallen in love. Those days? A lifetime ago, it seemed. A life she could recall, but no longer fathom.

Joseph entered Libby's house just before dawn to check on the bluebelly. See if he was breathing. He moved with stealth because it was only hours ago that he and Sally had left Libby and the soldier, and he hoped that she and Jubilee were still asleep. He himself had only dozed the last couple of hours. Sally, too.

At first, he was unsure if Weybridge had survived the night when he gazed down at the man on the floor. The comforter atop him wasn't moving. He squatted and peered at him, the sun still so low in the east that the room remained dusky.

The soldier reeked.

If he was dead or died today, it would be but one small tragedy in the midst of many. They would clean the bedding, and, perhaps, heaven would have one more angel. The firmament had been overrun with angels the last three years.

Abruptly, however, the man on the floor coughed, small but consequential. His eyes remained shut. But he was indeed alive, and Joseph exhaled. He hadn't realized his anxiety had him holding his breath.

And an idea came to him. Before they moved him upstairs, assuming he survived the coming hours, Joseph would bathe him and shampoo his hair. Trim that beard. Maybe even get out the tooth powder and a brush and clean his teeth.

And though Libby disagreed, he was going to broach once again the idea of approaching the doctor. He had an inkling of how they might bribe a scalawag like Doc Norton for his help.

Jubilee was aware of the light in her room. The sound of the chickens outside. She could tell she had slept later than usual; of course, she had been up so much later than usual.

She sat up in bed, remembering the night before.

The man on the floor below her, the stranger in the parlor, was her enemy. Her father and her uncle were fighting men just like him.

But she understood her aunt's predicament. She herself couldn't have left the man, even if he was a jackal, to die alone at Mrs.Bingham's place.

She had chores to do, and, she supposed, the jackal—and that was what she was going to call him, even to his face, she decided, if he lived—would make for even more work. And so she went to the slop jar and did her business, and then threw some water from the porcelain basin on her dresser onto her face. As she got dressed, she looked at her bed, aware that tonight or tomorrow, the jackal would have her aunt and uncle's big bed to himself, and she would be sharing her small one with Libby.

There was an injustice to this, but it was a minor one. The last few years, there had been far worse ones, including her mother's death from what the doctor had said was malaria, but no one else caught it, and so even now she had her doubts. But, somehow, her mother had died while battling the seemingly incompatible, dueling symptoms of fever and chills. Ague. That was the word.

She'd died in her sleep, while Jubilee had cried alone in the next room, because the doctor would not allow her near the bed, and her father was fighting far, far away.

Her Aunt Libby wasn't that much older than she was now when first her own mother and then, a few years later, her own father had died. She didn't speak of them much. Jubilee found this baffling. She loved quoting her own mama, even if she was usually making the quotes up. It kept the woman's face fresh and her voice alive. And given the way the war always seemed about to knock on your door, how the only news was bad news, the good memories otherwise could get buried like the dead.

Not forgotten, certainly. That never happened.

Jubilee had a feeling that her aunt carried her memories inside her, one more great burden. Maybe the woman was afraid to talk about her missing husband or her own dead parents. Maybe she was afraid that speaking too much of the deceased would

bring all that sadness and grief to the surface like algae. Pond scum. And the bad, bad air that killed people.

The simples for pain were lavender, rosemary, and mint. Sally had had the most success against body aches and sore muscles with rosemary tinctures, but all she had now was one made from lavender she used for headaches that she began steeping the last day of August. She liked the leaves to soak in vinegar for months, not weeks, but it would have to do.

Still, she knew, it would not do much. They needed bark juice—hard liquor—or opium, and they had neither.

Nevertheless, midmorning she and Libby sat on the floor in the parlor, surrounding the Federal, his head propped up by an additional pillow from Jubilee's bed, and spooned him lavender oil and broth from the chicken they had boiled last night. He was weak, but he'd improved overnight, at least a little bit. He seemed stronger, though it was clear the pain was excruciating. He murmured that his fingers—his hand, he meant, since he was motioning at digits that were gone—hurt as much as the remains of his leg.

Sally hated to see him suffering. She hated to see any creature, man or animal, so uncomfortable, but the agonies of this one in particular caused her the same frustration she'd experienced when her children had been sick or when her parents had been dying. The anxiety was not as deep, nor would be the grief if he died. Not at all. But this was a man fighting for her people, and she wanted to do right by him. God's plan was what it was, and her simples would not change His mind or the trajectory of this Northerner's death, if that was what God envisioned. Nevertheless, her inability to mitigate this soldier's discomfort and misery was vexing her. If he were a horse, they would have shot him by now, an end that, arguably, was more merciful than prolonging his torment.

Instead, later she and Joseph and Libby would begin the arduous process of bringing the man upstairs to Libby's bedroom. Jubilee was stripping the bed now, and Joseph was fashioning a litter from grain bags and two of the wooden staffs they used to clear the sluice that steered rushing water from the Opequon into the mill. They were going to carry him on the makeshift stretcher up the stairway. It was one thing to allow gravity to help Joseph and Libby bring him down the stairs at Maude Bingham's; Sally knew it would be quite another to expect that he would be able to ascend the steps with but a pair of old people, a young woman, and one weak leg to shoulder his weight.

Abruptly he gagged on the broth and spat it out, shaking his head in apology. Then he sunk into the pillow, his eyes closed against the pain, the indignity, the shame.

Yes, he was alive.

But only just.

"He's a jackal," Jubilee told her Aunt Libby in the kitchen. The soldier was in a fitful sleep again on the parlor floor.

"You've never even seen a jackal," her aunt said, focused on the papers before her with the notes she kept for the quartermasters who descended upon the mill. Jubilee knew her aunt was paid—when she was paid—with Confederate bluebacks, money that Libby said was best used as kindling to start a fire. That was its value. But it was the currency that was used in Berryville, and it was better than giving the flour away, though Jubilee knew her aunt had been miffed by how little even the army now paid her.

"No," Jubilee admitted. "I ain't ever seen a jackal. But I still know you can't trust 'em." She grinned in a way that her father used to call demonic, and because he laughed approvingly when he said it, she did it often, widening her eyes for effect.

“And what has this Federal done to earn your distrust?”

“That’s like askin’ what’s a jackal done to earn your distrust!” She understood on some level the circular illogic to what she was saying, but she knew both that there was truth to her argument, and, more importantly, that she was entertaining her aunt. And she liked that. “It’s in their nature, Aunt Libby. Jackals are just born bad. Criminal. Like that man in the parlor.”

“Born bad: because he’s from the North?”

“He’s on our land. He don’t have business in Virginia, ’cept burnin’ fields and killin’ our boys.” When the words were out there, she feared she had crossed a line, moving from levity to the realities of war. But her aunt was too preoccupied to feel an emotional twinge.

“Your uncle: did he have business in Pennsylvania?” she asked, speaking like a schoolteacher.

“The thing about a jackal is this: you can’t turn your back on one. Always keep eye contact.”

“Where did you hear such nonsense?”

The honest answer would have been nowhere. But whenever she said something outrageous, she’d learned to say that her mother had told her, because her mother had died tragically, and so no one questioned her—even if, often enough, they knew she was lying. She had milked her mother’s death too many times to count, and she believed this was her due. “My mama,” answered Jubilee. The word mama, when she uttered it, always elicited a small pang.

But her aunt, upon hearing the word, finally looked at her, just as Jubilee expected

she would. The woman raised a single eyebrow, her left, something Jubilee herself could not do. (It tormented her that she couldn't.) "Your mother knew a great many things and I loved her."

"But…"

"But, like me, she was no expert on jackals."

"Any wild animal, then."

"I don't think the man—"

"Ol' Billy Yank."

"Could hurt a kitten right now."

"I'll watch him."

"You do that," her aunt said. Then she asked, "Is my room ready for him?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And is your room ready for me?"

Jubilee knew it was not. First she had lost her home, when she was forced to come live here after her mother had died. The bedroom there that she treasured. Oh, if her daddy survived the war, she'd get it back. But, for now, it was gone. And now she was about to lose half her bed. Her privacy. Nevertheless, she did what she was told and went upstairs. She made the bed for the jackal, and started to move her aunt's clothing and perfume and jewels from the woman's room to hers. But then she stopped. Her aunt's things were sitting in piles in the hallway. There they were, the

corsets and cloaks, the crinolines and caps, the camisoles and cotton stockings and dresses and gloves and boots and shoes. She had not yet made room for any of it in her own small dresser.

Because it was an impossible task. Her aunt had a massive armoire and a wall with a row of pegs. Her aunt had a dresser with six drawers. Her own dresser had but three.

Which was when an idea came to her, and she raced back downstairs to the kitchen.

“Aunt Libby?”

“Yes?”

“We’re movin’ the jackal into your room ’cause nobody would dare look for him in there.”

“Correct.”

“Well, he stinks. They’ll smell him in Berryville. You can’t hide stink.”

“We’ll clean him up. Joseph will. I assure you, as that soldier is now, he would be most unwelcome upstairs.”

“Anyway, suppose Mosby’s people do come here and search the house. Search my room. If they see all your clothes there, they’ll know something’s wrong. And there ain’t room in my dresser for all you got. You got—”

“You’re right,” her aunt said. “You’re absolutely right. Move only my jewelry into your room.”

Jubilee stood up a little straighter. This was a thrilling victory. Not only would she

preserve a modicum of her life as she knew it—her things, few as they were, would remain sacrosanct—but clearly her aunt hadn’t completely lost her mind. She knew not to leave this Federal jackal alone with her garnet pin and pearls and gold ring.

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Bumblebees, Weybridge thought.

There were bumblebees on the drapes in this room, the curtains billowing in a breeze.

Once, when the world had been awash in bullets—Welden Railroad, June23—Marsh had called them bumblebees.

Get your ass down, Captain, them bumblebees will kill ya!

They'd been cut to pieces. When it was over, a couple of soldiers had draped empty sacks and rags over the faces of the dead on the battlefield. It was, Weybridge supposed, an act of grace for the dead and an act of mercy for the living.

Now he stared up into the ceiling in the parlor. Soon, these people were going to bring him upstairs to the woman's bedroom. He understood that he had to allow this—have her evicted from her bed—to keep them safe. Because his very presence was a bomb. He wanted to tell them how sorry he was that he was a burden, express his gratitude that they were trying to save him, but it was a task beyond his ken right now to share more than a few words before either exhaustion, pain, or despair stifled him. The Negro woman had been giving him teaspoons of a lavender tincture, but he had no idea if it was helping. Would the waves of white-hot agony that washed over his leg and caused shuddering paroxysms of pain be worse without it? He'd never know. Same with the lights-out spikes that shot up his left arm from the remnants of his fingers, leaving dancing white lights on the backs of his eyelids. He had aches and sores from lying on the floor, from his immobility, from the fact, he supposed, that

his body was dying.

When he opened his eyes, he was no longer alone. There, kneeling beside him, was that man named Joseph. Weybridge supposed the fellow a slave, what the white woman might call—a euphemism—a house servant.

“You ate good,” the man said.

Weybridge blinked, recalling the tiny bits of chicken and the broth. More this morning. Some of that breakfast, he knew, did not stay down, one more embarrassment in a parade of humiliations.

“I built a stretcher,” the fellow continued. “I think we can all carry you upstairs. It’ll hurt less than what we did last night.”

He tried to smile, but there was one of those barbs up his thigh and he winced.

“Don’t talk,” said Joseph. “Before we put you in a lady’s bed, I’m goin’ to clean you up. Shampoo your hair. Make sure you don’t got lice. You won’t smell as nice as one of my Sally’s tinctures, but you’ll be clean. Cleaner, anyway. And I’m goin’ to shave you. That okay?”

He nodded. He watched Joseph scoot back with more agility than he expected from a man his age, and then push beside him a basin. “This is warm water. Was hot water. But still warm. You haven’t felt warm water on you in forever, have you?”

“No,” he said listlessly.

Joseph had a washcloth and a towel, and the water indeed felt heavenly on his face and his right hand. His good hand.

“I won’t get soap in your eyes, don’t worry,” the man reassured him. Weybridge allowed Joseph to treat him like a baby. He had no other choice. The few times Emily had washed his hair, it had been a prelude to sex: he’d washed hers, too. He couldn’t remember his mother washing his hair as a boy, and he wondered whether she had been as gentle as Joseph. He doubted it: she would have been scrubbing the scalp of an energetic child, not a half-dead soldier with but one leg and eight fingers.

The man laid his head on another towel on the comforter on the floor and, his own hands lathered in the soap, began to scrub Weybridge’s hair. As he worked, he was saying something about a doctor, but the words were but a stream that, like the water from the basin or on the washcloth, washed over Weybridge, the syllables the comforting babble of a brook.

Later, after Joseph had left him alone in the parlor, a word came to him: fraternization. Weybridge believed the penalty, if found guilty in a court-martial, was two years’ confinement. But he also knew that sometimes the soldiers were just shot. Or hanged.

Certainly, fraternization happened, especially during a long battle or siege. It was an acknowledged secret that Union men would meet up with rebels in no-man’s-land and exchange coffee for tobacco or newspapers. The rebs loved maple sugar, so Vermonters would sometimes write home asking their families to send them some, because a little maple sugar could be bartered for a lot of tobacco. Occasionally, the rival pickets lowered their guns and traded hardtack for Johnny cakes—neither was especially valued by most soldiers, but sometimes it was worth swapping barely edible crackers made of wheat for ones as likely to break a tooth made of corn—or share news of a nonmilitary nature. Horse racing. Music. Whether the wildlife around them in the dark included wolves and bears or merely foxes and squirrels.

He knew that no Union tribunal would accuse him of fraternizing with the enemy. It was this woman and her family he was worried about.

For the first time, he pondered where her husband was. A soldier was the likely answer. That girl he had seen: was she the woman's younger sister? The child was too old and the woman too young for them to be mother and daughter. Who else knew he was here, in this house?

He grew alert when, outside, he heard wagons on the road and men, likely teamsters, driving the horses on. He waited for them to pass by the property, but they didn't. They stopped within earshot, and his heart started to beat a little faster. These were probably Confederate soldiers. At least two, perhaps as many as four. Because it was clear there were two wagons. Among the voices were Joseph's and the woman's. Libby's. The pair must have been nearby or even expecting these men.

He tried to listen more carefully, even sitting up on his right forearm, enduring spurs of pain throughout his body. He scanned the room for a weapon, perhaps a fireplace poker, though he knew he was deluding himself. He hadn't the strength to swing a wrought-iron bar, and he was unable to stand. What would he do, trip his assailants?

His best hope, if the soldiers came inside, was that they ended it quickly for him with a bullet in the head.

But what would they do to the woman in whose parlor he slept last night and among whose comforters and pillows he was right now oozing pus? To the Negro man who had washed him and trimmed his beard? To that man's wife? To the child—that girl?

The voices receded, but the teamsters weren't leaving. At least not yet. He heard the occasional thud of what, in his befuddled mind, sounded like corpses being tossed into the back of a wagon. But it couldn't be that. There hadn't been a skirmish here. At least, he didn't believe so. But time remained a mystery he could no longer parse. He'd been confident only moments ago that he'd been here only one night, but now he was no longer sure even of that.

And then he heard the woman's voice and one of the men's, and his fear receded. They were discussing, of all things, flour and payment. It was civilized: she knew these soldiers, and those thumps he had heard were sacks of flour. There must have been a gristmill near this house, and the woman must have been helping to manage it.

Well.

This was the breadbasket of the Confederacy. It seemed that the teamsters had been sent by an army quartermaster. The idea of entering the house hadn't even occurred to them.

He was surprised that Libby was running the mill, but not dramatically so. Yes, she was young, but she was clearly tenacious and resourceful. After all, he was alive today at least in part thanks to her. Still, the reality was not lost on him that the woman who was saving his life also fed the very same people who had shot off his leg and a chunk of his left hand.

In any other war, this would have been absurd.

But in this conflict?

It almost made sense.

He lay down again and grimaced against the relentless ache where fingers once met his palm and where his thigh once met a knee.

When he awoke, it was still daylight, but the sun was lower. His eyes moved from the window and the drapes, and then he saw her: the girl. She was sitting in the easy chair, using crewel to embroider a handkerchief.

"I didn't know jackals spent so much time sleepin'. Lazy beasts you are," she said,

not gazing up from her work but aware he had opened his eyes.

“So far today, I have moved everything my aunt owns out of her bedroom and then moved it all right back into her bedroom. Yes, back. I have gotten my room ready for her, because she’s goin’ to move in with me. I weeded around the last of them turnips and carrots we got in the garden—the ones we get to keep, not sell for almost nothing to the army or give for free to them Mosby men when they come by to torment us—and made seven trips with the yoke to the well. Seven. I got us our eggs. I fed the chickens and the horses and the cow. I—”

“You milk the cow?” he asked, his voice guttural and soft.

“She don’t milk herself!”

“Of course.”

“This is the first time I have sat down almost all day. And you, Mr.Jackal? You just sleep and sleep and sleep. And when you ain’t sleepin’, you’re getting’ all prettied up by Joseph—who has much more important things to do—and still, you are just stainin’ that good comforter with all your pus and blood.”

“I’ll try to bleed less.” Her eyes were even rounder than his older boy’s. They were great brown and black and white globes that lived to express indignation and ire. She was a wealth of protests and gripes, and he realized that despite the fact she was trying to shame him (and succeeding), he was enjoying her monologues. He liked, to use one of his wife’s favorite words, her sass.

“And who do you think emptied your slop jar?” she asked him.

“I’m…sorry,” he murmured, mortified. He barely remembered using it.

“My aunt one time and me two times. That’s who! And you have the trots, Jackal, the worst trots I ever seen. You should just be livin’ outside in the privy.”

The degradations of dying. What was that expression for men laid up with diarrhea or dysentery? They don’t have the guts to fight.

But now he knew the girl’s relationship to the woman, though it only suggested even more questions, the foremost one being this: Where were her own parents? What had happened to them in the cauldron of war?

“Where is your aunt now?” he asked.

“She ain’t here. But don’t get any ideas, Jackal. I can take care of myself.”

He felt the tremors of a grin. Yes, it was evident that she could. He didn’t think there was deep malevolence in the girl’s name for him: after all, she’d been sitting here with him, likely because one of the grown-ups had told her to watch him and let them know if he took a turn for the worse. Now that he was awake, he was, it seemed, her entertainment.

“She and Joseph are fetchin’ the doctor. Doc Norton. They’re hopin’ he’s not too drunk to help you, but I told them he’s probably ’bout as sober as you need to keep a jackal alive. Besides, who’s got whiskey? We don’t. He don’t. At least not much. Which is why what they’re doin’ shows neither my aunt nor Joseph got any horse sense left. None. Joseph’s big idea? Get so much whiskey and so much medicine from your jackal’s nest at Harper’s Ferry that they can bribe Doc Norton to keep you alive and keep his mouth shut that you’re here. And Aunt Libby is goin’ along with it!”

Geography and distance had grown blurry in the last few days. But the Union garrison and Sanitary Commission at Harper’s Ferry were at least twenty miles

distant. Maybe thirty. Land controlled either by Jubal Early or John Mosby. Even if the turnpike weren't scarred by battle and rains and the endless movement of armies, it would take at least four or five hours to get there. They'd have to hope their luck prevented marauders from spotting them or pickets from shooting them. The journey would be madness even if they set out at dawn. To leave in the afternoon and make most of the trip there and back after dark? They wouldn't stand a chance.

And, even if they made it, why in the world would the Union soldiers give a Confederate woman whiskey and medicine, and send her back across the lines? They wouldn't. They'd suppose it was for wounded rebels.

He took a deep breath, gathering himself, and managed to ask, "They're not going there now, are they?"

"What, don't jackals have ears? 'Course not. I told you, 'cept it seems you don't pay attention, they're gettin' Doc Norton. He lives in the village, not even a mile past the Covingtons'."

He had no idea who the Covingtons were, but he didn't imagine he was supposed to. The girl was content to talk.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Jubilee."

"I like that name. Leviticus. Coleridge."

"I ain't met them."

"You will," he said. "My name is Jonathan. But you can call me Jackal."

“I plan to.”

“How many of you live here?”

She shook her head. “That is a military secret. I ain’t no spy who’s goin’ to tell you something like that.” Then she put down her crewel work and scooted over to him, sitting back on her heels. She stared at him. “I must admit, I thought you was whipped this morning. But you ain’t, are you, Jackal?”

He took this in: she thought he was going to live.

Or, at least, he had a chance.

And this gave him more comfort than he might have expected a few minutes ago.

Did he doze after the girl had left? He might have, he thought, but if he had, it had been brief. He heard in the distance the sound of cannons, and he grew alert. The shelling wasn’t why he had woken up: it wasn’t that close. But he recognized the sounds, and it was close enough. And it was considerably more than a skirmish.

His mind went first to his men, to friends like Eustis Marsh, the lieutenant who had put the tourniquet on his thigh. Were they there? It was possible, and the idea that the 11th Vermont was involved caused him to fret. So many of those boys had been safely in the forts around Washington just that spring, and now they were, once more, in the raging crucible of battle, a world of chaos and smoke and, he knew firsthand, anarchic slaughter and pain.

And he thought of the woman who had brought him here, now retrieving, on his behalf, a doctor.

“Canister?” the doctor asked, smelling the wound on his leg and then probing it with

his fingers.

“I think so,” Weybridge answered, flinching at the touch. Occasionally, he—all of them—could still hear cannonade.

“Very little foreign matter in what’s left. No uniform. No lead. That’s good. Probably why the infection was less ferocious. I see they used silk to sew up the blood vessels and the flap. We often have to use horsehair,” he muttered. “Their work was professional. Nice sutures. Did they drop morphine where they sawed—or on the wound on your hand?”

“I don’t know.”

“The fact you don’t know means they probably did.”

He put a stethoscope against Weybridge’s chest and listened. Told him to breathe. Then the physician held his remaining foot in both hands, murmured that it felt healthy and the circulation seemed good, and checked his pulse. When he was through, he took a step back and looked at Libby. “You know you are aiding and abetting the enemy,” he said, irked, his tone clipped. “The Yankees right now are fighting just outside of Winchester.”

“I couldn’t very well leave him to die,” Libby responded.

“You could. You chose not to. Soldiers die by the hundreds every day. Some days, perhaps this day, by the thousands. We’ve all lost—”

“There was no need for this one to die, too.”

“Need? Our lives, because of men like him”—and he pointed at Weybridge, his eyes narrowing, his face curdling—“are nothing but need.”

Weybridge could tell that Doc Norton was older than his father back in Vermont. He was a slender, still hard-charging man with a great shock of white hair, a manicured Dutch beard also the color of snow, and a spider's web of thin red lines spreading from the bridge of his nose across his face. His eyes were bloodshot, his eyelids loose like empty sacks. Weybridge, recalling what Jubilee had told him, was surprised that he didn't smell whiskey on the physician when the man was examining him. He seemed sober and competent, if rather aggressive with his touch: he had no inclination toward gentleness when he explored the effectiveness of Confederate artillery on Weybridge's hand or the work of the Union surgeons on the remains of his leg.

The fellow leaned against the wall beside the window, the sun almost behind the trees, speaking to the other three adults as if Weybridge weren't present. "The only reasonable course is to tell the army you have him. Let an army doctor tend to him. If, by some miracle, he lives, then they can send him to a camp with other Yankee prisoners."

"I'm not doing that. He's better today than yesterday. Already he's improving," Libby countered.

"Because you got food and water into him. Maybe his improvement will continue. And maybe it won't."

"You said there was good pus."

"Laudable pus, Libby. The term is laudable pus."

"Fine."

"He still needs more than I can do for him with what I have. If I had any common sense left, any at all, I'd turn you all in."

“But you won’t.”

“Don’t be so sure. It would be for your own good, because if I don’t? He’s either going to die or someone will find out you’re harboring him. The man’s a Lincoln hireling.”

“We have a plan.”

“For what? To get Joseph and Sally hanged? To get yourself sent to prison?”

Weybridge saw Sally flinch when she heard that. “The doctor’s right,” he said, his voice a croak, as he tried to project. It was hard to fathom how once he could command his men above the din of battle and, before that, be heard in even the most cavernous lecture halls at the college. “Turn me in.”

The physician looked down at him. “Well, the Yankee is wiser than the people who saved him.”

“No one’s going to turn you in,” Libby said.

Weybridge shook his head. They must.

“Doc Norton,” said Joseph, “you heal people. It’s what you do. You—”

“I can’t heal him. I don’t have the right medicines.”

“We can get them.”

“How? How in the world would you be able to round up the very things that I and the Confederate Army lack?”

“Harper’s Ferry.”

The physician looked back and forth between Joseph and Libby. “Suddenly, Libby, you’re a Union sympathizer?”

“Of course not.”

“You think you’re going waltz into the Union stockade and leave with whatever you like? And how would you even get there with—”

“Winchester’s west of us. Harper’s Ferry is northeast. Besides, the bluebellies have been fighting in and around Winchester since, it seems, this war began. This battle is just one more round in a boxing match that’s been going on practically since Peter left.”

“You’re set on this, aren’t you?”

“You know I am. And you know I’m not being unreasonable.”

“Actually, Libby, I don’t know that. I know only that you’ve been headstrong since you came here.”

“I’ve been headstrong since I was born, Jeremiah. It’s why that mill still runs and I can help feed our boys.”

He shook his head ruefully.

“This man is a Northern captain,” she said. “One of theirs, I know. But that also means, yes, at Harper’s Ferry we’d try and get you the things you need. Whatever you ask for. We would make it”—and she paused ever so briefly—“worth your while.”

“You insult me. I’m a doctor. If I could save him, I would,” he said, but his voice betrayed him. He had heard something in Libby’s entreaty that intrigued him.

“I didn’t mean to suggest you wouldn’t. But think of all the good you could do right here if you had whiskey for your patients. If you had the right medicines.”

Weybridge was impressed by her skills as a negotiator but still thought she shouldn’t take risks on his account. “Libby, don’t,” he told her. But it was as if he weren’t there.

“I’d need more than whiskey,” Norton said.

“Of course. Tell us what you need, and—”

“They killed my two boys,” he reminded her, cutting her off.

“I know, Jeremiah,” Libby murmured. “I know. I’m asking a lot. But not everyone has to die. And, someday, this war will end.”

“If Lincoln wins in November, then the war is lost,” the doctor said. “Who knows what the Federals will do to us after that.”

“I agree.”

“If you bring me whiskey—and other medicine—and I try to help this captain, you will need to vouch for me. You and this Yankee, if he’s still alive, both will. Speak to my character and what I risked to try and save his life.”

“Certainly.”

“Obviously, I hope Lincoln loses.”

“Obviously.”

He ran his fingers through the beard along his chin. “The surgeons who debrided the man’s wounds did a good job. There’s inflammation, of course, but no sign of putrefaction. I suppose there’s still a chance of pyemia.”

“Blood poisoning?”

“That’s right. But I don’t think that’s likely.”

“This all sounds very promising.”

“We’ll see.” He rolled his neck and glanced once more at the man on the floor. “I would need the following: Lint. Carbolic acid. Iodine. Morphine. Materials for decent splints. And, yes, whiskey. A good deal of whiskey,” he told her, tapping out on his fingers what he deemed essential. “Our own soldiers in the Valley aren’t getting most of those things. Some of the boys getting shot right now. Our own women and children don’t get them. So, add to the list potassium iodide and castor oil. You would do us all a great service if, somehow, you actually could retrieve those items from Harper’s Ferry.”

“I’m willing to try.”

“Maybe even bromine and chloroform. I’m not a surgeon, but if you were able to acquire some, our army could surely use it. I haven’t seen chloroform in these parts since Stonewall Jackson captured a supply train in Winchester, and that was a long, long time ago.”

“I can ask.”

“And quinine. Quinine, too.”

“Won’t they know a lot of that isn’t for their captain?”

“They might. They might not. Depends on who you’re talking to. The chloroform is the one to avoid if they have doubts. But if the infection goes beyond his hand and leg, he’ll die. So, things like carbolic acid and iodine and whiskey—plenty of whiskey—are critical.”

“We could leave before sunup tomorrow,” Joseph said. “Be back before day’s over.”

“If you’re lucky,” Norton reminded them. “If you’re not attacked on the way there. If the Yankees let you return. For all you know, if you even get there, you’ll be in the Union stockade by sunset. Maybe you’ll be fortunate enough to get the same room as John Brown before they moved him to Charles Town.”

“I understand the risks,” said Libby.

“And yet you still want to do this? Your husband—”

“My husband is the reason I’m doing this,” she snapped. “I’d want a Union wife to do the same thing for him. I’d expect it. This war hasn’t turned us all into animals. At least not yet.”

“Well. Tell the bluebellies not to stint on the bark juice. I will need plenty.”

“Of course, you will,” Libby agreed.

“One more thing,” the doctor said.

She waited.

“Get this man off the floor. And get him hidden.”

“We will,” Libby told him, nodding, pretending neither suggestion had crossed her or Joseph’s minds, or that Joseph hadn’t already constructed a stretcher to bring the patient up the stairs.

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Libby stood in the doorway, a candle in a tin holder in her hand, and stared at the man in her bed. The stretcher had made easy work of carting Weybridge up the stairs hours ago. Once more it was quiet in Winchester, the fighting done for the day. Perhaps for a while. Somehow, the servants always knew first what had occurred at the battles in the Valley, and the servants who worked the Covington plantation had told Joseph and Sally that this was no mere skirmish, but it was over now. She hoped so. She hoped so for a great many reasons, but mostly because she still planned to head northeast tomorrow to Harper's Ferry.

The Yankee was sound asleep. He'd eaten the catfish that Joseph had caught for dinner, but, again, he'd vomited some of it back up. Maybe most of it. A setback, for sure. Unless, perhaps, Vermonters just didn't appreciate catfish. Maybe that was it. Perhaps Sally could hook some more while she and Joseph were gone tomorrow, and this time it would be agreeable to him. The truth was, they ate a lot of fish these days, because the armies—the North some years in this war, the South in others—commandeered almost any farm animal they saw with four legs. The only reason they still had two horses was because of the mill. Once they'd had four cows and a steer. Now they had just the one.

Thank God a mill needed running water, because it meant that they lived by a river and, thus, had access to fish.

She went to the bed and watched the coverlet rise and fall atop Weybridge's chest. He was a handsome man cleaned up, even though his face had been hollowed by his ordeal. Once, she and Peter had slept beneath that light quilt in this very bed. The

Yankee was wearing one of her husband's nightshirts.

Peter was, she had told the physician, the reason why she was going to Harper's Ferry: she would want someone to do for her husband exactly what she was doing for Weybridge. But there was more to it than that, an idea she had been turning around in her head almost since they had brought him here. Perhaps she could use this man as barter with the Yankees or, at least, as a sign of her goodwill. In return for saving him (or trying her best to save him), maybe they would use their boundless resources to find her husband and free him. Send him home to her.

Or, if nothing else, find out for her what had happened to him.

She put her free hand on Weybridge's forehead, relieved to find it cool. She was about to turn away when he opened his eyes.

"Shhhhhh," she murmured. "Go back to sleep."

He looked up at her and then around the room. "I forgot…"

"Yes?"

"I forgot where I was."

Abruptly he flinched and shut tight his eyes. When he reopened them, he apologized.

"For what?"

"For…wincing. I alarmed you."

"Hardly."

“I think I made a face my boy makes.”

“You have a son?”

“Two.”

“They must be young.”

“Five and three. You?”

“No children. Just my niece. My brother’s girl. You must be tired. Go back to sleep.”

He stared up at the top of the canopy, and she could tell he was trying to remember something. “Whatever it is, it’ll keep,” she whispered.

Then, after a deep breath that caused him to shudder on the exhalation, he whispered back, “Lord that lends me life…lend me a heart with thankfulness.”

“I don’t recognize that Bible verse.”

“Shakespeare.”

“Play or sonnet?”

“Play. And you don’t recall it because I butchered it. I’m missing words.”

“I haven’t read much Shakespeare. But some. You’re a teacher, aren’t you?”

“A professor.”

“Ah. I insulted you.”

He managed the smallest of smiles. “It takes more than that to insult me. And I had only been doing it a few years when I enlisted.”

“I’m glad I didn’t offend you. Now, you need rest.”

“This bed…”

She waited.

“With the Shakespeare. All I meant was…was I want to thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

He nodded and then shut his eyes and, almost instantly, once more was asleep.

It dawned on her, after she left him and closed the bedroom door, that among all the preparations that she and Joseph had made for tomorrow’s journey, they’d forgotten one important chore: asking the captain if he had any proof of his identity they could present at Harper’s Ferry. Credentials, of some sort. They’d neglected this task, and she considered whether to wake the soldier and ask him what he might suggest. But she recalled that his clothes were behind the house under an eave, in an empty washing tub. Tomorrow, Sally was planning to clean them. Libby wondered what she might find in his shirt or pants pocket. She decided to search them and only awaken the Vermonter if there was nothing in his uniform and she had to.

When she started toward the stairs, there was Jubilee beside her.

“I thought you were asleep,” Libby said, hoping the fact she was startled was not apparent.

“No.” The girl motioned at the door behind which the soldier was sleeping and asked,

“He still breathin’?”

“He is.”

“You were just in there makin’ sure so you don’t get yourself killed going to Harper’s Ferry for nothing?”

