

A Thirst for WAR



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For Laurie Rosin, who helped edit the original draft; and my loving wife,
Barbara Horne, for her editing skills and invaluable insights.

CHAPTER ONE

The Classroom

The gallows trapdoor opened and the Yankee soldier fell to his death, dangled a moment with feet twitching, and then twisted silently.

The crowd gasped a chorus of *Amens*, a preacher stepped forward and read a Bible verse, and then the soldier was cut down, his hood removed, and his limp body placed on a stretcher. He was a young boy with flaxen hair, a few sprigs of whiskers around the mouth, and blood stained hands. A large bruise covered one side of his face.

"They said he raped and killed a woman," said a coarse, gap-toothed man standing next to Professor John Ulysses Martin.

"So I've been told," the professor said. "Things like this happen in war."

"You think they was wrong to hang him?" the man asked, eyeing the professor suspiciously. Rumors about the rapist and an accomplice (who still hadn't been caught) had run rampant in the village of Clarksville, Tennessee.

"I wasn't at his trial," the professor said, jostled from behind as the crowd pushed forward. It wasn't every day they got to see a hanging up close. "And I don't know any of the facts."

"Well, I was there," the man said, placing a large workman's hand on the professor's brown coat and dragging him forward. "Let's get a good look at this son of a bitch the military found guilty!"

"I don't really want to do this," John said. His comment was lost—people behind him were talking; the stale odors of garlic, onions and unwashed bodies assaulting his senses. Involuntarily, he stumbled forward three steps and found himself staring down at the rope burns on the boy's neck.

What was it about good, churchgoing people that made them so desperate to see a dead body? He glanced upward. Lord, the day was far too beautiful for such depravity. Propelled by a strong wind, cottony clouds made their way across a bright winter sky. Then, another scent hit him. It was pungent like the odor from an outhouse. The stench grew stronger, nauseatingly so. People began to complain, and then gagged and coughed. In a final tribute to justice, the soldier's bowels had let loose.



"Stop shoving, you fool!" a voice bellowed in the hallway outside the classroom.

"Go to hell!" came the booming reply. Heavy boots and shoes tramped along the wood floor, followed by a second group pounding up the stairs from the first floor of the Administration Building.

"Take this, you moron!" A body thudded into a wall. Raucous laughter was followed by more profanity.

"Hurry up, nitwits!" A crescendo of boots and shoes scurried along the hall. The two groups were coming closer and closer, the one catching up to the other. "Get out of the way slowpokes or we'll all be late!"

"Go to hell!"

His hands twitching and his face flushed with anger, Professor John Ulysses Martin waited before the lectern in the oak paneled classroom. A dozen Federal-style easy chairs with soiled doilies on the headrests were arranged in a semi-circle before him. The chairs were well-worn, with rips and tears from years of use.

Hanging on the wall to his right was a portrait of Andrew Jackson, seventh President of the United States and, more importantly, a Southerner. Across from the portrait, the Ansonia clock on the fireplace mantle showed the time, three minutes after eleven. The students were late again. *As usual.* He glanced

at a set of tall windows at the far end of the room. Bracketed by floor-to-ceiling drapes, the windows looked out onto the common area of Stewart College and the brown winter lawns crisscrossed by gray sidewalks extending all the way to College Street.

With a great crunching of bodies the five young men squeezed through the open door. Cursing and shouting, they headed for their chairs, bumping into each other and knocking over a potted plant in a stand. Somebody lurched sideways and caught the plant before it hit the floor; took an exaggerated series of false steps, and then sat down, giggling but agitated.

"Let's have some order!" Professor Martin shouted. He reached over and took hold of the hall door, gave it a shove, and caught a flashing reflection of himself and two of the young men in the glass. George Singletary stuck a foot out and tripped Curley Holland. Curley got up and threw a punch at George who ducked and cackled with laughter.

"There was a hanging!" Curley Holland shouted.

"I know," the professor said, raising his hand in a gesture of silence. The memory of death came back, haunted him so that he had to push it to the back of his mind.

"It was that damn Yankee who killed a farm woman," George Singletary blurted. A murmuring broke out, metamorphosed into another round of excited conversations.

"Order!" Professor Martin shouted as he turned around. He pounded a large fist on the lectern. "Let's have some order so we can begin today's lesson!"

"Yes, professor," they replied as they settled into their chairs. They removed their winter coats and draped them over the wings of the chairs. Hats and wool gloves fell to the threadbare carpet. Finished, they looked up at him, their eyes bright and wondrous like small children; their faces, by contrast, a gaggle of sneers and smirks typical of mischievous young men in their late teens.

"Gentlemen, now that we've gotten this hanging business out of the way, I assume you've read today's assignment?" John Martin opened his tattered copy of Herodotus' *The Histories*. His face still crimson with anger, he reached inside

his wool jacket and fingered the long envelope bearing the seal of the Confederate High Command. Only this morning a Colonel Armistead in Richmond had informed him his application for military service had been denied. Professor Martin cursed beneath his breath. *What more could go wrong today?*

All his life he'd dreamed of a career as an army officer, wanted it so badly it gave him chills every time he thought of it. Then, after receiving his degree in History from the University of Virginia, he'd readied himself to accept his commission. He put his financial affairs in order by selling his textbooks and hand-me-down furniture, and used the money to buy uniforms, equipment, and a good horse. This morning's letter had hit him like a blow to the face, and it stung all the more because of its bluntness. It was as if no one cared. And that really rankled him!

Something else is going to happen today. I can feel it in my gut, but I'll be damned if I know what it is or what to do about it!

A recent honors graduate, he was a tall, lanky man of twenty-two with intelligent blue eyes, wavy brown hair, and a smattering of freckles concealed by a beard until only last week. When he spoke his voice resonated with authority. It had to in order to deal with this wild and raucous group sitting before him.

Resting two large hands on the lectern before him, he watched the five young students assembled for Ancient Civilizations class this bright, sunny morning in February 1862. Due to the rampant war fever in town, these were the only students left, the school's upperclassmen having enlisted in General Lee's fine army many months ago.

As Professor of History at Stewart College in Clarksville, Tennessee, John Martin believed it was his duty—nay, his calling—to instill the patriotic virtues of duty to God and country in his students so they would never compromise the South's honor on the field of battle. But one of his students had called him an *armchair idealist cloistered in an academic fortress*. John scoffed at the idea. His father, James Pettigrew Martin, a hero in the War of 1848, had planted the

seeds of John's political philosophy when the boy sat on his knee night after night and listened to tales of derring-do against the Mexican army commanded by Santa Anna. Above the fireplace in their home hung a saber used in battle. The rust on it, his father explained, had come from fresh blood, now dried and turned a reddish-brown with age and memories.

"Gentlemen?" He cracked his knuckles, working them in a slow, deliberate manner as the usual paper shuffling and throat clearing subsided.

"What *was* the assignment?" James "Curley" Holland called out from his easy chair in the center of the group. Already a big strapping fellow at nineteen, he loved history, cigars, and whiskey, traits his father, a pro-slavery Memphis preacher, detested. Curley had expressed no opinion on the institution of slavery, although he had expressed to John in confidence he felt his father was somewhat of a hypocrite: a man couldn't love one's neighbor and simultaneously believe in slavery. Today, Curley's deep brown eyes glowed with a mischievous brilliance. For once he looked sober, and John counted this as a blessing. Hopefully, there would be no more trouble today. Controlling these rambunctious young men had always been a problem. With the advent of war, it had become an increasing challenge.

"Herodotus' *The Histories*, Book Seven," John answered. He liked Curley because the boy reminded him of himself at that age: impetuous, irresponsible, and fun loving, all of which was offset by a keen interest in history. However, Curley's love of whiskey often sidetracked his academic pursuits.

"We had planned to discuss the subject of courage," John continued, "and how it applied to King Leonidas and his men at the tragic battle of Thermopylae in 480 BC."

"Where's that horrible smell coming from?" Emanuel "Smiley" Riordan turned to Curley who sat next to him. Son of a local Clarksville farmer who neither owned slaves, nor believed in the institution of slavery, Smiley was a tall, muscular fellow with dark brown eyes, flaming red hair, and large callused hands that played a fiddle with remarkable agility.

"What smell?" John asked. He rested a hand on the lectern to steady himself because he was lame in his right leg. Trouble was brewing. *Again*. Sometimes it started in an innocuous way, like a wisp of smoke curls under a closed door recognized too late as a danger.

"Yeah, what smell are we talking about?" Curley asked, sitting up straight in his chair. He arched his back.

Smiley leaned toward Curley, pushed his nose up with his index finger, and snorted like a pig. "Been wallowing in the sauce, M. Prodigal Son?"

"Not hardly, Mr. Music Man," Curley said, frowning. "But it sure smells like there's a hint of pro-slavery sympathy emanating from your pores. Most likely in the form of intestinal gas."

"Like hell!" Smiley growled, his face brightening like an oil lamp turned up high. He was the levelheaded one in the group, but if pushed too hard he could explode with the force of gunpowder. "Even though our family owns no slaves, I believe in slavery because it's the bedrock of our economy, jackass. The wealth generated by it allows us to finance this war, in case you've forgotten that simple fact."

"But an economy based on slavery is a false economy," Wilson Compton interrupted. "Compared to the massive industrial might of the North, we produce hardly any weapons or munitions, and we lack their intricate network of railroads to transport goods and supplies. Consequently, we must buy everything from Europe—or trade with the North." Wilson, the youngest of John's students sat next to Smiley. He was a sensitive young artist with a boyish face and liquid green eyes that mirrored the ever-changing colors in the landscapes he painted. His sketches had caught the eye of a Nashville philanthropist who said he painted with the grace and flourish of the French artist David. As a result, an exciting and promising career awaited him.

"Ah, go stuff it, Mr. Portrait Man," Curley said. "We do have a railroad here in Clarksville in case you haven't noticed." He crumpled a piece of paper into a ball and tossed it over Smiley's head. The ball landed on top of Wilson's notes. Scowling, Wilson swept the ball onto the floor.

"Gentlemen, *please*," John pleaded. "Let's not get out of control like we did coming into class this morning."

He ran a big hand through his mop of brown hair. Three years older than Curley, he understood the temptations and passions ruling young men's lives. At the University of Virginia he had nearly succumbed to these vices. Fortunately, he had reformed himself in time.

"Right, professor," Curley said as he looked at Smiley. Pinching his nose between his thumb and forefinger he spoke nasally. "I apologize."

"You always say that, and then you revert back to your old habits," said George Singletary, who sat to Curley's left. Son of a Mississippi plantation owner, he was a skinny fellow whose clothes hung on him like they'd been draped over a chair, had jet-black hair parted in the middle, and dark brown eyes that turned coal black when he was angry. *Like now*. He'd enrolled at Stewart College to study business so he could help his crippled father run their plantation. John suspected, however, George's father wanted to ensure his son's safety by keeping him out of the army. George's only brother had died at the battle of First Manassas, early in the war.

"And while we're on the subject of slavery," George continued, "our family treats our slaves with respect. So much so that they work hard for us from dawn to dusk!"

"And how much do they earn?" Smiley asked. "My father and I pay a fair wage for a hard day's work on our farm. That's part of our Christian compassion for our fellow man."

George glared at Smiley. "Where's your sense of honor?" he said, talking down to him as if he were a disobedient slave. "You're denigrating our heritage!"

"Stuff your slave heritage!" Smiley said, his face reddening. "Because you're a member of the landed gentry and own slaves doesn't mean we have to listen to your aristocratic bullshit."

"You tell him, Smiley." Darren Page burst out laughing in a giddy voice. He sat at the end of the row next to George. He had freckles and a mop of brown

hair like Professor Martin, and tried to emulate his teacher by dressing in the same manner (starched white shirt, colorful cravat, and old woolen jacket) and mimicking his pro-war opinions. Darren's shoemaker-father had scrimped for years to send him to college so he could make something of himself, but the boy played guitar and drank most of the time.

"I thought we were going to discuss the big battle at Thermopylae," Wilson said.

"An excellent point," John said. He walked to the fireplace and rested a hand on the mantle. His fingers brushed the curved wood of the Ansonia clock, and then he turned around and said, "So, gentlemen, how would you define courage?"

"Not backing down when you run into the school bully," Curley said.

"Possibly," John said.

"It's a strength of character few men possess," Smiley said. Leaning back hard in his chair he tilted it onto its two hind legs while he opened *The Histories*, rapidly turning its pages in an attempt to find the day's lesson.

"But your answer doesn't really define it," John said, beginning to wonder why he'd come to class this morning if no one had bothered to read the lesson. Already, they had wasted close to twenty minutes bantering and picking on each other. Despite the hanging, no one had brought up the fact there had been a major battle at Dover, Tennessee some thirty miles west of town.

"Anyone else?" John asked. He returned to his lectern. "If not, maybe a short test will help."

A chorus of vibrant, "Noes!" erupted in the room. John guffawed, then regained his composure and said, "Before I forget, your assignment for next week is to write a short paper on that concert we attended in Nashville last month."

"What concert?" George asked.

John looked at him for a moment to see if he was being baited. For him, the concert had been both uplifting and depressing. Uplifting because of the grace

and majesty of the music; depressing because its inner beauty reminded him of a romance gone sour at the University of Virginia.

"We heard Robert Schumann's Piano Concerto in A Minor," John said, his throat constricted.

"Oh, that one," George said. "So what is it you want us to write about?"

"A few paragraphs on what you felt while listening to the performance." He took a deep breath. Taking this group of misfits to Nashville had, despite the ruckus that had gotten them ejected from the second half of the performance, been worth it because several of the boys, namely George and Wilson, had perked up and listened attentively. Afterward, Wilson had tears in his eyes, and George looked plain sad, almost depressed. John wanted all of his students to pursue the feelings generated by the music, not only to broaden their horizons—the South was woefully lacking in culture as compared to the North—but also to strengthen the philosophical underpinnings of the cause they would soon defend on the battlefield.

"I'm confused as to what I should write," Wilson said.

"What comes from your heart," John said, and before anyone else could interrupt he said, "How did the music make you feel? Did it conjure up forgotten emotions, events, and places from long ago? Did Robert Schumann's courage in composing his Concerto remind you of something? Anything?"

"Oh crap!" Darren said. "I need a drink."

"The assignment is really not difficult, gentlemen," John said. "However, completion of it is mandatory. Now, let's get back to today's lesson on the subject of courage. Anyone?"

"Courage," Wilson said, running a hand through his straight black hair, "is the ability to pull from one's inner core the strength to face adversity when all seems lost."

"Very good," John said, his face lighting in a smile. He thumbed *The Histories*, stopping at some notes he'd scribbled in the margin. A chill ran up his spine when he considered the magnitude of the event that had taken place at the dawn of civilization. "So, let's begin with some background: in 480 BC

the Persian general, Xerxes I, had his army construct a bridge across the Hellespont. He then marched three to five million men—by recent estimates only several hundred thousand men—across the bridge and positioned them to attack the Greek city-states. The leader of the Greek army, King Leonidas of Sparta, consulted the Delphic Oracle and was told by the high priest he would either be killed or Sparta destroyed. Despite this omen, Leonidas formed an army of seven thousand Greeks, coupled with three hundred elite Spartan soldiers, and occupied the mountain pass at Thermopylae. Was that a courageous act on Leonidas' part?"

"It was more like a calculated risk," Wilson said, "because Leonidas knew the pass was too narrow for Xerxes to use his cavalry."

"Bravo!" John clapped his hands. "Somebody *has* read the assignment."

"Teacher's pet." Curley snickered. He leaned back in his chair and placed his hands on top of his head.

"Stuff it!" Wilson said, his face turning red.

"Go paint yourself into a corner," Curley shot back. He grasped a lock of thick, brown hair between his thumb and forefinger, and twisted it. Then, he stuck his pencil in his hair and laughed at his own joke.

Wilson's face turned brighter. "Why you goddamn piece of—"

"Gentlemen!" John cut in. "Let's continue with the lecture, shall we? The Persians attacked and were driven back by the Spartan soldiers. This went on all day and, as Mr. Wilson has informed us, Xerxes was unable to use his cavalry. After the second day, a Greek traitor named Ephialtes told the Persians about a poorly guarded track leading over the hills to Thermopylae. Xerxes sent Hydarnes and several hundred men over the track, and they came up behind Leonidas at first light."

"Ephialtes sounds like a despicable character," George said, his dark brown eyes glowing.

"So was Hydarnes, knowing he was outnumbered, a fool," John said, ignoring him, "or was he simply obeying orders?"

"He was the enemy *and* he was a fool," Curley said, leaning forward and staring hard at Wilson. "Like the damn Yankees invading our beloved South. You mark my words, Mr. Painter. The Yankee Army will use our very own railroad to ride into Clarksville. Then, they'll cross the Cumberland River on the new bridge and continue west to the Mississippi. Maybe not this year or the next, but at some time in the future."

"Maybe," Wilson said. "But getting back to Hydarnes, it took great courage for him to do that because the Greeks could have crushed him."

"But they didn't post any guards," Curley said. Now, he had *The Histories* open on his desk, and his finger ran down the page, skimming it.

"Oh yes they did," John said, "but Herodotus tells us an oak woods covered the hills, concealing the Persians' approach."

"Perhaps the Greeks heard the noise of tramping feet on the leaves," Curley said. He turned the pages, making them crinkle.

"By that time the Persians were upon them and reinforcements quickly followed," John said, glancing out the tall windows. An array of mule-drawn Army wagons was headed up College Street from the Cumberland River wharf. "Anyway, let's get back to Leonidas. Don't you think he exhibited great valor by remaining at the pass, knowing he was facing certain disaster by a Persian army of overwhelming superiority?"

"Of course," Wilson said. "His honor and the fate of Sparta were at stake."

"Sounds like a damn foolhardy thing to do," Curley said.

"Possibly," John said. He flicked a spot of lint off his wool jacket. "In the meantime when Leonidas learned the futility of facing both Zerxes *and* Hydarnes he dismissed his men, telling them to flee. However, they refused to leave."

"Here we go with this honor crap," Curley said. "Sounds like some of your silly plantation morality, George."

"Stop denigrating our heritage!" George snapped. He jerked his necktie down in anticipation of a brawl. A murmuring broke out in the room. The sound was low and swarmy like bees agitated in the hive.

"Gentlemen, *please!*" John said. He waited until he had their attention. "Wasn't it courageous for Leonidas to remain at his post? I think so."

"I agree wholeheartedly," George said. He leaned back in his chair and raked his fingers through his jet-black hair.

"Ah c'mon, professor," Curley said. "With your bum leg keeping you out of the army, what in hell would you know about courage?"

"I—I—" John stammered. His face turned bright red like a pepper, his fists clenched the seams of his wool pants, and his Adam's apple constricted, causing his breath to catch in his throat. When the sensation subsided he touched the freckles on his cheeks. They were hot pinpricks of fire.

"Let him alone!" Wilson said. "The professor can't help the way he walks."

"Curley-whirly," George sneered in his plantation voice, "you're such a surly drunk!"

"Damn you!" Curley picked up *The Histories* and hurled it at George.

"You drunken bastard!" George ducked, and the book crashed into the wall, knocking down the Andrew Jackson portrait. He scrambled to his feet. "I'll teach you a lesson!"

"Stop right now!" John ordered as he rushed around the lectern.

His fists clenched, Curley jumped up and snarled at George. "A namby-pamby blueblood like you is going to teach me *what?*"

George swung, connecting high on Curley's forehead. Curley's right hook smashed into the center of George's face, sending him stumbling across Darren's desk.

"Watch out, slaver!" Darren shouted, and shoved George off onto the floor.

George got up and hit Darren, and then Wilson and Smiley jumped onto Curley. In a moment, vile oaths, books, and chairs flew about the room. Someone smashed Curley over the head with the Jackson portrait. With his crimson face and foaming mouth framed by ripped canvas, and one hand stuck in the jacket of a general's uniform, he looked like an idiot. He ripped the portrait off his head and jumped back into the foray.

When it all ended several minutes later, a red-faced Wilber Abernathy, the Dean of Students, stood lecturing the students on proper classroom decorum. John had already stalked off down the hall, muttering to himself about the stupidity of the incident and his loss of control. More force, either in his voice, or demeanor, would be needed the next time. Then, he thought of the insult hurled at him. It cut to his core and left him foaming at the mouth.

"Goddamn it, I'll find a way to enlist and prove I'm a man!" he raged as he headed for the Cumberland River, willing his bad leg to keep up. "I'll set an example for them they won't ever forget!"



"Old Abernathy was shore pissed," Curley said after the Dean had left the room. "And he threatened to expel us."

"He said damaging the Jackson portrait bordered on blasphemy," Darren said.

"I'll pay to get old Andy Jackson repaired," George said. "After all, I was the one who smashed him over your head, Curley."

"I never would have guessed." Curley chuckled. "Now, that was the crowning moment of my life: General and President for five seconds. Gave me a feeling of exhilaration. Like I felt during that Schumann piece."

"Perhaps," Wilson suggested, "we'd better get started on our assignment about the concert. I don't want the professor to flunk us."

"What concert?" George asked, and then burst into laughter. "I was just joking."



George took out a piece of paper and began to write: *At first, listening to the Schumann Piano Concerto made me feel sad. I can't express it properly, but it*

conjured up a feeling of deep despair and profound loss, like when I learned of my brother Ronald's death at the battle of First Manassas. Then, as the music progressed, it uplifted me and I was transported to some faraway place in the heavens where I was given the strength to overcome my grief, return to school, and continue the education I needed to help my father run our plantation. God bless Robert Schumann.



Professor, Smiley wrote, as you may know, I play fiddle a lot. Mostly for Saturday night dances at the Presbyterian Church, and for wedding receptions where there's a lot of dancing going on. The tunes are simple, countrified, and a part of our Southern heritage. But when I heard the violins playing, accompanying the piano (or the other way around), it left me aghast at the complexity of the music. I'm a simple farm boy and used to simple things. Like the fields at rest when the sun comes up in the morning, all hot and glowing with varying shades of orange and red. Now, I see something more complex, more wondrous in nature and music, and want to try my hand at musical composition.



When I read the program notes, Wilson began, and saw that exquisite portrait of Clara Schumann, the composer's wife, a strange desire came over me: I wanted to paint her. To caress her eyes, lips, and throat with the softest brush that ever graced my palette . . . Oh but it goes much deeper than this, and I thought how a loving Robert must cherish and worship this woman, the inspiration for his musical compositions and the mother of his eight children. Would that I could have such a divine creature as my wife!



I plunked on my guitar the other night, Darren said, and lo and behold what came out after a pitcher or two of beer at the Montgomery Hotel, was one of the melodies from the Concerto. Seems I've been tinkering with this old guitar for years now, unable to find any type of tune that will point me in the direction my life should be going. God, if only I can keep this up, play melodies similar to those Mr. Schumann conjured up in his most creative moments. Why, I might yet make something of myself, despite what my shoemaker father says.



Like Wilson, Curley said, I, too, was quite taken with Mr. Schumann's wife. Her picture, however, gave no intimate glimpse into her soul; and the program guide tells us only that the couple was drawn to each other despite her father's objections. What was the attraction? I imagine that for Clara it was the beauty and majesty of Robert's compositions, especially the 168 songs (or Lieder) he wrote for her in 1840, the year of their marriage. For him it was her alluring smile, haunting eyes, and God-given talent as a piano virtuoso. These things, along with her words (carefully chosen to encourage his compositions) stirred his aching soul. Under these circumstances how could they not fall in love? How could they fail to keep their hands off each other?

Now, Professor, let me take a sip from my handy flask and digress for a moment. The program notes said the Schumann's had eight children. For the sake of argument, think of the number of times they were intimate for her to have conceived her brood. 'Brood' is perhaps not the correct word, but from what I've seen in my father's church never has such a beauty graced his congregation. From my view, I would have tried at least ten times to make each child and that, in and of itself, makes the intimacy all the more intimate.

CHAPTER TWO

A Chance Encounter

In finding a wife to love and cherish, Professor John Ulysses Martin had failed miserably. At the University of Virginia he'd pursued one or two of the local women, but that had come to naught because of his social status: poor. That is to say, the women there were of the landed gentry: intelligent, pleasant and sociable; but haughty and distant when it came to contemplating a relationship with anyone beneath their station. That he was good-looking and highly intelligent mattered little to them—they were primarily interested in finding a man of good breeding. *Even if some of them were outright dumb*, John thought.

Upon his return to Clarksville, he found the pickings sparse. Oh, there were the local farm girls, big and bosomy and wanting a man such as himself; or the daughters of shop keepers and tavern owners, pleasant enough in their own right, but not suitable for him. In a way, he realized, his attitude was akin to Charlottesville's haughty maidens.

Nursing his snobbishness, he despaired he could ever do anything about his situation. In this small burg, he would have to suffer silently until someone came along and changed his luck.

Of course, there had been a fourteen-year-old girl, a Lydia somebody-or-other, who'd attached herself to him before he left for university. Although she was pretty, and desirable enough, he hadn't wanted to chance the ridicule of the townspeople should he, a man of eighteen, pursue her. Not that he would have acted miserably like a bull in rut. It simply wouldn't have worked out.

Now, taking a seat on a stone bench in the Clarksville cemetery, John set *The Histories* and a local newspaper on his lap. Absentmindedly, he petted his dog, Lady, a Chesapeake Bay Retriever and stared down at the Cumberland River wharf where sailboats lay anchored next to three troop transports and a steamer. Charcoal-colored smoke drifted upward from the steamer's lone stack.

John thought about the hanging. Did that Yankee soldier-boy really do all those heinous things the newspaper claimed he did? Was someone so young capable of so much violence? But you know the answer to that. A combat veteran of three major campaigns, he'd probably shot or bayoneted God knows how many Southern boys. God rest his seventeen year old soul!

Now, Lady growled at a man dressed in black who sat down behind a tree a short distance away. As the stranger made no movement, John settled into the coldness of the stone bench and thought about those things that really mattered to him: the ever-growing war and, in particular, the course of the two armies, Blue and Gray, moving his way. Since arriving at Stewart College in September of last year, he relished news—any news—about the escalating war in the West. But all he ever heard were silly rumors.

He opened the newspaper. From St. Louis, Missouri came a two-week-old dispatch headlining the Union army as it marched through Cairo, Illinois, headed into western Kentucky. An artist's etching showed polished brass cannons drawn by prancing horses, and marching men with brand, spanking new uniforms. Dozens of cheering townspeople lined the street, a band played, and teary-eyed women waved lace hankies. The scene fascinated John, as did a reporter's account of confident young men who spent their days tramping from battlefield to battlefield so they could savor, over and over, the bittersweet fruit of killing total strangers, former friends, and distant kin.

In spite of these morbidly fascinating tales, John's conviction remained firm he should do his part in making the kind of military history that would be written about for generations to come. He would have given anything to serve. He met all the requisite qualifications: he was a husky young man of twenty-two, a crack shot with a revolver or rifle, and deadly accurate with a shotgun.

But he walked with a limp, as Curley so hurtfully reminded him. His dream shattered, he resolved to increase his fiery lectures about duty, honor, and love of country. Hopefully, his students would enlist and he would feel vindicated.

When the sun broke through the clouds, he took a long look at the figure in black. The man—John couldn't see his face—had a notebook spread out on his lap, and his arm moved back and forth as if he were sketching.

The river? John wondered. The bluff beyond? Or—the strange thought came to him—was the man counting troops on the wharf? Could he be a spy?

John shrugged. Most likely the man was another mourner who wanted to sit near the grave of a departed relative, hoping to embrace the soul of the deceased. Better not to start any rumors about the man. God knew there were enough of them spread by the old men in Clarksville's taverns and the courthouse square. Only last week they had spoken bitterly of "Unconditional Surrender" Grant's victory at nearby Dover, Tennessee.

John set the paper down. It was old news; stale and worn like the brown leaves lying at his feet. He reminded himself that despite the ruckus in the classroom, he still had to finish the lecture on Thermopylae. His students would become disillusioned if he failed to do that, and where would that lead?

With the sun warming his face he pulled out a flask of red wine and swallowed a large mouthful. Then, he stretched out on the bench, propped *The Histories* across his chest, and struggled through his notes. He yawned. His eyes closed, and his mind drifted, imagining the tragic battle forming at the mountain pass of Thermopylae. . . .

At dawn in his dream, lookouts signal the arrival of Persian troops at the bottom of the pass. John lifts his hand and shades his eyes. A dust cloud larger than any he has ever seen trails out behind Xerxes' army as far as the horizon. As they stop and form into battle ranks, the dust catches up to them, graying the color of their bright flags and dulling the glint off sharp spears and polished shields. Their dark hair and fierce features take on the pale shading of prehistoric ghosts.

John orders his troops to assemble by the first of three defensive gates, stops short when he catches movement from the corner of his eye.

"What, or who, is that?" John asks angrily, pointing to a beautiful maiden driving errant lambs along a narrow path on the mountain above. She is dressed in goatskins, and has long brown hair that reaches to her slender waist. A wreath of yellow flowers is wound scarf-like around her neck, with a solitary flower of the same color woven into her hair.

"What is your name, woman?" John calls up to her. She is only thirty or forty feet above him.

"Arete," she replies in such a melodious voice he wonders if, indeed, she might be a goddess meant to prove false the Oracle's prophesy of his impending death.

"And where are you from?"

"These mountains." She gazes at him with intelligent blue eyes, and ventures closer to the edge of the path. The drop is precipitous, and where John stands there is a slewing of rocks and boulders that have fallen.

"Are you a goddess?" he asks, resting a foot on a boulder.

"Nay," she replies in the same melodious voice.

"Careful you do not fall," John cautions.

"Fear not, for I am as sure footed as these gentle creatures." She laughs, and her voice sounds like the wind sighing through the tops of the tall oaks. He has listened to this music before, and it has lulled him to sleep whenever uneasiness overcame him.

"Well, then," John replies as the Persians start into the pass, "you are in mortal danger here so you had better get your lambs back up that mountain. We've a battle to fight."

She waves good-bye as she gathers her angels, using a long stick to prod them along.

"And go quickly," he adds as a trumpet fanfare shatters the damp morning air, echoing across the mountaintops. Like a great serpent the Persian army slithers forward, its soldiers horrid-looking creatures with gray features.

Marching six abreast, they wind their way up the narrow pass to the Spartan positions.

"Now!" John shouts to his men. Like a flock of seabirds, Spartan arrows sail through the air, showering the Persians and dropping them by the hundreds. Still they come, their feet crunching on the road.

"Forward!" John bellows. Shouting, cheering Spartans follow him into battle, their bloodthirsty cries filling the air. Iron swords slash and clank, blood spurts from mortal wounds and severed limbs. Spartan soldiers use their height to good advantage, forcing the enemy back with devastating casualties. Relentlessly, the Persians close ranks and surge forward, wave after wave of them. John and his men retreat to a second, wider gate, where he forms them into the customary phalanx. Their intertwined shields and spears form an impenetrable barrier against the Persian arrows. When the arrows blot out the sun, John quells the mawing in the ranks and states, "So much the better, for now we fight in the shade."

Awakening, John glanced at a cawing crow flitting from tree to tree. The man in black watched, too. John returned to his book and tried to read, but a yawn escaped his lips and he dreamed again.

When Xerxes raises his shield and bellows to the gods of darkness, John engages him in combat. Sharp thrusts and heavy clanks highlight the struggle, replete with desperate pushes and angry curses. A swift kick to Xerxes' knee knocks him off balance. With a two-handed sweep that goes up, around, and down John's razor-sharp sword lands on the infidel's neck, severing it.

"Lo, men of Sparta, follow me!" Holding Xerxes' head high, John rallies his men and drives the rest of the foreign invaders from the pass. "Lo!"



"Am I disturbing you? I only meant to say 'hello.'" Wrapped in a dark red cloak, an attractive young woman with pale, satiny-smooth skin and delicate white hands stood before John.

"No!" Startled, John jumped to his feet, and the book fell to the ground. He glanced at his hands, which were red, and thought he was back in his dream, holding Xerxes bloody head. Then, he remembered drinking the wine before going to sleep. The flask had overturned and lay at his feet.

"Of course not," he said, bending to snatch up both flask and volume.

He straightened to look into emerald green eyes set in an angular face with high cheekbones. Tendrils of sleep still hanging about him, he was reminded of Arete, but recognition came to the forefront of his mind and he called out, "Lydia . . . Lydia Robertson? Is that you?"

"It is I," she said, and she smiled, displaying even white teeth. Whipped by the wind coming off the river, her long brown hair tumbled down over the collar of her cloak. "I was taking a walk . . . I mean, this is my favorite spot, and I didn't expect to find anyone here."

"I can't believe my eyes." He swallowed hard, amazed at the resemblance between Lydia and Arete. "How much you've changed! What's it been? Four years?"

"Yes, John. Four very *long* years." Her eyes glistened, and her voice strained to find the right words. "I . . . I remember the day you left for college."

"It was at the train station," he said, remembering the scene. He had known she had feelings for him, and he wanted to say he shared them. But he was afraid of being laughed at for speaking to a mere girl of fourteen. "You had pigtailed and freckles, Lydia, and you were standing with your mother and father. The whole town was there. Watching, too."

"Correct." The smile that filled her face was intriguing, and when she laughed it was like the wind sighing through the tops of the tall trees.

"I can't get over how much you've changed."

"I simply grew up." Lydia knelt and petted his dog. "She's a real beauty, and has such a healthy coat! What's her name?"

"Lady."

"Hmm. I don't remember her from before." She stroked the dog's ears.

"She was a gift from a young woman I tutored at school." He frowned, remembering Erica, the planter's daughter he'd tutored, whose parents despised him because he was not of their social class. During Easter week of 1861 Erica had invited him to meet her parents, at which time he intended to ask her father for her hand in marriage. All had gone well the first day as John practiced his best manners. Her parents were impressed, and John was hopeful. However, when his financial status and family background were discussed, the father asked him to leave. As simple as that. With a shouted profession of true love for Erica, and a bellowed protest of unfairness, John mounted his horse and galloped off. His last vision was of her blotting tears with a lace hanky while she clung to a long white column. He did not see her the rest of that semester, and learned, during the long painful summer of her absence, she would not be returning in the fall; had, in fact, been sent off to some prestigious girl's school in New England.

"And the young woman stayed in Charlottesville when you left?" Lydia asked.

He blushed, knowing he would lie, but finding himself unwilling to confess the entire truth. "Things were not right between us, something about her family and mine. But she gave me the dog—a puppy back then—as a parting gift of our friendship."

"Friendship?" Lydia stopped petting the dog and looked at him with questioning eyes.

"Yes," he said. "Friendship."

"More like love." Lydia resumed her petting.

"You might say that."

John looked into her face and decided he liked what she had become. From the little brat who used to follow him around in school, she had grown into a

beautiful young woman. Like Arete of Thermopylae. Intelligence glowed in her eyes, in addition to real warmth and compassion. Such qualities were rare these days amid all the harshness bred by the war. Many of the young women he knew hated for no apparent reason, merely parroting their parents' prejudices against Yankees.

"You look chilled," he said. Taking her hand, he guided her to sit beside him. He felt pulses of electricity shoot through her fingertips, and he imagined their emanating from some secret place deep within their owner's heart. He liked that idea, and decided to be honest with her. If possible.

"So why do you come to the river?" Lydia asked, cocking her head in an intriguing manner. "To get away from your heartache?"

"At first the dog was a constant reminder of what I had lost, but in time my love for Lady eclipsed the hurt." He blushed again, realizing he was telling her sacred thoughts he'd told no other living soul.

Lydia smiled.

"Actually, I like to watch the riverboats . . . or the trains crossing the new bridge."

She said nothing, turned to follow his gaze toward the railroad trestle.

"The bridge will be an important military objective in the next battle," he said, his voice rising to match the enthusiasm building in his breast. Having studied the infantry tactics used by the South's generals, Lee included, John considered himself an expert on the subject. He stood up.

"That's what my father says." She looked up at John in an appraising manner.

"Willard's quite the military historian, if I remember correctly."

"He learned a lot of practical stuff when he went off to war in Texas and Mexico." She sighed. "Why haven't you enlisted like the restless young men in our town?"

"Remember, I'm lame?" he said, defensiveness and anger suffusing his voice. He tapped his right leg. Bitter memories of the scene with Curley, and earlier at his enlistment physical, assaulted him. Stripped naked and shivering

in the cold, he'd been looked up and down by an army doctor and sneeringly called a cripple. "So the military doesn't have any use for me."

"Oh!" She blushed. "How could I have so stupidly forgotten something like a . . . fracture was it?"

"You were only five or six when it happened," he said, remembering the fall from a horse which had broken his right ankle. The pain grew more severe when he tried to move. At ten years of age, tears had come to his eyes; he tried to act like the brave soldiers he read about in his books, willing himself not to cry. But the pain overwhelmed him and the tears burst onto his cheeks like a spring flood on the Cumberland. His father wrapped him in a blanket, carried him home, and set the ankle because old Doc Webber was laid up with the flu. However, the joint never healed properly, and that was that. He simply walked with an awkward gait.

Now, as her voice softened, she looked up into his eyes, and said, "It's too bad you were left lame."

"You don't know how much it bothers me," he said, his voice still gruff. He pivoted awkwardly away from her. "All my friends have received their army commissions."

"My three brothers enlisted in our stupid army!" she said, her voice booming like thunder disrupting a clear sky. Her face reddened, and her fists clenched into tight little balls.

John gasped. "You don't approve of this war?"

"Not at all!"

"Why not?" He stared at her, aghast, unbelieving anyone in this town could hold such profane thoughts.

"The near-fatal chest wound Daddy suffered in the Mexican War continues to plague him to this day." Lydia's green eyes glowed hot with anger. "Did that make a difference to my brothers? Of course not!"

Her vehemence had taken him aback, and he could think of nothing to say in rebuttal. He wondered where she got her ideas. Certainly, they had not come from the same books he'd read!

Her eyes followed his as they settled on the rows of gray-clad soldiers from Ft. Donelson tramping aboard the transports at the wharf. Barked orders drifted on the wind as the beaten men took seats in haphazard rows. Thick black smoke wafted above their bowed heads as the steamer prepared to tow them upstream to Nashville.

"So why do you still want to go and fight?" she asked.

"In my dreams great generals speak to me," he said, resting his hand on *The Histories*. His gaze lingered on a bend in the river. "And when I read these pages, the pass at Thermopylae flashes before my eyes and I hear the screams of the dying as blood gushes from my sword."

"That's a bit frightening," Lydia said, bursting into laughter. "Do you dream this way every night?"

"Only when the moon is full." Realizing he had been melodramatic, John laughed, too, and then glanced at the tombstones below him where the man in black sat sketching the river.

Why did I dream about Thermopylae? he asked himself. *Was it to remind me of an important role in this great fight of brother against brother. And what about Arete? Was she a substitute for Erica's love, or a precursor to Lydia's entrance into my life? Of course, the two women resemble each other in many ways and . . . and I don't know. I just don't know the answers to any of these things!*

Since he and Lydia had been talking, the sun had fallen behind the ridge on the opposite shore, leaving a pale orange glow in the sky. In the eerie stillness that followed, the glow settled over the graves and glistening fields of the cemetery.

"We should be getting back now." John sniffed the chill air, knowing the night would be cold. Above him, faint stars twinkled in the fading sky.

"Would you like to meet my parents?" Lydia asked, stuffing both hands into her coat pockets.

"Indeed I would!" John replied, ecstatic.

"Will your friend be leaving now?" Lydia asked, pointing at the man in black.

"He's not my friend," John said. "In fact, I don't know who he is."

At that moment, the man rose and came toward them. He moved quickly and with purpose, his boots crunching on the gravel path.

Lady growled.

"Sit," John commanded. He gripped her collar, felt the protective strength tugging back at him. The hairs stood on her back, and the growling continued.

"That's the new preacher at the Presbyterian church I attend!" Lydia waved as he approached. "Hello, Reverend Parks!" She introduced the two men.

With a practiced eye, John estimated the preacher, big boned, tall, and muscular, weighed close to one hundred eighty pounds. His grip was powerful, and his black hair flecked with gray indicated middle age. He had a pleasant smile, despite the suspicious gaze flickering in his gray eyes.

"And what brings you out today?" Lydia asked.

"I was seeking a few minutes of solitude to read some Scripture." The reverend's eyes locked on Lydia while he spoke.

John's eyes went to the minister's notepad.

"And to prepare my next sermon," Parks added. "Will I be seeing you in church on Sunday, John?"

"I attend the First Methodist Church," John lied. "Where are you from?"

"Meridian, Mississippi," the preacher drawled. "It's a sleepy little village in the center of the state. My parents, and those before them, were merchants there. And you?"

"Born and raised in Clarksville, like Lydia," John said.

"Perhaps you two are related and don't know it," Parks quipped, a grin stealing its way across his face.

"Perhaps." John frowned. There was something disingenuous about this preacher, as if some other person were hiding in the black raiment.

"It's cold, John. Don't you think we should be leaving?" Lydia asked. She stuck her hand in the pocket of his winter coat, and tugged at it.

"Of course."

After saying good-bye, the reverend walked back to his bench.

"I had a delightful afternoon," Lydia said when they reached her parent's three-story mansion, only a few blocks from the dingy boardinghouse where John rented a room. "And I'm so glad we've gotten reacquainted."

"So am I," said John. "May I ask, are you engaged to anyone?"

"Not at the present," Lydia said. Her smile yielded to a deep blush.

"Then may I call on you tomorrow?" he asked at the walk leading to her house. A wrought iron gate barred his way, and he stopped.

"That would be nice," she told him as she opened the gate. When she looked up, disappointment shone in her eyes. "Do you still want to say hello to my parents?"

"I'd be delighted," he said, wondering what his reception would be like. *Would it be like the one with Erica's parents?* After climbing the porch steps he tied Lady's leash to a railing and followed Lydia into the house.

"Mother has consumption, so I help her with the housework," Lydia said as they shrugged off their coats and hung them on a wooden wall rack.

"I'm sorry to hear that," John said, shock registering in his voice. The scents of cooked food wafted toward him, along with the pungent smell of cigar smoke.

"Mother! Daddy!" Lydia called out in a bright, cheery voice that echoed down the length of the hallway.

"We're in the parlor!" came a man's stout reply.

John followed Lydia down the hall and into the parlor where she presented him to her parents.

"Look who I ran into at the cemetery," Lydia chirped.

John caught the look of concern that flashed across her father's face.

"You two were alone there?" her father asked, raising an eyebrow.

Lydia nodded, and then added, "Reverend Parks was there."

"So you're the same John Martin who went off to school at the University of Virginia," Mayor Robertson said, relief flooding over his face. He rose from the sofa where he'd been sitting beside his wife. His brown eyes sparkled with good humor as he came forward, clasping his protruding belly. A trace of the scent

of whiskey drifted toward John. "You've certainly matured, my boy. How was your education?"

"Four pleasurable years at the grindstone," John said as he shook the man's outstretched hand. The grip was firm and steady, and matched the warmth and genuine interest in the mayor's eyes.

"Ma'am." John smiled at Henrietta as he sat beside Lydia on the loveseat.

When Lydia pinned her hair up, he caught a glimpse of her bare neck. The skin was white and smooth, with a trace of perfume lingering on it. His lips moved as if forming a kiss, and a lump rose in his throat so he was forced to look first at her father and then her mother before saying, "I'm most glad to be home again, sir. Ma'am."

"I hope we can still call it home once the Yankees get here," Willard said, returning to sit by his wife. As he took her hand and patted it, his brows knit. "Refugees passing through town have told me the bluecoats are headed this way."

The soft wheeze as he spoke reminded John of the wound the mayor had suffered. "I've heard the same thing, sir," he said.

"It seems like only yesterday you left," Henrietta said. A small woman with light brown hair and pleasant, hazel eyes, she clutched a Bible in her right hand. The pages had closed over the index finger of her right hand, as if she had been reading scripture and, finding herself embarrassed when John entered the room, quickly shut the Book.

Henrietta coughed, wrapped her shawl tight around her shoulders, and moved closer to her husband.

"Not feeling well?" Willard asked his wife. He patted her hand again.

Looking tired, she nodded and coughed into a lace hanky. Her hand trembled as it drew away from her face.

"I should be getting home," John said, realizing the woman was more ill than she let on. Rising, he took Henrietta's hand in his own, gave it a gentle squeeze, and bade her farewell, telling her it was a pleasure to see her once again.

"I enjoyed visiting with you again, sir," John said to the mayor after they stood on the front porch. The crisp air, now black and frigid, assaulted him like an unwanted intruder.

"Call on me tomorrow morning at ten o'clock," Lydia said. Wood nymphs, swirling caricatures of white etched in the glass, danced as the door swung closed. A latch clicked, followed by the hollow sliding of a bolt, and then John was alone on the porch with only the dog for company.

He stepped off the porch and walked home quickly, knowing the night ahead would be a battleground replete with tossing and turning as Lydia flitted through his dreams and he tried to catch her. He could hardly wait for the nocturnal struggle to begin.

CHAPTER THREE

The Invasion of Clarksville

With Lady by his side the next morning, John started up the street to the Robertson's mansion. In his dream last night, he'd held Lydia in his arms and kissed her, gently at first, and then with a growing hunger. She responded in turn, and at some point they'd consummated their relationship, then tarried in their ecstasy until he was left exhausted when the sun crept across his window ledge at dawn.

Now, he ached to see her again, but his progress was impeded because the street had become clogged with a flood of refugees in carriages and wagons. Long, crisscrossed ropes secured tottering loads of household possessions. Swinging pots and pans made clanking sounds, adding to the cacophonous chorus of clip-clopping horses' hooves, clucking chickens, and cackling children. A few soldiers in gray, stragglers with bloody bandages, hobbled by using cut tree limbs for balance. Their wan, lifeless looks attested to the severity of a recent battle.

At the Robertson's wrought iron gate John stopped. Wrapped in her dark red cloak, Lydia sat in a wicker rocker watching a spiraling cloud of black smoke in the eastern sky.

"Where's that fire?" she asked after they had greeted each other and John had come up on the porch. "It's absolutely enormous!"

"Someone said our army had fired the Red River railroad bridge," John said, reaching for her hand which felt cold. He massaged it, warming it with tenderness much as he'd done at the beginning of his dream last night. "There's a report of Yankee troops landing at the wharf. Want to go see?"

"I'd never thought you'd ask," she teased.

"Where's your father?"

"Gone to his office to meet the Yankees when they get here." Her tongue licked her lower lip. The glistening wetness stirred his loins, and reminded him, longingly, of their passion last night.

"Then, perhaps, we'd better go to the courthouse," John said as he led her down the steps to the sidewalk. "You look apprehensive this morning. Is there anything wrong?"

"Seeing all the smoke frightened me," she admitted.

"Destroying the bridge was a tactical necessity," John said. "What I don't understand is why nobody blew up the railroad bridge over the Cumberland River. That act would have halted all rail traffic headed into west Tennessee."

"Professor," she said as she gave his hand a quick squeeze, "I think I'll defer to your military expertise."

He laughed, but as they passed his drab boarding house he was reminded of the stark contrast between their social positions. *When she finds out the degree of your penury will you even stand a chance with her?* But, then, as if she'd been privy to his thoughts, she smiled at him and gave his hand another squeeze.

As they approached a tall stately home on the left, Mary Peabody, the town clerk, waved from her front porch. A homely spinster in her late forties, she wore a man's heavy winter coat and a wool nightcap with a long orange tassel. The nightcap sat cock-eyed on her head, and the tassel swung every which way when she spoke.

"You two children get up on this porch immediately," she said, and added in a voice loud enough for the refugees to hear, "there's too much riff-raff in the street!"

After John and Lydia had joined Mary on her porch and were discussing the refugee problem, the hairs on the Lady's back bristled and she uttered a low growl. Moments later, she barked at the sound of marching feet.

"Make way, folks!" Led by an officer on horseback, a column of Yankee infantry, four abreast, tramped up the hill from the wharf and turned right onto the street in front of the house. With their Springfield rifles resting on their right shoulders and their equipment clanking, row after row of men in dark blue uniforms passed in front of Mary's house. Muttered oaths about the cold weather and the hurried march filled the air.

"Good morning, miss!" a young lieutenant called out to Lydia. The polished brass on his blue uniform sparkled in the early morning light. A scruffy sergeant with dirty black hair and a craggy face rode next to him.

Snarling, Lady bolted at the sergeant.

"Lady, stop!" John cried.

"Damn bitch'll eat us alive!" The sergeant leaned down and kicked the dog, catching part of her flank.

Lady yelped and ran toward John.

A mean look in his beady green eyes, the sergeant cocked his rifle and took aim at Lady's head.

"Shoot her, you Yankee son of a bitch," John shouted, "and you'll deal with me!"

"Why don't you people act like decent folk?" Mary hollered, her brown eyes flaring with anger.

"Sergeant Haddonfield." The lieutenant slapped the carbine aside. "Stand down!"

"Here, girl. Come!" John knelt and slipped Lady's leash on. She trembled and leaned against him.

"Please accept my apologies!" Sword jangling by his side, the officer strode up to them. His dark chiseled features, aquiline nose, and dusty uniform reminded John of a Persian soldier. Wavy black curls protruding from the sides of his slouch hat added to the image.

"I'm Lieutenant Wallace. United States Army."

Despite his anger over the confrontation, John stood up and introduced Mary, Lydia, and himself. As he spoke, however, his hands shook and his voice trembled.

"Sorry about the sergeant. We're all a bit on edge." The lieutenant smiled, his teeth even and white. His hazel eyes, sparkling and self-confident, turned to Lydia, causing a crimson blush to creep up her throat. Her hands crisscrossed her breasts, but she smiled and leaned toward the officer.

John noticed Lydia's reaction and a pang of jealousy swept through him. *Why the attraction?* To him, the lieutenant was merely a soldier: polite, courteous, and duty-bound. Even if he was a Yankee. Did the fact he had reprimanded that ogre of a sergeant threatening to shoot Lady strike a sympathetic chord deep within Lydia's heart? Or was it something else?

"Can you direct me to the mayor's office?" Wallace asked.

"Go four blocks south, and you'll find the courthouse," Lydia said. "My father is in his office right now."

"You're the mayor's daughter?" the lieutenant asked, his eyes narrowing with interest.

She nodded, and her smile deepened.

"Move that damn thing out of the way!" Sergeant Haddonfield cursed at an elderly man whose wagon had broken down in the middle of the street.

"Haddonfield!" Wallace called out to the sergeant. "Show some Christian compassion. Help the man!"

"Yes sir!" came the gruff reply.

John watched the trepidation creep across Lydia's face. He reached for her hand and squeezed it, but she jerked free. *Oh Jesus, what's gotten into her?*

"Don't worry, Miss Robertson," the lieutenant said, "no harm will come to you or the good people of this town."

"I should hope not," Lydia said, her back rigid and her eyes radiating defiance.

"We expect to be here a good while, possibly until the conclusion of the war." The lieutenant smiled. "Perhaps we'll meet again?"

Lydia nodded, and then blushed.

Throwing a casual salute, the lieutenant strode back to his men and left.

"That was a whale of a way to introduce the Yankees to our town," Mary said. "You'll excuse me a minute? I have to go inside to check on my mother."

"Yes, ma'am. Give my regards to her," Lydia said absently." She stood transfixed, with her green eyes riveted on the handsome young officer's departing back.

Piqued at Lydia's obvious attraction to the lieutenant, John sat on the porch steps and petted Lady, running his hands up and down her coat and rubbing her ears. The dog looked up at him and licked his face.

"How is your mother?" John asked when Mary returned with a pot of coffee and some cups.

"She's having one of her bad mornings," Mary said, setting the tray down on an old wrought iron table. "Her rheumatism is acting up again."

"I'm sorry to hear that," John said as he poured the coffee. He took his the way he liked it, black with neither cream nor sugar. When he caught movement from the corner of his eye, he jerked his head around and growled, "Here comes Haddonfield!" John pointed to a man on horseback.

"You get that horse off my property!" Mary shouted as the soldier rode across the lawn.

John grabbed a snarling Lady by the leash and cried out, "Hold it right there, soldier!"

Haddonfield stopped his steed inches from the porch railing and jabbed a crooked finger at John. "I come back to tell you this is my town now, and don't you forget it!"

John struggled to keep a snapping, growling Lady under control. *Oh God, don't let loose of the dog now. That Yankee bastard will shoot her! Where in hell is that damn lieutenant?*

His hand flicking the latch on his holster, Haddonfield cast a spiteful look at the dog, and then turned and leered at Lydia before riding off.

"What an ugly man!" Lydia shuddered. "Did you see his teeth? They were crooked and black!"

"Dear Lord!" Mary said. "How could God allow these terrible men to enter our town? After all, we *are* good Presbyterians. Let's go inside, children, before something else happens."

"Thanks," John said, taking hold of Lydia's hand, "but we'd better get to her father's office."

At the town square dozens of Union soldiers occupied the lawn in front of the courthouse, a three-story building with a granite facade. Some of them talked in groups, while others sat on the stone benches where gossipy old men gathered on Saturday afternoons. Haddonfield was nowhere to be seen. Near the edge of the crowd Reverend Parks in his black frock coat and top hat passed out Bibles to the soldiers while he chatted with Lieutenant Wallace.

"Hey professor!" Wilson called out as he and the other students ran up to John.

"Hello, boys," John said, and then realized why they were smiling so much. It was because they'd seen him holding Lydia's hand. So, he quickly said, "Good job, all of you, on those papers I asked you to write about the concert."

"Our intimate pleasure, professor," Curley said, and they all giggled.

"There's Daddy!" Lydia pointed to her father standing on the courthouse steps. He was talking with a Union colonel named Wentworth Harris. The colonel was a middle-aged man with silver-gray hair, and outweighed the mayor by a good thirty or forty pounds.

"Coming, John?" After casting a glance at Lieutenant Wallace, Lydia dashed up the granite steps and kissed her father on the cheek.

"See you in class," John said to his students, and then rushed to catch up to Lydia.

"And who might this charming young lady be?" the colonel asked. His smile radiated warmth, but his bright blue eyes conveyed an inner sadness.

Mr. Robertson made the formal introductions. The colonel and John shook hands. Lady sat down, an intent look in her eyes as she watched this soldier.

Colonel Harris looked at Lady. "That's a beautiful Chesapeake Bay Retriever you have there."

"Thank you, sir," John said. "You seem to know your dogs."

"One of my wife's relatives in Maryland has one." The colonel smiled. "Otherwise, I profess complete ignorance about the breed. May I pet her?"

Lady wagged her tail and looked up at John.

"Of course."

"Come on, beauty," the colonel said, and slapped his chest. "Up!"

The dog jumped up and put her paws on Harris' shoulders. He stroked her head and ears with both hands, and looked into her eyes.

"As I was telling your father, Miss Robertson," warmth and kindness came back into the colonel's eyes, "we've come here to form a permanent garrison. There's no need for panic."

Lydia sighed, and her expression conveyed great relief.

"You have a Sergeant Haddonfield in your command," John said, "who was rude and boorish to Lydia, myself, and another civilian." He told him about the incident in front of Mary Peabody's house.

"I'll look into it," the colonel said. A gold wedding band flashed on his hand as he reached for his pocket watch. "Mr. Mayor? One more item of business before I leave. Effective immediately, I'm declaring martial law." His voice turned stern. "All public officials, including your office, will fall under the jurisdiction of the United States Army." Lieutenant Wallace came and stood next to him.

"That's so harsh," Lydia protested. The color had drained from her face, and she looked as if she were about to faint.

"My dear," her father counseled as he grasped her by the elbow, "the colonel's only trying to do his duty."

"Thank you, sir. I assure you I'm not an ogre." Colonel Harris forced a smile. "Could someone please direct me to Stewart College? I plan to make my headquarters there."

"Take any of these streets," John said, a feeling of emptiness and dread creeping into his voice. He struggled to control it, but a little voice in his head told him the school was already closed and his employment terminated. Cold prickles of fear crept up his spine because he had little in savings and no job prospects. "Go north until you reach College Street. Turn right, and you'll see the campus sitting on a hill. You can't miss it. Sir."

"Thank you kindly. It's been a pleasure meeting all of you." After shaking hands with the men and making a slight bow to Lydia, the colonel mounted his horse and rode off with Lieutenant Wallace.

"Now, that wasn't too bad." The mayor put his arm around his daughter's shoulder. Then he looked at John who was frowning and asked, "Is something wrong?"

"I guess I expected something more sensational than a bunch of Yankees loafing on our courthouse lawn." John's frown deepened. "A formal surrender of the town perhaps?"

"We're fortunate nothing serious happened," the mayor said in a gruff voice as he turned to enter the courthouse.

"Of course you're right, sir," John said, glancing at Lydia who was petting the dog. *At least she's not pining after that damn Yankee officer!*

Then a wave of despair washed over him when he remembered his dream about Arete as Xerxes' army started into the pass. He'd forgotten about that incident. Now, an opportunity to prove himself in battle and impress Lydia had passed him by. The foreign invaders had landed at Clarksville, and he had done nothing to stop them.

CHAPTER FOUR

Stewart College

As she walked with John to Stewart College several days later, Lydia wondered how she could be attracted to two men at the same time. Was this duality of the heart abnormal, she mused, or was it simply the usual searching for love a young woman went through? For some overriding reason, she couldn't erase Lieutenant Wallace's face from her mind. Whom did he remind her of? Her father in his crisp colonel's uniform shortly after he returned from the Mexican War in 1848? No, it wasn't that. She was only four years old back then, and the memory hazy. Who then? She could think of no one.

Turning a corner, she bundled her coat around her throat to protect herself from an icy windblast. John reached for her hand, but she tucked her head down into her coat and clutched at the lapels with both hands. "I'm freezing," she lied, wanting to be alone in her reverie.

Saying nothing, he stuffed his hands deep into his pockets and continued walking.

Lydia's thoughts turned to Lieutenant Wallace, and she imagined him growing up in a three-story farmhouse in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. With a picket fence out front, the chalk-colored house had a porch running along three sides, a red barn with hayloft (slivers of hay filtered down whenever someone creaked the overhead planks), outbuildings, and fields dotted with yellow wildflowers that danced on the wind. On warm summer holidays his family would gather for picnics. A pig basted with honey and brown sugar roasted on a spit while his brothers and sisters—why there must be at least three of each!—chatted with Mom and Dad. A half dozen nieces and

nephews frolicked in the yard or swung on a wooden plank attached to a tree limb. Squeals and laughter drowned out the squeaking of the heavy ropes, and the summer breeze carried the heavy aroma of a nearby field. On a window ledge close by, apple or cherry pies, their dough-hardened crusts dotted with knife slits, waited to be devoured. Yum!

Ever since taking employment as a part-time teacher at the Clarksville Female Academy, and even before, Lydia had envisioned meeting a handsome and intelligent young man with whom to share her life. This man would be her soul mate and share her innermost thoughts and feelings. She felt John might fill that role as she came of age four years ago, but he had ignored her and gone merrily off to college. Upon his return he had not bothered to look her up. And then the war started and, as she had learned the other day, he seemed preoccupied with military tactics.

So, all this town offered were the boring prospects her father brought home. They were men who hunted and fished, not from necessity but from the sheer pleasure of it, and who gambled and drank to excess in dank-smelling barrooms while they told bawdy stories and cavorted with undesirable women. Who would want to have oodles of babies with such offensive men?

Lydia realized she would have to accept the fact most husbands engaged in a little drinking and gambling. What she couldn't tolerate, however, was a lifetime of marriage to a dull man. Unlike John, most of the men she had met were incapable of discussing a topic with anything approximating intelligence.

Her attempts to seek the advice of her Uncle Matthew Maury in the selection of a mate had been met with a sharp rebuke. "Marry anyone," Matthew had said, the strong odor of whiskey on his breath. "You don't want to wind up an old maid like Mary Peabody." Despite thirty-two years of marriage to his beloved wife, Beatrice, rumor had it Matthew had taken up with a widow living out in the county.

Lydia stole a glance at John. There was no denying he was handsome and intelligent, that he met the necessary requisites for a mate. She longed for him to hold her in his strong arms while she ran her hands through his wavy brown

hair. On a higher plane, she loved his clear blue eyes because they offered an unobstructed view into the purity of his soul. That he was now an unemployed college professor and unable to support her mattered little. Hopefully, her parents would overlook these shortcomings.

But looming still, in the back of her mind, was this unexplainable attraction to Lieutenant Lawrence Wallace, United States Army.

She and John turned a corner and Stewart College came into view. Set in a quadrangle facing College Street, the campus consisted of four wooden buildings: a dormitory, library, dining hall, and classroom-administration building. Crisscross walkways, blanketed by large oak trees, connected the graceful three-story buildings.

John stopped abruptly, and his sharp intake of breath was audible.

Lydia followed his gaze and was taken aback at the sight before her: smashed furniture, debris, and broken glass littered the sidewalks and lawns.

His face flushed with anger, John quickened his pace, dragging Lydia along until they reached the Administration Building. He stopped at a screen door hanging by one hinge.

"What the—?" He ripped it open and stormed inside. Bewildered students and teachers wandered the halls, sidestepping the damage and casting hateful glances at the new occupiers of the building: Yankee soldiers. The soldiers stared back, an indifferent look in their vacant eyes.

"This is awful," Lydia whispered. In the back of her mind an odious Sergeant Haddonfield would jump out from an alcove and shout at her. She flinched.

"Professor Maury!" John said when they saw an elderly professor struggling to carry an armload of books and papers. "What's going on here?"

"John, and my dear niece, Lydia," Professor Maury said in a wheezing voice. He sank down onto a battered leather couch and ran a gnarled hand through his frizzy white hair. "The college has been closed. John, we're both out of a job."

"That's what I figured," John said. He frowned, knowing his worst fears had been realized. "May I help you carry your things out?"

"Thank you for your kind offer. I suggest you gather your belongings and clear out immediately." He wheezed harder and clutched his chest.

"Are you all right, Uncle?" Lydia sat next to him and held his hand.

"A little shortness of breath," Professor Maury said. "It will pass in a moment. Go now, children."

John started off down the hall, but stopped when he heard his name called. He turned around as a breathless Wilson and Curley, their arms loaded with clothes, books, and papers, ran up to him.

"They kicked us out of the dormitory!" Curley cried.

"Oh good Lord!" Lydia said. "That's awful."

"The soldiers barged into the room and told us to get the hell out!" Wilson raged. "I barely had time to grab my paintings."

"So what are you going to do?" John asked.

"Smiley said we could stay at his farm," Curley said. "The other boys, too."

"Well, hopefully that will work out," John said. "I'm sorry for all of you."

"We'll work the farm with Smiley and his father," Curley said. "George said he'd help, though he won't have any slaves to supervise."

Wilson chuckled. "It'll do him good to get his hands dirty working the soil."

"A taste of his own medicine," Curley added.

When they reached John's office, John and Lydia found Lieutenant Wallace sitting in an upholstered armchair with his feet propped on a mahogany desk. He smirked at the drawings as he flipped through Herodotus' *The Histories*.

Such delightful arrogance, Lydia thought. *He's moved in and made himself right at home.*

"Lieutenant?" John cleared his throat. "May I ask what you're doing here?"

Wallace swung his feet off the desk and stood up. "Colonel Harris assigned me your office now the school's officially closed." He looked around at the mess.

"Sorry about the damage. I assure you the men responsible will be found and punished."

"I trust you're a man of your word," John said, and took a deep, calming breath. "Would it be an imposition to gather my papers and books?"

"Of course not." The lieutenant smiled at Lydia, turned on his heel, and left the room. His boots crunched broken glass as he made his way down the corridor.

Lydia put her arm through John's and leaned her head on his shoulder as he surveyed the damage to his office. "It looks frightful."

"Look here," he said, his voice quaking with anger. "An antique lamp my mother gave me is shattered." He separated the pieces into big piles and little ones, as if sorting memories according to their importance. "The lamp had been in my mother's family for several generations prior to the Revolution."

"I'm sorry for you, John," she said, feeling his hurt and anger. She stooped to pick up the pieces.

"Watch out for the leaking oil, Lydia."

"This is dreadful," she said sympathetically. "I'm so very sorry."

He snatched some loose, oil-soaked papers and held them up for her to see. "Here's my manuscript dealing with the British sack of Washington during the War of 1812." His face reddened, and he flung the pages across the room. "How stupidly ironic this all is!"

Tears came into her eyes, and she dabbed at them with a hanky.

"I'd hoped to publish this so I could further my career and pay my college debts." He stood up, and his fists balled at his sides. "Damn it all! What the hell am I going to do for a living—sweep the streets?"

He kicked the desk and stormed from the building.

Cringing, Lydia hurried after him, unsure what lay beyond this dark side of him. Would a life with him be filled with fearful demonstrations such as this? Was the lieutenant an angry man, too? "Please calm yourself, John! I'll help you find something."

"I'm sorry," he said, collapsing onto a stone bench. "My whole world has been shattered."

She took his hand and looked into his face, but the anger burning in his molten eyes terrified her.

Later that evening, John took Lady to the Montgomery Hotel where he stopped to say hello to his students (who were eating sandwiches and drinking beer) before going over to Elias Montgomery. He gave his uncle an abbreviated version of the day's events.

"So you need money, nephew?" Elias, John's uncle on his mother's side of the family, was a burly man with a pug nose, brown hair, and brown eyes. He chewed a plug of tobacco while he served a drink to a customer.

"For living expenses, and to pay you back my college debts." During his stay at the University of Virginia, Elias had financed John's tuition, books, and miscellaneous expenses, leaving him free to study. John earned additional monies for luxuries by tutoring students like Erica.

John released Lady and she went behind the bar, sniffing for scraps of food.

"Tell you what you can do, John." Elias wiped his hands on his apron. "Tend bar, sweep the floors, and take the trash out each night."

"Appreciate the offer, uncle."

"Want to start work now?"

John nodded and put on a white apron while Elias took a pitcher of beer to a soldier sitting by the window.

The street door banged open and Sergeant Haddonfield staggered in. At two hundred and thirty pounds, he was much taller and meaner looking than John remembered. Haddonfield swaggered up to the bar and plunked a wad of greenbacks down.

"Oh Christ," Smiley said. Darren groaned and set his guitar down while the rest of the students slowly got to their feet. Beer bottles in hand, they were already quite drunk.

John tethered a growling Lady to a ring on the bar.

"Whiskey!" the sergeant demanded.

Lady continued growling.

"Hush!" John filled a glass with some cheap Kentucky whiskey.

"Make that a double, country boy," Haddonfield said, slurring his words. Both of his green eyes were bloodshot, and the left one had a bright clot of blood below the pupil.

So he's already drunk, John thought. His face reddening, he slopped more whiskey in the glass and handed it to the sergeant.

"That's better." Haddonfield downed it all in one gulp. "Say, where's all the purty Southern women I been hearin' about?"

"They've gone home." John gritted his teeth.

"Yeah, I'll bet," Haddonfield sneered. "And the piece of ass you were with the other day. Where's she live?"

John's hand tightened around the rag. He needed this job. And a voice inside his head told him to keep his big mouth shut.

"Where's your whore?" Haddonfield shouted. He thumped his fist on the bar.

The soldier sitting by the window looked up and shook his head. Elias set his hands on his hips and watched as did John's students. The students approached the bar.

"She's not a piece of ass, and she's not a whore!" John blurted out as he waved his students away.

"You uppity piece of Southern white trash." Haddonfield lurched to his feet. "Apologize this instant!"

Snapping, Lady leapt up and put her paws on the bar.

"Get that bitch out of here afore I blows her head off!" Haddonfield threatened.

"Do as he says, John!" Elias turned to the sergeant. "And you, sir, I think it's time you left."

"I'll leave when I'm damned good and ready." Haddonfield slid back onto his bar stool.

John took Lady and tied her up in the alley. When he returned, Haddonfield sat slumped over with his head on the bar.

"I don't think he'll give you any more trouble," Elias said. "I'm going into the basement for another case of bourbon.

"I'm still awaitin' your apology," the sergeant called out after Elias had left.

John rested a hand on the double-barreled shotgun stashed under the counter. A man staring down its barrel usually sobered right up when a bartender pointed it at him.

"Who in the hell do you think you are coming in here and talking the way you did?" John asked, suddenly emboldened.

"I'm warning you, boy," the sergeant said, looking up. "I ain't about to take no crap offa you."

"My uncle told you to leave," He jabbed Haddonfield's chest. "So get moving!"

"Rebel bastard!" Haddonfield slapped John's hand away. His bloodshot eyes turned to mean slits. "Gimme another drink!"

John shook his head. "Not for any Yankee shit, I won't."

Haddonfield stood up and hurdled over the countertop. His fetid breath blew hot in John's face. "Apologize, you lame piece of shit!"

John lunged for the shotgun, Haddonfield reached it first.

"Well, whadda ya know?" The sergeant held the shotgun up. "Little Reb got hisself a pop gun!"

"Go to hell, you Yankee scum!" John swung, but stumbled on his bad leg and missed.

The sergeant hit him with two sharp jabs that knocked him to his knees. "Apologize, boy, or I'll give you the beatin' of your life."

Fists raised, John's students rushed forward, but Haddonfield pulled out a Bowie knife and waved it at them. "You boys git the hell back!" he snarled.

Bloodied and dazed, John tried to lever himself up onto his knees. He collapsed on the plank floor.

"Then I'll have to teach you a lesson, Reb." He hauled John to his feet and punched him again and again.

The blows exploded like shotgun blasts as Haddonfield's fists thudded into John's chest and rib cage, doubling him over. Two more connected to his cheeks and forehead, pinning him to the bar. Another volley to his stomach and chin lifted him up, and then a final blow spun him around and sent him plunging back to the floor. As his head hit, white light streaked before his eyes.

"I ain't done with you yet, boy." Haddonfield grabbed John by the belt and shirt collar, lifted him off his feet, and sent him sliding facedown the length of the bar. John crashed into bottles and glasses and flopped off onto a table. He rolled over and lay there staring at the ceiling.

Through a red haze, John saw his students jump en masse on the sergeant who flailed with his fists. Curley got in several sharp jabs before the sergeant hit him, sending him flying into Wilson and the others. Immediately, they scrambled to their feet and jumped back on the Yankee soldier.

Lady crashed through the screen door and leaped onto Haddonfield. The sergeant thrashed and screamed as the dog's teeth closed on his forearm.

Club in hand, Elias ran into the room and whacked Haddonfield over the head, knocking him out.

The soldier sitting by the window came over and spat on Haddonfield's chest. "Bastard always does this—suckers a man, and then beats him up."

"So why didn't you stop him?" Elias snarled as he and the soldier helped John to his feet and half-carried him to a chair.

"Every man's got to fight his own battles, Mister," the soldier said. "Haddonfield outranks me. I ain't so stupid as to cross him."

"We'll get the professor home," George said. His left eye was swollen and was turning black and blue. "It's the least we can do."

With his student's help, John hobbled back to his boardinghouse and collapsed onto his bed. Mrs. Huber sent for Doc Webber, and then gave John a bottle of whiskey.

"Haddonfield, you son of a bitch," John mumbled through his pain. He held the bottle up to his swollen lips and gulped the whiskey.

"What'd you say?" his landlady asked.

John burned with the humiliation of standing helpless, taking punch after punch. *My stupid leg tripped me up*, he thought, and plunged into a morass of self-hatred, self-pity, and pain. *You're no man. You're a lame piece of shit like he said. You couldn't possibly defend Lydia, and you sure as hell couldn't serve in any man's army!*

You've got to find a way to kill him, said a little voice in his head. *He's got Lydia on his mind, and he's not going to forget what happened with Lady and Elias.*

John recognized the truth of that. As long as Haddonfield was quartered in Clarksville, he would stalk Elias, Lady, and himself, and then go after Lydia.

As the whiskey eased his pain, John imagined himself standing in the alley behind the Montgomery Hotel, the shotgun pointed at Haddonfield's face. "Now who's the lame piece of shit?" he snarled, and pulled both triggers.

CHAPTER FIVE

Complaints

At John's boarding house the next morning, Lydia began an incessant knocking on the front door. Mayor Robertson stamped his feet and swung his arms while he complained about the cold weather.

"Mayor, dear child, do come in," Mrs. Huber said after she opened the door. "It's absolutely dreadful what's happened to John."

As they entered the hallway John's students scrambled to their feet. They were bruised and haggard looking from both the fight and a lack of sleep. Across from them Mary Peabody glanced up from the dining room table. She stirred a cup of tea, her face haggard and her eyes bloodshot with fatigue. "Morning," she said, and did not get up.

"Mary spent the night helping me tend John," Mrs. Huber explained. "And his boys sat up all night in case he needed any help."

"That was so nice of you all," Lydia said as she followed the landlady up the long flight of stairs to John's third-floor garret. Mayor Robertson's heavy steps crunched the risers behind her.

"You have visitors, John," Mrs. Huber gingerly opened the door.

Inside the room, a turned-down oil lamp cast pale shadows over a man who lay propped on two pillows. His face was misshapen and bruised. Whorls of yellow and black covered his cheeks, and his eyes were swollen nearly shut. A trickle of blood seeped from the corner of his mouth. Lady lay next to him. Her tail twitched, but she didn't rise.

"John!" Lydia exclaimed.

He groaned and opened his eyes.

Lydia sat on the edge of the bed and held his hand. She looked up at her father as if to say, *Do you see?*

The mayor frowned. "Has Doc Webber examined him?"

"There were no broken bones," Mrs. Huber said.

"We've had a number of these incidents," Mayor Robertson said mostly to himself. "I'm going to speak with that Yankee Colonel Harris as soon as possible. This cannot go on!"

Lydia patted the dog's head. Lady nuzzled her hand and whined.

"I'll take her out," Mrs. Huber offered, and left with the dog. Her departing footsteps echoed on the creaky risers.

"I want to go with you to see the colonel," John said.

"I don't think you're going anywhere, young man," the mayor told him.

"Haddonfield has to be locked up," John said, as bits and pieces of the fight returned to him.

"You can't go out like this," Lydia pleaded.

"Lydia," John said, ignoring her comment, "would you wait downstairs? And, Mr. Mayor, would you be so kind as to help me get dressed?"

Moments later, Lady started barking. The noise turned to deep growls and then coarse barks. A man's gruff voice shouted, "Bitch!" A pistol discharged, and a dog yelped.

"God!" John started down the stairs and was joined by his students

Lydia screamed, "John!" as he flung open the back door. A big man in a dark blue army coat hurried up the alley.

"Lady!" John rushed to where his dog lay whimpering. Blood gushed from a gaping wound in her right side. John knelt and cradled her head in his hands. She looked at him, and then her head slumped and her tongue, wet and warm, lolled on his hand.

"Good Lord Almighty!" The Mayor cried. "Is she—?"

"She's dead," John moaned. He pressed Lady's head against his chest, kissed her and told her he loved her.

While his students chased after the figure in the army coat, John looked up at Lydia and spoke in a voice choked with anger and grief. Tears streamed down his cheeks. "She was the only friend I ever had. Who in the hell could have done this?"



"You look awful, Professor Martin," Colonel Harris said, motioning for John, his students, and Lydia and her father to sit in the stiff-backed chairs reserved for Dean Abernathy's errant students. "You ought to be home in bed."

"I was," John mumbled through painful lips, "until one of your soldiers shot my dog."

"What?" Harris sat upright in his chair and leaned forward. His hands grasped the edge of the desk. "Tell me about it!"

John mumbled a few words, and then Mayor Robertson, with the help of Smiley and Wilson, related the story about Lady.

"Have you seen a doctor?" the colonel asked. His brows knit with concern.

John nodded. "But the reason I'm here is about Sergeant Haddonfield who—"

"I know who you're talking about," Colonel Harris interrupted. "I had him demoted to corporal and shipped to Nashville on last night's steamer."

"Last night?" John asked. "That's impossible!"

"Did you see the man who shot your dog?" the colonel asked.

"Only the coward's back as he fled," John said.

"Sir," Wilson said, "we chased that scoundrel all the way up an alley to Second Street, but lost him when some cavalry came by."

"Just arrest the man!" the mayor demanded.

"I took such action as I thought necessary," Colonel Harris said. He reached over and adjusted the picture of a young Army lieutenant sitting on the corner

of his desk. The officer had blond curly hair, penetrating eyes, and a Roman nose inherited from his mother.

"Your son?" Mayor Robertson asked.

"He's assigned as General Grant's aide." The colonel smiled. "His mother and I are very proud of him."

"Then," Mayor Robertson said, "as a father you can understand our concern for John's welfare."

Harris' face reddened. He said nothing.

"We've had a number of serious incidents." The mayor told him about an attempted rape and the burglaries of a half-dozen stores and homes. "When I controlled the reins of government, men like Haddonfield would have been sent to trial, not shipped off to another city."

"I can understand your anger," Colonel Harris said, "but a man in the bar said John instigated the fight."

"I most certainly did not!" John exploded. The students jumped to their feet and spoke at once in John's defense.

Fuming, Mayor Robertson said, "That doesn't give Haddonfield the right to—"

"Of course not." The colonel frowned and picked up some papers on his desk. "There's really nothing I can do. Gentlemen and lady, if you'll excuse me?"

"What a stupid waste of time it was coming here," John said after they were outside.

"Christ," George said. "That colonel's about a pint short of being an idiot!"

"More like a goddamn fool," Smiley said, who was seconded by Curley, Darren, and Wilson. The students assumed the role of soldiers at attention and mocked the colonel.

"If it's any consequence," the mayor said, "a demotion can hurt a man's army career."

"Haddonfield's not the type to worry about that," John said.

Lydia shivered and drew her coat tight about her.

"Aren't you cold?" she asked John.

"Actually, the wind's making my face numb," he said. "And that feels good."

"I need to get to my office," Mayor Robertson said.

"We'll bury your dog, John," Wilson said, while his friends tugged at his coat sleeve so John and Lydia could be alone.

"Thank you, gentlemen."

"I'll walk him home, Daddy," Lydia volunteered.

John watched Reverend Parks striding up the walk to Colonel Harris' office. Bundled up in a black overcoat, the preacher held on to his top hat with one hand.

"This whole business disgusts me," John snarled, turning his face back into the wind. "Haddonfield should be horsewhipped, and then strung up."

The ugly tone in his voice startled and frightened Lydia, and she drew back. She gripped his arm. "Please try to calm down. Getting angry about something you can't change only—"

"Don't tell me what to do!" he snapped. "The son of a bitch killed my dog!"

"John, don't talk that way!" She looked up as Lieutenant Wallace left the Administration Building. With his slouch hat set at a jaunty angle and one hand gripping his sword, he walked at a brisk pace. *What a dashing man, and such a sharp contrast to John with his hot, spontaneous anger that erupts like a volcano.*

"I'm sorry for acting like a fool," John said. His voice softened, and his cold, rough hand gripped hers.

The howling wind gusted, sweeping dead leaves and debris across the lawn where the smashed furniture still lay. Through a break in the gray, overcast sky, a solitary band of light appeared. The light was cold and dull.

Lydia remembered a similar day when she was twelve and had gone hunting with her father. She had been the first to spot the deer when it broke from a stand of maples, and her father quickly told her how to hold the rifle

and aim. Barely containing her glee, she pressed the cold stock of the rifle against her cheek and squeezed the trigger. The animal dropped, and the blast echoed against a far-off hill. When they ran to retrieve the buck, Lydia's shrieks of joy turned to horror. With half its face blown away, the buck lay gasping and bleating. After her father's shot killed it, Lydia never went hunting again.

"No man wants to be beaten and not get a punch in," John said. "It's embarrassing to have to face everyone in town after what happened."

"Then we'll do it together," she said, watching as a light wooden chair tumbled end over end across the lawn.

"I don't need your help!" he said, jerking away from her.

She looked at John's bruised face. His pain and grieving, in sharp contrast to his otherwise kind and gentle nature, touched her deep inside. It was something he'd chosen, unwittingly, to share with her as if she were his soul mate. That sharing, that tenderness, she would hold close to her heart and treasure for the rest of her life. But, in the meantime, his deep brooding bitterness threatened to separate her from him.

I can't and I won't let that happen! she thought as she grabbed his hand and squeezed it. It was then she realized she loved him, not as a child of four years ago, but now, as a young woman.

"Let's go home," she said. Delighted with her new assessment of the situation, she decided this business with Lt. Wallace was simply an infatuation. *Or was it*, a little voice inside her head asked?

CHAPTER SIX

A Formal Dinner

"I see most of the swelling in your face has subsided." Willard Robertson said as he met John at the front door on the first Sunday of March 1862.

"Fortunately, it has, sir," John said. His cheeks burned with shame as he followed the mayor down a long hallway past a coat rack and a case clock, and into the dining room.

Family members and guests sat at a linen covered table set with pale blue, Staffordshire plates decorated with eagles and flowers on a scrolled border. Silver place settings and folded linen napkins complemented the china, as did the Waterford cut-glass goblets that sparkled in the light from the ornate chandelier.

Opposite a thriving fire in the hearth stood two exquisite pieces of furniture: a mahogany china cabinet with glass doors and glass pulls, and a waist high server with intricate scrolling on the backboard. A set of china coffee cups, several bottles of liquor, and a silver coffee pot adorned the server. At the far end of the room, heavy maroon drapes framed the floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out on a bed of withered flower stalks and the Stewart College campus a block away.

Henrietta Robertson sat at her usual place at the foot of the table, with her brother and his wife, Matthew and Beatrice Maury, seated to her right and left, respectively. Mary Peabody and Lydia used two of the three chairs next to Beatrice. Reverend Parks, along with the town barber, Fred Knox and his wife, Martha, occupied seats adjacent to Matthew. Marianne, Lydia's twelve-year-old sister, was squeezed in next to her mother.

"Good afternoon, everyone." John slid into the empty seat next to Lydia.

"Hello, John," Lydia said. The low cut of her blue dress exposed her bare shoulders and hinted at her ample bosom. Reverend Parks in his usual black garb gave her a predatory glance before turning away. The scent of Lydia's perfume, a mixture of roses and sweet smelling flowers, drifted toward John. A sad look in her eyes troubled him.

"Is something wrong?" he whispered.

She shook her head and gave his hand a quick squeeze under the table. "How are your fine young students?"

"Working over at Smiley's farm," John said, a proud smile on his face. Finally, his boys were showing some maturity. "They're working hard to pay for their room and board."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"Where is Professor Maury?" John asked. "I haven't seen him in over a week."

"Home in bed with an attack of angina," Matthew said, slurring his words. Close to Willard's age, he was a big man with disheveled gray hair and bloodshot blue eyes. His large hands cupped a glass of whiskey and swirled it, trying to see how close he could come to the edge without spilling it. John tolerated the man's abuse of hard liquor only because Matthew had been a close friend and sometime business partner of his father.

"I hope he's taken his medication," John said, "and he's feeling better."

"He is," Matthew replied. He tugged at a piece of skin on his pudgy face and stared at John. "I see you're looking much better after the fight you were in."

"I am," John said, and his face burned.

"Well, you still have some bad bruises," Henrietta said. A brooch on her dress caught the light from the Waterford chandelier and reflected it toward John. "Are you in any pain?"

"Plenty of ice and the cold wind on Mrs. Huber's front porch took care of that," John said.

"With God's help the healing process will be speedy," Reverend Parks said.

"Isn't our reverend a wonderful human being, John?" Henrietta asked.

John nodded.

"A very remarkable man," Beatrice chimed. Matthew snorted and finished his drink.

John noted he and Matthew seemed to share the same opinion of the preacher.

"He's always helping people who are in need," Beatrice said. Matthew rolled his bloodshot eyes.

"He counsels the sick members in our congregation," Henrietta added, "and goes out of his way to help the less fortunate, even if they aren't Presbyterians."

"Ladies. Please," Reverend Parks said. "Your bountiful accolades humble me in His service."

"Oh," Beatrice said. "Isn't he magnificent, John?"

Matthew scowled.

"Yes, ma'am." John unfolded his napkin and placed it on his lap.

"Reverend?" Willard asked. "Will you say grace?"

"Certainly." Reverend Parks glanced at Lydia and began the blessing. His voice was melodious, and his words were sincere. It was no wonder all the women adored him.

While the preacher rambled, John glanced around the room. The atmosphere was pleasant and comfortable, the result of immense wealth funneled into a well-designed plan to stimulate intimate conversations and strengthen close relationships.

"Matthew, dear," Beatrice said after the reverend finished, "why don't you put another log or two on the fire? Henrietta looks so chilled."

"Stop nagging me, will you?" Matthew snapped. With outstretched hand he lurched from his chair as if to strike her, caught himself, and sat back down. He scowled.

His wife cringed, and her bottom lip quivered as she looked to John for help.

John got up and tended the fire.

"Drink up, gentlemen." Mayor Robertson walked around the table refilling the men's glasses. When he returned to his chair, he started a platter of fried chicken down one side of the table.

John noted the frugal allotment of food for each guest: one chicken breast, and a large spoonful of mashed potatoes, peas, and carrots. Before he left for college, he had heard about the extravagant holiday parties given by the Robertson's, especially at Christmastime. The war had changed all that.

John twirled his napkin while Lydia chatted with Mary Peabody and Martha Knox across the table. Martha was a sickly woman of forty with stringy hair and dark circles under her gray eyes.

"Congratulations on your inheritance, Fred," Mayor Robertson said as he picked up his fork.

"Thank you, Willard." Fred, a short, thin man of forty-five with wisps of blond hair stretched over his balding forehead, had inherited the building where his barbershop was located. "Martha and I are very pleased."

"That's wonderful!" Beatrice exclaimed. "Well, everybody, it certainly has turned bitter cold. If it snows again we'll have to—"

"Why don't you shut up?" Matthew snarled from across the table. He took a gulp of his bourbon. "We've had enough of your drivel for one day. God!"

"Matthew!" Reverend Parks exclaimed. "Taking the Lord's name in vain is inappropriate for a Christian."

Matthew jabbed his fork at Parks and said, "Your attention to my business ends at your church door, parson."

"Matthew!" Beatrice exclaimed.

"Shut up, you old bitch!"

Beatrice dropped her napkin and fled the room. Matthew jumped up, knocking over his chair, and lurched after his wife. The two of them could be heard arguing in the study.

An embarrassed silence settled on the table. With the exception of Reverend Parks who stared at Lydia, all heads were bowed so as to avoid any

embarrassing eye contact. Flames hissing and popping in the hearth did little to distract from the raging argument.

"I'm afraid our Sunday dinner has turned into a dreadful family squabble," Willard said, speaking first. "I apologize for that, everyone."

"The food is delicious, Mrs. Robertson," John said, changing the subject.

"Thank you, John," she said as she rose to clear the table. "I worry my dear boys, Winston and David, aren't getting enough to eat at the front." Lydia and Marianne jumped up and took the plates from their mother.

"Now, Henrietta," her husband called after her, "I'm sure General Lee would never let his men go hungry."

"Try not to worry, Mother," Lydia added. Her voice trembled as she brought a custard pie into the room. After she placed the pie on the server, she turned and gave her mother a quick hug before Henrietta sat down.

"I can't help it, dear." Mrs. Robertson passed behind John and took his empty plate. "The mail service is so bad that . . . that if something dreadful happened—dear Lord, it would be a wonder I'd hear anything at all about my precious boys!"

Lydia burst into tears and fled the room.

"Excuse me." John went after her. As he passed the study, Matthew raised his hand and slapped Beatrice across the mouth. She screamed, and Matthew hit her again.

"Goddamn it!" John rushed into the room and caught Matthew's raised arm.

"Take your hands off me," Matthew snarled.

"You drunken sot!" John shoved him into a chair. "Stop it!"

"What're you going to do?" he sneered. "Beat me up, like you did that—?"

"An honorable man doesn't hit his wife!" John said. He rested his hand on Matthew's shoulder.

Matthew smacked John's hand off, got up, and headed for the front door.

"I'm sorry, Beatrice," John said, going to her as Mary and Henrietta rushed into the room. *Where's Lydia?*

Beatrice's sobbing filled the room while the two women consoled her with small talk.

"John?" Her cheeks stained with tears and her nose red, Lydia appeared in the doorway. "May I see you a moment?"

"Of course." He followed her into the parlor and sat next to her on a triple-crested sofa by the fireplace. "What's on your mind?"

Two letters were clutched in her hand. She took a deep ragged breath. When she tried to speak her throat constricted and no words came out.

"Lydia?" He reached for her hand.

"This letter from Winston's commanding officer," she said, "informs me of my brother's death at the Battle of Pea Ridge, Arkansas. The other letter, found on Winston's body, tells of my baby brother, David, and his death from camp fever only two weeks before."

"How tragic," John said. "I'm really sorry."

Her shoulders slumped, the letters fell from her hands, and her whole body convulsed.

John put his arms around her and held her tight. He knew war was brutal, savage, and indifferent in its quest to take human life, but he had never witnessed its effects up close. *So why*, the nagging question arose in the back of his mind, *do you thirst for a drink at the trough of war?*

"Why haven't you told your parents?" he asked, kissing the top of her head.

She choked back a sob and looked up at him. "It would crush them to hear it today."

"Want me to tell your father for you?" he asked with kindness.

"Thanks, but I'll do it early tomorrow morning," she said, standing up. "Please excuse me, John. I'm totally exhausted from this ordeal and need to rest."

"Of course." He walked with her into the foyer and watched as she trudged up the stairs.

John turned to find Matthew at his elbow.

"An apology is in order for my behavior in front of you and the Robertsons," the older man said. "Will you accept it?"

"All right," he said sullenly.

After saying good day to everyone, John paused at the staircase leading to the second floor. Thinking he heard sobbing coming from up there, he was tempted to go to Lydia. *If only I could hold her once more. Yes. To hold you, dear Lydia, and to kiss away your tears and pain, and comfort you for the rest of your life.* It was then he realized, quite simply, he was falling in love with her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A Yankee Demon

One evening in late April 1862 John entered the smoke-filled Montgomery Hotel bar. A Yankee soldier by the door lay with his face on a table, his mouth squished so he looked like a dead fish. On the far side of the room loud singing came from a crowd standing around a soldier playing a ballad on an old piano. The music, a sad story about a young woman's beau gone off to war, offended none of the men's sensibilities, North or South, some of whom were singing off-key and tapping their feet in time with the music.

"Hello, Professor!" Wilson Compton called out.

"Hello, Wilson," John said to his former student. "How's the new painting coming along?"

"I've given up," the gifted young artist said.

"What?" John said, disbelieving what he'd heard. The painting, set on a large canvas measuring twenty-six inches by two and a half feet, was a magnificent picture of a cathedral organ with pipes of varying lengths. The pipes were painted in the bright, sunlit colors of fire-orange and blazing yellow, and by far it was the most impressive thing his young student had ever done.

"What is it you're telling me?"

"I'm saying," Wilson said, a mischievous grin on his face, "I'm going to be doing my painting in northern Virginia."

"No way!"

"Follow me, sir," Wilson said. He stopped by the bar, picked up two pitchers of beer, and led John over to the rest of the students who sat at a large, round table. Fred Knox, the barber, sat next to Smiley Riordan, Curley Holland, and

George Singletary. Darren Page, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, strummed on a guitar resting on one knee. His eyes were glazed and he didn't so much play as pick at dissonant chords like a small child dabbling at the keyboard. Occasionally, he struck a few chords that resembled the Schumann piece.

"Hi, Professor. Sit your ass down and have a beer." A grinning George Singletary took the large glass pitchers Wilson handed him and poured, overfilling a glass and slopping most of it on the table.

With much scraping and giggling the students shuffled their chairs around until they had made an empty place for John to sit.

"Thanks." John took the glass and swilled half of it. "All of you seem fired up about something. What is it?"

"Tell him," Curley Holland urged. "We got a lot of planning to do, and the professor will play an integral part in it."

John sat back in his chair. He least expected this type of comment from Curley who had always been something of a ne'er-do-well.

"We're planning to go east and join up with General Lee's army," Darren Page said in a twangy voice that mimicked his guitar. "It's our patriotic duty, as you've told us over and over."

"At's right," Smiley Riordan said. He grabbed his bow and fiddle as if he were about to strike up a tune, changed his mind, and set them on the table. "I'm a patriot!"

"Lord!" John said.

"My daddy says the damn Yankees should go the hell home." George stood up, took a big swig of his beer, and shouted, "And leave us alone to run our plantations as we see fit!" Some bluecoats at the next table looked up and gave him a cold stare.

"Damn straight!" George's eyes blazed with the fervor of patriotism bolstered by strong drink.

"And I'm going, too." A drunken Fred flicked a glance at John's leg. "Why don't you come along?"

"I'd like to," John tapped his leg, "but the army won't let me."

"Bullshit!" Fred said, his face reddening. "Every day in my shop I listen to crap about how so and so can't go because of some damn physical infirmity. So I thought, being older and all, I ought to set the example for these here boys."

"That's very noble of you," John said sarcastically.

"One can't be choosy," Fred shot back. "So if the army'll use a man my age, they damn sure ought to take *you* with your bum leg!"

"I'm *not* a coward." John's face flushed hot. "It was always my intention to enlist, goddamn it!"

"I know, I know." Fred refilled John's glass in a gesture of kindness mixed with apology. "So why not join us? Maybe you'll find an enlistment officer who's not picky."

John thought for a moment, and then burst out laughing. "I will!"

He grinned and flexed his muscles in an exaggerated manner. In the past few months his biceps and back muscles had grown taut from unloading heavy cases of liquor on delivery wagons parked behind Elias' hotel.

"A toast to John!" Fred said.

"To John!" the boys cried.

"So we're off to fight these chickenshit bluecoats." Fred jumped to his feet. "Right, boys?"

They let out with a tremendous cheer. Angry looks on their faces, some Yankee soldiers started to get up, but flopped down when Lieutenant Wallace entered the bar. John glowed with the spirit of camaraderie and the reincarnated hope of a great military career. That he would face hideous carnage of every imaginable sort was pushed to the back of his mind by the flush of alcohol and the boisterous laughter of men.

"Sir?" Lieutenant Wallace came up to John. "I'd thought I'd better warn you. Private Haddonfield's back in town."

"What?" John's eyes widened in disbelief. *Was this some hellish nightmare he was relating?*

"I'm afraid it's true," Wallace said. "General Rosecrans from Nashville transferred him to us."

"Haddonfield!" John saw red. He squeezed his glass with one hand until it shattered in his palm, spilling beer all over the table.

"Be careful around him, John." Lieutenant Wallace took a step back. "He was demoted from corporal to private . . . for fighting."

"Thanks for the warning," John said. Reaching for a handkerchief Wilson handed him, he wrapped the material around his gashed palm, and tied the ends in a knot.

George's face was ashen, as were the other students.

The street door banged open and Private Haddonfield staggered into the bar. With a cigar clamped between his teeth he grinned nastily at John.

Seething with rage, John stared at him. *If that drunken son of a bitch starts anything I'll whack him with a whiskey bottle, and then beat the crap out of him. The bastard!* A chill ran up his spine. *But he almost killed me the last time he came in here!*

"Now listen up, soldier." Lieutenant Wallace walked over to Haddonfield. "There'll be no rowdy behavior in my command. Got that, *private?*"

"Yes, sir." Haddonfield saluted, walked to the bar, purchased a bottle of whiskey, and left.

Red seeped onto the table from John's bandaged hand. He removed the handkerchief, folded it several times, and rebandaged the wound. As he finished, a dog started yelping.

John and his students rushed out the back door and found Private Haddonfield berating Willis Yankton, a Free Black who worked for Matthew Maury. Willis held his snapping terrier Mums in his arms.

"You son of a worthless black whore! I want an apology for bumping into me." Haddonfield turned to John. "And you still owe me one from before, Martin, you lame piece of shit! And ain't you the boys what jumped me in the bar some months ago?"

"And what if we were," Smiley snarled, raising his fists.

"Go back to your quarters, Haddonfield you shit-faced drunk!" John bent down and grabbed a piece of pipe lying on the ground. The steel was heavy and cold, and he tapped it against an open palm as he advanced toward the hated bluecoat.

"Take off, Martin," he snarled. "Or I'll shoot you like I did your goddamn bitch. Ha ha!"

"You bastard!" John lunged at the man.

Haddonfield sidestepped and caught the pipe in mid air. John lashed out with a vicious punch to the face. The big man groaned from a broken nose, followed by an agonizing scream.

Willis Yankton stepped back and drove his knife into Haddonfield's back, twisting the blade this time. A powerful black hand clamped Haddonfield's mouth and guided his body down.

John looked into Willis' brown eyes. They were fearful, yet kind and intelligent. Blood dripped from the razor-tipped knife.

"I saw the whole thing, John." Matthew Maury came running over. He nodded to the students.

"What should we do with him?" John said. His hands were shaking.

"We'll take him along on a delivery early tomorrow and dump him in the river," Matthew said.

"Good idea," John said.

"That man was nothing but a low life," Willis said. He wiped the blood off his knife and stuck it back in his boot. "Last month he raped my wife and fourteen-year-old daughter!" Mums whined, and the man reached down and picked her up.

"Lord!" John's eyes went wide as did those of his students.

"C'mon, John, boys," Matthew started for his store. "You'd better get the hell out of here, Willis. If the soldiers find you, they'll lynch you on the spot."

They rolled Haddonfield up in an old rug, and put him in Matthew's storeroom. After having a drink, John said goodnight to his students and his uncle, and walked home. At a street corner he remembered how Lady used to

nudge his hand, as if to say, "Be careful of the steep curb, Master, and that wagon approaching on your right."

As he trudged up the stairs in his boardinghouse, he swore he heard the patter of paws treading behind him.

I must leave with George, Wilson, and the rest of them when they go east, he thought as he undressed and got into bed. If the Yankees somehow linked him to Haddonfield's killing, they would waste no time in constructing a gallows. Enlistment in the Confederate Army was the only way to stay alive.

CHAPTER EIGHT

An Unofficial Funeral

Snow flurries dusted John as he made his way through the pre-dawn streets to Matthew's General Store. He glanced over his shoulder at the faint tracks his footsteps were leaving on the sidewalk. Thankfully, no soldiers were following him at this godforsaken hour. In the last week or so, the bluecoats had started dressing in civilian garb and now patrolled the streets at odd hours. No one knew the reason for their actions.

As John stepped off a curb a gust of angry wind blasted him full in the face. The distraction reminded him of the Great Blizzard of December 1848 and the jubilation he had felt as an eight-year-old when the storm began piling up huge drifts. His teacher, Mary Peabody, had dismissed class none too early as the blizzard, howling like angry wolves, beat against the glass panes of the one-room schoolhouse and progressed, by whipped degrees, into the storm of the century. After the storm passed he, along with dozens of jubilant children, took to sledding Clarksville's hilly streets in an extraordinary celebration that lasted three exhausting days.

Now, shivering and miserable, and consumed with guilt over the murder, he tucked his head into the collar of his coat and increased his pace until he reached the alley behind Matthew's store. His students were already there, making themselves useful by helping Matthew.

"Good morning, John!" Matthew's words billowed like puffs of smoke from a steam locomotive. He pointed to two horses hitched to a delivery wagon and said, "Come and give us a hand with the supplies, will you?"

"Of course." John nodded to his students, and then turned to Willis and stooped to pet his dog. The terrier nuzzled his hand, and John winced, reminded of Lady's tragic death at the hands of Private Haddonfield. Killing a beautiful animal, such as a Chesapeake Bay Retriever, was a deed masterminded by the Devil, and the pain of such acts, John felt, never healed, leaving in their stead unholy scars.

"That Yankee bastard under the seat?" John asked after he'd grabbed several boxes and hefted them into the wagon. He shivered not because of the cold, but at the chilling thought of what the Yankees would do to them if they were caught with the body.

"Rolled up in that old rug," Matthew replied. He tugged at a piece of loose skin on his pudgy face. "Next to the picnic basket."

"Clever," John said, and climbed up onto the wagon's seat. Wilson smiled as he sat between his teacher and his uncle. The rest of the boys piled into the back of the wagon.

Matthew cracked the whip and they set off at a brisk pace. Willis, a dark wool hat pulled down over his ears, sat with the students with Mums snuggled up on his lap. He petted the dog.

"And where exactly are we going with the body?" John asked.

"We'll cross the Cumberland, head upstream for a mile or so, and throw him in the current."

"Why upstream?" John asked, prickles of fear running up his spine. "What if the body drifts back toward town?"

"North of town the land's open," Matthew explained. "Anything we'd do would be noticed."

"I see."

"And the ground's too hard to simply put him in a hole, so we'll weight him down with rocks," Matthew said, seeking to quell any more objections. He looked hard at John, but said nothing.

Not satisfied with Matthew's explanation, John sat back and watched the scenery unfold as the wagon rolled down one street after another. At the

hillside cemetery where his father lay buried, he spotted the humped, brown graves of the new war dead. Owing to the lateness of the spring, the grass had not sprouted there, nor was the maple tree in bloom above the stone bench where he and Lydia had first met. When John looked up, they were approaching the ferry crossing at the river. His hands drew into tight claws, and his heart pounded, sounding like a smithy shaping a horseshoe on an anvil.

"Halt!" A pimply-faced soldier stepped from his sentry box. His Springfield rifle reached almost to the brim of his regulation hat. One hand repositioned the hat, and then the sixteen year old was all business.

"Good morning and a happy Sabbath to you!" Matthew reined the horses to a stop, set the brake, and put one booted leg up on the sideboard. He smiled.

"What are you carrying?" the soldier challenged, the bayonet on the end of his Springfield rifle dull and lifeless in the bleak cold of dawn.

"Provisions!" Matthew's voice boomed out. He took off his wool hat and signaled the ferryman on the opposite shore to come across.

"And where are you going?" the boy-soldier asked.

"Transporting supplies to the needy across the river." After handing him a pass dated April 30, 1862, Matthew pulled out a flask and sipped from it. "Sure is a mighty cold morning for sentry duty."

"You can say that again." He blew on his gloveless hands as he struggled to read. "Supplies for . . . Mary Beth . . ."

"Brinton," Matthew said, trying to be helpful.

"Ah, yes." The young sentry tilted the paper as if to see better. "The writing's a bit smudged."

In spite of himself, John smiled at Matthew's ruse.

While the young soldier his interrogation, a column of Yankee cavalry across the river rounded a bend and cantered toward the ferry crossing a hundred yards away.

A frightened look on his face, Wilson nudged John.

The sweat ran inside John's flannel shirt at the thought of what would happen if the sentry demanded they unroll the rug. If they fled, surely the boy would open fire, the soldiers would give chase, and—

"And this?" With eyebrows arched and a suspicious look in his pale green eyes, the sentry stick stuck his bayonet into the picnic basket. He twisted the bayonet, hoping to find something—anything!—to justify his being out here on this cold Sunday morning.

John's fist clawed at his pants leg and he wished he'd brought his father's revolver. But if he drew the Colt and shot the sentry, the cavalry would be alerted and his student's lives put in jeopardy.

"Ah!" A smiling Matthew pulled the cover off the basket. "It's a hot meal for the widow Brinton: smoked ham, sweet potatoes, biscuits, and hot apple pie for dessert. 'Tis certainly nourishing food to uplift an old lady's heart on a blustery Sabbath morn."

The cavalry halted at the edge of the field, a mere fifty yards from the ferry crossing. John fidgeted. *What in God's name are they doing?*

"Sir," the sentry said to Matthew, "seeing this food reminds me of how my dear departed mother—" his Adam's apple bobbed up and down,"—used to cook and slave for us."

"How did she die?" Matthew asked in a gentle voice.

"From consumption." His voice cracked with emotion, and a dirty hand wiped a tear from the corner of his eye.

"Ah, lad, 'tis a sad experience for one so young. Yes, indeed." Matthew reached into the basket and handed the boy a piece of apple pie. "Try this savory delicacy my cook prepared this blessed morn."

"I couldn't take from the poor," the boy protested, swallowing hard.

"It's all right. There's plenty more."

While Matthew coaxed the sentry, a cavalry officer with field glasses scanned both sides of the river. When he finished he motioned the column to continue riding toward the ferry crossing. Meanwhile, the flat-bottomed boat that would take the wagon across the river was approaching, its ferryman

poling the water in a regular rhythm. *Will the cavalry stop and interrogate us on the other side?* John wondered. Wilson was shivering with fear and now Matthew was watching.

"It's delicious," the boy-soldier said as he chewed. "Mmm! Just like my—"

"Hullo!" Much closer now, the Free Black ferryman angled the bow upstream a bit so the boat would run in straight for the dock.

Matthew waved, and offered his flask to the sentry. "Care to take the cure?"

"Drinking's not allowed on duty, sir," the boy said in a stern voice, reciting his general orders. But his eyes said he wished he could be done with this maddening cold.

"It's forbidden to take a smidgen of good ole Kentucky medicine to warm you on a blustery day?" Matthew looked up and down the road, and across the river. He winked at the boy. "Go ahead, it's safe. No one's watching."

"Well, I am cold. Oh, all right." Turning his back to the river, the soldier took a long swallow. "Ah, that's good stuff."

"Warms your bones, eh?"

"You bet." He smacked his lips. "Burns all the way down."

"Have some more."

The ferry nudged the dock. Across the river, the soldiers had stopped again. John cringed.

"I don't want to drink it all." The sentry grinned stupidly as the alcohol brought the flush to his face.

Matthew checked the road again. "Oh, go ahead."

"If you insist."

"I do."

The boy gulped and his Adam's apple spasmed like a cork bobbing on a fisherman's line. "I'm warm now," he said. "Thank you for your kindness."

"God bless you, son." Matthew gave the whip to the team, the wagon moved aboard the ferry, and they set off.

"God bless you, too!" the soldier called out. "And wrap up in that tattered rug under the seat if you get cold!"

John cringed again. While the others made small talk with the ferry operator, he scanned the slow-moving river. Tree stumps on the opposite shore, which would be submerged in the spring flood, stood up stark and bare like splintered stalks in an old garden. Soon, they'd dispose of the body . . . if the soldiers didn't stop them!

When the ferry gained the far shore, they disembarked and headed upstream. The wagon bumped and creaked over rocks and stones, causing Haddonfield's body to thud against the sideboard. Behind them came a sudden volley of gunshots.

"Drive!" John grasped Matthew's shoulder. "Drive!"

"Relax, John." The older man chucked a fist over his shoulder and spoke in a calm voice. "We don't want the Yankees to think we've got some reason to run away."

John turned around as a trooper rode out into the field, dismounted, and stooped to inspect a deer.

"They're foraging." Matthew chuckled and took a swig from his flask. "Like us, they never have enough meat."

With their thoughts concentrated on the task to come, they drove in silence for several miles until the road dropped down to a thick stand of trees at a secluded inlet.

"I think it's time." John motioned Matthew to stop as he scanned the area, looking for soldiers hidden in the thick brush or trees, their horses held at short tether to prevent them from neighing or stamping their feet.

Anxious to be done with their deed, everyone jumped down, unloaded the body, and scurried to gather large, flat stones lying on the shore. Using a coil of thick brown rope, John lashed the stones to the carpeted bundle. As he turned the body on its side, a flap of blanket fell off, exposing Haddonfield's upper chest and face.

"Good God!" George sputtered. The other students stood there aghast with mouths open.

"Damn!" John stared at the broken nose and the dried blood, now caked and turned dark brown. The open mouth with the lips curled back against the gritted teeth, and the wild staring in the green eyes, attested to the fact Haddonfield had glimpsed the fires of Hell as death's door opened.

"Cover him up!" Matthew demanded. "Jesus Christ!"

His hands shaking, John slapped the blanket over Haddonfield's broken face and tied it with several large knots. What he'd seen would haunt him forever.

"All together now," John said as they lifted the body. In time with the clanging of a church bell far downstream, he counted. At "three" they heaved the soldier's body into the water. The corpse landed with a huge splash, and waves washed back to shore.

"May God punish the man who raped my wife and daughter!" Willis intoned. His hands shook and he stooped, picked up Mums, and held the terrier tight against his winter coat.

"And to the criminal who killed my dog," John said, wiping beads of sweat from his face. *Good! You've said it aloud for the first time in months. Now finish the catharsis.* "May he rot in hell forever!" he said, and a smile appeared on his lips. He stood up straight, feeling like a heavy burden had been lifted from his shoulders.

"To the man who stole repeatedly from my store," Matthew said, watching the road in both directions. "Amen!"

"And for the bastard who beat up our professor," his students chimed.

As he stared at the water John felt little or no remorse over the murder. Haddonfield was evil through and through. Some men got that way from the war, but he suspected this Yankee soldier had always been like a swamped vessel: filled to the gunwales with anger, hostility, and rage.

"Let's get back to town," Matthew grouched as he listened, now, for the sounds of a farmer's wagon. Or the hoof beats of approaching cavalry.

John climbed aboard the wagon, and they drove away in silence. Several times he glanced over his shoulder, worried that—somehow—the body might

surface downstream near the town. But what Southerner would care if a Yankee corpse washed up at the Clarksville wharf?

And if something untoward happened? Weird scenarios popped into the forefront of John's mind. Like pesky mosquitoes buzzing around in the night, they simply wouldn't let him alone.

I must leave with George, Wilson, and the rest of my students when they go east, he thought. If the Yankees somehow linked him to Haddonfield's killing—and they eventually would—he'd hang for sure. Again, he came to the same conclusion: enlistment in the Confederate Army was the only way to stay alive.

CHAPTER NINE

Death of a Relationship

One stifling day near the end of July 1862, John sat on a shaded bench on the Clarksville courthouse commons, an unopened letter from his mother on his lap. Reluctant to read the letter, he gazed at a statue of a Revolutionary War hero. The statue, its horse and rider now faded with age, reminded him of his dream about Thermopylae and how he had warned the maiden Arete about the approaching Persian army. And it brought to mind his failure to do something—anything!—when the Yankees had arrived in Clarksville. *Some war hero you are*, he chastised himself.

Grudgingly, he opened his mother's letter. Short and reproachful like all of them, she related how his younger brother, Robert, had run away from home and enlisted as a drummer boy in the Union army. Of course, his mother said, John was to blame for this impetuous act because he'd told his brother to follow his dream: join the army. His mother was "dreadfully fearful" for Robert's safety, and went on to complain Robert was just like his father who had run off to fight in the Mexican War of 1848. A daguerreotype of a uniformed Robert was enclosed. John smiled. Finally, the boy had gotten out from under his mother's thumb and turned into a fine looking young man of fourteen.

John crossed one leg over the other, pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket, and wiped beads of sweat from his brow. He glanced at some quarrelsome soldiers as they left the Montgomery Hotel. One pushed the other off the curb, and that brought on a tirade of profanity. They snarled at each other like tom cats, raised their fists, and circled each other. Too soon fisticuffs broke out.

John looked the other way. This Private Haddonfield business had made him anxious and fidgety ever since they'd tossed his corpse into the Cumberland. The threat of the body surfacing close to town drove him mad, and served as a factor in all his actions. The sooner he left Clarksville, he reasoned, the better off he would be.

To compound his problems, John's former students dawdled while they worked on the Smiley family farm, settled their affairs, and packed up their belongings. Because the boys never ceased to have something to do, and their money never ran out, the days had turned into weeks, and then months.

John put his mother's letter away. Taking a long, calming breath he thought about the scores of wounded Confederate soldiers trickling back to Clarksville. Some of these boys were his former students who enlisted early on in the war. Once filled with patriotic fervor, they were now reduced to skeleton-like figures in tattered uniforms—some hideously maimed, others with only an arm or leg missing. With blank eyes, they walked amid Clarksville's sea of bluecoats and, knowing their lives were ruined, pondered the reason for their fate. This repeated scene had dampened—but not dissolved—John's enthusiasm for a drink at the trough of war.

His fear at again being rejected by the army plagued him. With Fred along, however, he reckoned he would have the moral support he needed to convince an army doctor of his worthiness. But Fred was having trouble making financial arrangements for his wife and daughter. Finding someone competent to lease the barbershop during wartime was no easy task, and that raised the possibility his friend might not leave with the group.

Then there was Lydia, whom he had avoided because he feared her rejection if she found out he was involved in this Haddonfield business. Of course, John knew she was preoccupied with Lieutenant Wallace. The two of them attended church and social functions on a regular basis, and took extended walks down by the river. Nothing could be done about that. Consequently, John hadn't called at her house these past few months. Oh, there was the chance meeting last Sunday as she came out church. A quick

"hello" to her and the lieutenant, and then the couple had gotten into her father's carriage and driven off. Other than that, there had been nothing. What had seemed like the start of a promising romance at the Robertsons' Sunday dinner in early March faded like a flickering lamp about to run out of oil. As a result, John despaired his relationship with her would wither away.

"Professor!" Wilson Compton cried out as he and the other students ran up to him. "We're ready to go east!"

"You're kidding!" John said. He shook hands with each of the exuberant young men. "When do we leave?"

"Tomorrow!" Wilson said.

"Why the sudden change in plans?" John grinned. To tease them a little, he put on a perplexed look. "You mean to say you've finally run out of excuses?"

"We're tired of milking and tilling fields." Wilson shrugged. "But I still have plans to paint an epic battle scene while it's taking place."

"That's good," John said. "Has Fred found someone to run his business?"

"A little old man who used to hang around his shop," Darren said. "Fred's giving him barbering lessons as we speak."

"Amen," John said. "Shall we start packing, gentlemen, so we can get an early start tomorrow?"

"First things first," Curley said. "We need to celebrate this momentous event." He produced a bottle of whiskey, took a long swig, and handed it around to each man. Finally, they sat down on the courthouse lawn and began to drink seriously until the bottle was empty.

"How will we get to the army?" Wilson asked, looking up at John.

"We'll go by horseback to Knoxville," John said. "Then take the train east into Virginia and see where we wind up."

"Oh, Lord," Wilson said as he struggled to his feet. "My poor backside will be aching from all that riding. Let's go get packed, fellows! See you later, Professor."

Grinning and excited for the first time in months, John was headed to Matthew's store to make his good-byes when a body of cavalry dashed around the square. After their dust cleared he saw Lydia marching along on the other side of the street. Her face had a querulous, accusative look on it. He tried to avoid her, but she spotted him and motioned him to come over.

"I need to talk to you, John Martin," she said, a tartness in her voice. "You've been avoiding me and I need to know why."

"I've been thinking about my future," he said. He took her by the elbow and led her to a bench beneath a huge oak tree. "Sit a moment with me, will you?"

"So what conclusions have you come to?" she asked with that trace of inquisitiveness in her voice that reminded him of his mother.