“I won’t get killed.”

“You and Joseph. Going to leave Sally and me to clean up this mess all alone.”

She pressed her palm on Jubilee’s back and gently pushed her away from the door and down the corridor. Then she said, “It is a mess, you’re correct. But Joseph and I won’t be gone long. I’m not deserting you.”

“You better not.”

“Don’t worry. I mean that. Don’t worry.”

“It’s the jackal who best be scared if you two don’t come back.”

“Oh?”

“Anything happens to you two, and I am hoistin’ the black flag.”

“I have no idea what that means.”

The girl put her hands on her hips and rolled her eyes. “Pirate flag. When soldiers hoist it, it means they ain’t takin’ prisoners.”

She raised a single eyebrow. “Civilized armies always take prisoners, Jubilee.

Civilized people —”

“There are no civilized people wearin’ blue uniforms in the Valley. We’ve all heard tell what they’ve burned. We know all the animals they’ve butchered. When they decide to stop here again? They’ll kill our cow, any chickens we got left, and take our horses. Both of them. If the mill wasn’t made of stone, they’d burn it down.”

Libby didn’t tell her niece that if the Yankees did return, they’d take axes to the sluices and pull off the wooden waterwheels to burn them, rendering the mill useless. It would be months—perhaps years—before it would function again.

“My hope is that they will be civilized because we are caring for one of their own. And he seems like a good man.”

“You bringin’ the pistol?”

“The Colt? Yes.”

The child nodded. “I wish you had more bullets.”

“I do, too,” she admitted.

“Of course, you and Joseph probably couldn’t hit the ground if you shot straight down. You’d both still miss.”

“Depends on how close the ground was. Also…”

Jubilee waited.

“Just showing someone I have it might be enough.”

“If you wave it, you better be ready to use it.”

“I know,” she agreed. And it would be her who would be carrying the weapon. There was no way she could allow Joseph to touch it. Even freedmen were not allowed to carry guns. He’d be hanged in a heartbeat if he were caught with the revolver. Then she said, “I have to get up earlier than usual in the morning. And I still have one task before sleep.”

“And that is?”

Libby sighed. “I’m going to go through the captain’s clothes. I want to see if there’s something—anything—I can bring to Harper’s Ferry. Proof, I suppose, that we have the man.”

“Well, that’s a dandy idea. Sure, bring something of his. But how you gonna prove he’s alive? How you gonna prove you didn’t pluck whatever you got from his cold, dead body?”

Her niece was correct. But Libby remained steadfast in her belief that she could not go to Harper’s Ferry empty-handed. “You should get into bed. I’ll be right up,” she said.

“I’ll go with you.”

“Fine.”

The girl didn’t follow her down the stairs, but ran ahead, all filly, energized even this late at night. She was outside and at the washing tub, empty of water, well before Libby, and already pulling out the pants.

“These smell like a swamp! Why don’t we just burn them? He used his trousers like

they was a chamber pot! And there's blood all over 'em!"

"Hand them to me," said Libby. She placed the tin holder with the candle behind a beam to prevent a night breeze from extinguishing it.

"With pleasure," the girl agreed, reaching next for the uniform coat. She brought it to her nose, too, and cringed at the stink. When Libby didn't take it from her right away, she dropped it back in the tub.

Libby found nothing in the pants, and so she retrieved the coat. The first pocket was empty, but there were two pieces of paper in the second. One was an empty envelope addressed to him, but it had the stamp of the Union War Office on it. The other was a letter, the folds adhering as if glued. When she examined it more closely, she saw it was a letter from his wife, and the epoxy was dried blood. Including that envelope, she would be bringing two pieces of evidence. Not proof that he was alive, but proof that she had at the very least come across the man they'd deserted and left to die. Here it was—the reality that they left Weybridge behind—the ace in her hand. Aces, in fact. She would bank on the fact that she was doing for him what the bluebelly cowards would not.

"You got what you want?" her niece asked.

She nodded.

"You expectin' anyone at the mill tomorrow?"

"No."

"Good. But if someone does come, what do you want me to tell 'em?"

"Tell them Joseph and I are getting some part for the mill."

“What part?”

She thought for a moment. “A damsel. It’s why we have the wagon.”

“What, you don’t want me to tell everyone you’re getting medicine for a Yankee?” the girl asked sarcastically.

“Jubilee, I am too tired for this right now. Don’t even joke like that. Am I clear?”

The girl glared at her, but nodded. It was rare for her niece to acquiesce so easily.

“Come on, then. Let’s go to bed.”

Libby carried both pieces of paper inside the house. Tomorrow, assuming she made it to Harper’s Ferry, these were the cards she would play.

It may have been an invasion of Weybridge’s privacy to read the letter, but Libby couldn’t help herself. Its proximity to her half of Jubilee’s bed was keeping her awake, and she needed to rest: tomorrow would be a long day and she knew she would need a cool head and a sharp mind. And so, once Jubilee was asleep, she took the letter into the corridor with a lantern and carefully unfolded the paper, sliding a fingernail through the dried blood to open it.

Parts of the letter were no longer legible, the ink badly smeared or obscured by sweat and blood. Still, the correspondence was chatty, and from it she learned that one of his two boys was, apparently, climbing trees. If Weybridge were still at the college, he would see that fewer students than even last year were returning this autumn: so many more had signed up. He and his wife, Emily, lived in Middlebury, and it was evident that both her family and his were affiliated with the college there, and the grandparents helped with the boys. She described a dinner at the school with tables of meat and cakes, and how one of the professors, a fellow who knew Charles Dickens

personally, insisted that the writer was planning to return to America once the war was over. The letter did not mention hardship and was utterly lacking in complaint, other than that she missed her husband.

It all made Libby hate the woman.

Weybridge woke up, shivering. Squinting into the darkness, he recalled where he was. The comfort of the bed was disorienting. It was a fourposter with a canopy.

But the cold. The cold.

It was cold within him, not in the air.

And the relentless ache in his hand, the throbbing of his…stump.

Stump. He loathed the word.

The drapes in the window were open, and he saw white clouds passing against a silver-black sky like horses. Horses that raced. That ran. That galloped, that cantered, that bucked, that bolted, that trotted. That reared up.

Never again would he do any of that. Never would he climb a tree with his sons, one of whom had, in Weybridge's absence, been given the nickname "Squirrel" because of his proficiency scaling the largest red maple in their yard.

He felt an obligation to live, though the grip of breath was weakening. He was just so tired of pain, of humiliation, of clinging to life by the filaments of a spider's web. He had no idea what actually happened to a man with one leg, what future existed for him in a world where he would be so horrifically diminished. God, did a one-legged man with eight fingers even dance? There was Emily, a memory of her in a silk dress the color of lemons, cinched at the waist, the two of them twirling at a Christmas

formal, in the days when they had had just the one boy. A baby, then. They had danced past midnight. There was more champagne than either of them had ever seen or, he supposed, would ever see again. He'd worn his finest black broadcloth suit, a matching waistcoat, and silver cufflinks. Neither of them believed that war was coming, though others at the gala did. Others were sure of it. South Carolina was insisting that it was going to secede now that Lincoln had been elected president.

He thought of the lamplighters in Middlebury, and the ones he had seen in Boston and New York, and how they would stand like rare birds on their toes or a single leg in the gloaming.

And yet after all he had endured since the battle at the Opequon—and because the days and nights had bled into one, the length of his travail since then was unknown to him—how could he give up now? After all this rebel woman and this Negro couple had done for him, how could he stop fighting? He would still be able to teach, and so there was that. He and Emily and the boys would not become a fiscal burden on their families.

If, of course, he lived. If he died here in Virginia, Emily and the boys would become entirely dependent on his parents and hers.

With his right hand, he pulled the comforter over his shoulders. Even a task this pedestrian sapped his strength. He was on his back, as he was always these days. He had grown tired of the position, rather than accustomed to it. Once upon a time, he had slept on his side. He couldn't anymore. At least, not these nights—and days.

Was it a minister or a poet who had said that all of living was but saying goodbye? That we wept because of the utter transience of our lives? He felt that truth now in his bones, his soul, his ever-breaking heart.

In a few hours, the rebel woman would be going to Harper's Ferry. She was risking

her life for him. He turned his head into the pillow and was embarrassed to feel wetness against his cheek. He had been crying again in his sleep, the tears coming then because in slumber there were no sandbags to stem the flood.

There would be no meat or fish for this breakfast, but they certainly had flour, and so Sally baked biscuits. She also boiled carrots into mash, fried eggs, and steeped sassafras tea. There was just enough chicory for a little faux coffee for Joseph and Libby. There would be milk for Jubilee. It was a bigger meal than usual, but Sally wanted to be sure that she had filled her husband's and Libby's stomachs before they set off.

"You'll bring the captain some breakfast when he wakes up?" Libby asked Sally.

"Yes, of course," she answered.

"Have you heard anything more about the battle yesterday at Winchester?"

"A lot of the city's a hospital again. But it's quiet. 'Cept for the wounded, I suppose. Fighting is done for now."

"For now," Libby repeated. She was exasperated.

Jubilee, who had awakened with Libby, complaining that her aunt was a bed hog and monopolized the quilt, spooned some of the carrot mush into her mouth and observed, "That jackal has four human beings waiting on him hand and foot. It's like he's died and gone to heaven."

"You don't really believe that," Sally said to her.

"I do."

“The man’s in a lot of pain and, if he lives, is always going to be crippled,” the older woman corrected her. “Don’t sound like heaven to me.”

“Sally’s right,” Libby said. “If something happened to your father? You’d want people to care for him.” But the contents of the letter she was bringing to Harper’s Ferry had stayed with Libby, and she was, once more, feeling a twinge of resentment. She understood well Jubilee’s aggravation. Based on what the wife of the man upstairs had written to her husband, the woman wanted for little in Vermont. There was no brigand who had tried to rape her decomposing in the dirt on her property. She didn’t know hunger. Her hands hadn’t become callused from running a gristmill and her back didn’t ache from hoisting bags of flour, day after day. She wasn’t wondering if she had enough bullets for her pistol. She was surrounded by family: her parents and her husband’s parents all lived in the same village and the men worked at the same college. It was as if the war had barely touched their idyllic world.

Some moments, the fact that Libby had not heard from Peter in months weighed more heavily on her than others. Now it was an anchor.

For the first time, an idea came to her: perhaps she wasn’t going to Harper’s Ferry to retrieve the provisions she needed to save this man’s life or learn more about her husband’s whereabouts. Perhaps this wasn’t about doing what was right and because she would want a Yankee woman to do the same for her man. Perhaps she was hoping in the dark, subterranean part of her soul that when she reached the Union garrison, the Federals there would inform her that she wasn’t going back. They wouldn’t let her return, and, for her, this long war—and the fear and loneliness and deprivation and sweat and sadness and loss that defined it—would finally be over.

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Libby had been to Harper’s Ferry before the war, a town that had changed hands often the last three and a half years. That autumn the Yankees held it, and the word was that they had no plans to relinquish it anytime soon. She knew well the stretch of the Shenandoah Valley from the Potomac River south, from Falling Waters to Woodstock. But she had never been on the turnpike as early as six fifteen in the morning, and that was the time that she and Joseph had set off. She was wearing one of her husband’s coats against the autumn chill, though she expected that by midmorning she would have shed it against the sun. In one of its pockets she had her late father’s watch; in another, she had the papers she found in Jonathan Weybridge’s shirt. She held in her hands the dead ranger’s Colt. The sky to the east had ripples of rust above the Blue Ridge, and, in the west, in the valley toward Flint Ridge, there were waves of white mist.

“I remember when John Brown was hanged,” Joseph said, thinking of their destination, “I knew for sure war was comin’ right then—soon as he tried to take that town.” He was holding the reins loosely, the wagon’s wheels well greased. The horses were moving easily on this patch of road, the macadam hardpacked and flat, the fields on either side leveled now that the last of the wheat and corn had been harvested before the Union could arrive and burn it. “When Mr.Steadman died and his son gave us all our freedom, I just hoped the war would be short.”

“It wasn’t. It isn’t,” she said. But they had all thought the war would be short. She, like everyone she knew or had known, the living and the dead, supposed the North would fold quickly.

“You peek in on the captain before we left?” he asked.

“He was sleeping. Seemed like a good sleep. His breathing was deep and steady. Quiet.”

“On his back?”

“Yes.”

“He said something to me that he don’t like sleepin’ on his back.”

“I don’t either.”

“But that’s good he was sleepin’. Means he’s not in terrible pain. Can’t sleep when you’re hurtin’.”

She nodded, though he was staring ahead and couldn’t see her. She watched three crows chasing a hawk across the sky, and wondered what the raptor had in its talons that had the black birds so angry. This time of year, she doubted it was a baby or fledgling. But she didn’t know for sure. Most of her education before the war had had very little to do with the natural world. Her father was a lawyer, and her mother raised her brother and her, arranged flowers, and managed the small household in Charlottesville. The woman played the piano every day until a week before she died, when she grew too sick to leave the bedroom. They weren’t wealthy, but they were prosperous: it certainly wasn’t a childhood with deprivation or want. The house was in town, two blocks from her father’s firm, where he made his money on contracts and negotiations involving railroads and real estate. Most of Libby’s education since moving to Berryville had been the logistics and economics of a gristmill. The rest? Coping with Jubilee, a child at least as heedless and hard-nosed as she herself had once been. Trying to keep food on the table. And, lately, how to bury one body and keep another breathing when all signs suggested it was a futile proposition.

There were long stretches some days when she could forget the dead man on her property, the feel of his weight upon her, his hands like snakes. But then the memory and his presence—intangible, invisible, but as real as the malarial stench of bad air—fell upon her with the ferocity of the water that powered the mill.

“Ma’am?”

“Yes, Joseph?”

“Up ahead. Keep that gun ready. You might need it.”

Down the road, she saw two men on horseback riding toward them. They weren’t wearing blue, but she couldn’t tell whether they were Confederate soldiers, guerrillas, or drifters. Their faces were hidden at this distance by the brims of their slouch hats.

“Keep going,” she told Joseph. “Perhaps they’ll doff their hats and ride by.”

But they didn’t. They drew their revolvers and blocked the road, one turning his horse so it was perpendicular to the wagon, the other riding up beside Joseph. They were young men with long, hard, bitter faces, and neither had a semblance of gray or butternut on their clothing. They both had holsters with two guns, and one had a carbine attached to his saddle pack.

“Mornin’,” said the one who had brought his animal beside Joseph. “What we got here?” His tone was feigned cordiality. There was an undertow of menace in his greeting. They might have been slave catchers, but it was daylight, and those beasts usually did their work after dark, when runaways were most likely to be traveling. He had more beef on him up close: a barrel for a chest, all muscle, and thumbs like sausages.

“Good morning,” Libby replied. Joseph knew not to answer unless he was addressed

specifically. “We’re going to see a friend who’s feeling poorly in Charles Town.”

“You don’t mean South Carolina,” he said. “That’s the other way. And a long way off.”

“No.”

“You mean our Charles Town. One here in the Valley.”

“I do. Yes.”

“Awfully close to the Yankee line. Charles Town, that is.”

She knew this. “But didn’t we whip the Yankees just yesterday in Winchester?” she asked him, hoping she sounded naive.

He ignored her. With his revolver, he pointed at the back of the wagon. “What you got there?”

The back of the wagon had a canvas tarp across it, because Libby was hoping it would be filled on the trip home. “Nothing,” she replied.

“Pull back the canvas,” he ordered Joseph. He had no right to make this request, but there was no alternative but to obey. The older man gave Libby the reins, which she took with her left hand, her right still holding the Colt, hidden now beneath the flap of Peter’s coat. Then Joseph climbed down from the seat, judiciously placing one foot after the other onto the toe board.

“Hurry up,” the man demanded of him.

Hoping to diffuse the situation, Libby smiled at the riders. She knew it would be

inadvisable to try and make conversation by asking in a tone that veered toward coquettish if they were part of General Early's army, because it was evident they weren't. They might be with John Mosby, and the idea that this was her best hope exacerbated her anxiety. "How is the road up ahead?" she asked instead, an innocuous pleasantry.

"Don't know," he answered, walking his horse a few paces behind the seat, watching as Joseph carefully untied the canvas. When Joseph drew it back, revealing it was indeed empty, the marauder stared at it for a moment. "I was sure you was lying to me," he remarked.

"No," she said.

"But you are lying about somethin'. I got a good sense about that. Always know when someone's lying."

"He does," said his partner, speaking for the first time.

"Where are you really going?" he pressed. "Why would you take a wagon to see a sick friend up in Charles Town? You expect she's going to die and you're planning on bringing the corpse back to"—he paused, then resumed—"Where you coming from?"

"Berryville."

"What's your name?"

"Libby Steadman. My husband, Peter, is a captain in the Second Virginia. Now he's lost somewhere in a Union prison."

"That's a damn shame."

She said nothing. Joseph stood beside the back of the wagon, dwarfed by the man's great chestnut horse, not daring to tie back the tarp until this white man with the gun had told him he could.

"So, Mrs.Steadman," the stranger continued, speaking slowly, as if there was something he didn't like in her name, "You ain't told me the truth. It's like you don't want to. But I got me all day. I'll just ask it again: Where are you going? Truth, this time. Don't you lie to me."

He wasn't a slave catcher, but he was, Libby decided, one of those men who were either just born bad or raised in such a way that they festered until their souls grew putrid. She'd seen her share. The war had allowed them to be themselves—execrable and unrepentant—in ways they couldn't before Sumter. She wasn't sure how this was going to end, but as she prepared her response, she gripped her own pistol a little tighter and wrapped her finger on the trigger. If this were a military confrontation, he would think he had her outflanked, but, in truth, he didn't. Her gun was pointed at him—or, given the fact that she had no experience with guns, pointed in his general direction.

"I don't lie," she said, a lie itself, hoping she had quelled the quiver in her voice. She had lied plenty lately, and was about to lie once again. "We are going to see Mary Garrison. She's eighty-two, but has always been like a grandmother to me. We're bringing the wagon because her son needs it and I don't. The army took his wagon."

"So, you're just giving away your wagon?"

"Lending it to her son. We'll get it back."

"You're comfortable with that kinda generosity? Really?"

She said nothing.

“Your man here,” he said, drawing one of his two pistols and aiming it cavalierly at Joseph, using the weapon the way a schoolmarm might a pointer. “You generous with him, too?”

“Please. That gun. It might go off,” she said.

“You think I’m the sort who might accidentally shoot off a gun?” he asked, smirking. Then he pointed it straight into the lightening sky and fired. Joseph’s shoulders curled in, a reflex. She supposed hers had, too. “This slave of yours. Why—”

“Joseph isn’t my slave. He’s a freedman.”

“Well, Joseph freedman. Show me your papers. Show me just how free you are.”

Joseph looked between Libby and the outlaw with the gun and then asked him, “May I please put my hand into my pants pocket, sir? Under my jacket?”

“?’Course you may. After all, you ain’t got a holster with a gun beneath that coat. If you did, I’d have to kill you for breaking the law.”

Slowly Joseph reached into his pocket and withdrew the paper. The bummer yanked it from him and stared at it. His partner started laughing.

“What’s so funny?” the one with the paper asked.

“You can’t read, you idiot. Them letters don’t mean shit to you. Give it to me.”

“I can read.”

“About six words, Webb, six. Maybe seven.”

“You’re a deadbeat, you know that?”

“I do,” his friend agreed, still chuckling.

“I see nothing in this paper that says this old darkie shouldn’t be helping the cause. I think the army needs you more than this here lady you’re driving. So, I hereby requisition you for the right esteemed General Jubal Early.”

His friend cackled again. “Esteemed. You wouldn’t know esteemed if it kissed you on your sorry lips.”

“You can’t requisition him,” Libby said. “You can’t just do that.”

“I can’t? I can and I will. It’s what I aim to do.”

Joseph gazed at the other bandit, his eyes imploring him to intervene, but it was clear he had no intention of helping him.

“Lady,” said Webb, “this man, free or not, has value. You claim to be so generous, but you’re hoarding property. Either hand him over willingly or we take him anyway and turn you in as a traitor. You all are low-hanging fruit, and we aim to harvest the pickings.”

Libby looked to the one blocking the road with his horse. He looked back, raising both eyebrows. In response, she raised one. And in the pause, the world growing perfectly still in the stalemate, she shifted the pistol a hair more toward the bastard holding Joseph’s proof of emancipation, and fired the Colt through Peter’s coat. Almost at the same moment that she pulled the trigger, he barked and dropped the paper, glancing reflexively at his left shoulder. She’d grazed him, tearing a hole through the sleeve of his shirt, the blood already starting to stain the fabric the deep color of ripe cherries. Before he could turn his own pistol on her, Joseph grabbed his

arm, and even though the younger man was stronger and faster, he was wounded and surprised, and Joseph was able to pry the pistol from his grasp. Libby stood in her seat and pointed her gun at his partner.

“Don’t touch your holster. Don’t touch either gun,” she said, her voice an unattractive bray in her head. “Move your hands and I’ll kill you.”

He nodded and smiled, and the grin, so condescending, offended her. They had no idea if she was a sure shot or a novice. If she had had more bullets, she imagined she’d shoot past him, firing for no other reason than to scare him and wipe that smirk off his face. Still, Joseph walked to the front of the wagon and disarmed him too, standing on his toes to take the carbine off his pack. He placed the pistols and the rifle on the seat of the wagon beside Libby.

The wounded outlaw kept glancing down at his shoulder, his eyes drawn there as if the blood were a magnet. It wasn’t a deep gash. It was likely to stop bleeding on its own soon enough. He said to her, his tone cold and condescending, “You ain’t gonna kill us, lady. You do not have the stomach for that. But here’s why we got ourselves a problem now. Your so-called freedman is holding a gun. He attacked me. You just shot me. And you can’t outrun us, not with plow horses and a wagon. So, what we got here is a standoff, and even if my friend and I don’t got guns right this second, we still got the better hand.”

“You think I plan to negotiate with you?”

“I think, in the end, you’re going to surrender to me. And then I’m going to take your old man and the army can put him to work, and as for you, I will…”

“You will what?” she pressed him.

“I wasn’t rightly sure. But I am now. You are one fetching girl, Libby Steadman, but

you are mighty cantankerous. Too ornery for your own good. I aim to fix that."

Was it the way he said her name that caused the blood inside her finally to boil over, all her fears to dissolve into air? It was, she decided, definitely it was. But she doubted her aim. No, it was more than a doubt. She knew she had none. And she was down to four bullets.

Actually, that wasn't true. Not anymore. She only had four bullets in the Colt she had taken off the dead ranger. She had more, far more, in the arsenal—three loaded pistols and a carbine—beside her. Plus, there was the gun in Joseph's hand.

Still, the issue of her aim dogged her. A thousand bullets were no help if she couldn't shoot straight.

And so she climbed down from the wagon. She walked to the assailant called Webb who had done most of the talking and put the Colt she knew at least a little into his chest.

"How are you going to fix that?" she asked him.

"You're going to give me that gun for starters."

"You sure about that?"

"I am. And then, because you're so damn difficult, I'm going to kill your old darkie—at this point, shooting him will give me more pleasure than turning him over to General Early—and take a switch to your backside. Bend you over them wagon wheels and let some hickory or a piece of birch teach you to heel."

"Any chance I can change your mind?"

“Nope.” Then he laughed, and she felt his muscles move across the barrel of the gun and into her fingers and wrist. Either he was fearless or he doubted her.

“That’s really your plan?” she pressed. It was, she decided, his very last chance, though a part of her knew already how this was going to end. He’d given her no choice.

“That’s my plan, little girl. Kill your old man, give you the whupping you deserve, and take your wagon and horses.”

“And I walk home?”

“If you can. I don’t guess you’ll be able to walk much when I’m done with you.”

“Fair enough,” she said, and then she pressed the Colt hard against where the bastard’s heart would be, if he had one—one that did more than pump blood, one that knew decency and honor and kindness—and shot him dead on the spot.

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Forty dead men.

That was what they called it, because, Weybridge knew, most Union soldiers were allocated forty cartridges before going into battle. At least that was the intended practice. It was an inexact science and distribution. It was Eustis Marsh's voice that he heard. He was saying something about ammunition. There was the smell of gunpowder, metallic and sulfurous.

"Forty dead men?"

A woman's voice now. He opened his eyes and saw the Negro woman sitting in a chair beside him. He was in that lovely bedroom. The four-poster bed. It all came back to him as he emerged from whatever it was he'd been dreaming, the vision already less tangible than steam. She had a plate with fried eggs and a biscuit in her hands, and she wanted to feed him.

"Did I say that?" he asked her.

"You did. And your voice sounded good. Stronger than I've heard it."

Sometimes he did talk in his sleep. Emily had told him.

"I didn't kill forty men," he murmured. "At least not at one time. Not even…"

"Not even what?"

“Not even altogether,” he said, but if one could ever tally all the Vermonters he had led into battle who’d died and all the rebels they’d killed, the combined total would dwarf that strange, biblical number. Forty. He looked at a small painting of hills on the far wall. Those hills were reminiscent of home. As he gathered himself, there was the usual ache from the remains of his leg and his hand, a further reminder of where he was. He pressed his right hand and his left leg into the mattress and pushed himself up into a sitting position.

“That looked like it hurt,” the woman said.

“A little.”

“But I’m guessing that means you want to eat.”

He did. “Do you have coffee?”

She laughed. “We ain’t had coffee in two years. We got boilt chicory. Small cup, maybe. You want some?”

“Drinkable?” He found himself speaking in short sentences. It was easier. But he did feel stronger than yesterday. Sleep and food would do that, he supposed. The body—perhaps even his—still wanted to mend.

“Barely.”

He smiled. “Sure.”

“But eat these first.” She started to slice off a piece of the egg with the side of her fork, but he stopped her.

“I’m sorry,” he said carefully. “I don’t remember your name.”

“Sally.”

“Thank you…Sally.”

“It’s nothing.”

“May I…”

“What?”

He put out both hands. “I want to try myself.”

She shrugged and placed the plate on the coverlet on his lap. She gave him the fork. He tested its weight in his right fingers, then glanced down at his left hand, still wrapped in ticking and lint. It hadn’t seemed to have oozed overnight.

“You can do it,” said Sally.

He thought about this, but paused. “Libby. Has she left?”

“She has. While ago. She and Joseph were off before sunrise. It was light out. But early.” She must have seen the anxiety on his face, because she reassured him, “Fighting’s over in Winchester. They’ll be fine. Joseph is smarter than most any man I’ve ever met. And Libby? Ferocious girl.”

“Girl.”

“Still a girl to me,” Sally said. “And you’re just a boy, even if you do have them captain’s bars.”

Girl. He could almost, but not quite, recall a quote from Cooper’s The Deerslayer.

That all-seeing eye discriminating between the living and the dead. The unfortunate…girl. Lifted from…no, removed from…or beyond…human rituals.

There was more to it than that, but he was not going to remember.

“If they do reach Harper’s Ferry, no Union soldier will shoot them,” he said. “They might not believe Libby or give her what she wants…but they won’t shoot her.”

“You sure about that?”

“I am,” he said, but he wasn’t. It depended on how young and green or old and angry the pickets were.

“Mostly I’m worried about Southerners,” the woman told him. “I fret whenever Joseph leaves Berryville. People don’t know him.”

“May I ask you something?”

“?’Course.”

“You and Joseph…you’re slaves. But…”

“We ain’t slaves,” she corrected him, her tone firm. “I am a freedwoman and Joseph is a freedman. Peter Steadman freed us before the war.”

“Peter. Libby’s husband?”

“That’s right.”

“And you stayed?”

“Everyone else left, including our children. But Joseph wanted to run the mill with Peter and get paid for it. That was part of it. Other part? We were both too old and too set in our ways to start again somewhere else. And then came the war.”

And then came the war. He’d heard that construction a lot, as if the war were a northeaster that just appeared on the horizon, not the result of white men across the South wanting to keep people in chains. “What did you do on this property before Libby’s husband set you free?”

She stared at him intensely. Then: “You don’t know me well enough to ask some things, Captain. And there are parts of my life that ain’t your business.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. I am very glad you’re here. You, your army. If it takes this war to set us all free, so be it. God’s will be done.”

He nodded.

“Libby will never treat me the same way she would a white woman,” Sally continued. “I know that. You know that or will find that out. Not sure she knew any Negroes in Charlottesville who weren’t slaves. But she likes Joseph and me, she respects us, and she knows the two of us are all she got. She figured out we are ’bout the only friends she has in these parts, given the way folks ’round here did not appreciate Peter Steadman setting us free. So, the best thing you can do for her or me or Joseph is this: eat and get better. You understand?”

“Yes,” he said.

She sat back and sighed. “I worked in this house,” she told him, answering his question now. “I cooked and cleaned and raised Peter and the children that lived, and

tended the children that were sickly and died. I was there for them. Not for my own children. For the white ones."

He forked some of the egg into his mouth. He chewed slowly because he had absolutely no idea what to say.

Late morning, Jubilee burst into the bedroom, a wild animal that had just scaled the stairs with a catamount's speed, and then collapsed into the chair beside Weybridge.

"I am plum tuckered," she said.

He was wide awake now. "You had plenty of energy a second ago," he told her, struggling back into a sitting position. "It sounded like you were taking the stairs two at a time."

She glared at him. "I have been workin' all morning. Hours and hours. What have you done to earn your keep?"

"What would you have me do?"

"I would say husk the corn—we got some—but I don't think you can."

He imagined the logistics. She was correct; he couldn't. Not yet, anyway.

"How old are you?"

"Twelve. But I'll be thirteen soon," she answered.

"I have two boys at home. Five and three."

"So, how old are you?"

“Twenty-eight.”

“My uncle, the man whose bed you’re lollygaggin’ in, is twenty-six.”

He was about to ask more, when she continued, “My own daddy’s ten years older ’n that. He’s thirty-six. He’s a captain—like you.”

“Where?”

“Somewhere near Petersburg or Richmond,” she said, and then shook her head. “See, you’re a jackal! That’s what I mean. I come in to rest a minute, and suddenly you got me tellin’ you things I shouldn’t!”

“There’s not much I can do with that reconnaissance,” he reassured her.

“I ain’t tellin’ you anything else of importance.” She folded her arms across her chest. “Not one thing.”

“When’s the last time you saw him?” he asked. “Is that also a military secret?”

She seemed to think about this. “Last saw him in May.”

“Maybe he’ll be able to come visit you soon.”

“If he does, and if you ain’t dead yet, he’ll either kill you or send you packin’. A bluebelly in his sister’s bed and bleedin’ all over them sheets?” She rolled her eyes. “Disgusting.”

“I am.”

“A bluebelly or disgusting?”

“Both.”

“Well, hallelujah. There is one thing we agree on.”

“I’m sure there are plenty. But I think I’ve stopped bleeding.”

“And you’re talkin’ more than before. Are you gettin’ better, Captain Jackal, or just eatin’ our food before plannin’ to die?”

“I didn’t plan any of this.”

“My aunt is a crazy woman.”

“See? We agree on that, too.”

She leaned forward in the chair. “You think her tryin’ to save your life is crazy?”

“I do. I’m glad she’s making the effort, and I want her to succeed. But the effort is”—and he paused to frame his thoughts—“Greek in its hubris. Arachne. Icarus. Odysseus.”

“You just love to name people I ain’t ever heard of or ain’t ever goin’ to meet. When you’re not a bein’ jackal, what are you, a professor?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“A professor who travels this far just to kill my people? You really are as crazy as my

aunt.”

He considered whether to defend himself. The fact was, he had traveled very far with the intention of killing people. He was a soldier now. And while the cause was just, he knew what he’d done. He lifted his left hand, swaddled, and stared at it. He had counted himself among the unlucky, but he was less sure now. How long before self-pity became self-loathing?

“Jubilee?”

“Yes, Jackal?”

“Where’s your mother?”

“She died.”

He had suspected as much. He’d hoped he was mistaken, and it was like a gut punch to have it confirmed. “I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t kill her. You can’t take credit for that.”

“Did you go to school? Before the war?”

“I went to school right up ’til my mama got sick. Then she died and I was brung here.”

“You’ll go back to school when the war is over?”

She shrugged. “Maybe some handsome cavalry officer will sweep me off my feet first. That’d be more fun.”

“You didn’t like school?”

“I liked it fine. But I was one of exactly three girls. And the teacher thought we girls was all dumb as biscuits.”

“But you can read and write.”

“Just ’cause I have not heard of the names you like to drop like pebbles in a pond does not mean I can’t read, Jackal. I can read and write with the best of ’em.”

A notion came to him suddenly. He tried to lift his right arm, but it was a struggle. He had planned to ask Jubilee for paper and a pencil, but he wasn’t sure now he had the strength to write more than a couple of words. He also wasn’t convinced that he was ready to use the remnants of his left hand to even hold a piece of paper in place. And so he had another idea. “If I wanted to dictate a letter to my wife, would you help?”

“You’re a professor and you can’t write?”

“I can—”

“I know the problem,” she said, a hint of levity in her voice. “I was just pokin’ you. Yes, dictate whatever lovey-dovey words you want. I’ll write ’em all down for you.” And then she was on her feet and at the desk along the side wall of the bedroom, withdrawing paper and pencil from the top drawer.