He laughed to himself. She had given him the perfect opportunity to reveal his plans. After they were seated he took her hand and held it. "I believe, like the ancients, that man is born to die," he said in the most serious tone he could muster, "and he should die an honorable death, preferably in battle and always in the defense of his family."

"Nonsense," she interrupted. "You have no family here."

"The citizens of Clarksville are my surrogate family." He waved his hand, dismissing her next objection. "By dying on the field of battle one attains eternal glory, and that justifies the warrior's existence on this wretched earth."

She didn't respond for a moment, then smiled and spoke in a cheery voice. "You've either been reading—or drinking. In fact, you sound like King Hrothgar from the *Beowulf* I studied in my high school English classes." She gave a short, nervous laugh.

"I speak like King Hrothgar, or Leonidas of Sparta." He chuckled. "However, it is I who am telling you this, not them."

"So tell me, John Martin, what's the real problem with you?" She leaned back and laughed.

"I'm bored with tending bar, and dearly miss being a teacher." He flung his hands in the air. "And I'm bored with my cramped boarding house, bored with these dirty old streets, and bored with Clarksville in general!"

He stared at an abandoned house. A relic from the Revolutionary War, all its windows had been broken except for one in the entrance door. In that pane John saw Haddonfield's grisly face the day the blanket had come off down by the river. He shuddered and drew back.

"And are you bored with me, John Martin?" she asked, misreading his thoughts.

"No," he said. Then he looked into the misty green of her eyes, and the old desire for her blossomed. He blushed. "You are like the sun and the rain, which nourish the spring crops in the fields and make them grow." He held her hand tighter. "And how I desire to be like those crops, so your hand might touch me and allow my soul to blossom and grow." He looked deep into her eyes. "But you exclude me from the field because of your outside interest with Lieutenant Wallace."

Her face flushed, and she averted his eyes. "I cannot for the life of me explain my attraction to him, or my reluctance to contemplate a life with you." Her mouth dropped open in surprise at what she had uttered. She pulled her hand from his grasp.

"I'm not asking you to." Again, he took her hand, and this time held it with both of his. It was warm and soft, and shook.

"Give me time, John." Her chin jutted. "You've planted yourself in a different field. You're attracted by violence—something I've moved away from. This war you seek to enter has butchered my brothers and killed thousands of innocents on both sides." Her voice turned shrill. "For me, this war is vulgar, immoral, and ungodly—the complete antithesis of all I believe in!"

For a moment he feared she had found out about Private Haddonfield. In desperation he said, "It is true a love of war resides in my family; but it goes far deeper than pride in my father's and grandfather's soldiering. Don't you see, Lydia? I have something to prove, both to myself and to everyone in this town—yourself included."

"Which is?" She arched her eyebrows.

"That I'm a man, in spite of this damn leg!"

"I like you the way you are!" she said with great passion.

"A voice inside is calling me to battle." He took a deep breath and plunged ahead. "In the morning, Fred Knox, my students, and I are going east to join up with Lee's army."

Lydia gasped, and looked up at him with tears in her eyes. "There's no need for you to go. Don't you realize what this war is all about? It's about men killing each other, not proving yourself!"

"Then marry me now." He put his hands on her shoulders and pulled her face up close to his. Her perfume swirled and he bent to kiss her.

"So I can be a war widow for the rest of my life?" She looked away, and then the tears started, slowly at first until they ran in little rivulets down her cheeks.

"I'm coming back, Lydia." He held her tight when she struggled to move. Her face was inches from his, her perfume intoxicating.

"Only God knows for sure."

"Jesus Christ!" He released his hold on her and dropped his hands. "Why do you refuse my offer?"

Her face brightened and she turned on him. "Your whole problem, John, is you're an ox! No, I correct myself. Only a dumb ox would jump into a foray such as the one you're heading for."

"An ox? How dare you call me that!" He stood up.

She grasped his hand, but he flung it free. Stung by her words, he left her sitting there with the tears streaming down her cheeks, and stomped off to his tiny garret to begin packing. At dawn he would leave this bleak existence, and escape the infernal threat of Private Haddonfield and Lydia's prying questions. Leg or no damn leg, he would fulfill his destiny and prove his worth as a man!

CHAPTER TEN

A Short, Pitched Battle

"I shore need a drink!" Curley said after they stepped off the train in Culpeper, Virginia in late August. He mopped his brow with the back of his hand and shook the excess sweat off. "It's just too dammed hot!"

"I *thought* we came east to enlist in the army," John said. He, Fred, and the other students walked their horses along a dusty street with plank sidewalks lining both sides. Like hot poker the sun's rays bore down on them as they passed a general store, a two-story hotel, and a livery stable. Since they wore no uniforms, no one paid them any attention, not even two dogs lolling in the shade of the livery. It was, after all, a Southern town.

"Hot ain't the word!" Smiley grouched as they approached a sign that read, MacTavish's Saloon. His red hair flamed, and streams of sweat rolled off his forehead like water sluicing over a spillway.

"We need a temporary diversion." Wilson darted over to the saloon and threw open the door. He bent forward at the hips and made a grand, sweeping bow, the large ostrich plume in his hat touching the ground. "Step right in, gentlemen."

"Oh I guess it'll be all right," John said. He tied his horse, Comet, to the hitching post and followed Fred and the students inside. Empty chairs and tables set in a haphazard fashion filled a long, rectangular room with a huge stone fireplace along one wall and a mahogany bar opposite it. The setting reminded him of the Montgomery Hotel, and he grew homesick thinking of Clarksville, Lady, and, most of all, Lydia.

"What'll it be, gents?" the bartender, a robust man with black hair the color of a steam locomotive, asked. He wiped his hands on his white apron and then set his fists on the edge of the bar.

"Whiskey all around," John said, and shoved some greenbacks toward him.

"Coming right up!" The man set seven glasses in a row, reached for a bottle, and filled each glass half full. "How's this for starters?"

"Excellent." John picked up his glass. "To us, men, and to the South!"

They raised their glasses, cheered, and swallowed their whiskeys in one gulp. The ruddy-faced bartender refilled their glasses. Then the hip-hip-hoorays began. They continued throughout the third and fourth rounds. Soon, individual voices metamorphosed into a roar that sounded like a waterfall.

"Have you written to Martha yet?" John asked after he and Fred took seats at a table near the door. The clopping of horses' hooves on the street outside caught his ear and he looked out a dusty window as a troop of cavalry stopped in front of the saloon. Their gray uniforms assured John these soldiers would be friendly.

"I started a letter in Knoxville, wrote some more when we got to Bristol, and mailed it, finally, in Lynchburg this morning." Fred chuckled. Already drunk, he slouched in his chair, and then slid down so his head rested on the seat back.

"I'm sure your wife will be pleased."

"She didn't like my going one bit." Fred sat up. "Started a letter to Lydia?"

"What's the use?" John recalled her stinging rebuke beneath the huge oak. "She called me an ox for wanting to enlist, and then compounded her insult by saying only a dumb ox would have more sense than to jump into such a foray!"

With a bang the entrance door swung open and a dozen Confederate soldiers trooped in, followed by a tall, lanky man wearing captain's bars. Spencer repeating rifles in hand, the soldiers fanned out in a semicircle while the captain blocked the doorway. His hand resting on his holster, the captain said to his men, "Start looking for stragglers."

Sensing trouble John's hand grazed the Colt Navy revolver hidden beneath his shirt. He stood up, knocking his chair over, and locked eyes with the captain. A hard determination shone in those hazel eyes.

A big trooper wearing sergeant's stripes strode over to Curley. "Got any papers, bub?" he asked in a strong Virginia accent.

"And who might you be?" Curley drawled, jumping up to face his accuser. "The captain's messenger boy?"

The sergeant was not amused. "What regiment did you skeedaddle from, you drunken sot?"

"None at all!" Curley got up in his face.

"You one of those kinds?" The sergeant rolled up his sleeves, exposing his brawny arms.

"Get away from me, dog breath!" Curley swung and missed, and his opponent picked him up with one arm, drew his fist back, and hit him, sending him crashing over the bar top.

"You dirty bastard!" Darren jumped on the sergeant, followed by George, Smiley, and the rest of the men.

The soldiers piled in. A tall soldier with red hair charged at John and threw a wild punch. John sidestepped and smacked him on the side of the head, hit him two more times before the captain jumped onto John's back.

John drove an elbow into the captain's ribs. The officer let go and crashed against the bar. He stood there gasping, a wild glaring in his eyes.

John laughed, and was staggered by a roundhouse punch to the jaw from another man. The captain lurched forward and swung. John ducked and hit him square in the left eye.

All around John, chairs and tables hurtled through the air and crashed against the bar and walls. Exhilarated, he felt like a soldier fighting a momentous battle. Vile oaths were uttered, glass shattered, and then a shot rang out.

"Stop fighting!" the captain shouted, holding his revolver over his head.

Smiley threw a chair at him.

The captain sidestepped, and fired, blowing Smiley's hat clean off. "The next one, sir, goes through that thick skull of yours!"

By the look on Smiley's face, John could tell his friend needed no further convincing. Nor would the others. The fight ended. The men sank down on the floor or leaned against the bar, breathing hard and bleeding from numerous cuts.

"Hoo-ee! You're the roughest group of stragglers I've ever run into," the sergeant said, nursing a bloody nose. "Damn! Where you boys from?"

"Tennessee," John said, holding a handkerchief to a gash on his cheek. Blood seeped through it and he pressed harder to staunch the flow.

"Figures."

"All right," the captain said, picking up his hat. "Let's get these jokers out of here."

"Who in the hell are you?" John asked, leaning against the bar.

"Captain Lloyd Hamet to you, young man." The officer pushed forward until he stood almost on John's toes. He had a narrow jaw, beak-like nose, and a mane of curly black hair that tumbled down to his shoulders.

"You won't find any stragglers among us," John said. He limped over to help Fred to his feet. "We've come east to enlist and do our duty. So if you don't mind, we'll be on our way to find Lee's army."

"I believe you've put that limp on for show." The captain snorted in derision.

"What?" John spun around and stumbled.

"It's pretty convincing, though." The captain laughed. "Where'd you learn that act? In the circus?"

"It's no show," John snarled. He raised his clenched fists.

"I'll call your bluff," the captain said. "If you're looking to enlist, you won't mind if I swear you into the army right now." He leaned against the bar and grinned.

John looked at his friends. They shrugged as if to say, *might as well*. "Have it your way, sir."

"Raise you right hand, men," the captain said, and swore them all in. When they finished they signed enlistment papers dated 27 August, 1862.

"Now that that's done," the sergeant said, "we'll get cleaned up and show you new troopers where you'll be sleeping tonight. Follow me."

On their way out the door, Fred slapped John on the shoulder. "Well, we did it—Grandpa and Gimp are soldiers!"

After breakfast the next morning, the sergeant ordered the men to assemble in front of the barn where they had spent the night. Curley seemed hung over and miserable. Captain Hamet looked worse with his swollen left eye. Whorls of black and blue stared out from it.

"Men," Hamet began, "we've received word from the local citizenry that a large detachment of Yankee cavalry comes down this road every morning. Today, we're going to give them a little surprise."

John's heart thumped against his breastbone. Any prior doubts about why he was here were dissolved. Today, he was going to see some real action, not the kind that culminated in a mere barroom brawl. Now, he'd have the opportunity to prove his mettle on the field of battle. This was something he'd waited for all his life!

"You men line up in the woods on both sides of the road and stay out of sight until I give the order to fire."

"Yes, sir!" they said crisply.

"That your weapon?" Hamet smiled as he turned to John.

John held up his revolver. "We brought our own, sir."

"You stick close to me." Hamet grinned. "With those civilian clothes I don't want anyone mistaking you for a Yankee."

John laughed. "When will we get uniforms?"

"Who knows?" Hamet shrugged and strode off to check on the men. He called over his shoulder, "they're in short supply like everything else in this man's army."

After John had taken up a position behind a thick, fallen tree he waited, running his finger over the barrel on his revolver and watching the dusty expanse of road in both directions—so there wouldn't be any surprises. If there were . . . well, John figured he'd be the one to sound the alarm and save all the men. Be a real hero, like in his dream at Thermopylae.

Realizing this vision of Thermopylae would keep popping up, John reckoned he had better do something to lay it to rest. He took a deep, calming breath. He imagined Spartan trumpets sounding in his ears, harsh and tinny, and he conjured up a vision of himself taking a last-stand action against the Yankees (the modern Persians). This valiant effort would allow General Lee the time to marshal his forces and defeat the enemy; and permit John the latitude to prove to his students he was something more than a mere teacher. The one thing he feared most in life was to be thought of as a pedagogue who, as Shakespeare had put it, told a tale, "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

When a warm breeze carried the sweet scent of honeysuckle to him, John looked closely for its source. A clump of nearby blueberry bushes distracted him, and he remembered the time his mother had baked a pie after he brought home two pails of blueberries. He hadn't told her he'd eaten a half pail while picking. Later, she guessed the truth when he turned down a second helping of pie.

Now, he pulled out a handkerchief, wiped the sweat off his forehead, and glanced at the cloudless sky. Some buzzards circled over a field fifty yards to his right. *Probably something was dead or dying over there. Was it a portent of things to come?*

His gut twisted and he returned to watching the road. From where he'd been told the Yankees would come, the highway stretched out in a long, winding S-curve. Out of sight in the thick stands of trees to the right and left, men hunkered down, their rifles and shotguns resting across their thighs or held with the barrels pointing up.

Captain Hamet returned and squatted next to John. Sweat ran off his face and heavy blotches stained the front of his uniform jacket, making the pale gray look black. "Nervous?"

"A bit," John admitted. He licked dust from his parched lips, and then smelled the sourness of his own sweat. A violent spasm twisted and churned his gut, and he held his hand tight against his stomach to ease the pain.

"Your first time?"

John nodded.

"Don't worry." The captain patted him on the shoulder. "Follow my lead, and everything will be fine. Commence firing only when I give the command. We've set this trap dozens of times for these dumb Yankees."

"I hope this won't be the first time something goes wrong," John said.

"I've watched you walk," Hamet said, ignoring him. "That limp is genuine, isn't it?"

John nodded, and then found his voice and told him an abbreviated version of what had happened when he was ten years old. As he finished, a lookout atop the barn's roof waved his hat, signaling the approach of riders.

Hamet motioned to his sergeants, pointed down the road, and then put his index finger over his lips.

In a nearby tree some birds chirped and a pair of chattering squirrels ran up, down, and around the trunk playing a game of tag. Their frivolity broke the stillness of the tense wait.

Soon, a large body of Yankee cavalry came around the curve and started up the road toward the waiting men. A blue pennant marked their head; a trail of dust, their rear. A lieutenant rode next to his commanding officer, a captain.

"They've no one riding point," Hamet whispered.

John tensed and held his revolver close to his body. "That's dumb!"

From the top of a nearby tree a woodpecker drilled for worms in a cadenced tap, tap, tap. The measured beating reminded John of the University of Virginia Marching Band with its snare drums and stark, blaring horns. He recalled a

pre-war rally in Charlottesville two years ago. The martial music, along with the heated speeches, had fired his thirst for war.

Now, when he glanced up the dusty road he imagined the marching band coming around the curve, its horns blaring and pennants flapping in the breeze as the musicians marched in lockstep formation toward the soldiers with waiting guns.

Again, his stomach twisted. The stench of his sweat nauseated him.

"Easy now," Hamet whispered to John. "Let them come even and then some."

As the sun beat down on John's brow, the pounding hooves intensified, growing louder and louder. With his hands shaking and sweat sluicing off his brow, John clenched his revolver and counted twenty men riding their snorting horses at a canter. *Christ almighty! What have you gotten yourself into?*

A flock of birds burst from some maples near the road. Hamet leaped to his feet and yelled, "Fire!"

Flames belched from the Confederate line. Over the roar of the Spencers, John's revolver cracked, Curley's shotgun wumped, and Fred's derringer popped.

Shocked and bewildered Yankees fell from their horses. Those not wounded charged the Confederate line, breaking through in places as their horses rode over crouching Confederates. Shrieks and screams from both sides filled the air.

With drawn saber waving above his head, the Yankee captain galloped straight for Hamet. Hamet took careful aim with his revolver and squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened. "Damn!" he cried.

His horse snorting as it lunged, the rider quickly closed the gap.

"Good Lord!" Hamet kept clicking the trigger. He swore again, leaned forward, and worked frantically at trying to remove a jammed cartridge.

The Yankee officer raised his arm and began the death stroke.

John brought his revolver up and fired twice. The captain jerked backward and then slumped sideways. John fired two more rounds, and the officer fell

from the saddle. As his horse broke and ran, the man's foot caught in the stirrup, and he was dragged off, facedown. His face melted, turning to brown and red slush. John cringed and turned away.

The Confederate firing continued for several more minutes until all the Yankees had been killed or wounded.

"All right!" Hamet stepped onto the road. "Gather the wounded and bury the dead. On the double!" He turned to John. "You saved my life. Thank you."

John grinned, trying to feel heroic. "What happened to your revolver?"

"I don't know." A perplexed look spread across his face as he examined the weapon. "It's the first time it ever jammed."

From across the road came the screams of a wounded man. "One of the new one's hit," someone hollered. "And Sarge is wounded!"

John limped across the road and found George on the ground beside a tree. He was screaming and thrashing about while two men tried to restrain him. Up close, he had a severe thigh wound and half of his jaw had been shot away. Bright red blood gushed from both wounds as a corporal worked at staunching the flows.

A wave of nausea swept over John as he knelt beside George and took his trembling hand. Tears welled up in his eyes when George squeezed back. *Oh God, this is bad!*

The boy tried to speak, but made only a bubbling sound. Spittle mixed with blood drained from his mouth. When he coughed, bits of red teeth showed through the gap in his jaw. He gripped John's hand and moaned.

John looked at the corporal.

The man shook his head and turned away to tend the sergeant.

George's moaning stopped, and he lay there with his mouth open and his eyes staring at the sky. His fists were still clenched.

John pried open a fist to release his own hand. Dazed, he stood up and looked around. "Where's Smiley?" he said to no one in particular. "I don't see him anywhere."

A trooper pointed to a man leaning against a tree. "That him?"

John recognized Smiley and went to check on his student. The lad wasn't moving. He'd been shot through the forehead. Blood ran down the right side of his face, soaking his denim shirt where the top portion of a musical composition protruded from a pocket. The back of his head was red pulp where the ball had come out. John was reminded of the captain's prophetic statement in MacTavish's Saloon: "The next one, sir, goes right through that thick skull of yours!"

John bent down and retrieved the composition, closed Smiley's eyes, and laid the boy flat. The rich brown earth around him had already turned dark red.

"It happened real quick," the trooper said to John. "If that's any consolation to you, sir."

"Thanks," John whispered. Sick at heart, he turned away. Other bodies were spread out or slumped over. Those men were already dead.

"Bury them," Hamet ordered as he came by. "Quickly, men. There's bound to be more Yankees in the area!"

John helped dig the holes and bury the dead. Someone threw in Smiley's body. It landed face down on the pulp of George's shattered jaw. John threw in a load of dirt, and George's hand jerked upward as if asking a question in class.

After they finished they mounded the dirt and patted it flat with the backs of their shovels. No words were said for the deceased as Hamet had already given the next order: Ride!

Later that day the column headed north, following a twisting road that plunged in and out of an eerie pine forest. When they were in among the trees the sun filtered down through the canopy, its light diffused like a hand held up with the fingers splayed. Out in the open, the sun beat hard upon them as they shadowed a mountain range off to the west. More pines, deep green and thick, flowed all the way to the top of that range.

"Where are we going?" John asked Hamet as he rode beside him. Poison ivy grew alongside the road, curled up over a fencerow, and encircled the trunks and lower branches of some maple trees, choking them.

"Up into Maryland to meet General Lee," the captain replied, nursing a bruised hand. "Barring any more trouble like we had this morning, we should catch up to him in three to four days."

"That's interesting he would venture so far north," John said.

"He's planning on taking the war home to the Yankees." Hamet grinned. "They need a taste of it in their own backyard like we've had for the past year and a half. Might cool their thirst for war."

John looked down the road in the direction from which they'd come. *How many more of his fine young students would die before this war ended?* he wondered, dreading the answer. A hard, hot lump formed in his throat. The only way he could disgorge it would be to wail with grief for George and Smiley. In his mind their faces flickered and then faded as he shoveled dirt over them. Fighting the urge to cry, John tried to summon a vision of Thermopylae with his sword held high as he charged into battle.

Instead, he felt helpless and alone, and more keenly aware of the clapping of the horses' hooves and the trail of thick, choking dust fanning out behind the column of men riding north. The rhythmic clapping reminded him, over and over, he was going into a real battle. It was bigger than a playground brawl with a school bully, the stupid fistfight with Haddonfield, and the bar fight and minor skirmish at Culpeper. It was, he sensed, greater in magnitude than anything he'd ever imagined or read about in the textbooks he used at the University of Virginia. He cracked his knuckles one, by one, and with that came the realization he had no say in the matter now.

"Oh God," he wondered half aloud. "What am I getting myself into?"

"What did you say?" Hamet asked.

"I was praying," John lied.

"A good thing for a man to do," the captain said. "I've got a bad feeling about this upcoming battle."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Antietam

"We're definitely lost," Captain Hamet admitted as they reached the end of a draw one morning. He dismounted, pulled out his map, and sat on a fallen log. "We should have caught up with Lee's army long before now."

"Perhaps we've swung too far to the east," John said, letting his horse, Comet, drink from a stream. He peered through the thick brush and trees, looking for signs of movement. "We don't want to wander into an ambush like we set for the Yankees back in Culpeper."

"Um," the captain said, half listening to John as he unfolded the cumbersome military document. He knew John's courage and had recognized his intelligence from their conversations. Learning that John was a college professor, Hamet had elevated him above the other men.

John had been with Hamet's column for close to three weeks now, studying the men, observing their tactics, and emulating his comrades. Riding until well after dark each day, the column had made steady progress north toward Lee's army while at the same time managing to avoid the main body of Union cavalry. Since noon of last Friday, however, they seemed to be wandering in great sweeping circles, taking unmarked roads and then doubling back, only to repeat the process over and over on yet another road.

"Is the map accurate?" John asked, sitting next to the captain. He leaned over so he could see.

"It may not be." Hamet had his compass out and had turned the map so it was oriented toward north. He fell silent. "Listen!"

Like thunder heralding a late summer storm, a distant booming echoed on the hills off to the northwest. Nearby, a gust of wind swept down through the trees, rustling the leaves and blocking out any sound. When the wind stopped, the deep booming resumed.

"I doubt there's a storm brewing," John said, glancing at the cloudless sky.

"That's cannon," Hamet said, his face brightening with a smile. "And where there's artillery, we'll find Lee!"

"Wilson!" John called over his shoulder. "Put that sketch book away. We're moving out."

"Okay, Professor." Wilson stuffed the book in his rucksack. Each time the column had stopped, either to eat or water their horses, Wilson had pulled out a charcoal pencil and worked on his sketch. This one was a drawing, he had explained earlier when John looked over his shoulder, of Yankee cavalry moving along a forest trail. Soldiers squatting in the brush waited to ambush them.

Now, Hamet guided the column back to the entrance of the draw and headed them northwest, traversing land that rose in a steady incline. By ten o'clock, when the sun beat like hot pokers on the soldiers' necks, John found himself standing atop a mountain pass. A posted sign told him he'd reached Turner's Gap.

Acrid gray smoke drifted into his face and grew in intensity as he rode down the westernmost slope.

"Judging by the smell, it's not looking good," Fred remarked, pulling his horse alongside John's Comet. "Think there was a battle?"

"We'll soon see."

Within a half hour they came upon a scene that caused the men to stop and stare in horror. Across the land lay scores of dead bodies and the carcasses of mutilated horses and mules. Fires smoldered from the wreckage of overturned caissons and splintered supply wagons. Interspersed with these were great jagged holes caused by artillery shells.

"God Almighty!" John said, gawking. "I've never seen anything like this!"

"And it won't be the last," Hamet murmured solemnly.

Farther into this grisly setting, a stench filled the air, and flies swarmed under the broiling sun. Cursing men with white handkerchiefs covering their faces stood in the backs of open wagons and heaved lifeless bodies into a parallel trench. Other men used long spades to throw dirt over them.

"Damn!" John said, reminded of the burial party at Culpeper. The hideous odor assaulted his nostrils, and he fought not to wretch. Comet whinnied and reared until John could barely control the big bay. Finding himself out of line, he hurried to catch up with the quick-moving column.

When they reached the outskirts of Sharpsburg, Maryland, Hamet sent John forward to a battery of artillery to speak with the officer in charge.

"How do I find General Hood's headquarters, sir?" he asked.

"Take the Hagerstown Pike over yonder—" the officer pointed to a falling-down sign, "—and follow it a spell until you come to the Dunker Church. It's white and has no steeple. You can't miss it."

"Much obliged, sir." John saluted, rode back to Hamet, and repeated the directions.

"Thanks," Hamet said.

The column followed the road until they reached the church. Behind the whitewashed structure a sea of tents filled a large pasture bordered by a thick wood. The trees provided cover and concealment from the road, and from anyone scanning this position from the hills to the north and east. Muskets were stacked in neat rows in front of the tents. Hundreds of ragtag, emaciated soldiers sat in small groups by the tents, or drilled on a makeshift parade ground. They may have ragtag uniforms, John noticed, but their drilling was impeccable, indicating a well-trained body of men. From what he'd read about military tactics, precise maneuvers on the battlefield sometimes meant the difference between victory and defeat . . . or life and death.

"So this is Hood's encampment," John mused.

"I don't see the general." Hamet said, and then spun on his heel and pointed north. "Good God! Will you look at that?"

More than a mile to the north, an endless column of bluecoats streamed over a hill and marched toward an encampment of white tents pitched in a wooded area. Bright colored pennants at marked intervals indicated this was a sizeable force of men. Behind them came another force of equal size, and then another.

"Are they getting ready to attack?" John asked while watching the ant-like progression.

"No," Hamet said. "Like us, they're merely setting up their encampment. There'll be one hell of a scrap tomorrow. You mark my words."

"How many Yankees are there?" John asked, noting yet another contingent of bluecoats setting up camp, this time off to the east.

"Our cavalry estimates about sixty thousand men," Hamet said. "But not all of them will be engaged at once."

"Why not?"

"A good general keeps some men in reserve," Hamet said. "And McClellan, the Union commander, will probably hold back at least half his men. He's overly cautious."

John frowned. "And how many men do we have?"

"About forty thousand."

"So if we're outnumbered why are we here?" John asked, prickles of fear growing in his breast. He remembered the carnage at South Mountain, and wondered if that scene would be repeated here tomorrow. "Isn't there a good chance they'll annihilate us?"

Hamet smiled and said, "General Lee, bless his soul, knows what he's doing. He's never let us down before."

"I hope this won't be the first time," John said. He frowned at the inadequacy of Hamet's answer. Like a child, the captain was so trusting with their lives.

"The Yankees under McClellan are disorganized at headquarters level," Hamet said seeing John's concern. "And this translates down through Corps and Division. Additionally, they have an overabundance of political appointees

serving as brigade commanders or higher. Makes for more confusion, all of which General Lee is aware of and will use to good advantage as he has in the past."

"I see," John said, his fears partially allayed. Then he noticed the rows of twelve-pounder Napoleon cannon sitting in an open field southeast of the Dunker church. Two of these Southern batteries faced to the north, and the other two were angled to the east. Behind the batteries stood the dual-wheeled wooden limbers containing ammunition chests and various implements. Farther back stood the caissons with piles of additional ammunition. Inside the ammunition chests, among other things, he knew, were rounds of canister. When these were fired, steel balls fanned out like the blast from a shotgun, cutting down anything in their path.

Again, John thought about the carnage caused by the artillery at Turner's Gap. Unlike the battle at Thermopylae, tomorrow's battle would compound the slaughter tenfold as a result of new battlefield technology.

"I still don't see General Hood," Hamet said, shading his eyes with one hand. He glanced around then, and called to a man emerging from a nearby tent. "Lieutenant?"

"Sir?"

"I'm Captain Hamet attached to Hood's Division." John's companion pulled a sheath of papers from his breast pocket and flashed them to the lieutenant. "Here are my orders. Take these new men to Supply and get them outfitted properly."

"Will do, sir." The lieutenant saluted, called a sergeant over, and repeated the instructions.

The sergeant motioned to John and the others. "Follow me, boys."

"When you're done, show them where to tether their horses," Hamet ordered, "and then send them to make camp with us."

"Yes, sir."

After donning their new uniforms, Fred, Wilson, Curley, Darren, and John led their mounts behind some tents. John set a picket pin near the horses

already there. He removed Comet's saddle and blanket, and then lugged them over to a group of seated men. His friends drifted over as they finished their tasks.

"I'm John Martin from Clarksville, Tennessee," John said, as he went through the motions of introducing Fred and the others. A sergeant identified himself as "Henderson," and the men shook hands all around. Conversations sprang up about hometowns, wives, sweethearts, and kin. The sergeant started a bottle around.

While the men talked, Henderson pulled some green apples from a haversack, sliced them into quarters, and threw them into a three-legged kettle sitting on a roaring fire.

"I'll bet you're dying to know what's ahead for tomorrow," he said.

"Not exactly *dying*." John grimaced. He watched as Henderson stirred the kettle, added water from his canteen, and tossed in a handful of corn. The kernels were green and looked like small stones. Seeing that did not prevent hunger from gnawing at John's innards. "I would like to know what's expected."

"The bulk of Lee's army has arrived." The sergeant stoked the fire with some larger pieces of wood. "We're still waiting on General Jackson and his men who're busy taking care of army business down at Harper's Ferry. Once Old Stonewall gets here tomorrow, though, everyone's confident of a victory in the battle against McClellan."

John looked at one of the men who worked at waterproofing his boots with beeswax. With his thick features and big, round face, he bore an unsettling resemblance to Smiley.

Fred nudged John. "Don't he look like—?"

John nodded. A shudder swept over him at the thought of George and Smiley's deaths. Tomorrow, the other students, Fred, or himself might die. No one was immune from the Yankees' iron arrows.

As the late afternoon sun descended into the western trees, dozens of long shadows marched across the field toward the church and sitting men. *Like Persian soldiers advancing on Thermopylae*, John said to himself. Wilson had

picked up on the scene and was sketching the church, his pencil dashing across a sheet of paper to form a cartoon he would later fill with his intricate, and unique, artwork.

"Them's Yankees way over there," Sergeant Henderson said. He pointed north at a gap in the trees where orange dots pinpointed individual campfires. "And there's more of 'em over to the east."

John noticed the number of bluecoats in both positions had swelled in the last hour or so, which meant tomorrow's battle would be a large one.

"So let's get the evening meal out of the way and get some sleep," Sergeant Henderson said. Grinning, he pointed to the kettle. "There's some chickens in there, compliments of a local farmer."

"Thanks." John scooped apples, corn, and chicken onto his plate. "What is today's date?"

"September sixteenth."

After dinner, by the light of the campfire, John used his pocketknife and whittled a fine point on a charcoal pencil. He started a letter to Lydia, made several ludicrous attempts at confessing his love, and then tore up the note, knowing it was useless to pursue this course of action. Most likely, he thought as he rolled out his bedroll and lay down, she would not post a reply to him because she was embarrassed after calling him a dumb ox for wanting to enlist in the army. Sometimes, though, words spit in the heat of anger were true.

High in a nearby tree, the first bird broke into a long, rambling lyric that paid tribute to the advent of dawn. Others followed as men stirred, twitching like nervous cats while they mumbled in their dreams of battles fought and sweethearts loved.

A light drizzle had dampened John's hair, and the overnight drop in temperature had left him cold and shivering. Yet a part of him remained warm where a nocturnal Lydia had lain close, her head resting on his shoulder, and her arms and legs intertwined with his. As the dream receded, her hair fluttered over his cheek and she whispered, "I'll always love you." He reached

for her hand, found nothing. Pulling the wool blanket over his head, he sought the warmth of sleep, but the drizzle formed cold beads and seeped through the material.

He shivered again and jerked the blanket from his head. Close by, gray-black smoke from a campfire hugged the ground like early morning fog covering the Cumberland River's bottomlands. Yawning, he sat up and put on his boots. Then he stood up, flexing his muscles and stretching his arms above his head as a long groan escaped his lips.

Wilson smiled and shoved a plate of food at him. "Eat quick, Professor. Word's out: the enemy's on the move."

"What time is it?"

"About five-thirty," Wilson said.

"Seems awful dark for a battle." While he wolfed down his food, some men fiddled with the big guns in the field next to the church. An artillery horse passed gas, and then nothing more happened. John continued to eat, his mind quiet and peaceful, not filled with any particular thoughts.

Captain Hamet dashed by and shouted, "Form the men up along the road, Sergeant!"

"Right away, sir!" Henderson tossed his mess plate down by the fire and hollered, "Formation! On the double!"

From out of the mist two-dozen men with long-barreled rifles converged on the road in front of the Dunker Church. They joined a hundred or more already standing there.

"I thought we were cavalry," John said to the sergeant.

"General Lee needs infantrymen." He pointed. "Look! Here he comes now."

From the covering darkness of the oaks behind the church, a man on a white horse moved onto the road and turned toward John and the waiting soldiers. Flanking him left and right were two men, both bearded. The one on the left was taller by a head and wore a wide brimmed hat; the other, short and squat, was nondescript in the misty light.

"The one riding the white horse is General Lee," the sergeant said, his voice a mixture of awe and respect.

"And the other two?" John asked.

"Generals Jackson and Hood," the sergeant said, pointing left then right. "Morning Generals!" He saluted as the three riders came abreast.

Lee touched a finger to his hat, and said to Jackson, "Hooker will attack from the North Woods after the opening bombardment. Mansfield, who waits in reserve in the East Woods, will attack later."

"Yes, sir," Jackson said. He rode with one hand resting on the pommel while he chewed a lemon. Hood nodded.

Lee stopped, took off his hat, and ran a hand through his white hair. He pointed to the North Woods, and then raised his field glasses and sighted the Yankee positions. "They're getting ready now, as we speak. Are your men ready?"

"Yes, sir," Jackson said.

"Have they eaten since arriving?"

"They're awaiting breakfast right now," Jackson replied.

"Good," Lee said. "Let them eat. We'll hold them in reserve."

The three generals moved on down the road to the artillery, and then cut back around the church and into the woods.

John leaned on his rifle. *Like a surgeon contemplating an operation, Lee plots the course of history in a dispassionate manner. Is he aware Death and History stand shoulder-to-shoulder, ready to judge his errors? The former will devour his men; the latter his reputation.*

"Sergeant!" Hamet ordered. "March your men down the road to that cornfield." He pointed to a rise a half-mile up the pike. "It's on the other side."

"Yes, sir."

John quick-stepped with the formation along a brown road that sidled down a grade, bottomed, and then rose in a quick, upward climb. When they reached the crest of the hill he spotted a large cornfield—his practiced eye estimated at least forty acres, possibly more, surrounded on all sides by a low

post-and-rail fence. Dandelions, their yellow tufts sticking up like soldiers standing at attention, grew in large clumps in front of the fence, their mission to stand guard over scattered croppings of daylilies. A dirt track, probably used by a local farmer, ran parallel to the cornfield and meandered off to the west where it merged with the Pike amid a stand of trees named the West Woods. A meadow along that road headed north to another stand of trees and the vague outline of a farmhouse.

To the east of the cornfield an adjoining meadow sloped downward and ended in an area known as the East Woods. Yankee troops, their colorful pennants flying in the early morning breeze, waited, as if they expected an invitation from the Rebels to be hand delivered.

Before him lay row after row of ripe corn that stood as tall as a man. A warm breeze carrying the scents of hay and manure from a nearby farm reminded him of Clarksville and an earlier time—so long ago now, it seemed—when he'd been invited to Smiley's house for dinner. He, Smiley, and his father had stood on their farmhouse's front porch discussing the corn crop and how much it would bring at harvest.

Yes, Smiley. He considered he ought to write a letter to his parents explaining how their son had died. The same held true for George. *And if you should die? Who will write that letter?*

"Martin!" Captain Hamet laid a wet hand on John's shoulder. "I want you as an artillery observer. If you see artillery smoke coming from there—" he pointed to a range of shrouded hills a mile north of the cornfield, "—let me know immediately."

"Yes, sir!" John pulled out his field glasses and adjusted the lenses. He'd take care of this letter writing business later when—

"Get down!" Sergeant Henderson cried. "A Yankee sharpshooter will pick you off!"

John dropped to his belly as Hamet ordered Fred, Wilson, Curley, Darren, and the rest of the men across the road and into the field of six-foot high corn.

There were probably close to two hundred soldiers by now, and most of them were veterans.

With the advent of sunrise, harsh streaks of light colored the landscape blood red. John used the field glasses and scanned the faces of the men. Wilson and Fred sat with bowed heads, praying. Curley inspected an ear of corn while Darren watched a circling crow. Their eyelids twitching, the other green troops fingered the barrels of their Enfield rifles. The seasoned soldiers, their faces unreadable, leaned on their weapons and waited.

John pulled out his pocket watch and noted the time: ten minutes to six. The light in the east had grown brighter, and it swept over to the Pike where a batch of fog had settled in a hollow. From somewhere in its depths bugles blared, their sounds tinny and distorted.

Blue ghosts emerged from the mist and worked their way south along the Pike. A few shots rang out as the Yankees came within range of the pickets. Then, the pickets fell back and the men in the corn stood up.

"Hold your fire!" Hamet shouted as the blue horde drew nearer, their lines wavering like a rag-tag army. Equipment clanged and more bugles blared while somewhere behind them a band started playing off key.

"Yes sir," a sergeant replied.

Long rifle barrels swiveled around to the north and dipped parallel with the earth. Southern faces tightened, and hardened lips muttered oaths and prayers.

Behind them the Confederate cannon opened fire with staccato-like booms and flashes of orange and red. Bright explosions dotted the woods off to the north, falling behind the approaching federals. John adjusted the glasses as the ground erupted in huge geysers. Tree limbs broke off and flew across the ground, slamming into fence posts.

Huge palls of acrid cannon smoke drifted past his position, obliterating his view to the north. Behind him, the gunners went about their business of reloading and firing the big guns. Soon, there was an echo from the long range Yankee artillery over to the east. A few shells whizzed by overhead and crashed

into the nearby woods. Then, the shelling stopped, the smoke cleared, and the bluecoats came at them like a horde of angry, swarming locusts. Their bayonets glittered in the bright light.

"Easy," Hamet cautioned as they came within rifle range. "Easy, boys!"

Faces filled with questions as apprehensive heads turned to Hamet.

The captain let the bluecoats come forward another thirty paces. He drew his sword, lifted it above his head, and slashed downward, yelling, "Fire!"

En masse, the men let loose a withering volley that cut a wide swathe in the wave of approaching Yankees. The artillery joined them, firing loads of canister that decimated the enemy line. The men in the corn reloaded and fired again and again until the Yankee line broke and turned back to the North woods. Cheering and waving their hats, the men in gray slapped each other's backs and congratulated themselves on their great victory.

"Don't get cocky," Hamet warned the men. "They were only probing us."

The minutes dragged by as the sun rose. Bunches of daylilies along the Pike swayed in the breeze. John used his glasses and scanned across the corn, zeroing in on pennants and hundreds of blue-bellies massing again at the north woods. Two Union officers on horseback rode out in front of the waiting infantry. One of them scanned the cornfield. When his glasses stopped on John, the officer raised a hand and waved. John waved back, and then the two men turned and rode back through their lines. *Strange there's only Americans out here today*, John thought. *No British or French, or Indians or Spaniards. Just Americans. And within the hour we'll start killing each other in earnest.*

His hip aching where a stone bit into the flesh, he wiggled until he was comfortable, and then returned to watching the bluebellies. They were now formed into two professional lines, one behind the other. Battle flags popped up at intervals, and the row stretched to over a half mile in length. Another group of blue swept over the hill, forming two more lines behind the first group.

John focused his glasses on some artillery behind the Federal troops. Four groups of six men each stood at attention and waited. An officer raised his arm, held it for what seemed like minutes, and then dropped it perfunctorily.

"Puffs of smoke from the north, Captain Hamet!" John hollered.

A moment later the cornfield erupted in a flash of blinding light and an earth-shattering explosion. John ducked his head. Then the rest of the barrage came with an enormous booming like nothing he'd ever seen or heard. He cringed as the rich brown earth rose up, sending geysers of dirt and body parts flying everywhere. A shell burst twenty feet away, drowning out the screams of the wounded and dying. John kept his head down as the bombardment continued. With each explosion he bit his lip, chewed on it. Blood, salty and warm, ran in his mouth.

The cannon behind him opened fire, and the combined noise grew deafening. Twenty minutes later, when the shelling finally stopped, the cornfield lay in shreds. Where once had stood two hundred defiant young men, less than a score remained. In their midst Wilson and Fred wandered in aimless circles. Darren was nowhere to be found. With a shock, John realized Curley was propped on his thighs, his legs blown off at the hips. He was screaming for his Momma to save him. Blood spurted everywhere like water pouring from a burst dam. John's stomach lurched as Curley toppled forward. He lay still.

"Good Christ!" Hamet exclaimed, and sent Sergeant Henderson for reinforcements.

From the north came a huge wailing, and the half-mile row of bluecoats started forward. Flags dipped as the men surged across the field. As they came closer and closer, individual faces came into focus. When they were within rifle range, Hamet ordered a volley. Sheets of orange flamed out across the road. The Yankees plugged the gaps in their lines and pushed forward. At the sound of bugles, they charged.

The artillery by the church opened with double rounds of canister, leaving great holes in the Union advance. Still the bluecoats came. Through the glasses John watched the wounded writhing in agony on the ground, and the ragged, determined faces of the men sweeping around them.

"Reinforcements!" Captain Hamet called over and over. "Where the hell are my reinforcements?"

"Here we are, sir!" Sergeant Henderson led dozens of gray uniforms double-timing up the road from the church. At the cornfield they kneeled and fired volley after volley into the advancing bluecoats. Yankee shells started dropping on them, and that, combined with the return fire from the Federal infantry, thinned the gray lines.

"We can't hold this position!" Captain Hamet shouted. "Fall back!"

"Wilson! Fred!" John hollered at the awestruck men standing on the road. "Get back!"

The men couldn't hear him over the din of battle. Finally, Wilson snapped to and grabbed Fred by the arm.

Like crazed predators the Union soldiers swarmed into the flattened corn. They shot or bayoneted the stragglers and drove the rest of the men back across the road. John joined the other troops in a mass retreat to the Dunker church where vicious hand-to-hand fighting erupted. Men shouted and cursed as they struggled to kill each other.

A shell burst in the yard and the hot blast of the concussion knocked John flat. When he got back to his feet, a great, roaring cheer turned the tide of battle as the main body of Jackson's infantry swarmed from the woods behind the church. Yelling and screaming, and with weapons blazing, they drove the Yankees up the road and over the rise. They stopped there and watched, exhausted, as the bluecoat retreat continued.

"Thank God we're still alive," Wilson said.

"Amen," John replied.

Wilson held his canteen to his lips and gulped air. A piece of shrapnel had ripped a large, ugly hole in it.

"Have some of mine," John offered.

"Thanks." Wilson took several long gulps, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, and sank down in the shade of a tree. "Oh my God, there's Fred!"

Two men half-carried Fred to an aid tent. Silent screams issued from his mouth with each step. One hand clutched his left arm.

John hurried over to his friend, reaching him as two soldiers escorted Fred inside.

"You can't go in there," said a third man, blocking his entrance.

"He's my friend!" John protested.

"You want to watch them take the arm off?"

John gasped and stepped back.

The man's expression gentled at the horror on John's face. "Come back tomorrow, friend." He rested a hand on John's shoulder. "I know how you feel."

John walked back to the shade tree.

"Poor Mr. Fred," Wilson said after hearing the news. "He talked us into coming here, and now this."

They lapsed into a stunned silence. Everywhere, men with exhausted faces sprawled on the ground. Some lay face up, watching the sun ascend into the cloudless sky.

John pulled out his canteen, but his hands shook and he dropped it.

"Damn," he muttered.

"What's wrong?" Sergeant Henderson asked as he passed by.

"My hands!" John held them up.

"It happens to everyone," the sergeant said and passed on. "Get used to it."

John reflected the trembling sprang from the imminent fear of death he'd felt on the battlefield. Or it could have come from the recurring image of a screaming Curley with his legs blown off.

He groaned and pulled a bottle of whiskey from his rucksack, took a nip before handing the flask to Wilson. Slowly, the trembling subsided in his hands. He closed his eyes and prayed the fighting would end soon. But it was only eight forty-five in the morning and the Yankees were swarming again, this time over to the east.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Shell

Drained of all emotion, John sat with his back against the church wall, his left hand toying with some mushy red dirt. Individual gunshots echoed somewhere in the distance. He ignored the dull retorts and thought about the battered cornfield. In the harsh sunlight of mid-morning mutilated bodies lay everywhere. In some places there were so many of them jumbled together they looked like mounds of blackened, plowed up earth. Once the wounded had been removed to the aid tents, the burial parties would arrive. The carnage out there would keep them busy for hours.

Now, in the woods behind him cicadas burst into sound with a low buzzing. John marveled any living creature could be alive after all the killing that had taken place. The buzzing increased, drowning out the sounds of men talking nearby.

"Had a weird thing happen last night, John." Wilson flopped down beside him and sipped from a new canteen. His face was dark from spent gunpowder.

"Oh?" John said, stirring from his lethargy. The sun's rays, having grown with intensity during the last half hour, beat down upon him. With the back of his hand he wiped the sweat off his brow, and then turned to face his friend. "So what happened?" he coaxed.

"I had a vision of my pa's face on the day he died," Wilson said. "His lips were moving, as if he were trying to tell me something."

"What was it?"

"I dunno."

"Interesting time to have a vision." John stared across the field to the east. A great many troops in blue were forming over on a ridge. They were up to something, probably another senseless attack. *God, I'm so tired from the last one I could go right to sleep.*

"I wasn't dreaming. I swear I saw him for real." Wilson pushed the words out through clenched teeth.

"Take it easy." John offered whiskey from his flask.

"No more today."

"How'd your pa die?" John asked, his voice gentle.

"When I was ten he tripped and fell across a moving saw in the mill." Wilson's voice was strained, and John could barely hear him over the buzz of cicadas. "I was scared shitless—he was hollering like blue bloody blazes because he was ripped open across the middle and his intestines were hanging out. After Old Doc Means rushed over and sewed him up, Pa made it through the night and the next day, so I figured he was gonna live. But early the next morning I crept barefoot into his room and held a lamp up to his face. He was lying there real quiet with his eyes open. You know, the kind of quiet before dawn? When the birds aren't awake?"

John nodded. He watched the Yankees to the east, keeping an eye on them because they were still massing. Pennants were going up everywhere.

"So I went up to him and called out, 'Pa?' but there was no answer. I touched his face, and it was cold and hard. He'd passed on, and the sun hadn't come up yet." Wilson sat hunched over with his arms wrapped tight around his stomach and his head shrunk down upon his chest. He looked as if someone had pounded him into that position. He might even have been crying.

"Wilson?" John touched him on the arm. "You're the lucky one—you must realize that. You made it through the cornfield."

"I know." Wilson looked up, and his eyes were filled with tears. "All my life everyone has told me how lucky I am, but I've got a bad feeling my luck has run out."

"On your feet, men!" Captain Hamet bellowed. "They're getting ready!"

John grabbed his rifle and joined the rest of the men in the long, gray line.

"I'd half thought the battle was over."

"Not by a long shot," Hamet said. He pointed east at thousands of bluecoats massed in a field a half-mile away.

White dots of light flashed on the hills beyond the bluecoats. Within seconds a barrage of Yankee shells plowed into the men on the road, wiping out whole bunches of them. Reinforcements were thrown in as bugles blared and the bluecoats started across the field.

"Fire at will!" Hamet ordered when the Yankees came within rifle range.

John drew a bead on a man with an American flag and squeezed the trigger. The Enfield roared, and the man jerked backward and dropped. Another took his place, and the flag was raised again. The line advanced, stopping to belch fire along its length like heat lightning rolling across a lazy summer sky.

John found he had a natural talent, nay an affinity, for the killing. His nerves were calm, and his hands steady once again as he fired, reloaded, and fired again. His actions were methodical, simple and impersonal like slapping cards down on a table during a game of solitaire.

With a great banging Yankee canister exploded on the road. Large clots of men dropped in the line. Hamet shouted to close up the ranks as the shelling continued and the bluecoats advanced, drawing closer and closer. The screaming of the wounded and dying rose to a feverish pitch, eclipsed only by the explosion of shells and the roars of volleys.

The Yankees were so close now the hatred shone in their eyes. John reloaded his rifle and fired again. His ball plunged into a big Yankee's neck, the impact sounding like a whip slapping a horse's rump. The bluecoat's hands flew up, and his rifle fell to the ground. Chunky fingers clawed at his neck, trying to staunch the fatal flow of blood. Red spurted through his fingers, staining his hands and uniform, and spraying the man next to him. Blackened lips widened into a grimace, exposing big yellowed teeth. The lips pulled back tight against the gray gums and he died in a long strident scream.

John dropped the man to the left and right, and a hole opened in the line. The federals plugged the gap only to have yet another hole ripped open from the constant fusillade.

John grew numb from the banging in his ears and the constant recoil of the rifle butt slamming into his shoulder. As the hot sun beat upon his neck, he decided the men he'd shot weren't real. *They can't possibly be!* he thought, as he licked sweat and powder from his lips. Rather, they were like the toy soldiers he'd knocked down with a slingshot when he was eight years old, standing on the earthen ramparts of a play fort that overlooked the Cumberland River.

"How's it going?" Wilson shouted.

"Fine," John called out. "Just fine!" And he meant it.

Wilson fell backwards. Bright red blood seeped from a large hole in his forehead. John dropped his rifle, picked Wilson up, and cradled his student in his arms.

"Wilson!" Gray brains spilled out the back of the wounded head onto his hands. They were bloody and spongy, what was left of them. A chunk of skull lay next to his boot.

"God almighty!" John cringed and laid Wilson flat. Quaking with anger, he picked up his rifle and resumed firing.

Shouting encouragement, Captain Hamet rode up and down the line. "Keep it coming, boys! Keep it coming. Show those bluecoats what we're made of!"

A round knocked Hamet from the saddle. Dazed, he got to his feet and staggered toward his horse. Blood soaked his right arm, which hung useless by his side.

"Goddamn Yankees!" John seethed. "First Wilson, now Hamet!"

He ran to Hamet and guided the officer to sit under a tree. Ripping off a long strip of undershirt, he wrapped it around Hamet's arm, inserted a bayonet, and twisted it to make a tourniquet. "Hold this tight!" he ordered.

"Never mind me," a dazed Hamet cried. "Get back in line and stop those Yankee bastards!"

"I'll do one better than that, sir!" John grabbed Hamet's revolver and sword, mounted his horse, and charged the oncoming Yankees. With the revolver, he brought down a half-dozen men, and then used the sword to hack and sever his way through the first row of bluecoats. Wheeling his horse around, John came face to face with a young drummer boy pointing a rifle at him. The dirty face and the bright blue eyes could have been his brother Robert's—

The lad cocked his weapon.

John swung the sword, and the boy shrieked as the rifle discharged, sending its ball plunging into John's horse. The animal screamed, reared up, and began its death descent. John jumped clear and landed on the ground next to the boy.

"Mummy!" The sobbing boy clasped the bloody stump of his arm as a round of canister exploded. Bodies thudded down around him.

"Dear God!" John gawked at the blood spurting every which way from the boy's stump.

"Mummy!" the boy cried. He looked at his arm lying on the ground and his blue eyes widened with abject terror. His strident screams rose above the fevered pitch of battle.

"God forgive me!" John bolted away to meet his advancing lines. As he neared them, a shell exploded with a deafening roar. Thick clouds of choking, acrid smoke settled over the ground, concealing him from the Yankee troops rushing to fill the gap in their lines.

The carnage went on for three long hours. When it ended, thousands of men lay dead or dying in the fields to the north and east. More filled the road in front of the Dunker church, and on both sides and behind it.

John walked up the road and into the trampled field where the tall green corn had stood. Amid the debris of shredded stalks and unexploded ordnance were splintered bones and chunks of charred flesh. He stepped around the shells. Since no burial party had yet been formed, John borrowed a shovel and dug a grave for what was left of Curley's body. After lying for hours in the hot

sun, the corpse was bloated and had begun to emit gaseous fumes. Darren was nowhere to be found. John suspected his student was there somewhere . . . Probably in pieces.

"Private Martin?"

"Sir?" Startled, John turned around and looked hard at General Hood sitting astride his gray stallion. John was in no mood for soldiering right now, let alone a lecture on why he'd removed his uniform jacket.

"Captain Hamet told me of your performance today." He reached in his pocket and pulled out a gold bar. "Pin this on, lieutenant. You've earned it."

"Thank you, sir." John saluted, and the general turned and rode away. The bitter taste of bile soured John's throat. *What have you done to merit this? Killed dozens of men, one of whom was a child like Robert? What if it really had been your brother you butchered out there? How would you explain that to Mother?* Moment by moment the burden of the killings sank deeper and more painfully into his heart until he thought the weight of it might crush him. The drummer boy's bright blue eyes . . . They would bind him forever to despair.

The trembling began again in his hands, and he remembered Sergeant Henderson's telling him to get over it, as if it were a mere love affair gone sour.

John returned the borrowed shovel and walked over to the aid tent to check on Fred. From inside came shrieks and ungodly screams, coupled with gruff curses and vile oaths.

"Sir," John said to an orderly who came out, "I'm looking for Private Knox from Clarksville, Tennessee. He was wounded in the left arm."

"Never heard of him," the man said. His gray eyes were glazed, and his hands and the front of his white gown were splotted with crimson.

"He's balding and in his forties . . . I think they had to take the arm."

"Like I said—" the man started to leave, "—I ain't seen him."

"Then where can I find him?" John grasped the man's arm.

"How the hell should I know?" He broke free from John's grip.

"What do you mean you don't know?" John demanded. He grabbed the orderly by his shirt collar and yanked him up close. "He's my friend, goddamn it!"

The orderly twisted out of John's grip. His eyes flared, and then his expression softened. "I'm sorry, friend. There's so many of them that—" He shrugged, shook his head, and reentered the tent.

Too exhausted to continue searching, John returned to the church and fell asleep amid the cries of the wounded and the dying.

"Lee's planning a really big attack," said a short, wiry man the next morning.

John had sat with the men for several hours and still the call to battle had not come. A hot breeze wafting off the field brought with it the gagging scents of bloated corpses. He thought about the cornfield again, wondering if he'd missed Darren's body out there yesterday. Late yesterday evening, over to the east, Wilson's body had been dumped on a cart and hauled away. There had been no sign of his artist's sketch book.

"Aw, you're full of it!" another razzed. "Like always."

"I'm telling you," the first man retorted, jabbing a finger at his accuser, "I heard it from an orderly in Lee's own tent. He said it takes time to plan these attacks. You mark my words: before sundown we'll be in the thick of it again."

John listened awhile, and then fell asleep with the sun in his face. In his dream Robert walked toward him across a fog-shrouded field. John ran up to him, but his brother faded into the mist. "Robert!" he cried. "Wait—"

"Wake up, Lieutenant!" Captain Hamet shook him.

John stumbled to his feet. The sky was deepening and the sun lay a hair's breadth above the horizon. With a start he realized it was somewhere around six o'clock.

"Take some men and scout the Yankee positions to the east," Hamet ordered. His bandaged arm hung in a sling. Fresh blood seeped through the

material. "We're retreating soon, and I need to know what the enemy's up to, especially if he's planning an attack. Report back to me as fast as you can."

"Yes, sir!"

Since the air was cool and his uniform shirt wet from perspiration, John removed it and shrugged on a sweater Mrs. Huber had knitted for him. Dirt and grime caked his uniform pants and he replaced these with his civilian ones. Then he found his horse and saddled him.

"You!" He pointed to six men. "Mount up and come with me."

The horse soldiers proceeded down the road for a quarter mile, and then cut north into a field. John dismounted behind a haystack and used his field glasses to reconnoiter a line of trees a half-mile ahead. Bluecoats from a battery were hurrying to fire their cannon. John made a note of their location on his map.

"Exercise caution, men," John ordered as he swung back into the saddle. "Something's going on in those trees."

"Look out!" A man pointed to the flash from a cannon.

Seconds later, the explosion threw John's horse into the air. Sharp pains stabbed at his right arm and right leg. A pall of smoke enveloped him as the ground came up and smacked him hard. He lay dazed and staring while all around him wounded soldiers screamed.

Two men jumped on their horses and galloped off toward the Dunker Church. Dirt from their hooves sprayed John's face, and he spat out what he could.

The odor of singed flesh gagged him. Fearful, John levered himself up on his left arm. That movement caused an agonizing surge of pain up and down his entire right side. Cursing, he looked at his right leg. Six inches below the knee there was hardly anything left. It looked like the pulpy remains of a tomato after a wagon had run over it.

God almighty! What am I going to do? With a harsh faint rolling before his eyes, he remembered something Wilson had said in class long ago: "Courage is

the ability to pull from one's inner core the strength to face adversity when all seems lost."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Official Notices

"Will there be anything else, Reverend Parks?" Lydia asked from behind the counter in her uncle Matthew's dry goods store. Her bony white hands rested on the polished mahogany surface, and her emerald green eyes sparkled with a mixture of interest and haughty contempt.