“This is gonna be good,” she said. “I can’t wait to hear what a Mr.Jackal says to a Mrs.Jackal.”

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There was no time to question what she had done. There was no time to ponder whether there had been other, better options or ruminate upon the shape of her character and this new blot.

No: blots.

Because now there were two dead men staining her soul. She had shot them both. The second one fell to his knees, and she was prepared to spare him, convinced—if only briefly—that he'd tell no one anything, say not a word, not ever, but the second she started to lower the gun, he'd reached for it. But he wasn't fast enough. Almost. But not quite. His face and her hands were speckled with black powder, the stippling like certain birds: a flicker, an owl.

It was the powder on her fingers that finally caused her to fall to her knees and vomit. But it was also those smudges that reminded her to empty each man's haversack until she had retrieved their powder flasks and bullets.

Now she and Joseph dragged the bodies into the woods, Libby not bothering to wipe the ebony flecks from her fingers until the two corpses were hidden beneath the fallen branches of a dead evergreen easily a hundred yards into the forest, and she could brush the dirt aside, too.

The dead men would not remain hidden for long. Both she and Joseph understood this. At some point that day or that week, someone would find them—or parts of them, if bobcats or turkey vultures discovered them first. She and Joseph picked the

spent cartridges off the pike and ground the blood into the dirt with their shoes, but soon enough someone would miss one or both of the dead men or, at the very least, wonder at their whereabouts. Briefly she and Joseph considered bringing the pair's horses with them to the Union garrison, an offering of sorts, but they still had a long way to travel, and it was possible that they would be stopped by people who recognized the animals or wondered where they had gotten them. And so they decided they would lead them a half mile or so from where she had executed their riders and there set them free. They'd be spotted. Soldiers, scoundrels, and civilians alike needed horses and these two were healthy and strong.

"Their guns?" she asked Joseph. She wanted them. She wanted them badly.

He nodded his head, not necessarily suggesting they should take them, but pondering the idea. "If we're stopped by other scalawags, it might be helpful to have 'em. But if we do reach Harper's Ferry, it might not look good. These are Colts, a course."

Unspoken was also the reality that if Confederate soldiers stopped and searched them or some of Mosby's men detained them, the fact they had five pistols—the one they had brought plus the four that had belonged to these interlopers—and a carbine would get Joseph strung up from a tree on the spot. That was certain. And her? Very likely, she'd be hanged tomorrow as a Union spy.

"I say we keep them," she decided.

"All right, then. We keep 'em. Seems you got the ammunition you wanted."

She closed her eyes for a moment, trying to suppress the idea this was selfish, and convince herself it was purely self-preservation.

"One thing," he said. She waited.

“Maybe up the road apiece, we find a spot to hide the weapons. We can pick ’em up again on the way home. Somehow I don’t think a bunch of Yankee soldiers are goin’ to let a rebel lady and me into the garrison with five pistols and a rifle.”

“What if someone else finds them first?”

“Better that than someone thinkin’ we’re there to kill a colonel.”

He was right. He was usually right. One of the smartest Negroes—no, one of the smartest men—she knew. And so she agreed.

As Joseph drove the wagon northeast, they spoke little of the men she had killed, though Joseph reassured her that they hadn’t had a choice. She tried to convince herself of this, but she also couldn’t deny the reality that she and Joseph would not be on this road today were it not for her belief that she needed—and needed was the right verb, it was a compulsion—to save the life of a Yankee stranger. It was as if she were in a fairy tale and under a spell. Bewitched. Weybridge had tried to thank her with Shakespeare. She gazed up at the canopy of trees and this shadowy stretch of forest and thought to herself, perhaps instead he should have quoted the Brothers Grimm.

They passed the charred timbers of barns, the skeletal framing awash in soot, fields of deep black ash that once were acres and acres of corn. A copse of dead trees, splintered by battle, the ground chewed up by horses and rutted by limbers and caissons. What once was a cluster of houses, one of which was now but a stone chimney rising from the rubble like a sentinel, and another that could have been a doll’s house, one wall so perfectly collapsed that they could see the furniture and wallpaper inside.

She’d had a dollhouse like that. Jubilee may have once, too. Perhaps it sat even now in her bedroom in her own house, waiting for her to return.

Ah, but the Jubilee who someday would greet those dolls would be nothing like the child who had left them.

Neither she nor Joseph said a word, and if she were to see into his mind, would she see the dead men they had left in their wake? She turned to him: his eyes were fixed on the road with grimness and determination.

It was already after twelve thirty when they were surprised by two soldiers in blue uniforms covered in dust. The pickets emerged from the woods with the suddenness of deer. They were younger than Libby. Teenagers, she supposed, one trying to grow a pathetic moustache, his shoelaces untied. He commanded them to halt, while the other aimed his carbine at Joseph and her, moving it back and forth between them.

“You don’t need to shoot,” she told them. There had already been too much shooting today. And while she was able to feign equanimity, inside she was a riot of regret and horror at what she had witnessed and what she had done. “My name is Libby Steadman. I’ve come to plead on behalf of one of your soldiers. One of your men.”

“One of ours?” He was incredulous.

“Yes. Captain Jonathan Weybridge. Vermont Brigade. He’s alive, but wounded. Badly wounded. He needs help.”

The young man ignored her and untied the canvas atop the wagon.

“Empty,” he told his partner, the one aiming a rifle at them. He sounded surprised. Then he asked, “Weybridge, you say?”

She nodded. “He’s from Middlebury, Vermont. Lost a leg and a good part of his hand,” she answered. “I have a list from a doctor of all the things he needs. Things that might save his life. I was hoping the garrison could give us—”

“Lady,” he cut her off, shaking his head and silencing her, “I don’t know what you think you’re going to accomplish, but I’m not a toddler with a leading string on my back. You can’t just sashay here and expect to walk out with the pharmacy. I know you rebels are desperate, but no one’s going to be fooled by a lady smuggler.”

“I’m not a smuggler.”

“And I ain’t a soldier.”

“I told you—”

“She’s a blockade runner,” the other picket said, attempting a small joke. “But she lost her ship so she’s gotta do this.”

“Maybe she’s a spy in a petticoat,” his partner agreed, chuckling.

“I’ve come from Berryville,” she insisted. “We’ve been on the road since dawn. Please, at least let me talk to a doctor.”

“A doctor? You’re serious.”

“I am.”

“I don’t see it. I just don’t. We ain’t going to shoot a woman, even a rebel, so I see two options. Your best option is to turn around and skedaddle back to wherever you came from. A worse option is we let you through and you talk to Sergeant Chittenden, and then he sends you back—or arrests you. He might do that instead.”

“That’s what I’d do,” said the one pointing the gun.

She reached into her pocket and held up the envelope and the letter. “I have proof I

have a Union officer in my care. Here it is."

The soldier examined the papers. "This ain't blood on it, is it?"

"It is."

"His blood?"

"Yes."

"In that case, seems more likely he's dead than alive. And you just want medical supplies for your secesh army."

"Or that devil, Mosby," added the other picket.

"He's alive, sir." It was Joseph, and Libby turned to him. Usually he was so careful not to speak unless addressed. "At least he was when we left. I swear on my life he was alive. And I think he still is. He's in this woman's house. My wife and this lady's niece are carin' for him as best they can. But they need medicine we ain't got."

"You her slave?" the Yankee asked him, and Libby couldn't decide whether there was more sympathy in his tone for Joseph or anger toward her.

"I ain't nobody's slave," Joseph answered. "I am a freedman. My name is Joseph."

"Then what are you doing with a rebel?"

"I run a gristmill. I am paid to run a gristmill," he said, and Libby thought about how little she had in fact paid him since the war had started and Peter had left. The truth was, he was more her partner than her employee, and they were running a concern where their largest client was the army, and Confederate currency had about as much

value as sheets of old newspaper.

The privates seemed to take this in, and so Libby pressed her case. “Your army left a captain to die when you moved on after the fighting at the Opequon. Me and my people have kept him alive. So far, anyway.”

“Must have been pretty far gone.”

“Fine. But you left him behind with a few opium pills and a canteen. A captain. An officer.”

“Have you heard of this captain?” the first picket asked the other.

“It’s a big army, Lucius. No.”

“Me neither.”

“But that doesn’t mean anything. The sergeant might.”

“Or Colonel Duffy.”

“Yup.”

“You got the proof he’s real in your hands,” Joseph said, pointing at the letter and the envelope.

The private glanced one last time at the papers and then handed them back to Libby. She looked gratefully at Joseph because of the way he seemed to have changed the pickets’ minds—or, at least, planted a doubt in what they thought was a rock-solid truth a few moments earlier. She knew they were going to let her pass.

In the hours between when she killed the two brigands and they reached the garrison at Harper's Ferry, she was able to quell her beating heart. Her anxiety had not diminished, but its outward and obvious manifestations had. She was not cool, but she was collected. They crossed the bridge near where the Shenandoah River met the Potomac, passed the railroad, rode parallel to the tracks, and reached the stone and thick-timbered structures nestled amidst the hills. She could see how the arsenal was still damaged, its roof pockmarked and riddled from, she supposed, when it was blown up back in 1861, but even it was being used as a warehouse now—because the town was nothing like the sleepy place she remembered from before the war. The first hint of change had come as they were arriving, when three dozen immaculate Union cavalry soldiers raced past them, riding in the opposite direction, their guidon's swallowtail tips flapping like birds' wings. The town had felt dark and small to Libby when she had been here years ago, human civilization shadowed by tall trees on steeply sloping ridges, perhaps even a little sorrowful and bleak. Now it was crowded with soldiers and teamsters, and she had never seen such plenty: barrels upon barrels of pork, walls of crates filled with condensed milk that blocked most of one building, wagons lined up as if for a parade that stretched to the railroad depot, some empty and some packed. And then there were the guns. There were piles of old muskets and chests of new Sharps carbines, fresh from—according to the stamp on the side of each chest—the factory in Hartford, Connecticut. The cavalrymen's horses were gorgeous animals, Morgans and Thoroughbreds, and the teamsters couldn't unload the trains and fill the wagons fast enough. The sutlers were everywhere.

One of the pickets had told them where to find Army headquarters and whom to ask for, and a blacksmith pointed out precisely the building. Joseph was frisked by a sergeant outside Colonel Duffy's office, and the Federals found a washerwoman to search her. Then she and Joseph were escorted inside by the sergeant. Duffy was a squat man with dark hair and a handlebar moustache, and he stood when he saw that it was a woman being brought to him. Then, as if he were showing off a prized painting in a living room, he gestured outside his window.

“See that building? John Brown’s last stand before he was hanged,” he told her, shaking his head. “Crazy man…but good. Good to his bones. It was your ‘peculiar institution’ that got him killed.”

She considered correcting him: regardless of whether what John Brown did was right or wrong, the old man got himself hanged. But the last thing she wanted to do was antagonize this Yankee.

“Damn fool was ahead of his time,” the colonel added.

She recalled the panic and the fury that Brown had unleashed in the Valley—across all the South.

Altogether, there were four Union soldiers crammed into the office with them, including the colonel, two guards, and a captain from Vermont named McKenna. Duffy had summoned the captain because the soldier had been in the skirmish near the Opequon and, apparently, knew Weybridge. Now the colonel turned to McKenna and said, “Tell me: You think it’s possible this woman is telling the truth and this Weybridge is still alive?”

McKenna had a long, tired face for a man not much older than she was. He was roughly the same age as Weybridge, Libby guessed.

“Weybridge was tough. Maybe is tough,” he told the colonel, shrugging. “You wouldn’t have known it to talk to him. Calm demeanor. He was bookish, after all. But he was big.”

“You’re not answering my question.”

“When I saw him after the surgery, he was in a bad way.”

“Surgeons think he’d live?”

“When they finished the surgery, they thought he had a chance,” the captain replied. “Not a good one. But a shot. After they brought him to that abandoned house near where we were camped, they grew less confident. Just getting him there nearly finished him off. When the army moved on, two soldiers stayed with him, figuring he’d pass in a few hours.”

“And the soldiers saw him die?”

“No idea, sir. Their orders were to stay with him, unless he died.”

“You believe them?”

“I don’t know them. But when I got the word that Weybridge was gone, I wasn’t surprised. I expected it.”

“We’ve both seen soldiers run, Captain.”

The captain looked down at his boots. “Yes, sir. And two boys left behind with the rebel army right there and John Mosby’s men lurking about? I can see boys running like rabbits. Even good boys.” Then he raised his eyes to Libby and said, “Ma’am, you say Captain Weybridge is alive. Is he awake? Speaking?”

“He is,” she answered. “He’s weak, but he’s talking. He improved considerably once we got some food and water in him.”

McKenna took this in. “Maybe, if that’s true, you can tell us something he’s told you that isn’t in this letter.”

She understood the challenge. “The letter mentions his boys, but not their ages. I can

tell you that. One's five and one's three. The letter mentions the college, but not what he teaches. I don't know the details, but he certainly knows his Shakespeare."

"What else?"

"He's spoken more to my niece. We have a gristmill, and I have work to do."

"What's he said to her?"

Joseph raised his fingers. "May I, sir?"

"Go ahead," agreed the colonel.

"When I was shampooing his hair and trimming his beard—"

"You washed and shaved him?"

"He was filthy," Libby interjected without thinking. "You all left him to lie on the floor, soiled by his own grime and muck!" Then, afraid her irritation might jeopardize the goodwill that she needed, she softened her tone. "So, yes, Joseph cleaned him up. We were trying to do right by him."

"He said somethin' about a friend named Marsh. A lieutenant," said Joseph.

"Eustis Marsh?" pressed the captain.

"I think that's it."

"Man was the closest thing Weybridge had to an adjutant," McKenna told the colonel.

Duffy had been grinding his teeth, the bones on both sides of his jaw moving with the constancy of a metronome. He sat forward. “Was?”

“He’s fine, sir. I meant he was by Weybridge’s side until the captain was wounded. If Weybridge is alive, it’s because Marsh got a tourniquet on his leg at Gilbert’s Ford—that’s where we were along the Opequon—and then got him to the surgeons.”

Libby restrained herself from adding that he was alive because of her and Joseph and Sally. She could feel that the attitude of these Union officers was shifting in her favor. She understood the magnitude of her request and did not want to endanger her momentum.

“The fighting has been all around Berryville this fall. But your home was spared?” the colonel asked.

“So far. But I’ve heard the cannons. The fighting was close yesterday. It’s been close often the last three years. Seems like there’s always an army coming and going through Winchester.”

McKenna looked down at his boots, exhaling through his nose. When he glanced up, she saw a flicker of something—sadness, perhaps—in his eyes, and he seemed about to speak when the colonel shook his head, silencing his junior officer. “You said your husband is a prisoner,” Duffy remarked.

“He is. Captured and wounded at Gettysburg. Peter Steadman, Second Virginia.”

“Ah, once the Stonewall Brigade,” he said, as if speaking of a house or a family that had fallen on hard times.

“Yes. Once.”

“How is he?”

“I’ve no idea. I’ve no idea if he’s even still alive. It’s been months since I got a letter,” she answered. She sensed that the moment was nearing when she should press them about Peter, see whether they might be willing to help her find him—or, at least, find out if he had survived his ordeal.

Duffy took this in. “So, you’re doing all this for Weybridge out of…what? Christian charity?”

“I was thinking of my own husband after he was wounded.” She shrugged. “I suppose I’m doing this because I didn’t have much choice in the matter. I couldn’t just let the man die.”

“Oh, you could have. Lots of rebels would have done just that,” the colonel said.

The remark was cutting—as it was meant to be. But he had still tacitly acknowledged that he believed Weybridge was breathing. “As I told the doctor in Berryville,” she said, “I would have wanted a Yankee woman to do the same thing for my husband.”

“A doctor knows you have Weybridge?”

“Yes.”

“Rebel?”

“Yes. But he…”

“Go on.”

“He can be bought. The doctor.”

McKenna looked at his colonel. “Why don’t we send a few cavalry soldiers and a wagon to retrieve Weybridge? Bring him back?”

“Because he’d die in the back of the wagon,” she told them. “He barely lasted the two miles or so between the house where you left him and mine. If you tried to bring him here right now, the jostling would kill him. It took Joseph and me six hours to reach this garrison.”

The colonel stood up, an indication that he’d had enough and made a decision. “We’re not going to risk cavalry soldiers—not six or sixteen or sixty—their horses, and a wagon to try and save one man who may die anyway. But bring this woman to the Sanitary Commission and have a doctor there give her whatever she needs.”

“Whatever?”

“Whatever…within reason.”

“I believe this woman is telling the truth, sir,” said McKenna. “But even if she is—”

“I am, Captain. You know very well I am,” she said.

“Even if she is telling the truth, Colonel, you’re not afraid that whatever we give her will just fall into rebel hands? It must be twenty miles back to Berryville, and we don’t control those roads.”

“I’ll risk whiskey and iodine, Captain. I’ll risk a whole damn portable drug chest. But I won’t risk more men.” The colonel turned to her. “Thank you, Mrs.Steadman. The Union Army thanks you.”

She nodded and took a deep breath. This was her chance to lobby on behalf of Peter, to call in that favor. “May I ask one more thing, Colonel?”

“Of course.”

“As I said, I’ve not heard from my husband in months. Is there any way—any chance—you could find out how he is? Where he is?”

“We have a lot of rebels in our camps. You have a lot of our boys.”

“I know. I was hoping for a prisoner exchange and—”

“And those are done,” he said, his voice firm. “But where was your husband when you last heard from him?”

“Camp Chase.”

“Ohio?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll see what I can find out.”

“That’s most kind of you.”

“You plan on staying in Berryville?”

“I do.”

The captain smiled mordantly and jumped in. “Well, then,” he said, “with any luck, General Sheridan himself will drop by and tell you whatever the colonel was able to learn.”

She didn’t think McKenna had meant to be hurtful: this was just soldierly gallows

humor. But it was stinging nonetheless. The colonel glared at the other officer and said, “I’m sure all Captain McKenna meant is that the war won’t last forever.”

“Sorry, sir,” the captain murmured.

“If we discover your husband’s whereabouts,” the colonel told her, “we’ll be sure a letter reaches you through the proper channels. We’re not monsters, Mrs.Steadman. You’re trying to save the life of one of our soldiers—a man whose wife never expected to see him again. At our end? We’ll see what we can learn for you about the man you married.”

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It was Plutarch who wrote that the Spartans brought the dead back from the war on their shields. Weybridge recalled the quote, a mother to her son: “Either this or upon this.”

But it was utter nonsense. He taught Plutarch, and if he lived and taught Plutarch again, he would stress to his students with a passion they would find unexpected that this was but a poetic conceit. No one was going to carry a reeking corpse home on a shield. No mother would want to see her son’s decomposing remains after days—or weeks—in the Mediterranean sun.

Or amidst the humidity here.

Far away, Weybridge heard the girl’s voice. Jubilee’s. He opened his eyes because her voice wasn’t a dream, and he listened, focusing on her both because he was acutely aware of his vulnerability and because it took his mind off the throbbing aches in his hand and his leg. The bedroom door was shut, the sound was bubbling up through the open window.

“There ain’t nothin’ to see,” she was saying. “My aunt will be back this afternoon. And Sally’s just down by the river.”

“Where is she? Your aunt?” It was a man’s voice, southern. Husky and deep.

“Getting some part fixed for the mill.”

“What part?”

“No idea. I got me too much to do around here already.”

He heard a second voice, another male, but he couldn’t quite make out what this other person was saying. But the men knew who lived here, and Weybridge assumed that was a promising sign. At least he hoped it was. But the idea that Jubilee was telling them there was nothing to see here was ominous. It suggested that whoever had come, had come to see…something.

“And I sure ain’t seen any Yankees,” Jubilee continued. “If I did, I can promise you I’d whip ’em good. Send ’em runnin’ like squirrels.”

“Well, please tell your aunt that Lieutenant Morgan sends his regards. I’ll try and return another day.”

“She’ll be here. We’ll all be here. That gristmill won’t run itself!”

And then he heard this Lieutenant Morgan and whomever was with him turning their horses and riding off. It was possible they were looking for him because that doctor had told someone he was here. Or someone had been aware of him when he’d been dying on the floor of that abandoned house and the word had trickled out.

But he may have been catastrophizing. Perhaps this Lieutenant Morgan was a quartermaster and there was supposed to be a grain delivery today. Or perhaps he was a friend of Jubilee’s uncle, Libby’s husband, a friend whom the girl hadn’t yet met. Maybe the man was bringing word of the prisoner.

He wondered if next he would hear the girl’s feet pounding their way up the stairs, either to inform him of what had just transpired or to ramble on about nothing. She did love to talk. But instead he heard only the sound of the chickens as, no doubt, the

girl was continuing her chores and feeding them.

Sally brought him a bowl of broth, telling him that if he could keep this down, they could try catfish again a little later. She used pillows as bolsters and sat him upright so she could spoon the watery soup into his mouth from a chair beside the bed.

“You’re looking peaked in this light,” she said. She sounded worried. “You sleep?”

“Yes.”

“After you eat some, I’m going to look at your leg and your fingers. The doc may come back tomorrow to see what Mrs.Steadman has rounded up.”

The broth was weak, but it was warm and felt good on his throat. “I’m sorry,” he told her. “Earlier…I shouldn’t have assumed you were a slave.”

“Reasonable thing to suppose,” she said.

“Well, thank you.”

She handed him the spoon to let him use it himself.

“What time is Libby due back?” he asked, after swallowing some more. His voice was hoarse, and he tried to clear it. He’d expected the soup to soothe it.

“It’ll be late, I suppose. Hoping it’s before dark. But already the sun is setting lots earlier than last month. So, maybe not.”

When he had eaten all he desired, which wasn’t much because something was still wrong with his stomach—he felt nauseous and the liquid was making it worse—Sally pulled back the coverlet and the sheet and studied the dressing above where once he’d

had a knee.

“How does it look?” he asked softly. He was no longer modest. There wasn’t a point.

She remained mute and sniffed at the ticking. Her silence unnerved him. He felt weaker than he had last night. And yet earlier today, when Jubilee was visiting, he’d seemed to be getting stronger. Now he was less sure. He hoped he could keep down the broth. He repeated his inquiry.

“It’s draining. Again. That’s good. You in pain?”

“No.”

“You’re lying.”

“A little.”

“I hear you’re a professor.”

He nodded.

“You want something to read? I can bring you my Bible.”

“You can read?” he asked, a reflex, and instantly he regretted it. He felt a pang of self-disgust.

For a moment, she said nothing. She smoothed her dress and then answered, “Not a miracle. People read.” Again, there was a sharpness to her tone that was slight but clear.

“You’re right. I’m wrong. I was just thinking of the law,” he murmured. “I know in

Virginia that slaves aren't allowed…"

"Tell me: You figure I was illiterate because of the color of my skin or because you think so little of Libby that you believe she'd marry a man whose kin wouldn't let us learn?"

"I hadn't thought about it," he admitted. "I hadn't meant to insult you."

"Or Libby or her husband or his family."

"No. I'm sorry."

"Remember, Captain. I'm a freedwoman. But I could read just fine even before I was freed."

"I understand."

"So: you want that Bible?"

"Thank you. But I'm not sure I could hold a book," he answered. "Maybe later."

"If I had time now, I'd read to you," she said. Then she stood and repeated back to him his own words. "But maybe later."

Was it the idea that Sally could read or the fact that Libby and Joseph went to Harper's Ferry that conjured for him John Brown? Or, to be precise, "John Brown's Body," the song, which, in turn, instantly summoned a vision of the man himself?

A memory came to him in Libby's great bed.

It had been spitting snow, and Vergennes was thirteen miles north of his home in

Middlebury. Weybridge didn't know what time John Brown's actual body—the corpse—would arrive in Vergennes. Moreover, Emily had given birth that fall, and he had papers to grade. And while the college was a family business of sorts, with his father and his father-in-law both teaching there, it was his first semester in the classroom, and he could not afford to be late with his December exams. So, he had not gone. He'd wanted to, but he hadn't had the time. But he knew of students and at least three professors who had ridden north in the cold to see the widow and John Brown's casket with their own eyes. A state legislator from Middlebury had gone, too, one of the men who'd voted two years earlier to approve Vermont's twenty-thousand-dollar appropriation to bolster the antislavery settlers in Kansas.

He'd heard that night that the crowds, first in Rutland and then in Vergennes, were among the largest ever gathered in those small cities: at least two thousand people in Rutland, one student insisted, and perhaps half that many in Vergennes. One of the young men had cut a souvenir piece of wood from the casket. It seemed a dozen of the more passionate abolitionists had done that. The student had showed off the sliver of pine as if it were a relic from the one true cross, and Weybridge's father-in-law, when he'd heard the next day, had asked him what in God's name the young fellow was thinking when he'd defaced a man's coffin. But the student had assured the professor that Mary Ann Brown, the widow, hadn't seemed to care. She'd understood why people wanted pieces of the casket.

Another man, old enough to be Weybridge's grandfather—pencil-line-thin strands of white hair atop a bare skull, white also but marked by deep-brown smudges and specks—had placed both hands on the coffin as it paused by the common in Vergennes, as if he were laying healing hands on the sick.

This was almost five years ago now. December 1859. The idea he would live most of his life on crutches had never occurred to Weybridge that day or that he himself would be fighting a rebellion so close to where Brown was executed.

Downstairs, he heard Sally cooking supper, the sound of a knife on a cutting board. The chopping sounds were melodic, and the lyrics of the song came to him:

John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave,

His soul's marching on.

Marching. Even with two legs, was it ever pleasant? He'd heard men sing around the campfires (though not often), but rarely could he recall men singing as they went hay-foot-straw-foot for miles and miles in the dust or the rain or the heat or the cold, knowing that all that would greet them at their eventual destination was (best case) digging in for the night or (worst case) rebels who were already dug in themselves. In his experience, as the men walked, they talked casually when they weren't frightened and with animated bluster when they were. They complained about the food and the mail and sleeping in tents. They grumbled about sunburn or wet clothes, they groused about the incompetence of the generals and Washington. Rarely did they talk about why they were fighting when they were on their feet.

And when they'd had enough, when they were too tired to talk (or sing), they lumbered along in ornery silence.

But there were exceptions. And one had occurred just this past summer. When the Vermont Brigade was marching through Charles Town, someone must have thought of Brown and his execution there, because a soldier with a gorgeous tenor started singing "John Brown's Body," and soon others followed. Weybridge joined in, too, and it sounded like the whole brigade was singing, and their step had more energy than it had in months.

He sighed at the memory.

He hoped that Libby and Joseph would return soon.

He hoped they would return at all.

It was dark now, and Weybridge wished that he had a lantern.

And as if the gods, if one or more existed, could read his mind, he heard Jubilee running up the stairs, the light flickering ahead of her and illuminating the wallpaper like dreams. She bounded into his room, planted the lantern on the dresser, and collapsed into the chair near the bed.

“So, Mr.Jackal, what have you done today to help out?”

He watched the shadows on the wall and on the side of her face. It was autumn, and so he replied, “I picked the last of the apples. Baskets and baskets.”

She leaned in to him. “How you know we got apples?” She spoke slowly, the way his father or father-in-law might challenge a student.

“Spying,” he said.

She slapped her knee. “I knew it.” Then she sat back and said, “If you Yankees weren’t here, we’d have apple butter right now. So much apple butter. Jars and jars. But, no, you all even ruin apple butter season.”

“My army’s taken your apples?”

“Both armies. And the apples the soldiers didn’t get, bandits and scalawags did. Feedin’ all of you is like feedin’ the ocean.”

“You’ve fed the ocean?”

“Ain’t even seen it. But I will.”

“I wouldn’t bet against you.”

“Don’t.”

“What time is it?”

“Near nine.”

He had the sense she was worried about her aunt. He felt the need to say something reassuring. “Your aunt will be back soon.”

“She will. Someone picks a fight with her or Joseph? She’s a wildcat. And he’s too smart to get killed.”

Was this whistling in the dark? Didn’t matter. He thought the girl was right: Libby probably could be ferocious, if she ever needed to be, and Joseph had a good head on his shoulders.

“Who’s Lieutenant Morgan?” he asked.

She leaned toward him. “Why you need to know that?”

“I’m curious.”

“You eavesdropping?”

“I heard the two of you through the window.”

“I don’t know him. But he seems all right. Army of Northern Virginia, after all.”

“What did he want?”

“Wanted to see my aunt. Wanted to know if we’d seen any bluebellies.”

“Any one in particular?”

She bit at a fingernail. Then: “You just think everything in this whole world is about you. It ain’t.”

“Good. I don’t want to get you or your aunt in trouble.”

“I did not say you were wrong, Jackal.”

The relief he had felt evaporated. “Were they—”

“I don’t know. I just knew I didn’t want to get myself killed because we’re hidin’ you. But, no, they did not ask, ‘You got any crippled Yankees bleedin’ all over your house?’?”

She stood up and brought the lantern to the bedside table. Then she sat back down and reached into the pocket of the apron she was wearing. She pulled out a deck of playing cards, and instantly he was catapulted back to memories of bored young men around campfires, and their games of poker and euchre.

“I suppose a professor like you can count. You can, can’t you?”

“I can.”

“Know how to play twenty-one?”

“Yes. But my hand is—”

“Wah-wah-wah. You just tell me if you want the card or not. You can play.” And,

with that, she smoothed out the coverlet and started to deal.

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Sally pulled her shawl around her shoulders and sat alone in the dark on the porch of her house—what had once been the overseer's home. A man who was crueler than some and kinder than others (though kindness was not a word she would have used to describe Robert Grafton when he was running this place), and had disappeared into the Valley once Peter had set them all free. Maybe he was fighting in the army now, maybe he had found another place to work. A plantation of real size.

She hated it when Joseph was gone. She fretted that this would be the time that some trash looking to bully an old man would choose not to believe his papers or, perhaps, would be unable to read them. And Joseph would wind up like that Zach Covington, one of Leveritt Covington's slaves, who kept escaping and getting caught, until the day that slave catchers beat him so bad he was worthless and they lynched him, with his master's permission, there on the spot. Robert Grafton made all of Mr.Steadman's people look at the body before someone cut it down, marching them four miles down the turnpike to see it, and this on a day when they could have been working. That was how important it was to Grafton that they witness the price of running and understood how munificent he was as an overseer.

Zach had been strung up on a lone tree by the pike, white stone and pale dirt, the land behind him undulant and gentle as the Opequon, as the river lolled against the banks after days without rain.

This was easily ten years ago now, and even her grandchildren had had to see it. How, she had thought at the time, would any child not be haunted forever by a corpse dangling from a tree branch, the body's bare back striated with coal-black lines, the

runnels filled with dried blood from the lash, and the bare feet void of toes? They had cut off Zach's toes that day to make it harder to run, she supposed, perhaps before deciding to lynch him, but that had also made him incapable of doing much good around the Covington plantation and so his punishment had become inevitable. She'd wanted to look away and her daughter tried to keep her own children from staring, but there was no ignoring the dead man, because Robert Grafton would not allow it. He barked that making them see this was charity that someday would save their lives.

Now, of course, the white people were hanging each other, too. At least those were the stories she was hearing. A cavalry officer named Custer had executed a couple of John Mosby's rangers, and Mosby had retaliated by hanging a couple of Yankees.

And somewhere on the turnpike were Joseph and Libby. But they'd had to go. They'd had to. You couldn't let a good man die if you could save him.

Still, it would be hard to forgive herself for telling Libby there was a Union officer close to death at the Bingham place if anything happened to the woman or Joseph. She was the one who had set this in motion, and now she could only pray that they came home to her safely.

Joseph slowed the horses, and the wagon came to a stop. The sun had set, and he guessed they had perhaps fifteen minutes of daylight. Already, the woods were dark.

"This is the spot," he told Libby. "There are the maples and that's the evergreen," he added, pointing.

"Good. You wait here. I'll go get them."

He had agreed to this plan and this division of labor, but only because it was the less dangerous of the two options.

Or, at least, the two options that Libby would even consider. The third option, leaving the guns from the men she had killed that morning in the woods was unacceptable to her. She wanted the weapons, and she would have the weapons. He knew her. Having her retrieve the Colts and the carbine made more sense because if someone came upon them as he was emerging from the woods with the small armory, he'd be hanged and she'd be jailed. If someone spotted them, it was better he was just a Black man driving a wagon than a Black man with serious firepower in his arms.

Though, he was aware, he was a Black man with a wagon filled with whiskey and medicine. More whiskey and medicine than he'd ever seen in one place. The bluebellies, thank the Lord, felt guilty for leaving their man to die when they had moved out, but if he were caught with that plenty it wouldn't be pretty. A quartermaster had even given them some ham, claiming he was an abolitionist, though Joseph could see the man was infatuated with Libby, not interested in him. If any rebel drew back the canvas, all that cargo would be hard to explain.

No, not hard to explain. Impossible. A Union pharmacy chest with small bottles of ipecac, calomel, and mercurial ointment? They'd lynch him for sure.

And if he were spotted by slave catchers? Even with his proof of emancipation, without Libby present, they'd take him.

So, he sat on the seat, the reins in his hands, and listened as carefully as the horses. Horses knew they were prey, and they had become Joseph's pickets whenever he was with them.

And, sure enough, they pricked up their ears, and then, a moment, later, he heard the tin clatter of kits jangling on—given the speed—cavalry horses. He sat up a little taller and braced for the worst.