"No, that about does it for my order, Miz Lydia." His gray eyes smiled as they studied her. Wearing a pale blue dress with a lace collar suggested a feeble attempt to hide her natural beauty; and piling her hair on top of her head only compounded the ruse, making her all the more desirable.

"Bath soap, perhaps?"

He laughed and shook his head. "Do you think I need some?"

"Of course not!" The color rose in her cheeks, and she laughed with him. "It's simply my job to help customers with items they may have forgotten."

"I think you're trying to help your Uncle Matthew by selling as much of his inventory as you can get away with," he teased.

"A new shaving mug, perhaps?" Lydia asked, playing the game.

The minister slapped himself on the forehead. "Of course! I knew I had left something important off my list. Add it to my bill."

"Good!" Lydia burst out laughing.

The minister chuckled, thoroughly enjoying himself. There was something powerful and exciting, Parks realized, about having information concerning John Martin that Lydia knew nothing about. As he watched her laugh and smile, he knew full well her whole world was about to change.

Beatrice joined them at the counter. "You two are having entirely too much fun," she said, wagging a finger. Humor sparkled in her blue eyes. "Lydia, get Reverend Parks' mug while I total his bill."

"Okay, Auntie." Lydia carried a stool over to the floor-to-ceiling shelves that lined the wall.

Reverend Parks admired her fine feminine curves as she reached toward the top shelf. Her blue dress clung tightly about her as she stretched higher and higher. The shaving mugs were beyond her grasp.

"You'll have to use the ladder," Beatrice called out. "It's over here."

"A new list of casualties has been posted on the courthouse door," Parks said to Beatrice. "This one's exceptionally long."

"Anyone we know from church?" Lydia asked.

"I didn't have time to read the entire list, though I'm sure it must include men we know. It always does." He shook his head sadly. "Have you heard from John Martin?"

"Not since he left," Lydia said. She looked down and away.

His hawk-like eyes followed her as she brought the ladder over.

"May I carry that for you?"

"Certainly not!" she said, and then caught herself. "Thank you for offering, though."

"I admire self-sufficiency." He watched, arms folded across his broad chest, as Lydia set the ladder by the shelves and climbed up. When she took hold of a shaving mug, she turned to the side and caught him admiring her. He smiled. Looking flustered, she hastened down the rungs.

"Thank you, Lydia." He extended his hand for the mug and, as she passed the purchase to him, his fingers covered hers. Her perfume, an alluring mixture of lilacs and rose musk, wafted over him.

"Believe me," she said, her cheeks flaming. "It was nothing."

"A most attractive gentleman," Beatrice said, looking up from her small desk at the front of the store. She was sorting bills, placing them into half a

dozen neat little piles. A quill pen, a pot of ink, and an open, leather-bound ledger lay next to her.

"Who is that?" Lydia asked. Her legs crossed, she sat on a stool and fanned herself with a peacock-colored fan. One leg swung back and forth, keeping time with her fanning. A shade fluttered in the warm breeze coming through the open window.

"Why, Reverend Parks." She gave her niece a sly smile.

"Auntie, he left the store an hour ago." A blush crept up her face. "Why are you still thinking about him?"

"No particular reason . . ." Beatrice made pen and ink entries in her ledger.

Lydia thought about marriage and the complications that arose in it. She remembered how Beatrice had confided to her only last week about the dream she'd had after sipping a large amount of laudanum. In it, she chased Matthew around the house. Each time she caught him, she chopped off fingers or toes.

Was this retribution for her uncle's infidelities? Lydia wondered. *Or did it go much deeper?* Beatrice had confessed an infant son had died of scarlet fever, and she had miscarried another male child. Matthew's anger had never abated, Beatrice had explained, and added he had not performed his husbandly duties since.

Now, Lydia glanced out the window at the form of Reverend Parks crossing the courthouse commons. *Be honest, girl. You haven't stopped thinking about him, either.* Yes, she realized, he had great presence, and was obviously attracted to her despite his being twenty years her senior. Yet there was something suspicious and frightening about him. For one thing, his drawl did not ring true. He was too worldly to have come from a small community in Mississippi. And she hated the way he leered at her. It had started in church one Sunday when she caught him looking at her while he spoke. His speech was the kind used by Southern gentlemen, yet the tone was intimate and made her feel uncomfortable. And with each uttered word it seemed like he was planting kisses on her cheeks, neck, and breasts. Now, with her face flushing, she pressed her legs tight, hoping to stop the tingling that'd arisen there.

*Isn't he supposed to be good and true and loving, a reflection of the Creator?
Why should a man of God make me feel . . . unclean?*

John never made her feel that way. Her anger slid over from the preacher to John. She had written six letters to him since he left, and he had answered none of them. She would not allow herself to think something dreadful had happened to him. Instead, she believed he had gotten interested in another woman—a *camp follower!*—and forgotten all about her. She berated herself for allowing him to leave while they were arguing.

"John didn't need to prove himself to me. All I wanted was for him to be the way he is."

"What, dear?"

Beatrice's question startled Lydia, who realized she had spoken aloud. "I'll bet John's got himself another girl," she said petulantly. Saying this aloud brought a sudden stab of pain, and she became enraged. "How I wish he were dead!" she said, angry tears welling up in her eyes.

"Lydia! For the love of God, don't speak that way!"

"I can't help it!"

The bell above the door jingled, and the town clerk, Mary Peabody, entered the store. A bouquet of fresh daisies pinned to her hat contrasted sharply with the grave look on her face.

"What's wrong, Mary?" Beatrice asked.

"The new list of missing and dead on the courthouse door . . ." Mary's bottom lip quivered, and her eyes moistened.

A feeling of dread swept through Lydia.

"I think . . ." Mary couldn't finish as her tears overflowed.

"Whatever is the matter, Mary?" Beatrice asked.

Lydia tensed as Mary dabbed at her eyes with a lace hanky and prepared to speak. "John's name is—"

"No!" Lydia screamed.

"—posted on the door."

The room tilted and Lydia bolted from the store, knocking down the undertaker, old Mr. Reedy. Mumbling apologies, she helped him to his feet, gathered the hem of her dress in one hand, and fled to the courthouse. Dozens of people stood before a list flapping on the huge wooden doors.

"Let me see, please!" Lydia pushed her way through the crowd. At last, she stood face to face with the list. Written with the usual flourishes of the pen, the long document purported to be, "A Most Solemn Record of Those Gallant Soldiers Who Gave Their Lives at the Battle of Sharpsburg, Maryland, on 17 September, 1862."

She ran a finger down the list of names. She stopped at John Ulysses Martin. *It can't be! It must be a mistake. Surely there's more than one John Martin in the Confederate Army!* She felt ill as the awful truth echoed in her mind: *How many have his middle name?*

She allowed herself to be pushed aside as others tried to look at the list. *No, she thought as she turned to leave, it can't be my John. They wouldn't have let him fight!*

Storm clouds scudded across the sky, and rain came down with measured indifference. The drops hit the list, blurring the ink and forming cheerless streams that ran together.

Lydia wiped the wetness from her face, unable to distinguish her tears from the raindrops. Soon the shower was over, and the clouds continued on their westward path. The harsh words she'd spoken earlier came back to haunt her. Could there be forgiveness for the thing she'd said in Beatrice's store? A new storm, whose origins lay in the dark, brooding recesses of the heart where guilt is born, arose to rival the echo of more thunder banging from the east.

She almost fainted and fell into Lieutenant Wallace's arms. His iron grip kept her from tumbling down the steep flight of steps. Hysterical, she struggled to wrench herself free. He held her tight.

"Easy now, Miss Lydia."

"His name!" she wailed. "John's name—"

"I know," and he held her, his gentle hand pressing her cheek against the harsh blue of his uniform. He stroked her hair, and then blotted her tears with his handkerchief. His kiss brushed her lips.

"Please, Lieutenant. Let me go!" She pulled away, undeserving of kindness, worthy only of burning forever in Hell to atone for those grievous words that had brought the unthinkable to her door. Yet the memory of the lieutenant's kiss had ignited a fire deep within her loins. The memory would not go away, nor would the flames go out.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Armory Square Hospital

As John remembered it some weeks later, it was the middle of the night when he came to beside a somnolent campfire. A thin trail of smoke held the mosquitoes at bay while blood, salty and warm, oozed from his bottom lip where he'd chewed it. Unable to move his right arm or right leg, he lay still, turning only his head. He wasn't sure where he was or how he'd gotten here, but he was surrounded by dozens of men in blue uniforms. In their death throes they writhed and moaned, and he realized with a start that he, too, was going to die.

He called out for Lydia, but she didn't answer. From somewhere in his tortured past, he remembered her being a very beautiful woman with long brown hair, emerald green eyes, and delicate white hands. Since the first day they met he'd held her hand and stared into her eyes, so pretty and glowing with their life's force. Her eyes, he decided, were the entrance to her soul where kindness and compassion and love resided . . . Now, he needed to do that once again, to look into those eyes and draw upon her strength. But she wasn't here, he reminded himself, and he thought again about how he was going to die.

The idea both terrified and repulsed him, and he drove it from his mind, but Death, in a sinister voice spoke, brought back the memory of the exploding artillery shell that had blown him from the saddle and killed his horse. Fearful, he levered himself onto his left arm. The pungent odor of singed flesh gagged him, and an agonizing pain surged along his entire right side. Cursing, he looked down at his right leg. Six inches above and below the knee there was

massive swelling, ending with a grotesque melee of dirt, blood, and flesh below his shin.

Now, the man on his right was loaded onto a stretcher and taken into a huge tent. Ghostlike shadows flickered on the walls, and the pleas and screams carried through the canvas. When the laden stretcher came out, a bright shaft of light lit the campfire area. The men bearing the stretcher headed toward the cemetery while an orderly tossed a bloody object onto a four-foot high pile. John peered. A clot of arms and legs lay jumbled every which way. Here and there bits of dark cloth clung to the appendages where a shell had burned the material, singeing the flesh.

John glanced at his right leg. The eerie light illuminated a crude tourniquet made of a knotted rag and a splintered board fastened to his thigh with rolls of bloodied gauze. When he lifted his head for a better look around him, a jolting pain stopped the movement. Clenching his teeth and clawing the earth like a wounded animal, he fought not to cry out.

"Next!" a man said, and John's stretcher was jerked upward.

He screamed like a wounded panther as the orderlies hustled his stretcher into the tent and dumped it on a plank table. Above him, a kerosene lantern hung from a rope stretched between two pine boughs. Moaning, he breathed air laced with the smells of pine pitch and smoke, spilled whiskey and stale perspiration—and of other things too hideous to think about.

Two men in white looked down at him, their weary gazes assessing him from behind wire-rimmed glasses.

"Don't know if he's one of ours. There's no uniform I can see."

The tourniquet was removed and a scissors cut away the rolls of bloodied gauze from knee to boot. "Looks bad. Probably a shell. So, who is he?"

"I'm Lt. John Martin," John mumbled. No one understood him. "Certainly you must know I'm a Confederate officer!"

"Might be a civilian." Curious-green eyes squinted at his right arm. "The elbow's not serious. Only a nick."

"Let's take care of the leg." Brown-eyes slopped liquid from an open bottle onto a rag, and then held it over John's face.

Like a crazed man, John thrashed about before a dozen hands pinned him down.

"Easy, son." A sympathetic voice lulled him. "It's chloroform and it'll make you sleep."

"Oh God!" Trembling, he gulped several breaths and slipped into a stupor. Above him, bright steel glinted as the kerosene lamp was turned up high. His eyes closed against the hurtful glare as a smoky lantern was jerked down close for a look-see. Slapping sounds came from his right leg . . . urgent whispers . . . the click of a box lid.

The whole table shook, and a rasping pain unlike anything he had known or could ever imagine tore him apart. He gasped, and then screamed for a long, long time before whiteness closed in around him.

Now, jostled again, John opened his eyes to murky darkness and the harsh creaking and groaning of a wagon's wheel left ungreased. *Where the hell am I? Lydia!* In the semi-light he glanced at the stretchers above him and to his right. There were no windows, only a door at the far end where slivers of moonlight illuminated the foot of his stretcher. The ambulance jolted right and left, and then banged down hard.

The men screamed, and a hot pain shot up John's entire right side. Another bump elicited shrieking and groaning, and the throbbing in his stump intensified.

John struggled to bear the pain and to hold out against the regret, bitterness, and self-pity that hung over him like a dark, angry cloud. In spite of his efforts, the tears came, and he wept for himself, the drummer boy—lying dead only God knew where!—and his students who, like him, thought they were headed for glory, only to find themselves butchered on the altar of flag, honor, and country. *They'd died in vain, their brilliant careers wiped out because you, the egotistical professor who gave fiery lectures about duty to God*

and country, talked them into enlisting. Why did you do that? Why couldn't you have died instead of them?

He called out for Lydia and she appeared before him, her eyes radiant with love. His hand reached out to touch her, and the image faded. She was with him, and then she wasn't.

He beat himself with the knowledge of all he'd lost. "Fool!" he called himself a thousand times and more. "Damn stupid fool!"

Morning arrived, along with the chirping of birds and the chattering of squirrels. John opened his eyes as the ambulance doors swung open by a loading dock at the rear of a two-story wooden building. With bright blinding sunlight came the ugly realization that not only was he a prisoner of war, but he was covered with warm, fresh blood not his own. It had dripped from a huge, gluttonous circle in the bottom of the stretcher above him.

A soldier in blue pulled that litter halfway out. "This young'n looks dead to me," he reported to another man. Muttering, they struggled with the stretcher because it had become stuck on something. Perspiration beaded on their brows and the stale scent of perspiration stained their uniforms a dark blue. They gave the litter a harsh, rolling jerk and it sprang free. A jerk the other way kept the corpse from falling off.

John cringed at the face of a Union drummer boy when the stretcher swung down. *He's but a child, with a child's pale face!* He thought like an officer: *Who will write his mother the letter that will bring agony to her each time she reads it?*

The rest of the men in the ambulance were removed, and then it was John's turn. He braced himself, but the soldiers jerked him hard. His fist pounded the side of the stretcher and he let out with a gut-wrenching scream. A fiery pain coursed up and down his injured right arm before it settled in his elbow, and then slid, by degrees, down to the stump.

"Sorry, buddy." The man's dark brown eyes glistened with compassion. "We're trying to be careful."

They jostled him again, right and left, and he screamed louder.

"Take it easy with him, please!" instructed a young woman with blond hair pulled back taut from her face. As she bent close, an errant strand skimmed his cheek.

"Poor boy," she murmured, her blue eyes warm and steady as she assessed his injuries and read the hospital tag pinned to his shirt. The cool back of her hand rested on his feverish forehead. "Don't worry. The worst is over."

Her perfume blended with her words to create a narcotic that comforted his soul while it chased away the lingering streaks of pain. When he looked up, she was gone.

He slept for days, drifting in and out of his pain. When his agony was at its height, ghostly figures spoke to him. The shepherdess, Arete, from an earlier dream about Thermopylae, said, "Leonidas, did you not learn anything about suffering and death?"

His deceased father, with his long black beard and top hat, spoke of the bloody saber that hung above the fireplace in their home. "You chose to live by the sword and now you must cross the line. Come give me your hand, son, and I will help you." John thrashed about in his bed and screamed, "No! I can't. I won't!"

Lydia, with disheveled hair and tears streaming down her face, fell to her knees and tugged at his hand. "Don't leave, John!" she sobbed. "Please don't leave. You are my life!" Her sobs turned to wails as a man in black with a white collar emerged from behind a partition, one made of wood or clouds. His presence was overwhelming, his words kind as he uttered: "Through this holy unction may the Lord pardon thee for whatever sins or faults thou hast committed." John gazed past him to where a greater Man stood, hands folded while he waited.

The Man smiled and beckoned with his forefinger. John drew back. "I can't! How can I leave this woman whom I love?"

And so it came about that Lydia, naked beneath her silken robe, appeared and stood before him, held his hand, and reminded him who he was, who he

would always be. Her presence rekindled his soul; and it stirred his loins, reminding him, longingly, of their passion that first night in the upstairs room of her parent's house. They'd finished the last of the sweet wine from the ceremony and, as he took her hand, led her to the bed, and entered her, he told her how candlelight sparkling on their ornate glasses reminded him of better times before the war.

By degrees, the intensity of the dreams lessened, along with the overwhelming pain, until one morning he became cognizant of his surroundings. After having slept on the ground for many long nights, he thought he was still dreaming when he felt the soft mattress, feather pillow, and clean sheets beneath him. He rubbed his eyes and looked around. Two rows of narrow beds, each occupied, lined both sides of a long room separated by a wide center aisle. Men and women in white uniforms bustled up and down the aisle, talking in excited voices or hushed whispers while they attended to various tasks.

Tacked to the rafters a series of fan-shaped displays of red, white, and blue bunting swooped down from one wall, met in the aisle, and glided back up to the far wall, disappearing, somewhere, in the sets of tall curtained windows. Diffused sunlight pouring through the curtains cast uneven shadows on the beds, marking conspicuous places where arms or legs were missing.

"Hi, soldier!" The same blond woman stood before him, the scent of her toilet water sweeping over him. She was dressed in a white cotton uniform, starched and crisp, and flattened in all the vital areas except her bosom—that area couldn't be disguised. Her hair was pulled into a tight bun at the back of her neck, and no makeup was visible on her cheeks. Her eyes, of a deeper blue than any John had ever seen, smiled at him and dispelled any notion she might have a harsh, uncaring personality.

"Who are you?" John asked, half-wondering if he were still in the world of dreams.

"Ann Marie Walsh." She smiled, displaying a set of even, white teeth. Sunlight shone on her blond hair, making it sparkle. "I'm a nurse."

"Where am I?"

"Armory Square Hospital in Washington City." She reached up and retied some bunting that had come loose. Her hands, delicate and white, worked deftly at their task. When she finished she unwrapped the bandages covering the wounds on his right elbow and right leg.

He stared at the purplish whorl marking the amputation site six inches below his right knee. It was strange not seeing his ankle, foot, and toes anymore. It was the same leg he'd been lame in since age ten, and now the whole thing was gone . . . Waves of white pain rolled before his eyes when she touched the stump, and he had to fight to keep from fainting.

"This will *really* hurt, soldier!" Lifting a bedside pitcher, she poured water on his wounds and caught the overflow in an enamel basin.

He winced. His hands closed into fists and his teeth clenched. An animal sound came from deep within his chest. It sounded like the passion from his wedding night, but he knew that wasn't true because it had taken place in a dream. *Or had it?*

"I'm sorry." She produced a roll of clean cotton from a bedside table and bound the elbow and stump. "Your wounds will probably fester."

"Is that good or bad?"

"The doctors say it's good. I disagree." She used a scissors and split the cotton before tying it off. "Wounds kept clean heal much faster. Maggots speed the healing process."

"Do I have any maggots?"

"A few have made their presence known."

"Oh." A dollop of fear shot through him at the thought if the maggots didn't succeed . . . At Sharpsburg he'd heard of soldiers who'd needed a second amputation. Then he noticed her wedding band. "Is your husband a soldier?"

"He was. He died at First Manassas." Her voice sounded distant, as if she had returned to that gray moment when she first learned of his death.

"I'm sorry, ma'am."

They both fell silent as she went about the rest of her duties, tidying up around his bed and helping him change his gown and bathe. After she finished, she pulled a straight-backed chair next to his bed and asked him his name, rank, serial number, and marital status. He replied to each question, and almost said "married" instead of "single." He thought of Lydia for the first time in days. *What is she doing right now? Helping in her Uncle Matthew's store? Taking food baskets to poor, lonely widows? Writing another letter filled with passionate longings for your safe return?* Unable to remember how much time had passed since he'd been wounded, he imagined it must have been many days. So, he asked the date and Ann told him it was September 20, 1862.

He lay stunned, thinking of the lost days. "How long will I be here?"

"Until your wounds heal. Then you'll be paroled and can return home."

"How do I apply for parole?" His spirits rose at the thought of going home and seeing Lydia . . . and Clarksville, the place he had spoken of in a disparaging manner. *A small town where pigs run the streets looking for slop.* And other things he'd never mentioned to Lydia. Shame brightened his cheeks at the thought he could be so callous.

"I'm working on that right now." She bent her head and, as she wrote, her pen scratched its way across the paper, stopping now and then to dip for more ink. When she finished she stood up. "I'll be back soon," she told him, and then moved on to the next man.

Somewhere down the hall a door banged hard. John jumped, made like he was diving into a shell hole, and nearly tumbled from his bed. The pain in his leg shouted and he cried out, "Damn!" He was wound tighter than a child's top, the result of a battle that had sapped his strength and left his nerves frayed. It all flashed back to him: the brutal fighting that began at dawn, plodded through the day's heat, and relented, finally, long after dusk when the grace of night cast an indifferent blanket over the landscape; and then came the shell and the loss of his leg.

When he didn't see Ann Walsh for over two weeks, John assumed she'd been transferred, or quit. When he asked his new nurse about her, the woman said a nurse's job was difficult and demanding, and many couldn't stand it for more than a month or two. He felt saddened by Ann's disappearance. Then one morning the cool back of her hand touched his feverish forehead.

"I don't believe it." He struggled to sit up—a strenuous task because he had to drag the stump. Flashes of pain brought back the horrendous actions that had taken his leg and left him crippled. *Yes, you really are a cripple. A God damn cripple!* Rage swept over him like the spring floods on the swollen Cumberland. He opened his mouth to utter a string of obscenities, but stopped short because Ann was staring at him.

"How're you getting along today?" She smiled.

"I'm feeling much better, Mrs. Walsh." He noticed her teeth were even and white, and her cheeks, even without rouge or powder, were rosy and full. He took a deep breath and drew in the clean smell of her scent. He found it both fascinating and exciting, and it left him with a feeling of elation. Like a dry spring running once again, life was coming back into him. Only last week he had doubted a woman's touch would ever elicit any emotion in him, the more so after all the killing and butchering he'd taken part in.

Now, something told him if he never killed again there might be a chance of returning to a normal life. But this morning when he'd run his wheelchair into the latrine, and had stropped his razor and wet his beard, his image in the mirror shocked him, left him bewildered and angry. Although he'd been away only four months, it seemed more like four years. His face, once pudgy from the good food he'd eaten as Professor John Martin of Stewart College, was gaunt around the cheekbones with the lips pursed and pale; and his blue eyes were dull and lifeless from all the killing he'd done. He burst out in a profane diatribe and drove a fist into the bathroom wall. No one noticed.

He decided when his parole came through he'd return to Clarksville to be with Lydia. Of course, she would ask about everything that had happened to him, but he knew the English language contained no words to describe his

ordeal. His silence would entomb his anger, and carry with it the possibility of violent outbursts that would doom any chance of a successful marriage. Perhaps, though, with time her love would draw him out, elicit a smile and a spontaneous outburst of either laughter or, more importantly, redemptive anger. She would not give up on him, nor he on her.

After Ann tended his wounds, she handed him a pocket Bible and a pair of crutches. "Try them out. I've got lots of patients to see, but I'll return soon." And she was gone.

His first try on the crutches landed him on the floor. He cursed under his breath. The fire burned in his stump, and the pain was excruciating to the point he reeled with a faint. He felt both stupid and foolish as he lay there, looking like the butt of some obscene practical joke.

"Here," came a man's deep voice. "Take some of this. It'll help the pain."

John rolled over to find Albert McLaws, who occupied the next bed, kneeling by his side. A factor from Birmingham, Albert had lank black hair and ice-blue eyes. He pushed a flask of whiskey at John.

"Thanks." John took a grateful swig, and then handed the flask back. Though the alcohol was cheap and tasted like rotgut, he expressed his appreciation by smacking his lips and wiping his mouth on the back of his hand.

Albert smiled. "Have some more."

John drank again. Within minutes the pain receded as the whiskey's warmth spread throughout his body. He sat a few moments before saying, "I believe this stuff is helping."

"That's what it's for," McLaws said. "Say, have you heard anything about your parole?"

"Still waiting," John said, feeling sad. "I hear it might take six months or a year."

"In the meantime, have you thought about helping our cause?" McLaws leaned down close and whispered, "A wealth of military information lies outside

these windows, John Martin, and we could pass it on to Richmond. You *are* a loyal Southerner, aren't you?"

"Of course!" He blushed.

"Then help us. Once you get that furlough, you'll be cashiered out of the Confederate Army, and that'll be the end of your military career. This'll be your last chance to help, Lieutenant."

John took another gulp of whiskey, relishing its taste now that it had gone to his head. "Then I suppose it's my patriotic duty," he said with reluctance. After the amputation, he'd figured the war was over for him. Now, this new assignment threatened to draw him back into the middle of it all!

Albert told him to count the supply wagons passing outside the window, and to note the direction they took, emphasizing not to get caught because he would be taken to the Old Capitol Prison and hanged by Colonel Baker.

"Who's that?" John asked.

"The head of Lincoln's Secret Service."

Starting the next morning, John busied himself counting wagons, soldiers, and artillery pieces moving past his window. At first he made mental observations, then remembered his pocket Bible and scribbled his notes in code throughout its pages. The process took his mind off the boredom of hospital life and helped the days to pass. He knew it was a stupid little game he was playing but, he reasoned, anything was better than lying around in bed reading the same old magazines and books, or using his crutches to hobble outside into the little courtyard to look at the same old plants and flowers. He'd met a man out there, a botanist with no legs, who'd attended the University of Virginia at the same time he did. Together, they reminisced about old times, and the botanist introduced to him, by scientific and common name, each plant and tree in the courtyard. John soon tired of the scientific discourse. He simply wanted to go home to Lydia. And too soon, the botanist died.

Now, John glanced out the tall windows while some squirrels scampered about gathering nuts. The leaves, with their brightening shades of orange, red, and yellow, dropped from the trees, or blew down in great bunches when the

wind gusted. Autumn was upon Washington City, with the cold of winter lurking nearby, waiting to pounce on its unsuspecting citizenry.

Several times, attempted letters to Lydia were torn up in disgust. Always, he remembered that one scene where she and Lieutenant Wallace had left the church in her father's carriage. For some reason, this indelible image always led him to the same conclusion: what was the use of writing if she cared about someone else?

Still, he wondered where they went and what they did. Once they were away from the nagging presence of her parents, did Wallace take her down to the river and hold her hand while they sat on a rock overlooking the slow moving Cumberland? Did she allow him to kiss her? Did she invite more than a casual kiss?

John remembered with great passion the day she had taken him home to meet her parents, how with her hair pinned up, he'd glimpsed the nape of her neck. The skin was pale and smooth, with a trace of perfume lingering in the air around it. His lips had moved as if forming a kiss, and a hard lump had risen in his throat so he was forced to look first at her father and then her mother before he was able to speak. He remembered, too, her attire that first Sunday in March when he went to her parent's house for dinner. The striking blue dress, low cut and inviting, exposed her shoulders and hinted at her ample bosom.

Surely, Wallace must have noticed all these things, and if he did, had his hands strayed over the front of her dress, or lingered on the back of her neck? Had Lydia encouraged more?

At night John Ulysses Martin sipped the laudanum Albert McLaws freely dispensed. It helped him sleep when his thoughts wouldn't quiet down, or when he ran a fever and bordered on delirium. It also gave him a strange, recurring dream. In the dream he sat on a bench reading a Sunday school picture-book showing Death harvesting the newly departed on his cemetery rounds. As he turned the pages he saw Lydia and himself walking hand-in-hand along a dusty road. She wore white muslin, cut like a shroud, and carried

a bouquet of wilted white lilies. He was dressed in a black frock coat, white cravat, and black stovepipe hat like the one worn by President Lincoln. Up ahead, through some burnt out pines at a bend in the road, towered the white spire and façade of the church where they were to be married. The church bell started an incessant clanging, a calling of the betrothed to hurry to its open doors and waiting chapel. As they rounded the bend, his students stood by the church doors that were chained and padlocked. A sign nailed to the door proclaimed, "Closed by Order of the Clarksville Garrison Commander for Violation of the First Commandment."

At that point John awoke and sat bolt upright in his bed. Sweat soaked his nightshirt and his stump ached from his nightmarish tossing and turning. He gulped more of McLaws' laudanum. As the liquid slid down his gullet and warmed his stomach, he forgot about the dream. But it would start again, either that night or several nights later. Always it would return.

To stifle the boredom of hospital life, he threw himself into the task of counting the slow-moving wagons and the squadrons of troops and cumbersome artillery pieces moving past his window. There didn't seem to be much point to it all until late one night he noted the movement of large siege guns drawn by long teams of horses. They were all headed south toward the Long Bridge that crossed over the Potomac River. As that road led straight to Richmond, he made fastidious notes in his Bible. After the siege guns came column after column of marching infantry all headed in the same direction. By five a.m., when John was about to drop off to sleep from exhaustion, the procession ended.

John's casual remark to McLaws that next morning elicited a "Job well done! Lucky for our side someone was awake."

Several days later, toward the end of October, harsh voices woke him in the middle of the night, and he sat up to find men in black uniforms rummaging through each patient's personal belongings.

"Hey!" protested a Georgia man with a bandage covering his head and left eye, "take it easy with my wife's picture!"

"Shut up, fool!" A man in black hit him in the face with a rifle butt, knocking him unconscious.

The uniformed man moved to John's side, searched around the bed and under the mattress before pulling out a small notepad. "Ha!" He waved the pad under John's nose. "What's this, Reb?"

"I have no idea." John recognized McLaws' handwriting. "It's not mine, goddamn it!"

"Shut up, Reb!" The man punched him in the mouth.

Reeling, John grabbed his Bible as two men in black seized him under the arms and hustled him out the door. They threw him in the back of an enclosed wagon, and his crutches clattered down beside him.

Two prisoners in evening clothes, a man and a woman, helped him to a seat. The door slammed shut, and a bolt slid into place, plunging them into darkness.

"Where are they taking us?" John asked as the wagon lurched forward. Hooves clip-clopped on a brick street.

"To the Old Capitol Prison," the man said.

"To a fate worse than death." The woman next to him broke into a paroxysm of sobbing. "We're all going to die!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Old Capitol Prison

His crutches clicking on the brick sidewalk, John hobbled along behind the elderly couple. The man was tall, well over six feet in height, and broad shouldered. The woman was at least a head shorter and walked with an arthritic limp. When they stopped, two uniformed guards opened the glass entrance doors to the Old Capitol Prison and herded them inside. Marble columns and Romanesque statues adorned the deserted lobby. Above, candles flickering in dusty chandeliers cast eerie shadows on the paintings of former presidents and senators. Rundown and desperately in need of repair, the building appeared to have played a prominent role in Washington City's politics in the distant past.

"Up!" A brutish guard with a blunt face and darting eyes herded John and the elderly couple up a broad flight of stairs John's difficulty negotiating the steps only seemed to annoy the guard, and he prodded him with his rifle. "Get a move on, Reb," he said in a gruff voice. He pressed the three prisoners to go faster as they walked along the second-floor hallway.

"Whoa!" The guard stopped before a set of doublewide iron doors. Their fortified hinges and thick, oval windows reminded John of the portholes on a naval vessel he'd seen steaming up the Cumberland last February.

The guard selected a key from an assortment on an oval ring, inserted it in the lock, and twisted. The massive structure swung open, exposing a rectangular room which John, with his practiced eye, estimated to be seventy-five feet long by forty-five feet wide. Dozens of men and women of all ages slept on pallets crowded together on the floor.

"Get in there, spies!"

The guard shoved John so hard he was thrown to the floor.

"You bastard!" John cried as a fiery pain shot through his stump.

"You bully!" The elderly woman's hazel eyes flared with anger. "Why are you picking on a crippled soldier?"

"Shut up, you old hag!" The guard slammed the door, locked it, and left.

"Here, let me help you." The man offered John a hand and helped him up. The sweet scent of pipe tobacco clung to his suit jacket. "I'm Harry Johnston, and this is my wife, Ida Mae."

"How do you do," she said, and bent to pick up the crutches. She handed them to John while her husband supported him until he found his balance.

"Thank you kindly, both of you." Leaning on his crutches, John introduced himself, rested a moment, and then said, "Why are you here?"

"We'd just returned from a charity ball when Colonel Baker's hoodlums arrested us," Harry snorted. "I'm a Congressman from Baltimore and criticized President Lincoln publicly for his suspension of the Writ of Habeas Corpus." Harry's deep voice rang with indignation. "That was one of the first things that idiot did when he took office!"

"I remember reading about it in the newspapers," John said. He looked about the room. Ornate chandeliers, their candles covered with dust, hung by long chains from the arched ceiling. What light there was came from candles set in saucers next to individual pallets. Not a lick of furniture was in sight, though scrape marks on the floor suggested a great many chairs and tables had once filled the hall. Attesting further to the poverty of the surroundings, light colored rectangles on the wall hinted at the former presence of large paintings.

"What place is this?" John asked, turning in a half circle. Ten feet from a door-less latrine an old wall clock kept time with methodical tics and tocks. The clock rang out the hour with two loud bongs. "It doesn't look like a prison."

"Believe it or not, sir," Harry stood with his hands clasped behind his back, "this is where the House of Representatives met from 1815 to 1825. And

Senator Calhoun died here in 1850 when it was a fashionable boardinghouse. Right now, however, it's Colonel Lafayette C. Baker's personal prison. He's the head of the Secret Service."

"And downstairs is where the Senate convened," Ida Mae added.

"Stop talking!" The guard pounded on the door with his rifle butt. The heavy clanking echoed throughout the room.

John glanced at the door. Two darting eyes stared back at him through the thick glass.

"I think," Harry said, "we'd better turn in for the night before they come in here and beat us."

"I surely hope they won't do that," John said as he sat down on the floor and laid his crutches next to him. Yawning despite himself, he stretched out. Others around him blew out candles. Within minutes the House Chamber had been reduced to abject darkness.

"Martin!" A black-shirted guard kicked John awake the next morning. "Colonel Baker wants to see you."

"All right. Hold your horses!" As John reached for his crutches and struggled to stand, he noticed a clot of people gathered around a nearby pallet.

"I do believe Mary Roberts has passed on," someone said. "Probably from lack of food."

"Or the interrogations," another added.

John stared at an old woman who lay curled on her side, her chalk-white hands clasping the neck button on her black dress. A thread of saliva hung from the corner of her mouth. *I've never seen a dead woman before*, he thought, and cringed.

With the guard prodding him, John left the room and was herded down the hall to Room Number 19. The guard knocked, opened the door, and pushed him inside.

Dressed in a black uniform, a muscular man with a red beard and flame red hair sat hunched over a Tambour writing table. The fragile table wobbled

as he bore down with pen and ink. An oval badge, "Death to Traitors," dangled from his shirt pocket.

"Lieutenant Martin," the interrogator looked up. Pig-like brown eyes set deep in his head stared at John. John took an instant dislike to him.

"I'm Colonel Lafayette C. Baker, head of the Secret Service," he said in a deep, rasping voice. To exaggerate his importance, he rose and took a stance between portraits of President Lincoln and Secretary of War Stanton.

John glared at him, noting the man's arrogance. "So?"

"So, you're charged with spying against the United States Government." A mocking sneer on his face, Baker got right to the point. "How do you plead?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Colonel." John pointed to the stump of his right leg and laughed bitterly. "Do I look like a spy?"

"I repeat: how do you plead?" Baker rested his hands on the writing table and glowered.

"I demand to speak with an attorney," John said.

"It's prohibited. Sign these papers." Baker handed a sheath of documents over the desk.

John picked them up, noted they were dated November 1, 1862, and scanned an itemized list of his alleged activities. His face reddening, he threw the papers down on the writing table. "The hell I'll sign these lies!"

Baker snapped his fingers.

From the shadows a giant of a man stepped forward, his Springfield rifle held at the ready. Its bayonet glistened in the light streaming through a barred window.

"These records of federal troop movements were found under your mattress at the hospital." Baker opened McLaw's notepad and held it up so John could see.

"That's not my handwriting!" John exclaimed.

Baker's fingers drummed the edge of the desk.

"I demand to speak with an attorney and to appear before a federal magistrate for arraignment." John stabbed a finger at Baker. "Those are my rights!"

"Fool!" Baker exploded. Jumping to his feet, he rushed around the table. "Can't you get it through your thick head you have no rights?"

"No rights?" John stepped back and jabbed with his crutch. "You imbecile, have you forgotten this country still has a constitution?"

The guard swung his rifle, and the last thing John remembered was the weapon's butt smashing into the side of his head.

John awoke late that afternoon to the sound of hammering in the outside courtyard. The harsh noise sent waves of pain surging through his head. Gently, he touched an egg-sized lump above his ear. He winced, and when he tried to stand, the whiteness of a faint rolled before his eyes and he had to sit back down.

"Easy, boy," Harry said. "You may have a serious concussion."

"I'll be all right," John grouched. He needed to walk, to think and assess the situation he found himself in. *What is it they do to spies?* he said to himself. He cringed, knowing the answer.

Ida Mae brought over some water that he drank, and then held his crutches while Harry helped him stand.

John hobbled to the windows where a gallows' trap door was being tested in the courtyard below.

"One of the guards said it is for your execution the day after tomorrow." Harry rested a hand on John's shoulder. "I'm sorry, son."

"Good Lord!" John's gut wrenched and he leaned against the windowsill.

"Don't talk to anyone outside if they call up to you," a guard said.

John turned and looked into the bright green eyes of a young corporal.

"The colonel gets real upset and will throw you into an isolation cell."

"Thanks for the advice." John managed a weak smile.

"My name's Gilbertson. Grant Gilbertson."

"John Martin." He nodded at the tall, gangly youth.

"I've heard all about you, sir." He ran a hand through his curly black hair, and then blurted out, "I know you're not a spy, John Martin." The boy blushed with shame. "Colonel Baker admitted it."

"What did he say?"

"Somebody in the hospital has been passing information on a regular basis long before you arrived. But he has to execute someone in order to save face with President Lincoln and Secretary of War Stanton."

"That's unfair," John muttered. "To be spared on the battlefield, only to be sacrificed here?"

At noon the next day the massive hall door opened and a guard led Ann Walsh into the room. She wore a white linen dress with matching hat and gloves, and a pinchbeck brooch. Smiling, she hurried to John.

"I thought I'd never see you again!" John's heart lurched.

"I just found out you were here." Her blue eyes sparkling, she came up to him and they embraced. "Pretend we're engaged," she whispered.

He held her close and told her about his scheduled execution the next morning.

"Listen, darling, I've already heard that and I have good news." She dabbed her eyes with a lace hanky, feigning tears. "I've arranged your escape," she whispered.

He gripped her hand and wanted to shout for joy.

"I have a large sum of money for you. Tonight, bribe a guard named Gilbertson into letting you onto the roof. If you've managed to arrange it, stand by that window at seven o'clock and strike a match." She inclined her head to the right. "I've taken a room across the street at the Claridge Hotel where I'll be watching. I'll return your signal by striking another match, and then close the drapes. At eight o'clock I'll pass by with a wagonload of hay. Watch for me and jump."

"And if I can't signal you at seven?"

"Keep trying every hour on the hour."

"I will." He told her about the vital war notes in his pocket Bible. "Take them. They must get to Richmond!"

"I already know of their importance, but I'll be searched on the way out." She came up close to him and kissed him on the lips. At the same time she pressed a creased and bulky envelope into his hand. "I must leave now. Sweet dreams, darling."

After she left, John found a private moment to count the six hundred dollars in greenbacks she had given him. Hope washed over him until he realized if the plan fell through, Ann would wind up in this prison. He wondered if saving his life was worth exposing her, and possibly others, to such consequences.

After Corporal Gilbertson made his rounds at six p.m., he seemed in no hurry to leave. John approached with a dry mouth, wracking his brain for a subtle way to offer the fellow a bribe. "Do you like working here?" John asked.

"It's better than being killed on the battlefield." He blushed. "I'm a Quaker. I wavered in my faith and enlisted when I saw the wounded boys in my hometown who had sacrificed themselves for their country. When I saw the foolishness of this war, I applied for a discharge, but was turned down. Now I'm stuck here until the hostilities are over."

"That may be quite some time," John said.

"In the meantime," Gilbertson said, "I've got a sick mother at home with no one to help her. And the colonel won't allow me time off to visit."

"I'm sorry for you, sir," John said in a compassionate voice.

"About all I can do is send Mother my army pay." He sighed. "And a corporal's wages aren't much."

"Maybe we could help each other," John said, his heart thudding. "Can I trust you?"

"We're not all like that idiot colonel." The boy looked him directly in the eyes. "What are you suggesting?"

"Can you get me to the roof?" John asked.

"That's too risky!" the corporal said, shaking his head and taking a step back. "Last month a man slipped on a roof tile and fell to his death!"

"If I'm going to die, it might as well be trying. I know there's considerable risk for you, and I'm willing to pay for your help—five hundred dollars."

"I wouldn't take it, John, except for my sick mother," the corporal said, his face red with shame. "What time do you want to do this?"

"Seven o'clock?"

Gilbertson pulled out his pocket watch. "That's too early and far too risky. Make it around ten. By then most of the guards will be asleep. They doze off after everyone tucks in for the night."

Sweat broke out on John's forehead. "How about nine?"

"Okay," he agreed reluctantly. "Nine it is."

After John slipped him the money, Gilbertson left.

At precisely nine o'clock John moved to the window and lit a cigarette he'd borrowed from the Johnstons.

Rough hands spun him around. The guard was big-boned and rotund, and reminded him of Private Haddonfield.

"It's all right to smoke, isn't it?" John asked.

"Yeah, but move away from the window." The guard waited until John did as he was told and then walked away.

John returned to his post as soon as possible. Frantic he had missed Ann's signal, he lit another match and held it before the window. Across the street, the hotel's facade had dozens of windows, all with their drapes closed. There was nothing, not even a flash of light in return.

God, he moaned to himself. If she didn't see the match and I try to go it alone, I'll suffer the same fate as the man last month!

Outside, the wind came up, followed by lightning and thunder. Soon, the western sky burst open with great streaks of orange and red.

Where in hell is Gilbertson? John wondered. Has he stolen Ann's money? Did he lie about being a Quaker and having a sick mother? Needing to know, no matter what the cost, he used his crutches to position himself next to the hall

door. Through the small window he saw Gilbertson talking to the Haddonfield look-alike. John pressed himself against the wall and prayed nothing was amiss.

Minutes later the corporal rushed into the room. "The coast is clear," he whispered. "Ready?"

John nodded and followed him to a stairwell that led to the roof. Gilbertson unlocked the door and handed John some matches as they climbed the stairs.

After they reached a landing, Gilbertson shoved a blackjack and a length of rope into John's hand. "Good luck. Tie me up and then knock me out. And for God's sake, don't kill me!" He turned around and laced his fingers behind his back.

"Thanks for your help, my friend." John bound Gilbertson's wrists, whacked him on the back of the head, and guided his limp body to the floor.

Striking a match, John made his way up the stairs, stopping every few feet to light a new one. At the attic, he struck his last match. A strong breeze snuffed it out, and he was left standing in total darkness.

"Damn!" he mumbled. "Now what?" After his eyes adjusted to the dark, he looked around for the source of the breeze, finally spotting starlight coming through a hole in an attic vent. He fed his crutches through the rafters and hoisted himself up. He managed the acrobatics more easily than he had anticipated, then realized that moving his body about on crutches had strengthened his arms and shoulders.

Using a crutch, he pushed the vent out of the way. Again, he followed the crutches through the opening and found himself on the slate roof. Four stories below lay the deserted street and the darkened façade of the Claridge Hotel. A steel cable attached to the hotel's flagpole vibrated in the strong breeze, making a harsh clanking sound.

John glanced at the sky. Dark masses of billowing clouds were rolling in from the west. A major storm was brewing and would hit at any minute. Rain would make the slate roof slick and dangerous for a one-legged man; however, the storm would block the moonlight and offer the protection of total darkness.

John peered. A scant thirty feet away, an apparition faced in the opposite direction. The long barrel of a rifle jutting up from the back of the guard's raincoat heightened the illusion. John's heart pounded and he dropped flat on the tiles. Sweat formed on his forehead and mixed with a light drizzle, which, within seconds, turned into a heavy downpour.

With his heart still pounding, he tucked both crutches under one arm and eased himself down the slope, sliding a few feet while grasping at whatever tile would slow his descent. The method worked well until one of his crutches came loose, clattered down the tiles, and disappeared over the roof's edge.

John gasped. He hazarded a look toward the guard. The apparition still faced away, his raincoat pulled over his head. The sound of the storm overrode all else.

John slid down to the last row of tiles and peered over the edge. His crutch from that dizzying height looked tiny. Knowing he would never survive a fall, he scanned the side of the building until he spotted a drainpipe a mere ten feet from the guard. John inched forward, pushing with his good leg until he gained the pipe. He tested the ancient-looking structure. It felt secure. *Will it hold?* he thought. A shiver rode up his spine. *You have no choice!* Easing his good leg over the side and abandoning his crutch, John dropped down hand by hand until he reached a second-story ledge. There he carefully slid into a seated position and waited, dripping wet and cold.

Had Ann already passed by? He did not remember hearing a wagon. He wished he had a pocket watch. Any concept he had of time would be distorted by anxiety.

A wagon carrying a load of hay rounded the corner and rumbled up the cobblestone street. John's heart sank when he saw the driver was a man. When the man looked up, John recognized Ann.

Without a thought he jumped, landed on his back in the hay, rolled to the side, and grabbed a rail at the last moment to keep himself from being thrown out.

A shot rang out, and a ball tore through the wood next to John's head. The guard on the roof had fired his rifle.

Ann whipped the team, and the wagon shot forward.

Another ball zinged through the air, shattering a street lamp outside the hotel. A woman screamed. Fearing Ann had been hit, John lifted his head and caught a glimpse of a young prostitute who had been sprayed with glass. Screaming, she ran off down the street.

"We've done it!" John scrambled forward and climbed onto the seat next to Ann. He threw his arms around her and kissed her hard on the cheek.

"Yes, we have indeed!" Laughing, Ann made a sharp turn at the next corner. Whipping the team, they disappeared into the gloomy darkness of Washington City.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

New Beginnings

One Sunday in early November a glum Lydia sat in the parlor feigning polite conversation with Reverend Parks. In the study, her father and Lieutenant Wallace drank and smoked. With Sunday dinner concluded, Lydia's sister Marianne was washing the dishes, freeing their mother to go upstairs and lie down. Due to the rapid advance of her consumption, Henrietta Robertson needed assistance in many of the things she'd done in years past. Gone were her beloved pastimes of gardening, baking, and knitting. Now, there would be no succulent tomatoes plucked from the vine, no hot chocolate chip cookies pulled from the oven, and no woolen sweaters knitted to keep her family warm in winter. In short, the woman's health was failing, and failing badly.

Last March, after Lydia had broken the news about the deaths of her brothers, Winston and David, her mother had never recovered from the shock. She wandered about the house, her face a mask of dimensioned grief and never ending sorrow. With each passing month, her cough had grown worse. One morning before anyone else had arisen, she confessed to Lydia she would die before the end of the year. The distressed "Oh Mother!" from Lydia did nothing to dissuade her from the truth of that compelling statement. It had come to her in a vision the night before, and that was that.

Now, Lydia was afraid her mother really was dying, and she was in a frame of mind for blaming it on herself. In the month and a half since John's death, Lydia had blamed herself for every mishap, piece of bad news, and setback the family suffered, big or small. In fact, the self-blame could be traced back to the

start of the war when Henrietta's maid, a slave named Juanita, had run off with their houseboy and not been heard from since.

"Life is never an easy path to follow," the reverend was now saying as he looked at her with concern, "and death is a painful burden. We cannot question why good men such as John and your brothers have been taken from us. We can only accept God's will and know they are in God's embrace."

"So I've been told," Lydia said in a dull voice.

He reached out and stroked her hand. "If there's anything I can do—"

Drawing back, Lydia stood up. "I need to help my sister in the kitchen. Please excuse me, reverend."

"Thank your parents again for a most delicious meal. I'll let myself out." He smiled and walked to the front door. After a moment the door closed with a slam.

Now that she was alone Lydia returned to the study and fished a letter from her pocket. She had been eager to hear what her brother Albert had written.

"I see you don't take kindly to your preacher." A grin on his face, Lieutenant Wallace stood in the doorway.

Startled, Lydia laid her palm over the letter. "You might say that."

"Am I keeping you from your correspondence?"

"It's from my brother." Lydia scanned the letter without looking up. A cramp gripped her heart. She had never received one letter from John before his death. Obviously, the argument before he left had ended their relationship for good.

Dear sweet John, she thought, and the tears started yet again, rolling down her cheeks in slow rivulets of pain. She searched for a hanky. "I'm sorry," she said, shaking her head. "I can't seem to stop crying these days."

"Of course not," he said gently. He sat down beside her and offered his handkerchief. "In time, you'll make your way through the sadness. It will never leave you, but you'll learn to live with and around it."

She looked up at him with newfound admiration, not having expected such kindness. She was tired of people saying she would "get over it" when she knew

that was impossible. So genuinely concerned did the lieutenant look, she nearly confessed to him about wishing for John's death that day in Aunt Bea's store; once that awful secret was purged from her soul, she felt she might stop crying so often. But she could never tell this officer lest he be repulsed by her. The dilemma turned her crying to wrenching sobs.

"I know you must be suffering terribly over the deaths of your brothers and your friend John." The lieutenant took her hand and held it.

Again, Lydia looked up and nodded, and this time she thought, *What a good man he is!*

"How about a walk around the block? It'll do you good to get out of the house."

She thought for a moment about her self-imposed exile since John's death six weeks earlier. Some fresh air would be a pleasant change. "I'd like that," Lydia said, rising. "Let me get my wrap and tell my parents."

As they walked down the street, he placed her hand in the crook of his arm and told her he was from Providence, Rhode Island, and had two brothers and three sisters, all married and with children.

After a pause, she cocked her head and said, "But *you're* not married."

"Most women don't take kindly to the nomadic ways of an army officer." He gave a short laugh and rubbed the back of her hand. "Feeling better now?"

She nodded, and then glanced at the boarding house where John had lived. A cloud of black smoke swirled from the chimney next to his garret and faded into some trees in a vacant lot. In the days after he left, she recounted everything about him—the freckles on his face, the way he always smelled of fresh soap, the deep blue of his eyes, and his explosive laughter. But now the fine details were beginning to slip little by little into the recesses of her mind. Sometime in the future, she would be left with only an impression of him and a shadow of the pain she now felt.

Lydia realized with a start this was the first time since John's death she had thought of the future. Supposing it was a good sign, she relinquished her guilt, turned her head, and smiled at her escort.

"Have you ever considered marriage?" she asked.

"Pondered it many times," the lieutenant said, his hazel eyes glowing like a lantern on the mast of a ship. "I never found a girl I liked. That is, until I met you."

Lydia smiled, deciding this was a good sign for her future. The important question was, however, would Lieutenant Wallace, with all his superb qualities, be a wise choice for a husband?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

On to Richmond

As they approached each intersection John searched right and left for signs of soldiers, policemen, or Colonel Baker's men. His heart pounded in his chest but, as the wagon sped through the crossroads, a street lamp revealed the areas were deserted.

"I can't thank you enough for helping me," he said, resting a hand on Ann's arm. He drew in a breath of fresh air, thankful he could do something as simple as that. And with that act came the sobering realization he'd escaped the hangman's noose by only a few hours.

"I did it because I like you." She slowed the wagon. "More importantly, the notations in your Bible are critical to our cause. Did you bring the Bible?"

He nodded. "And did you have help with the escape?"

"Many gave unselfishly of themselves."

"I appreciate their help, and thank God for them." His voice rang with a deep heartfelt gratitude. He looked down the road. "Where are we going?"

"I'm taking you to the Navy Yard Bridge which leads into rural Maryland." She wheeled the team to the left at a fork in the road. "It's not a direct route to Richmond, but I doubt Colonel Baker's men will be looking for you there."

John pondered that for a moment, said nothing.

"After you cross the bridge head for Port Tobacco," Ann continued. "There you can cross the Potomac, slip through our lines, and make your way to Richmond. President Davis will find the Bible immensely interesting. McLaws told me to tell you that before we parted."

"So McLaws arranged the escape?"

"Yes." She smiled. "In the back of the wagon you'll find a satchel with provisions, along with a cane and a prosthesis. You'll get around more easily, and it could possibly save your life—Colonel Baker will be looking for an amputee with crutches."

"Thank you, Ann." The murky silhouette of a large bridge loomed up in the rain.

"Here's money and a forged set of furlough papers." She handed him an envelope. "You're John Randolph from North Carolina. Remember that. Repeat the name to me."

"I'm John Randolph."

"And don't forget to kiss me when we say good-bye," she said as she reined the horses to a stop at the foot of the bridge. "The guards are sure to be watching."

John watched in rapt fascination as she removed her hat, unpinned her hair, and shook it out. It rose up gaily like a poem offered to the gods . . . and then settled slowly over her shoulders.

She turned to him. "John—"

He kissed her full on the mouth, and then held her for a few minutes. "I will never forget you," he whispered.

She climbed from the wagon, retrieved the prosthesis, and helped him strap it on.

When he stepped down and put pressure on it, the stump burned, and he cried out. "God that hurts!"

"I'm sorry," Ann said. "You'll need to use the cane until the stump is fully healed."

"I see what you mean." He shifted his weight onto the cane while she unhitched one of the two horses removing the trappings and slipping the bit into its mouth and the bridle onto its head.

"May I help?" he offered.

She shook her head. Going to the back of the wagon she picked up the saddle and lugged it back to the horse where she hefted it over the animal's

back. When she bent down to buckle the saddle, her dress tightened about her buttocks. John sucked in his breath.

"What a job," she said, a blush on her face as she straightened. But then she bent over again and checked the buckle to make sure it was tight.

"Let me kiss you, Ann." He took her in his arms.

"The guard is thoroughly amused." She gave him a long, lingering kiss, and then handed him the satchel and climbed back into the wagon. "Adieu, my love!" With a sharp crack of the whip, she turned the wagon in a half circle and headed off toward Washington City. Her hair billowed, and then she was gone, fading into the mist and darkness.

"Got a real love affair going there, huh, Reb," the soldier at the sentry box asked after John walked the horse up to him.

"I'm a lucky man," he said, handing the man his papers.

"Your name?"

John panicked, and then spat out, "John Randolph."

"Where are you from?"

"Winston-Salem, North Carolina," he said, cursing himself under his breath for not having read the papers.

"Says here Wilmington." The soldier's brows came together.

"You're in the army." John shrugged. "You know how these people are at headquarters."

"Says here you're an amputee." The man gave him a cold stare.

Using his cane for balance, John rolled up his right trouser leg.

The man lowered a lamp and squinted. "Uh, I—I'm sorry to have detained you, Mr. Randolph. You may pass on."

"Thank you."

"And have a safe trip home!" he called out as John rode down the other side of the bridge into Maryland.

John headed east, pushing the horse to a gallop. After a mile he stopped at a creek, let the horse drink, and then proceeded at a walk. The darkness and

the rain conspired to bathe him in the illusion of safety, but Ann's words of caution hung over him like a pregnant storm cloud about to unleash its fury. Consequently, he remained vigilant throughout the rest of the night.

At the village of Port Tobacco on the shores of the slow-moving Potomac, he hailed a black ferryman.

"Up awfully early, aren't you, mister?" the man asked after he poled up to the dock. Dawn's first light cast its glow upon the wooden planks, wet either from dew or rain.

"I'm eager to get home." John dismounted, led the horse onto the barge, and paid his fare.

"And where might home be, sir?" The man shoved off. He had big hands and a thick neck. Long ropy muscles bulged beneath his cream colored shirt.

"Wilmington, North Carolina."

"You've a long trip, indeed." The ferryman raised a small sail, and then sat in the stern and steered.

Midway across they had to yield to a navy warship coming down from Washington City. Expecting to be challenged, John fretted how he would escape. If he dove overboard and tried to swim, the prosthesis would drag him down and he would . . . The frigate glided by. White sails glistening with dew faded into the rising sun.

The barge continued to the opposite shore, where John called out a hearty thanks to the black man as he rode onto Virginia soil and headed down a winding road.

Drawing in a deep breath, he burst into a smile. He was going home . . . to Lydia! All those memories and dreams that had stood to be wiped out by the hangman's noose were now a bright, effervescent reality. And Ann? She was a pleasant memory which would not be forgotten. Ever.

After riding several miles he turned up a fog shrouded creek and tethered his horse in a grove of trees. Feeling safe from detection, he mixed water and corn to make a mush he heated over a fire. After he finished eating, he lay down on a patch of grass. The sweet scent of the grass mixing with some

nearby honeysuckle was the last thing he remembered as he drifted off to sleep.

Like an exploding shell, a tremendous clap of thunder awakened him at noon. He jumped to his feet. His prosthesis gave way and he crashed to the ground.

"Damn!" he cried out in pain. Agonizing memories from the war bombarded him one after the other: the deaths of his students and the drummer boy, the amputation, the Old Capitol Prison. He leaned over the creek's bank and stared at his image in the water, saw himself for what he really was: a killer. *There were thousands of men on the battlefield who killed as you did*, he said to himself. *And they had the force of law behind them!* He knew, however, no manmade law could absolve him of the sin of murder. Guilt tore his heart in two, and he became sorely ashamed of himself when he remembered a Sunday school Bible quote: "Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me."