And, in a moment, they were upon him. Confederate cavalry, four riders. They started

to ride past the wagon, uncaring, but the respite—and his hope that they had urgent business elsewhere and would ignore him—passed in barely a heartbeat, because one of the cavalrymen saw he was Black and called for a halt. The men surrounded Libby's two horses, and the six animals eyed each other warily.

One of the riders, a lieutenant, brought his own mount beside Joseph.

"You ain't a runaway, because you're headin' south," he said. "And you ain't gonna run far with them plow horses pretending to be stallions and that anchor they's pullin'."

"No, sir," he agreed.

"It's gonna be dark soon. You got papers?"

"I do, sir. My name is Joseph Steadman. I can show you."

The officer put out his hand for them. The men with him were young, barely more than boys. It was too dark to see their eyes beneath their hats, but he felt the threat. Finally getting into the fracas, and he, an old Black man, could be pleasant game for them: an easy quarry before a real fight. But maybe he'd be lucky and they'd view wasting energy on him as beneath them. He couldn't decide what they were thinking. Slowly he reached into his jacket pocket for the most important piece of paper he'd ever own, and handed it to the lieutenant. He felt the angst he felt always when someone else was holding it.

"What are you doing north of Berryville?" the lieutenant asked after scanning it.

No answer was going to work, Joseph knew, at least one spoken by him. There wasn't a lie in the world that was going to prevent them from pulling back the canvas and either arresting him or hanging him right here and now. He could say the

provisions were for their army, but as soon as they pressed for details, he'd be finished. But it was the best of all his bad options, and his mind was scouring for a regiment he could use and the name of a colonel. He was, he knew, stalling: only postponing the inevitable.

"He drove me to Charles Town."

Joseph turned at the sound of the voice, as did the four riders. There, emerging from the woods, was Libby. She hadn't the weapons with her, thank God. But, still, Joseph realized now, he'd been hoping she'd have the common sense to stay hidden and save herself. There was nothing she could do to save him. Not anymore.

"And who are you?" the lieutenant pressed. None of the men tipped their slouch hats.

"I'm Mrs.Libby Steadman, wife of Peter Steadman, Second Virginia. This man, Joseph, works for me. Together we run a gristmill in Berryville."

"Together?"

"Together."

"What were you doin' in them woods."

She frowned at him. Then she said, "I was doing the same thing in the woods that you are likely to do in the woods. Or bears or squirrels or deer."

One of the riders chuckled, but stopped the second the lieutenant turned to him.

"And what were you doin' up in Charles Town?"

"The damsel is about spent. My cousin lives there, and he's a blacksmith. He made

me a new one."

"Ain't you a damsel?"

"A damsel's part of a mill. It fits over the spindle. He also repaired some of the cribbing and hammered out a new gudgeon. He was doing me a favor. Now, we grind a lot of flour for the army—for you. And I'd like to get home because we have a quartermaster coming tomorrow afternoon, and we need to get back to work as soon as Joseph here has installed that cribbing and replaced the old damsel."

"Sounds like my uncle. Always replacin' one damsel with another."

Libby didn't laugh. She climbed into the wagon.

"Would you please return to Joseph his papers?" she asked when she was settled. It was more a command than a question, and the lieutenant looked at the paper one last time, before handing it to Joseph.

"Get yerself home safe, Mrs.Steadman," he said to her, and now he did tip his hat. "But you ain't no damsel. I expect you'll be fine." Then he steered the horse in front of the wagon and spurred it on, and his three men followed. The soldiers galloped down the road, and neither Libby nor Joseph spoke until the sound of the hooves had disappeared.

"I thought we were out of luck," Joseph murmured finally. He wiped his forehead. He hadn't realized how badly he'd been sweating.

"Me too," she agreed. He was about to prod the horses forward, when she put her hand on his to stop him.

"Not yet," she said. Then she climbed back down from the seat and returned to the

woods. But she didn’t go far. She was in there little more than a minute or two. When she emerged from the brush, her arms were full: she had with her the pistols, the powder flasks, and the carbine from the men she had executed earlier that day.

It was almost eleven at night when the two of them reached home. Jubilee and Sally were awake, which didn’t surprise Libby. She knew they’d be worried. Both greeted them outdoors when the wagon arrived, Sally wrapping her arms around Joseph with a passion that momentarily caught Libby off guard. When they pulled apart, the woman still had her hands on Joseph’s shoulders, staring up into his eyes with palpable relief.

Neither Sally nor Jubilee had dressed for bed.

Libby drew back the canvas, and Sally held a lantern over the bounty, remarking, “They gave you the hospital.”

“And the still,” Jubilee added, climbing up into the back. “I ain’t ever seen so much whiskey!”

“No, I don’t suppose you have,” Libby murmured. “I know I haven’t.”

Instantly her niece was handing a crate down to Sally and then another to Joseph, who was saying something about wanting to get the provisions inside the house so he could get the horses dried off and bedded down for the night.

“Where do you want all of this?” Sally was asking.

“Up in my bedroom,” Libby told her. Then she asked, “Is the captain awake?”

Jubilee answered, “The jackal? He might be. All he did today was sleep and eat and play cards.”

“He played cards?”

“With me. We played twenty-one. I licked him almost every game. There’s a reason his own army left him behind. If you can’t win at—”

“That’s enough, Jubilee. I’m glad he felt up to cards.”

Then Libby hoisted one of the crates from the wagon and started up the walkway into the house.

Libby sipped whiskey in the chair beside Weybridge after midnight. She had used more on the wound on the captain’s left hand and on the spot above his knee where his right leg now ended. It hadn’t been as difficult as she’d expected to douse lint in the alcohol and then dab at the injuries. She’d been afraid of hurting him, and then she’d feared having to gaze into the abyss of the amputation. But perhaps because she’d been working by the light of a lantern, it hadn’t been hard: she’d been spared having to see the minutiae of the mutilated flesh.

Of course, it was hard to be squeamish these days. This night.

There were still a few crickets out there in the dark, chirping, but they were the very last: it was fall, and soon their purling would die, too.

He was drinking whiskey with her, having chosen the alcohol over the opium in the medicine chest the Yankees had loaded onto the wagon. Across the hallway, Jubilee was supposed to be going to sleep, but Libby knew full well that she was eavesdropping.

“I wouldn’t have pegged you for a whiskey drinker,” he said.

“I’m not. Usually.”

“Ah. But after today?”

“That’s right.”

“What happened?” he asked.

“It was just a very long day.” She was not going to tell him the truth. She couldn’t. The dead men, the pickets, the cavalry. It was too much to verbalize tonight. Probably forever. Joseph said he didn’t plan to tell even Sally: she already knew about the dead ranger that they had buried right here. He wanted her to know nothing about the pair Libby had killed today, and how the two of them had dragged the corpses into the woods. He wanted Sally utterly innocent in the event someone ever came here asking about them.

And, certainly, Jubilee could never know.

Was there a moment for the dead when they first understood all that awaited was putrefaction and rot? That corpse in her own yard: had it opened its eyes to the blackness of dirt, the soul sober now, and understood? And those unburied corpses off the road on the way to Harper’s Ferry, did they look at each other as a coyote or crow or turkey vulture was pulling at their flesh, comprehending that while there was no pain, there was also no life, no breath, no hope? There was only…this?

What had she done? What was she doing?

“Fourteen hours on a wagon seat? Yes, that’s the definition of a long day,” Weybridge agreed, pulling her back from her musings.

“Your army certainly packed the wagon on your behalf,” she told him.

“Guilt is great motivator.”

“Oh, they did feel guilty.”

“I’m sure. But they shouldn’t. I couldn’t have gone with the army when it moved out. Whoever made the decision to leave me behind was right.”

“Well, Jeremiah will be pleased. Dr.Norton. We retrieved a lot of medicine.”

“From what I’ve heard, it’s the whiskey that will delight him.”

“It is very good.”

“I am going to be the ruin of you, Mrs.Steadman.”

“Libby.”

“In that case: Jonathan.”

“No.” She shook her head.

“No?”

“I’ll defer to my niece. I think I’ll call you Jackal, too.” Maybe it was the whiskey, but chiding him was irresistible. She could see he was smiling, which made her unexpectedly happy. She supposed her niece, in her bedroom, was, too. “You don’t have a big snout, but I can see the canine in you.” A word came to her: wolf. But she sensed he wasn’t a wolf. Not at all. He was just tall, and his face was a series of strong, sharp angles.

“I’m sure I’ve had students call me worse than Jackal.”

“Ah, but only behind your back.”

“Only.”

She leaned over for the jug and refilled her sherry glass. She saw his was empty and poured some into it. Then she said, “I can’t see you as a taskmaster.”

“I wasn’t much older than my students. I did have a reputation for being genial.”

“Even on the battlefield?”

He seemed to think about this. “Less so. There.”

“But your men liked you. I’m confident of that.” Then, for reasons she could not immediately parse, she added, “I know they liked my husband. I’m sure he’s still popular—wherever he is.”

“Jubilee said he was a captain, too, when he was wounded.”

“He was. He is. It was his leg that was shot. Not as bad as you. Not nearly that bad.”

“Good.”

“It is.” She stared at the lantern through the sherry glass, the way the flame danced behind the liquid. She was definitely tipsy, but she didn’t believe she was drunk. At least she didn’t think so. She’d never been drunk.

“But you don’t know what prison camp he’s in now.”

“No. He was in Camp Chase in Ohio. That’s where his last letter came from. He wrote that they were going to move him because it was getting too crowded, but he didn’t know where.”

“And no correspondence since?”

“Not a one. Not a word.”

There had been so many theories, so many ideas. Everyone had one. The optimistic suggested his letters had been lost in transit. The battlefield, especially here in the Valley, had been fluid. She had written him at Camp Chase, asking that her letters please be forwarded if prisoner Peter Steadman was no longer there. She’d even written to the camp’s Union commander, but she’d never heard back. There had been rumors of a smallpox outbreak at Chase earlier this year, and the timing had coincided with Peter’s last letter and his telling her that he was likely to be moved. Hundreds of prisoners—maybe a thousand—died.

“But I’m hopeful,” she added.

“There’s every reason to be,” he told her, but she wasn’t sure he believed that.

She made a decision: she liked whiskey more than sherry. She liked the warmth of it on her throat and in her chest, she liked the way the world seemed less dark and dangerous, and the fact that she had killed two men today more palatable. Even the idea she had a dead ranger buried on her property seemed a less burdensome weight on her soul.

“I hear you dictated a letter to Jubilee for your wife,” she announced. “It’s Emily, right?” The woman’s name felt thick in her mouth. It was as if the word, and all it connotated, was simultaneously a way of suggesting her fidelity to her husband and a betrayal of him.

“It is.”

“Did Jubilee tell you how we intend to mail it?”

“No.”

“She hasn’t told me, either. It’s one thing for letters we send across lines to prisoners. This is quite another.”

“I hadn’t thought of that. I’m not quite myself, I suppose.”

“Oh, I’m certainly not me,” she said. There was disappointment in his face, and so she added, “At some point, I may have to try and return to Harper’s Ferry. I hope not. But long ago I gave up trying to know the future. I could bring it then. Your letter.”

“I’d worry about you on the road. You shouldn’t go just to post a note.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t. I also wouldn’t carry with me the one you dictated to Jubilee. When I asked her, she said you used our names. You’d need to dictate a new one.”

“My God, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s fine. Tomorrow, or the next day, we can try again—if you feel up to it.”

“Thank you. I’ll be more circumspect next time.”

“And I’ll have the doctor here first thing in the morning.”

“That’s only a few hours away.”

She nodded. It was.

And there was the mill.

She rose and lifted the lantern. “You should sleep. We both should. Are you comfortable?”

“As comfortable as possible. You’ve done an awful lot for me. Thank you.”

“I’ve only done what any decent woman would do. Good night,” she said, and then she turned to leave, the room growing dark behind her and the word decent echoing in her mind.

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The doctor tried to restrain his glee at the amount of whiskey that Libby and Joseph had brought back, but as Norton worked on his leg and his hand, the physician reminded Weybridge of his nephew on Christmas, a child he had last seen in December 1860, when the boy was six. Giddy and shocked at the unexpected bounty. His own son—his firstborn—that Christmas had been an infant: far too young to appreciate the idea of gifts, much less the meaning of the holiday. The realization that Weybridge had but one Christmas with his second boy struck him now as another indication of the way this war had dragged on forever.

“I suppose you’ve killed a lot of good Southerners,” Norton was murmuring as he draped lint soaked in carbolic acid on the remnant of the leg, sponging at the pus. “But the fact you’re here now? What Mrs.Steadman brought back from your garrison? It’s a blessing, Captain. She even brought back Dover’s Powder and the blue pills. So, you’re going to save a few boys now, too. Your ledger, when you die, will not be quite so one-sided.”

His touch was gentler today than it was when they met. Weybridge was confident it was because the physician had all that whiskey in his future and was in a better mood.

“How much pus is there on the leg? I don’t see a lot on my hand.”

“Not much on either. And less than the day before yesterday. There’s inflammation, of course, but no sign of putrefaction. If you die, it won’t be of blood poisoning.”

The news was a comfort. This had been a fear.

But he definitely felt stronger. The pain had diminished, at least a little. It may have been a result of the simple fact that he had been eating and drinking and sleeping in a bed for two days. Of course, it may also have been the whiskey. He was still avoiding the opium Libby brought back because he wanted to remain clear-headed.

“I don’t think you’re going to die anytime soon,” the doctor added.

“No?”

The physician shook his head. “The ministrations of a good woman. And her servants.”

“I don’t think Joseph and Sally are her servants,” he corrected Norton, and then felt a spike of pain up his leg, as the physician pressed his thumb into a spot near the severed bone.

“Like you, Captain, they owe their lives to her,” he said, regarding the stump. He pulled back his hand and took a step away from the bed, surveying his whole patient.

Weybridge considered fencing back by remarking that it was a good thing the Union army had recaptured Harper’s Ferry, because otherwise there would have been neither medicine nor whiskey for Libby to retrieve. But he suspected that Norton might decide to probe the wound again if he did, a spiteful little stab. So, he simply nodded and said, “And I owe you a great deal, too.”

Norton dunked his hands in the wash basin and dried them on a towel.

“I’m going to stop by again tomorrow. This afternoon, I want you in a chair by the window. I want you getting some sun and some fresh air on the wounds. Joseph will help move you.”

“When do you think I might hobble there by myself?”

“Not today. We’ll see about tomorrow. Maybe I’ll ask Joseph to make you some crutches—though it’s not like the man has the time for that.”

“I know. I’m a burden.” His tone, when he heard it, sounded facetious. But he hadn’t meant it that way, and was contemplating an apology, when the physician agreed with him.

“You are. But you’re breathing, and Mrs.Steadman wants to keep it that way. And, I suppose, as a doctor I do, too.”

“Ah, but not as a Virginian,” he said, unable to resist.

“Nor as a father who has outlived two sons because of the likes of you.”

The response was gutting, and Weybridge felt a deep pang of remorse. “I’m sorry,” he told him.

“Words. Just words, Captain. No one knows what it’s like who hasn’t experienced it.”

“You’re right,” Weybridge agreed. “I’ve had to write too many parents. Too many wives. I have children of my own. Sons. Before the war, I spent my life with words, and yet, in all those letters, I never wrote anything adequate. Not once. No parent should witness his children buried or hear of their demise from a stranger with a pen.”

“Indeed. I’m not sure what’s worse: how we hear of our children’s death or the fact we know their body’s been buried far from home.” Norton gazed past him out the window. “There are just too few of us and too many of you,” he said after a moment. Then he picked up the jug of whiskey and cradled it like an infant against his chest

and, without saying goodbye, turned and left.

It was glorious to sit by the window in an upholstered chair and feel the sun on his face. The last time he had sat like this was the morning of the attack that would cost him his leg and much of his hand, a memory that made him think of Eustis Marsh. He hoped the farmer was well, and Weybridge guessed that he was. No one was unkillable in this nightmare, but Marsh might have been as close as one got.

Joseph and Jubilee had carted this chair upstairs, an effort that Jubilee had made clear was a task for which she expected someday to be duly compensated: it replaced the small wooden one that had been there. It was late in the afternoon and wafting into his room from the kitchen was the aroma of frying okra and ham. It seemed Colonel Duffy had sent Libby and Joseph home from Harper's Ferry with a little meat, too, and she was downstairs cooking supper.

Earlier in the afternoon, Libby had taken a break from the mill and suggested he dictate that new letter to his wife. She wasn't going to attempt another journey to Harper's Ferry anytime soon, but she said the field of battle was so fluid that an opportunity to get a letter there might present itself. And so they'd spent a few minutes together, and she'd taken down his words. He recalled now what he had said. He'd been circumspect and modest, because this woman he barely knew was his conduit. The headline was simple: he was alive. He didn't know if the Vermont Brigade had notified her that he was merely wounded or had written her that he was dead. He minimized his injuries, saying only that he thought his leg and his hand were healing. If Emily knew of the amputation, she still could take comfort from that news. If she did not yet know, he didn't see a reason to reveal that he had been crippled in his very first missive since, perhaps, returning in her eyes from the dead. He would let her savor the fact he was breathing, not be devastated by the reality that if he did make it home, he'd be returning a shell of his former self. Libby seemed to approve of his lies of omission.

This time he did not share the names of the people who were saving his life: Libby and Joseph and Sally. He did not tell Emily where he was. In hindsight, he was worried that his tone in the letter was passionless, a possibility that left him fretting, both because of the signal he suspected it could send to his wife, if, somehow, she ever did receive this correspondence, and because Libby might think less of him. He sounded, best case, like a stodgy schoolteacher and, worst case, like an officious martinet.

And it was the idea that he had left an unfavorable impression on Libby Steadman that had him more unsettled.

He was watching two squirrels chase each other around a red oak when he heard Jubilee—already he had come to know her footsteps well—bounding up the stairs and then into her aunt's bedroom. With great histrionics, she collapsed onto the carpet before the chair and looked up at him, her face flushed from her exertions.

"Well, look who still hasn't gone back to bed. My, oh my. What's next? You gonna chop us some wood, Captain Jackal?"

"Captain? I see I've been promoted."

"Don't let it puff you up. You're still a bluebelly. I only added 'Captain' because I liked how it sounded."

"It is a nice rhythm. Captain Jackal. A pirate, perhaps. Are you a writer?"

"I'm twelve. I'm nothing."

His mutilated left hand was tucked beneath the flap of his shirt. It had become a habit of his, he was beginning to realize. "No one's nothing."

“So, the schoolmarm’s now a preacher.”

He started to defend himself, to remind her he was a college professor, not a schoolmarm, but caught himself. He couldn’t believe that he’d almost taken the bait. Instead, he smiled and said, “Schoolmarm is a noble calling.”

“Tell me something.”

He waited.

“What’s it like to kill a man? Doc Norton don’t like how many Virginians you’ve probably killed.”

“I’m sure he doesn’t.”

“I don’t think he waited ’til he got home to have himself some of that whiskey we gave him.”

“Very possible.”

“Whole jug—just today! Just so he keeps his trap shut and doesn’t get us all hung.”

“Hanged,” he corrected her, a reflex, but then his mind paused. The combination of this twelve-year-old asking him what it felt like to see your bullet end a man’s life and her awareness of how his presence could get them—at least Joseph and Sally—hanged, caught him off guard. He had not expected this, and turned away from her toward the squirrels while he contemplated a response. The two animals were gone. Her inquiry felt legitimately curious to him, a question not tinged with the judgment of the physician who, clearly, blamed him for the death of many Southerners.

“That problem too tough for a schoolmarm?” she pressed when he was quiet. “What it’s like to kill a man?”

“It’s too tough for anyone,” he admitted.

“Some professor you are.”

“There are the Southerners I’ve shot and there are the Vermonters I’ve sent to their deaths by ordering a bugle call. I regret them all.”

“I bet you ‘regret’ your Vermonter deaths more.”

He decided to administer some tough love. “The men I sent into battle knew what they were fighting for. They were fighting because there are people across the South who do not see Joseph and Sally as human beings.”

“I ain’t ever owned a servant.”

“Slave. The word is slave.”

“That ain’t what this is about. My daddy never owned no one. Same with my uncle. Heck, my uncle freed his people.”

“Then what is this about?”

“You Yankees won’t leave us be. That’s why we’re fightin’.”

Downstairs, he heard the sound of plates and silverware. Jubilee had heard it, too, her eyes going back and forth between Weybridge and the door. “If anyone’s a slave, it’s my aunt. It’s me. All we do is work, work, and work some more, and what are we paid? Either nothing or Confederate money, which is also nothing. I got good reason

to be right peevish."

"You do," he agreed. "But no one is ever going to put you in chains. Literally: in chains. No one is going to whip you or work you to death. No one can buy you or sell you as if you weren't a human being. That's why we won't—to use your words, Jubilee—leave you be."

She fiddled with the lace on her boots, clearly deciding on her response. He considered whether he was too stern. The reality was that her mother was dead. Her father was fighting. And her uncle had vanished, disappeared into the maw of the Union prison system, very likely dead, too. Moreover, in the time he had been here, he had seen no other children. Not a one. Jubilee's company consisted of three grown-ups, two of whom were old enough to be her grandparents.

When she said nothing, he continued carefully, "When you were living with your mother, how would you spend your days?"

She crossed her arms across her chest. "Why?"

"I'm interested. I'm a father."

"I got me one of them. It's a mother I lack. I don't need you to replace a good man who you bluebellies want to shoot."

"I understand."

"Do you, Jackal? I can tell you plain: when it was just me and my ma, I figured life could not get harder. Well, I learned when she passed: it's a big mistake to believe life can't get harder. It always can and it always will. Look at you! A month ago, you had two good legs and two good hands, and now you got yourself eight fingers, five toes, and one knee."

She pointed at the ceiling—meaning, he could tell, the sky—and then continued, “I once heard a preacher talk all about how we come into this world with nothing and can’t take a slop jar with us when we go. That whole ashes to ashes sermon. Every preacher has got himself one. Well, you know what ‘godly’ men don’t talk about in that whole ashes to ashes blah-blah-blah?”

He didn’t answer; he didn’t need to. Whatever pause he’d given her during his brief lecture was behind her. Now she was a train roaring down the tracks.

“How a baby ain’t got a thing of value and an old man dyin’—or my ma dyin’—ain’t got nothing of value. For sure, they got nothing that will make a lick a difference. But, somehow, that old man and my ma at the end had so much in between. So many friends and so much family and the smell of bacon and the taste of strawberries and swimmin’ when you ain’t supposed to. No preachers ever talk about how you ain’t ever gonna smell rosewater again, at least the way it once smelled on your ma.”

She raised her eyebrows at him, challenging him to respond, daring him to try and admonish her again.

“My mama’s last words were about me, you know.”

“I did not know.”

“?’Course you didn’t. But she told the doctor to tell my aunt, ‘Do right by her.’ Do right by me. Then she passed.”

“I think your aunt has done that, don’t you?”

“She has. But—”

“Jubilee?” It was Libby’s voice from the bottom of the stairs. “Supper’s about ready.

Come set the table."

The girl rolled her eyes. "And you ask why I'm right peevish. After I eat, I get to cart a tray up here so you can eat by the window or eat in bed. My aunt will have cut your food into pieces like you're a toddler. Then I'll empty your slop jar 'cause you can't hobble your way yet to the outhouse."

"I didn't ask for any of this. I assure you, it's…humbling."

"Humbling? I get that. But do crippled royalty have it so good? Kings and queens?"

"Well, which am I, Jubilee? A one-legged jackal or a one-legged king?"

"Oh, you're a jackal."

"Good. I don't approve of kings. It sounds like you don't either. So, we have that in common."

She stood and said, "Some people are killers and some ain't. My aunt can barely bring herself to kill the chickens, so she sure ain't capable of killin' a man. My Lord, look how she's helpin' a dog like you. But me, Captain Jackal? I could be a pirate. So, mark my words: you better do right by me. And you better do right by her."

Then she was running down the stairs, and he heard the sound of the silver as she set the table. He thought the girl was underestimating her aunt. The woman was tough, and she was a survivor. But Jubilee was most likely right about one thing: as resilient and independent as she was, Libby Steadman certainly wasn't a killer.

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Here I am again, Libby thought, sitting in a chair late at night, sipping whiskey with a Yankee captain. Her back was sore, as it was most evenings, but she was beginning to understand the attraction of hard spirits. She could almost forget the ache from kidney to kidney and in her right shoulder. And while the world seemed no less mad to her, it did seem more tolerable when viewed through the amber mist of this alcohol. She noticed how, by the light of the day, Weybridge's eyes were green; by the lantern, however, they were black as crows. He was, once more, in her husband's sleep shirt. It smelled of soap, not Peter. It hadn't held her husband's musk in years.

"Libby?"

Her name pulled her from her reverie. She was staring at him, but she had lost the thread of their conversation. She smiled.

"I'm curious: Where will the doctor say he got the quinine and all that medicine?" he was asking her.

"Jeremiah Norton is a very capable liar. I've heard him tell people who won't live through the night that they'll be fine, helping them pass in their sleep. That's a gift. And when a doctor can't cure you, it's helpful when he can ease you from this world with poppycock and tripe."

"So, he'll come up with something?"

"He will. Or did. He and Joseph have already delivered much of it to the army. Said it

was likely some bighearted smuggler dropped it off at his place. I am quite sure the army didn't ask questions."

"Or he could have said it was Mosby's men. Given them the credit."

She shook her head. "No, he couldn't. If the rangers had commandeered a wagon with that much medicine, they would have brought it directly to Jubal Early's command. And taken the credit."

"Of course."

"And kept some for themselves."

She saw the toothbrush beside the glass of water on the night table. He'd been giddy as a child when she'd found it in the plenty she'd received at Harper's Ferry and brought it upstairs to him. Joseph had brushed his teeth for him the morning after he'd arrived, but the idea he had his own toothbrush had made him happy almost beyond reason. They hadn't given her tooth powder, but tooth powder was one of the few commodities they had in excess here at the gristmill and house. Eggs and flour and tooth powder, it seemed. And catfish.

"You're fortunate you're right-handed," she said. "I see you brushed your teeth all by yourself like a big boy."

"My independence is staggering," he said. Then he continued, "I was never going to be four F."

"Four F? What Yankee nonsense is that?"

He smiled. "You can't serve in the army if you're four F. It means you're missing the four front teeth you need to tear open the cardboard cartridges for your rifle. That's

how it started, anyway. Now it means anyone who's unfit to serve."

"Somehow, I doubt teeth have been a factor in Southern recruitment. We need every warm body we can get."

"Both sides do. My company was often at half strength."

"I will never forgive your General Grant," she said, shaking her head at the thought of the man. He was vile. She loathed him more than Abe Lincoln.

"I can think of any number of reasons why the man might have earned your wrath. Is there one in particular?"

"You really don't know?"

"I don't."

She sighed heavily and put the tumbler down on the night table. "He was the one who stopped the prisoner exchanges back in March. Up until then, I always had hope that Peter might come home in a prisoner exchange with you Yankees. Now, if he comes home, it won't be until the fighting is over—which, if your current president wins in November, will likely be never."

"No war lasts forever, Libby."

"Well, the Hundred Years' War lasted a hundred years."

"One hundred and sixteen."

"Thank you, Professor. There's no trait in a man more attractive than the willingness to correct a lady. I couldn't tell you the dates of that war, and I don't care. The fact it

lasted one hundred and sixteen years is about all I need to know."

"I'm sorry."

"Apology accepted. Not sure it was necessary, but I'll take it. Of course, from now on when I call you Professor, please know there will be the smallest dollop of rebuke in my voice."

"My penance?"

"And I'm going easy on you," she said. She supposed she should push herself to her feet and go to bed. But she was comfortable in this chair. She would be content to scandalize the world—well, Sally and Joseph and Jubilee—and close her eyes and sleep right here. In this chair. It wouldn't take long to fall asleep. She even closed her eyes and tried it out, breathing in slowly through her nose, counting the breaths, savoring the quiet with this man who may have been a bit of a know-it-all, but was otherwise a most companionable presence.

"Tell me something," she said, her eyes closed, her voice huskier than usual. It was the whiskey, she guessed.

"Of course."

"What have you heard of the Union prisons?"

"I've heard they're fine."

"Fine."

"Yes."

“You’re lying.”

“I am. But only because I’ve never seen one. My sense is that your husband is as well as can be expected. He’s being fed and kept warm, and will come home to you when this is over.”

Against the back of her eyes, she saw Peter. But only dimly. How quickly one could forget a face. It was both pathetic and tragic.

“May I ask you something?” he said.

She didn’t open her eyes. She was enjoying the dark there. She nodded.

“I know you and Peter don’t have any children. Did you have a baby that died?”

“No. I’ve never been pregnant.”

“Is that a disappointment?”

Now she did open her eyes and meet his. “No. We’d been married barely a year when the war came and he left. If I’d had an infant to care for on top of everything else? I’d be licked by now. Utterly whipped.”

“I doubt that. You have a stronger spine than a lot of the men I’ve commanded.”

“You may be right. I’m not shy about my capabilities. But a baby the last three years? No.”

“Can you shoot?” he asked, and there was something devilish in the question. She couldn’t tell for sure, but from the tone, it seemed, he didn’t believe that she could—which was both true and not. She really couldn’t shoot, but she had fired a

Colt and amassed a small armory. She had killed more men than any woman she was likely to meet.

Or not. Who could say what secrets other women had after three and a half years of war?

Especially here, where the armies—both sides—always seemed to be coming and going.

“No,” she answered finally. “But I have other strengths. Make no mistake: you don’t want to cross me.”

He put up his right hand in surrender. “Never. If I have learned one thing in the army, it’s this: never go into a fight you can’t win.”

“You’re a wise man, Professor.”

“Jonathan. Please.”

“I’ll work on it.”

“Very kind of you. And Professor is better than Jackal. ”

“Depends on what I mean when I say it,” she told him. “So, tell me. How are you feeling?”

“A little better, actually. I mean that.”

“Do you need anything?”

“No.”

She took her glass off the night table and rose. With her free hand she touched his forehead, relieved to find it as cool as hers. She allowed her fingers to linger there an extra second. Then she came back to herself. He was definitely mending. She motioned at the lantern, and he nodded that she could take it with her to the room she was sharing with Jubilee. Then she turned and left him alone in the dark. She felt unsteady on her feet, and knew it was not merely the whiskey.

The afternoon sky was waxen and stark, an endless flatness the color of eggshells. In the pasture, the two horses and the lone cow were grazing. The day was windless, and the birds, at the moment, were silent.

Jubilee was too short for the crutches, but Joseph watched her take one and hop about on it while he finished sanding the handpiece of the other one. He was seated on a stool in a patch of flat dirt beside the corncrib, empty since they had stopped growing corn.

“That man is a lot of work,” she said to him. Joseph knew whom she was referring to.

“He has made the days a little longer,” he admitted. “But not everyone in this war has to die, now do they?”

“And even with them crutches, I don’t see how he can help around here. You been up since dawn—”

“Before dawn.”

“Me too. And you were at the mill, and then hammerin’ back them boards in place in Cinnamon’s stall, and now you’re makin’ the man these crutches. Sally was not happy you didn’t stop for dinner. She says you’re too old to be missin’ meals.”

“I’m a little sick of okra.”

“Me too. But that ham you got from the bluebellies in Harper’s Ferry? That was tasty.”

He looked at the handpiece and ran his fingers over it, savoring how smooth he had made it. No chance of a splinter there. “Bring me that other crutch,” he said to the girl, and she pretended to use it, hobbling over to him. When he had both, he stood and tried them out, bending his right leg at the knee and lifting it off the ground.

“You need more padding on that part there that goes under his arm,” Jubilee told him.

The girl was right, and so he took some of the worn fabric Libby had found him from the basket, sat back down, and cut another piece. The pattern was paisley, and likely the remnants that were not needed for a dress.

“I hear Sally usually cans tomatoes and makes mighty good pickles. I reckon not this year,” she went on.

“Nope. No more tomatoes and cucumbers to pickle. That’s what happens in a war. Too many people to feed. Too many people just takin’ what they want.”

“You see Doc Norton when he was here today? He’s seen that jackal three times now.”

“I did not.”

“He thinks he’s a better doctor than Robert E. Lee’s a general. Says he’s workin’ wonders on the bluebelly.”

He cut the fabric into a long strip and wound it around the top of the crutch. “The man is much better.”

“It’s sleepin’ in my aunt and uncle’s bed. It’s all the food he’s eatin’.”

“And the medicine. And the doctor.”

“Doc Norton practically fell off his horse when he was leavin’. Smelled like a saloon.”

Joseph sat up straight and folded his arms across his chest. “Child, you have no idea what a saloon smells like. Are you sayin’ in your fashion that the man was tipplin’ before he came here?”

“Tipplin’? Jeremiah Norton pours bark juice down his gullet like he’s tryin’ to power the wheels in the mill!”

Joseph knew it was no secret that the physician drank too much: whiskey was always part of his plan to bring the physician into their camp. But people shied away from calling him a drunk. And the idea that the doctor was already five sheets to the wind when he was here this morning was worrisome. Yes, they were plying him with whiskey to buy his silence, but that alcohol could also prove to be their undoing if he was too drunk by midday to hold his tongue.

He pulled at his shirt collar, which was soaked through with sweat and chafing his neck. He was unsure what they could do, but helping a Federal was treason. He’d only been free a half decade, and the last thing he wanted was to lose that freedom to a noose.

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They moved briskly through the field, toward the woods that sloped down to the river. Weybridge had mastered the crutches quickly, even on the left side where he had but two fingers and a thumb for the handpiece. The empty pants leg, tied off, bounced along with him. Often Libby suggested they slow down, but he had always walked fast. Besides, who wanted to meander when the air was warm but not humid (for a change) and the last of the apples were waiting?

“They’d be long gone if anyone knew about them,” Libby was saying about the apples. “But no one does. A couple trees that grew far from the orchard. My hope is there are enough for pies. I want to make four. Maybe five.”

“Is that your way of telling me that we don’t eat what we pick?”

“Oh, we’ll eat a few. I’m quite sure of that.”

As if he were riding a horse, his eyes were soft, scanning the earth before him so he could see any stones or holes in the ground that might trip him. He knew the woods would be more difficult, but he assured Libby that he wanted to try. You like apples that much? she had asked, and he had answered that he liked the idea of trying to expand his world beyond the yard around the house and the mill that much. This was only his fourth day with the crutches.

“Why so many pies?” he asked.

“Because you’re gaunt.”

“Fair enough.”

“One will be for Jeremiah. I know Joseph is worried about the man, and this is just another small way to buy his silence,” she said, and then she pointed at a copse of evergreen beyond a patch of wildflowers—goldenrod, aster, and a few gangly sunflowers—waffling in the slight breeze. “There’s the path,” she said, pointing. “It’s only steep near the river, and we won’t be going that far.”

“I’m unstoppable with these. You have no idea how good it feels to be moving again.”

“We’re picking the apples and then we’re going home. You’re ready to walk, not run. You don’t want to reopen the wounds.”

“No. I don’t.” And, though he detested the idea of slowing their pace, he did. When they reached the wildflowers, she paused, and so he rested a moment, too. He felt the pressure under his arms. He wiped at his brow, wondering if he was doing too much too soon. He looked back at the house and the mill, small now, and his year as an artillerist in Washington came back to him: he estimated instantly that the buildings were four hundred yards distant.

“When I was growing up in Charlottesville, my mother had a flower garden,” she said. “I always thought I’d plant one by the house. By the front walk.”

“You will,” he said.

“Who has that kind of time? This is the first day this fall I’ve gone anywhere near these trees or this part of the river.”

“The last time I was at the Opequon, I wound up head over heels with a tourniquet on my leg.”

“Thank God, for that—the tourniquet.”

“You ever think of going back to Charlottesville? Wait out the war a little further south?”

“My father’s people would like that. But I live here now. My father’s dead, my mother’s dead. This is my home.”

When they entered the woods, he paused. Before them were tree roots and buckthorn and stones the size of skulls. One of his crutches sank inches through wet dirt and, suddenly, he was unsteady on his feet. His foot. And then Libby was taking him by his arm, holding on tight, her small fingers a reassuring vise on the muscle there.

“You’ll be fine,” she told him.

He turned to her.

“It’s not far,” she added.

Yes, she had found him on the floor, his clothing plastered to his skin by his own urine and excrement, and seen the ruin of his body before and after Joseph had first cleaned him up. She had given him her bed, her husband’s clothes. They had sipped whiskey together in the small hours of the morning, alone in her bedroom. And yet this touch now felt almost too intimate to bear. It was exquisite, and he’d felt a warmth through the cotton of his shirt—no, this wasn’t his shirt, this too belonged to Peter Steadman—as potent, it seemed, as the sun.

And his confidence, bolstered by her touch, returned, even as his lone knee felt a little bit weak.

Weybridge was alone in Libby’s bedroom later that day when he heard the horses.

Two. Maybe three. Downstairs, Sally was making the apple pies, not Libby, because that neighbor named Leverett Covington had sent his people over with a wagon load of wheat, and so Libby and Joseph had stopped whatever they were doing and gone to work. Here, Weybridge had learned, the mill came first.

He peered from the window, hiding behind the curtain like an actor surveying the crowd before the first act, standing now on but one of his crutches. There were two riders, both in butternut uniforms and wearing slouch hats against the sun, one with gold braid along the brim. Weybridge could see the bars on that soldier's shoulders: he was a lieutenant and he had a private with him. Both men were younger than he was, perhaps even younger than Libby. As they were dismounting, Sally emerged from the front door to greet them.

"Your mistress here?" the lieutenant asked, looping the reins of his horse to the railing by the front steps.

"She's at the mill, sir."

"Mind if we come in?"

"Is something the matter?"

"I hope not."

"I'm baking, sir."

"I can smell it. Delicious. I'm going to guess a pie."

"Yes. There were so many apples, I'm baking four."

The private finished tying his horse to the railing. He stared up at the second floor,

and Weybridge knew he had plastered himself against the wall just before he would have been spotted.

“So. Shall we come in?” the officer pressed.

“May I please get Mrs.Steadman? She wouldn’t want to be inhospitable.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“It’s no bother.”

It was clear that Sally could stall for only so long. His mind raced between ways he might defend himself and whether he should turn himself in. But the ramifications of shouting down to the rebels that he was here and would work his way down the stairs would endanger everyone—not just him. Unfortunately, his weapons in this bedroom consisted of his crutches and a water pitcher. Not much against two rebels with pistols.

“I should get her,” Sally was saying. “It’ll just take a minute.”

Sally had no intention of giving him up, which would only make whatever punishment she faced worse. He had no good options, but came to the conclusion that his only chance—the best thing he could do for the people who had saved his life—was fight. The soldiers would start up the stairs looking for him, and he’d be waiting around the corner at the top. If he could push one into the other and send them both spiraling backward down the steps, he or Sally might be able to retrieve one of their guns while they were injured or stunned. If they had drawn their pistols, he might even be able to grab one at the top of the stairs.

And then…what?

Kill them?

Yes. Of course.

He couldn’t fathom what these kind people would think of him killing in cold blood—in their home, not the infernos of Cold Harbor and Spotsylvania, or even a few miles from here at one of the brawls on the Opequon—but this was the choice he was making. He was just starting toward the bedroom door and the top of the staircase when he heard Libby calling to the men, as she marched briskly up from the mill.

“Hello!” she yelled cheerfully.

The men turned and removed their hats in unison.

“Would you gentlemen like some water? Water is about what I have, but Sally sweetens it with mint. We still have some mint.”

“You’re Mrs.Steadman?”

“I am, yes. But, please, call me Libby.”

“Lieutenant Darcy Sears, ma’am,” he said. He didn’t introduce the private with him. “We don’t need anything. But thank you.”

“What can I do for you? Are you with the quartermaster?”

“No. I’ll be straight. We’ve heard talk there’s a Union captain ’round here. Was left down the road at the house of someone named Maude Bingham. Someone says you might have brought him here.”

“Well, wouldn’t that cause a ruckus?”

“At the very least.”

She laughed. “My husband is Peter Steadman, Second Virginia. Captured at Gettysburg. I was just at the mill working to grind more flour for our army. Why in the world would I bring a Yankee here?”

“You tell me.”

“The only person in this world I hate more than Abe Lincoln is Ulysses Grant.”

“Then you won’t care if we search the house?”

“Of course not.”

“And the mill?”

“You can search the house, the mill, the smokehouse, the corncrib. Go search Joseph and Sally’s place, look inside the servants’ quarters. Scour the property, Lieutenant, have at it.”

“And the barn?”

“Yes. Of course.”

The lieutenant ordered the other soldier to start with the mill and then go the barn. He himself would search the house.

“Come with me,” Libby was saying. “I can give you a tour.”

“Thank you,” he said, and then Weybridge saw the private striding off toward the mill and the two women and the lieutenant entering the front door. Weybridge knew that he had had a piece of unexpected good fortune: Sears had sent his man to the mill to look for him. He’d divided his little army in half.

And so Weybridge changed his plan. Silently he shut the door to the bedroom. When Libby opened it and Sears walked in, Weybridge would be ready.

The voices came and went like waves. One moment he heard them clearly, and then their conversation became the distant burble he might have perceived while submerged beneath the skin of a pond. The house wasn’t large, but it was big enough: it took time to traverse the four rooms downstairs, opening cabinets and inspecting the pantry.

In the meantime, his plan grew firm. He was standing on but one crutch, his back to the wall behind the door, with the porcelain water pitcher in his hand. The biggest problem was that he had to use his left hand to grip the pitcher, so his right could hold the crutch that had replaced his missing leg—which, in turn, meant that he was grasping his weapon with but a thumb and two fingers. Whatever blow he landed with the pitcher would be feeble. (Once, he’d regularly held a sword that weighed not much more than this pitcher. He knew other men who carried heavier ones they nicknamed “wrist breakers” because of their heft, but Weybridge had never seen the point. A sword for him was more like a flag than a weapon: it was a way of showing his men where he was.)

But, perhaps, the pitcher would weigh just enough. He only had to stun the lieutenant enough to grab the pistol. Surprise was on his side, and if you’re going to attack, there was no better ally.

Libby would notice the door was shut but, very likely, intuit he was awake. He couldn’t imagine what it would be like for her to witness the violence that loomed:

she was a formidable woman, that was clear, but he was confident that she'd never witnessed a brawl or seen a man killed.

"How many rooms you have upstairs?" the lieutenant was asking, and he heard their feet on the stairs.

"We have three."

"This place always been in the Steadman family?"

"Yes. It was my husband's father who built it."

"You from around here?"

"Charlottesville," she answered. "This is where my niece sleeps. It's her bedroom."

"So, it's just you and her and the two slaves."

"They were slaves. My husband freed them."

"How come they didn't run off with the others?"

"Ask them. Sally's right downstairs in the kitchen. I suppose it's mostly because they're older. Don't we all get a little set in our ways when we get to be that age? And the others didn't run off. That implies they're runaways."

Weybridge heard his heart in his head as he listened, a sensation he'd experienced before in the calm that existed between cannonade and charge.

"And this is the sewing room?"

“And storage. But, as you can see, we’re not hiding a Union captain.”

He heard what sounded like a table being moved.

“May I open that trunk?”

“Of course.” Then: “See? No sign of a Federal hiding with my old fabrics.”

“That your bedroom?”

“It is. And I will open the door so you can see inside and peer all you want. But only from the doorway.”

“Mrs.Steadman, that—”

“That will do. That will have to do. We have not sunk so low that you are entering a married woman’s bedroom to leer while her husband is in a bluebelly prison camp. You are an officer and I am married to an officer, and I trust you will stand in the doorway and behave like a gentleman.”

And then the door was swinging open, not enough that it hit him, but close, and he raised the pitcher aloft, prepared to strike the rebel in the head and then, as likely as not, collapse upon him and fight for his gun.

But the lieutenant did not enter the room. Weybridge held his breath, waiting, waiting…

And then he heard the sound of both Libby and the soldier retreating.

“Satisfied?” she was asking.

“I’m satisfied he isn’t in the house. If Private Sanderson doesn’t find him in the mill or smokehouse or any of the outbuildings, I’ll be even more comfortable tipping my hat and leaving you be.”

“Who told you this nonsense that I have a Yankee here?” Libby asked, as they started back down the stairs. He exhaled and lowered the pitcher. But he didn’t move. He didn’t dare. He wouldn’t move until the lieutenant was back outside.

“Doesn’t matter.”

“It does to me,” said Libby. “I want to know who is defaming my character.”

“It wasn’t like that. Just a…a rumor,” he told her, and now they were downstairs and the front door was swinging open, and the private was calling from the smokehouse that there was no sign of the Yankee there or in the gristmill, and he was going to search the slave quarters now. The lieutenant said he would join him.

“Would you mind if I returned to the mill?” Libby asked.

“No, ma’am. Thank you for feeding the army.”

“Of course. And if I see a Yankee captain, I’ll be sure and let you know,” she said, and Weybridge found himself smiling at the faint hint of derision in her tone. But there was also the nagging concern that someone was sharing more than they should.

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“If it had been two of John Mosby’s men, I doubt they would have let a lady’s bedroom be. They’re not known for that sort of nicety,” Libby told Weybridge that evening, as dusk turned slowly to night. Nicety. Some of them, she knew well, were pigs.

A bat had been darting back and forth, harvesting mosquitoes and moths. Venus was high above the fields where once the Steadmans had grown corn. She’d carried a wooden rocker onto the front porch for Weybridge and sat down on the top step beside it. Jubilee was inside, cleaning up the kitchen while there was still a little light. Libby found that her shoulder was throbbing more than usual tonight, and couldn’t believe that at the age of twenty-four, she had the aches and pains of a grandmother. She felt the weariness coming on that lived inside her now like a vital organ.

“That water pitcher wasn’t much of an arsenal. I wish we had a gun. Even one,” he murmured.

She pulled her sweater more snugly around herself, aware of the hitch in her shoulder. Did she tell him? He had used the word arsenal. She and Joseph had amassed one.

“But,” he continued, “my God. The damage a Colt can do at close range? I hope you never have to see such a thing, Libby. There is nothing on this earth as violent as a cannon or a gun. I hope you never have to see—”

“I’ve seen your hand. I’ve seen your leg.”

“Fair enough. I hope you never have to experience that sort of bloodshed as it happens.”

He seemed to have no secrets from her. She had so many from him.

She and Joseph had some they hid from Sally and Jubilee.

Two men from Sally. Three from Jubilee.

There had been a point that afternoon, alone in the kitchen with Sally, when she’d almost told the other woman of the two dead bandits in the woods on the way to Harper’s Ferry. She’d wanted desperately to unburden herself after the property search and…confess. Tell someone what she had done. But she couldn’t because Joseph didn’t want his wife to know. And he was right. Neither Sally nor Jubilee could ever know—for their own good. For their own safety. It was bad enough that Sally was aware of the dead ranger on their land. Libby supposed it was possible that she would be taking the story of the men she had killed to her grave.

“I want to be able to protect myself,” he was insisting. “That’s a problem. But a bigger one is that I also want to be sure you can protect yourself.”

“I can.”

“But if I had a weapon, a gun, I—”

“I have a gun,” she said. She hadn’t planned on telling him. The words just came out. “Don’t ask me how or why, but, yes, I have one.”

He stared down at her.

“It’s a Colt,” she said. She didn’t mention that, in fact, she had five Colts and a

carbine. “And I have bullets and powder.”

“Was it Peter’s?”

“It doesn’t matter whose it was.”

“Are you a good shot?”

“No. I’m not even sure I know how to load it.”

“What about Joseph?”

“A Negro? Not a chance. It’s against the law for him to have a gun.”

She looked at the tangle of dead leaves and vines that had given life to the tomatoes in the kitchen garden. It had all gone to weed now, the whole garden, some of the interlopers already knee high. She heard the chickens settling in for the night in their coop.

“Tomorrow, show me the gun,” he said. “I need to teach you how to load it.”

“Oh, my: the bluebelly houseguest expects me to hand him a pistol? I must look awfully gullible.”

“You don’t honestly feel that way.”

“No, of course not.”

“So, tomorrow I’ll give you your first lesson?”

“Fine. Thank you.”

“The idea there were two more soldiers here today worries me. The doctor, perhaps.”

“I know.”

“Is it possible that, by accident, Jubilee said too much?”

She scowled. “No. It’s not. That girl talks and talks, but she is too smart to have a slip like that.”

“Fair enough.”

“Her life is not easy. Like mine, it’s not the life she expected. Or, I suppose, yours.”

“No. But my life is much better than it was a few weeks ago. Thank you.”

“Mine, too,” she said, careful not to make eye contact with him.

Once more, the bat darted past them. She decided she would light the lantern and they would sit out here a little bit longer.

“You really think you can carry a pail of milk to the house?” Jubilee asked Weybridge the next morning, as he stood beside the cow on his crutches. The tip of one crutch was lost to the straw, dry and tinged with the scent of manure, as were the legs of the girl’s stool. Her hands moved with the rhythm of a pianist, and the streams of milk broke the liquid surface near the top of the pail like boys jumping from high cliffs into a lake. She’d clearly been at this a while and was almost done.

“It’s fifty yards,” he told her.

For a moment, her head fell forward in exhaustion, but quickly she rallied. Kindly she patted the animal’s haunches and climbed to her feet, the milking complete, and put

the stool by the wall of the small barn, alongside the chains and ropes and horseshoes. Beside the yoke and a scythe and yet more buckets and pails. “Even if you can hold a bucket, which I doubt, you’ll spill most of it. And milk and flour and eggs is about all we got. And fish, which I don’t like. At least not very much.”

“No?”

She ignored his question and motioned at the cow. “And Flora here ain’t gonna give us another bucket of milk just ’cause you bounced most of this one onto the yard as you hobbled your way to the kitchen.”

She picked up the bucket and started to leave him alone in the barn. But then she stopped and turned back to him. “You hankerin’ to earn your keep? Okay, then. Walk Flora to the field, so I don’t have come back out here and do it. I think you can herd a cow. She ain’t no ignoramus. She’ll probably lead you.”

And then she stamped to the house, lugging the pail full of milk.

Weybridge was wary of the physician now. He suspected that Norton was the leak, though he wasn’t sure the doctor had done it on purpose. It was possible that the man had just been wallpapered—Weybridge knew how much whiskey Libby already had given him—and spoke without thinking. The doctor may not even have realized that he’d tipped someone off that a wounded Yankee was recuperating at Libby Steadman’s place. As Norton dabbed carbolic acid on the remains of his right leg, he muttered, “You won’t win any running races, Captain, but someday you’ll walk without those.” He pointed at the crutches, which were leaning against the wall beside Libby’s bed.

“A peg leg,” he said to the physician.

“Better than that. Last year we started giving our boys legs with knee joints. Ankle

joints. I've seen some in action."

Weybridge took this in. He'd seen plenty of men with false legs, but he'd never studied one.

"Still mostly wood?"

"No, iron," Norton said sarcastically. "Of course, they're still mostly wood." He pulled Weybridge's pant leg back over the stump, and tied off the bottom section with twine. "You're a lucky man," he said after he was finished.

"I am," he agreed. He was crippled—but alive.

"I think this is the last time I'll bother with this," he added, putting a stopper on the bottle of carbolic acid, and then placed the bottle in his bag.

"It hasn't bled in days. My hand, too."

"You have a strong constitution, Captain. You did more to save yourself than I did. Libby did more than I did. Getting you off the floor and getting some food and water into you? Best medicine we have. You in pain?"

"Not much. Not much at all, these days."

"Good."

"One thing," said Weybridge.

The doctor didn't look up. He continued packing his satchel.

"We had some company the other day," Weybridge told him.

“Very nice. Libby needs more company than a couple of freed Negroes, a girl, and a Yankee who should be in a prison camp. She’s a young woman whose husband—”

“Not that kind of company,” Weybridge said, cutting him off. Now he had Norton’s full attention.

“Then what kind?”

“Two soldiers.”

“Stragglers? Deserters?” he asked. “What did they want?” He was staring back at Weybridge. He was closer to sober than drunk this afternoon, and now seemed to be on alert. Weybridge couldn’t decide yet whether the man was surprised and worried about Libby or a very good actor.

Still, even if he was startled by the news, that didn’t mean he should be exonerated. Not yet. Maybe he’d been inebriated when he told someone of Weybridge’s presence and honestly didn’t remember.

“Me,” he replied. “They were looking for me. Obviously, they didn’t succeed. They didn’t find me.”

“Why did they think you might be here?”

“I have no idea. Do you?”

He stood up straight and regarded Weybridge with inimical weariness. “Don’t insult me. I’m a man of my word. I said I’d tell no one, and I haven’t. We have an arrangement, and I am abiding by it.”

“In that case, it seems I’m mistaken,” said Weybridge, though he didn’t suppose that

he was. Still, he could only make his relationship with the doctor even more prickly than it already was by pressing him. “I’m sorry. I had to ask. I didn’t mean to offend you.”

Norton shook his head ruefully, as if disappointed in a child. “Once a Yankee, always a Yankee. You are a people without honor,” he said. Then he took his bag and started down the stairs without saying goodbye. When Weybridge went to the window to watch him leave, he saw that the healer was bringing with him another jug of whiskey.

“You’re not going to load it on the fly,” he told Libby. “At least you don’t want to. You’re going to load it ahead of time.”

They were alone at the kitchen table, the Colt and the powder flask on the pumpkin pine surface between them. He was grateful to be able to focus on the bullets and the gun, on the task at hand. He found himself losing himself a little bit each time he looked into her eyes.

“I’ve never met one of Mosby’s rangers face-to-face, but I’ve heard they often ride with two Colts, so they have twelve shots ready to fire,” he added.

“Two guns,” she murmured, and he couldn’t decide from her tone whether she found this impressive or excessive.

“Yes.”

“Even the soldiers who came looking for you didn’t have two guns in their holsters.”

“I’m not surprised.” At Cold Harbor, his men’s advance had been stopped cold by withering fire from behind Lee’s breastworks. Pinned down, his men had dug trenches of their own, gathering up the muskets of the dead and using the corpses in

their own makeshift earthworks. The wounded had passed their cartridge boxes to the men who could still shoot. The best marksmen would fire and then trade their empty musket for one that was already loaded.

“Your pistol has six chambers in the cylinder,” he said, opening the flask and tipping the black powder into one of the chambers. Then he dropped in a bullet. He could feel her watching him intently, and he recalled the pleasurable sensation of being at the front of a classroom. When he had done this twice, filling two of the chambers, he spun the cylinder and used the loading lever along the bottom of the barrel to press the round balls in tight against the powder.

“It doesn’t seem hard,” she said.

“It’s not. Boys can do it who don’t know their left foot from their right. Even the greenest of Sunday soldiers can manage a musket-loading drill.” He loaded two more bullets. When there were only a pair of empty chambers remaining, he handed her the Colt. “Here. You finish.”

When she had, he gazed at her. She was a fast learner and more dexterous than he was. Nevertheless, she handled the weapon with the prudence of most raw recruits, which meant none at all, and this earthiness was alluring in a way he hadn’t expected. “Now we go shoot something?” she asked, raising a single eyebrow mischievously.

“Are you serious?”

“Dead serious.”

“You really think that’s wise? I said I wanted to teach you how to load it. The noise—”

“My nearest neighbors are a mile and a half away.”

“Libby, we all heard the fighting in Winchester last month.”

“Those were cannons.”

“I know. Trust me, I know what a cannon sounds like.”

She put her hands on her hips. “There has been so much shooting around these parts the last few years, if anyone hears—and that’s a big if, Professor—I tend to believe they’ll steer clear. And what good is a loaded gun if I don’t know how to shoot it?”

He saw her point. “Sure,” he said. “Fine.”

“And we have the bullets.”

He had seen how much ammunition she had and hadn’t pressed her for the source—just as he hadn’t pressed her about where she had gotten this weapon. He reached for one of his crutches and rose, and then grabbed the second one. She scooted ahead of him to open the door, and they moved the lesson outside.

“We’ll empty the chamber, but only one time. Let’s not press our luck,” he said. “I think you have enough ammunition that we can waste six bullets.”

“Waste? It sounds like you are impugning my aim.”

“Oh, I’d never do that. Wrong word. I’ll rephrase: I think you have enough ammunition that we can use six bullets for target practice.”

“How far away should I set up the tins?” she asked. Her eagerness was childlike. She had rounded up two cans that once held condensed milk, and now nails.

He shook his head. “Let’s get a bigger target. Those are tiny.”

“So?”

“I appreciate your confidence, but how about we line up three or four of those barrel staves I saw by the corncrib?” He pointed. “We could jam them into the ground right over there.”

“I’d be aiming awful low.”

“That’s right. I spent a lot of the last year yelling at my men to aim low. After all, they’d been artillerymen until Grant decided he needed the Eleventh as infantry. We all have a tendency to shoot too high.”

“How far?”

“A good shot can hit something twenty yards away. Some even twenty-five. But less on a horse, of course.”

“So…”

“Let’s start at ten yards.”

“Ten?” The idea seemed to exasperate her.

“You’re not going to be shooting charging Yankees, Libby—much as you might want to. If you ever have to fire a gun, and I hope you never do, it will likely be at very close quarters.”

She gazed down at her shoes. It was as if he had inadvertently hit a nerve, and he assumed it was by forcing her to imagine shooting someone so near that she could see his countenance when she killed him.

“Are you all right?” he pressed.

She looked up. “Dandy. Just dandy.”

He held the gun out to her and showed her the notch in the hammer that served as the sight. “The sight is only going to be usable when the revolver is cocked,” he was saying, but she stopped him.

“Wait here,” she ordered. “Let me go get the staves. Then we’ll see what I’m capable of.”

He watched her squint, holding the Colt in both hands. The first shot landed nowhere near any of the three barrel staves, the ball falling in the field behind them. Before she could fire a second time, he lowered her arms.

“That was fun. Except for the waste of a good bullet,” she told him.

“It’s not fun if you’re aiming at a person,” he corrected her.

Her smile vanished instantly. “No,” she agreed. “Probably not.”

“Killing a person is—”

“I understand,” she said. She started to raise the gun again, and he stopped her.

“You didn’t aim too high, which was good. You were off to the left, I believe. So, the correction is—”

“I might like you more as a jackal than a professor, after all,” she told him, and started toward the middle barrel stave, stopping when she was within feet of it. There she raised the Colt and put a round hole through the wood. Then she took a pace back

and fired again, once more hitting it and adding a second fissure.

“Libby,” he said, but she ignored him, retreating further, and sending another ball through the stave, this time from perhaps ten yards away.

He expected her to empty the cylinder, but she stopped. There were two bullets left and the smell of black powder filled the air like a smokehouse.

“Professor?” she said, the single word a question.

“Yes?” He wondered what chastisement awaited.

“You are, in fact, a fine teacher,” she told him. Then she spun and emptied the Colt, one ball flying beyond the staves, and one hitting that middle one, splintering it now into kindling. “And I am, for good or ill and probably for ill, a natural.”

He hobbled over to her. “You are,” he said.

She put her left hand atop his on the crutch and looked into the distance at a group of crows on the bare branches of a dead oak tree. “You said you hope I never have to use one of these.”

“I did. And I do.” He had the sense that she was about to tell him something important—to reveal another part of herself. He waited, the feel of her fingers on his causing his heart to race a little bit faster.

“Well,” she said instead, “me too. But right now, the future’s darker than the sky before a twister. And when the storm comes, which it will, I defy anyone to underestimate me.”

He started to assure her that he could not imagine how anyone could underestimate

her when he heard Jubilee yelling from the road. Instantly Libby removed her hand from his, and then the girl was upon them.

“Did you mean to make me think U.S. Grant was attackin’, or was that just a happy accident?” Jubilee asked, her tone a mixture of enthusiasm and pique.

“Your aunt is a pretty fair shot…if the target is only a few feet away,” she told her niece.

“So, you got us some more bullets, after all. Where?”

Libby looked back and forth between Weybridge and the girl, and he could see how the woman was formulating an answer. It seemed the gun was not a surprise to Jubilee, but the idea that the family had enough ammunition to shoot it was.

“Mr.Covington had some,” she answered.

“I thought you came back empty-handed.”

“I did. The first time. But when he got some bullets and an extra powder flask, he sent it all over.”

“That old grouch finally did something decent? Well, good for him.”

“Yes,” she agreed.

“Jackal here teachin’ you how to shoot?”

“He is.”

The girl turned to him. “Wanna teach me?”

Weybridge glanced at Libby, confident she was going to tell the child that she'd lost her mind. But, once more, she surprised him. "That's a very good idea, Jubilee. Professor, are you game?"

"Do you have enough bullets and powder?" he asked carefully.

She nodded. "Tomorrow," she said to the two of them. "Jubilee, after you've finished your morning chores." She tucked the Colt into the belt of her dress.

"Why not right now?" the child asked.

"Because you're going to muck the stalls and feed the chickens. And I'm going to help Sally with supper." Then she started briskly toward the house, leaving him and the girl and the barrel staves at the edge of the field.

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Overnight, it seemed, the maples turned, and Weybridge thought of Vermont. They had probably changed a week and a half ago there. Maybe two. He stood on his crutches in the yard, not far from where only yesterday he had given Libby her first lesson with a gun, observing how now the leaves were the colors of ripe apples and red wine. It was as if when the morning fog washed over them, it transformed them alchemically with its touch.

He thought of the letter he had dictated to Emily, and experienced a dagger of guilt. He wanted to believe that the kindness he felt toward Libby was gratitude and not desire. But this was prevarication at best, and delusion most likely. He almost—but only almost—wished that Peter Steadman would suddenly come tramping down the road and into the dooryard, a prisoner who had managed to escape and work his way home. That would put a damper on any fledgling spark. But who knew if the man was even still alive? Weybridge had come to doubt it. He had a feeling that Libby had, too.

Ah, but Emily was alive, thank God, and as recently as mere weeks ago, he would have viewed the idea that he might ever have thought about another woman as absurd. Beneath him. This morning he had eaten fried eggs and grits at the table with Libby and Jubilee and Joseph and Sally, but there was a moment when everyone but her fell away, their voices—even Jubilee's—the buzzing of flies, and he saw only Libby.

He looked at his left hand, studying where the pinky and ring fingers had once been. The skin that was growing back was reminiscent of the new flesh after a terrible burn.

He had seen it before on other men, the skin smooth and red and vaguely transparent. The same was true on his leg.

This morning he had asked both Joseph and Libby if there was work he could do at the mill, ways to earn his keep, but there had not been a delivery of wheat or grain since that last delivery from Leveritt Covington, and they were caught up: the mill had been inactive for days now. And so, again today, he was going to help Joseph put in wood for the winter. Even with but two fingers and a thumb on his left hand, he could hold down a branch small enough to be cut into usable pieces with Peter Steadman's compass saw. He had found that he could swing an axe, though not hard enough to split actual logs.

"You ready?"

Weybridge turned at the sound of the voice, and there was Joseph. The man's height surprised him sometimes: for a fellow on the far side of sixty, he had shrunk hardly at all. He nodded, and together they started down to the woodlot. Weybridge was pleased he could keep up with him on his crutches, even a little proud, because despite his age, Joseph was one hell of a fast walker. He would have schooled the Vermont boys in Weybridge's company, many of whom were not yet twenty.

Joseph sat down on a tree stump in the shade, stretched his long legs before him, and ran a handkerchief across his forehead. He had rolled up his sleeves, his shirt a blue-check calico, and loosened his collar. The stump was wide and flat and, Weybridge guessed, had been cut four or five years ago, when Peter Steadman, Joseph, and who knew how many other men were logging here. The tree would have been far too broad for Joseph and him to have felled today with the small saws and axes they'd brought, or the reality that half the crew had one leg and eight fingers. Still, in three hours they'd created a nice pile. Soon they'd bring the wagon to the edge of the woodlot, and one of the horses would pull their work back to the house.

“How’s your hand?” asked Joseph.

“Hurts a bit. But manageable. Really, not too bad.”

“And the leg?”

“It’s the leg that’s whole that’s sore. The good one. It’s not used to carrying so much weight on its own.”

“Doctor thinks you’re mendin’. He’s happy.”

Weybridge pulled the stopper from the canteen and took a long swallow. It had C-S-A stamped on the wood, Confederate States of America, and Libby was unsure where she had gotten it. He knew well that in a war, even the most prosaic things were often lost and found, especially here in a corner of the Shenandoah Valley that had changed hands so many times in the three-plus years of fighting.

“Well, there’s nothing I want more than for Doc Norton to be happy.” His sarcasm, he supposed, made him seem ungrateful.

“You sound like you’re in a mood.”

“No. I just don’t care about the man’s happiness.”

“He’s a drunk. But he did his best for you. And the whole idea you’re helpin’ me get some wood? That’s either a miracle or proof that he knows what he’s doin’.”

Weybridge offered the canteen to Joseph, but the older man shook his head, and so he plugged the stopper back in. “I don’t question his competency. I swear I don’t. I just think he was the one who told someone I’m here. He put you and Sally and Libby and Jubilee in danger. Not just me. The four of you.”

“My biggest fear when Libby and me went to Harper’s Ferry? Slave catchers. It’s why Sally and me don’t go far and why we have never once been to Richmond to see our children. But you know what?”

Weybridge waited.

“I don’t think it was Doc Norton.”

“You don’t?”

Joseph shook his head. “First off, he’s a good doctor: I got a boy alive because of him, my son in Richmond. He wants people breathin’, not danglin’ from trees. Does he also like his whiskey too much, especially since his own boys were killed in the fightin’? Sure does. Both things can be true. But here’s the thing. Mrs.Steadman has plenty of enemies in these parts. So does Peter.” He reached into his haversack for the bread and broke off a piece for Weybridge.

“I can’t see how Libby could antagonize anybody,” said Weybridge.

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“Well, let’s think about that. In a couple weeks, it will be five years—five years exactly—since John Brown took Harper’s Ferry. Whole Valley thought every slave between there and New Market was about to rebel. We would just rise up and kill our masters and do God knows what to their wives. And then Peter Steadman’s father dies. And what does Peter do? Sets us free. Whole Valley’s on edge about slaves takin’ up arms, and he sets us free. No one appreciated that—’cept us, of course, his slaves. Seems to me, we had every right to take up arms.”

“Peter’s father. What did you think of him?”