"No!" he cried. "No more!" His fist pounded the ground. "The killing must stop. Right here and now!"

"*Swear it*," a voice inside him pressed.

"I swear it. Upon my father's grave, I shall never take another life so long as I live!"

He pulled himself into a sitting position. Lydia had been right: war offered no glory, only the senseless taking of lives. Men went into battle with noble reasons. In the end, though, anguish, strife, sorrow, and a terrible loss of innocence were all that awaited the soldier. And with that came the bitter realization that an amputated limb could never be regained.

He lay down again and wept until he was wrung dry and exhausted. A small sense of relief gave him peace.

Later, he broke off a piece of hardtack he found in the saddlebags and ate it. After his meal, he mounted the horse and pushed hard the rest of the day. At dusk he entered the town of Bowling Green, Virginia, and found a room in a hotel. As he undressed, he decided he had been alone enough in his life.

Whatever his reasons for avoiding commitment to Lydia, they were behind him now. He was done trying to prove things to himself and to the world. He was what he was, for better or for worse.

Again, he remembered how she'd looked that first Sunday in March when he'd been invited to her parent's house for Sunday dinner. She glided across the room, the blue dress exposed the soft, white skin of her shoulders and hinted at her ample bosom. How he longed to touch that flesh!

When I get home, he decided as he crawled into bed, the first thing I'm going to do is propose to Lydia and beg her to marry me as soon as possible. Never mind our relationship has faded, no letters were written, or she'd been seeing Lieutenant Wallace. That love we conceived at the cemetery last February is precious and eternal.

With a smile on his face, he fell into a deep sleep.

Two days later John rode into Richmond and paid for a room at the Marshall Hotel, the only place where he could find decent lodging. He purchased the morning edition of the *Richmond Examiner* dated November 5, 1862, and entered the dining room where he ordered a hearty breakfast of eggs, ham, grits, cornbread, and coffee. As he prepared to open his newspaper and catch up on the latest war news, he spotted Captain Hamet and General Hood sitting at a corner table. The general was a tall stocky man with a full beard who towered over Hamet.

Hamet looked up and saw John at the same time. His jaw dropped in surprise as he sprang to his feet. "John? John Martin?"

"Yes! Good morning!" John grabbed his cane and stood up.

Hamet waved to him. "Come join us!"

"Nice to see you again Captain Hamet, General Hood, sir." John said when he stood before the two men. He set down his cane, plate, and coffee mug, and then shook hands with the men.

"*Major Hamet.*" Hood corrected him as John pulled up a chair. He remembered his Texas manners and smiled, displaying a face-full of large white teeth. "Promoted shortly after the battle of Sharpsburg."

"We thought you were dead!" Hamet exclaimed. "The men who came back from that patrol said—"

"I was wounded," John interrupted, and then told a much-abbreviated version of his travails.

"I apologize from the bottom of my heart, sir." Hood looked profoundly embarrassed. "I have never knowingly left wounded men behind on the battlefield."

"And you're due that medal we honored you with posthumously," Hamet said, "along with a considerable amount of back pay."

"Thank you." John presented his pocket Bible to Hood, and explained the coded markings in it and how to interpret them. "Sir, I believe those siege guns are on their way to Richmond, and an attack is imminent. Please make sure this Bible gets to President Davis."

"Holy Texas!" Hood exclaimed, "Good job, young Martin. Good job! And you may rest assured, sir, that I will deliver your Bible personally to the President."

"Thank you, sir." John beamed as he lit into his breakfast, greatly relieved his last mission as a soldier had ended.

Hood lit a cigar and leaned back in his chair. He stroked his beard. "What will you do now, Lieutenant Martin?"

"Return to Clarksville, sir, now that the army has no further need of me." He continued eating, savoring each bite of the cornbread and ham. Armory Square Hospital food was grand compared to Army field rations. But this meal was superb! He grinned, and then remembered, as an afterthought, to wipe the corners of his mouth with his napkin. The return to civilian life with its overabundance of polite manners and intricate customs would be difficult. Lydia would expect that of him.

Hood and Hamet exchanged glances, and General Hood nodded. He eyed John in a thoughtful manner. "I've had a dream—" Hood lowered his voice, "—"

of conducting an offensive in West Tennessee. I would start near Murphreesboro, drive our troops north to the Ohio, and then clean out every damn Yankee west to the Mississippi. The attack could begin in December of this year, *if* I had someone reliable to destroy the railroad bridge in your hometown of Clarksville. That would prevent the Yankees from bringing up reinforcements or conducting a flanking maneuver."

John did not like the way Hood was looking at him. "I'm sure you'll find the right man," he said. "With my leg gone, I'm afraid I'm not of much use to the army."

"On the contrary," Hamet said. "You've proven you're an excellent choice! Think of the way you conducted yourself on the battlefield, the note taking while a prisoner of war . . . and you *do* have a prosthesis. Right?"

John nodded without enthusiasm.

The general smiled. "Good. Now that's settled—"

"I didn't say I'd help you." John started to rise.

"Sit down, Lieutenant Martin!" Hood's voice boomed out across the dining room. Several officers turned and stared. "You're still in the army until discharged."

"Yes, sir." John slid into his chair. *Why are they asking this of me?* Anguish flooded his mind and immediately turned to anger. *Haven't I done enough?*

"Don't be upset, John," Hamet said. "There's a shortage of men with your exemplary qualifications. Furthermore, with the critical situation in middle Tennessee, the whole area is about to crumble. If nothing is done, your home state will become a permanent Yankee stronghold."

"Look," John set both fists down on the table. "At Sharpsburg I had my leg blown off, lost three of my students, and murdered an innocent boy. For atonement, I vowed never to kill another human being." His voice grew louder with each word. Then, he exploded. "In short, you gentlemen can go to hell!"

Hamet started to speak. Hood waved him into silence, and then turned his steely blue eyes on John. "Lieutenant Martin, you can help us now, or spend the rest of the war in a military prison."

"Thank you, sir." John glared at the general. "That is a generous reward for all I have done and been through."

"It's your decision." Hood leaned back in his chair and puffed on his cigar.

"You *gentlemen* leave me no choice," John said, barely able to conceal the sarcasm in his voice.

"I was hoping you'd say that, Lieutenant." Hood grinned triumphantly. "You have not lost your good sense along with your leg. Here, have a cigar. No hard feelings, right?"

"Thank you, sir," John said, feeling miserable.

"You see," Hood said, "President Davis has already approved the attack. Do you have any experience working with explosives?"

"Yes, sir." John swilled the last of his coffee and resigned himself to the task before him. "I've studied several texts, plus I helped the structural engineer plant the charges when he destroyed the old railroad bridge across the Cumberland."

"When was that?"

"Three years ago in eighteen fifty-nine." A waiter swooped down and lit John's cigar.

"Good, but let me emphasize one thing, Lieutenant Martin. Timing. To blow the bridge too soon or too late means a flood of gunboats and reinforcements breathing down my neck. And if that dilly-dallying McClellan is replaced by Ulysses S. Grant—that's one hell of another matter!"

"I understand, sir," John said. "Fully."

"Good! This calls for a celebration. Waiter!"

The general ordered a bottle of whiskey, and they drank toasts to the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis, and finally Robert E. Lee.

"Well," Hood stood up, putting his hand on the back of his chair to steady himself, "I must get your information to President Davis. Major Hamet will handle things from now on. I want to get our arrangements under way as quickly as possible."

By early afternoon of the next day, John was settled in a railcar heading for home. In his lap he had two letters from Lydia, which Major Hamet had brought to him from headquarters, along with an envelope containing his back pay and a medal to pin on his chest.

In the cargo car was a cavalry mount—a gift from the major.

"Why is he called Murder?" John had asked earlier. They stood on the railway platform surrounded by John's gear. Small groups of civilians and soldiers were saying their good-byes and boarding the train.

"You'll find out when you ride him," the major replied, chuckling, and then handed John a new Spencer Carbine. "Compliments of General Hood. It's the latest technology: an eight-shot repeater that can fire twenty-one rounds per minute."

John accepted the handsome weapon with reluctance, telling himself he would use it only for self-defense.

"And one more thing." Hamet handed him an envelope. "Here's two hundred dollars for expenses."

"Thank you, sir."

"Good luck!"

I'll need all the luck I can get, John thought and then reviewed the rest of his instructions as he arranged himself in his seat. First, he was to recruit five or six trusted helpers from among Clarksville's residents; then, he was to gather the explosives to destroy the bridge. When he protested the Yankees had collected all of the townspeople's weapons and ammunition at the start of the occupation, the major had merely shrugged and suggested John and his co-conspirators raid the Yankees' armory.

"Then wait for orders from the general giving you the date of the attack," Hamet had instructed.

"How will he contact me, sir?"

"By courier. He'll say, 'At Clarksville it's but a stone's throw across the Cumberland,' and you will reply, 'Only when the riverboats aren't running.'"

Now, John shook his head and told himself everything would work out, even though he would be resuming his former duties as a professional soldier. More pressing now than blowing up a silly bridge, however, was his desire to see Lydia.

He took out her letters. Both envelopes were scuffed and the ink in places was blurred, as if it had gotten wet and been stepped on at some point in its long, arduous journey. He tore open the first letter dated Monday, August 26, 1862. Although its tone was warm and friendly, he realized with a feeling that wrenched his heart his relationship with her would be hard to renew.

Dear John,

This summer's been a long hot one, with the blazing sun offering no relief, even when I sit and read under the shade trees in the back yard.

I don't know where you are or what you're doing, but I pray you're safe. As a token of our continuing friendship I enclose two rose petals and ask you to return one of them if you're of the same mind.

My father is fine. Mother coughs more and more from the congestion in her lungs. She has not gotten over the loss of my two brothers. As a result, I continue to do all the housework. Marianne helps when she can, but a young girl of her age has only one thing on her mind: boys!

The occupation here continues unchanged. Colonel Harris and his subordinates do nothing to curb the abuses: pillaging of crops and livestock, thefts from Uncle Matthew's store, and women accosted on the streets in broad daylight.

With love,

Lydia

With several concentrated blasts from its whistle, the engine lurched forward, taking up the slack in the cars. Puffs of coal smoke filtered past the windows as the train left the station.

He opened her letter dated Sunday, October 5, 1862.

Dear John,

I don't know if you've received any of my letters or the pound cake and plum pudding mailed last month after Daddy got your new address from the War Department in Richmond. If not, perhaps some lonely soldier enjoyed the food.

The war toll of local boys continues to grow. Mary Peabody came to church this morning with tears in her eyes. One of her sister's boys had died at the Battle of South Mountain, somewhere in western Maryland.

The Yankee repression grows worse. I won't trouble you with the details, which are petty compared to what you are going through.

Please write whenever you have the time. I would appreciate hearing from you.

Your friend,

Lydia

John stuffed the letters in his pocket, and settled back for the long train ride. After his long absence he would have to begin anew with Lydia. At least she hadn't done anything foolish like marry Lieutenant Wallace. Or so he hoped.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Grieving

Lydia sat in a window alcove on the second floor of the Stewart College Library. Her favorite place, the niche was cozy and warm in winter, but shielded from the blazing rays of the summer sun. It also afforded her a perfect view of the campus and surrounding area.

By swiveling around in her overstuffed armchair, she could make out the line of trees that marked the cemetery where she and John had met last February. And by turning back the other way, she was able to pinpoint the window in the administration building where his office had been. Further contortions allowed her a glimpse of his garret at Mrs. Huber's boarding house. In short, the chair where she sat made it ideally located for Lydia to bask in her grief.

Earlier today, her father had ordered her to get out of bed, get dressed, and go see Reverend Parks. "Moping!" her father cried, launching one of his infamous tirades. "And pining for the dead! When will it all end, Lydia?"

Her protests having fallen on deaf ears, Lydia slugged on her warm winter coat and left the house without saying so much as a goodbye. But instead of going to Reverend Parks' office, her feet led her to the Stewart College campus and her favorite armchair in the library. She would deal with her father later on when he was in a better mood. In the meantime, she wanted to be alone with her thoughts.

Weeks had passed since the notification of John's death, and she could not bring herself to completely forget him. Thank God she had written to him and

apologized after their argument! How much worse it would have been if he had been killed while they were on bad terms.

Now, feeling restless, she rose from her chair and browsed the stacks until she came to the school's collection of English poetry. Picking up a volume—she didn't look at the title—she carried it back to her armchair and made herself comfortable.

Perhaps Father is right, she thought as she opened the book. I do mope around all day long. When will I feel like myself again and stop mourning John?

"Let the dead bury the dead," she whispered, remembering a phrase from her grandfather's funeral. At the time she had been too young to understand the words. Now, however, she understood the expression: those who went before him were better qualified to tend to his soul.

She turned to the open book of poetry on her lap and began reading. The poems were about two young lovers, and she allowed herself to become immersed in the rhythmic fantasy of their passion, heartbreaks, and final separation by death. There were no descriptions of sex, as the college did not allow such works in the library, nor was the subject ever discussed in print, as was the custom of the day. All was innuendo. If one wanted to read about the real thing . . . well, she'd glimpsed one of her brother's smutty books once when he was out hunting. She had pulled the book out from under his mattress and opened it, having seen him stash it there a few days ago when their father had come traipsing up the stairs. The pictures had both terrified and fascinated her.

Now, she contented herself with the prim literature on her lap. With the afternoon sun streaming through the window, warming her face as she read, she drifted off to sleep. . . .

"I'll always love you," a smiling John said, the coarse hairs on the back of his hand brushing her cheek. She looked up into his eyes and opened her mouth when his lips met hers. His lips were warm and she savored his probing tongue and the hardness of his teeth. She reached up and threw her arms

around his neck, to hold onto him so that he would never slip from her embrace again.

In the way of dreams, she was suddenly sitting on his lap with her head resting on his chest. As she listened to his heart beating, she felt secure and at peace, and knew he would never leave her again.

When she awoke, a note lay on her lap. "Come see me. I have a present." Lieutenant Wallace had signed it, "Lawrence."

The gentle wind caressed her face as she made her way along the winding walk between the wooden buildings. A few leaves, the last hint of fall, fluttered down onto the collar of her coat. She thought of Lawrence. He was kind and gentle, and she wondered what life would be like with this handsome Yankee soldier. Her father was right; she must let go of the past and get on with her life.

Trembling, she opened the door to Lieutenant Wallace's office.

"Lydia!" A smile on his face, he rose to his feet. "Please sit down." He pointed to the old leather sofa.

She did as he asked, and waited with her hands folded on her lap while he rummaged through his desk.

"I see you got my note," he said, casting a sly glance at her.

She nodded. Finally, she realized nothing could elude him for so long a time in the small drawer. "You're teasing me!" she protested, and burst out laughing.

He joined in her laughter and with a flourish presented a small box tied with a red bow. "Here!"

Beaming, she opened the gift. "European chocolates! Thank you!"

"I ran into your sister one day and she mentioned you favored them." He sat next to her and rested his hand on the sleeve of her dress, toying with a bit of lace.

"I'm touched you would remember something insignificant." She smiled.

"To me it was of great importance," he said, his voice deep and steady as he fixed his gaze on her.

Lydia felt disoriented—sitting in what in the past had been John's office with the very present lieutenant. She rose and moved to the window, looking out at the line of trees and the river beyond.

"It's really a beautiful sight," Wallace said behind her. He stood close, his breath warming the back of her neck.

"And so lonely," Lydia replied. She thought of John, buried in a military cemetery somewhere with probably nothing more than two sticks of crossed wood to mark his grave. The thought brought tears to her eyes.

"Lydia." His hands touched her shoulders, pressing the flesh.

The tears swelled in a sudden onslaught that left her sobbing.

Wallace turned her around, pulled her close, and held her. "It's all right," he murmured, pressing her head against his chest. "Let all those tears out once and for all."

And the tears came: grief for the man she'd lost and anger at herself for wishing him dead.

"Here." The lieutenant handed her a handkerchief as she stepped back.

"Thank you."

"Let me." And he dabbed gently around her eyes and along the softness of her cheeks, catching the long trail of tears that had run down her chin onto her neck.

"You're very kind," she whispered.

He brushed a lock of hair from her forehead, bent forward, and kissed her gently on the lips.

Overwhelmed by a sudden stab of loneliness, she allowed him to continue holding her. His lips brushed the top of her head, and his hand cupped her chin. Smiling, he placed both hands on either side of her cheeks and kissed her on the lips, gently at first, and then with increasing desire.

"Stop!" Lydia struggled to break away.

"Let me kiss you, sweet Lydia." He pressed her tight against him, and nibbled her lips.

"Stop!" she shrieked. "I can't do that!" And she fled his office, running as hard as she could down the long hallway leading to the exit doors. She charged through them, hearing them bang closed as she raced into the sharp, autumnal air of the commons.

She stopped when she reached College Street. In the distance lay her father's mansion. When she looked over her shoulder, she caught a glimpse of the college. *I was lucky*, she thought, *to get away from Lawrence when I did. So very lucky.*

But the memory of the lieutenant's lips pressed against her own had ignited a fire deep within her loins. The memory would not go away, nor would the blaze go out.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Test

No matter which way John had turned during the night, finding a comfortable position in his cramped seat eluded him. The train's coach rocked to and fro, and the leather seat cushion with its thin padding was hard and unforgiving.

Now, he used the palm of his hand to clear a small moon on the window's dirty glass. Outside, the train had slowed and was creeping up a long grade beside a swift-running creek. The brakes locked, and the train stopped with a lurch. Several men standing in the aisle kept from falling by grasping seat backs, leather straps hanging from the ceiling, or the handles to overhead luggage compartments. Vile oaths were muttered between clenched teeth.

"What's going on?" the civilian next to John asked.

"Can't tell," John said, yawning. "Maybe something's blocking the tracks."

A bullet smashed into the window one seat up from John, showering two elderly ladies with bits of glass. They broke into hysterical screams and cowered in their seats with their hands grasping the tops of their hats.

"Bandits!" someone yelled from the other side of the car.

More passengers shouted as masked men on horseback charged from the trees alongside the tracks. They raced up and down both sides of the train, firing at soldiers and anyone else who pointed a gun. The gunfire terrified the old ladies even more, and their crying grew strident.

John stood up and reached for the Spencer in the overhead luggage compartment as the door at the front of the car crashed open. A black, floppy hat pulled low over his eyes, a huge man wearing buckskins stood framed in

the entrance. His revolver held at the ready, his eyes scanned the frightened faces before him.

"Everyone freeze!" he ordered as three more robbers entered the car from the opposite end.

John eased his hand down from the Spencer's leather case, hoping no one had noticed his actions.

"Gentlemen, empty your pockets; ladies, your purses," ordered the man in buckskins. "Hand over your jewelry, watches, and money."

While two men brandishing revolvers remained on guard, the other two proceeded down the length of the coach, collecting valuables and tossing them into a canvas bag.

When John hesitated the bearded bandit ran down the aisle and stuck his gun in John's face. "Cough it up you piece of shit!"

John pulled out his wallet and threw it in the bag.

The thief's eyes narrowed and he grabbed John by the coat lapels, patted him down, and yanked out Hamet's pouch. Opening it, he found the two hundred dollars in expense money.

"Whoopee! Lookee here boys!" He held the pouch high in the air, and then stuffed everything into the bag. He shoved John into his seat and stuck a revolver under his chin. He cocked the hammer and said in a loud voice, "I ought to kill you right now so everybody can see what happens to scum who hold out on us."

With the steel of the barrel pressed against his throat, beads of sweat formed on John's forehead.

The bandit gave a coarse laugh. Then he pulled the gun away and moved on.

"Damn him," John muttered as the robbers worked their way to the front of the car. The rest of the passengers had scrambled to have their valuables ready.

"Everyone stay in your seats!" Firing several shots into the ceiling, the bandits hurried out the door.

John jumped up, jerked the Spencer from its case, and started down the aisle. The pain in his stump throbbed, but he had no time to worry about that.

"Where are you going?" a civilian called.

"To get my money back!" he growled.

When he reached the door, John peered through the glass. Seeing no one, he jerked it open and stepped onto the platform. The man who had threatened him was mounting a horse. In his left hand he carried the canvas bag. The other members of his gang had already begun to flee.

John cocked the Spencer and took aim. "Hey, scum!" he yelled. "Drop that bag!"

When the bandit raised his revolver, John fired three rounds. The thief's hands flew in the air as a red stain exploded on the front of his shirt. He toppled from his horse, and the canvas bag landed on the ground next to him.

Two of the robbers looked back at the sound of the volley, wheeled their horses, and headed for the bag of loot. Inside the train gunfire broke out as passengers fired their weapons through open windows. Protected by their cover, John retrieved the bag. The men on horseback retreated before the onslaught of bullets and galloped into the woods. John fired the Spencer at the robbers' disappearing backs, and then brought the canvas bag back to the train.

Once the gunfire stopped, cheers erupted for John and the men who had come to his aid. He derived no pleasure from their praises and pats on the back. He had wanted simply to go home, complete Hood's mission, and put the past behind him.

He dug his wallet and Hamet's two hundred dollars from the bag, and then handed the sack to another man, who saw to returning the belongings to their owners. Then, the pain in his stump hit him hard. It was fiery, and throbbed all the way to his hip.

As the train ground forward again, John looked out the window at the thief's corpse, left where it had fallen. He thought about his vow not to kill again and how quickly he had broken it.

I had no choice, he thought, pressing his burning face against the cool glass. The foul odor of tension and fear rose from his clothing. I have to try again. I can begin right now!

But with Hamet and Hood in control of his actions, John knew that somehow, somewhere, he would be forced to break that vow again.



After departing the train in Bristol, Virginia, John had an uneventful trip by horseback until he reached the outskirts of Clarksville on November 15, 1862. By that time, he and Murder had come to a good understanding. John was in charge.

Not wanting to confront the Yankee pickets on the main road leading into town, John waited by the edge of a creek until dusk, and then slipped past them and entered the town. His heart pounded when he saw the spire of the Presbyterian Church, College Street, and finally the Robertson house. Stopping across from the house, he gazed up at the lamp glowing behind the lace curtains of the front parlor. Uncertainty assailed him.

After his extended absence and no correspondence for several months, would Lydia care he was back? If Hamet and Hood thought him dead, had official notification of his death been sent to Clarksville? His blood ran cold at the impact such news might have had on Lydia.

Good God, he thought. She might be betrothed to another man! The idea so horrified him, he nearly cried out her name. Fear, not common sense, held him back. *I'll find out tomorrow about Lydia, he decided. One of us, at least, should be prepared for this reunion.*

The front door opened, and Lydia and Lieutenant Wallace stepped onto the porch. The lieutenant took her hands and kissed her on the lips.

Aghast, John shrank back into the shadows as the lieutenant strode to his horse. Tossing her a kiss, Wallace rode off into the night, and Lydia entered the house.

A cold wind swept down College Street, leaving John chilled. Heartbroken, he turned away and started for the Montgomery Hotel.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Reunion at Clarksville

"Hold your horses!" John shouted as he sipped a whiskey in his third floor room of the Montgomery Hotel. The knocking turned to pounding. "It ain't locked, goddamn it!"

The door flew open and Elias Montgomery rushed into the room.

"My God, it's true!" The big man pulled John from the chair. He hugged him and thumped him on the shoulder and back. "We heard you were dead, nephew!"

"So I've been told." John smiled. "Care for a drink, Uncle?"

"Care for one? I *need* one!" He plopped in a ragged armchair with some stuffing hanging down to the floor. "Tell me you're not a ghost!"

"As you can see, I'm here in the flesh." After filling a glass for Elias, John flopped on the mattress and started pulling his right leg onto the bed. "Ah, but it's nice to have a decent place to sleep after all those—"

"What happened to your leg?" Elias gasped.

"I left it on a battlefield in Maryland," John said, realizing that from now on people would stare at his leg. Each time, a long, tedious explanation would be in order. And something else came to mind as he filled Elias in on the details of his amputation and convalescence. The telling about the leg brought home the finality of the surgeon's actions. The leg was gone, and he was forced to accept that fact.

"Dear God!" Elias's face had drained of color. He leaned far back in his chair as if trying to get away from the truth. "It was that bad?"

John nodded as he gazed out the curtained window. "We were shooting and killing, and we didn't know why."

"Oh Lord!" Elias sprawled in his chair.

"Let's talk about something else." John reached over and touched the bottle to his uncle's glass. "How's Lydia?"

"I was afraid you'd ask." Elias gulped half of his drink.

"Well?"

"Your death hit her hard, but Lieutenant Wallace helped console her." Elias brown eyes studied John for a moment. "She's been seeing a lot of him lately."

"I expected something like that." He sipped his whiskey, and his face tightened as the memory of the kiss he had seen tonight washed over him. "But to get that serious over a Yankee?"

Elias snorted in derision. "You'd think there wasn't a war on, the way the young ladies in this town have taken up with them."

The two men sat in silence for a moment. John noticed the subtle changes that had come over Elias in the last four months. His hair was graying around the ears and his belly was flattened so he no longer looked portly. And a shroud of despair hung over him. It clouded his eyes and made him look old and wretched, like a man whose infirmities have gotten the better of him. John remembered Lydia's letter and her description of the occupation. *Had it gotten worse, strangling those who tried to deal with its inequities?*

"Elias," John said, unsure whether he should be talking this way to his uncle. "I need to discuss something with you."

"Spill it, nephew." His brown eyes came back to life: they lit with interest.

John took a deep breath, knowing that by involving Elias he was putting him at great risk. He also knew he could trust his uncle with anything. "Sometime soon I need to get a good look at the railroad bridge over the Cumberland River."

Elias bolted upright. "You on some military mission?" he whispered.

John nodded.

"My Lord!" Elias slapped his knee. "If you need help, I'll sure as hell volunteer right now!"

"Good. I knew I could count on you." John swore him to secrecy, and then told him about the planned offensive and the importance of destroying the bridge.

"When do we begin?" Elias asked.

"Right away. And I'll need five others if I'm to do the job properly."

"I could talk with Matthew Maury and Mayor Robertson for starters." Elias pulled out a cigar and lit it. He puffed mightily, displaying his pleasure at being afforded an opportunity to help the cause.

"What about Fred Knox?" John asked. "Did he make it back? I lost touch with him after he was wounded at Sharpsburg."

"He's home, minus an arm, and he's still cutting hair, only a little slower." Elias looked at the floor and shook his head before gulping the rest of his whiskey. "Terrible the way Martha carried on when she saw him the first time. Just awful. As if they didn't have enough troubles."

John shook his head and stared out the window, thinking about the Knox's disabled daughter, Helen, hidden away in a room above the barbershop. He turned back to Elias and said, "We'll need a meeting place. How about Mayor Robertson's house?"

"I'll check." Elias scratched his chin. "And we might bring in Mary Peabody because her job in the town clerk's office deals with train and riverboat schedules."

"Good idea," John said, nodding even though he had qualms about involving a woman in a dangerous undertaking. Yet he knew Elias was right. Mary was privy to information that would be crucial to their success. "And, Elias, time is short for all we need to do."

"I'll arrange things as quickly as I can." Elias stood up. "You look washed out, John. Get some sleep and come to church tomorrow at eleven. Afterward, you can see the others. They'll sure as hell want to see you! My God, I still can't believe you're back!"

At the crowded Presbyterian Church the next morning, John sat in the back row with some Yankee soldiers, still considered outcasts by the regular parishioners.

Hoping to find Lydia, he scanned the sea of church goers. Several rows up sat a clot of women dressed in an array of yellows, reds, purples, and greens. Churchgoing in Clarksville, he remembered, had always been a social event.

John glanced down at the clothes he'd borrowed from Elias early this morning: a black suit, which was a bit threadbare yet fit fairly well, a white shirt, matching black tie, and black hat. Lacking a comb he had raked his fingers through his hair until the image he saw in the mirror looked presentable.

Now, the hat lay in his lap as he scanned from left to right. He spotted Miss Mary Peabody sitting primly several rows forward on the left. A pink bonnet sat atop her head, and a light blue shawl cloaked her shoulders. She was thumbing through a hymnal resting on the back of the pew in front of her.

Standing behind the pulpit, his dark gray eyes scanning the congregation, a somber Reverend Parks was immersed in his sermon. "Although we are unworthy, we must strive to love the way Jesus loved. Although we are sinners, we must learn to forgive the way Jesus forgave."

John found Lydia's parents midway down the right side, two seats in from the aisle. Henrietta leaned against her husband, as if she had hardly the strength to sit by herself. John remembered Lydia's letter about the state of her mother's health. Surprised not to find Lydia at Henrietta's side, he wondered if she had stayed home. *Is she ill?* he wondered, and considered going to her house.

"We are bound to fall short, for we are only men, and men are flawed and weak. But our task is to strive for the virtues of God in everything we do, from dawn till dusk."

At that moment John found Lydia sitting beside Lieutenant Wallace four rows in front of her parents. She wore a bright yellow dress and matching shawl, their color a pleasant fit with the lieutenant's dark blue uniform.

John gasped at the sudden pain of seeing them together again, so close, so familiar. Her brown hair, shiny in the light streaming through the stained glass windows, was coiled on top of her head and held in place by a black comb. The stark white of the nape of her neck riveted his attention. He remembered the first time he saw it, in her parent's parlor last February after Lydia had introduced him. Oh, how he'd wanted to kiss that soft, white flesh!

Now, as he continued to stare, John reached in his coat pocket and fingered the envelope containing her letter and the two rose petals she had enclosed. By this symbolic act she had indicated an unwillingness to sever the ties they'd so tenderly threaded that first day at the cemetery. He believed Fate had brought them together and guaranteed their love would survive all obstacles. His eyes told him otherwise.

She thought you were dead, he growled at himself. You couldn't expect her to grieve the rest of her life. You've lost her. Now forget her, as she's forgotten you.

In his mind, however, he stood, walked down the aisle, and smiled at her. She cried out his name, jumped up, and hurled herself into his arms. Unmindful of her parents, Wallace, and the other parishioners, they kissed and proclaimed their love for each other.

A cramp shot up his right thigh, and John used both hands to clasp his leg and ease the pain. When he looked up, his eyes met Lydia's. She was staring at him, shock and disbelief on her face.

He smiled wanly at her, and she turned back around.

Within minutes the reverend's sermon had dwindled and he was motioning the congregation to stand. When the choir burst into a final hymn, John walked outside with his cane and waited in the fresh air. Nearby, horses stood with their carriages, their eyes twitching and tails flapping, anxious to get home and munch the sweet hay thrown down from the loft.

Soon the congregation filed out. John spotted Lydia when she stopped to talk with Reverend Parks. In the sharp light, her hair shone like harvest wheat, and the gentle beauty of her face intrigued him as much now as it had when they met last February. Yet her voice had changed, sounded haughty and contemptuous.

It puzzled him to see those changes. He waved, and when their eyes met, she rushed over and threw her arms around him.

"I thought you were—Your name! They posted it on the courthouse door!"

"Lydia," he whispered, holding her and stroking her hair. "My sweet Lydia."

She clung to him and sobbed, pulling away only when Lieutenant Wallace and her parents approached.

John pulled out one of the rose petals and handed it to her. "Here. This was in a letter you sent."

"Look, Daddy!" she cried, turning from him as she slipped the petal into her coat pocket. She was blushing, and it was a deep crimson color that had come up on her face. "Look who's come back!"

John shook hands with Mayor Robertson who wheezed when he spoke.

"Glad to see you, John!" Willard thumped him on the back.

Lieutenant Wallace extended his hand. "Returned to the land of the living, I see," he said, his face unreadable.

"I'm so thankful you made it home safely," Henrietta said. She coughed, and brushed some lint off John's coat.

"Will you be staying for the church dinner?" Mayor Robertson asked.

Lydia gave him no chance to answer. "What's wrong with your leg, John?" she asked. "You've got a cane and you're walking differently."

Disconcerted by her immediate presence, and self-conscious of how he must appear to her and the others, John did not answer right away. He remembered the scene in the hospital bathroom when he had stropped his razor and wet his beard. His image in the mirror shocked him. Although he'd been away only a few months, the changes which had come over him made it seem like four years. His face was dull and lifeless, looking more like a ghost

than the healthy young man he'd been while teaching at Stewart College. The killing had done this to him.

He realized he couldn't answer Lydia's question. The English language contained no words to describe his ordeal. When Lieutenant Wallace came and stood beside her, the pinhole of hope he felt closed.

"What happened to you?" she cried now, taking his arm and shaking it.

"I was wounded at Sharpsburg," he managed to say. He spoke in a somber tone as he looked into her misty green eyes. "They took my leg."

Later, after entering the church basement and taking a private moment to greet Fred Knox, John sat at the Robertson's table, along with Reverend Parks, Matthew and Beatrice Maury, Mary Peabody, Elias Montgomery, and Fred Knox and his wife. Lydia sat at the far end between her mother and Lieutenant Wallace. The lieutenant, the only Yankee present, sat at what seemed like parade rest, stiff and unsmiling, while Lydia chatted with her parents.

John glanced over at Lydia. Her eyes met his, and she smiled, although sadness and guilt tugged at the corners of her mouth.

John noticed the chill hanging over the church basement, despite the crowd of people and the steaming food on the cloth-covered table. Plates of fried chicken, along with bowls of mashed potatoes, gravy, and cornbread lined the center of the table. Fresh flowers arranged to form a centerpiece served as a reminder of better times.

"Might those be your flowers?" John asked Mary.

"Indeed they are!" Mary beamed. She started to say something, stopped, and cast him a strange almost frightened look as if he were a ghost. Finally, she said, "I grew them in my hothouse."

"Mary's always doing something nice," Beatrice said.

Matthew threw her one of his spiteful glances, much as he had done at the Robertson's Sunday dinner last March. That had ended in a shameful squabble at the table and, later, his slapping her.

"How is your mother?" John asked.

"Still battling her rheumatism," Mary said, frowning. "It acted up during a recent cold spell last week."

"I don't see Professor Maury anywhere," John said after Reverend Parks finished saying grace. "Is he all right?"

"My brother died on October first." Matthew shook his head, his face reddening.

"I . . . I don't know what to say, Matthew." John set his fork down. "He was like a father to me." His throat tightened with sadness. "Was it sudden?"

"Absalom died of angina." The pain in Matthew's blue eyes clouded over with the fire of anger. "When his medication ran out, Doc Webber went to Colonel Harris' office and asked them to telegraph Nashville for a re-supply. The request was denied because it wasn't a military emergency."

John stared at him, incredulous.

"So Absalom lies dead," he hissed, "because of these Yankee bastards!"

"Matthew!" Beatrice cried, glancing at Reverend Parks who was smiling. "Such language in God's house."

"Shut up once and for all!" he snarled. "It's my brother we're talking about!"

John cleared his throat. "I'm sorry to hear of all this, Matthew. He was always in my thoughts."

"And he always spoke highly of you, John," Matthew said. The red hue on his cheeks had subsided. "He grieved fiercely when he heard of your death. Thank God that wasn't true." He looked down at his plate and began to eat, as did everyone else at the table.

Several minutes later John asked, "How goes the occupation?"

"There's a terrible shortage of coal," Mary said, shivering. Her bony hand—John hadn't remembered that from before—reached for a steaming pot of coffee. After filling her cup she held the vessel with both hands and sipped slowly, relishing its warmth. "It's constantly cold in the house, and I worry so about my mother."

"The war has left us with severe shortages of everything," Matthew said, his hair looking blacker than John recalled, as if he'd taken to using coloring to rid

himself of the gray. He caught John's eye. "Everyone today brought a covered dish."

"And there's lots of thievery," Beatrice said, shaking her head.

Matthew glared at her.

Fred, his left sleeve pinned neatly below his shoulder, cleared his throat. "I see a multitude of Yankee officers and enlisted personnel in my shop each day," he said, bitterness tingeing his words, "and on the whole, they are perfect gentlemen. They wait their turn—even the officers when there's a private ahead of them—and they tip their hats to womenfolk passing on the street." He frowned. "But there's always the exception."

When the dinner ended John caught Lydia's eye again and they exchanged smiles. He rose to speak with her. Elias tugged at his arm. "I need to talk to you, John," he said in a low voice.

John looked longingly across the room at Lydia. She was watching him. He turned back to his uncle. "Can't it wait?"

Sounding offended, Elias said, "I've been making arrangements for your mission, John. I thought it was urgent."

"You're right, of course. I'm sorry." John looked at Lydia again and shook his head.

Elias hustled him out into the hall, looked both ways, and whispered. "I've spoken with Matthew and Fred, and they both want to do anything they can to help you."

"Thank God they're willing to help," John said, leaning on his cane. "Have you asked Mayor Robertson if we can use his house for a Wednesday meeting?"

Elias nodded.

"Is there any black powder available?" John asked.

"None in the whole county," Elias said, "which leaves us with two options: the new Yankee armory out behind Stewart College—"

"I don't really want to risk that."

"—or a ragtag guerrilla band up in Trenton, Kentucky."

"How did guerrillas get black powder?"

Elias gave a nasty smile. "Periodically, they raid the supply trains coming into town."

John signaled Elias to stop talking when Reverend Parks entered the hall. The preacher turned away from them and climbed the stairs leading to his first floor office. A moment later a door banged up there.

Fred and Matthew entered the hall, and John stood with his arm around Fred's shoulder as they discussed the dusk-to-dawn curfew Colonel Harris had instituted only last week. Finally, John excused himself and reentered the basement hall. He started toward Lydia, stopped abruptly.

Standing at Lieutenant Wallace's elbow as he told a story, she leaned against him and rested her hand on his sleeve. She giggled like a schoolgirl. John scoffed at her behavior. Perhaps she liked what she had found in this bluecoat officer. Then, he considered what the lieutenant offered her far outweighed his own prospects, especially with only one good leg.

Feelings of abandonment welled up in him, and he became angry. *If she's so interested in him, what's the point of pursuing her? Remember your mission. You've got a bridge to destroy!*

He shouldered through the crowd, left the church, and headed for the cemetery.

The number of new graves shocked John. White military crosses dotted a vast field where grass and wildflowers had once swept, unobstructed, down to the river road. Opening a book, he sat on the stone bench where he and Lydia had met last February. The memories swelled like the spring flood on the Cumberland, sweeping him from the present to the past and back: Lydia's laughter sighing like the wind in the tops of the tall trees; her tears flowing over the deaths of her brothers Winston and David; her anger rising at his leaving for the war; and, now, her childish laughter at Lieutenant Wallace's funny story in the church basement.

The memories, too many and too painful, overcame him. He closed his book and walked down to the river where he stood staring at its shimmering surface. Upstream lay the railroad bridge, its trestle stark and bare in the harsh light of

day. He forced his mind to move from the unchangeable past to the problems inherent in his present assignment.

Soon, tomorrow or the next day, he'd take a closer look at the bridge and calculate the amount of black powder needed to destroy it. Then, he would organize his friends into an efficient band of saboteurs who would obtain the needed supplies by Christmas.

Hamet had not said what would happen if John should fail. Judging by Hood's reaction when John first declined the mission, the stakes were high indeed. With that in mind, he compiled a mental list of the things he would need to complete his assignment. As he thought about it, however, the assignment seemed so utterly hopeless that he despaired of even starting it. Yet, he had no choice in the matter. Absolutely none!

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Questions

Unnerved by John's sudden return, Lydia slipped away after the church dinner and walked down to the river. As she strolled along the bank her anger came to a boil over the fact he had made little or no effort to talk to her. True, he'd sought her out after this morning's church service and returned one of the two rose petals she'd sent him. That indicated he was of the same mind as she had been when she wrote her letter last August. But as the dinner concluded and a lull developed, when there'd been an opportunity for them to chat and make small talk, to declare himself a suitor, he'd left the room without so much as a goodbye or an explanation. As a result, she was left standing there alone and embarrassed while trying to make sense of his actions.

She knew his being a professor meant he was a complex person. Mature for his age, in contrast to the simple bumpkins her father had brought home, he'd formulated his political and social opinions after much reading and soul searching. This cerebral side had a strong pull on her. And his physical attributes added to the attraction: he was rugged and handsome, smelled always of fresh soap (she wondered what he looked like when he bathed), and had deep blue eyes that probed the most intimate parts of her soul. But the thing she liked most was his laughter. It was a series of explosive chords that reverberated from her ears down to her loins. All of these things then, the mental and the physical, stirred the intricate sexual fantasies that occupied her mind as she dreamed about him at night, and left her feeling ragged and frustrated when the neighbor's cock crowed at dawn.

She stopped for a moment at the water's edge. In the center of the channel a huge tree trunk, its leafless limbs a barren jutting array, drifted downstream past the cemetery where she and John had met.

So many complicated things have happened to both of us over the last nine months, she said to herself; and a shudder swept through her as she thought about her brothers, her mother, Lawrence.

She wondered why the lieutenant had not asked her father's permission to marry her. Everything pointed in the direction of the altar, and when they kissed the aching of her desire drove her mad. Marriage would be the cure for that! Otherwise she was afraid he might profess to love her only while he was stationed in Clarksville, and then leave her behind, forsaken, when the war ended. *But if not, why is he waiting to speak to Daddy?* she asked herself for the thousandth time.

Whenever her thoughts followed this path, the blame always landed on John. If he had listened to her and not gone off to war, if he had written one letter she would have known he still loved—

"Hello, Lydia."

She looked up as John laid down his book and rose from the broad rock on which he'd been sitting.

"Oh!" A nervous laugh escaped her lips, and it sounded false and shrill. "You startled me."

"I'm sorry." He reached out to help her unto the rock, and she accepted his hand, which was warm and gripped hers in a determined way. "I know it was a shock to see me this morning."

"It was, John, and I imagine you went through a lot," she said, her tone less than sympathetic as the color rose in her cheeks. "You look tired after your trip from Richmond."

He nodded, and his eyes studied her. "I suppose you're curious about what's happened since last August."

"I am," she said, and sat beside him. "Only if you feel like talking about it."

As he told her the details of his wounding at Antietam and his recuperation in Armory Square Hospital, her heart broke for him although not enough to dispel her anger.

"And the tragedy is it was all avoidable," she said, although a small voice in her head told her to be quiet. "You didn't have to go because of your limp. I told you not to, but you wouldn't listen!"

"You're right, of course." He sounded deflated. "And now you're in love with someone else. It's true, isn't it?"

"Right now, I'm too overwrought to tell you how I feel," she said, her face reddening.

"My dear sweet Lydia." He reached over and kneaded her fingertips. "How I missed you!"

"Why didn't you write?"

"There never seemed to be enough time," he said. "And when we did make camp, we were all too tired to do anything."

"I wrote you many times." Tears came into her eyes, and she was surprised at the degree of anger boiling beneath the surface. "Long, faithful letters!"

He sat there, gaping at her, wondering what he'd missed in those simple epistles.

"And when you were wounded and had all that time in the hospital, you still did not write!" She could not help herself. The anger and hurt came together and filled her voice with rage. She jumped up and shrieked at him. "I thought you were dead! If you had written me one letter, just one, I would have been spared the hell I went through. Was that too much to ask? I thought you loved me!"

She burst into tears and covered her face with her hands.

"And did Lieutenant Wallace help you compose those letters?" he asked, a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

She gasped, as if he had struck her across the face with an open hand. "Lawrence was very kind to me after I learned of your death." The tears spilled

over onto her cheeks and ran in little rivers down her face. "What was I supposed to do?"

"I honestly don't know," he said icily. "I have to go."

Her heart filled with regret. "Will I see you again?" she asked.

"Why would you want to do that?"

As she watched him limp away with his cane, her tears started anew. Defiant, and needing comfort, she set off for the Stewart College campus. She was aware part of her motivation for going to Lawrence now was to hurt John, even if he never found out. On the other hand, if Lawrence proposed marriage, John would certainly be the first one to hear about it.



Your mother arrived in good health today, with plans to spend the entire month. The children and I are thrilled to have her with us. I crave the company of another adult in the house. I miss you so much, my darling. I pray for your continued safety and know you are in God's hands.

All my love,

Mary Ellen

At the sound of the familiar soft knock, Lieutenant Wallace folded his wife's letter and stuck it in his desk drawer. "Come in, Lydia," he called, getting up.

"How did you know it was I?" She peeked around the door.

"I can feel your presence whenever you are within a hundred feet of me," he said, taking her hand and closing the door behind her. "To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?" He led her to the sofa and settled in beside her.

She told him of her encounter with John.

"Ah, unhappy fellow," Lawrence said. "And my poor, precious darling, to have been subjected to such torture."

She smiled at him. *So trusting*, he thought, and stroked her long, lovely throat with the back of his hand. *And she's so close to giving herself to me. I'll be sorry to let her go, but John Martin's return might solve all my problems.*

"You never disappoint me, Lawrence," she cooed. "I came here looking for a sympathetic ear and I found one."

She rested her head against the back of the sofa. Her chin tilted upward, and her small pink tongue slid across her bottom lip.

"You are looking so delectable, my dear," he said in a husky voice, "I may have to set aside my work for the rest of the afternoon." The back of his hand brushed her cheek.

"Do you suppose the war can go on without you?" she said, smiling.

He held her face between his hands, and kissed her on the forehead, nose, and lips. Over the years, he had learned no females were more responsive than the young ones. So eager to please, so open to learning . . . their easily aroused passion overwhelmed any guilt, any fear, any sense of duty or obligation that might ruin the act. In every town in which he had been stationed, he always found a young virgin to be his student, his lover. This one needed to be primed for the act of love.

"Larry," she whispered.

"What is it, darling?" he said. He looped his arm around her shoulder and drew her to him. He tilted her chin and kissed her lips and ran his hands through her hair. Her comb loosened and her hair tumbled down. He kissed her again and she responded with abandon, moaning as she pressed against him. Her tongue sought his and sucked on it.

His fingers unbuttoned her dress one button at a time, his kisses following each revelation of bared flesh. Reaching reached inside her dress, he cupped her breast and fondled the nipple. Already, it was taut and aching.

Lydia continued moaning as he slipped her dress down over her shoulders.

"Oh darling," he groaned as her breasts sprang into view. Milky white and full, they jutted upward. He bent down and sucked the nipples.

Panting, she pulled away. "Larry, I . . . I want you to talk to my father about us. I want you to ask him for—"

He stopped her words with another passionate kiss and reached under her dress, knowing how to maneuver until he reached her tangled mass of hair. She moaned again and her thighs opened and closed tight against his hand as he inserted a finger.

There was a loud double knock and the door banged open. Reverend Parks barreled in. "Larry, I—"

The minister took in the scene and stared openmouthed. "Good Lord," he said. A slow smile crept across his face, and he leaned against the door jam. "Uh, good afternoon, Lieutenant, Miss Robertson. I did not realize you were such good friends. I beg your pardon, both of you, for barging in."

Wallace leapt from the couch to shield Lydia, who was blushing as she hastened to cover herself. "Reverend, I think you should leave. Whatever you have to say can be taken care of later, I'm sure."

"Of course," Parks said. "Where are my manners? Good day, Miss Robertson. Please give my regards to your fine family." A moment later, he was gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Sketching the Bridge

"Let's see if I can find those bridge drawings," Mary Peabody said as John followed her into her office early Monday morning. She went to the window and threw up the shade. Bright sunlight flooded the room, illuminating an old desk, file cabinet, and several wooden chairs. She touched her index finger to her nose, held it for a moment, and then sneezed.

"Bless you," John said, thankful he had remembered his manners now he was home.

"Thank you," Mary said. "One of these days I must clean this dreadful place. It reeks of pent up dust."

"It always did," John said and chuckled.

"Ever the jokester." She smiled and rubbed her hands to warm them. "Right now it feels like the North Pole in here."

"Let me get the fire going," John said as Mary bent over and shuffled through the bottom drawer of her file cabinet. He opened the pot-bellied stove, threw in some newspaper and kindling, and struck a match. He added lumps of coal after the paper and sticks had caught.

"That's strange. I can't find the bridge drawings." Frowning, Mary looked up at him. "Only last week they were right here."

"Did somebody borrow them?"

"That's possible." She closed the drawer. "Sergeant Pritchard—he works here with me—did say Colonel Harris came by while I was at lunch the other day. Maybe that's the explanation."

"Thanks for trying, Mary." John was disappointed. Nothing could be done about the architectural drawings now. He sat down on one of the hardback wooden chairs common to all government offices and leaned back against the wall. The building was silent except for the wind flapping the oil shade through a crack where the window met the jam. "I'm surprised no one else is here now."

"At this time of the morning?" She chuckled. "Garrison duty appeals so much to Sergeant Pritchard, he never arrives before ten."

John stretched his leg out before him and rubbed it where the stump had started to ache. "What are the train schedules like?"

Mary sat behind her desk and arranged a bouquet of homegrown flowers. "There are two trains a day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. The westbound one's already here."

"Anything out of the ordinary?"

"A train carrying timber and rails for repairs was attacked and burned."

"I meant of military importance."

"Other than the troop trains, one loaded with ammunition and huge siege guns came through last Friday. The guns were mounted on long flatcars."

He sat up straight in his chair. "Where was it headed?"

"Memphis." Her busy hands arranged ledgers and writing implements. When she finished, she lifted her eyes, cocked her head, and smiled. "Can't you give me a slight clue," she said archly, "as to the mission you're on?"

"Believe me, I will explain everything at Wednesday's meeting." He made a mental note to jot down the destination of the siege guns.

Pretending to pout, Mary reached for a woolen sweater she had been knitting for her mother. From the bottom drawer of her desk she pulled out a new ball of yarn.

"What about the river traffic?" John asked. He glanced out the window, unable to see the railroad trestle because a stand of trees, even with most of its leaves gone, blocked his view.

"Mostly merchant traffic, a lot less of it than before the war. Twice weekly a gunboat docks at the wharf on its way to and from Nashville. Would you care to look at the schedule for next month?"

"Yes, ma'am." Using his cane, he came and stood by her desk.

She spread the ledger open before her. "This lists all Union troop and supply movements by water, land, and train."

"Excellent!" Bending close, he ran a finger down a column, noting the dates and times, and the marked increase anticipated for December. "Looks as if the Yankees have got something really big planned, Mary."

"Yes, it seems."

A door slammed and heavy boots moved briskly down the long hallway.

"Quick! Sit down!" Mary motioned to a chair. Then she affected a conversational tone while she closed the ledger, put her shawl on top of it, and picked up her knitting. "So the last graduating class at Stewart College was—"

"Good morning, Mary!" A balding, bewhiskered man in a blue uniform strode into the room. The bold yellow stripes on his sleeves indicated a rank of sergeant. "Didn't know you had company."

"And how are you, Bill?" Mary stood up and introduced Sergeant Pritchard to John.

Smiling, the sergeant held out his hand. Gaps showed between his large front teeth. "Glad to make your acquaintance."

"Same here." John shook hands, noting the firm grip and the warm look in the man's brown eyes. Apparently the war hadn't soured him as it had so many others—himself included.

"John used to teach at Stewart College," Mary said. "He enlisted and was wounded."

"My profoundest apologies, sir. This war—" he gazed out the window, "—has wrought a grievous havoc among all the men in my hometown."

"Where's that?"

"Little place in central Pennsylvania I'm sure you've never heard of—Gettysburg."

"Sorry," John shook his head. "Can't say as I have."

"I'm going back for a visit next summer." The sergeant pulled out a picture of a middle-aged woman with jet black hair and a bonnet. "My wife." He held the picture up for John to see.

"She looks like a nice person," John said, wondering if the day would ever come when Lydia would be his wife. The thought soured when he remembered their spat at the river.

"Yes, indeed she is." His face lit in a broad smile. "I'm really looking forward to seeing her and the children."

"I certainly hope you have a nice visit." Cane in hand, John stood up and started for the door, dragging his leg more than usual. "I must be leaving, Mary. Nice meeting you, sir."

The sergeant stared at John's leg. "A touch of arthritis?"

"No." He stretched out his hand and the two men shook hands. "The stump gets to hurting in cold weather."

Pritchard's face paled. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize. Where'd you serve?"

"Sharpsburg."

"I'm sorry for you." He pumped John's hand again.

"Thank you."

John rode south around the edge of town until he reached the Cumberland River. He tied Murder out of sight in a clump of trees, and made his way down to a small bluff where he pulled out paper, pencil, and field glasses. Sitting with his back to a large oak, he made a preliminary sketch of the bridge.

All of a sudden it occurred to him someone on the trestle might be watching him. He moved out of sight and resumed his work. Using the glasses he scanned from left to right. Two soldiers with rifles, their bayonets glistening in the sunlight, walked their posts at opposite ends of the trestle. In the center a thin trail of smoke from a bridge tender's hut wound its way upward into a cloudless sky, indicating the possibility of a third man.

John scribbled some notes and made a slow sweep of the bridge. Constructed of wood timbers, the superstructure was attached to iron trusses, which in turn rested on tall stone pilings. At the base of one of these columns, above the low-water mark, he would plant his explosives.

General Hood's warning and its implications haunted him: if he blew the bridge too soon, the Yankees would be able to clear the wreckage and resume regular river traffic. Destroy it too late, and vital reinforcements would slip through and cut off the general's attempt to retake western Tennessee.

All of today's preparation would amount to nothing if he failed to obtain black powder. He reasoned his best source would be from the guerrilla band Elias had mentioned. That raised the question of where to store the explosives once he brought them back. Because of his bad leg and the considerable weight of the kegs, he knew he would have to hide the black powder as close as possible to the bridge—and he would need help doing it.

John picked up his field glasses and studied the sentries once again. The man on the far end had a large upper body and broad shoulders. He gawked at one shore and then the other, and every few minutes pulled out his pocket watch and stared at it as if he could hardly wait for his post to end. Apparently, he was not concerned with the possibility of sabotage.

The closer sentry, who was no more than sixteen or seventeen years old, chewed a large wad of tobacco. His jaws chomped like a grazing cow's, up and down and from side to side. Every so often a thick stream of brown juice flew onto the tracks.

Both men carried Springfield rifles, but the boy was the more conscientious of the two because he watched the traffic on the road under the east end of the bridge.

Better to avoid a fight with them if he could. Gunfire this close to town would bring a troop of cavalry swarming down on him within minutes.

After marking the location of the telegraph wires that would have to be cut, John used his pencil as a ruler and measured the width and height of the

stone columns supporting the bridge. Later he would calculate the exact amount of gunpowder to be used.

His work completed, he sat there for a few minutes and buttoned his coat while a chill wind off the river dusted him with snow flurries. An old memory drifted back to him. When he was ten he had broken his right ankle, which had eventually lamed him, while hunting, and his father had brought him home in the back of their wagon. Along the way they'd run into a blizzard, complete with billowing black clouds and high winds that howled like hungry wolves. His ankle didn't hurt *that* much, and he was warm scrunched down inside his wool coat with its hood. However, his father had taken the time to stop the team and cover him with an old quilt. Worry mixed with love and concern had shown on his father's face and in his sharp blue eyes. And although nothing was said, John was left with a feeling of warmth and security.

John realized his father probably had witnessed more slaughter in Mexico in 1846-1848 than he himself had seen at Culpeper and Sharpsburg combined. He wondered how those battles had affected his father, and he wished he were alive now so they could talk about their experiences. John believed he would feel better if only he could talk to someone who could understand.

But his father, who had a war medal for "Conspicuous Valor on the Field of Battle," was a silent man who never talked about his combat experiences. When John asked about this one time, his father gave him a stern look that said, "be still," but then changed his mind and said the anger, hatred, and accompanying violence of the 1846-1848 War were un-Christian and the memories of them did not belong in a marriage. His hands shaking, as they often did, he stated a man did not pass on the sins of the father to his children. He would say no more than that.

John's mother dismissed her husband's screams in the middle of the night as "memories of Daddy's War;" the same for his behavior at the breakfast table when he sometimes sat staring, a pained look on his face. She would not elaborate.

Thus, the one person who could help John had lived in a world of silence, unable to speak of the torments that ran through his head. Because he had no one, John was pushing his recent past to the back of his mind, trying to forget everything that had happened. An image formed in his head of all his war memories falling through a hole in the bottom of his stump because he refused to think about them. John shook off the vision and forced himself to concentrate on the large sentry at the far end. After stamping his feet and rubbing his hands together, the soldier entered the bridge tender's hut and emerged with a blanket around his shoulders. A third man with sergeant's stripes followed him outside, and the two of them stood together smoking cigarettes and talking.

John scanned the river one more time, honing in on the bank far upstream where they had dumped Private Haddonfield's body. Would his corpse ever surface? What a calamity that would produce! Well, he couldn't do anything about it if it did.

Satisfied he'd seen enough, John struggled to his feet and made his way back to his horse.

Tomorrow at first light I'll ride up into Kentucky and see about getting some black powder from the guerrillas. But roaming around the countryside without a legitimate cause might interest a Yankee cavalry patrol if he ran into them. He would have to think up a ruse to fool them. It had damn well be good!

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Counseling

Terrified, Lydia awaited Reverend Parks' return after a knock on his office door. She glanced around the room looking for an escape route. There was only the one door through which the minister had left.

She sneezed several times in succession, and used a lace hanky to wipe her nose. Parks' unheated study reeked of dust like an unused room closed up for ages. The tall bookcases with their dozens of ancient volumes and the long heavy drapes covering the windows held a fine coating of the stuff. In a corner up near the ceiling, a spider had woven a gossamer web linking the drapes with the wall.