Joseph met his gaze, contemplating a response. This man was a Yankee, but he was still a white man. “Nope. Not goin’ to be talkin’ about that.”

“I wouldn’t say anything to Libby.”

“Captain. No.”

“I’m an abolitionist,” Weybridge said defensively.

He stared at the Vermonter. “We never grew cotton here. Didn’t grow tobacco. A little corn, a little wheat. Was never a serious plantation. You know, a big one. You ever set foot on a serious plantation?”

“No.”

“Ever watch men and women pick cotton or tobacco?”

He shook his head.

“I am sure you ain’t ever seen a Negro whipped. You ain’t ever seen a human being stripped to the waist and put in chains, have you?”

“Joseph—”

“We was a small group ’cause this was a small farm. Peter Steadman’s father had three overseers in my lifetime. First and last were better than the middle one, but that didn’t make ’em good people. Sally and me have five children, three on this earth and two in heaven. Two are in Richmond, and one is I don’t know where. Why? Because Peter’s father sold him when he was thirteen years old. Sold him. He was only a little

bit older than Jubilee. And the other slaves who used to be here? I got no clue where they went. None. Some went north, thank the Lord. I wish my two children who went to Richmond had gone that way."

"And—"

"I already said too much."

"Why didn't you and Sally leave?"

"Because we were both too damn old to start again someplace new. And because Peter promised us something different. Help him run the mill and help him raise a family, and we'd be paid and treated like white people."

"Did he do that?"

"He wanted to. Who knows how it really would have worked out. But Virginia left the Union and he's a Virginian, and so he was off. Look, Sally and me appreciate what you Yankees want to do, Captain. We appreciate you givin' a leg and a hand on our behalf. But you asked me why folks 'round here might not cotton to Mrs.Steadman. A lady you can call Libby and I can't. I ain't sayin' people blame Libby for Peter settin' us free. I ain't sayin' people think she talked him into it. But she's his wife, and they know her kin never had slaves."

"Did she talk him into it?"

"They weren't even married yet. They were just courtin' then. But she approved. So, if anyone around here was goin' to hide a Yankee captain, she's the one everyone would suspect."

Weybridge ran his fingers over the three letters on the canteen. "Still, she provides a

lot of flour to the army. And her husband fought for Virginia."

"Like I just said. Two things can be true."

"Do you believe Peter's alive?"

He finished the bread, chewing thoughtfully, and then said, "He's a good man, so I hope so. And I hope so for Mrs.Steadman."

Weybridge knew he had asked an impossible question. What was more important was that he feared his own motives for asking.

And as if Joseph could read his mind, protective of both Libby and the man who had freed him, he said to Weybridge, "They had almost no time together as man and wife, those two. Broke Sally's heart more than a little bit when he went away and then when he was wounded and captured. So, I'll tell you something plain, Captain. If I thought for one minute you were goin' to try and come between those two young people, I would send you hobblin' north on your crutches, and let Mosby's bandits or some trigger-happy rebel decide how to deal with you."

Weybridge tried to smile, but his lips felt frozen in place. When he spoke, the words sounded uncharacteristically guttural and hoarse. "I'm married," he croaked simply.

"I know you are," said Joseph, and he stood. "And I ain't questionin' your character. I'm just sharin' with you the lay of the land." He wiped his hands on his pants and then clapped them together. "Well, sir. Should we get back to work?"

Joseph saw the men first: two of them on horseback, both in gray uniforms, in the road in front of Libby's house. He put one hand on Weybridge's arm, silencing him, and nodded in the direction of the riders. They were too far away for Joseph to determine if they were from the quartermaster or he might know them—his eyes had

barely missed the turn of the last century—but instantly he was on alert. The Yankee was seated beside him at the front of the wagon, the wood they'd cut in the bed behind them.

"Captain, get out now, as best you can," he said, and Weybridge tossed his crutches over the side and climbed down.

"The woods?" Weybridge asked him, suggesting a place he could hide.

"That's right. Stay behind the wagon 'til you've seen me wave to whoever that is. Then wait a few seconds more before you start. Try and keep the wagon between you and those men 'til you get there."

It was no more than fifty yards to the forest, but the field here had ruts and hillocks and gnarled ground that was sure to slow a man on crutches, and then there was the goutweed and dead yarrow. It would take time, and Joseph didn't want to draw the attention of the soldiers. These men were talking to Sally, who looked tiny beside the horses and the riders, both of them tall in their saddles. Only when the pair noticed him did he remove his hat and wave. When they'd turned back to Sally, he prodded the horse forward, and heard Weybridge huffing his way double-quick to the woods.

When he reached the house, the soldier in charge, a lieutenant, said to him, "You're Joseph, I gather?"

"Yes, sir."

"I hear there's a Yankee captain near here."

"Could be," he said. "But I ain't seen a single bluebelly since the battle in September. And that was just some cavalry racing down the pike."

“Your wife says the same thing,” the lieutenant grumbled. He turned to Sally and asked, “Where’s your mistress?”

Joseph knew not to correct him, though the idea that the soldier was still speaking to the two of them as if they were slaves rankled.

“She and her niece, Jubilee, are in town, sir.”

“They walk?”

She nodded.

“You got a mouth and you got a brain, woman. I’ll ask you again: They walk?”

“Yes, sir.”

The other soldier, a corporal, said to the officer, “Lieutenant Morgan, I think she’s lyin’. I think they both are.”

“Maybe.” His head moved back and forth between Joseph and Sally. “But my grandfather says these two are the only ones who didn’t hightail it outta here when Peter Steadman set ’em all free. The way Leveritt tells it, Joseph here’s the main reason Mrs.Steadman can still run the mill.”

Joseph knew not to speak unless spoken to. Still, his mind was moving fast as he tried to anticipate what he could do if the lieutenant announced that he was going to search the house. He knew evidence of the man’s presence existed in Libby’s bedroom, including all of the lint and ticking and bandages. He knew the soldier’s blue uniform jacket hung on a peg in that room. More than anything, he wanted to ask the lieutenant who it was who had told them that he and Sally might have seen a Union officer, but he didn’t dare.

“Want me to look around, sir?” the corporal asked.

The lieutenant scanned the area, his eyes moving first toward the gristmill and then toward the smokehouse and corncrib.

“Joseph, which slave cabin you call home?”

“We live in what was the overseer’s house, sir.”

“The overseer’s house. Really?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, if that don’t beat all. The servants with an A-number-one roof over their heads.”

“Would you like to see it, sir?” Sally inquired, and Joseph liked the idea that she was offering to lead them away from the house. It was smart. Perhaps while she was showing them their home and, undoubtedly, the slave quarters, he could find a way to hide Weybridge’s things and the medical supplies.

“You know something,” the lieutenant said, thinking aloud. “I’m tempted to take you up on that. But I’m here because my grandfather is worried about your mistress. Pardon me: the woman who was once and should be your mistress. He’s heard talk that a Lincoln man was left for dead and then disappeared. That’s why he asked me to ride by…again. Make sure she’s okay. Safe. Now, me? Slightly different agenda. Here’s what has me scratching my head. Yankee captain vanishes—Poof!—and suddenly Doc Norton has quinine and carbolic acid and whiskey. You follow me?” he pressed Sally.

“I don’t, sir. But it’s good that he has medicine, right?”

“And there’s this: when I first met Libby Steadman last month, she was waving a Colt pistol at me.”

Sally held the man’s gaze. Joseph had known her long enough to understand she wouldn’t give anything away by glancing at him. And so, like her, he waited to see what the officer would say next.

“You two aware she has that gun?” he asked, not directing his question at either of them specifically. And so Joseph jumped in.

“Yes, sir. She probably has it with her right now. Keep her and her niece safe.”

“Her aim any good?”

“I don’t know if she’s ever fired it.”

“Friend of my grandfather’s went missing last month. He carried a Colt, too. So, there are any number of…of sources where she might have gotten herself the pistol.”

Again, Joseph said nothing. Neither did Sally. He was already sweating from his and Weybridge’s exertions in the woods, and now the air felt more humid than ever.

“Where’d she get it? The gun?”

“I don’t know that, either. But I could tell her you was asking when she and Jubilee get home.”

“Joseph?”

“Yes, sir?”

“You sit right where you are. Do not climb down.” Then the lieutenant ordered the corporal, “Stanton, go check the slave quarters. I’ll go to the overseer’s house. Then we’ll both scour this place.”

“Sir, may I go get the bread out of the bake oven?” Sally asked.

“Fine. Get your bread.”

Only now, when the soldiers had started riding toward the outbuildings, did he glance at Sally. She bobbed her head slightly, an almost imperceptible nod, and he felt a modicum of relief that, somehow, she would find everything that incriminated Libby and the two of them, and hide it someplace where this lieutenant wouldn’t think to look. He watched her race up the steps, hoping he was right and she’d have enough time.

The bread was not quite done, which was a relief, and so Sally raced upstairs to Libby’s bedroom and shoved all of the ticking and cotton she could behind the pillows on the bed. What didn’t fit she would have to toss into the fire box in the iron stove in the kitchen. The captain had been wearing Peter Steadman’s clothes these days, with the exception of his Union Army coat some nights when there had been a chill. All of it she wedged into the bottom dresser drawer.

Then, before returning to the kitchen, she took Libby’s sleep shift and the other clothing that belonged to the woman from Jubilee’s bedroom—a day dress, a sunbonnet, a chemise—and tossed them on a chair in the woman’s own room. She brought two jugs of whiskey downstairs.

When the evidence of Jonathan Weybridge was hidden, she moved a chair to the kitchen cabinets, because she knew that Libby had hidden the man’s papers above them: the envelope from the Union War Office and the letter from his wife that she had brought to Harper’s Ferry to try and convince the Yankees that Weybridge was

alive. Libby and Weybridge had agreed that she would secure them here, because they were invisible from the floor. But Sally decided she'd hold on to the papers herself until this lieutenant was gone.

And it was when she was standing on the chair, planning to retrieve the letter and the envelope, that she saw atop the cabinet and flush against the wall four more Colt pistols, a powder flask, and two boxes of bullets. There was no time to find a better place to hide them. She'd have to hope that Morgan wasn't as diligent as she feared. Nevertheless, she took one pistol down, checked that it was loaded, and placed it inside her dress. It fit…barely. She couldn't imagine shooting this lieutenant: she was still surprised that Joseph had been capable of killing the drunken straggler who'd attacked Libby in this very kitchen. But she was also not going to be hanged if this soldier found evidence of the Yankee they'd brought back from the dead.

The lieutenant was thorough, but she got lucky. They all got lucky. He didn't think to stand on a chair and explore the top of the cabinet or the hutch on the wall opposite the iron stove. He didn't open the firebox. Now he and the corporal and Joseph were standing around the table, all of them, it seemed to Sally, uncomfortable—though the reasons that these white men felt this way differed from hers and Joseph's. The soldiers were annoyed that they had found nothing; she and Joseph were anxious they still might.

And Sally wanted these men gone because she wanted to ask Joseph what he knew about those pistols and the ammunition. What secrets were he and Libby hiding from her and, undoubtedly, from Jubilee? She had found four guns. Were there more?

"Tell your mistress we were here: Lieutenant Henry Morgan. Sixth Virginia Cavalry. She'll remember me," he told them, though he was speaking primarily to Joseph.

"We will," her husband said. "And we'll let you or Mr.Covington know if we see any Yankees."

The lieutenant still eyed him suspiciously. He eyed them both with skepticism. Finally, he said, “No. I don’t think you will. And that’s a problem for me.” Then he ripped off a piece of bread from one of the loaves she had taken from the stove, still warm, and said to the corporal, “Let’s get out of here, Stanton. I won’t enjoy this bread with the stink of these two polluting my nose.”

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“It seems we’re always the last two awake,” Libby murmured. She was wearing a black cloak with a hood tonight. Years ago, the first time Peter had seen her wear it, he’d joked that it looked like she was in mourning. But it was October now, and she’d been cold when she and Weybridge were last chatting here on the porch, and so she’d retrieved it from her armoire after supper. Besides, she could hide a pistol beneath it. She liked that idea, given the number of people who seemed now to be sniffing around. The professor was wearing Peter’s barn coat. The moon was almost full, and she could see him from this angle even without the light from the lantern. As seemed to have become their custom, he was in the rocking chair, and she was sitting on the top step beside him. “You should have a pipe,” she added.

“Or you,” he teased her.

“I can’t imagine such a thing. I have no interest.”

“To be honest, I can’t see you smoking a pipe either. But life is nothing if not unpredictable. You probably didn’t expect you’d be running this place a few years ago—and feeding the Army of Northern Virginia.”

Or, she thought, sitting with a Colt she could draw if anyone came looking for this man. She took another sip of the whiskey. “It’s quiet now. You should have seen the mill back in July and August.”

“Oh, I am quite certain the quartermasters and teamsters were fighting to come here, Libby. I see them rolling dice: the winner gets to bring the wagon trains to Libby

Steadman’s mill in Berryville.”

She punched him lightly in his left shin.

“Trying to break my one good leg?” he asked.

“Yes. I want you in a wheelchair so my life can be even more complicated. That’s my plan.” More complicated. She had chosen those words over harder. There was a difference. She supposed she knew why, but didn’t want to give the idea credence. Just words, she told herself. Just words. She knew she was lonely before she met Weybridge, but she hadn’t known how she hungered for company like…this. Like him.

He leaned over for the jug of whiskey and topped off both of their glasses. An owl cried out in the nearby woods.

“Jubilee sure gave me hell for not giving her a shooting lesson today,” he said.

“You think that was my niece’s idea of giving someone hell?” She laughed. “You got off easy.”

“I just didn’t think it was wise. The noise? Too risky now.”

“I know.”

He gazed up into the night sky. “?‘When it is dark enough, you can see the stars,’?” he murmured.

“Is that your Thoreau or your Hawthorne?” she asked. “I recognize it from one of them.”

“Close.”

“Dear God, please don’t tell me it’s Harriet Beecher Stowe.”

“You’ve read Uncle Tom’s Cabin ?”

“I have. I read it years ago. When I lived in Charlottesville with my parents.”

“And?”

“I told you: my family never owned slaves. And in my current…situation…the adults closest to me these days are Joseph and Sally. Yes, Negroes. I probably have more Negro friends, that means, than you do in Vermont. What do you make of that, Professor Abolitionist?”

“You’re right,” he admitted.

“You’ll see I’m right about most things,” she said lightly. “Tell me, have you read Macaria ?”

She could see embarrassment in his eyes. The name was familiar, but he couldn’t place it. “Something from the Greeks? Euripides?” he asked.

“Oh, Professor. You can do better. You’ve been fighting too long.”

“I have,” he agreed. “We all have.”

She pulled her legs close and wrapped her arms around her shins. “It was a sensation in these parts this spring and summer. It was the book to read all across the South. Augusta Jane Evans—our Harriet Beecher Stowe. Macaria: Altars of Sacrifice. A romance, and I usually like romance. Not this time. I couldn’t get past the first

chapter.”

“No?”

“?‘Brightly-burnished brazen candlestick.’ That’s in the very first sentence. Real tongue twister. And, I’m sorry, candlesticks aren’t brazen. As you may have noticed, I don’t have time for foolishness. These days, I don’t have time for much of anything but work. What we’re doing now? These nights? Until you came, I hadn’t done something like this in forever. Fact is, I don’t have many friends. I don’t have time for friends. And, who knows, maybe I was never going to make any here, especially after Peter left. Anyway, Uncle Tom’s Cabin only pointed out for me what I already knew.”

He seemed to be taking this in. He cleared his throat and said finally, “Emerson. That quote I mentioned. It’s Emerson.”

“Well, now. Here’s the Emerson you can put on my tombstone if you outlive me and are, for whatever the reason, still hanging around these parts: ‘All loss, all pain, is particular.’ Six words, short and sweet.”

“I think you’ve read more than my students.”

She rolled her eyes. “Should I be insulted because you don’t think women read? Or Southerners?”

“Actually, I was making fun of my students.”

She found herself chuckling, and the sound of her laugh surprised her. It was so rare. For a long moment, she only breathed. But, slowly, the reality of the world and where they were and what they were doing returned with the force of winds before a summer storm. “Sally thinks Lieutenant Morgan knows you’re here,” she said finally.

They hadn’t discussed it over supper because Jubilee was present. “Sally’s nerves are as good as mine—maybe better—but she said today was a close call.”

“It was.”

She thought of Morgan’s grandfather, wondering at his suspicions. Leveritt had thought so highly of her husband until Peter emancipated his family’s slaves. His attitude toward the young man changed then. Thought he was both a coward and an idiot: was scared of his slaves and didn’t understand the economics of farming.

“And Libby?”

She waited.

“The wolves,” he said, “will only circle closer until they catch the scent and find me. And that means cornering you and Joseph and Sally, too.”

Sally had confronted her after supper about the weapons she’d found. She hadn’t discovered the carbine, but she’d uncovered the Colt pistols Libby had taken off the blackberry pickers after she’d killed them weeks ago on the way to Harper’s Ferry.

“What are you suggesting?” she asked.

“I should go. I should leave.”

She knew this was coming, but the short sentence still hit her like a Minie ball.

“I believe Joseph thinks so, too,” he added, when she said nothing.

“So, your plan is to limp north twenty miles on crutches to the Union line? Take the turnpike that the Army of Northern Virginia uses? The roads that Mosby’s Rangers

own?”

“Libby, I—”

“I didn’t mean to snap at you. I was just pointing out the absurdity of your leaving. You were at death’s door not all that long ago.”

“You’ve done wonders.”

“And now you want to go.”

“We need a plan,” he said, and she felt his utter lack of reaction to her like a slight. “We need a plan that keeps you all safe and, yes, gives me a fighting chance.”

There were reasons people drank that had nothing to do with a lack of character. She took another swallow of the bark juice, vowing never to judge Jeremiah Norton again.

“And that plan is?” she asked.

He shrugged. “Don’t know.”

“So, we have finally stumped the professor. Hallelujah. Found a problem the professor can’t solve.” She was trying to regain her equilibrium and say something playful, but her tone, she feared, sounded only ornery.

“Not yet,” he replied, not taking the bait. “But I’ll solve it. We’ll solve it.”

“Well, if you make it north, you can ask your bluebelly friends about my husband. I did when I was there. And I remain unimpressed with their efforts on his behalf.”

“You don’t know what they’ve found. How could you? For all you know—”

“I know he’s dead,” she said, and once the words were out, she understood this short sentence had been inside her like a tumor for months. Once the letters stopped. Once she heard about the overcrowding and the smallpox. Once Peter wrote they were moving him. “And he’s just one of the people I’ve lost. It’s a long list, Professor. One goddamn long list.”

“Libby, I know—”

“You know nothing! Who have you lost? No, you know absolutely nothing.” She reached into her cloak and pulled the Colt from the inner pocket. “This pistol? It’s one of five I’ve amassed. Five! Sally found the other four today. Didn’t know that, did you—that I have five? And I have a cavalry carbine, too, hiding now on a beam above one of the hoppers in the mill. And—take a breath, Captain Weybridge, inhale good and deep—I may not be a good shot, but I have shot to kill. Two times. On the way to Harper’s Ferry to get you your goddamn medicine. I shot two deserters, Southern boys, who would have been happy to kill Joseph and…” The words stopped in her throat, but already he was climbing down from the rocking chair and sitting beside her. He started to put an arm around her, but she pushed him away and continued, “And as for Joseph? What he’s done? Well, there’s a dead ranger—or some bastard who may once have been a ranger—who attacked me in my kitchen, was pulling up my dress and reaching into my drawers, when Joseph took a shovel to the back of his head. He’s buried right here. On this land. And this Colt? My first Colt? It was his. That, Captain Weybridge, is where I got it.”

Suddenly she was shaking her head against the tears, but she had no chance of stemming the tide. She closed her eyes, but it was hopeless. She collapsed into him, after all, that first arid, choking sob swelling into runnels of despair, and felt his left hand, the one with but two fingers and a thumb, on her shoulder, and then his right, and she nuzzled her face into his neck and allowed herself to be engulfed by him.

In the morning, once the animals had been tended to—the cow milked, the chickens fed, the horses' stalls mucked and the pair walked to the south field to graze—and once the water had been brought from the well to the kitchen and the washtub, Libby gathered the five of them around the kitchen table. She could see in Jubilee's face that she knew something of importance loomed. Sally had broken some eggs into one bowl and poured flour into another, and had a cup of cow's milk on the counter. But she hadn't started baking the biscuits yet.

"The professor here has announced that it's time for him to go," she said without preamble.

Jubilee sat back and folded her arms across her chest, her eyes growing small and dark. Libby was not surprised by her disappointment. Weybridge had meant more work for the girl, but he had also been something new: a break in the routine. Libby wanted to believe this was all he had meant to her, too, but now that she'd accepted the idea that Peter was dead, spoken the words aloud, she knew she was mistaken. Weybridge, for whatever the reasons, was no mere placeholder. She had liked him—no, she liked him still. She was just now feeling a nonsensical hurt. He had begun as an act of kindness, a moral absolute; she'd never expected to have feelings for him beyond what she might for any sick or wounded stranger. He was a totem for her husband, something (not someone, some thing) that gave her a reason to believe that Peter was being cared for as well. And then he became something more than that. Something more tangible.

"Well, praise the Lord," her niece said, raising her hands. "I get back a bed of my own."

"Oh, I don't know, Jubilee. Maybe we can find a nice officer from the Army of Northern Virginia to billet here. Wouldn't that be a kind thing to do?" Libby teased the girl, trying—rather like her niece—to be courageous and put a bow on her disappointment.

But this wasn't just disappointment: it was a venomous mix of sadness and irritation. Something combustible fueled by yet more loss.

"?'Specially if he can't walk without crutches and is finicky about catfish. That would be just perfect," Jubilee added.

"Was I finicky about catfish?" Weybridge asked, offering the girl a small smile.

"When you weren't puking it up, yes, Jackal, you were. You are. But that's okay by me, because the only thing I am more sick of than catfish is eggs."

Joseph clasped his hands on the table, taking charge. "When you leave," he said to the Yankee, "you're obviously goin' to have to ride in the wagon, but, just as obvious, you ain't goin' to be sittin' on the seat. We should think about whether nighttime is better than daytime. I can see advantages to both. When Mr.Steadman returns—"

"Peter's dead, Joseph," Libby said, interrupting him and silencing the room like a sudden, unexpected clap of thunder. This anger was new, the coals igniting the night before, and now it was as hot as a blacksmith's forge. Flames rose high, yellow and red, the sparks devils' eyes, and she could not contain them when they reared up. "He's not returning."

"How do you know?" asked Joseph. "Did you hear something?"

She shook her head grimly. "I've been lying to myself for months. We've all been lying to ourselves for months."

Sally put her hand on Libby's arm and stroked it. Libby had the sense this older woman assumed her husband had perished months ago, and had had the wisdom and kindness not to dampen her hopes. Suddenly, Libby hated her husband for dying, and

while she understood it was unreasonable to feel this way, she couldn't help herself. She turned her attention back to Joseph, because now that she had said her piece, she wanted to speak no more of Peter this morning. "Yes, Joseph, you're right. We need to decide the timing, and we need to decide whether we're going to disguise the captain or hide him."

"Libby," Weybridge began, "we'll figure out how to get me north. We will. But as for Peter, let's talk—"

"There is no as for Peter. You and I resolved that last night." As soon as she finished the sentence, she felt Joseph and Sally looking at her even more intensely now, their sympathy tinged with curiosity. Last night. The adults were wondering what she meant—what happened. Even Jubilee was more alert. And so Libby looked around the table and elaborated, "I told the captain last night that it's clear my husband is dead. That's all I meant. So, let's please focus on the issue before us: how do we get this man back to Harper's Ferry? What were you thinking, Joseph?"

Sally and Joseph glanced at each other. They cared for her, but she didn't want their sympathy today. She wanted the sorts of things they couldn't give her, the things this war had taken from her and could never give back.

"Go on," she said finally to Joseph. "Speak your piece."

"Well, this is goin' to sound mighty dark. But I was thinkin' a coffin. We put the captain here in a casket, and say we're goin' to Charles Town, like we did in September. But this time, we're bringin' a body to be buried if someone stops us."

She liked the idea. She looked at Weybridge, curious as to how he'd respond.

"Adonis," he said. "That's an accurate way to describe me."

She knew the reference and how he was endeavoring to lighten the mood, but no one else at the table understood the allusion. “Adonis was killed by a wild boar,” she told them. “Zeus brought him back from the dead. The professor here is showing off his oh-so-fine book learning. His…erudition.”

“I was thinking Lazarus and the Bible,” said Sally.

“I wasn’t thinking either,” Joseph told them. “No miracle to the captain bein’ alive this morning: just good doctorin’ and good food.”

“And the biggest bed in the whole house,” Jubilee added. “Biggest bed on the whole property!”

“I don’t suppose you have a coffin lying around,” Weybridge said.

“No. I’d build you one. I don’t think we got grain deliveries comin’ to the mill in the next day or two. Do we, ma’am?”

“No,” said Libby. “We don’t. So…a coffin.”

“It will be plain. Plain and simple. But it’ll do.”

“Who are we saying is in that coffin, since it isn’t Lazarus?” asked Sally.

“I guess that depends,” Libby said, thinking aloud. “If we’re stopped by people who know us near here, I don’t think there’s a lie in the world that’ll work.”

“I could build it different. Shippin’ crate. We could say there’s pottery in there, maybe,” Joseph suggested. “But, thing is, that wouldn’t stop rascals from breakin’ it open. That’s why I thought coffin. You have to be the worst sort of nasty to break open a coffin.”

“And you have the perfect black cloak for a lady in mourning, Libby,” Weybridge told her, but the remark—part flattery and part small joke—only irritated her. She was almost nothing but ire now, as irrational as that was. She just didn’t want him to go.

“I could find a way to bore an airhole. Punch in a gap so you could breathe,” Joseph continued.

“Maybe ones for a gun, too,” said Weybridge.

“I’d carry one Colt, and you could have another inside your coffin, Captain,” she said. There was something hurtful in the way she called him “Captain” this morning. It was formal. It was distant. She knew he preferred it when she called him “Professor,” teasing him good-naturedly.

“We got ourselves two guns?” Jubilee asked.

“Yes,” said Libby. “We do.”

“Where’d we get the second one? I want to carry one.”

“No.”

“Where’d you get it?”

“Where doesn’t matter. We have two. I’ll carry one, and the Yankee here will have one. Joseph, you’ll build the casket?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And, Captain, you’ll help Joseph in whatever way you can?” she said to Weybridge,

framing the question in a way that both asserted her control and his diminishment. She hated herself for being this cantankerous, but her world was about to grow empty again.

“Yes. Of course.”

“One thing,” said Sally.

Libby looked at her, and she saw the older woman’s face was strained. Sally was worried about her. Well, so be it. Libby was a train without an engineer. “Go on,” she told the woman. “What’s on your mind?”

“If we put the man in the coffin and you and Joseph are stopped before you’ve gone far, we still don’t have a name for the body. A person you’re taking to Charles Town to bury. We ain’t solved that one.”

She stood. Sleep had come slowly last night, and she was tired. She went to the counter and stared at the fixings for breakfast, her hands on her hips. She lit the stove. “Fine,” she said, her tone a mixture of exasperation and pique. “I’ll go kill someone.”

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Weybridge knew little about construction or nails, and this gap in his knowledge reminded him how he hadn't known much about guns, marching, and musket drills as recently as a few years ago, either. Until he'd enlisted, he knew books, mostly. His childhood, as the son of a college professor in a college town, could only have been called precious. But this morning Joseph had amassed a variety of different kinds of nails, many that would usually be used for flooring, and had said they would have to do. He'd given Weybridge the same frame saw he'd used when they were working in the woodlot, because a man with one and a half hands could handle it easily. The Steadmans had used this corner of the gristmill as a workshop for at least a decade, and it was here that he and Joseph had brought planks, most leaning now against the stone wall, but two on the carpentry trestle. Joseph had sketched the coffin's design, and now Weybridge was holding down the tape measure against one edge of a plank while Joseph ran the thin strip out to seven feet.

They'd been working largely in silence for the last two hours, Weybridge following Joseph's directions, when he finally asked the older man one of the questions that had been gnawing at him since he and Libby were alone last night.

"The dead man," he began carefully. "The one who was attacking Libby in the kitchen. Where precisely is he buried?"

"He is no candidate for this casket," Joseph answered, making a mark where they were next going to saw.

"I didn't mean that."

“I know,” he murmured, his focus on the plank. Then he looked up and said, “Edge of the south woods. Not all that far from where we graze the horses and the cow.”

“Is he in a—”

“No. Just buried. We needed that body hid quick. No time for me to build him a coffin. But he’s deep enough that he ain’t been dug up by any animals. Deep enough that already buckthorn and weeds the animals don’t eat are spreadin’ over the dirt.”

“Who was he?”

Joseph put down his pencil and leaned on the plank on the trestle. “I don’t know. He had no papers on him. You think I shoulda let him go ahead and have his way with Mrs.Steadman?”

“No. Of course not.”

“Of course not is right.” He shook his head. “My plan wasn’t to kill him. I never planned to kill anybody ever in this life. But a Negro hitting a white man with a shovel? It don’t matter what that white man was doin’—especially since he was doin’ it to Mrs.Steadman. Wife of the man who set us free. A man can get used to many things in this world, but a body don’t take kindly to a rope around its neck and danglin’ a couple feet off the ground.”

“You have no idea who he was?”

“He was more’n likely one of Mosby’s rangers. Or was ’til even they couldn’t abide a scoundrel the likes of him. I believe he was livin’ with Mr.Covington. That’s my guess.”

“Ah, the Leveritt Covington I’ve heard so much about,” Weybridge said. He felt a

strange and icy satisfaction.

“Yeah. Mr.Covington’s young kin is that Lieutenant Morgan who’s come ’round a couple times. I told you plain, Captain: when you were fightin’, you were fightin’ for the people Mr.Covington keeps in chains. He grows tobacco and wheat and corn, and while it ain’t a big plantation, it’s still a plantation: the backs of those folks there have scars they did nothin’ to deserve.”

He started to tell Joseph he agreed, that Joseph had no choice but to kill the rogue, but the words felt inadequate. Still, his hatred toward this dead man he had never met had grown like one of the massive pumpkins he used to see this time of year in the patches on the farms just west of the college. “Tell me something, Joseph,” he said after a moment. “When I’m gone, what will happen to Libby? What will happen to you and Sally?”

Joseph studied him, and Weybridge felt himself sweating, especially his armpits, where the crutches pressed hard through the shirt against his skin.

“I can’t tell the future and won’t try,” he said. “I pray every day for that boy, Peter Steadman. But Mrs.Steadman’s right: he probably ain’t comin’ back. We all know that. You know what you’ve seen. You know what you’ve lost. But, still, a person can pray. So I do. And I pray every day for Mr.Lincoln and U.S. Grant, even though Mrs.Steadman hates ’em both the way I hate any white man with a whip or chains or a noose. So, when you’re gone? What’s gonna happen here in the Valley? I see Genesis, chapter nineteen, verses twenty-four and twenty-five: Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire. He overthrew them cities, and all the plains around ’em, and all the people, and everything that grew up from the ground.”

A swallow flew into the gristmill, circled them, and then darted back out through a glassless window.

“Captain,” Joseph continued, “the Valley will become ashes. The buildings will be ashes. And this mill? Well, you can’t burn stone, but you can bring it down with cannons. You can tear up the sluice with axes and wreck the wheels. And they will. You Yankees will. You know what you’ve burned already. You know. Now, none of that will happen ’cause you’re gone. But you ain’t goin’ to see it, and you asked. Mrs.Steadman will live through that ’cause she’s a fighter. Sally and I are, too. But people in these parts will shun her for as long as she lives, first ’cause her husband was a turncoat in their eyes, and then ’cause of the rumors that she saved a bluebelly. That she saved you. Now, me? I thank you, Captain. I thank you with all my heart. But the rebels in this Valley who are about to lose the little they got left—and they asked for it, they asked for it, just as did the people who lived in Sodom and Gomorrah—they are never goin’ to look kindly on the Widow Steadman.”

Weybridge fought hard not to look away, to meet the steel that was Joseph’s gaze. He knew well that the Union plan was indeed to reduce the Valley to ash.

“And I’m glad you all are goin’ to do it,” Joseph continued. “Just as God did what he had to do, your army is doin’ what it has to do. Peter Steadman is—or was—a good boy. Like his father, he didn’t care that we all learned to read and write. And then, unlike his daddy, he set us free. But that don’t mean he wasn’t on the wrong side of God when he put on that gray uniform to fight just so his neighbors like Leveritt Covington could keep us in chains. That don’t mean this whole valley ain’t on the wrong side of God.”

“When you help here at the mill…when you help feed the rebels…”

“I am keepin’ that woman alive. I am keepin’ that child alive. If she didn’t? If we didn’t?” He brushed sawdust off the back of his hand. “The army don’t pay much, and their dollars ain’t worth the paper they’re printed on. But it’s something. And, more important than the money is this: so long as she grinds their grain, she’s safe. And my Sally is safe. And I’m safe.”

Abruptly Joseph grew alert and sniffed the air, and so Weybridge followed his lead. He could smell it, too. Somewhere, something was burning. It wasn't the smell of brush or a whole forest on fire: Weybridge knew that terrifying stink well, the stench of great woods set aflame by muskets and cannon fire. But there was smoke, and Joseph ran toward it from the gristmill. Weybridge, though he couldn't keep up on his crutches, followed him outside, moving as quickly as he could.