Feeling trapped, she scrunched down into the leather armchair and asked herself again why she had consented to come today. The man had seen her half undressed in Lawrence's passionate embrace, her hair and clothes in disarray. She could never erase the humiliation she felt, and every time the memory came to mind, she shuddered and her cheeks burned.

Since that disgraceful moment, she escaped in long afternoon naps and left the house as rarely as possible. Her father interpreted this new withdrawal as severe doldrums because John had returned and wouldn't pay her any attention. "I want you to see Reverend Parks," her father had said. "He's a nice man and an eligible bachelor."

Her feeble protests elicited a harsh demand. "You will go, young lady, and I'll hear no more about it!"

Her mother, distraught at the disharmony between father and daughter, started sobbing. When the sobbing turned to violent coughing and strangled wheezing, Lydia knew she must obey, no matter what the cost to herself.

For some reason, the minister had not alluded to the incident. *Was he content to forget all about it?* she wondered. She prayed he could be trusted to keep her secret.

"You'll excuse the interruption," the preacher said as he walked in and slammed the door behind him. "The coal man was here with the winter's supply."

"Th—that's—" Her throat was constricted, her mouth dry. She cleared her throat and began again. "That's perfectly all right."

"Now where were we?" the reverend asked after he had seated himself in the chair opposite Lydia. He stretched his long legs on the rug, and let his eyes run over her body. For a moment he looked as if he would rise and come over to her. He rearranged himself in his chair, crossed one leg over the other, and waited.

"I was telling you I spend most of my day reading." She tucked her feet under her chair. "All of Chaucer, lots of Robert Burns, some minor poets. Only yesterday I started the complete works of Shakes—"

"We can dispense with the chit-chat," Parks interrupted. "I want to talk about you and Lieutenant Wallace."

Lydia's face turned crimson. As a man, what must he have imagined when he saw her in that most compromising of positions: aroused sexual passion? His only response had been a blurted apology and the faint smile that crept across his face. As he was leaving, he had alluded to his power when he told her to give his regards to her fine family. That terrified her.

"Come now," the preacher said. He appeared to be enjoying himself. "Nothing's as bad as it seems. And you do want to keep this little matter of a tryst in Lieutenant Wallace's office a secret, don't you?"

Lydia nodded, fear clutching her innards.

"I am interested in helping you with that. Of course, one hand washes the other; if I aid you, I can reasonably expect your help in return—isn't that right?" He sat back, smiling, his fingers laced across his stomach.

A sick feeling churned in her stomach. "What do you want me to do?" she asked.

"Keep tabs on John Martin." He shrugged as if it were a small request. "I want to know where he goes, whom he sees, and so on."

Appalled, she jumped up from her chair. "I can't do that!"

"All right then," Parks said. He unfolded his long body from the chair and stood. "Subject closed. Forget I asked." He moved to open the door and stood aside for Lydia to walk through.

She hesitated, and then stepped into the corridor.

"Too bad your father will find out about you and the lieutenant," the preacher said behind her. "I'm sure he'll think the worst."

She whirled to see the smirk on his face. She wanted to slap it off.

"I can see his face when I make the announcement at church on Sunday morning," he said nastily.

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Of course I will."

"You're a monster!" She had no choice. He would drag her name through the mud and destroy her family. She reentered his office and sank into the chair, its leather emitting a faint protest.

"All right," she said, covering her face with her hands. "I'll do it."

He told her what he wanted, how she was to go about getting it, and when to report back to him.

Angry, and with her face still flushed, Lydia fled his office. Her heart pounded in her chest and her hands shook so much she had to clasp them together lest anyone see her in this condition. At the sanctuary she paused, considering a moment of private prayer. She decided against that and headed for the exit door leading to Second Street.

Once free of the confines of the church, the thought crossed her mind she could ignore Parks' demands to spy on John. Abject terror filled her bosom when she pondered the minister's threat to expose her. Parks had a juicy bit of evidence to hold over her head. If she stood before the congregation and swore before the Almighty it was not true, when Parks spoke from the pulpit his parishioners would take his word, that of a man of God, over hers. She'd be driven from Clarksville in disgrace, and forced to flee to God knew where, both penniless and disowned by her parents, the lieutenant, and John. Where would she go, and how would she support herself? She had no money and the skimpiest of educations (thanks to her father) and that meant she would be reduced to finding menial employment, either as a housekeeper or clerk in some far away town. Or . . . or what else was it women did for money? She trembled at that thought, and the shaking in her hands grew uncontrollable when she considered rumors had a way of catching up to one, of destroying *any* attempt at a new life.

"So what did she want?" Lieutenant Wallace took a seat on the parlor settee in Parks' office. He glanced at his pocket watch. He'd been waiting for thirty minutes on a hard bench in the darkened sanctuary. "My passionate Lydia looked very upset."

"She didn't see you, did she?" Parks asked, a hint of menace in his tone.

"Nah. When I heard her coming, I ducked behind the door."

"Her father sent her for counseling." Parks grinned.

"I'm sure you did her a world of good," Wallace hooted.

The preacher sat behind his desk. "She has too many worldly concerns for one young woman to handle. My heart goes out to her."

"Just so you keep your dick in your pants."

The words had flown out of his mouth, and Wallace wished he could call them back. He narrowed his eyes at the preacher, amazed Parks had infiltrated Clarksville on behalf of Lincoln's Secret Service—and Colonel Harris had not been suspicious. Parks had revealed himself in a private meeting with the

colonel and the lieutenant, and conveyed orders from Colonel Baker to cooperate fully. Wallace still didn't know what the man's game was. He felt ill at ease in his presence.

"Watch yourself, Lieutenant." Parks lit a cigarette and blew a lazy smoke ring into the air. "Your affair with Lydia must not interfere with your soldierly duties. You don't want these side interests to hurt your military career or destroy your marriage to Mary Ellen."

The lieutenant struggled to maintain his composure.

"I know about Sarah," Parks said.

"Sarah?" He arched his eyebrows.

"The young woman you seduced at Fortress Monroe."

"Ah, yes, Sarah." Wallace had been transferred in the nick of time after getting the young woman pregnant. He forced a smile to his lips. "You know quite a bit about me, Reverend."

"I make it my business." He snuffed out the cigarette. "Lydia has her instructions. I received a telegraph from Colonel Baker at Secret Service Headquarters, saying John Martin conferred in Richmond with General Hood and his staff scarcely a fortnight ago."

"We may have a problem," Lawrence said. "I believe Martin has done something suspect."

"Why? What did he do?"

"One of the sentries reported seeing a man sketching the railroad bridge yesterday. I thought of Martin when I heard the description."

"All the more reason I must know his every move." Parks placed a pistol on the desk and started cleaning it with an oily rag. "Once I find out what he's up to, I can hang him."

"Of course I'll do my best to help, but—"

"Go on." He raised the gun and put the lieutenant in his sights.

Uncomfortable, Wallace chuckled. "Actually, I was hoping Martin, fool that he is, would marry Lydia and take her off my hands. She's been nagging me to talk to her father about us."

"You don't have to worry about Lydia," Parks assured him, lowering the gun and giving it a final rub.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," Parks set the oily rag down, "once I dispense with Martin and am ready to return to Washington, I plan to announce to the church congregation Lydia is a fallen woman and should be included in their prayers. After I have disgraced her, I shall invite her to come east with me. I think by that point, she will be eager to leave town."

Lieutenant Wallace cringed. Parks was a dangerous man, and he reasoned he'd better watch his step with the preacher. One false move, and he might wind up on a train headed for the Old Capitol Prison. He couldn't afford that! What would happen to his wife and children? How would Mary Ellen support herself?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The Kentucky Guerrillas

"I'm looking for Colonel Lewis Armistead," John said. At dusk on Tuesday, November 18, 1862, he stood in the middle of a guerrilla camp talking to a bearded man wearing buckskins and a floppy black hat. Nearby, a dozen ragtag children raced around a multitude of rundown shacks and canvas tents while playing a game of tag.

"And who might you be?" the man asked. One hand rested on an open holster attached to his hip. Behind him, a sentry wearing overalls walked his post. Farther on, a man with a rifle aimed at John stood in the crook of a tall tree.

"I'm Lt. John Martin of Clarksville." He leaned forward and rested his hand on the saddle's pommel. "Colonel Armistead ordered me to obtain guns, ammunition, and black powder for the Confederate Army."

"Name's Craig Ralston and there ain't no Colonel Armistead here." Ralston removed a pipe clenched between his teeth. Steely blue eyes assessed John. "You don't look like no soldier, especially with that fishing pole and basket lashed to your saddle."

"A ruse to fool the Yankees, I assure you." John laughed, reminded that Elias had thought he was nuts this morning when he asked for the fishing pole.

"They'd probably fall for it." Ralston smiled. His big, square teeth were straight, but stained brown from tobacco juice.

John glanced at the perimeter of the ramshackle camp. Set a half-mile downstream from the nearest road, and several miles east of the town of

Trenton, Kentucky, the encampment offered cover and concealment, a safe haven for the men and their families from any roving Yankee patrols who strayed across the state line.

Calculating the man was illiterate, John handed him the safe-conduct pass signed by General Hood. "Here are my orders, sir."

Ralston unfolded the document and peered at it. "I can't read," he admitted, and handed the paper back. "You look like an honest enough fellow. Come sit a spell and share our fire while we talk."

"Thank you, sir." John dismounted, and then draped Murder's reins over a stump. Using his cane, John followed the man to a nearby campfire. Overhead, a flock of Canadian geese dipped low, looking for a quiet pond to spend the night.

After sitting down, John carried his deceit a step further by pretending to read from the paper. "You are empowered to obtain, with local help, any and all military supplies you need."

Ralston lit his pipe with a twig, puffing until a great cloud of smoke rose above his head. "See for yourself," he said. "We're a poor band of soldiers—really nothing more than a bunch of ex-farmers and townspeople down on our luck."

"I see," John said.

"Times are hard, Mr. John Martin. Very hard." Ralston took off his hat and ran a hand through his curly black hair. "Ever since Donelson, we've had little or nothing to eat. We give first to our young'uns, and then to ourselves."

"How do you manage?"

"We shoot game and steal anything we can from the damn Yankees." Ralston puffed on his pipe. "We lost a man at a railroad bridge in Tennessee last night and barely got away with our lives."

"I'm sorry to hear that." John watched a fire blazing inside a circle of large rocks. A tin coffeepot and a three-legged pot straddled the burning logs. The savory smells of brewed coffee and cooked meat drifted toward him.

"We don't want to operate close to camp for fear we'll be discovered and attacked," Ralston said. "We've got us a lot of kids here."

John sighed, thinking of the simple pleasures of marriage and children of his own. *What would Lydia do if she found out the true nature of your mission? You know the answer*, he said, answering his own question.

"Supper's about ready," Ralston said. "You're in luck if you want to stay. One of the men brought down a big buck. So, we've got meat tonight. That okay with you?"

"That's fine."

A young woman in a denim shirt and brown britches walked up to the campfire. Her hair was pulled back into a tight bun, exposing a jagged scar on her right cheek. Without speaking she removed the lid from the kettle, ladled venison stew, cut-up potatoes, and onions onto tin plates, handed them to the men, and walked away.

"Her husband was killed by the Yankees," Ralston explained. He picked up a fork. "Then the bastards burned their farmhouse, shot all the livestock, and raped her. She ain't spoke since."

John shook his head. "That's tragic."

Ralston threw a log on the fire. "So where do you plan to get your black powder and supplies?"

"The only other place I can think of is the Yankee armory in Clarksville." John dug into the stew. The meat was tangy and highly seasoned, and he washed it down with the whiskey Ralston offered. "They're turning the town into a huge supply depot."

A few men wandered over and sat down to eat. They nodded at John in greeting.

Looking at them, John realized his trip had not been in vain. "Do you and your men want to help raid the armory?"

Ralston looked at his plate as he spoke. "Maybe. What's in it for us?"

"Plenty of ammunition—" Ralston looked up as John spoke, "—and as many Spencer repeating rifles as you can haul away."

Ralston stopped eating. His eyes searched John's. "And what do you get?"

"Enough black powder to blow the railroad bridge at the east end of town—" he took another swallow of the whiskey, "—and half a dozen Spencers."

Ralston thought for a moment. "We'll discuss it among ourselves and get back to you. That's how we do things." He took a long swallow from the jug.

"Suits me. I'm staying at the Montgomery Hotel in Clarksville."

"You'll hear from me soon. Now you'll have to excuse me. I plan to sleep for a spell." Ralston yawned, opening his mouth wide. "Later tonight we're going on a raid in Russellville about twenty miles from here. It's safer to operate in Kentucky because the Yankees ain't active up there. You're welcome to come along. Maybe you'll find something you need."

"Much obliged." John caught the yawn rolling off his own tongue. "I think I will."

Ralston laid his bedroll out by the fire, wrapped up in it, and quickly fell asleep.

After the other men left, John sat by the fire stirring the coals with a stick. The whiskey made him sleepy and he curled up and went to sleep.

"Wake up, John Martin. Wake up!"

"Uh?" His eyes jerked open. The area was pitch black except for the glow from the campfire embers and a few stars in the sky. The moon, a bright sliver off to the east, had begun to rise.

Ralston was shaking him again. "It's time." He walked away, saddled his horse, and mounted.

They rode north at a brisk pace for over two hours until they arrived at a railroad siding in a deserted lumberyard. The wind, harsh and cold, carried traces of coal smoke from a dozen houses. Above, the moon hovered behind a large bank of clouds. John counted that as a blessing.

"Is this Russellville?" John motioned to the wood-framed houses.

"Yep." Ralston dismounted and ordered his men to dump some timbers across the tracks. "Now we wait."

After an hour had passed, Ralston took off his hat and threw it to the ground in disgust. "Looks like the train ain't coming. Dang thing should have been here by now!"

"With the tracks in poor repair, sometimes they run several hours behind schedule," John said.

"Mount up!" Ralston ordered.

"Wait!" A man put his head to the rails. "I hear something!"

Ralston laid his head on a rail. "Tracks are a vibratin' for sure. Take cover, men!"

Ten minutes later a freight train chugged through the center of town and stopped, screeching, before the logjam on the tracks. Its engine hissed and emitted a large cloud of steam.

"Get 'em!" Ralston said, and whooped.

Shots rang out as the guerrillas charged the train, disarming the engineer and fireman and breaking open the mail car. Gunshots were exchanged with the two soldiers and one civilian inside, and then all was silent.

"All right," Ralston said. "Grab the money bags and let's get the hell out of here!"

John entered the mail car and glanced at the dead men, snatched up a half dozen rifles and carried them out. He returned for several boxes of cartridges and two kegs of black powder which Ralston's men helped him lash across Murder's saddle.

"Cavalry's comin'!" a man posted down the road called out.

"Burn the train!" Ralston mounted up as a man took a lighted lantern and heaved it into the mail car. "And let's ride!"

John galloped off with the guerrillas. Over his shoulder the approaching riders were highlighted in the flames from the burning train.

"Set up an ambush!" Ralston cried as they neared a bridge over a small creek.

John could see the men had done this before. They divided into two groups and spread out in a tangle of trees and brush on both sides of the bridge. The scene reminded him of Captain Hamet's ambush at Culpeper, Virginia.

As he waited, John's horse stamped its feet. Its ears flattened against the sides of its head at the approach of the riders on the road.

As the Yankees came charging down into the draw, the guerrillas opened fire. John brought his Spencer to bear on two soldiers attempting to outflank them. Several shots brought the men down and sent their whinnying horses racing back up the road into the main body of cavalry.

"Oh, Christ!" Ralston cried. "It's a whole damn troop. Let's get out of here!"

John wheeled Murder around and spurred him into a gallop. At a fork in the road, Ralston ordered his men to disperse.

"See you around!" Ralston called over his shoulder as he bolted into the night.

On impulse, John urged Murder across a brush-strewn field. Behind him gunshots faded along the road. After turning into a stand of trees, he galloped along a winding trail until he stumbled into yet another field, now lit by bright moonlight. Pounding hooves behind him caused him to wheel Murder back into the trees. He waited, his Spencer cocked, until two bluecoats burst into the open. He aimed the rifle and squeezed off two rounds, dropping his pursuers.

Hugging the trees along the forest's ragged edge so as to avoid observation, John galloped away, keeping a wary eye out for more Yankees.

When he came to the railroad tracks leading back to Clarksville, he stopped to water Murder beneath a bridge. He held a hand to his ear and listened for the sounds of riders. The night lay quiet and peaceful, its tranquility broken only by the sound of water gurgling in the brook.

While the horse drank its fill, John moved a few feet upstream, cupped his hands in the icy liquid, and poured it down his throat. The coldness made his teeth ache and his hands turn numb. Winter was not far off, he noticed, as brown leaves tinged with yellow and red floated by on the current.

When he looked up he noticed the bridge's rotting timbers. He climbed up to the tracks where he found rotted ties and missing spikes. Apparently, the Yankee track crews were failing to keep the road in good working order because of Ralston's frequent raids. As a result, a disaster was in the making and would surely come in the form of a vicious derailment.

John's thoughts returned to the powder lashed across the saddle. His heart pumping, and his whole body pounding with excitement, he wanted to shout with joy. He had ammunition and rifles, and possibly some young, experienced allies.

God must be on my side, he thought as he mounted Murder, *for everything to fall into place so perfectly*. For the first time he felt as if his task was not insurmountable.

Some farm dogs started yelping as he came down a road and passed a two-story, clapboard house set in a hollow. Its upper façade was gray in the light of dawn, its front porch and lower windows still cloaked in the black of night. The outlines of other buildings (a barn, smokehouse, corncrib, and henhouse) were barely discernible.

Fearful a roving Yankee patrol might be alerted by the barking dogs, John quickened his pace and hurried on up the road and around a bend.

Near the outskirts of Clarksville he hid the black powder, cartridges, and rifles in some thick brush and trees along the Red River, avoided a lone Yankee patrol, and slipped unnoticed into the Montgomery Hotel.

Exhausted, he flopped down on his bed and stared out the window at the sun rising in the east. As the minutes passed, the aggressive sphere grew larger and brighter. *Thank you for your help, God*, he thought, feeling a bright future in store for himself.

Then, he remembered his vow never to kill again. Shame burned his cheeks with the knowledge he'd shot four men tonight. *It was self-defense*, he reminded himself, and he was within his rights according to the Southern code.

The word "hypocrite" came to mind as he dropped off to sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Night Streets

"Looks like a storm's brewing," Beatrice Maury said as a gust of wind ruffled the kitchen curtains. She clasped her arms and rubbed them before closing the window. "It's certainly turned chilly outside since we've been talking."

"Goodness, it has, and it's already ten o'clock!" Lydia said, glancing at the clock above the stove. "I should be getting home." She finished the last of her tea and placed the cup and saucer on the sink.

"I don't think it's wise to leave," Beatrice said as she followed Lydia into the cozy parlor with its ancient couch, overstuffed armchairs, and antique oil lamps. "There's been a rash of incidents involving the soldiers again."

"Where's Uncle?" Lydia said as she shrugged on her wool coat. "He can walk me home."

"It's Friday night and he's out drinking somewhere, if I'm lucky." Beatrice scowled. "If I'm not, tumbling in the sack with his widow friend."

"Aunt Bea!" Lydia picked up her shawl. "Don't talk like that!"

"It's the truth," Beatrice said tartly. "Why shouldn't I say it?"

Lydia thought for a moment. "Because it's shocking, that's why."

"Why don't you stay the night?" Beatrice offered.

"Daddy would have a fit if I didn't come home." She thought of Lieutenant Wallace. Her father would accuse her of being with the lieutenant if she stumbled in at the crack of dawn. That would upset her mother, even if the truth came out later.

"But it's not wise for a young woman to be out alone!"

"Don't worry, Auntie. I'm all grown up now." Lydia gave her a peck on the cheek. "It's not far to walk."

"I worry so about you," Beatrice said, tears forming in her eyes. "You're the only niece I've got."

"What about my sister, Marianne?"

"Good grief!" Beatrice blushed. "I'd completely forgotten about her. Whatever is the matter with me?"

Lydia laughed as she opened the front door. "I'll be fine, and I really had a good time talking about your childhood."

Outside, the first drops of rain splattered the slate walk as Lydia started down the street. Thunder rumbled and the wind came up. Along the tree-lined sidewalk the leaves danced and swirled, as if some evil witch had come along and stirred them with a broom.

From experience, Lydia knew a deluge would catch her long before she reached home. She increased her pace, but at a stretch of loose stones, she slowed and stepped carefully so as not to twist an ankle. In a way, it was like the game of hopscotch she had played as a child many years before. She remembered having a favorite flat stone as a marker and how careful she had been never to lose it.

Now, the wind gusted and the rain came in a short spasm that soaked her coat.

She hurried on. Behind her, a slate creaked. She turned her head and searched along the walk. There was no one except a drenched cat hurrying toward a porch light several houses back.

Lydia walked faster, listening intently, hearing only the distinct clicking of her boots on the sidewalk. As she hurried, she remembered when she was in grade school how the boys at school would often jump out from behind a big tree and cry "Boo!" Shrieking, she and the other little girls would run home as fast as they could while the boys of Clarksville stood holding their sides, pointing and hooting. When she swept through the door, her father would pick her up and hold her tight against his big chest, explaining that the boys, not

knowing how to act around girls they liked, tried to scare them. Then, her father would take her by the hand into the dining room where her tears would be forgotten during the evening meal with its family members talking about the day's events.

Again, a slate creaked, the sound much closer now.

Jerking her head around, Lydia peered into the mist. Seeing no one, she lengthened her stride. Rain dripped from the eaves into a barrel, its sound overridden by the rush of water in the street gutters. Sporadic gusts of wind whipped through the darkened trees, making wooing and rushing noises.

She turned a corner and headed up Second Street. In the distance the clatter of hooves echoed on the brick paving stones. The clatter turned to a steady clop-clopping that mingled with the staccato voices of men, tired and short of temper, as they urged their horses on to the warmth and safety of the barracks. The Yankee patrol passed a block away and faded into the night. For once, she was glad to have these invaders occupying her beloved town. Their closeness offered the illusion of safety, even if, individually, some of them didn't live up to her expectations of proper behavior. She was reminded of that dreadful Private Haddonfield who had nearly killed John in that bar fight. *Whatever happened to him*, she thought?

On the left stood the night-blackened facade of the Presbyterian Church, its tall, majestic spire soaring into the cloud-swept heavens. *If a downpour should start again*, she thought, *you could seek shelter inside*. But since no light burned in Reverend Parks' study, she felt uneasy venturing alone into the darkened sanctuary, all the more so after her recent meeting with him.

Behind her, the walk lay devoid of all sounds except her clicking boots. Home, fewer than three blocks away, lay at the top of a long hill. Within minutes she would be inside the warmth of her mother's kitchen, hanging her wet clothes up to dry over the coal stove.

The wind gusted, blowing and howling like hungry wolves on the prowl. Lightning cracked and flashed behind her, and upon its heels came the rain in a long, sweeping swell. Knowing the storm would not abate soon, she turned

into an alley adjacent to a hardware store, reasoning her arrival home would be speeded by this shortcut.

She raced past a wall of long, narrow windows. Dirty and gray, they yielded no clue as to what lay inside the shadowy recesses of the store. The storm intensified, hurling sheets of rain against the windows. Like a giant hand, the deluge swept the dirt and grime from the windows, revealing a burning oil lamp.

"Open up!" She pounded on the glass. "Please let me in!" She tried the handle—the door was locked—and peered inside at a lamp that had been turned down low, possibly left that way by a forgetful clerk.

From behind her a boot crunched gravel and a powerful hand locked around her throat. She was dragged backward and down.

"No!" she screamed. "Let go of me!"

Another hand clamped her mouth shut. She bit hard, gagging on the toughness of calluses and drawing blood. Her attacker snarled as his grip weakened.

She tried to run. Her attacker grabbed her coat and spun her around.

Lydia faced a tall, masked figure in a black overcoat. Terrified, she screamed again and again, but a backhand to her face whipped her head around and sent her reeling into the brick wall. Blood poured from her nose.

Anger masked her fear, and she tried to deny this dreadful event was taking place. No one had ever been violent with her in her entire life. *How dare this man hurt me!*

Her attacker wiggled a knife in a menacing manner.

Terror made an icy fist in her throat. *Oh, God, don't let this happen,* she thought, feeling a strange sense of being beyond and outside herself. *Don't let me die in this alley!*

The figure lunged, slicing buttons off her coat, exposing her dress. He ripped and clawed her dress to get at her undergarments.

Lydia pummeled him with her fists and knocked the knife from his hand. The weapon fell to the ground and clattered against the cobblestones. Her

attacker grabbed her by the neck and lifted her off the ground. She bit hard on his wrist. He howled and dropped her. She drove a boot upward into his groin, twisting her heel.

He let out a guttural cry, lurched forward, and clutched himself.

Lydia ran off, the wind and rain pummeling her bare breasts and swollen face. Her right hand clutched a man's pocket watch.

At the next corner, she stopped beneath a street lamp and glanced back. Her attacker had not followed. Shivering, she wrapped her coat tight about her. Shame turned her face crimson. What would Aunt Bea say when she found out: "I told you so?" Why had she been so foolish as to cut through an alley? She grabbed at a lamppost to keep from falling as her knees weakened.

Her parents would blame her for being headstrong and stupid. They would never look at her with the same eyes. They, and everyone else who learned about it, would see her as "ruined." If word of this attack ever got out, neither Lawrence nor John would ever take her as his wife.

Her shivers turned into a violent trembling. Like a winter storm trapping the unwary, harsh words came to the forefront of her mind. "It's always the woman's fault!"

Cradling that burden, she walked the last half block to her house where the flickering gas lamps on the porch awaited her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

First Meeting

The first meeting of the saboteurs took place in Mayor Willard Robertson's basement on Friday evening, November 21, 1862. A draft pouring through a cracked window stirred pages of newspapers piled beside a stack of Bibles on a discarded kitchen table. A coal oil lamp on the table provided the only source of light in the room.

"The Bibles are insurance in case the Yankees barge in on us," Willard explained as he buttoned his overcoat.

"Where'd you get them?"

"From Reverend Parks."

"Did he ask why you needed them?"

"No."

When the lamp on the table started smoking, John turned down the wick, and then glanced around the basement. To his left a haphazard array of abandoned furniture had been piled one item on top of the other. Across from the furniture, tall dusty shelves held an assortment of preserves and canned items. Next to them, a half empty coal bin with a wide lipped shovel leaned against a waist high door. The adjacent coal furnace cast a shallow arc of heat that failed to compensate for the drafty window. The earthen floor didn't help any.

"I'd like to call our first meeting to order," John said. He took a seat at the kitchen table. Willard Robertson, Fred Knox, Matthew Maury, Elias Montgomery, and Mary Peabody joined him.

"And I thank everyone for coming tonight to plan our mission," John said.

"What is the mission?" Willard asked, a worried look pinching his face. He peered at the stairs leading to the kitchen and then at the grimy window along the far wall. The wind continued to pour through the cracked pane, making an ominous wooing that rose and fell. John pictured a coven of witches casting a spell over a cauldron.

"First," John said, "to convey the gravity of this situation, I must tell you if I'm captured, I will be hanged." He paused on purpose. "And the same applies to anyone who helps me."

Mary Peabody, who had stood up and now leaned against a support column near the furnace, sat down, her face drained of color. She folded her hands on her lap to prevent them from shaking. "It's our patriotic duty to help," she managed to blurt out.

"Dear friends," John said, "I don't wish to frighten you, but I am *not* exaggerating. If you are not willing to sacrifice your lives for the Confederacy, then I suggest you leave right now before anything else is said or done."

He looked every person in the eye. They all met his gaze. Not a one of them moved.

"What is the mission?" Mary asked quietly.

"The destruction of the Cumberland River railroad bridge."

Willard Robertson sucked in his breath, and the others began speaking at the same time.

Matthew was the loudest. "When do you hope to do this? And how?"

"For reasons of security," John said, "I don't want everyone to know the plan in its entirety."

Willard slapped his forehead, Matthew and Elias frowned, Fred's bottom lip curled, and Mary groaned.

"Which means?" Elias asked.

"If the Yankees capture and torture you, for example, you won't be able to give them enough information to compromise the plan."

"I see," Elias said, his frown deepening.

"It's not that I don't trust you, uncle," John said in a conciliatory tone. He turned and looked pointedly at each of the others. "This decision is based upon my concern for the integrity of the mission."

Upstairs, piano playing by Lydia's thirteen-year-old sister, Marianne, grew strident. Several very wrong notes broke the tension of the moment. Mary and Fred giggled, Elias and Matthew smiled, and Willard shook his head.

"John," Fred said in a somber voice, "if no one but you knows the entire plan, and something happens to you, this whole thing will disintegrate. Have you thought about that?"

"Of course," he replied, "and for that reason I suggest a second in command be appointed. Mayor Robertson?"

"I graciously accept your offer to serve in our worthy cause." The mayor puffed himself up. "May God grant me the strength and fortitude to carry out my duties."

A round of applause echoed throughout the basement.

"Every one of us has a lot to lose," Elias said. "My entire life—and livelihood—are tied up in this town. But that is also an excellent reason to commit to this action. For so long I've wanted to do something to help. I never could find a way."

"The damn Yankees shoplift from my store everyday," Matthew grouched.

The cellar door to the kitchen opened, startling the group and triggering looks of fear and guilt.

"Daddy?" Marianne called down.

"Stay upstairs, dear," he said. "What do you want?"

"I have the refreshments for your guests."

Mary dashed up the steps and retrieved a large tray holding mugs, a plate of fresh brownies, and a pot of steaming coffee.

"And, Daddy." Marianne's voice wafted down to them. "Would you read my essay for English class when your meeting is over?"

"Can't Lydia do it?"

"She's not back from Aunt Bea's yet."

"Very well," Willard looked at his pocket watch and frowned. "I'll be up soon."

"Thanks, Daddy." The door closed.

Willard smiled at his friends and shrugged.

John waited until Mary finished pouring the coffee. He reached for one of the brownies, thinking Lydia had probably baked them. She was always doing nice things for other people.

"One thing I forgot to mention," John said as poured his coffee. "After the meeting I think we should leave the house one or two at a time."

"To avoid attracting attention," Mary said, almost as if posing a question.

"Correct," John said as he sipped his coffee. It was black and strong, exactly what he needed. "By the way, how many weapons do you all have?"

"A few," Elias said. "After you left to join up, the Yankees searched our homes again and confiscated the rest of our guns. I still have the one I hid. So does Fred."

"And I have my old Colt revolver," Matthew said.

Which he keeps for protection when visiting his mistress, John thought. He shook his head. He had counted on all of them having serviceable weapons stashed somewhere. But this? *At least we have the guns from the raid,* he thought. He decided not to mention them yet. To protect both his friends and their dangerous secret, he would impart information only when the necessity was at hand. "Then we'll improvise," he said with a confidence he didn't feel. "In the meantime, I need to assign duties to each of you. Willard?"

"At your service, sir." The mayor set his cup down and turned to John.

"I want you to keep an eye on Colonel Harris and the officers in his command."

"My pleasure, sir." The mayor rose to his feet and bowed, throwing his arms out wide.

The others laughed. Fred, his left shirtsleeve pinned at the shoulder, stood up and marched military fashion around the basement. He stopped before John, came to attention, and saluted smartly.

"Fred and Matthew," John continued after the laughter died away, "you are assigned to listen closely to any conversations the Yankees may have in your respective business establishments. Eavesdrop as much as possible without seeming obvious."

The two men beamed. Willard went over and shook hands with both of them.

"What's for me?" Mary asked.

"Keep tabs on all rail and river traffic, and make note of any radical departures in the schedules."

"Ah," she sighed, "at last a chance to do my patriotic duty."

"Don't forget me, nephew," Elias said, jabbing a long finger at John.

John turned to his uncle and smiled. "We need to ply the Yankees with as much liquor as possible to get them talking freely about military secrets."

"I'll gladly drink to that assignment!" The hotel owner chuckled at his joke.

"Oh, you!" Mary said, and swatted at his sleeve.

John smiled again. "Funnel all information through the mayor if I'm not available."

"Yes, sir!"

"In addition, we'll need lots of black powder." John took another sip of coffee. He was pleased with his friends' enthusiasm and cooperation. He reflected they were like a mirror image of himself before going off to war: naïve and full of delusions about what duty to God and country meant. He realized how much he had changed since last February, so much so that now his much revered former opinions and beliefs were detestable to him. What he once held dear, he now loathed. Now, he was stuck, trapped by Hood and Hamet, and their insane plan to destroy the bridge.

"Black powder's hard to come by," Matthew said.

"I obtained two kegs on a guerrilla raid up in Trenton, Kentucky," John continued, "but that's not enough. We need much more."

He scanned the group, their eager faces turned to him. Taking a deep breath, he said, "We must start digging a tunnel under Stewart College to get to the Yankee armory."

"An admirable plan," Matthew said, his eyebrows arching. "But it seems extremely risky, not to mention dangerous."

"Where would you start this tunnel?" Willard leaned back in his chair. He shook his head from side to side.

"In the basement of the library," John said. "Hardly anyone ever goes down there."

"We'll be displacing many yards of dirt." Matthew tugged at a piece of loose skin on his pudgy face. "What will we do with it?"

"And how will we shore up the roof and walls?" Elias added.

"We can smuggle the lumber in at night when no one's around." John gave a sly smile. "And spread the dirt around on the earthen floor. If we tamp it down real well, no one will be the wiser."

"John," Elias said as he refilled his coffee cup, "exactly how do you propose to blow up the bridge?"

"I'll set my charges at the base of a column and use an extra long fuse."

The room was jolted by a scream from above. "Willard!" Henrietta cried out from the kitchen. "My God! Willard!"

"What's happened?" the mayor yelled, already moving toward the stairs.

"Lydia's been attacked!"

John was at the mayor's heels. When the men gained the kitchen, both stopped, shocked by the sight that met them. Henrietta, ashen and trembling, held on to Lydia's shoulders, supporting her. Marianne was screaming.

After a second's hesitation, the mayor plunged forward, his arms outstretched, catching his elder daughter as her eyes rolled and her knees gave way.

As the mayor carried Lydia up the winding staircase to the second floor, he asked John to tell everyone to go home.

"But sir," John said, pleading, "Lydia needs me."

"I will take care of *my* daughter!"

Disturbed, John returned to the Montgomery Hotel after sending the others home. At the entrance, two drunken soldiers tumbled out into the street, almost knocking him over. Cursing at each other, they brawled, fists flailing.

Disgusted, John sidestepped the men and trudged up the stairs to his room. He lit his lamp, poured himself a glass of whiskey, and collapsed into the battered armchair. *So much violence*, he thought glumly as he sipped his drink and stared sightless out at the darkened street.

Will no one be spared? He saw the war as a thick, ropy vine growing out of control, spreading its roots, reaching with its curling tentacles, choking decency and morality out of everything in its path. No one was safe. Nothing was sacred.

The tattered curtains flapped in the breeze. His thoughts turned to Lydia; he was unable to shake off the horrible memory of her bruised face and bloodied skirt.

Lydia! His hands opened and closed, yearning to hold her, rock her, whisper to her it would be all right, it didn't matter. His fingernails bit deep into his palms, and he knew what he really wanted was to find the man or men who had hurt her, and for every scratch and bruise exact revenge a thousandfold.

Then how will it ever end? he wondered. *By murdering the assailant, won't I sink to that monster's level?* For a moment he reconsidered his involvement with the destruction of the bridge, knowing he was spreading violence with his participation.

Had the innocence of the land and its people been lost forever? Or could it be regained? What would be the first step? Did it require only one man to stand up and declare boldly, "No more?" Was he that man? Would he be willing to go to jail for the cause of peace?

What do I believe? John wondered in anguish. *Do I stand for peace or war? Could I have found glory in nonviolence, or is the warrior's path of my grandfather and father the only way?*

When he enlisted, he felt sure of the answer. Not now. He touched his prosthesis, slid his fingertips up along the wood and wires and leather straps to the flesh of his thigh. He sighed.

A harsh pounding on the door jolted him. Rising, he pressed his ear to the door. "Who's there?" he whispered.

"Elias."

John twisted the key in the lock.

Reeking of whiskey, Elias staggered into the room. "Sorry for the late hour." He collapsed in the chair by the window. "I saw your light was still on so I came up . . . Did you see Lydia's face?"

John nodded as he sat on the edge of his bed, thinking of revenge again.

"We ought to string up the bastard who did that!" Elias made a noise deep in his throat. "But that's not why I came. When I was leaving the mayor's house, I saw Reverend Parks in the shadows two houses away."

John's eyebrows shot up. "Could he have been on his way home and stopped because of the commotion?"

"Nah. I know when I'm being watched, John. Know it deep inside here." He thumped his chest. "And that's what the man was doing!"

John pinched the bridge of his nose and wondered if the night could get any worse than it already was.

"He's not to be trusted." Elias snorted. "And even though I'm in church every Sunday, I don't think he sounds much like a preacher."

"Did anyone check his credentials before he was hired?" John asked.

"I believe the board of elders did, although I couldn't swear to it." Elias struggled to his feet, and John preceded him to the door. "And don't worry about this bridge thing. We may be nothing but civilians—and amateurs at that—but don't underestimate what determination can accomplish."

After Elias left, John undressed and blew out the lamp. He was physically and emotionally drained, but sleep eluded him. He could not stop thinking about Lydia.

He lit his lamp, got dressed, and headed through the dark streets to her house. He would not knock on the Robertson's door or disturb the family with his presence. But he knew he would not feel so helpless if he was close to Lydia, guarding the family's front door from dangers he could not name.

As he walked, the wind rebuked his face with icy blasts, and a sudden downpour drenched him, making his coat heavy. At the Robertson's porch, he sank down in an old wicker chair near the front door, listening to the rain and feeling the weight of his heart.

Was Lydia all right?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The Consultation

"Lieutenant, what is so urgent to awake me at this hour?" Reverend Parks growled as he opened the front door to the manse. He yawned, failing to cover his mouth. "Couldn't it wait until morning?"

"I was coming past the Robertson's house when I noticed a good many people trooping out." Wallace hesitated, unsure the information he brought was important.

"And?" Parks motioned the lieutenant into an armchair and took one by the unlit fireplace. "We can expect the mayor to have visitors."

"They were slipping out one by one." Wallace lit a cigarette and puffed on it. "And they were peering around to see if anyone was watching."

Now Parks seemed interested. "Were you observed?"

"I don't think so. At least not by them." The leather armchair creaked as he leaned back in it.

"What do you mean?"

"Another man was in the area." Wallace's voice cracked. He was unsure where this conversation was going, or if he should have brought the subject up. "He seemed to be keeping tabs on them."

"What did he look like?" Parks grabbed the armrests of his chair and leaned forward.

"About your height, with a black coat and matching top hat. Couldn't get a look at his face, though." Wallace puffed on his cigarette, sending smoke rings spiraling up toward the ceiling. He cocked his head. "Was it you?"

"I haven't been out all night."

Then why the fresh mud on your shoes? Wanting to show Parks he was not to be trifled with, Wallace looked pointedly at the man's feet. "I thought you might have taken a walk."

"Drop the subject, Lieutenant." Irritability added an edge to the man's voice. "It's not your job to question me. Who were the people leaving Mayor Robertson's house?"

The lieutenant listed the names of all he had seen, with John Martin first among them.

Parks listened, his lips curled back in disgust. "Mary Peabody, that plain old bitch. She's the only one whose work is of any consequence. You'd think she'd be smart enough to stay out of trouble."

"Why single out Mary?" Wallace asked. "All of them have meaningful jobs in town."

"Think, man, think!" Parks steepled his fingers in front of his face, "Mary has access to every train and riverboat schedule, and one of the sentries saw a man who looked like Martin sketching the railroad bridge."

"You think there's a link?" Wallace asked.

"We'll watch them both and see what develops." Parks stretched his legs out and crossed his feet at the ankles. "Now, I understand Martin wasn't around on Tuesday?"

"That's a good question, *Reverend*," the lieutenant said, emphasizing the title. "No one in town could find him."

"And he didn't show up for work that night?"

"Nope. And then on Wednesday he was back tending bar as usual."

"Did you question him about it?" Parks demanded.

The lieutenant nodded. "I asked him if he was sick the night before. He shrugged it off, said he hadn't felt up to snuff all day, and was reading his Bible in his room."

"He's obviously lying. Where the hell was he?" Parks jumped and began pacing. "These people are up to no good. I want to know exactly what's going

on!" He stopped and trained his dark gaze on the young officer. "And when I find out, I'll need a lot of rope to hang each and every one of them!"

A shiver raced up Wallace's spine when he saw the look on Parks' face.

"How's your lady friend?" Parks asked humorlessly. He reached for his pocket watch, pulled out an empty eight inch chain, and frowned.

"Lydia?"

"You have more than one?" Parks smirked and sat on the edge of his desk.

"She was visiting an aunt, so I haven't seen her tonight."

"Ask her about Martin. She knows what she has to do."

"I doubt she'll be of any use to us," Wallace said. "Aside from meeting him down by the river the Sunday he came back, she hasn't talked to him."

"Is it over between them?"

"Seems that way." Wallace stood up. "Got to go. Duty tonight."

Outside, Lieutenant Wallace calculated he had better watch his step with Parks. The detective was a dangerous and overzealous man, one who would stop at nothing to achieve his goals.

Parks had already caught the lieutenant and Lydia in a compromising position. That was something the detective could hold over his head in addition to that business with Sarah at Fortress Monroe. If Wallace did something stupid again, Parks might view him as a liability and think about getting rid of him. The Old Capitol Prison came to mind.

Then, there was the problem with Lydia and her nagging him to ask her father's permission to marry. If Mayor Robertson found out his daughter had been disgraced by a man with a wife and kids back home, there would be real trouble. John Martin might be the solution to that problem because he was the only man who would marry Lydia and not care a whit whether she had been disgraced. Men with only one leg couldn't be choosy.

However, the problem with Parks takes priority. So, you'd better start thinking about a transfer. But sweet Lydia is so close to giving herself to me!

He thought about the scene in his office, how her nipples had jutted, became taut and aching when he'd sucked on them. And he'd had his hands all over her inner thighs. *Damn*, he thought, *she was so close to giving herself to me. How can I possibly walk away now?*

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The Troop Train

At midnight on Saturday, November 22, 1862, a massive explosion shook the Montgomery hotel, rattling its doors and windows. Jostled from a dream about Sharpsburg, John threw up the shade and peered into the street below. Soldiers were gathered on the sidewalk, shouting and pointing to the east. More bluecoats streamed from the hotel lobby and joined them. Another explosion lit the whole eastern sky, rattling the windows and doors again.

"That's no cannon!" Minutes passed all too quickly, as John hurriedly strapped on his prosthesis, put on his clothes and heavy winter jacket, and hurried outside.

"What's going on?" he shouted to a soldier galloping by in the street.

"Train derailment!" the man hollered. "At the new Red River Bridge!"

John headed for the stable out behind the hotel.

"Hurry, John." Elias was already mounted and holding Murder's reins. "They're saying it's a troop train!"

John placed his good foot in the stirrup. In one swinging motion, he was up and into the saddle. They galloped north to College Street and headed east, following a column of fast moving cavalry.

At the Red River Bridge, John came upon a chaotic scene of carnage unlike anything he had witnessed since South Mountain or Sharpsburg. The locomotive, tender, and mail car of a troop-supply train had derailed on the west bank of the trestle. The engine lay on its side, gasping steam like a mortally-wounded prehistoric animal. Thick, gritty smoke laced with spiraling

fingers of flame rose from the bottom of the riverbed where a half-dozen passenger coaches lay piled every which way. From somewhere within their tangled depths came agonized cries and hideous screams that drowned out the crackling from the burning inferno.

"Dear God," John whispered. "Have mercy on those men!"

At the east end of the trestle a dozen boxcars, twisted from exploding ordnance into skeleton-like shapes, were ablaze. Farther on, the last three cars remained unscathed. A red signal lantern dangled from the caboose.

"Damned coal stoves must have overturned," Elias said as they dismounted next to some soldiers. "Them and the kerosene lamps created this inferno. Jesus, this is horrible!"

Nearby, cartridges in a burning ammunition crate exploded. Zinging bullets whistled through the air. Several soldiers, including Elias, ducked. John stood firm.

"Somebody give me a hand!" a man's deep voice boomed out from the riverbed below.

John moved to the edge and peered down into the darkness. "Where are you?"

"Here!" When the man held up a lantern, John recognized Doc Webber.

Followed by Elias, John worked his way down the steep path.

"This way!" A hand-rolled cigarette clamped between his teeth, Doc motioned them over to a young soldier pinned beneath a coach. Four soldiers wrestled a railroad tie in a desperate attempt to lever a car off the boy's legs. Despite the crisp November air, great streams of perspiration ran on their faces.

"Hurry it up, fellas!" Doc yelled to the men. He paced back and forth. "We don't have all night!"

"We're doing the best we can," the sergeant growled. Elias went to help them.

"How long will it take?" Doc's cigarette glowed bright red.

"An hour or more if we're lucky."

"Can't wait any longer. He's lost too much blood." Frowning, Doc reached for his bag. "John!"

"Sir?"

"Lend me a hand. I've got to amputate his leg to free him." He opened his black case and rummaged inside. "Bring the lantern over here."

John hesitated for a moment, unsure he cared to witness the surgery that had changed his life forever. He brought the light down close by the soldier's face. "My God," he gasped. "He's so young!"

"Please, mister!" With pain-filled eyes the boy looked up at John. A bloody hand reached out and grasped John's coat sleeve, twisting it tight. "Don't let him do it!"

"Can't you wait?" John asked in anguish.

"I have no choice," Doc snapped. "Do you want him to die?"

"Please, mister!" Panic glittered in the boy's eyes.

Doc produced a long knife and a bone saw, and set them on a splintered railroad tie.

"No-o-o!" the boy screamed at the sight of the instruments.

Doc pulled out a leather strap and two pieces of polished wood. He took the strap, made a tourniquet around one leg, and inserted a stick. "Hold this tight, John, and then have him bite down on the other stick."

John did as he was told.

"Bite hard, son." Doc rested a hand on his patient's forehead. "This is going to hurt."

"Don't let him cut off my leg! I'd rather die than be a cripple!"

John was struck dumb by the boy's plea.

"Elias," Doc grumbled. "Help hold him down."

The boy wailed as Doc raised the knife.

John looked in horror at the surgeon. "Doc, where's the chloroform?"

"It's used up!" He slit the trousers down the side and made the first cut.

The boy screamed and flopped every which way.

"Hold him still, goddamn it!"

John, Elias, and two soldiers clamped down hard on the boy, who struggled like a crazed animal.

Against his better judgment, John looked at the boy's leg. Two-thirds of the way between the knee and upper thigh, a jagged piece of bone protruded from the blood-streaked flesh. Next to it, the other leg looked normal. It was puffy and had some bruises, as if the boy had been climbing in some rocks and simply gotten stuck.

"Where's my damned saw?" Puffing on his cigarette, Doc held the lantern up, almost burning John's face.

The bright flash carried him back to the Sharpsburg battlefield and the exploding shell. His horse was thrown into the air, and then he was down on the ground with sharp pains running up and down his right arm and right leg. He moaned and came back to his senses as Doc's saw blade glinted in the firelight.

"Momma! Momma!" the boy screamed as the sawing started.

The boy's hand broke free. John grabbed at the swinging arm. The boy flailed a roundhouse blow to John's jaw. An excruciating pain stabbing his face, John pinned the boy's hand with his good knee and held on. When his grip loosened on the tourniquet, he remembered to tighten it.

Doc, his blue eyes blazing and his cigarette jiggling in the corner of his mouth, whipped his arm back and forth while he sawed.

The boy thrashed about, bucking up and down like a gut-shot horse. Finally, he fainted.

Blood squirted into John's face, and he slipped back into the long ambulance ride to Armory Square Hospital.

All around him groaning men thrash about, calling for water or reciting the Lord's Prayer. Above him, the drummer boy is quiet as his life's blood seeps through the stretcher's canvas. Drip, drip, drip. Drops land on John's blanket, form a dark pool, and run off onto the ambulance floor. Drip, drip, drip. It goes on all night long. It's maddening! Drives him crazy! And by dawn when saboteurs destroy a railroad bridge and the bodies of men, women, and little children are

flung, piece by shredded piece, into the Cumberland River, the world ends and the redemption of sin is no longer an option. Some things are too hideous to be forgiven—

"John!" Doc was shaking him. "John! Are you all right?"

"Huh? Oh. Yeah." He snapped to, his face drenched with sweat. His hands shook as he asked, "How's the boy?"

"I had to take the other leg. He's lost a lot of blood, but at least he's alive." Doc wiped his instruments on a rag and put them in his bag. "I've bandaged the stumps. It's all in God's hands now."

John and Elias picked up the unconscious boy and carried him to the top of the embankment. Snow flurries swirled around them as they laid him in the back of a wagon with the wounded and dying. John shook out a wool blanket and covered the boy, wrapping it around him, tucking it in with care and concern much as his father had done for him when he broke his right ankle at age ten.

During the rest of the night the freak November storm continued unabated, howling and moaning in its relentless fury. An hour before dawn a white coating several inches thick covered the entire landscape. In this eerie, setting the dying engine dozed while the mangled coaches and burned-out boxcars stood watch over the shrouded humps of the dead. Like clothes flapping on a storm tossed line, the bitter wind ruffled the sheets covering the bodies, tossing the snow from them with each gust as if by this courageous act it could preserve the memory of the terrible mishap that had taken place.

"Mount up!" Colonel Harris came by in the darkness, snapping out orders to his men. His voice waxed and waned in the stiff wind. "The blizzard's getting worse. We'll come back later to bury the dead."

Yowling like a pack of wild dogs, the north wind swept down through the leafless treetops and hurled the snow straight at John. The sheets covering the icy corpses blew off, exposing the full fury of Death at the moment its victims crossed the line. Hoary corpses, their faces frozen in the agonies of death, stared at John. He cringed.

"Let's get the hell out of here!" Elias set a hand on John's shoulder. "I'm beginning to get the creeps."

"See you later." Doc chuckled as he headed toward his buggy.

"I haven't seen Reverend Parks all night," Elias said, looking around.

"Me neither." John searched for the wagon where they had placed the boy. The vehicle was gone, having disappeared in a snowy blur of horses, men, and equipment heading back to town. "You'd think being a preacher and all—"

"Watch it!" Elias pointed. "There's a boulder."

John nudged it with his toe. "That's no boulder." He bent down and dusted the snow off. "Jesus, it's a keg of black powder!"

He and Elias exchanged startled looks, and then glanced around to see if they were being observed. They were alone.

"I'll be—" Elias said, a grin stealing across his face.

"And look here!" John pointed to more ordnance sticking up in the snow. He counted a total of six kegs.

"Damn!" Elias said and laughed.

John ran a hand through his snow-covered hair. "Let's get them out of here before the Yankees find them."

The two men brought their horses over, lashed the six kegs over the saddles, and covered the ordnance with blankets. They rode past the procession of army wagons.

As they came abreast of Stewart College, John stopped. "I want to see what's going on."

"Do you think that's wise?"

"I might learn something we can use," John said, hesitating. "But first we'll stash the kegs in my hiding place along the Red River."

John returned to the college an hour later and entered the dining room through a side door. The entire hall had been divided into a combination operating room and staging area. Chloroform and cigarette smoke mingled with the overpowering stench of sweat and blood. John's stomach churned, the

smells evoking strong memories of his own hospital experiences. He steeled himself to continue his appraisal of the situation.

Gruff-looking sergeants barked orders at scores of enlisted men who scurried about tending the injured. At the far end of the room, where a door opened onto an alley, a corporal directed soldiers carrying stretchers into and out of a white-curtained area. From behind the thick material, the yellow circles of kerosene lamps glowed like phantom fireflies while shadowy figures with upraised arms moved to and fro, billowing the curtains.

At intervals, unholy shrieks and screams filled that end of the hall, destroying the military's attempt to maintain order and discipline. Bright red blood seeping from beneath the curtains formed in gleaming pools. John backed away from the sight.

"Excuse me." John had stepped on a man's hand. "I'm very sorry."

The soldier stared up at him with unseeing brown eyes.

Mary Peabody came by. "This poor boy's gone," she said, touching John's arm. She closed the soldier's eyes and pulled a sheet over his head.

"You look tired, Mary," John consoled her. He rested a hand on her shoulder.

"It's been an ordeal for all of us." Mary sighed and slumped down in a chair.

Having seen enough, John said goodnight and returned to the Montgomery Hotel. After washing with soap and water, he gulped down some whiskey, crawled into bed, and waited as the burning liquid spread its soothing relief throughout his aching joints.

Scrunching up the pillow he drifted toward sleep on the rolling, whiskied sea. But from the next room came the rhythmic creaking and groaning of a bed, and the whispered sighs of a couple making love.

In an effort to block out the noise, John turned onto his side and pulled the pillow over his head, but the moaning and sighing, and creaking and groaning, grew louder and louder, finally merging with the full fury of the storm pummeling his window and the methodical sawing of bones that grated inside

his head. All became one cacophony of sound, one blur of pain, one crushing weight of heartache.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Uncertain Progress

With bandanas tied around their foreheads, and their sleeves rolled up to their elbows, the three men working in the basement of the Stewart College Library that Tuesday morning of November 25, 1862 spoke only in whispers. Outside, the harsh November storm of two days ago had yielded to balmy fifty-degree weather. Streets once full of slush and melting snow were now dry and filled with the sounds of rattling wagons and clip-clopping horses as the military went about its business.

John continued wielding his crowbar this way and that to loosen more dirt from the opening in the tiny closet. After the hole had grown to three feet in diameter, he dabbed his face with a handkerchief and took the empty bucket Fred handed him.

"Gentlemen," John said as he plunged a shovel into the thick red clay, "it looks like it's just a matter of scooping the rest of it out."

Fred leaned close and examined the exposed earthen wall. "At least you've got no rocks to contend with."

"That's true."

"I guess I ought to start spreading this stuff around." Fred dumped a load of dirt on the floor.

"Tamp it down good," John ordered. "Since the Yankees think the Red River train derailment was deliberate, they're gotten very jumpy. If they come down here and find a mess, they'll get suspicious and start looking around."

"My turn." Elias took the shovel from John. He jammed it into the earth. "Sure is a dirty job you've gotten us into, nephew."

"I won't disagree with you." Still sweating, John sat down on an overturned crate and wiped his face again. He frowned.

"What's wrong?" Elias asked.

"Ah," John said, "I was thinking about the Cumberland River bridge."

"Do we have enough black powder to blow it?" Fred asked.

"Barely."

"How about those guerrillas up in Kentucky?" Elias asked. "Can they be counted on to help us?"

"I seriously doubt it," John answered. "All Ralston's men seemed to be interested in was the money from the train." His thoughts centered on the bridge. The lack of black powder worried him. If the charge blew and the bridge *didn't* go down . . . His frown deepened. Hood would have him court-martialed for sure.

"Gentlemen, I've got to go," John said after he pulled out his pocket watch and checked the time. "I'm meeting Lydia."

"How's she doing?" Elias asked.

John shrugged.

"Have they found the bastard who attacked her?" Fred asked.

John shook his head. "Colonel Harris still hasn't made a single arrest, even when Lydia showed him the pocket watch her attacker dropped. There was an inscription inside the watch: To Matilda with love, Emmit, or something like that."

"Lieutenant Wallace looked as pale as a ghost when I told him about Lydia," Elias said.

John bristled. If Wallace thought Lydia was ruined now that she had been attacked, John would be tempted to beat the officer to a pulp. At the same time, he prayed the lieutenant had lost interest in her.

"Be sure and use separate exits when you leave." John tucked his shirt into his pants. "We don't want the Yankees finding out about the tunnel."

"We will," Fred said. "Give Lydia our regards."

As he left the building John wondered what kind of afternoon he would have with Lydia. Would it be enjoyable? Or otherwise? Considering what she had been through she would be nervous and jumpy, and undoubtedly scared to death of all men. Not exactly a pleasant combination for an afternoon social call. Perhaps, he reasoned, he should simply stay away from her. After all, he was only seeing her because there had been an underlying sense of urgency in her voice when she had asked him to take her for a ride. *So why wasn't she taking this ride with her beloved Lt. Wallace?*

He frowned. This military business he was involved in was simply too dangerous and complicated for him to get mixed up with her again. At the river a scant nine days ago, he had asked whether she still cared about him. Her answer was evasive, which brought him back to the reason why she wanted to see him today. Was she interested in resuming their relationship, or was there some hidden reason?

Your jealousy about her and Wallace made you cold with her, John scolded himself. And that jealousy still persists. If you want a straight answer about how she feels, you'll have to start talking honestly to her.

He had yet to tell her about his plan to blow up the bridge, and he had no idea what her reaction might be to the news. She might be proud of him because he had been chosen by the Confederacy to play such an important part in the war. On the other hand, was blowing up a bridge any different from enlisting in the first place? Lydia certainly had not supported that action. He decided to wait and see what happened today. Right now he had to borrow Matthew Maury's wagon and go to pick her up.



"Where are we going?" Lydia asked as John clucked to the horses and sent them trotting slowly down College Street. She was wearing a brown plaid skirt with a white sweater. As the wagon picked up speed, she shivered and

withdrew into her red coat, raising its hood so only part of her bruised face was visible. She was still ashamed to be seen in public, and Parks' threat of exposure if she refused to help him hung over her like a storm cloud about to burst. Driven by fear and guilt, she had asked John to pick her up today.

"For a short drive across the river," John said. He chuckled. "There're fewer Yankees snooping around over there."

He seemed evasive, but she had no reason to mistrust him. When he looked at her, heartbreak was as clear on his face as the angry purplish marks were on her own. Lydia felt herself being drawn into a web John unwittingly spun by being a kind and caring man. The last thing she wanted was to love him now that Reverend Parks had forced her to spy on him.

After they'd taken the river ferry and driven a short way upstream, John turned onto a tree-shrouded cutoff that led to a bluff above the river. The wagon rumbled down the lane and stopped in the shelter of a thicket. The seclusion frightened her. Since the assault, anything, even the familiar and the trusted, could send paroxysms of terror running up her spine.

"What are we doing here?" she asked, working to keep her tone confident.

"I need to see something," he said. Reaching behind the seat, he pulled out an army blanket and handed it to her. "Wrap yourself up in this. It'll keep you warm until I get back from—"

"Can't I come along?" The panic rose in her throat, and her voice sounded unnatural in her ears.

"Actually, you'll be safer here," he said as he set the brake and climbed from the wagon.

Lydia watched as he made his way down to the bluff at river's edge. He lay flat on the dried leaves and grass, pulled out a pair of binoculars, and adjusted the lenses.

Whatever in the world is he doing? At a gust of wind, Lydia looked over her shoulder at the surrounding forest and imagined evil forces hidden within its shadows. She shivered, certain right now her attacker was watching her,

planning how to get at her, how to—*Stop it!* she told herself. *You'll drive yourself mad!*

Empty assurances played through Lydia's head as they had for days—silly, comforting remarks from Aunt Bea, her father, and her sister—her mother could not broach the subject yet, which hurt Lydia terribly: You've been safe from the day of your birth through the night of the assault; you are safe again. Its happening once does not mean it will happen again. He was passing through Clarksville and is miles away by now, probably in another state. He would be a fool to hang around town. People are looking for him.

Unconvinced and frightened, and feeling like she was wound tighter than a top, Lydia's thoughts skipped to Reverend Parks' threat. If he exposed her to the town now, no one would believe she had been attacked. Everyone—including her family—would think she had invited the assault.

Lydia cringed. She had no choice but to spy on John.

She climbed down from her seat and, blanket in hand, strode toward him, crunching leaves as she walked and praying John's behavior was above reproach.

John looked over his shoulder and smiled at her.

"I didn't want to be alone," she told him truthfully, and spread the blanket on the ground. She sat hunched over with her arms clasped around her knees. Her ribs still ached from her attacker's kick. She stifled a groan. "What are you doing?" she asked, hoping to sound nonchalant. "The bridge is the only thing I see."

"While I was convalescing at Armory Square Hospital," he said, "I devoured the one book they had—a colossal work on bridge construction. I vowed if I ever got out of there I would become an engineer."

She hesitated, wondering if Reverend Parks would accept that answer. Probably not, she decided. "Don't lie to me, John Martin! What are you *really* up to?"

"I'm on a secret mission for the Confederate government."

A nervous laugh escaped her lips. "You are not. Tell me the truth this instant!"

"I am serious about what I said." His smile had faded, and when he spoke, it was in a stern whisper. "For your own safety, it would be better if you said nothing about this to anyone."

"Are you serious?" She gripped the hem of her red coat, twisting the material.

"Deadly serious," he said, leveling his gaze on her. "If you tell anyone, I'm sure to be hanged, and so will you as my accomplice."

Lydia cleared her throat and forced out the word, "Really?"

"Really." His voice was as cold as the north wind that swept down upon them. He put his arm around her and gripped her shoulder. "What would you say if I told you my mission could shorten the war?"

Oh? Why don't you tell me all about it? The words formed in her head, not in her mouth. This was all so confusing. Parks would, at the least, berate her for not asking for details, but she couldn't trick John. She might be sacrificing everything, but. . . *So be it!* she thought. "I'm not sure I want to hear any more about it," she said at last.

"Why not?" He gave her a long stare. "Especially when what I am about to tell you is in agreement with—"

"Stop!" She practically screamed it at him. He was so trusting he would confess everything to her, and then her quandary would only deepen.

"What's wrong, Lydia? Don't you want to hear—"

"No!" She started to rise. The pain in her ribs stopped her. Groaning, she held herself tight and began swaying back and forth.

His eyes narrowing, John spoke in a tight voice. "Are you hiding something from me?"

She shook her head back and forth in a vehement manner. At that moment the landscape turned black, and the world collapsed around her. She felt friendless and unworthy, stupid and wrong. If she had been holding a gun, she would have ended her life then and there, for suicide offered the only means of

escape from her shameful dilemma. She shivered in the midst of her void. But there, reaching in to her, was John. He rubbed his hands up and down her arms.

Faithful, adoring John, whose only sins were his serious nature and self-doubt. No matter what she had done and in spite of what people might say about her, he was loyal and kind to her. She took a deep breath. When she looked into his eyes she realized how much she loved him.

She leaned against him. Much against her better judgment, she asked, "What can I do to help you?"

He held her, still rubbing her arms. "I thought you were opposed to the war."

"The last six months have made me bitter. Throughout this never-ending occupation I saw what beasts men can be, both in and out of uniform!" She burst into tears. "You can't imagine what it was like to have someone lunge out of the darkness and attempt to . . . to rape you." Her body went rigid, and her knees locked tight together.

"You're right," he said, holding her and rocking her. "I couldn't begin to fathom that."

She wept, making strange sounds as if something inside had been jarred loose and was banging around in there, causing her extreme pain. Her cries grew louder, reverberating against the forest behind them. Wails that did not sound human doubled her over and left her clutching her rib cage. She could not silence these wails, or the low, guttural sounds that accompanied them.

John rocked her and held her and said her name into her hair, as if reminding her who she was, who she would always be. At last she was emptied, cleared of the anger, pain, and humiliation.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

She nodded, at the same time yielding to an overpowering need to yawn. It was so incongruous after the crying, they both laughed.

"Sorry if I've bored you, Lydia," John teased, and they laughed again.

The rattle of musketry exploded downstream. It sounded like gravel flung onto a tin roof.

"What's that?" Lydia grabbed John's arm.

"I don't know." He held the field glasses to his eyes and scanned the tops of the buildings in the downtown area. To the south of the Presbyterian Church, a puff of black smoke rose into the air.

"Uh-oh!" He struggled to rise after another burst of gunfire. "Let's go! Something's *drastically* wrong!"

CHAPTER THIRTY

Hostages in the Courthouse

A large crowd of unruly civilians blocked the main street leading into the downtown square. John elbowed his way through the crush of people, shielding Lydia as well as he could and regretting having her along. He had tried to convince her to go home, but she had been frightened and insisted on staying with him. Now, she clung to his arm. When he spotted Mayor Robertson and Mary Peabody across the square, he dragged Lydia toward them.

"Stop pushing!" snarled a man holding an open flask. Others scowled and waved splintered two-by-fours in a menacing manner.

"Pardon us, folks," John said. "We're trying to get to her father."

"This is awful," Lydia said, pointing at the courthouse. Most of the glass in the building's windows was gone, and the stone façade was dotted with pockmarks from stray Minie balls. The ghostlike figures of men moved back and forth inside.

At the sound of gunshots John pulled Lydia behind a wagon. The firing died off.

"What's going on?" John called over to a lanky young lieutenant.

"Sir. The Rebels up there tried to break into the armory." The lieutenant's blue eyes flashed hot with anger as he pointed to the second floor of the courthouse. His blond curls were dark with sweat.

"How did they get up there?" John asked.

"We had them surrounded, but they broke through our lines. We chased them here and now they've taken hostages." The lieutenant's voice was strained.

"Everyone get down!" some soldiers yelled as more firing broke out. The heavy retorts of muskets were punctuated with the sharp cracks of pistols and revolvers. Within moments, the firing had escalated into a fusillade.

After the exchange of bullets stopped, the young officer excused himself and hurried over to Colonel Harris.

The commander tied a white flag to the end of a bayonet and stepped off the curb. "You men in there! This is Colonel Harris, Commander of the Clarksville Garrison." He held the flag higher. "I want to talk."

A bearded figure appeared in one of the courthouse windows. "What do you want, Yank?"

John recognized John Ralston from the guerrilla band in Trenton, Kentucky. John snorted in derision. Ralston had gotten greedy and tried to go it alone. Now he was in one hell of a predicament.

"I demand your immediate surrender!" Colonel Harris' voice boomed.

"Not on your life!"

"The courthouse is surrounded." The colonel moved farther into the street. "There's no chance for you to escape. Surrender immediately!"

"Why should I, when I got hostages?" Ralston pushed Fred Knox, several women, and a young boy—he looked to be about seven or eight—onto a balcony. Ralston put a rough hand on the boy's shoulder. "My men and I want fresh horses and your word that we'll have safe passage out of town. We'll leave the hostages by the bridge. You can pick 'em up later."

"No deal!" Harris bellowed.

"I'll kill 'em all!"

A shot rang out, and a ball tore through the colonel's white flag. Yankee sharpshooters opened fire as Harris ran for the safety of a wagon. His face was dark with rage.

"Move that battery into position!" he ordered his captain of artillery.

John and Lydia approached the colonel and heard the mayor already protesting.

"There's a boy and several women in there, sir!" Willard cried. "They deserve your protection! Would you martyr them?"

"Six of my own men are dead or wounded!" the colonel snapped.

"Sir," the blond lieutenant said, "I've seen what those big guns did at Shiloh!"

"That's enough!" The colonel cut him short.

"But, Father—"

"Clinton, you're being insubordinate!" The colonel stalked up the street to check on the artillery.

John noticed Lydia watching Lieutenant Wallace, who stood a half block away chatting with Reverend Parks. When Wallace rested a hand on Parks' shoulder, an odd expression worked its way across Lydia's face.

"What's going on? John asked her.

"Nothing," she snapped as she turned to her father. "Daddy, can't you put a stop to this idiocy?"

"Mayor, let me see what I can do," Clinton Harris said. He drew his saber and cocked his revolver. "I need six volunteers!"

A sergeant, a corporal, and four privates stepped forward.

Lieutenant Harris raised his saber. Under covering fire, the men raced toward the courthouse steps. From within the building came a volley of shots. Harris and the sergeant fell. The other men continued running, but a second volley drove them back. Harris struggled to his feet and staggered forward with the sergeant. More shots riddled their bodies. The sergeant slumped to his knees; the lieutenant was blown sideways and landed face first across a hitching post. A blood-soaked hand hung down, touching the ground.

Yankee troops poured volley after volley of gunshots into the courthouse windows until a cloud of black smoke gathered on the commons. When it cleared, John could see someone had carried away Lieutenant Harris' limp body.

Colonel Harris came running back to the square. "What's going on here?" he demanded.

"Sir," a pimply-faced private said, saluting, "your son was wounded in a charge against the Rebels."

"Where is he?" the colonel asked. His face was pale and his voice shaky.

"At the Montgomery Hotel, sir."

The colonel compressed his lips, and then said in a stern voice, "So be it. Let's get on with this."

"Sir." John stepped forward. "The men inside aren't going anywhere. To provoke them further will endanger the hostages."

"I'm already provoked!" Harris cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, "You in the courthouse! One last warning—surrender!"

"We'll kill each and every one of these people!" Ralston hollered back.

The colonel spun on his heel and motioned to the captain up the street to fire one round.

Flames and smoke belched from one of the large cannons. A shell screeched into the courthouse, destroying a portion of the northwest corner. A great mass of debris rained down on the statue of the Revolutionary War hero astride his horse.

"I demand your surrender!" Harris shouted again.

An emphatic, "No!" resounded from the courthouse. Fred Knox and the other hostages were pushed onto the balcony. The little boy was crying, "Momma! Momma!"

"Ethan!"

John turned around to see a young woman supported under the arms by two of her friends. Her ashen face was stained with tears and her hands rested on her large belly—she was pregnant with child.

"Momma!" the boy shrieked.

"Sir!"

Colonel Harris wheeled around as an out-of-breath private rushed up to him. "What is it?" he snapped.

"Sir, the surgeon reports that your son lies gravely wounded! If you want to see him alive—"

Grimacing, Colonel Harris turned away from the messenger and raised his voice. "Commence the bombardment!"

Six cannon exploded with flames, smoke, and a booming that echoed across the commons. Their shells crashed into the upper story of the courthouse, gutting the entire second floor. Horrible screams came from the hostages and they disappeared from sight as debris rained down with great force, smashing everything in its path.

John jerked Lydia under the wagon and covered her body with his own. Large chunks of stone and splintered wood thudded down all around them. One huge missile landed on the spot where she had stood.

"You saved my life!" Lydia cried.

John held her down as the bombardment went on, pressing his lips into her soft hair. A rock hit him in the shoulder, and he cried out in pain; blood ran inside his shirt. The shelling of the cornfield in front of the Dunker church flashed before his eyes, and an overwhelming pang of guilt swept over him. Why had he survived when two hundred good men hadn't? He could not shake that thought from his conscious mind. Now, he held Lydia as if these might be their last moments on earth.

"Cease fire!" Colonel Harris shouted.

Like an echo the order was passed up the street. The bombardment stopped and the only sound heard was the crackling of flames as fires licked at the courthouse windows. Thick clouds of black smoke drifted from the building.

At Colonel Harris' command, a squad of soldiers rushed into the building. A flurry of shots rang out. Within minutes, the soldiers emerged with Fred Knox and the women. They were unhurt.

"Where's Ethan?" his mother cried, as Colonel Harris ordered a fire brigade into action.

"I'm sorry, ma'am." A soldier walked up to her. "He's dead."

"Oh, my God! No!" She collapsed into the arms of her companions, sobbing.

More soldiers left the building. One carried the thin body of a boy—so *small*, John thought. Bright ugly bloodstains covered the front of the child's jacket. One arm was missing.

"Ethan!" His mother lunged toward him as more shots came from within the courthouse. She jerked the body from the soldier's arms and set the child down on the ground. Her weeping turned to wails. Finally, she rose to her feet.

"You monsters!" She picked up a chunk of stone and hurled it at the soldiers. "May God send you straight to hell for this, all of you!"

Some soldiers dragged a teenaged boy by his hair as they left the building. The boy thrashed and screamed a litany of vulgar epithets. When the Yankees reached a tree, they stopped and tied the boy's hands behind his back.

"You son of a bitch!" the sergeant shouted as he tossed a rope over a limb. "I'll teach you to kick me in the balls, you little bastard!"

"Go to hell!" the boy screamed. He was thin and wiry with curly brown hair, and looked all of sixteen. "Your mother was nuthin' but a black street whore!"

Another soldier slipped a hangman's noose around the boy's neck and set him on a horse.

"Damn you to hell!" the boy screeched.

"Damn you, too!" the sergeant hollered and slapped his hat on the animal's hindquarters. The horse galloped forward, and the boy was jerked backward from the saddle. He dangled there, his neck broken.

Like a match set to a charge, the crowd exploded, picking up bottles and stones and hurling them at the soldiers. Glass shattered, and a fire started.

"Form up!" a sergeant shouted to his men.

"Let's get out of here!" John said. He grabbed Lydia's hand, but the crowd carried them toward the line of troops.

A rock hit one soldier square in the face. Bright red blood gushed from his broken nose. The soldier next to him opened fire on the advancing crowd. A civilian dropped.

The air filled with angry shouts and vile oaths, and the crowd hurled more debris at the troops. Store windows shattered, and overturned wagons burst into flames.

"Hold your fire!" the sergeant yelled as the rocks continued to fly.

John got in front of Lydia and shielded her. At more gunfire, he pulled her to the ground.

"God help us!" she cried.

Next to them, an elderly woman had been hit. A pool of bright red blood spread along the cobblestones, staining her gray curls. She stared up, lifeless, at the sky.

"Fix bayonets!" an officer yelled as the crowd pushed forward. "Fire over their heads!"

A blistering volley turned the mob, driving those in front into those pushing from the rear. Unable to move, John clutched Lydia to him.

A wild, wordless chant of fury rose from the crowd, which surged *en masse* at the soldiers. Two volleys above their heads succeeded only in turning them in several directions.

"Let's go. Now!" John jerked Lydia to the right and hustled her into a storefront.

They bolted down an aisle and out the back door into an alley. At a street they turned left and made their way to the wagon. John helped her onto the seat and gave the whip to the team. Two blocks away they picked up Mayor Robertson and Mary Peabody.

"Home, children!" The mayor's face was sweat-drenched, and his breath came in great wheezing gulps.

"Good Lord," Mary said between gasps. "If only my mother could have seen this!"

As he drove, listening to an excited Mary babbling to the mayor, John reached for Lydia's hand. It was cold and trembled, but she did not pull away.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Colonel Harris' Sorrow

An orange glow filled the evening sky as John crossed the debris-laden town square. Overturned wagons, broken glass from shattered storefronts, and chunks of cobblestone and brick littered the street. He stepped around an assortment of items taken from a looted store: a bag of flour, a rake, two hats, some miscellaneous articles of clothing, and a woman's tortoiseshell comb.

He glanced at the courthouse. Although the raging fires had been extinguished, the blackened facade stared back at him as if wearing a macabre Halloween mask. Someone had cut down the boy the soldiers had hanged.

John entered the Montgomery Hotel bar which had been closed to the public by order of Colonel Harris. In a corner where a lamp hung from the ceiling, Clinton Harris was lying on two tables that had been shoved together. The boy's face was pale and his breathing so shallow his chest barely moved. Standing around him were Colonel Harris, Reverend Parks, Lieutenant Wallace, Doc Webber, and the regimental surgeon, Major John Ashby. All five except the preacher had grave, pained looks on their faces.

"How goes everything?" John asked Doc in a low voice.

He motioned John to one side and set a hand on his shoulder. "A Minie ball hit the femoral artery high up on the left leg. The bleeding can't be stopped." Doc frowned and the color in his eyes darkened. "He's already lost a great deal of blood from wounds to his abdomen, right shoulder, and right thigh. Several civilians were killed or wounded, including a woman."

Major Ashby, a lock of gray hair falling over his face, bent close to Clinton's mouth and listened. When he looked up, his expression was pained. "I'm afraid he's passed on, sir."

His face white, Colonel Harris staggered backward and sank onto a wooden chair. "No," he said, moaning. "No!" He stared at the floor and uttered the word again and again.

Reverend Parks murmured a short prayer while Major Ashby closed Clinton's eyes.

"I'm sorry, sir," Lieutenant Wallace said to Colonel Harris. "I know you were very proud of your son."

"Thank you," the colonel said.

John and the other men expressed their condolences.

"Sir?" Elias came over with a tray bearing a bottle of whiskey and some glasses.

The colonel looked up at the hotel's owner. "He was our only child," he said, dazed. "How am I going to tell his mother?"

"Have a drink, sir," Elias urged. He positioned himself between the colonel and Major Ashby, who was pulling a sheet over Clinton's body and supervising its removal by two stretcher-bearers. "I'll pour it for you." After doing so, he left the opened bottle with the stricken man and went back to the bar. Colonel Harris gulped down one glass of whiskey, and then another.

A black porter came over with a bucket and washed the blood from the tables, rearranged them, and mopped the floor with the methodical rhythm of long practice. From outside came the retort of several rifles, then a long, dull silence.

"What's going on?" John asked Lieutenant Wallace.

"They're still rounding up stray guerrillas," the lieutenant said in a strained voice.

"Professor Martin?" The colonel beckoned John to come over and help himself to some whiskey.

"Thank you, sir." John sat across from the man.

"I feel as if I've lost a part of myself." Tears clouded the colonel's eyes. "And now I have to write his mother and tell her what happened." He gulped his drink. "I've got to tell her, not only as Clinton's commanding officer, but as her husband."

"I wish there was something I could—"

"Christ!" He passed his hand over his face. "Do you have pen and ink, John?"

"I'll get them." He gathered the requested items, stopping to say hello to Matthew, who had carried a load of supplies into the bar and was talking in low tones to Elias.

"Here you are, sir," John said, almost in a whisper.

"Thank you," said Colonel Harris. "Now please leave me alone for a few minutes."

"Of course." John returned to the bar and poured himself a drink.

"How is he?" Elias asked, running a towel across the bar top.

"Not well." John refilled Matthew's glass, and then came around to the other side of the counter and sat on a stool next to him.

"Let the Yankee bastard suffer!" Matthew hissed. "He's responsible for all this damn killing out here today."

"That's true," John said, feeling his temper flare. Sometimes he couldn't understand Matthew's lack of compassion for his fellow man. As was to be expected, he had the businessman's clinical coldness in dealing with customers. As often as not, Matthew's actions contradicted what scripture taught and forced him to seek forgiveness on Sunday mornings. That explained it, and yet it didn't. Probably it went deeper, to a well of hatred that had its origins in his relationship with Beatrice and her inability to bear him a male heir.

"He just lost his son," John fumed, unable to shake his anger. "Have a little sympathy, goddamn it!"

"What's with you?" Matthew said, grumbling. "Gone over to the Yankees?"

John moved his face close to Matthew's. "I'm no turncoat, and I'll tell you that only once!"

"Go to hell," Matthew said and swiveled away on his bar stool.

"For God's sakes, Matthew!" Elias snapped. "John sacrificed his leg for the Confederacy!"

Matthew shrugged and said nastily, "That was then. Now is now." He reached for his glass and gulped some whiskey.

"Where's your sense of honor?" John put his hand on Matthew's arm to keep him from lifting his glass again. "That's the liquor talking!"

"Go to hell, both of you!" Matthew said, swiveling back around on his bar stool. His face was dark with rage, and the veins stood out on his forehead.

John sat back, prepared for Matthew to take a swing at him. When a drunk Colonel Harris made his way toward them, Matthew muttered an imprecation, turned away with a sour look, and stumbled out of the hotel.

The colonel rested a hand on John's shoulder. "I've struggled through the letter to my wife," he said. "Would you mind, being a professor and all, looking it over for me?"

"I . . . I'd rather not, Colonel. I'm sure it's much too personal."

"Please." Tears welled up in the colonel's eyes. "I need your help."

"Go ahead, John," Elias urged, and held out the whiskey bottle for him to take. "What harm could it do?"

"It's just that—oh, all right." Bottle in hand, John took the letter over to an empty table, sat down, and began to read.

November 25, 1862

Dear Evangeline,

It is with great sadness in my heart that I write to you today to report the death of our son, Clinton Edward Harris. . . .

He went on to explain the circumstances of Clinton's death, then wrote:

I am reminded, dear wife, of the time when our Clinton returned home from school with a bloody nose and an expulsion note pinned to his coat. For fighting in the classroom with another boy over little Marcia Brad-

shaw's honor. Then, too, did he risk personal injury and break the rules in order to take what he considered the rightful course of action.

Our son shall sleep in honor with the rest of our war dead in the local cemetery. The place overlooks the Cumberland River from a high, grassy knoll, and he will be at peace there.

My dear wife, I wish I could be with you now and comfort you as I did when our infant daughter died. But this damned war takes precedence over everything. It makes a misery of all whose lives it touches, and in the end there will be no peace. When such profound suffering fills people's souls, no room is left for forgiveness.

I enclose two locks of Clinton's hair. Please give one to his fiancée.

My love for you remains strong in these trying hours, and I trust in the Lord to care for you in my absence."

s/s Clifton

Moved, John returned the letter to the colonel and nodded his approval. "You've done a fine job, sir."

"Thank you." Harris stood up. Unsteady on his feet, he rested a hand on the chair for support. Then, with the letter in one hand and the whiskey bottle in the other, he marched to the exit. The wind sent an icy draft across the floor as the colonel opened the door and shut it behind him.

John stayed at the table and thought of the colonel's son, dead along with countless others. *So young*, John thought, and the drummer boy from Sharpsburg came to mind. At least the colonel would see his son's body in full military uniform before they buried him in that cold cemetery down by the river. And the drummer boy? Who honored him or cared where he was buried?

He shook himself, unable to bear the return of these memories. They threatened to unravel him, much like the night Doc sawed off the young soldier's leg. He couldn't let that happen again, not because he must fulfill Hood's mad order, but for Lydia's sake and all that had happened to her. He'd held her so close today—more than once—and the old feelings deep within his

heart and soul were reincarnated. They formed a vision of a new life where love, not hatred, thrived.

He thought about today's events in the town square. What he'd seen had angered him: the intense hatred and the indiscriminate killings. War bred hatred, and while it was good for politicians and war profiteers, it did no one else any good. Misery and heartaches were its chief end products.

He swilled more whiskey, and the bottle made a hollow sound when he banged it down on the table. From somewhere across the courthouse square, a solitary rifle shot echoed.

He reached for the bottle, knocked it over with a clumsy hand. It rolled toward him, the last few drops spilling out on the tabletop. A harsh scent wafted over him. Outside, the wind howled and a loose shutter banged against the glass in the window.

He glanced out at the street. *Thank God the boy the soldiers hanged has been taken down*, he thought. If not, the corpse would twist and turn in the cold wind while snow flurries blew in from the north and coated it a ghostly white. *And no one would care!*

Despair washing over him, John laid his head down on the table and stared through bleary eyes at the label on the empty bottle. From Culpeper to Sharpsburg to Clarksville, the ghosts of the dead rose up and hovered before his eyes. *They were all so young!*

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

A Time for Reflection

After dropping off a pie mold at Aunt Bea's, Lydia sat down on a stone bench in front of the Stewart College library. The air was crisp and clear, the sky a brilliant blue punctuated with a scattering of clouds. It was a perfect day for thinking, for analyzing the changes that had taken place since last February. Back then, her heart belonged to John, Lawrence didn't exist, and her innocence had not been tainted by a horrific attack. Now, with the holidays fast approaching and her life in turmoil, she decided the logical course of action was to push the issue of marriage with Lawrence once and for all. If he would talk to her father and buy her a ring, Reverend Parks would have no hold on her, and her honor would be restored. She would not have to betray John or expose his mission, whatever it was. *I'll simply tell Lawrence the truth, and let him deal with Reverend Parks.* Lydia saw no reason to be standing alone in this. Lawrence's assuming some responsibility for this scandalous situation was only fair.

Bolstered by self-righteous indignation, Lydia felt better until a small voice inside her head asked what she would do if Lawrence refused to propose. In the past, he always had the same excuse—war duties consumed him, and he would talk to her father as soon as those demands abated. But now she had Christmas on her side. If any time were appropriate for a wedding, it was this joyous holiday season. She pictured herself in a white wedding gown standing at the altar with the lieutenant.

For a while she had felt sure she loved Lawrence, wanted to spend the rest of her life with him and bear his children. *But what if he should be transferred*

to another post and did not take her with him? She stifled a cry. *Today's discussion would be different!*

This morning, though, John's face had cropped up in her mind. She knew even less where she stood with him. His attitude toward her had moved from cool and sarcastic to warm and affectionate. She was drawn to him all over again, as she had been at the cemetery last February. Yet he had not declared himself a suitor, and she shrank from the thought he simply pitied her.

"Am I interrupting you?" Reverend Parks sat down, pressing his thigh against hers and sliding one hand around her waist.

She flinched and started to rise.

"Stay where you are, Lydia!" He grasped her arm and jerked her back onto the bench. "We need to talk."

"You're hurting me!"

"Be quiet," he hissed as a trio of soldiers came toward them along the sidewalk. "Good morning," he said, smiling, and they tipped their hats to Lydia as they passed.

"What do you want?" she asked. When his grip loosened she moved away from him. Now the minister had shown her his propensity for cruel domination, he did not bother to feign goodness anymore. Palpable undercurrents of evil, unbridled power, and sexual desire emanated from him, terrifying her. The possibility of his hitting her came to mind, and she cringed.

"What have you found out about Martin?" he said in a harsh and demanding tone.

"Nothing," she said, eyes averted.

"You went for a little ride in the country, and then down to the river." His voice rose in disbelief. "And during all that time he told you nothing?"

Her eyes widened in surprise that he knew of their activities. "How did—"

"I had you followed." A smirk held on his lips. "So what did he tell you?"

"Nothing." She tried to collect her scrambled thoughts. "It was simply a pleasurable ride."

"Listen, you little tart!" He jerked her face up close to his. "I told you what would happen if you didn't cooperate."

"I . . . I—" she stammered.

"This whole damn town will know about you and your Yankee lieutenant!" he said, a snarl distorting his features. "You'll be disgraced and cast out into the street by your father! Is that what you want?"

"No!" Lydia burst into tears.

"Then what did Martin say?" He grabbed her arm and shook it.

Fear overpowered her. "He—" she sobbed, "—he said he was on a mission."

"What kind?" He pulled out a pocketknife and began cleaning his nails.

"I don't know," she whispered.

"You fool!" He jabbed the knife at her as he spoke. "Why didn't you ask?"

"I—" She drew back and sniffled. "He said something about it shortening the war."

"Is there to be an attack?"

She shook her head while she stared at her lap. "I don't know! I swear it!"

"Damn!" She could hear the controlled anger and frustration in his voice.

"Here comes your Yankee lieutenant." Parks stood and faced her. "Lydia!"

She raised her eyes. "Yes?"

"Find out more, or you'll regret it," he snarled. He grabbed her chin between his thumb and forefinger, and gave it a twist.

"I will!" Lydia cried out in pain.

The preacher turned and marched off down the walk while Lieutenant Wallace approached from the opposite direction.

"Lydia!" Lawrence hurried to her. "Whatever is the matter?"

"Reverend Parks." She choked back a new flood of tears. "He said the most awful things to me."

"Tell me, my love." Lawrence sat beside her and held her trembling hand.

"I can't!" She wailed. She felt angry with Lawrence and jerked her hand from his.

"We can't talk here." He looked around. "Come." And he led her to his office where she sank down into the couch cushions. When her tears started again, he gave her brandy which she sipped, relishing its warmth as it slid down her throat and raced toward the knot in her stomach.

"Will you tell me why you're so upset?" he asked.

She nodded. Taking a deep, ragged breath she told him Parks had been blackmailing her and why. She didn't have to explain the consequences of such an exposure; Lawrence knew how it would precipitate her father's rage and her mother's shock and dismay.

"Mother is so ill already," Lydia said, lifting her eyes to his. "What will happen when she is told by her minister that I am a . . . a tramp?" She covered her face with her hands. "Especially after having been attacked," she said in a small voice. A sob caught in her throat. Lydia cringed at the terrifying thought her mother might die. She loved her mother more than she did this man who sat beside her.

"That miserable excuse for a preacher," Lawrence said, his face reddening. He jumped off the couch and smashed his fist on the desk. "Imagine a servant of God talking like that!"

"It was awful."

"We can't allow a scandal to develop," he said with much fervor. He started pacing.

"You're right," Lydia said, and her spirits lifted. She readied herself for his proposal.

"Perhaps we should stop seeing each other."

"What?" she gasped. "No! You made promises. You said you'd never leave me!"

"I want what is best for you, my darling," he said in a low, sugary voice. He stopped pacing and slid onto the couch next to her.

"Then when will you talk to Daddy about us?"

"Soon, Lydia." He steepled his fingers. "Soon."

"But Christmas is right around the corner!"

"Ah yes," Lawrence said, "it would make an excellent time for a wedding, but I've got to return to Rhode Island. My mother is sick. It's her heart." He leaned over and kissed her on the lips, nibbled them.

"Stop!" The brandy had loosened her inhibitions, but her anger overrode her desire and forced its way to the surface. She started to rise, but his hands pinned her down.

"Just one kiss for your poor lieutenant?" he cooed, stroking her hair, and letting his hand caress her breast.

"Why should I," she said, "when you state we shouldn't see each other, and then tell me you're leaving town?"

"But, Lydia. I love you."

"How do I know you'll return?"

He laid his head on her chest, and slid his hand under her dress.

She pushed him away and struggled to her feet.

"Lydia, my sweet Lydia," he said, his hazel eyes glowing, pleading with her.

"Stop plying me with brandy to get your way with me!" she shrieked. Sweeping a handful of papers off his desk, she stormed from the office.

Her heated, "Damn you!" echoed in the hall.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

A Sunday Dinner

"Suppose I drew up a purchase order signed by Colonel Harris?" Mary Peabody said. "That way we could bring the wood in right under the Yankees' noses." Shivering, she wrapped her shawl around her shoulders and looked at John. Her brown eyes pleaded like a child begging for a favor.

"That's one possibility." John set his shovel down and thought for a moment. They were in the basement of the Stewart College library and had run out of planking to shore up the tunnel. Already some twenty-five feet long, and bolstered with an assortment of makeshift lumber, the digging would have to end. It was far too dangerous to continue because of the threat of a cave-in from the wet, porous clay. Only today, water had started dripping from the ceiling.

Although he appreciated Mary's spunk and persistence, and knew her idea was feasible, he was reluctant to let a woman take the risk. Yet he knew he had no alternative. Always, in the back of his mind, General Hood's words came back to haunt him: "To blow the bridge too soon or too late means a flood of gunboats and reinforcements breathing down my neck." *And if you don't complete this mission on time?* He had no doubt Hood would find some suitable punishment for him. A lengthy imprisonment was at the top of the list.

"I guess we could try it," John said, without looking at Mary.

"I object!" Matthew sputtered. "If it backfires, the soldiers will put Mary in the stockade. Or worse!"

"I agree," Fred said in a quiet yet firm voice. "Mary shouldn't do it."

"I, for one, cannot go on living this way, crushed under the Yankees' boot heels." Mary's chin jutted, and she clenched her fists. "Although I'm only a woman, I feel I must do *something*. You have not allowed me to help one iota except to push a broom!"

"Oh, all right," Matthew said. "Do whatever the hell you like!" He turned away muttering. Looking dismayed, Fred shook his head.

John took Mary by the shoulders and searched her face. "Matthew and Fred are right. What you are suggesting is dangerous. But it is also the only way I can see to finish our mission on time." He dropped his hands. "If you choose to do this, you must understand what you are risking."

"Then it's settled," Mary chirped. "I'll draw up the purchase order and present it to Mr. Watson at the lumberyard. He's a loyal Southerner, and if I tell him to deliver a load of wood to Stewart College, he'll do it, no questions asked. I'll be back in half an hour."

As her steps faded on the stairs, John stepped back into the tunnel and walked, hunched over, to the end. He picked up his shovel and jammed it into the wet soil. A huge load of wet dirt and rock broke off and fell to the floor, forcing him to jump out of the way. Water dripping from the ceiling increased to a steady trickle as a large crack appeared overhead. He cursed. There was nothing to do nothing except await Mary's return.

"It's already noon." John slid his watch back into his pants pocket. A feeling of impending disaster flooded over him, and a voice inside him told him to leave this place right now. He stood up. "I'm afraid something has happened to Mary. She's been gone for two hours. I think we should leave."

"Aw, sit down and have a whiskey." A drunken Matthew waved his flask at him. "You're nothing but a worrywart."

"That may be true," John said. "I order you to leave now. Move out, gentlemen! And make sure you don't all go at once."

Matthew and Fred clambered up the stairs after John retrieved the shovel and stashed it behind a bookcase. They left the building at timed intervals, and John, who was last, almost ran right into a guard making his rounds.

Outside, he headed down College Street, walking at a normal pace so as not to draw attention to himself. He crossed the street and ducked into an alley when he spotted Reverend Parks, a lieutenant, and a squad of soldiers coming toward him. However, they turned off the street and quickstepped up the entrance path to Stewart College.

Alarmed, John hurried back to the Montgomery Hotel, cleaned up in his room, and left for the Robertson house where he had been invited for Sunday dinner. Along the way, he ran into Lieutenant Wallace.

"Have you heard the news, John?" the lieutenant asked.

"What's that?" He fidgeted and stuck his hands in his pockets because he had forgotten to clean the dirt from his fingernails.

"Miss Mary Peabody has been arrested for trying to pass a forged instrument." The lieutenant stared at him.

"A forged instrument?" John's heart pounded in his chest. "What on earth is that?"

"A purchase order with Colonel Harris's signature for a load of lumber to be delivered to Stewart College." The lieutenant pulled out a flask and took a swallow. "It seems an officer walked into Mr. Watson's office—he owns the lumber yard—while Miss Peabody was arranging for a delivery. The officer got suspicious, said nothing, and waited outside until Mary left. Then he followed Mr. Watson to the college, where he delivered the lumber to the library's basement. Growing more suspicious, the officer had his men conduct a thorough search. They found a tunnel under construction, and it was headed in the general direction of the armory."

"Good God!" John exclaimed, wondering why Wallace had not mentioned Reverend Parks' name. "We've got saboteurs in our midst!"

"It would seem that way, sir." Lieutenant Wallace looked hard at John.

John wet his lips, and then chuckled. "I'm sure a logical explanation will emerge. Mary Peabody does not strike me as a dangerous woman."

"She is a friend of yours, is she not?"

"I have known her since I was a young boy in her grade school class." John's mouth was dry, and his pulse raced. "It's difficult, indeed, to believe a former school teacher meant any harm."

"The spirit of freedom has been totally ruined by these dastardly deeds!" Anger boiled in the lieutenant's hazel eyes. "I am confident she will tell us who else is involved in this treacherous plot."

"Where is Miss Peabody now?" John asked.

"Locked up in the courthouse jail," the lieutenant said as he turned to leave.

"Will you be going to the Robertson's for dinner?"

"Duty calls. I'm the Officer of the Day."

At the Robertson's house, evergreen wreaths hung on the windows on either side of the front door, and lit candles could be seen in the parlor windows.

After John knocked on the door he followed the mayor into the dining room where Henrietta presided at her end of the table. An assortment of red tulips, white daffodils with cupped yellow centers, and purple violets, filled a large vase in the middle of the table with a green linen table cloth embroidered with small flowers around the edges. Individual sterling silver place settings, Staffordshire plates, and Waterford cut-glass goblets completed the festive atmosphere of a Sunday family dinner.

John cringed at the flowers—they were Mary Peabody's—and wondered how he would explain her absence. Instead, he graciously walked over to Henrietta. "How are you today, ma'am?"

"Quite festive this family get together, but a bit tired," Henrietta replied. "And you?"

"Fine, Mrs. Robertson." He took a seat to her left, opposite Beatrice and Marianne. To John's immediate left, past Lydia's empty chair, Matthew slouched next to the mayor who sat down at his usual place at the head of the table. John spotted Lydia's aproned figure dashing back and forth in the kitchen.

"I'm sorry you're not feeling well," John said to Henrietta. "I know how much pleasure it always gives you to prepare dinner on holidays."

"I certainly miss the festivities." Henrietta sighed.

"Dinner is served everyone." Lydia carried bowls of food into the dining room and set them on the table. Marianne got up and helped her sister.

"Where are Fred and Martha?" John asked.

"Martha is sick," her father said. "I stopped by their building and Fred told me she came down with the flu. He feels he must stay home and look after her."

"That's a shame," Henrietta said. "Lydia, be sure to take a basket of food over to their house."

"Yes, mother."

"And where is Mary?" Beatrice asked.

"I suspect she'll be late," John said. "Last I heard she was coming."

The mayor went into the kitchen and brought out the turkey, which received a round of applause. He made a grand show of carving the bird, and then started a platter of succulent white and dark meat down one side of the table. Steaming bowls of green beans, sage dressing, sliced yams, onions in cheese sauce, and hot, buttered cornbread came next.

"What a feast!" John exclaimed, hunger pangs gnawing at his stomach. "Where did you find such a large bird?"

"I bribed an officer who works in Colonel Harris' office," Willard explained with a sly smile on his face. "He came by with the turkey and fixings early this morning."

"You're lucky to have such food during a shortage," John said.

"The Lord works in mysterious ways," Willard said with a twinkle in his eye.

John chuckled. Henrietta's chirping laughter broke into a paroxysm of small, sustained coughs. "Excuse me, please," she said, wheezing.

John filled Lydia's plate and his own, and then heads bowed for the mayor's grace.

"And where," Beatrice asked after they had started eating, "is Reverend Parks spending the holiday?"

Matthew glared at her.

"Haven't seen hide nor hair of him all day." Willard shrugged.

"He sent word," Lydia said as she slipped into a chair next to John, "he was going out of town to see a dying parishioner."

John forbore telling the group where he had seen the minister.

"An admirable thing for our preacher to do," the mayor said. After they had been eating for several minutes, he cleared his throat and broke the news about Mary's arrest.

"Dear Lord," Henrietta and Beatrice said at the same time. Matthew groaned and gave John a long, hard look. John's face flushed hot, and Lydia's hand flew to her mouth.

"What will happen to Mary now?" Lydia asked in a shaky voice. Her hand pinched her throat.

"The military will try her." The mayor crushed a yam with his fork. "If found guilty, she will be hanged."

"That's so harsh!" Beatrice exclaimed.

Lydia's mother started crying. "I . . . I'm so sorry," she said. "Mary's such a dear old friend, and I simply can't imagine . . ." The crying led to a severe coughing spasm, and within seconds her lace hanky filled with bright-red blood.

Lydia rushed to her side. "I think you should lie down, Mother."

"I must catch my breath, dear." With Lydia's help, Henrietta struggled to her feet and left the room. Marianne jumped up from the table and helped her sister.

Several minutes later, Marianne ran down the stairs and dashed into the dining room. "Doc Webber is needed, Daddy! Mama's gotten much worse!"

John stood up. "I'll go."

"No, John. I will," Matthew said, his words slurred. "My horse is already saddled."

"Thank you, sir," the mayor said. "I'll check on my dear wife, and meet you in the parlor afterward. Will you join me for an after-dinner drink, John?"

"Of course, sir." John watched a sullen Beatrice begin clearing the table. "Let me give you a hand," he said, grabbing the turkey platter and following her into the kitchen.

"You're very kind," she said after they had finished cleaning up the dishes and putting away the food. She sat at the table and poured brandy and another substance into a clean cup. "Care for some, John?"

"What are you drinking?"

"Brandy laced with laudanum." She gave him a mischievous smile.

"Thank you, no, Beatrice. I'll stick to bourbon." He was surprised at her actions. "Where'd you get the laudanum?"

"From Doc Webber," she answered, and then changed the subject. "I know Matthew's having an affair, but I don't know what to do about it."

"Have you confronted him?" John swiveled a chair around and sat opposite her at the table.

"Yes, but it didn't do any good." She finished her drink and reached for more brandy. "I think the answer is to put up with it, like bitter medicine."

"I don't know what to say," he said feeling sorry for her.

"How about 'Good night?'" Beatrice patted him on the arm, stood up, and reached for her coat. "At least I won't have to witness his goings-on for a while. I'm leaving tomorrow for Nashville to visit my dying aunt."

"I'm sorry to hear such bad news."

"It's something I must do," she said, sighing. She opened the back door and let herself out.

John helped himself to some coffee brewing on the stove and elected to stay in the kitchen because the mayor had gone upstairs. He felt sick about Mary and concerned for the others in his group. *Would Mary tell the Yankees about the bridge? Should he leave town while he still had time?*

He felt confident Mary would not betray him. At Stewart College she had exposed a side of her personality that indicated she would not succumb to an interrogation. He suspected after nine months of a harsh occupation, her grit was well rooted in hatred.

The front door opened, followed by voices in the foyer. Doc Webber's rumbling bass dominated the conversation as heavy footsteps trod the risers. Minutes later, Lydia came down the stairs and sat beside John at the kitchen table.

"How is your mother?" he asked.

"The doctor's still examining her," she said, leaning her elbows on the table and sighing. "He'll probably give her morphine so she can fall asleep."

"That ought to do the trick." He motioned to the coffeepot. "Would you like a cup?"

She shook her head. "What can we do for Mary? I'm worried about her."

For a moment John contemplated avoiding the subject, and then decided against it. "I share your concern."

"Do you think any harm will come to her?" Lydia's voice cracked. She clasped her hands to hide their trembling. "Will the Yankees really—?"

"The Yankees generally don't hang women," John said, knowing full well Mary's obstinate refusal to divulge the names of her co-conspirators would leave Colonel Harris no other choice. In his mind's eye he saw Mary take the long walk across the gallows' plank floor. He cringed.

"You said at the river if you or anyone allied with you was caught, they would be hanged!"

"Well, yes. The destruction of the railroad bridge means—"

She gasped, and the color drained from her cheeks. *That's your mission?*

He nodded. "The fate of our society depends on its success or failure."

"Dear Lord!" she said, throwing her hands in the air. "Oh, dear Lord!"

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

December Dance

On Saturday, December 13, 1862, a frail Henrietta Robertson sat on a stiff-backed chair at the edge of the dance floor. She wore a gray dress, a white lace bonnet, a bouquet of violets from Mary Peabody's garden, and a pair of sterling silver earrings with diamond insets. This last served as an important reminder of her upper-class status in times past.

Her clothing and accessories did little, however, to mask her pale and sickly features. Despite Doc Webber's orders to stay home in bed, she had refused to miss this important social function. The highlight of each year's social season climaxed with the December dance at the Presbyterian Church, and Christmas of 1862 was no exception. That it would be her last celebration had probably occurred to her although she had made no mention of it to John, who sat next to her, or to any of her family or friends. The only hint of her own mortality was the lace-trimmed hanky clutched in her right hand. Its material was speckled with red.

John engaged her in polite conversation while searching for Lydia. Dancers glided by on the floor, their clothes a bit tattered yet mended where necessary. Despite the war's hardships, they chatted and laughed, some even humming to the beat of the music.

"I hope I live long enough to see Lydia married and tucked safely in some good man's arms." Henrietta coughed into her hanky.

"Let's pray you do, Mrs. Robertson," John said with sincerity. "And next spring we'll see you outside planting a new garden."

"Oh, how I do miss that!" She gazed at the far wall, absorbed in her reverie. "It's absolutely divine watching the tomatoes, corn, and peppers sprout."

"I'm sure you enjoy that, ma'am." John smiled. He glanced at the Christmas tree with its decorations, the streamers hanging from the rafters, and the lace-covered table with its enormous punch bowl and cut glass cups. A slave appeared from the kitchen area and set a lone platter of ham sandwiches and sugar cookies on the table. The food stood in marked contrast to the prewar celebrations with their bulging trays of finger sandwiches, deviled eggs laced with paprika powder, and platters of ham, turkey, and fried chicken.

"We received word from the Army our son, Albert, is missing in action." Tears glistened in Henrietta's eyes, and she dabbed at them with her lace hanky.

"I'm sorry," John said. "Perhaps, he just got separated from his unit."

Henrietta shook her head. "You don't lie very well, John."

A group of fiddlers broke into a lively song, and one of them, at least ninety years of age, danced while he played. His head bobbed up and down, and his feet turned this way and that. John laughed aloud in appreciation of the old man's stamina.

Henrietta's foot kept beat with the music. John smiled and patted her shoulder. She reached for his hand and squeezed it.

"You know how I feel about you, John," she said. She looked at him with her doe-like eyes.

He nodded, pleased.

"I would feel eternally happy if you asked for Lydia's hand in marriage."

"I intend to, ma'am." His heart leapt with joy. Henrietta was on his side. "Thank you, ma'am. Thank you very much!"

Loud voices across the room caught John's attention. Matthew Maury argued with Fred Knox and a pot-bellied Yankee sergeant. Flask in hand, each man waved it about as he talked.

"My brother's certainly feeling his oats tonight," Henrietta said as she munched a sugar cookie.

"Yes, he is," John said, wondering if Matthew would be sober when it came time to take down the bridge.

"I wonder who Willard is dancing with now." Smiling, she scanned the dance floor, searching for her husband.

John reflected that over the course of many years their love had not waned as had happened in some marriages. He glanced again at Matthew, who treated Beatrice so disrespectfully, and a flood of anger surged through him. He could not imagine treating Lydia that way. A good mate was a blessing, a treasure, a—

Henrietta gave several loud coughs.

"Are you all right?" John asked, alarm gripping his chest.

She looked up and tried to smile as she patted her chest. "Cookie crumbs," she rasped, still coughing.

Concerned over Henrietta's welfare, John hastened to the punch bowl. Dispensing with his manners, he dipped a cup into the pinkish juice and hurried back to her side.

She shook her head and pushed the cup away. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

"What can I do?" John asked, helpless, as he bent close.

A spasm of coughing and wheezing took hold. Flecks of bright red blood appeared in the corners of Henrietta's mouth. John felt himself spattered with spittle and blood. A look of horror and shame came over her face. She shoved her hanky at him. He refused to take it.

"Please, ma'am," John said in a determined tone. "Let me assist you in some way."

She struggled to rise, and he helped her up. Waving off any further assistance, she moved toward the women's cloakroom.

"My sister okay?" Matthew asked as John wiped his coat with his handkerchief.

"I hope so." John spotted Beatrice standing in the doorway.

Matthew followed his gaze. He punched a closed fist into an open palm. "I figured the old hag would show up tonight, even though I told her to stay home and scrub the kitchen floor!"

The potbellied sergeant standing nearby cackled.

Matthew strode over to Beatrice, grasped her by the arm, and hustled her into the hall.

Elias, looking pale, wandered over. "What was that all about?" he asked.

"The usual family bickering," John said in disgust.

"I hope Matthew's lack of control doesn't jeopardize our plan," Elias said. He paused and gripped his stomach. His face was pasty looking. "Can you take over the bar for me during the next few weeks?"

"I'll find someone," John said. "If not, I'll do it myself. Are you sick?"

"Feels like another bout of dysentery coming on," Elias said as he turned to leave. "I'd better go home."

"Hope you feel better," John said, sensing Elias would not be able to help with the bridge. Then, he had a vision of himself blowing the bridge alone. Yet, he knew that would be impossible. He needed the help of at least one other person. Who would that be? A drunken Matthew? A one-armed Fred?

Her face bright red, Beatrice came through the doorway, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief. John went to the refreshment table, filled a cup with punch, and took it to her.

"Thank you, John," she said with a feeble smile. She sat on the same chair Henrietta had used.

"How was your trip to Nashville?"

"Aunt Ella died last Thursday." She choked back an onrush of tears. "I buried her Sunday."

"I'm sorry, Beatrice. I can only imagine how important she was to you."

"Consumption is a terrible way to die." She wiped fresh tears from her eyes. "And the final arrangements at Yankee headquarters were exasperating. All sorts of forms about Aunt Ella's death, burial, and estate. And guess who I saw there?"

John shrugged. "Who?"

"Our illustrious Reverend Parks talking to General Rosecrans!"

"Who is General Rosecrans?" John arched an eyebrow. "The name sounds familiar."

"Just the Union commander for the whole State of Tennessee." She sipped her punch.

John started as a dark feeling rose up within him. "What do you suppose Parks was doing there?" he said, mainly to himself.

"I don't know. I didn't get a chance to say hello because the general got up and closed the his office door when I started in." Beatrice took a breath and narrowed her eyes at John. "What's the matter between you and Lydia?"

"What do you mean?" John asked.

"Are you having a spat?"

"No. Why?"

"Because she's sitting in the hallway looking very unhappy." Beatrice inclined her head toward the door. "I tried to get her to come in with me, but—"

"Excuse me, please." John strode into the hall where he found a tearful Lydia sitting on a bench, picking at her fingers. She wore a yellow silk dress with lace ruching at the collar and wrists, and a silk shawl that was more show than warmth. She looked as much out of place as he felt with his missing leg.

"Lydia?" he said, walking up to her.

She said nothing.

"What's wrong?" He sat down beside her and took her hand in his.

"I . . . I can't bring myself to go in there."

"But you've waited all year for the Christmas dance!"

"I can't!" Tears filled her eyes. "All the women look at me as if I provoked the attack."

"Oh, Lydia, I thought—" He was going to say, *I thought you had put that behind you*, but he realized the trauma of the attempted rape would haunt her forever. "I certainly don't believe that nonsense. Come inside. We'll show everyone how proud I am to have you as my dancing partner."

She looked up at him through her tears. "Are you able to?"

He smiled. "If it's not fast, I can manage." He opened the door and led her onto the dance floor. Accompanied by three fiddlers, Marianne Robertson sat at the piano and picked out a waltz melody. Smiling couples floated by, hands and fingers intertwined, waists and shoulders touching in a prelude to nocturnal intimacy yet to come.

As they danced, much slower than the others, John rubbed Lydia's back, wondering what the rest of her would feel like to his exploring fingers. Then he chided himself for this indiscretion, because she had come to him like an innocent child in search of solace and comfort in her time of sorrow and need.

Lydia frowned at Lieutenant Wallace who had arrived and was handing his coat and hat to a woman at the door.

"Things not going well between you?" John asked.

"Not really." Her frown deepened, and she rested her head on his shoulder.

"Who's that rough-looking character?" she asked as they waltzed with a touch of awkwardness.

"Where?" John was concentrating on his steps as he relished the feeling of holding her.

"Over by the door. The man with one arm."

"I don't know," John said. As he led Lydia around the floor, the soldiers examined the man's papers. The stranger's Confederate Army jacket, which was open at the collar, had one sleeve pinned up. He was clean-shaven, but his pants were wrinkled and his boots were stained with travel. John expected the fellow to come in, but after placing his documents in his jacket's inner pocket, he turned on his heel and left. John noticed Reverend Parks making his way toward the entrance. *Could that have been the reason the man left so abruptly?* John raised his eyebrows at the thought, then dismissed the idea as irrational.

The music ended and John mentioned Henrietta's coughing spell. After Lydia went to check on her mother, John joined Beatrice at the refreshment table. He followed her glance to where Matthew danced with a widow named Mary Beth Brinton.

"May I get you something to drink?" John asked Beatrice.

"I could use something a little stronger than punch!" She spat out a bitter laugh. "That devil!"

Not answering, John filled a cup from the bowl. Candlelight sparkling on the ornate glass reminded him of better times before the war. How simple life had been back then!

He offered Beatrice the cup, but she didn't notice. A deepening frown filled her face as her husband's hand flitted over Mary Beth's buttocks. *Nothing good can come from that*, John decided.

"I'll fix him!" Beatrice muttered as she stalked across the dance floor and left the room.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Lydia's Travail

"You bastard!" Beatrice snarled after she returned to the dance floor a few minutes later. Her cheeks flamed as she pointed the Colt Navy revolver at Matthew. "After cooking and slaving for you for thirty-two years it comes down to this: dancing and carrying on with the likes of this shameless hussy!"

Matthew appeared unintimidated by the weapon she held, yet he moved Mary Beth Brinton behind him. He faced Beatrice and sneered, "I'll dance with whomever I—"

Beatrice pulled the trigger, and the gun roared. As Lydia watched in horror, Matthew crumpled to the floor, crying out in pain and gripping his groin. Mary Beth screamed and rushed to his side.

Women shrieked and men shouted as the space around Beatrice emptied.

"And this is for you, you wench!" Beatrice fired and hit Mary Beth in the arm. The impact spun the small woman around, and she collapsed.

"Damn you to hell!" Matthew moaned as he clutched his groin. Blood soaked his trousers and seeped through his hands.

"Oh?" Beatrice turned the revolver on him. "We still have some fight left in us?"

John rushed toward Beatrice. Lydia reached her aunt's side first.

"Don't, Aunt Bea!" Lydia pleaded, not daring to touch her. She glanced at her parents. Her father held tight to her mother, who recoiled at the sight of her brother on the floor.

"Easy now, ma'am." John held his hands up and circled away from Lydia.

Beatrice wheeled and pointed the weapon at him. "Get back!"

"Don't make it any worse, ma'am." He took a step forward.

"I don't want to hurt you," Beatrice warned. Tears rushed into her eyes and spilled over onto her cheeks.

"Please, Auntie!" Lydia cried. "Put the gun down!"

"Stand back, both of you!" The gun shook in her hands. A thin thread of saliva spilled from her mouth. "I'm giving him what he's had coming for a long time. I'm going to finish him off!"

"Please, ma'am," John said, his voice low and controlled as he continued circling her. "Enough's enough."

"Give him the gun, Auntie! Please!" Lydia said.

Beatrice swung around to her right and aimed the gun at Matthew, who writhed on the floor. "You bastard!" she said in a low voice.

John lunged and grabbed the revolver. Two soldiers converged and hustled her away. A final, "bastard!" echoed from the hallway.

Once she was gone, the crowd stood in stunned silence for a moment, and then a dozen people, including Doc Webber, descended on Mary Beth and Matthew.

"Was my uncle really having an affair with that woman?" Lydia asked.

John nodded, a grim look on his face.

"We'd better check on Aunt Beatrice," Henrietta said, gasping for air.

Taking her mother by the arm, Lydia left the dance floor and entered a cloakroom where Beatrice lay on a sofa provided for women who felt faint. Wheezing, Henrietta sank onto the couch beside her sister-in-law.

"Are you all right?" Henrietta asked.

"I don't know." Beatrice's face was pale, and her eyes puffy and red.

Henrietta's coughing and wheezing grew worse, and her arms came up and clasped her chest. "Oh God, this hurts so bad!"

"I'm taking you home," Lydia said as she reached for her mother's coat.

"Do you have someone to escort you?" Beatrice asked.

Several young women standing nearby snickered, and Lydia glared at them.

"I overheard them talking about your lieutenant friend," Beatrice whispered. "Something about going east to be with his wife and children at Christmas."