And there they saw it.

They saw her.

Libby was in the side yard, tossing her husband's clothes into a small bonfire she'd built, as if the garments were brush brought down by a windstorm. For a moment, the two men stood and watched, both of them mute, unsure whether they should stop her or allow her to continue to feed the pyre. It was a scene that was almost too intimate. But then Joseph said to Weybridge, "Go back inside the mill," and jogged over to her. Weybridge paused, uncertain whether to obey or follow him. Finally, he decided to disregard Joseph, and he hobbled over to the woman, too.

"You can't be doin' this," Joseph was saying.

She ignored him and fed the flames with another of her husband's shirts, careful to dangle it in first by a sleeve so she didn't risk smothering the fire. Then she bent over for a collar and a cap, one in each hand, and tossed them in, too. Weybridge stood still, watching the collar turn black and shrivel, and the cap burn yellow and red.

"Ma'am," Joseph began, but she didn't even look at him. She didn't look at either of them, her gaze intent on the flames.

Beside her was at least another armload of unburned pants and drawers and shirts. When she reached over for a pair of trousers, Weybridge considered whether he

should rest a hand on her arm and slow her, perhaps try and get her to look at Joseph and him and see how they saw her. But he didn't. It wasn't his place.

Overhead he heard geese flying south and gazed at them, honking so very far above the black tendrils of smoke.

"I am guessin' Sally has no idea you're doin' this," Joseph said.

She dipped a pants leg into the fire, holding it by the waist as it caught, and finally turned to stare back at the two men. Weybridge was about to take the burning clothing from her hand and drop it into the flames so she didn't scorch her own fingers, but she was a millisecond ahead of him and let the cloth fall into the small blaze, not taking her eyes off his.

"Libby," he said, trying to console her, "you don't know for sure that Peter's gone."

"I never did hear anything from Harper's Ferry about him," she muttered, almost as if she were speaking aloud to only herself. "Never really expected I would."

"It would be hard to get word to you."

"But I know. We know."

"Even if he has died, there are plenty of men, in addition to me, who could use the clothes," he told her.

"There are," she agreed, though it was clear she couldn't care less. "I could cut off the legs for some, like I did for you. I could cut off the sleeves for others. I could give the hats to the boys who've had their hair burned off and it won't grow back over the scars. I could do all of that. But I won't."

She used the toe of her shoe to push a smoldering piece of what once was a shirt back into the flames.

“How is your coffin coming?” she asked. “Is it about done?”

Weybridge told her it wasn’t, and the words had barely escaped his mouth when she said, “Then I suggest you get to it. And, gentlemen? Don’t forget the holes for a gun. I suggest you bore holes on both sides.”

“I think you’re all worryin’ for nuthin’,” said Jubilee, running her fingers over the roof of the coffin. Already the gristmill was darker this time of the day than it was even two weeks ago. Weybridge thought the days felt longer than in Vermont, but not by much. “Someone stops you and asks who’s in there? Say it’s some ol’ Johnny Reb who was a friend of my uncle or my dad and lived in Charles Town. Say he got himself shot at the same battle where Jackal here got himself crippled.”

“And why wasn’t he in a regimental hospital?” Weybridge asked her, nevertheless impressed with her idea and wondering if there was a way to make the story work.

“Maybe he was before comin’ here. Or maybe, just like you, Jackal, he was a captain, and so the surgeon wanted him to la-di-da in a private home.”

He recalled the floor in that first house. The bedroom. The stink. It was hardly luxurious. But he saw her point. Joseph, sanding one of the sides before he joined it in place, seemed to be mulling over her suggestion, too.

“Or just say it’s me,” the girl said. “Why not? Say I’m the dead body in there. What do I care?”

“What if it’s someone who knows us?” asked Joseph. “Someone who knows you?”

“No one knows me. People know of me: that I’m stuck here ’cause I ain’t got no place else to go. When your friends are you, Sally, my aunt, and a jackal, I don’t think anyone should be frettin’ about someone knowin’ me,” she told him.

“Still, Joseph is right,” Weybridge said, though he felt a pang that he was so focused on the problem at hand that he’d ignored the child’s implicit admission that she was lonely. Quickly he added, “And even if four grown-ups are the extent of your circle, enough people are aware of you that they’d be sad to hear you passed—and then rather confused when, at some point, they saw you very much alive.”

“Tell ’em all I’m a ghost,” she argued, but now, after acknowledging for the first time in his presence her situation, she was pouting. It seemed possible to Weybridge that she might actually miss him.

“We should give the dead rebel in there a name and a story,” he told Joseph.

“And a wound. We should know what killed him,” the older man added.

Jubilee put her finger in one of the two holes that Joseph had bored into the plane before the girl joined them. One was for the Colt, and one was so Weybridge could peer out to aim the revolver. “Some people will see this and think you’re all showin’ disrespect for the dead. Puttin’ a body in a box with more holes in it than a soldier’s shoe? Boards from trees woodpeckers got to?”

“It’ll do,” Weybridge told her.

The child bent over, her hands on her knees. “?’Course it will. I know this ain’t the work of a woodpecker. Gun barrel goes here, and you see out right here. Someone you don’t like walks up beside the wagon? Boom! Jackal here puts a Minie ball in his guts. Or if it’s someone sittin’ on a horse, he shoots him smack in the kneecap.”

“I doubt it’ll come to that,” Weybridge said.

“Oh, it will. It will. These days?”

He waited.

“If there’s a way to get killed, you will get killed.”

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There was a sunset, the orange and red of smoldering embers, and now, deep into the night, there was thunder.

At least this was Libby’s thought when the distant booming woke her: an October storm was approaching. The rains soon would follow. She sat up in bed, careful not to wake Jubilee, and supposed it could be cannonade. But she doubted it. She’d never heard artillery this time of night. Still, she rose and went to the window, gazing out at the night sky.

And it was then that she noticed the movement on the ground. Her first thought was a lone buck wandering past the house where Joseph and Sally lived and toward the autumnal weeds that had overtaken the kitchen garden. But it wasn’t a deer. There was another bolt of lightning, and in the percussive burst of light she saw it was a person, a Negro, and her instincts said runaway slave. Did he know them? Know of them?

Well, she thought bleakly, why wouldn’t her property be a stop on the underground railroad? She was already hiding a Yankee. Why not runaway slaves?

He knocked on what had been the overseer’s front door, and she watched Sally open it, a lit lantern in one hand, but rather than let the man inside, she stood with him on the porch, talking, and then Joseph joined them.

God. She thought, if nothing else, she knew what occurred on this property. Her property. She felt her jaw clenching in anger, not so much because this land might

have been a stop that runaways had been using for years to rest during daylight, but because two of the people closest to her in this world hadn't told her a secret of this magnitude. How many ways had they endangered her by not telling her? Hadn't the property been searched at least twice since they had taken in the captain? And they were not just endangering her, they were putting Jubilee's life at risk.

She would have called out to the small assemblage, but she didn't want to wake the girl.

She'd have to put on her cloak and see precisely what they were doing.

But there was another dagger of fire from the clouds and another clap of thunder, one that startled her with its proximity—it was as if it was overhead—and reflexively she stared at the sky that a second ago had been torn for the briefest of seconds with draperies of daylight. And when sheturned around, there beside her was her niece.

"Jubilee," she said, "what are you doing up?"

"Same as you. Hard to sleep when the sky's bangin' drums like that."

"Just a storm. Go back to sleep."

"I will if you will," the girl said, and before Libby could stop her from gazing out the window, the child had seen the group. "What in the world? Who's that man at Joseph and Sally's?"

"Don't ask me. I have no idea."

"Then let's go find out," Jubilee said, and she turned and ran down the stairs. Libby called after her that she was in her nightclothes and needed to put something on, but the girl ignored her and, a moment later, Libby saw her racing across the yard to the

trio on the porch.

By the time Libby had pulled on her cloak and boots, she heard Weybridge clomping down the steps from the second floor on his crutches. It was dark, and she half expected him to fall down the second half of the stairway and break his one leg. But he didn't, and in a moment he was beside her.

"I saw them, too," he said.

"A runaway, I guess."

He nodded, and together they ventured outside.

Already the other adults had grown quiet because Jubilee had beaten Libby and Weybridge there, and then Libby instantly recognized the man. He may have been a runaway, but he'd only run a mile and a half. It was Clark, a fellow owned by Leveritt Covington. He'd brought deliveries of wheat here dozens of times over the years, and had it not been nighttime and had he not been wearing a hat, she would have recognized him from the window right away.

"What's going on? Why is everyone awake?" she asked. She looked directly at Clark, his eyes catching glimmers from the flame in the lantern. "Why are we all standing here, about to get rained on when that gully washer coming over the mountains opens up?"

"Ma'am," Clark began, still a little breathless from running, "they're comin' for the Yankee." He pointed at Weybridge. "Mr.Covington's cavalry kin: Henry Morgan. Him and some rangers are comin' in maybe an hour. Maybe less. I overheard them talkin' to Mosby's men outside the house."

"I was about to wake you," Sally added.

So, he wasn't a runaway, she thought, and she couldn't help but see how ironic it was that she would have been better off right now if he were. They all would.

"They're plannin' to surprise you all and search the place—whole property—and lynch the captain if they catch him."

"Does Leveritt know?"

"He does. He says they're not supposed to hurt you or the child."

"Well, this is a big place. Big enough, anyway," Libby said, thinking aloud. "And in the dark, there are plenty of places to hide."

Clark shook his head. "Not this time." He looked at Jubilee, unsure if he should continue.

"Ain't nothing you can say is gonna shock me," the girl said.

"Go ahead," Libby told Clark.

He nodded toward Joseph and Sally. "You two? They're goin' to do whatever it takes to make you talk. Then, after they hang the Yankee, lynch the both of you."

"The cavalry carbine's in the mill, right?" Weybridge asked Libby.

"Yes, it's still there," she answered. She recalled the moment, which was only last month but felt like an eternity ago, when Henry Morgan had first shown up at the gristmill. He'd told her it was unlikely that the battle would ever be brought to her land. Well, it seemed, he was bringing it here himself. She turned to Clark. "Thank you," she told him. "You may have saved our lives."

“I hope so,” he said.

“Why are they so sure I’m here? Any idea?” Weybridge asked him.

“Doc Norton was visiting Mr.Covington’s sister, Felicia. And he just had so much medicine. And someone heard there was a Yankee at Maude Bingham’s before you spotted him, Sally, and then they saw Doc Norton comin’ here. So, people figured it out. He didn’t confess to anything. He didn’t have to. He’s a drunk, maybe, but I don’t think he slipped up.”

Libby took this in. “You should get back to the Covingtons’. You don’t want them to find you missing. And you don’t want to be here when…when Morgan and the rangers arrive.”

“I can stay and help.”

“No, you’ve done enough already,” she reassured him, moved by his willingness to fight for and perhaps die for a Yankee he’d never met until tonight. “You need to get back. And, for God’s sake, stay off the road. Stay in the fields and use that sliver of wood when you can.”

He doffed his cap and was off.

“Thank you, Clark,” Joseph called out to him, and the man turned and offered a small salute of sorts.

Libby looked at Weybridge, her arms folded before her. “So, Captain?”

“Go ahead.”

She felt waves inside her that left her jittery. She shook her head against the doubt:

this was her fiefdom, and she was no delicate flower. “I’m tired of people shooting people like deer. But I’m much more tired of being bullied and threatened. On the road, in my kitchen. Rangers, blackberry pickers, criminals. Henry Morgan may be Leveritt Covington’s kin and a soldier who, I presumed until tonight, was an honorable man. But I will not go quietly. No. I will not.”

Jubilee’s eyes grew wide, and she drew the girl into her, wrapping an arm around her shoulder. The girl felt so small, so slight. Libby said to Weybridge, “Captain, we have five Colts and one carbine. You have two people who can shoot—including me, a rank amateur. So…”

He waited.

“Deploy your forces.”

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He felt the churning inside him he had experienced before every battle, the agitation, the soul leaning into the violence. A small part of him was surprised that after the fight at Gilbert's Ford where, finally, the odds caught up to him and he joined the boys who were forever crippled, he wasn't more gun shy. Maybe it was his protectiveness of these people who had saved his life and risked all that they had for him.

Or maybe it was just the fact that man was a monster. Perhaps God, whatever or whomever he was, had not created us in his image, but instead saw us more like the minotaur, part man and part bull, or the animated corpse birthed by Mary Shelley. We hunted and killed with greater ferocity and precision than any other animal in Vermont or Virginia. And, it seemed, no classroom or book could bleed that from a person.

Weybridge was confident that he could pick off a single rider with the carbine if he still had two legs. Perhaps he could take out even two or three. And he could have done this at night, if there had been any moon at all and the skies weren't about to unleash torrents.

But there might be more than a couple of riders, according to Clark. And it was about to pour.

And he didn't have two legs.

So, he was not going to ambush them on the road between here and Leveritt

Covington's. Besides, there wasn't time to scope out the land and find the right ground.

Their best bet was a battle at close quarters, and to use the element of surprise to their advantage.

He surveyed the property, the contours of the buildings and their proximity to the gristmill, as he felt the first drops—cool and gentle—on his fingers and nose. He was only a captain, but he had been on enough battlefields that almost reflexively he fought by trying to imagine how his opponent was going to use his position, his assets, his ground. It was nighttime: these men with eyes even deader than his were not going to search aggressively. Not now. They were going to approach this differently.

"Well?" It was Libby. He looked at her, still in a sleep shift beneath her cloak. And at her niece, barefoot. At Joseph and Sally.

"Sally," he said, the thoughts forming in his mind as if he were writing them down, "please take Jubilee and go to the mill. Climb to the very top. Above the hoppers." There they would be above the fray and behind stone walls. They would be in some of the deepest black on this property.

"No, Jackal," Jubilee began, "you need me to—"

"I need you to listen to the man!" Libby snapped at the child, her voice uncompromising and fierce.

"We'll give you one of the Colts," he told Sally. "I know you've never used one."

"I've never even held one."

“But you’ll only fire it if one of Morgan’s men actually does search for me up there, and I don’t expect one will. You’ll be in the dark, and you won’t make a sound. If someone does go there, when he reaches the top step? Shoot him. Put the gun in his chest and shoot him. Joseph or Libby will bring you the Colt in a few minutes, when we have it loaded.”

“I ain’t even got shoes on,” Jubilee complained, but her aunt glared at her, and then Sally led the child away to the mill.

“I’m going to guess they’ll go to your home first, Joseph. They’re going to use you and Sally to force Libby to give me up.”

“And then kill me anyway.”

“Very likely.”

The world seemed to go still when he said that. There were dozens of other ways this could go down. They might shoot Joseph the second he opened the door, planning to use only Sally as leverage. They might dismount on the road and go first to Libby’s home instead, believing it was they who had caught the small Steadman contingent unawares, and burst through the front door, killing the Yankee and capturing his abettors. He needed to plan for this, too. He had to have a contingency.

There was another low rumble of thunder, and the rain was falling harder now.

“Let’s go inside,” he said. “Joseph, please get the carbine from the mill and then join us in the kitchen. Libby and I will start loading the Colts.”

“What did you call these?” Libby asked as they loaded the pistols. “The lover bullet?”

He'd forgotten he'd shared the term with her. It had been on one of those evenings when they had sat together on the porch. He'd been recalling for her his delirium on the floor at Maude Bingham's before they'd rescued him. "The mistress bullet," he answered.

"Salacious," she mumbled. "Improper, salacious, and just the sort of stupid thing a man would think. And more cowardly than heroic."

"I know."

"You never would have done that."

"No," he said. At least that's what he liked to believe. But certainly the idea had crossed his mind when he'd been dying on the floor of that first house.

They made quick work of preparing the guns, but still, when Joseph returned with the rifle, it was raining so hard that he was sopping wet and his clothing dripped onto the kitchen floor. Libby had opened the window wide so they might hear the approaching horses, and the storm was raking the sill and that corner of the room like waves crashing upon the sides of a dinghy, and Weybridge supposed that while Libby's thinking was logical, the storm would nevertheless shield the sound of the animals' hooves.

Libby handed two of the pistols to Joseph, one for him and one to bring to Sally, and he stared at them as if they were equipment for the mill he'd never worked with before. Then he raised one up and extended his arm, aiming it toward the window. "Was this the one we took off the man who attacked you over there?" he asked Libby.

"Right here," she answered. "He would have killed you with it. He might have killed me with it."

“If they come to your house first, open the door and shoot whoever’s there,” Weybridge told him. “Just point and fire—and keep firing. You have six shots and the element of surprise. You’ll get at least one of them, I’m certain of that, and I’ll be at that window right there with the carbine. I’ll get the others. I’ll use the sill to help with my aim, and I’ll also have one of the Colts handy. Libby here will have the other two. She may not have perfect aim at this distance, but she’ll have two guns and twelve bullets in the chambers.”

“And if they come to this house first?” Joseph asked.

“Stay where you are. If they come here, if they open that front door right over there, Libby shoots one and I shoot the rest.”

“You’re assuming there are only three or four coming,” said Libby. “What if there’s more?”

“We can handle four. Maybe even five.”

“And if there are six?”

He exhaled loudly, wishing he had better answers. “I don’t know how many men they’ll send for one crippled Yankee. It’s a lot of bother.”

“Bother? It just might be good-natured fun for them,” she said morbidly. “String up a Yankee and a freedman? They’ll hoot. Exact a little revenge for what you Yankees have done so far in the Valley? They’ll holler. Take a little pleasure at the expense of that Peter Steadman’s turncoat wife? They’ll cheer.”

“If the posse’s that large, I’ll throw down the carbine and walk out to them,” he said. “I’ll turn myself in and slip my head through the noose.”

“That’s a noble sacrifice. Downright chivalrous. But I doubt it would spare Sally or Joseph or me.”

She might have been correct. But he had laid out what felt like the best of their bad options. The kitchen had a moment of daylight, more lightning, and then there was another boom overhead.

“I like our odds,” he said, trying—and failing—to convince himself as well as them. “Two last things. I saw lots of boys shoot too soon. It’s natural. But don’t do it. And Libby? Remember what I taught you: aim low.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Oh, Professor? I am happy to shoot low. I am happy to shoot very, very low.”

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Weybridge had always been outwardly calm before a fight, but inside he was a riot of anxiety. It was usually less about his own mortality (though always there was that) than it was his fear that his inexperience would cost some good boys their lives. The waiting was always the worst, but tonight, it seemed, they wouldn't have to wait long.

No sooner had Libby extinguished the lantern and Joseph dashed through the puddles and great runnels of water at the end of the walkway to his home than Weybridge heard what might have been a nicker. A whinny that carried through the lashing rain and the window that, thank God, Libby had had the good sense to open. But he saw no horses; he saw nothing but the rain pelting the dooryard and the walkway and even the kitchen. It seemed Morgan, though a cavalryman, had learned the penchant for stealth made famous by Mosby's Rangers and dismounted down the road. But surprise, Weybridge knew, was still on their side. Nevertheless, he began to see flaws in his plans. What if they approached Joseph and Sally's home from the rear? What if right this moment they were stealing their way behind Libby's house? What if they had caught Clark on his way back to the Covingtons' and forced the man to confess all?

He glanced over at Libby but could not make out her countenance in the dark. He could barely make out her shape beside the front door.

And then, suddenly, they were upon them, and the battle was on. Libby sensed them first, before he did, and spun and fired, and so he whirled with her and shot, too, the salvos piercing because they were inside and echoing across the kitchen, and there was the grunt he'd heard before when a man was knocked back—or down—by a

bullet. Without the sill it was hard to hold the carbine and so he dropped it and grabbed the Colt, but he couldn't see precisely where to shoot; he knew only that they had come inside through the back, an idea he had pondered but a problem he'd failed to solve, and before he could fire again a bullet splintered part of the window frame by his head, a piece of wood dinging off his temple.

But he had seen the spark from the gun and shot toward it, firing twice, and yelling for Libby to get down. He rolled toward the kitchen table and was upending it, planning to use it for cover, but one of the intruders was a step ahead of him and the tabletop met resistance—human hands pushing it back—and so he shot around the side and this time it was not a grunt he heard, but the close-quarters howl of a man taking a round ball in what was, essentially, hand-to-hand combat. The rebel collapsed, not even trying to use his fingers to break his fall, and Libby fired over Weybridge's head toward the doorway, but this time no one fired back.

For a long second the kitchen was silent but for the storm outside, and when the room was lit by another dagger of lightning, he saw Libby on her knees, holding a Colt, and two men, one likely dead and one who would be soon, but for now was pressing both hands hopelessly upon his stomach, as if his fingers could staunch the bleeding.

"Are you hurt?" he asked her, the room already black again.

"No," she answered.

He was relieved and took in a deep breath through his nose. He couldn't believe this was it, but perhaps it was. He fixed his eyes as best he could on the dying man, a husk in a shadow, and wondered if he could help him. If the attack was over, he supposed they'd try and save him, though it would be an effort likely to fail. He crawled over to him, but already the man's hands were slipping away from his stomach and falling limply beside him. Weybridge reached him almost at the very moment he expired.

“Either of these men Henry Morgan?” he asked Libby.

“No.”

He fingered his hair beside where the wood dinged him, and felt blood. Because Morgan was not among the attackers, it was likely there were more men on the property.

“How many shots you fire?” he asked, worried that she had emptied—or almost emptied—the pistol.

But before she could answer, someone was kicking in the front door and he was unsure how many rebels were storming the room, but they were too close to Libby for him to risk a single shot in this dark or retrieve the carbine, and one was ordering him to drop the gun while at least two more were lifting Libby off the ground and ripping the Colt from her fingers.

Henry Morgan tossed Weybridge’s crutches into the corner and dragged Libby outside into the dooryard.

“Crawl to us like a goddamn darkie!” Morgan shouted at him, holding his pistol against the woman. “C’mon, Billy Yank, crawl like the goddamn slaves—animals, Billy Yank, animals—you love so goddamn much!”

And so, with no other choice, he did.

The South was, in theory, a culture that prided itself on old-world chivalry, and so Weybridge was surprised that Henry Morgan and the two surviving rangers had insisted that Libby sit beside him on the sodden ground by the walkway, her hands—like his—tied behind her back, as the cold rain pounded them and turned the dooryard to mud. Joseph had surrendered the moment Morgan brought Libby outside

with that Colt pressed against her head and told him to come out, too.

Now, at gunpoint himself, Joseph was being forced by one of the rangers to show them the slave quarters, the barn, and the mill, because Morgan had the good sense to disbelieve Libby when she insisted that Sally and Jubilee had gone to a friend of Libby's family in Charlottesville, precisely because she was hiding a Yankee and knew there might be repercussions.

As soon as they found Sally, Morgan told them calmly, they would hang her alongside her husband and the two of them. They'd hang them where both Sheridan's men and any Southerners tired of the fighting—those ready to bow before Lincoln's hirelings—surely would notice. Tomorrow morning when the sun came up, they'd be dangling like branches on weeping willows.

Weybridge had met men like Morgan before. On the surface, they were civilized. And, perhaps, without war they would have remained that way. But war gave them permission to be who they really were, men who were comfortable killing all the kindness and magic and beauty in the world, men whose souls were bleak and, therefore, dangerous.

Morgan squatted before him, his hat and his cloak keeping some of the rain at bay, but when the lieutenant leaned into Weybridge, the rain ran like tears down his cheeks, too, and he had to blink against the deluge.

"You should have taken a gun to yourself, Captain," he said, sneering. "Then I wouldn't have to hang a lady."

"Then let's go and be done with it. Shoot me, hang me, whatever. And then say good night," Weybridge said. "No need to have a woman on your conscience. You don't want that."

“Oh, I am sensing from your hurry a distinct corroboration of my instincts. No one’s in Charlottesville.”

“I’m telling you the truth,” said Libby, her tone venomous. “I’m not a liar.”

He turned toward her. “Ma’am,” he said, the word awash in sarcasm, “I won’t do anything to hurt your niece. She’s just a child. Father’s fighting down near Petersburg. And I’m a man of my word. Just like you all are going to die, she’s going to be fine. But you, Libby Steadman?”

Weybridge had no idea what more there could be after telling her she was going to die.

“The pain you’ve caused? You are a woman who should be ashamed. Tell me something,” Morgan said.

She waited.

“You two brush up in that big bed of yours? You and the Yankee cripple here?” he asked, his eyes moving back and forth between Weybridge and her, his smirk licentious and mean.

She seemed to be deciding how to respond. Then she leaned forward as if she were going to answer him. Instead she spat at him, the saliva only adding to the rain and muck on Morgan’s cheek.

Weybridge wanted to believe that they had never had a chance. Morgan had brought four men with him. He and Libby had killed two. But there was so much Weybridge knew he would do differently if he could go back in time even half an hour. Morgan and one of his two remaining rangers, a tall fellow with a mountain man of a beard who had pulled his slouch hat down to his eyebrows, were a dozen feet away,

conversing quietly, waiting for the other soldier and Joseph to return with Sally and Jubilee. They hadn't yet gone to the mill, but they would soon. And then?

Perhaps Sally would shoot the soldier and this pair would hear the pop through the storm. If he were Morgan, Weybridge decided, he'd immediately shoot his captives and prepare for whatever was coming next. But Morgan couldn't know what that gunshot meant. That was the thing about battle. It could mean that his own soldier was dead or Joseph was dead or even Sally or the child had been killed.

Or it could mean nothing.

The thunder and lightning seemed to have passed now, but the rains had continued.

Weybridge was still rehashing his mistakes in his mind when he heard that shot. There it was. Instantly, Morgan and his man knelt, drawing their guns and staring through the sheets of rain at the direction from which it had come. And yet it seemed to have been louder and closer than a Colt fired inside the very top of a stone gristmill some forty yards distant, where the report would have been further muffled by the downpour.

Libby looked at him. He wished he had the slightest idea what would happen now; he wished he could tell her anything of comfort or value.

"Lucas, that you?" Morgan called into the darkness and pelting rain. "Lucas?"

When there was no reply, the soldier with Morgan, possibly now the last of the men the lieutenant had brought with him, shouted, "Lucas!" Morgan stilled him by making a slashing motion with the side of his hand across his neck, as if he himself hadn't just shouted the man's name.

Which was when there was a second shot, this one so loud it was definitely fired

outside the mill. That, too, could have been Morgan's man. But at whom was he shooting? And why? It was possible that Joseph had made a run for it, but that didn't seem like Joseph. And it was possible that first shot had been Joseph's execution, and now the ranger—this fellow named Lucas—was firing into the night at an old woman or a twelve-year-old girl. But the shot was so close that Weybridge didn't believe it was either of those scenarios.

And Lucas had never answered.

"It ain't him," Morgan whispered, and then he was on his feet and grabbing Libby by her biceps and hoisting her off the ground. He pulled her against him with his left arm so she was a shield and placed his Colt against her temple with his right, and hollered into the dark, "Joseph, you have five seconds to show yourself or I shoot her! And I'm counting now!"

But he hadn't gotten far when a third crack ripped the curtain of night and Morgan's knees buckled. He crumpled, pulling Libby down with him because she was entwined in his arm, and Weybridge was close enough that he could see the back of Morgan's head was gone and there, right behind him, stood Sally with the Colt, the weapon still raised in her perfectly straight arm. Weybridge, though his hands were bound, tried to roll into the other ranger before he could fire, but he lacked purchase with just the one leg. And so the ranger got a shot off, hitting Sally squarely in the chest, before kicking out at Weybridge and aiming his pistol down at him.

Which was when Joseph screamed at the rebel, a biblical keening as loud as Weybridge had ever heard a man yell in the heat of battle. He ran at the ranger, emptying a handgun into the burly man and sending him to the earth, dead, half on top of Weybridge and half in the spongy grass of the dooryard.

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To mourn is to love, Libby thought, the grief nearly strangling her, as she clung to Joseph's shoulders as if they were the last flotsam or tar-soaked siding from a shipwreck. The two of them were on the ground where Sally fell, and Sally's head rested in his lap, the rain pounding them all like the rapids that poured through the sluice at the mill. Joseph's own pain had left him breathless with despair, and he was rocking back and forth, as if he had in his arms an infant, not the woman with whom he had endured decades of slavery and too few years of freedom. Or whatever freedom was allowed a Negro man and woman in the Valley. He murmured her name over and over, whispering it into her ear and the cold air as if it were both benison and endearment.

And, Libby knew now, she had loved Sally, too, she had loved her as she might have loved a welcoming mother-in-law, had Peter's mother been alive when they wed, and the way an interloper—that was what Libby was, someone new to this property and this patch of land—loved that one soul who saw not an intruder but a stranger in search of kinship. Had Libby done right by her? Had she done right by Joseph? No, clearly not. Because one was dead and one was a widower. And before that? Had she truly viewed them as her equals? Perhaps not. Probably not. And that realization, she knew, would grieve her a long, long time.

She'd feared for three and a half years that the battle, always nearby, it seemed, always a neighbor itself, someday would come here. To this very ground. Now it had, and it was she herself who had brought it here. The earth was but gardens of bullets. She'd saved a Yankee and set in motion the carnage that tonight had enveloped the property, littering her kitchen, the gristmill, and her dooryard with corpses. Six, all

told, including Sally.

And, in fact, it wasn't six. It was seven, she thought. Seven. It had rained so much tonight that she wouldn't have been surprised if, had she sloshed her way to the brush at the edge of the south woods, she had found churned to the surface the rotting cadaver of the ranger who'd attacked her in those first days of September.

A few minutes ago, Jubilee had helped Weybridge inside the house to retrieve his crutches. Now the child was packing, and Libby could see the lantern lights in both upstairs bedrooms.

She hadn't done right by Jubilee, either, and that was a betrayal of her sister-in-law and the woman's last words. Do right by me. Do right by her.

She supposed that when Weybridge returned, the three of them would do with Sally's body whatever Joseph wanted. Bury it, bring it to the wagon. It would be up to him. The living and the dead couldn't stay out here forever, though a small part of her, as she stared up into the night sky and allowed the rain to cascade upon her face with such ferocity that it stung, wondered, why not? Why not? At this point, what really did it matter?

But then she turned toward the house and saw Jubilee in the window, a reminder, and shook off the rain like a wet dog and held Joseph a little tighter.

"Should we hide the bodies?" Libby asked Weybridge, referring to Henry Morgan and his rebel posse.

"I see no point. They'll find them soon enough."

"But maybe not right away," she argued. "The hour or two they spend looking for them might be the time we need to get to Harper's Ferry."

“The hour or two we spend moving them is time we could be on the road.”

Weybridge had taken from the corpses their guns and any ammunition that was not soaked beyond use. He took the field glasses Henry Morgan had with him.

“It won’t take hours,” she said. “We’ll do it right now, while Jubilee’s packing. We’ll put some of the rocks by the mill in their clothes and roll them into the river.”

“Okay, then.”

For a brief second, she was surprised he had acquiesced so easily to her plan. The man was an army captain. But, then, he was also, she had come to understand, appreciative of her resourcefulness. He was alive because of her. “What about their horses?” she asked.

“If we pass them on the road when we leave, we’ll cut them loose and set them free. They’ll find new riders from one side or the other soon enough.”

The work was grim. Together, Libby and Weybridge dragged the bodies to the river. Weybridge moved like a field horse, looping one corpse at a time by the dead man’s suspenders or belt or whatever twine he could find around his own waist, and hobbled forward on his crutches, while Libby helped pull each of the dead by its cold, wet arm. They had not asked Joseph to help because he was digging his wife’s grave.

Just downstream of the mill, the water frothing and lapping at the top of the bank, Libby took rocks, some the size of human skulls, and shoved them inside each cadaver’s jacket or shirt, and rolled it over the side. There the bodies disappeared briefly beneath the current, but then they bobbed to the surface, rocks be damned, and were carried downriver. As Weybridge expected, even stones that big weren’t enough to sink them when the river was this wild, but Libby continued with her efforts, and he supposed this plan was better than no plan, because the Opequon didn’t widen and

grow shallow again for at least another half mile. Maybe further. The bodies might even be lost to a beaver dam downriver. No matter what, she'd been right: it was a good idea to move the bodies. In the morning, rebels would search for them, and it would likely take them more hours to find them than it had to heave them into the rapids.

When they were done, Libby stood under the awning on the porch, her arm around Jubilee, who was shivering in the damp night air. The rain now was barely a drizzle. Libby draped a shawl around her, and the two of them peered out into the mist. To the west, she saw wisps of the moon peeking through clouds and lightening the sky in waves. Joseph had laid out Sally on the couch inside, and was still digging her grave where, over the years, other slaves had been buried: a square patch of earth near a row of dogwood trees, bordered on two sides by a picket fence that Joseph had maintained since he was a young man, and his father had cared for before him. It was after two in the morning, an hour of the night Libby had seen before, and always because she was alive with anger or worry or sadness. Did anything good ever occur in the small hours of the night? No. Never.

Jubilee had told her more than Joseph had about what had occurred in the gristmill. Libby assumed she would learn additional details over time, when Jubilee was capable of sharing more or Joseph was willing to speak more, but the raw outlines were clear: Sally had executed the rebel at pointblank range just as he reached the top of the gristmill steps near the hopper, a shot that none of the living outside in the dooryard had heard. The man fell backwards down the stairs, nearly pulling Joseph with him, and was dead by the time Jubilee and Sally and Joseph stepped over the body on their way outside. Joseph took the rebel's pistol. The first shots that Libby and Weybridge had heard were the ones Sally had fired to distract Morgan and his man so Joseph could creep up behind them. But, apparently, Sally had just edged closer and closer to the group in the rain. Joseph hadn't expected her ever to get as close as she did. That hadn't been the plan. But she'd seen the opportunity and taken it, killing Morgan when she had the chance.

Now they needed to get ready to leave at first light. Regardless of whether it stopped raining, no matter the condition of the pike, what was washed out and what was washed away, they needed to be heading north to Harper's Ferry.

But the flight would be different than their original scheme. Before the nightmare that had unfolded tonight, the plan had been that when they left, Weybridge would be in the coffin and Libby and Joseph would ride at the front of the wagon. It would be just the three of them. Unless something went horribly wrong, which, of course, was always a possibility, she and Joseph would be home by nightfall.

Now, however, with Sally dead and the property littered with the remnants of battle, they wouldn't be coming back, at least until after the war. And Jubilee was, of course, going with them. They would still hide Weybridge in the casket, but Jubilee would sit between the adults on the driver's seat. They would pack as little as possible, because how much could these two horses be expected to haul all the way to the Union garrison? Most of what they would bring would be Jubilee's, because Libby wanted to give the girl as much comfort as possible.

The last thing they would do before leaving was say a prayer over Sally's grave. Joseph had insisted. He was clear that he wouldn't go if Sally had not been buried and they had not said a proper prayer, even though the work right now was likely breaking his back. And the only reason he was even willing to leave was because of his children. They were grown, but he said Sally would want to know he had seen their lives after the war, when they were as free as the white men and women who had once held them in bondage.

Jubilee milked the cow one last time and fed the chickens, the birds clucking in the dark, surprised they had been awakened. She scattered the grain and crumbled kitchen scraps like hail. She patted Flora the cow on her side, hoping she'd be discovered by someone by midday so she wasn't uncomfortable.

She surprised herself by hugging the animal.

She surprised herself by crying. She hadn't cried since her mother had died, and she buried her face between the animal's withers and neck, drying her face against the hair on the creature's leathery hide.

They left with the last of the moonlight, the moon peering now between the clouds that lolled across the brightening skies, the rain finally having stopped. But they'd gone no more than a few hundred yards from her property when Joseph halted the two horses. The rains had carved a wide runnel in the dirt, and water was sloshing through it like a creek. The horses could have navigated it without the wagon. With it, they didn't stand a chance. Libby and Joseph knew this instantly, and neither said a word for a moment.

"I don't see how we can go around it," Libby said finally.

"No," Joseph agreed. "I say we loop around the other way. Head up Walker Hill."

She thought about this. The road was steep there and would further tax the horses. But what choice had they? The detour would add, if there were no other washouts and they could pick up the Winchester Road two miles to the north, perhaps a half hour to the journey.

"Sure. Let's," she said. He handed her the reins and climbed down. It was going to take the both of them to turn the horses and wagon around so it faced in the opposite direction.

"Libby?" It was Weybridge.

She glanced back once at the coffin, but returned her attention to Joseph and the way he was already reaching for the bridle of each animal. "Yes?"

“If the roads are bad, leave me here. You and Jubilee ride one animal and Joseph rides the other.”

“No,” she told him. “I haven’t come this far and lost this much to lose you, too.”

As the sun, a blinding white ball against a sky the color of bread dough, began to rise above the Blue Ridge Mountains, they could still see the house, the gristmill, and the outbuildings—the barn, the chicken coop, the slave quarters, and the overseer’s house where Joseph and Sally had lived—in the distance. They were behind schedule, but at least now they were on their way.

Joseph brought the wagon to a stop at the peak of Walker Hill, and she thought at first it was because he wanted one last view of the only place he had ever lived. Or, just maybe, to allow her a final glimpse of what had been her small world for half a decade. But then he raised his hand and pointed, and she saw them. Rebel cavalry, perhaps a dozen riders, roaring down the road toward the Steadman land and descending upon the house and the gristmill. Quickly, he urged the animals forward another thirty or forty feet, where the road began to slope downhill and there was no chance the rebels would spot the horses and wagon. There he climbed down, and Libby joined him.

“Stay here,” she told Jubilee, but the girl shook her head and followed them, and Libby was too tired to argue. And so she retrieved the field glasses that had belonged to Henry Morgan from the straw beside the coffin, and the three of them walked back to the summit where they could see the farm and the mill. She considered freeing Weybridge, but she knew they couldn’t stop here long.

Through the binoculars, she watched some of the men dismount, while others rode acrobatically amidst the small buildings and to the edge of the Opequon, searching for…for, she supposed, them.

“They’ll milk Flora?” Jubilee asked, referring to the cow.

“Yes,” she lied. The animal would be roasting on a spit by suppertime.

When three of the soldiers emerged from the house, they gathered around a horseman still high in his saddle.

And then it began. A few of the rebels disappeared into the barn, emerged a moment later, and soon black smoke was belching from the loft. The roof was wet and would take longer to catch, but it was only a matter of time. There was plenty of hay inside, and the timbers there were dry.

Others were taking torches to the slave quarters, which she expected would burn even faster than the barn.

“Let’s not watch,” Jubilee said.

“No,” she agreed, as the girl started back to the wagon. But she did stay, transfixed by the black tendrils coiling into the morning sky. Soon they would burn her home, the place where she had expected to live out her life with Peter Steadman. This was retribution. Her punishment.

“The Yankees woulda done that if they didn’t,” Joseph murmured.

“Probably.”

“At least they won’t bring in a cannon to tear holes in the mill. They can still use it,” he continued.

“I suppose. But I don’t think there’s much grain left to grind. Anyway, all that means is the Yankees will blow it up when they arrive.”

“They’ll leave the graveyard alone, won’t they? Them rebs?”

“Yes,” she assured him, but once again she was lying. Whether those rebels thought the bodies were slaves or Steadmans hoping to find a final peace wouldn’t matter to the delusional men down there, angry killers with grievances who didn’t understand that the war was long over, and their cause long lost.

Especially a fresh, shallow grave with but a wooden plank stuck into the dirt. They’d string the Negro corpse from any branch they could find that hung over the Winchester Road, not caring that it was a woman.

There was no point in staying to watch them incinerate her house. Jubilee was right to walk away.

“Let’s go,” she said. “We need to get as far away from them as we can.”

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Libby shed no tears as the horses plodded north with the wagon behind them, and the October sun rose. She supposed it was a combination of anger at all they had taken from her and, pure and simple, the will to live. Even now. Her attention was on the road ahead, the blackened fields they passed—the occasional corn plants that hadn't collapsed beneath the heat of the torches standing like lone, shadowy sentinels above long plains of ashes—and the patches of forest that occasionally covered the wagon in shade. She was prepared to shoot anyone and anything that came near them, to (as soldiers were wont to say) rain down hellfire and hot lead.

Joseph said almost nothing, his own soul crushed by Sally's death. Her murder. Even Jubilee was mostly quiet, stunned into silence.

"You tired?" Joseph finally asked Libby at one point.

"I am not," she replied. She'd sleep after they killed her. Or when they reached Harper's Ferry. Whichever came first.

"I'm not, either," Jubilee murmured, her tone defiant, but she leaned a little deeper into Libby.

Occasionally, Libby called back to Weybridge, sometimes reassuring him (and herself) that though the horses were moving slower than usual, they'd get there soon enough, or to warn him when the road ahead was rutted. One time, she alerted him that riders were approaching, but it was rebel teamsters roaring south, and they had no interest in a Negro man, a white woman, and a white girl heading the other way.

Another time they had to pull over so Confederate infantry, also marching south, could pass them unobstructed. But, again, the soldiers, some barefoot and some with rags for shoes, paid them no mind, even though Weybridge in his casket and she in her seat had held their guns cocked. Only as row after row of boys passed did she realize the utter absurdity of bothering to have her pistol ready: what did she really believe she and a man in a box could do if these soldiers wanted to stop them? And why in the name of heaven would these men have any interest in a modest coffin?

By late morning, they were nearing the patch of road where the Union pickets had emerged when she and Joseph had first ventured to Harper's Ferry for whiskey and medicine, and the trip had been uneventful. And so when the two bluebellies appeared from behind a copse of hickory and oak, a few dying leaves still dangling from a few quiescent twigs, it was almost anticlimactic. The soldiers seemed more like teenagers than hardened veterans; they were not the same pair as last time, but they were interchangeable, she thought. Boys who should have been raising a barn with their elders or learning a trade or, perhaps, being taught Shakespeare by the likes of the professor behind her. They pointed their muskets at her, and she marveled at how easy it would be to shoot one. She wouldn't; they were just so young. But she felt the Colt in her hands and almost wanted to demonstrate that if they were going to threaten her with rifles, there would be a price to pay.

Instead she asked, "May my man and I get down and open the box in the wagon?"

One of the pickets glanced quickly at the other. "That coffin? What's in there?" he inquired, lowering his weapon slightly. The other kept the rifle aimed at Joseph and her. "What's so important you got them animals winded and lathered up?"

"A Yankee."

"You bringin' us back a dead soldier? Someone…" His voice trailed off, but his interest had been piqued. Someone… important ? Someone… I've heard of ?

Someone… you all killed ? There were infinite ways he might have finished the sentence.

Of course, there were thousands of ways she might have finished it for him. Someone… decent. Someone… kind. Someone… I kept alive at a price I could not afford.

“Not dead. Very much alive,” she answered.

And from inside the coffin Weybridge shouted, “Captain Jonathan Weybridge, Eleventh Vermont. Wounded last month near Berryville.”

“What the hell?” the picket said. He walked to the side of the wagon and asked her, “You from Berryville?”

“I am.”

He said to the other soldier, “I’m goin’ to climb into the wagon and open this thing. If some secesh spy or assassin jumps out and I get kilt, please be sure and shoot these two.” His tone was calm. He wanted to believe her and the voice from inside the makeshift casket.

“I swear it’s me, soldier,” said Weybridge.

The fellow stared quizzically at the holes on the side. He knocked on the wood. “You ain’t gonna shoot me, are you, feller? You do, and the two adults you got driving this rig are dyin’ with me.”

“No one’s going to shoot anybody, I hope,” the captain said.

And with that, the picket shook his head, attached his bayonet to his rifle and jimmied

the blade between the lid and a side wall. Then, as if it were a crowbar, he popped out the few nails Joseph had banged half-heartedly into the top to suggest verisimilitude and pried off the board.

Weybridge sat up, his right hand against the side for purchase, and blinked against the daylight. “Thank you, Private,” he said.

“If that don’t beat all,” the soldier said, and he allowed his jaw to fall slack.

“You going to salute him or just gawk?” Libby asked, and when a wave of worry crossed the private’s face, she smiled at him. “It’s fine to gawk. Man just popped up in a casket like he was a jack-in-the-box.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he agreed, but then he did salute. Both soldiers did.

Weybridge saluted them back and looked around at the trees as if they were unfamiliar flora, not the exact same kinds of maples, chestnuts, and red oaks he had observed daily the last month in Berryville. Then he sighed and murmured, “Well, now. It’s good to be home.”

They approached Harper’s Ferry, her second time here this autumn, one of the pickets walking beside them. Weybridge was sitting atop the coffin, and the picket occasionally glanced up at him with something like wonder in his eyes.

Libby could see how wet the horses were beneath their harnesses, and an idea took shape. She knew to give it life now, otherwise it would die inside her.

“Joseph?”

He waited.

“The horses are yours.”

“Yes, ma’am. Soon as we stop, I’ll dry ’em and get ’em fed.”

“No, that’s not what I meant. I’m giving them to you. They’re yours.”

“No, I can’t—”

She patted his hand. “You can. Who knows if I’m ever going back? I have no use for them. You do. You will.”

“Ma’am, that’s too generous.”

“The Yankees are less likely to take them from you than me. I’m surprised I was able to hang on to them this long, with one army or the other in need of animals to pull their cannons. Besides, I want you to have them. And the wagon, too, if you want it. Take it. View it as a partial payment for all the money I owe you or all the money I paid you in worthless Confederate currency.”

He said nothing for easily half a minute. His future was as murky as hers. Finally, he replied, “Okay, then. Thank you, ma’am.” And she was relieved. She had been worried that once he had brought her and Jubilee and the captain safely here, his will to live would collapse like the framing of their homes when the rebels had burned them to the ground. The fact he was willing to accept the animals was an encouraging sign.

She sat on the grass beside one of the sloping streets that meandered uphill through Harper’s Ferry, the afternoon sun on her face, Jubilee beside her. She and Weybridge had each kept one of the Colt pistols, but she’d turned over the other guns she had stockpiled to the Yankees. Weybridge had been taken to the Sanitary Commission, where he could be examined by a surgeon. Joseph and a Yankee private were

watering the horses and getting them fed, and parking the wagon…wherever. She had no idea where, and, at the moment, couldn't care less. She was homeless. A refugee. A stranger in a strange land.

Jubilee had wrapped her arms around her shins and was resting her chin on one knee.

"That brick building," she said to Libby, motioning with her head. "That where it happened?"

"That's what I'm told," she answered. She knew what her niece was referring to. The firehouse doors had been repaired, as had the walls, but she could still see where holes punched through stone and brick had been filled with limestone and clay.

"Were you scared?" the girl asked.

"A little. Not very. I was in Charlottesville. By the time I heard the news, John Brown and his men were already surrounded. It was only a matter of time until they'd all be killed or have to surrender."

"You didn't think the rest of 'em would rise up? The Negroes?"

"I thought it was possible," she answered. But she hadn't thought it was realistic. Southerners had too many guns and whips and shackles and swords.

"Is that why my uncle freed his servants?"

Libby turned to look at the girl. She was still gazing at the building that Brown had briefly held, and so Libby lifted the child's chin off her knee and brought her face near. She looked deep into the girl's eyes. "They're not servants. You—you and I both—need to stop calling them that. They were slaves. My husband set free his family's slaves."

“Them’s just words.”

“Yes. And words have meanings.”

“You been spendin’ too much time listenin’ to Professor Jackal,” said Jubilee, and Libby felt an unexpected spike of anger. But then she registered the levity in Jubilee’s eyes. The girl had meant nothing flippant in her response. She was just joshing her, as she did everyone, even now.

Even after last night.

She released Jubilee’s chin and smiled, relieved. The idea that her niece could joke after what she’d witnessed only hours ago as the rains fell with apocalyptic fury was another source of comfort. Like Joseph, this girl would go on. She, too, was a survivor.

“You’re probably right,” she told the child.

“Where do you think we’ll sleep tonight?”

“There’s an inn.”

“We got money for an inn?”

“No.”

“So where will we go?”

“Tonight? Tomorrow? That’s easy. Colonel Duffy is grateful for the way we saved the captain’s life. He said he’ll take care of our rooms.”

“And then?”

“I don’t know. But don’t worry. I have the garnet pin that your uncle gave me. I have my wedding ring. And my earbobs. I brought all my jewelry so we can sell it. And when the money runs out? Well, I’m still here,” she said. In her mind, she added, For now. But she wouldn’t verbalize such a thing this afternoon, even as she had doubts that she was capable anymore of caring for anyone, much less this resilient, remarkable filly beside her. The child deserved better than what she had become—and what, in the coming months and years, she would be able to offer the girl.

“What about Joseph?”

She ran a hand through her hair. “He can’t stay at the inn.”

“But ain’t we north now?”

“He’s still a Negro.”

“Are you tellin’ me that even Yankees—”

“Someone will figure it out, Jubilee. I’m sure they’ll find him a bed,” she answered, but she really had no idea.

Two bluebellies, one with but a single arm and one, on crutches, with but a single leg, waved at them. They were likely going to the Sanitary Commission or the garrison. The Yankee who’d lost his right leg looked like he was closer to Jubilee’s age than hers. The one without his left arm had the first threads of white in his beard.

“Will you look at them,” whispered Jubilee when they were past.

“What about them?”

“It takes the two of them to make one jackal: the kid has just a left leg like the professor and the other one has just a right hand.”

“The professor still has most of his left hand. That poor man lost his hand and his arm completely. But I do see your point.”

“Think it’s easier to keep a man in line who ain’t got but one leg or one hand?”

“Hard to say. Men, even crippled men, seem awful fond of killing. Why?”

“I expect when I get married, most of the boys I’ll get to choose from will be cripples. So, I was trying to find a silver lining.”

“Nothing wrong with a man without an arm or a leg. I just meant they’re still men.”

In the distance she heard a train approaching, and when she looked in that direction, she saw the black spindle of smoke curling above the engine as it approached the station. Already it was starting to brake, the wheels squealing against the rails.

“After the war, will it be hard for my daddy to find me?” Jubilee asked.

“No. When this is over, he’ll come home. And you’ll go home. And you’ll both start again.”

“If he lives.”

She nodded. She wouldn’t lie to the girl and reassure her that he’d survive. After last night, Jubilee would know the words were hollow. Or, perhaps, she would have known even before last night.

“Will them bluebellies hate him?”

“Do you hate Captain Weybridge?”

She shook her head.

“There you go,” Libby said.

“They tell you anything about Uncle Peter? When you was talkin’ to that Yankee colonel?”

“Nothing helpful.”

“You still sure he’s passed?”

“The colonel,” she told her niece, “wants to help me. Help us. He said he’ll send another telegram to the two camps where Peter might be located, and see what he can learn. There’s no record of his death, but they can’t find him, either.”

“Maybe he escaped.”

“Well, if he did, he was killed trying to reach me, because he never made it to Berryville. But a lot of men died at Camp Chase of smallpox, and some probably died when they were moved elsewhere.” The words caught in her throat, and she paused a second to gather herself. “Your uncle’s not coming back, Jubilee. That colonel? He might just as well be telegramming the sky.”

The train stopped, and she watched the teamsters descend upon it, unloading ammunition and food. They would fill wagons and wagons by the time they were done. The bounty was endless. The supplies were endless. It was—and she almost (but not quite) smiled darkly to herself—enough to feed and arm a whole goddamn

army.

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The surgeon told Weybridge nothing he didn't already know. He was healing. He'd be fine—or as fine as any man could be who had lost a leg and two fingers. No sooner had the doctor completed the examination, however, than a private informed Weybridge that the colonel wanted him to return to his office.

And so he hobbled across the courtyard, past the wounded soldiers lounging on the ground or on camp stools, some even more damaged than he, and back to the garrison. He wondered where Libby and Jubilee had gone. When he reached the squat brick building with Colonel Duffy's headquarters, he worked his way gingerly up the steps, the inside stairway cool and dark. The door to the office was open, and the colonel asked him to sit in the chair across from his desk.

"I've a letter for you. I'm told it arrived a few days ago," Duffy said.

It was likely from Emily. Word must have traveled fast from the time Libby was here last month requesting the whiskey and medicine that were among the reasons he was still alive. He knew that today, at least, he was the talk of Harper's Ferry: the Vermont captain brought back from the dead. The Yankee saved by a rebel woman.

He slit open the envelope and saw instantly that it wasn't from his wife. It was from his friend, Eustis Marsh, the lieutenant who'd created a tourniquet out of a canteen cord. Weybridge tried to read nothing into the fact that the colonel did not leave him alone with the correspondence: it was his office, after all. Could he know what was in the letter? He might for any one of a dozen reasons, though the envelope was sealed, and so Weybridge doubted he did. Still, the idea he'd remained felt like an ill omen.

His eyes began moving across the words from his adjutant.

I do not feel good about how we had to of left you behind. But the doctor hisself said you was a goner. I asked to stay, but they said no, we had ourselves work to do and a couple a boys been ordered to look after you. But I am still mighty sorry. But I am also mighty glad you are still walking this world, even if you are going to complain about things that do not matter like boots with holes.

They tell me some secesh lady has kept you alive and is going to bring you to Harpers Ferry and so I am hoping you get this letter. I am writing between skirmishes with johnnies deep in the valley. And it is bad news, Captain, as bad as it gets. Your beloved Emily was kilt by a damn horse. I do not know the details but I was told she was kicked when she was running after one of your boys. The mare was protecting a foal maybe three months old. It was two weeks ago and it was not the boys fault. Boys is boys.

There was more, but he felt a dizziness behind his eyes and the world was growing fuzzy, and so he bowed his head between his knees, the letter still in his fingers, and tried to absorb this blow. It was as if he had a head wound: not physical pain, but a wallop that had left him stunned. It was as if a shawl had been draped over him—or, perhaps, a shroud—and he was aware that the colonel was speaking to him and he needed to rally and respond, but the words were just noise, as meaningless to him as the concussive blasts of cannons or the roar of riders and hooves as cavalry would race past his infantry.

“Captain?”

He rolled his neck and looked up. “Yes, sir?”

“Bad news?”

“Yes.”

When the colonel said nothing more, Weybridge understood that he was waiting for him to continue. And so he did.

“My wife…she…she died,” he said. “A friend of mine heard. That’s why he wrote.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“Thank you,” he murmured softly. “It was a horse. An accident.”

“I’m sure your family has sent letters, too. I’m sure they’ll arrive any day now.”

“Yes, sir,” he agreed, though the fact he heard first from Marsh and not his own family hadn’t troubled him. It was the message, not the messenger. The messenger didn’t matter. In some ways, perhaps it was best to hear it from Marsh, rather than from one of Emily’s or his parents.

“You’ve endured a lot, Captain. To have gotten here and then received this news is tragic. Blessed are they that mourn. Isn’t that the passage in Matthew?”

“I think so.”

“There has been too much suffering since the South seceded.”

“There has been too much suffering forever,” he said, not precisely correcting a superior officer, but acknowledging what he had learned this autumn. He had been lucky for nearly three decades. Now the dice and the cards were exacting their toll.

“True.”

He thought of his boys. Of Emily’s family. What awaited him in Vermont. He’d manage, he supposed, because he had no other choice. He pondered whether someone put down the horse. He hoped not. But you never knew. People were volatile and

grief could exacerbate tempers. Ignite them.

“I requisitioned a room at the inn for Mrs.Steadman and her niece,” the colonel was saying. “It’s on the second floor. I got you one on the first floor. Minimize your time climbing stairs.”

“Thank you, sir. But I’m fine…on stairs.”

“I’m sure you are.”

He nodded. His eyes roamed the room. A thought came to him. “And Joseph?” he asked.

“Who’s that?”

“The freedman who came with me. The freedman who helped save my life.”

“Ah. The old Negro. We’ll find him a bed,” the colonel assured him.

“Thank you.”

“What else do you need?”

He thought about this. “Tell me. What will happen to her: Mrs.Steadman? To her and her niece?”

The colonel shrugged. “She may be a rebel. But she saved your life. I told her I’d do what I could to find her husband. And, if we do find him, we’ll send him back to her. Swap him for you.”

“The prisoner swaps ended.”

“I think Secretary Stanton would make an exception, in this case. We find this Peter Steadman, I expect we could send him and his wife and that niece of theirs home.”

“Though, of course, their home is gone,” Weybridge said, reminding Duffy of what he had told him during the initial debriefing.

“Well, they’re not alone,” he replied dismissively. “When this is over, there will be plenty to rebuild across the South. The price of secession. Of treason.”

“Yes, sir,” he agreed, but he knew it was more complicated than that in Libby Steadman’s case. He wasn’t sure if she could ever go home. With every decision she had made that autumn, she had distanced herself further from all that she knew. And, consciously or not, she’d done it for him.

“She’ll be fine, Captain.”

“I hope so.”

“And you?”

“I will, too,” he said, but he wasn’t confident. All he knew now was that his wife was dead and he was in shock, and yet the woman who had saved his life was—and who would have thought this possible?—even worse off than he was.

The inn had a restaurant. Weybridge hadn’t eaten in a restaurant since the spring, when the 11th had been part of the garrison around Washington.

He watched Libby slice the beef before her into small bites, but Jubilee was like a wild animal, ravenous, devouring her meat and cleaning her plate before either her aunt or Weybridge had made much of a dent into their meals. Libby turned to the girl and said, “I’ve seen wolves with better table manners.”

“You haven’t,” the girl corrected her. “I was hungry was all. When’s the last time you had beef like this? Me? It was before my ma died.”

“Going to lick your plate?”

“I just might.”

Weybridge was aware of the money in his pocket. That afternoon, a paymaster had set up a table in the garrison, but the colonel had intervened and made sure Weybridge didn’t have to stand in line for the salary he’d missed while recovering in Berryville. The fellow, an accountant before the war, had Weybridge’s salary ready and hand-delivered it to him.

“I had boys in my company who were very good eaters, too, especially when we had steers to slaughter,” he said. His voice had sounded strange to him since he’d learned that Emily was dead: less resonant. Oddly frail. It brought back those days when he was first wounded and, he had supposed at the time, likely to perish himself.

“See?” said Jubilee. “See?” She finished the sherry in her glass. Her second glass. Libby hadn’t planned on allowing the child her first taste of spirits tonight. But when the girl had pressed her luck and ordered sherry, it seemed to Weybridge that Libby had decided on the spot not to stop her, especially when her niece had reminded her that her birthday was next month and there were girls in the Valley who wed at thirteen and fourteen.

Libby raised a single eyebrow. “That’s precisely what I want from my kin: to eat like soldiers accustomed to mess kits and who’ve been marching for days.”

He’d told Libby that his wife had died, but not Jubilee. He’d asked Libby not to tell the girl. Not yet. He wanted the child today, now that they were in Harper’s Ferry, to have a reprieve from the dark of the world, the way it plucked from them all what they loved. That afternoon he’d written letters to his boys, Emily’s parents, and his

own mother and father. He said he hoped he'd be home before the first snow, but he wasn't sure.

Snow. The word had hit him hard. Snow. Sleet. Ice. He would have to learn to navigate Vermont winters anew.

But he would. He functioned well enough with eight fingers instead of ten.

When he was back home, it would be all about the boys. His sons. What else was there that mattered?

"Jackal, you daydreamin' now that you're back with your kind?" Jubilee was asking him.

"I was. Yes."

She shook her head in disapproval. "My ma never, ever had to ask me where my head was at. I always make sure people know."

"I'm sorry, Jubilee. I am preoccupied."

"Sometimes," Libby said to the girl, "it's perfectly fine to keep your thoughts to yourself."

"Oh, I know. I got my secrets. But Jackal? I got to ask you this. Joseph can't sleep at the inn, and he can't eat at this restaurant. If you folks want to free the slaves, why don't you just treat 'em like white people?"

"We should," he said.

"Sleepin' in some room off the horse corral with stable boys and grooms? That ain't right for a man like Joseph," the girl added.

“No. It’s not.”

“And if so many of you were goin’ to die and kill so many of us, you might have thought that through. What’s the point of all this killin’ if you still won’t let them eat or sleep wherever they want?”

Libby looked at her and then at him. Her expression, unlike that of her niece, was utterly inscrutable. He wished he could read her mind; he wished he had a decent answer for her niece.

He was awakened in the night by the feel of the mattress settling beside him and, reflexively, moving as fast as he ever had in battle, he rolled away and started to reach for the pistol he had placed on the night table. But then, climbing up from the depths of sleep, he understood that it was Libby.

“Shhhhh,” she whispered. “It’s only me.”

“Libby, what…” But his voice trailed off when she climbed beneath the coverlet, laying her head on his chest. “Where’s Jubilee?” he asked. “Is she—”

“A woman crawls into bed beside you, and you ask about her niece. My God, Professor. My God. I’m insulted.”

“But—”

“She’s fine. That sherry has her snoring like cattle.”

He wrapped an arm around her shoulder.

“I figured you needed company,” she said softly. “I know I did. I found myself missing our nights on the porch and the stars and the whiskey.”

“I liked them, too.”

“I know. How are you?”

“No longer stunned. But morose. Fretful for my boys. For Emily’s family.”

“I would comfort you if I knew what to say. But the words of preachers always seem to disappoint me.”

He stroked her head with his right hand, smoothing her hair against his palm.

“I almost cut it all off just now,” she murmured.

“Your hair? What? Why?”

“Not all of it. But most of it. Enough to hide what was left under a forage cap or straw hat. And then I’d disappear. Just go away. Vanish out west. Leave Jubilee with you until her father returned. Or, if he didn’t return, with you and your family in Vermont. That was my plan—or, perhaps, fantasy—until I learned your Emily had died. But I can’t do that now. Run off. Fade away. I can’t leave you with a third child to raise on your own, and I could not do that to the girl. Not after all she’s lost and all she’s been through. Her mother’s last words? Do right by her. By Jubilee.”

“I’ve never been on my own,” he admitted. “My parents are still alive. Emily’s are still alive. That’s a blessing.”

“You know what I meant.”

“I do. So…you’re not leaving?”

She shook her head against him.

“Good.”

“Good that I’m not dropping a very feisty twelve-year-old girl in your lap or good that I’m not leaving?”

He kissed her gently on her forehead, a kiss that was chaste and brief. But then she surprised him, rolling atop him and straddling him. She placed both of her hands on his chest and gazed down at him, her eyes intense. Her nightshirt was white, her hair falling in drapes on both sides of her face, and she looked almost ghostly in the moonlight.

“The Jackal’s mistress,” she murmured.

“What?”

“I have not been with a man since Peter was home briefly in the fall of 1862,” she answered. “And you with a woman? Not that long ago, I suppose. But, still, too long. Too goddamn long. I don’t know what awfulness tomorrow’s going to bring. But tonight? I have you, and you have me, and the thing that has me most tired is being lonely. Tonight, I am the goddamn Jackal’s mistress and putting us both, at least for a little while, out of our goddamn misery.” And then she leaned over and kissed him on the mouth, pressing her lips against his. She opened herself to him, as the night air and the cries of an owl in the distance and a wagon creaking its way down the steep street outside the window wafted into their room, a small refuge from the insensate, unending horrors of the world.

In the morning, when he awoke, he saw he was alone and felt a pang of guilt that he had fallen asleep before Libby had left him to return to Jubilee. But when he sat up and gazed down at the sheets, recalling how only hours ago Libby had been lying beside him, he felt no remorse. He began to make plans, imagining how he would introduce her to his sons and his parents, wondering how he would explain her to Emily’s family. He did not reproach himself for last night, and he did not judge

himself for his feelings toward this rebel woman. Emily was gone, and there was no power on earth that could bring her back. If she were alive, he had enough faith in himself and in Libby to believe that last night would never have occurred, and any future he had with the woman would have been but a platonic friendship that, over time, would have dissolved like seasonings in hot soup.

But Emily wasn't alive.

And he could still mourn her and love Libby: the mind could do two things at once. He could grieve, and he could be grateful. Libby wouldn't be merely a helpmate, though the logistics of being a widower with two young boys had seemed daunting yesterday, despite the proximity of Emily's parents and his. He would fan this undeniable spark that he and Libby shared, and count himself blessed to have had the passion of two remarkable women in his life.

He dressed and went to the restaurant for breakfast, and, as he expected, he saw Libby and Jubilee at a table, already devouring eggs and bacon and biscuits and gravy. The girl looked sleepy and he considered whether the sherry last night had been too much for her, but Libby was radiant. Her eyes were joyful and wide as she spoke to her niece. But when she looked up and saw him, her countenance changed. Her smile turned wistful, and for a moment, he saw melancholy there. But quickly she blinked it away, seeming to smother whatever stitch of sadness she had felt upon seeing him. He sat down, and Libby took his wrist and gazed at him, saying, "You won't believe it, but he's alive. Your colonel found Peter, and he's at Fort Delaware. He's alive!"

She said more, sharing the logistics of how the Union Army was sending her and Jubilee to the prison camp tomorrow, and Peter was going to be released, and her sentences were punctuated over and over with her excitement and disbelief, and her euphoria that Peter Steadman—her beloved—was breathing and well and coming home. And Weybridge nodded and found it in him to feign a happiness he wasn't feeling, because this was his duty and what was expected of him. He said little but

nodded much, almost fascinated by how quickly the kernel that last night had seemed ripe to grow was, by the light of day, a desiccated and lifeless husk.

“Jackal? Your head in the clouds again?” Jubilee was asking.

He looked at the girl. “Yes. Apparently, it was. But…”

“Well, go on.”

But maybe he was better off when his head was in the clouds. The world was too much with him, he thought, recalling Wordsworth. Perhaps now, but perhaps always. Maybe this was how one—anyone—survived the heartaches that came with heartbeats.

No, that wasn’t fair. His mind might wander, but his attention, when necessary, was rapier sharp.

And while the only inevitability in this world was death, that didn’t mean that the uncertainties and surprises of living weren’t lovely before you reached the end. Last night, for instance. He would have that memory forever, and if that moment was now as unsubstantial as, yes, a cloud…fine. So be it. Let it live inside him like a salve. It had happened. It once was real, and he would never forget it.

“But,” he said to Jubilee, “I always come back.”

Libby patted the girl’s hand. “Don’t try and guess what people—jackals or professors or your own kin—are thinking. We’re always outside looking in. We mortals get it wrong much more often than we get it right.”

The girl arched her eyebrows at her aunt. “Well, I know this: you grown-ups sure do.” Then she took the last of her biscuit and sponged the last of her gravy off her plate.