Lydia felt as if all the blood had drained from her body and then rushed back into her veins, superheated. "What! Are you sure?"

"There are rumors about women in other states." Beatrice held Lydia's hand. "It seems you are the last to know."

Her face crimson, Lydia went to one of the soldiers at the door and asked him to summon Lieutenant Wallace for her. Within moments, the private had done her bidding.

"Is everything all right, Lydia dear?" Lawrence asked, poking his head in the door.

"Would you come inside?" she asked.

"Certainly, my precious." He entered the cloakroom, and straightened his dress blue dress uniform. A ceremonial sword hung by his side. "You must be upset after everything that's happened."

"It's been a trying evening." She glanced at her aunt and mother, and then turned back to the lieutenant. "Tell me, Lawrence, have you any relatives back east?" She set her hands on her hips.

"Just my parents, four sisters, and two brothers."

"No one else?" she hissed.

"What are you getting at, Lydia?"

She was glad to see him looking uncomfortable. "Some women here said you were leaving to be with your wife and children at Christmas." She dug her fingers into his sleeve. "Have you a wife and family, you snake? Are you married?"

"I'd been meaning to tell you, but—"

Lydia heard her mother's distinctive gasp behind her. "But you never got around to it, right?"

"Annabeth has been sick for over two years and suddenly took a turn for the worse." He smiled wanly at Lydia. "So I decided to return home to see her

and the children. I thought it would cheer them up. I love you, Lydia. I have from the first day I walked into this town—"

"How dare you?" She exploded. "I've had enough of your lies! This evening has been a tragedy and embarrassment for my family without your deceit added to it."

"But—"

She slapped his face. "Good riddance, Lawrence!"

Her face flushed and her eyes glowing like hot daggers, Lydia left the lieutenant standing in the midst of the disapproving churchwomen. He cleared his throat, and then fled.

When Henrietta had her cape around her shoulders, one of the women offered to find John for Lydia. Soon he came through the door. "Can you help us?" Lydia asked.

"Certainly," he said, taking in the scene. He reached for his coat and hat. "I'll bring the buggy around to the side door."

"Hurry, John!"

Outside, John unhitched the reins for the buggy and walked the horse over to the church door. He unfolded a wool blanket for Henrietta to wrap up in, and laid it over the front seat.

"Nice town you have here." the one-armed Confederate came out of the shadows and eased up beside him.

"We think it is." John smiled. "Just furloughed out?"

"Yes, Lieutenant Martin." The words seemed to hang on the steamy vapor his breath made in the freezing air.

"How did you know my name?" John recoiled. He'd not thought of Richmond and General Hood all evening.

"At Clarksville," the one-armed man whispered, "it's but a stone's throw across the Cumberland."

The passwords! A shiver ran through John. "Only when the riverboats aren't running," he replied as instructed.

"Name's Walt Mahoney." He offered his hand. "I have a letter for you, Lieutenant."

The side door of the church opened, and Lydia and Marianne, supporting their mother, stepped into the cold.

"Are you ready?" Lydia asked.

"Yes." John turned to Walt. "This will have to wait. Their mother is very sick and I must escort them home."

"My message is of the utmost importance," Walt said, his facial muscles taut.

"John!" Lydia called, urgency mixed with desperation and pleading in her voice.

"Come with us." John pointed to the buggy. "Then we can talk." He introduced Walt to the women as someone he knew from Sharpsburg, and the five of them drove to the Robertson house.

John helped get Henrietta up the stairs. While the sisters put their mother to bed, he returned to the parlor where Walt was waiting in a chair by the window.

"Here." The courier pulled a letter from his coat pocket.

John turned up the wick on the table lamp and peered at the missive. Embedded in the wax seal was the stamp of the Confederate High Command. He tore open the envelope and read the contents.

Sir:

Attack planned for December 31, 1862. Carry out your mission as ordered, keeping in mind that precision timing on your part is of the utmost importance. Col. Nathan B. Forrest will contact you re: any supplies you may need. May God be with us.

s/s John B. Hood

Brigadier General, C.S.A.

John crumpled the letter and tossed it into the fireplace. The paper burst into flames.

"Make sure you sift the ashes," Walt said.

With a poker John stirred the billowy black mass. "Have you access to any kegs of powder?"

"No, sir."

John frowned. "When will Colonel Forrest be contacting me?"

Walt shrugged. "All General Hood said was that Forrest would be in touch. Have you any word for the general?"

"Tell him I'm ready to complete my mission," John lied.

"Thank you," Walt said. "He'll be greatly relieved."

"By the way," John said. "I noticed how you beat a hasty retreat at the church when Reverend Parks started toward you. Do you know him?"

"You mean that tall, slinking polecat?" Walt asked in disgust. "He's no minister. His real name is Emmett Jacobsen, and he's in the employ of Colonel Lafayette Baker, head of Lincoln's Secret Service." His lip curled in scorn. "Many's the time I saw him enter that swine colonel's office in Washington City."

John sank into the chair and sat dumbfounded.

"It's the truth," Walt said. "General Hood can testify to it. The two of 'em—Baker and Jacobsen—sneaked into Richmond once, only we didn't know who they were until after they'd left."

John shook his head. Words would not come, so great was the catastrophe presented by the revelation of Parks' true identity.

"I must leave Clarksville before anyone recognizes me." Walt rose and started for the back door. "Good luck, Lieutenant!"

John escorted him out, and then his thoughts returned to Reverend Parks. *What you had suspected all along, but never bothered to think about seriously, has been confirmed: the man is a spy.* That elevated the situation to one of immense complexity and danger. As careful as he hoped he had been with his actions to date, from now on he would have to be more vigilant. Lieutenant

Wallace had made his suspicions clear when Mary was arrested, and Parks must surely share them. *The Yankees will be shadowing my every move!*

A strident scream sounded from above. John bolted to the foot of the stairs. "What's wrong?" he called out.

Lydia came to the landing. "Mother's dead!"

"Good Lord!" John put his hand on the banister and his foot on the first step.

"Wait!" Lydia disappeared.

Taking a seat on a parlor couch, he stared with sad eyes at the last remnants of the fire in the hearth. He stirred the coals and threw on fresh logs, but it was of no use. Moments later, the fire went out. He poured a glass of whiskey and swilled some of it down. Then he closed his eyes, leaned back, and waited for Lydia. At some point Mayor Robertson returned home, and went to his wife's side.

John awakened when Lydia came and sat next to him. He put his arms around her and held her tight as her tears started. When they turned to sobbing, she broke away and sat hunched over with her hands covering her face. He rubbed her back and waited for this first tide of grief to pass.

"Do you want me to leave?" he asked. When she did not speak, he picked up his hat and coat and started for the door. He slugged his coat on.

"John?"

He stopped and turned around.

"I need to go for a walk. Do you mind?"

"Of course not."

Outside, the cold December dawn lit the horizon with vivid streaks of orange and red as John and Lydia walked hand in hand along the deserted streets. Although they didn't speak, John felt a commingling of his soul with hers; as if in her profound anguish and misery, she had sought him out, knowing for certain that his warmth and comfort would always be there.

They walked as if by prearrangement to the cemetery and sat on the stone bench where they had met the previous February.

Back then, a strong breeze had come off the river, but on this unusual December day, the rising sun shone on the couple, warming them. John wished they could stay here together for as long as it took to heal the wounds in Lydia's soul.

"What are you staring at?" he asked.

"Nothing really." Her hand sought his. "And you?"

"The bridge."

"I suspected that." She rested her head on his shoulder. "How short life is. Too short to make mistakes. If one takes a wrong turn . . . I feel so terribly alone, John."

He pulled her into his arms and stroked her hair, running his hands through its cool, silky softness.

"I feel such an emptiness," she said, "and dread without my mother in that house at night."

"But you have your father and Marianne!" He glanced at the grave of an infant, its short life preceding his or Lydia's birth dates by some twenty years. Shafts of sunlight warmed the tombstone's mildew-blackened lettering.

"True, but no one can replace my mother."

Lydia stood up and they walked to a cherry tree at the top of the next hill. With most of its leaves gone, the fruit tree looked like a scarecrow left over from last year's harvest. She circled the trunk, stopping every so often to look up at the branches from different angles.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Trying to determine if this would make a suitable resting place for Mother." She choked back a sob. "Is it?"

"I think you've made a wise decision," he said. "Next summer, the overhanging branches will shade the grave from the harsh sun."

"I have made some terrible decisions in the past." She reached for his hand.

"How so?"

"Getting involved with Lieutenant Wallace, for one."

As he shrugged, his heart sang at her words.

"Did you know he was married?"

"Not really." He could not control a small laugh. "But news of your *discussion* circled the dance floor faster than the Virginia reel."

"I feel so ashamed of myself." Her eyes met his gaze.

"No need. He deceived you cruelly." John reached for her hand. "I think beneath this cherry tree is the perfect resting place for your mother."

A lump welled up in his throat, and he blurted out what he felt in his heart.

"I love you, Lydia."

Drawing her to him, he kissed her and held her very tight. As he drew in the scent of her perfume, he glanced down at the path leading to town. Somewhere back there Lieutenant Wallace and Reverend Parks were conspiring against him. John knew those two men would compromise any future plans he made as long as he remained in Clarksville. To pack and leave before he was arrested would be the logical thing to do. But how could he do that when Lydia needed him now?

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Final Planning

"Hey, Larry!" It was Monday, December 15, 1862, and a drunken Lieutenant Thurston waved at Lieutenant Wallace across the crowded Montgomery Hotel bar. Thurston staggered toward him, moving past noisy, smoke-filled tables filled with talking soldiers and civilians, his hands touching chair backs to keep from falling.

"How the hell are you doing tonight?" Thurston asked when he reached the bar. He plopped himself down on one of the stools.

"Fine." Lieutenant Wallace chuckled to himself. With Thurston's pre-arranged help tonight, he would extricate himself from Reverend Parks' stranglehold once and for all by provoking John into killing the purported minister. "Want a drink?"

"Yup." A stupid grin on his face, Thurston reached in his breast pocket, pulled out a cigar, and lit it. The pungent odor mixed with the smell of stale cigarette smoke hanging in the air.

"John, set my friend up with a whiskey, please, and one more for me." Lieutenant Wallace swiveled around on the bar stool so he could face his friend. "What's new?" he asked, waving off Thurston's offer of a cigar.

Cupping his hand over his mouth, Thurston said, "Just heard a nasty rumor about Lydia Robertson."

"Shut up!" Lawrence snapped. "I've already heard it!"

John, his face reddening with anger, turned to face them. "Let him talk," he said, and plunked two drinks down on the bar.

"Reverend Parks—"

"Damn you!" Larry cuffed him on the side of the head. "Shut the hell up!"

"Fine. Sorry I brought the subject up." Thurston picked up his glass, excused himself, and walked back to his friends.

"What was the rumor?" John demanded.

"You don't want to know." Lieutenant Wallace looked down into his drink.

John reached across the bar and grabbed him by the collar. "Tell me!"

"Get your hands off me!" he shouted.

"Talk, damn you!" John got up in his face.

Steeling himself to control his laughter, the lieutenant met John's eyes and said, "Reverend Parks attacked Lydia."

"What!" John said with force. He took a step back. "Is this true?"

"At first I didn't believe it." Lawrence finished his drink and stood up. "But Thurston said there was a witness."

"Who?" John demanded.

"He didn't say."

"Damn it all!" John smashed his fist on the bar. Some soldiers glanced round at him.

His plan set in motion, Lawrence slipped his coat on and paid his bill. "I've got to pack. See you after the first of the year."

Enraged, John wiped the bar, jerking the rag first one way and then the other. *So that damn Yankee spy assaulted Lydia! I'll get a gun and blow his fucking head off—No!* he counseled himself. *Time's too short. The bridge has to come first. I'll deal with that scum later.*

He took a deep breath, poured a drink, and glanced out the window. With an overcast sky and no chance of a moon, he calculated the time was right to move the gunpowder into position. He would do it after tonight's seven p.m. meeting. Still seething over Wallace's revelation, he pushed aside his whiskey and went to get his coat.

"Stomach still bothering you?" John asked Elias when they stood with the others in Mayor Robertson's basement. They huddled around the furnace to ward off the damp chill from the cracked window. John opened the furnace door and checked to see if the fire had enough coal. Satisfied it did, he closed the door.

"I had to literally crawl out of bed to come here tonight." Elias grimaced.

"I'm sorry to hear that." John turned to the mayor. "How is Lydia?"

"Poor thing was so exhausted, she went to bed early. Marianne, too." Mayor Robertson, who smelled of strong drink, wiped beads of perspiration from his forehead.

"Give her my regards," John said. He wondered if the mayor had heard the rumor about Parks—Jacobson, rather—being Lydia's assailant. *Poor Willard*, he thought. *I'd probably drink a lot more if I had been through his last couple of months.*

"Any word when we will take down the bridge?" Elias asked.

"Nothing yet," John lied. "When I find out, though, we'll need a boat to get out there to place the powder."

"I stashed one on the Red River," Matthew called out as he limped down the steep basement stairs. Groaning, he walked over to a chair, jerked it away from the old table, and slumped down.

"How are you feeling?"

"Poorly," Matthew said. "Beatrice's bullet passed between my legs, grazing my balls. God, how they hurt!"

"You're lucky."

"Damn lucky!" Matthew said.

"Is Beatrice still in jail?"

"I dropped the charges," Matthew said, averting John's eyes. "She'll be here later."

"Has she forgiven you for your adultery?" John pressed him, knowing this might anger the man enough he would get up and leave. Of course, he didn't want it to happen, but he wanted to know the answer to his question.

"I don't know," Matthew said. "We had a long talk about it this morning when I brought her home. I promised never to see Mary Beth again."

From overhead, a door slammed and John heard Beatrice's screeched protests and the muffled rumble of male voices. John and the others raised their eyes to the ceiling and followed the tramping of heavy boots across the floor from the front of the house to the kitchen.

"Quick!" John pointed to the stack of Bibles on a nearby table. "Open them!" He began reading as his co-conspirators assumed expressions of rapt attention. "It says here in the Old Testament—"

The cellar door burst open, and a half dozen Yankee soldiers clambered down the old wooden steps.

"What's the meaning of this intrusion?" Mayor Robertson demanded as he jumped to his feet. He stood with his hands on his hips.

"We had a report armed saboteurs were holding a meeting here," the lieutenant leading the group said as he looked at the open Bibles. He blushed. "I guess we were wrong."

John burst out laughing. "I suppose you might say we're arming ourselves against temptation and wrongdoing."

"Preparing for Judgment Day," Fred added.

"Building an arsenal of prayer," Elias said in his most pious voice.

"Care to join us, gentlemen?" the mayor asked. He motioned to some additional chairs stacked against a damp wall near the window.

"Uh, no—we'd best be on our way. I apologize." The lieutenant looked behind a dusty bookcase and in the coal bin before trailing his men up the stairs.

"That was entirely too close for comfort," Mayor Robertson said after the front door closed. "Let's end this meeting right now."

"Fine." John set his Bible down and started for the stairs. "Elias, can you help me take the black powder to the bridge tonight?"

"My stomach's killing me."

"Is that a yes or a no?"

The man sighed in resignation. "For you, it's always a yes."

They left the mayor's house and walked to the Montgomery Hotel.

"Let's get cracking," Matthew said. His face white with pain, he sat down on a crate in the hotel's musty basement.

"Here's the pickax and bucket, John," Elias said coming out from the wire-laced supply bin. He closed the door, ran a heavy chain through the wire, and snapped the padlock into place.

"Thanks," John said.

"What's the bucket for?" Matthew asked.

"To make the mud for holding the charges in place. I'll do that now," John said. "It'll save time later. Elias, would you saddle some fresh horses for us?"

The man nodded. He thrust his hands into his jacket, hunched his shoulders against the cold, and left to do John's bidding.

John took the bucket, pumped water into it, added a load of dirt, and stirred until the mud was the proper consistency. Finished, he found a tight-fitting lid and placed it over the bucket. "Where is that boat hidden?" he asked.

"In a stand of trees about a quarter mile up the Red River," Matthew said. "Look for a lone maple that's been hit by lightning. You can't miss its blackened hulk."

"Good," John said. "That's close by the place I hid the gunpowder."

"We think alike, John." Matthew leaned back on his chair and grinned.

"Indeed we do."

"The horses are ready," Elias said, tramping down the cellar stairs.

John noted the pained expression on his uncle's face. It testified to the severity of his continuing bout with dysentery.

"Good luck and God speed," Matthew said as John and Elias left.

As the Yankees had doubled their patrols on all major roads since the derailment on the new Red River Bridge, John and Elias took back alleys and streets until they reached the cemetery. There, they cut downhill through the

maze of tombstones until they reached the river, waited for a patrol to pass, and then galloped along the riverbank until they found the boat in a tree-shrouded inlet marked by the blackened hulk of the maple tree. After loading the black powder, the two men set off downstream on the Red River. John rowed while Elias sat in the bow, his eyes peeled for any signs of movement or trouble.

"Stay close to shore," Elias cautioned as they approached the Cumberland. Turning his head left and then right, he peered off into the gloom.

John put on a pair of wool gloves, eased the bow into the big river, and rowed slowly upstream until they reached the bridge. The night air was crisp and clear, and he waited a moment, listening for the sounds of men or the scrunching of heavy boots up above. There were neither.

After maneuvering over to the center span, he climbed out while Elias tied the boat to an iron ring. The cold December wind whistled around the enormous stone column. John glanced at the rails far above, saw only darkness. If there were any guards, they were most likely asleep in the bridge tender's hut during this weather.

John used a hammer and chisel to loosen the mortar around a granite block. With a pickaxe he removed the first stone and then repeated the process with two more stones until he judged the opening sufficient in size.

"Hand me the first keg," John said.

His uncle groaned as he hoisted the thirty pound keg onto his hip. He shifted his weight and lowered the keg into John's waiting arms.

John shoved the keg into the hole, and then followed it with three more kegs after which he inserted a long fuse. Sweating despite the near-freezing night, he took the bucket from Elias, removed the lid, and slopped in a load of mud around the kegs. He tamped the mud down. Then, he did the same for the remaining two kegs. When he finished he tied the fuses together, left their ends dangling, and replaced the stone blocks.

"Will black powder around only one column be enough to blow the bridge?" Elias asked.

"Hardly," John said, wondering how he was going to blow the bridge on December 31 if he didn't have enough black powder.

"So what will you do?"

"Hope and pray we get more powder before the attack begins." His heaving breath made huge clouds in front of his face. "I'll loosen some more blocks, so if and when we get the last kegs we won't have so much work to do."

"Good idea," Elias said.

After he finished his chore, the north wind gusted in John's face as he stepped back into the boat and shoved off. Rowing downstream, he thought about his mission. *You have got one mighty big problem now, Lieutenant Martin. Hood's attack is set to roll, and you aren't ready. For sure, he will have you shot if this bridge business doesn't succeed! Where in hell are you going to find the rest of your powder?*

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Mary

"You may pass," the courthouse sentry said after conducting his search.

John thanked the young soldier and headed down the stairs to the basement jail cells. In one hand he carried a food basket, in the other a wool blanket—a gift from his mother last Christmas. Shivering, he wished he could wrap up in the blanket because an icy draft was blowing up the stairs. It whistled and had set the oil lamps to swaying.

In the basement he passed several empty cells before spotting a man hunched over on a stool. At first John thought he had fallen asleep in that position, but then he realized he was writing a letter. When the prisoner looked up, John recognized him as one of the men who had ridden with Ralston the night they raided the train in Russellville, Kentucky. John nodded, and the man returned to his task.

At a dimly lit cell John set his offerings down, rested a hand on one of the floor-to-ceiling bars, and said, "Hello, Mary."

"Who's there?" A Bible on her lap, she sat on an iron bunk suspended by chains from the wall. A candle flickered in a saucer on the floor. With no other source of lighting she must have read with great difficulty.

"It is I, John Martin."

"Dear me!" Mary had not changed clothes since the day of her arrest, and her blue cotton dress was wrinkled and filthy. Her auburn hair, which had shone like harvest wheat, was stringy and unkempt. She rose and shuffled to the front of the cell where she peered at John with a dazed look in her brown eyes.

"How have you been?" John asked, and then felt foolish for asking something so stupid. To make amends, he reached through the bars and held her rough hands. They were trembling and felt like ice.

"I am trying to keep my spirits up." Her eyes were puffy and red, her cheeks sunken. "How is my dear mother? "

"I stopped by and saw her before coming here," John said, remembering his visit. Crippled with arthritis and able to walk only with great difficulty, a gracious Mrs. Peabody had insisted on fixing tea and talking with him. "One of the neighbors prepares her meals, and Beatrice sits with her in the evenings."

"I'm so relieved," Mary said, a catch in her voice. "I've been mad with worry. Simply mad!"

"I'll check on her again after I leave," John said. He looked right and left along the corridor, hesitated, and then cleared his throat before speaking. "Mary, have they questioned you?"

"Extensively." She looked down at the floor and clasped her hands together to stop them from shaking.

John frowned and rested his hands on the bars. His fingers toyed with the thick, cold steel.

"Don't worry, John," she whispered. "I've told them nothing."

He took her hand and squeezed it, relief flooding through him. "I forgot. I have something for you. Please excuse my lack of good manners." He passed the wool blanket through the bars.

"Thank you," she said. Taking the blanket she unfolded it and wrapped it around her shoulders. "It's so cold in here. Bitter cold, actually, in the middle of the night when there's no heat coming from the boiler."

"I can't imagine treating people this way." He bent over and opened the basket. "Look what Lydia has sent—roast ham, sweet potatoes, cornbread, and a piece of pumpkin pie."

Her eyes lit, then darkened. "Everyone has been so dear to me since I—" Her voice trailed off.

"Lydia cooked every bit of it." He passed the contents of the basket to her one item at a time.

"It's so sweet of her to think of me now when she has such troubles of her own." Mary managed a small smile. "How is she doing, the poor dear?"

"Grieving, of course." John leaned against the bars, pressing his forehead into the cold steel. "Please go ahead and eat while it's still warm."

"I suspected Henrietta wouldn't make it to New Year's Day." Mary sat down on the bed and picked up her fork. She burst into tears and buried her face in her hands. "And I won't, either!"

"Don't talk that way, Mary!" Sensing the depth of her sadness and despair, he said, "You must not give up hope, woman."

She looked up and her mood turned to anger. "It's not you who was thrown in here!"

"I'm truly sorry," he said, feeling stupid and contrite. He looked down at the concrete floor. A cockroach scurried into a darkened corner.

"Is that so?" she asked sarcastically, choking back a sob. "Sorry isn't enough for me, John. You're not going to die. I am! And who will take care of my mother after I'm dead?"

"I—"

"Oh, leave me alone!" She threw herself on the thin pallet. Uneaten food fell to the filthy concrete floor and a plate broke. She curled up with her back to him and pulled the blanket up over her head.

"Please, Mary!"

"Go away!" she screamed.

"Shut up, bitch!" a nearby prisoner shouted. It sounded like Craig Ralston, the leader of the guerilla band from Trenton, Kentucky. "I'm tryin' to sleep!"

John turned, made his way down the corridor, and trudged back up the stairs to the exit.

"Have a nice visit?" the guard asked in a sympathetic voice.

Unable to speak, John simply waved his hand in acknowledgment and continued on his way. Preoccupied with his thoughts, he stepped outside and almost knocked the mayor down. His face flushed with shame. "I'm sorry, sir."

"Have you been to see Mary?" Willard asked.

John nodded. He leaned against a marble column.

"How's she doing?"

"She was sobbing when I left." John frowned. "Isn't there anything you can do?"

"I . . . the situation is hopeless, I'm sorry to say."

John threw up his hands. "There must be *something* you can do, Willard!"

"Young man, there are some things we can do nothing about, except learn to accept them with grace and dignity."

After the mayor entered the courthouse, John pondered his next move. The honorable thing, he reminded himself, would be to confront Colonel Harris and tell him the truth about the bridge, thus saving Mary from the gallows. *The Yankees will never hang a woman*, he told himself. *Harris is hoping others will expose themselves to save Mary's neck. To accomplish the mission, I must call his bluff. There's no other way!*

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Reverend Parks' Wrath

With Colonel Baker's telegram of December 18, 1862 clutched in his hand, Reverend Parks hurried down Second Street to the courthouse. Absentmindedly, he reached for his pocket watch and then remembered he had lost it. A thorough search of the manse had revealed no trace of it. He had even looked beneath his bed and turned his pockets inside out. Nothing. *Where could it be? Mathilda will kill you if she finds out you lost it!*

In the telegram Baker had advised him a large group of rebel troops were mobilizing south of Nashville. With time running out, determining what role John Martin played was of critical importance. The colonel kept pressing Parks for information, and suspected Martin's role was not insignificant.

Parks agreed. He reflected none of his threats had frightened Lydia enough to betray the professor. That angered him, as well as the fact Mary Peabody still wasn't talking, even though she faced the prospect of hanging. *Colonel Harris' hard questioning hasn't gotten results, but maybe I can sweet-talk Mary into spilling some information about John.*

He grinned as he reached the courthouse steps, bounding up them two at a time. Swinging open the huge wooden door, he stepped inside. As the guard knew him by sight and motioned him to pass, Parks scrambled down the long flight of stairs leading to Mary's basement cell. The corridor below was long and cold, unheated by design.

"I suppose you know John has asked my help now that Matthew's disabled and Elias has come down with dysentery," Reverend Parks said to Mary in his sincerest tone.

Mary gasped, then began weeping and sank down on her bed. Her Bible fell to the floor. "All for nothing," she cried, cradling her head in her hands.

Elated, Parks let her cry herself out. When she finished, he passed his handkerchief through the cell bars to her. She accepted it with a tired nod.

"I suspect he will have to do something," Mary said as she dabbed at her reddened eyes. "There's really no one left to help."

"A pity," Parks said. "What had John planned to do next?"

"Didn't he tell you?" Mary cast a strange look at him.

"No," Parks said. "When I saw him this morning, he was in a great hurry." The reverend sighed, trying not to let his impatience show. *If only the bitch would talk—*

"He probably went to help with Henrietta's funeral arrangements." Mary wiped fresh tears from her eyes.

"Mary, dear soul, I'm rather pressed for time." He rubbed his hands together. "Please tell me about his plan—"

"Why aren't you with the Robertsons?" Mary interrupted. "Surely, they must need your comfort!"

"I plan to drop by later today." He looked at her, thinking she was nothing but a small-town bitch, and an obstinate one at that. "Please, Mary?"

"I think you ought to track John down and ask him yourself." She picked up her Bible and resumed reading. "He's told me nothing," she said without raising her eyes.

Enraged, the preacher left the courthouse. When General Rosecrans arrived today, he would recommend Mary hang. If it precipitated another riot, so be it. Colonel Harris and his soldiers were capable of dealing with civil disobedience.

"What a stroke of luck," Parks murmured when he saw Lydia enter old man Reedy's funeral parlor. He strode over to the entrance and thrust open the door.

"What are you doing here?" Lydia looked at him, aghast. Tears streaked her face, and her obvious pain made her look all the more lovely.

"I came to offer my condolences," Parks said. He glanced around and saw no one else. "Where's Mr. Reedy?"

"I don't know." Lydia moved toward the door. As she brushed past him, he caught her hand.

"We need to talk," Parks snapped.

"Good God, not today!" Her eyes flashed. "Now I know you have no decency—"

"Sit!" He grasped her shoulders and pushed her down onto a dusty black sofa.

"Let go of me!" Lydia struggled to rise under the pressure of his hands. She lashed out and slapped him, raking her nails across his cheek.

"Damn you, bitch!" He cocked his arm and backhanded her across the face so hard she toppled off the sofa. Bursting into tears, she curled into a ball on the floor and shielded her head with her hands.

"My mother's dead!" She sobbed. "Leave me alone!"

"I'm done playing games!" Parks snarled. "Get it through your head—your mother's death is a small thing compared to this war. I want to know what you found out from Martin about his mission, and I want to know now!"

"Nothing!"

"You were with him all this time and found out nothing?" he roared, and pressed his foot into her shoulder. "You're lying, Lydia. Don't you think your father and sister are enduring enough pain without your forcing me to tell the whole town about your affair with your fine lieutenant?"

"Stop!" The rest of her words rushed out incoherently amid her sobs.

Parks yanked her to her feet and was about to speak as a wagon pulled up in back of the funeral parlor. Lydia glared at him with loathing, her hand held to the red welt already forming on her face.

Parks hurried to the door, turned, and stopped with his hand on the knob. He didn't like the defiant look in her eyes. "Say one thing to anyone about this, and I'll kill you. I swear it, young lady."

Lydia waited until the preacher was out of sight. She turned to flee, but stumbled into a coffin with an old woman lying inside. Up close, the wan face was powdered and shiny with the lips sewn shut. The gray-streaked hair was plastered across the forehead, and the waxen hands were folded prayer-like, across her chest. Lydia burst into tears at the thought her mother would soon look like that. Slipping out the front door she ran headlong up Second Street until she reached the Presbyterian Church. Like the problems facing her, the massive structure threatened to consume her.

Calming herself, she again considered those relatives and friends who could possibly help her. But always the question of exposure by the preacher stopped her from asking any of them. Once Parks spoke out against her from the pulpit, she would be driven in disgrace from the town, and wherever she went, suspicion about her past would follow her.

She thought of John, and a small, warm hope rose in her breast. But would he accept her once Parks exposed the most intimate details of her affair with Lawrence? Was John that open-minded about such things? She didn't know because they had never discussed the subject.

And what would happen when she told him the truth about Parks' demand she spy on him? That act of betrayal would probably drive him from her forever. Yet she knew even though she ran the chance of losing him, she must talk to him. There was no one—absolutely *no one*—in this God-forsaken town she could turn to.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Henrietta's Funeral

With Henrietta Robertson's coffin carried on their shoulders, John and the five pallbearers crunched tufts of frozen grass as they walked to the burial mound and the large clot of mourners. The air in the Clarksville cemetery was crisp; and the nearby river—unfrozen at this time of year—lay as still as reflected glass.

John's stump ached, and his ears and cheeks burned from the harsh December wind. He wished he had turned up the collar on his heavy wool coat before they left the Presbyterian Church, but he'd forgotten and now it was too late to do anything except put up with the cold and pain.

Somewhere behind him a horse snorted and stamped its feet. Another horse, stirred by a barking dog, started forward but stopped when the locked brake of the carriage prevented further movement.

At the graveside setting, the Robertson family waited beneath the barren limbs of the cherry tree. Willard Robertson, his face consumed with an overwhelming grief, stared at his feet while a tearful Marianne clung to the sleeve of his heavy wool coat. Her eyes glistening, Lydia stood apart from them as she stared down into the grave, a dark cavernous hole that looked like a yawning mouth.

"On the count of three," Mr. Reedy called out as the pallbearers stopped at the sawhorses.

"One . . . two . . ." The undertaker counted in a slow, deliberate manner, trying to add dignity to the service. "Three!"

The heavy coffin thunked down. John rubbed his hands and blew on them as he walked over to Lydia. She looked up at him, trails of fresh tears etching the pain on her face.

John remembered his father's funeral and understood what it meant to be totally alone in one's grief. Knowing there was only one way to bridge that chasm, he took Lydia's hand in his own and let his love warm it. Her hand twitched in his, and she began to sob. John put his arms around her and held her tight, telling her over and over he loved her.

John stared over Lydia's shoulder at Henrietta's open grave. *Was there no other place to dispose of the dead except a hole in the ground?* His first sight of hundreds of bodies being interred at South Mountain had mortified him. That scene had been repeated many times at Sharpsburg and, in time, it had hardened him. But poor Lydia, how she suffered! He wondered if a catharsis such as the one he'd witnessed before the courthouse shooting could erase the trauma of her mother's death.

"It's so cold," Lydia finally said, bringing out a hanky and blowing her nose.

"How'd that happen?" John glanced at the bruise on her face. When he reached to touch it, she drew back, abject fear flooding into her eyes.

"I fell coming down the—"

"Thank you for helping today, John." Mayor Robertson interrupted as he turned to them. If Lydia looked distraught, her father looked much worse. His face was old and tired, his eyes bloodshot, his nose puffy and red, and his clothes reeked with strong drink.

"My God," Lydia said as the wind gusted. "Your coat's half unbuttoned, Daddy."

"I'm not cold," Willard said, buttoning his coat in deference to his daughter's bidding. "I've taken extreme measures against the weather." Smiling, he patted the silver flask protruding from a pocket.

"Such a bitter day!" Beatrice exclaimed as she joined them. Matthew hobbled up behind her and stood so he blocked the wind.

"Indeed it is, Auntie." Lydia nodded to her uncle who handed a wool blanket to his wife and helped her wrap up in it. She gave him a peck on the cheek and smiled.

Finished, Matthew pulled John aside and motioned Fred Knox to join them. When they were alone he spoke in a harsh whisper. "I've spotted an unusual number of Yankee soldiers hanging around today."

"I suspect they're still jumpy after that business at the courthouse," Fred said. "Especially when there's a large crowd involved like today."

"For a simple damn funeral?" Matthew grumbled. He opened a flask, thought better of it, and put it away. "Do you think the soldiers are on to us, John?"

"It's possible," John said. "I think Fred is right about them being jumpy when a lot of people are around. By standing off by ourselves we give them reason to suspect us."

"You're right," Matthew said, and they walked back to the others.

"By the way, where's Martha?" John noticed an envelope clutched in Fred's right hand.

"Sick again with the influenza." He wheezed. "She wanted to come today. Doc Webber forbade her to venture outside."

"You're looking poorly yourself," John said. He wondered if Fred was going to tell him about the envelope.

"I think I'm coming down with the same thing." Fred turned and watched the slow moving river. Finally, he held up the envelope. His eyes glistened. "Martha and I have received some very bad news."

"What's that?" Lydia asked.

"Our son, Elton—" Tears welled up in his eyes, and he was unable to continue. He pulled out a handkerchief and made a show of blowing his nose.

"Is he? . . ." Beatrice put a light hand on his forearm.

Fred nodded, biting his lip.

"Oh no!" Lydia moaned. "How did it happen?"

"Shot and killed while escaping from a Yankee prison camp along the Delaware River." Fred's lower lip quivered. "Now what are Martha and I going to do? We are all alone in our grief."

John rested a hand on Fred's shoulder, knowing the loss of an arm and a son would fuel his resolve to help with the mission. He said, "You'll find the courage to go on with your life," but his words sounded as hollow and foolish as the ones he'd used with Mary. Lately, he had found his conviction to carry through on his mission waning. If Hood found out about this rash of self-pity and self-doubt now the time for the battle was drawing near, what would he do? What *could* he do? *And if you fail to blow the bridge in a timely fashion, the ever-present threat of a prison sentence awaits you.*

Fate had dictated that Mary, Elias, Matthew, and Willard could not help with the mission. Willard in particular was a broken man, his spiritual health deteriorating, hastened by his excessive use of alcohol. He would be unwilling to risk leaving his daughters without a father if he was caught.

A strong gust of wind blew a storm of leaves onto the mound of dirt next to Henrietta's grave. Reverend Parks, his Bible in hand, walked over and began the second half of the funeral service.

"Dear friends, we are gathered at this saddest of times . . ." Like an old, cast-iron bell the preacher's voice rang out across the hillside cemetery.

John felt Lydia cringe at the minister's words, and he wondered why she always appeared so sullen and withdrawn when Parks was around. *Did she know the preacher was actually a spy? And the bruise on her cheek? Where had it really come from?*

"I don't think I'm going to be able to get through this." Her voice cracked, and she leaned her full weight into him.

He squeezed her hand and pressed his bulk against her to stabilize their balance.

"Less than a week ago, our dear Henrietta crossed the great divide." Parks rested a hand on her coffin.

Marianne broke into uncontrollable sobs. Lydia extricated herself from John, put her arms around her sister, and held her tight. Although the crying stopped, the young woman of thirteen leaned against her older sister and stared with glazed eyes at her mother's coffin.

East of town, a train whistled. Its lonesome shriek, rising and falling on the sullen wind, was repeated several times as it rushed toward a graded crossing.

"And thus it is we commit Henrietta Robertson to Thy eternal care."

John rested a hand on Lydia's shoulder. She reached back and grasped his hand, interlocking her fingers with his. Turning her head she looked at him as her eyes filled with tears.

"From dust to dust." Parks' words went on and on, finally trailing off into an, "Amen."

Signifying its arrival at the station, the train's whistle gave a final shriek.

Lydia's hand tensed in John's.

The wind, as if out of respect for the deceased, and in deference to the living, stopped blowing for a moment while, with much creaking and groaning from an old winch, the lowering of the casket was accomplished. The gravediggers stepped forward, long spades resting on their shoulders, and started filling in the hole, tamping the red clay down when they finished.

Afterward, the long line of mourners filed back to their wagons and carriages. John and Lydia walked a short distance away so they could watch the river. In the distance, the train's whistle shrieked as it left the station, headed for the trestle over the Cumberland. The wind came up again.

"The nightmare is over," Lydia said in a choked voice as she rested her head on John's shoulder. "In spite of Mother's illness, I never thought this day would come, nor did I realize I would have to go on living without her."

"I'll help you get through this," John said. Her hand squeezed his.

The whistle shrieked as the train rolled up to the bridge and stopped. Below, a Union gunboat belched thick, charcoal-colored smoke as it headed downstream to the wide Ohio. Its shiny black smokestacks glistened in the early afternoon light, and waves of white foam swirled from its stern.

"Lydia, dear." Colonel Harris strode over to them. One hand rested on the hilt of his sword. "My condolences to you on this very sad day."

"Thank you, sir." She gave him a wan smile.

A commotion broke out as some soldiers grabbed Fred Knox and hustled him to a closed wagon. Fred thrashed with his one good arm. He was no match for his captors.

"What's going on?" John asked, anger and concern in his voice.

"He was spotted with a pistol," the colonel said. "I had him arrested."

"Undoubtedly, he was carrying it for self-defense," John snapped. "After all, his shop was robbed last week!"

"Nevertheless, military rules prohibit civilians from possessing weapons." He shrugged. "I must be getting back to headquarters." The colonel touched his hand to his hat, turned on his heel, and strode off.

John knew the soldiers would take Fred to the courthouse jail where he would be interrogated. John reckoned Fred would never betray their group. As mild and calm a person as he was, Fred's grief over the loss of his two sons and the amputation of his arm had strengthened his resolve against the Yankees. However, his incarceration meant he would be unavailable to help with the bridge.

Lydia shuddered.

"What's wrong?" John asked.

"Nothing," she whispered.

"You're trembling." Puzzled at her sudden change in mood, he looked around and saw Reverend Parks watching them, a spiteful look on his face. Without hesitation, he realized the preacher-spy had some hold on Lydia. *Did she suspect he was the man who had attacked her?*

"Let's get out of here!" Lydia grabbed John's hand, an anxious and imploring look in her eyes.

He escorted her up the hill and they sat on their bench beneath the oak tree. "Why are you always so upset when Reverend Parks comes near you?"

"It's because—" She burst into tears.

"Tell me, Lydia." John put his arms around her and held her very tight.

"I think I—" Her words broke off as the preacher walked up the hill toward them, his heavy boots crunching the frozen ground. One hand held his black topcoat closed around the neck; the other clasped his tall hat to keep it from blowing off in the wind. Lydia scrambled to her feet. "Keep him away from me, John! Please!"

"Stay away!" John called out to the man. Parks kept coming.

"Help me, John!" Lydia shrieked. "Please help me!"

Firmly sitting her down on the bench, he grabbed her shoulders and shook her. "Tell me what's wrong! Tell me!"

"He's blackmailing me!" she said, and wailed.

"Why?"

"I was in Lawrence's office. We were . . ."

"Go on!"

"We were . . . I was . . ."

"What, Lydia? Tell me, damn it!"

"Make him go away!"

"First you must tell me what's going on!" he demanded. "I love you, and I want to know!"

"Lawrence was kissing me as he undressed me!" she blurted. "Reverend Parks barged in on the middle of it!"

John gasped, feeling as if she had stabbed him through the heart with a white-hot poker. He released his grip on her coat and drew back.

Lydia's face was crimson, and she cried so hard saliva hung in threads from her mouth. "I . . . I have to go," she wailed. Spotting the minister closing on them she jumped up and ran across the frozen ground.

Stunned, John did not react for a moment. "Wait!"

Lydia was gone, running so hard and fast he could never catch her.

Reverend Parks stopped and laughed, and then turned and headed back to his carriage.

CHAPTER FORTY

Endings

In a secluded clearing by a stream some twenty miles west of Clarksville, Colonel Nathan Bedford Forrest, C.S.A., made camp. Fifty or more cavalry mounts were picketed in the shelter of some trees while sentries, armed with Spencer repeating rifles, walked the perimeter of the clearing. A man with field glasses gazed outward from his perch atop a lonesome pine, sweeping the points of the compass while he looked for signs of enemy forces. It was this man who had alerted those on the ground to the approach of Matthew's wagon.

A tall robust man with a dark beard, black hair, and steely blue eyes, Forrest reached inside his uniform jacket, and pulled out a sealed envelope that he handed to John. "This is from General Hood himself. Come warm yourself while you read, young man." He gestured toward a fire with blazing pine boughs, filled two cups with steaming coffee, and handed one to John.

"Thank you, sir." As Matthew limped away to distribute coffee, tobacco, and other items to the men, John sat down on a log. He broke the wax seal on the letter and began to read:

My Dear Young Friend,

The bearer of this letter is Nathan B. Forrest, an old drinking compadre of mine and an individual whom I would trust with my life.

A large-scale attack is planned for the last week of December. My courier will contact you with the exact date the attack will begin. General Braxton Bragg will conduct the offensive, as I will be detained here in Richmond for several months.

Colonel Forrest has been instructed to assist you in any way with the completion of your mission, but ultimately he will have to be in position at Murphreesboro where General Bragg needs his services.

I wish you good luck in your undertaking. I pray God will be on our side, and you will not let us down.

s/s John B. Hood

Brigadier General, C.S.A.

John tossed the letter and envelope in the fire, and watched the flames consume them. He held his hands out and warmed them, rubbing them to take away the stinging cold. An involuntary shudder wracked his spine when he thought about the last sentence of Hood's letter. Now that the general had invoked the deity's help with the mission, what would he think if John failed?

"How may I be of service?" Forrest asked. His blue eyes darkened with concern.

John read from a list in his head. "I need ten kegs of black powder, a hundred feet of fuse, four rifles, and as many cartridges as a man can carry."

"I have everything but I'm a little short on the powder," Forrest told him, a frown creeping across his face.

"How much can you spare?"

"Six kegs."

"I see." John's face reddened with anger, and then changed to abject disappointment. He said nothing. Arguing would not change the simple fact of what was. He gazed off down the wagon track they had taken to get here, and calculated he would have to place all of the new kegs around one pillar. Maybe, just maybe, with the added powder on that column, the bridge would weaken and collapse in on itself. He wasn't sure, but he could think of no alternative plan at the moment.

"It's the best I can do." The colonel said, as if reading his mind. He sipped some coffee and watched John.

"I was thinking how to blow up the bridge," John said.

The colonel instructed a corporal to load the ordnance onto the back of Matthew's wagon, and then said, "I believe General Hood impressed upon us both the importance of proper timing."

John raised his eyebrows. "And how!"

Forrest smiled. "Do you have enough people to destroy the bridge?"

"Barely." He frowned. "I had been counting on help from a group of local guerrillas, but they tried to raid the armory and were caught. Their leader, a man named Ralston—"

"Craig Ralston?" Forrest broke in. "That scoundrel deserted us during the battle of Fort Donelson. We've been looking for him ever since."

John shook his head in disgust. "I suspected something like that. Well, I believe the Yankees already took him east to stand trial."

"A long, slow hanging would suit me fine." Forrest shifted around so his left side faced the fire.

"Have you any men to spare?" John asked.

"None whatsoever," Forrest said. "I'll need every one of them in the upcoming battle."

"We should be getting back to town," Matthew said as he limped over to them.

"All right." John stood up and extended his hand to the officer. "Thank you for your help, colonel."

"Good luck with the bridge," Forrest said. "Did you have a nice Christmas?"

"I did." John smiled, thinking of Lydia. "And you?"

"Christmas on the run?" Forrest frowned. He waved goodbye as John and Matthew rode away.

On the return trip John remembered working the bar on Christmas Day, and how he had seen Lydia outside for a few moments. She was quiet and withdrawn. *Because of the death of her mother? Or her revelation at the funeral?* They said little, other than to wish each other a Merry Christmas before he returned to work.

Back inside, a fire burned in the hearth and soldiers accompanied a man playing "Silent Night" on the piano. John thought about Christmas in other parts of the country. Snow in the North covering the ground on Christmas Day, as it did so often; the South with rain and muddy roads traversed by people riding in wagons to see loved ones.

"All is calm, all is bright," came a contrasting chorus and then boisterous laughter from another part of the room.

"Holy infant so tender and mild," rasped the men standing around the piano. And the dead at Sharpsburg? Were they asleep now in heavenly peace? Or cold and lonely in their wintry graves? And the mission to destroy the bridge: would there not be casualties and more men sent to eternal rest because of Hood's damnable orders?

At one point, the town square had been dusted with snow flurries that reminded John again of the Great Blizzard of December 1848. There'd been sledding on into Christmas morning, continuing all day until his father had called to him to come home. Inside their house, his aproned mother basted the turkey and prepared the last batch of sugar cookies while four-year-old Robert played in the parlor beneath the tree. Freshly cut a week ago, the tree was wound with strings of popcorn, candles now unlit, and precious ornaments from his mother's childhood. The afternoon sun glistening off the ornaments added a sparkle that rivaled the glowing embers in the hearth where emptied stockings still hung.

God, how he missed that most sacred of times with its cherished memories wrapped warm and tight in his heart . . . Now, the images faded, yielded to the clip clopping of the horses' hooves on the dirt road, and the cold December wind biting into his face.

After John and Matthew returned to Clarksville, they stashed the black powder in the boat, and returned to the store so they could hide the rest of the supplies. As they finished an agitated Elias burst in upon them.

"Have you heard the news?" Elias rasped. One hand gripped his side and he doubled over in pain.

"What news?" John asked.

"Mary Peabody's to be hanged!" Elias' words came between gasps as he caught his breath. "A Yankee general named Rosecrans arrived this afternoon on a warship from Nashville. He held a trial and ordered her immediate execution!"

"Good Lord!" John rushed out the back door and over to the courthouse, where he found Colonel Harris talking with one of his men.

"Colonel!" John strode up to him. "Is it true Mary Peabody will hang today?"

"Yes," the colonel mumbled, looking away.

"In the name of God, why hang her?" John clenched his fists. "She's a harmless, defenseless woman! Can't you do something?"

"There's nothing I can do." Colonel Harris stared at the ground. "She refused to speak in her own defense so she was found guilty as charged. The general had no choice. My hands are tied."

"And if she had spoken?"

He shrugged. "She chose not to."

"May I see her?" John pleaded.

"Permission granted," Harris said gently.

After the guards searched him, John headed down the stairs and hurried along the basement corridor. A woman's screams stopped him cold in his tracks: "Help me! Almighty God, help me!"

That's Mary! he thought, and hastened to see what was happening.

Outside her cell gawking soldiers gathered in a knot. John pushed his way through them. What he saw made his breath catch in his throat.

Mary rolled around on the cell floor, thrashing her arms and legs, and screaming hoarsely. "Oh, sweet Jesus! What have I done? Help me! Help me!"

"What the hell's going on?" John started into the cell.

A guard reached out and restrained him.

"Let me in there!" he shouted, frantic. "She's a friend of mine!"

"You can't, sir." The guard stepped between him and the door and pushed him back.

From down the hall, black bag in hand, Doc Webber ran toward them with Colonel Harris and General Rosecrans on his heels. Charging through the clot of men, Doc fell to his knees and examined Mary. Using his index finger, he dabbed at some white powder on her chin. He licked his finger and cringed.

"She's taken strychnine!" He opened his bag and rummaged inside it.

"Strychnine?" General Rosecrans took a step backward. "Where could she have gotten that?"

"How the hell would I know?" Doc growled, working to restrain her.

Colonel Harris stepped into the cell and rested a hand on Doc's shoulder. "What's her condition?"

The doctor frowned. "She has about a half hour to live."

"Treat her so she can be hanged immediately!" Rosecrans demanded, arching his eyebrows. "We won't have anyone cheating the hangman's noose around here, by God!"

John whipped his head around to look at the general in disbelief.

"Get somebody else to do your dirty work." Doc stood up and looked Rosecrans squarely in the eye. "My job is to save lives. Since she's this far gone, let her die. A strong sedative will calm her and let her pass in peace." He fished around in his bag. "I have—"

"You defy me—" Rosecrans shook a finger in his face, "—and I'll have you put in one of these cells!"

"Go to hell!" Doc Webber snapped.

"Get the new regimental surgeon," the general ordered. "Armbruster's his name."

Stunned, Colonel Harris stood motionless for a moment, and then saluted. "Yes, sir!" He sent a man running up the corridor.

Helpless to assist Mary, John leaned against the cold, damp wall outside her cell and listened to her moans. He prayed she would die, in part to put her

out of her misery and in part—God help him for thinking it—because he feared she might decide in her final moments to implicate him and his co-conspirators.

Within minutes Colonel Armbruster arrived, examined the patient, and ordered a bottle of whiskey.

"Whiskey?" Rosecrans asked, incredulous. "Is this your idea of a joke?"

"Begging your pardon, sir," Armbruster said, "there was a similar case in New York City where a sea captain was about to be hanged. Whiskey was used to counteract the stimulant effects of the strychnine, and—"

"All right, do it!" the general snapped.

A bottle of whiskey was brought, and two guards dragged Mary into a sitting position while Armbruster held a glass to her lips.

"Drink this, my dear," the surgeon coaxed. "It will help with the pain."

"No!" She flailed her arms, and the tumbler flew from Armbruster's hand into the wall. Glass shattered, and the pungent odor of whiskey flooded the cell.

"Hold her!" the general ordered. "And make her drink the damn stuff!"

"My God!" Colonel Harris exclaimed. "You can't be serious!"

The two soldiers, looking reluctant, pinned Mary's arms, drew her head back, and pinched her cheeks so her mouth puckered. While John watched in horror, the general held the bottle over her lips and poured.

Mary choked and sputtered. She twisted loose from the soldier's grip and clawed the general's face.

He jerked back and whiskey spilled from the bottle. "Damn you, woman!" he shouted. "Restrain her, blast it!"

The soldiers pulled Mary's elbows behind her in a forceful grip while a third man stepped forward to hold her chin and angle her head back. The general raised the bottle once more.

"Stop, goddamn it!" John charged into the cell, wrenched the bottle from the general, and flung it against the wall.

"Guards!" Rosecrans shouted. "Take this idiot away!"

The soldiers released Mary and dragged John from the cell.

"She's not an animal!" he yelled, fighting their efforts to subdue him. They threw him onto the floor, but he scrambled up again. Seething, he vowed revenge against the general.

"Get another bottle and keep pouring!" Rosecrans barked, his hand covering his bloodied cheek. "And while you're at it, find Parks!"

After Harris sent a private racing up the hall, the general turned toward the colonel. "Harris? Be prepared to carry out the sentence within the hour."

"But general, that's inhumane—"

"Harris?" Rosecrans set his hands on his hips.

"Sir?"

"Do you wish to be relieved of your command?"

"No, sir!" Harris turned and gave the orders to a sergeant who left immediately.

Moments later, Reverend Parks and a soldier carrying another bottle of whiskey entered the cell. Parks picked up a lantern and swung it down close to Mary's face. His voice was unctuous. "My dear, is there anything you wish to tell—"

Mary covered her eyes and screamed, the horrific sound sliding into a wail when the courthouse bell tolled the hour. She cupped her hands over her ears. After the clanging subsided, her fingers twisted and clawed at the blue and white scarf around her neck.

Reverend Parks pulled out a small Bible, opened it, and intoned, "Our Father who art in Heaven . . ."

His words, cold and methodical, rang throughout the room as if he were simply reading the newspaper.

"Everything will be all right, Mary," Parks said, closing his Bible. "Soon you'll be with God."

Amid screams and choking sounds, Mary struggled against the guards as Colonel Armbruster pumped more whiskey into her. Within minutes the bottle was half-empty. Mary's dress front was soaked, and John wondered how much

of the liquid had burned its way down her throat and how much she had managed to spew up.

"Get her ready to go!" General Rosecrans ordered.

Black hood in hand, a tall brute of a guard started toward Mary.

"God, no!" she screamed, clutched her chest, and slumped forward.

"What's going on?" the general demanded.

Colonel Armbruster examined Mary. When he finished, he looked up and said in a rasping voice devoid of emotion, "It was her heart. She's dead."

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Confessions

Still trembling, Lydia opened the closet door and stepped into the hall after Reverend Parks left. The preacher had come tonight, uninvited, to wish everyone a Happy New Year. When she heard his deep voice she entered the closet and shut the door tight. Several times she clamped her hand over her mouth to keep from crying out at the sound of his voice.

Now that he was gone, she kept thinking how Parks had backhanded her at old man Reedy's funeral parlor. *And my assailant had done the same thing! Oh God! Was Parks the one who attacked me?*

She almost fainted, catching herself at the last moment. *Who would believe me? Daddy wouldn't, not in a million years. He's too distraught over Mother's death. I can't burden Marianne with this, although she would stand by me no matter what. And dear, sweet John? He came here tonight of his own volition to wish us a Happy New Year. Perhaps he's had time to digest my confession of intimacy with Lawrence.*

Still thinking about Reverend Parks, Lydia returned to the parlor and sat on the loveseat next to John. She wrung her hands.

"You look troubled," John said, leaning close so his shoulder touched hers. "I noticed how you fled when Parks showed up at the front door."

"I *am* troubled." She looked up into his blue eyes. "Very much so."

"Over what?" He cocked his head.

"The night I was attacked." She held his gaze, fearful he might rise and leave at any moment.

"I would imagine so, especially since they still haven't caught the man."

"Would you think me touched in the head if I told you I know who he is?"

He shook his head. "Who?"

"Reverend Parks." She whispered the name.

"That's what I suspected."

"What?" She sat bolt upright, and her mouth opened wide.

"Because he's not who he claims to be." He cleared his throat and took hold of her hand. "His real name is Emmett Jacobsen, and he's a Yankee spy."

"God!" Lydia groaned. She ran to her bedroom and retrieved the man's pocket watch she'd hidden on a closet shelf.

"Are you all right?" he asked when she returned.

She nodded and sat next to him, her trembling hands clutching the watch.

"How do you know he's a spy?" she asked.

"Remember the one-armed man who came here the night of the Christmas dance?"

She nodded.

"He identified Parks as a spy, but I had my suspicions long before that. Then, Lieutenant Wallace blurted out Parks' name as your attacker."

"What?" she said, her voice hoarse with emotion.

"I felt the lieutenant was lying." He told her about the episode in the bar, and how, when he had turned his head, Lawrence had called over Lieutenant Thurston. "On reflection, I believe the whole thing was a setup to get me to kill Parks, although I don't know what your lieutenant's motive was."

"Here!" She thrust the watch at John. "My attacker dropped this!"

He opened it and stared at a woman's picture before reading the inscription aloud: "To Emmett with love forever, Mathilda." He handed the watch back to Lydia.

"That son of a bitch," John growled. "I wonder why no one else has suspected him."

"Because he's a preacher," Lydia replied acidly. "Everyone thinks he's so high and mighty, and all the church ladies believe he's—" She checked her words as she remembered the countless snubs she had endured from those

women. *Dirty* was what they had whispered but never had the courage to say. A blanket of humiliation settled over her.

John's arm slipped around her shoulder, and he held her as she stared into the fire.

"I have something to confess," she said.

"Sh . . ." He stroked her hair and kissed it. "You don't have to—"

"I must!" she cried as she broke free. "If I'm ever to be forgiven for what I've done, I must say it now. I . . . I was supposed to spy on you for Reverend Parks."

"What?" John jumped up and stared at her. His fists curled into tight balls, and he clenched his teeth and scowled.

Now it's out. Nothing is hidden between us. If he should walk away now— "Otherwise, he said he would tell the whole town about that scene in Lawrence's office."

"And did you spy on me?" He pointed an accusing finger at her.

"I tried, John, but I couldn't bring myself to do it." She looked down at the carpet. "I couldn't do that to you, no matter how much was at stake."

"But he did ask. So what did you report to him?"

"I told him I hadn't found out anything."

"Good God!" John exclaimed. "Surely he didn't fall for that!"

"I don't know. He'd just hit me and threatened to kill me. So, I didn't really know what I was saying." Lydia shuddered at that thought, and the horrible memory of the night she was attacked. Trembling, she looked down at her lap, ashamed to meet his gaze.

"Did you tell him about the bridge?"

She shook her head, then whispered through a tight throat, "Can you still care about me, in spite of all this?"

"Sh . . ." He sat next to her and grasped her hand. "You know the answer to that."

"But can you still love me?"

"Wallace deceived you, and you thought I was dead. What were you supposed to do, grieve the rest of your life?" He shook his head. "And Parks threatened you with disgrace and death!" He pulled her into his arms and held her. "When I met you at the cemetery last February, I knew you were the one for me."

Tears came into her eyes, and she remembered that meeting as if it were the first time all over again. She had felt the same way about him—as if she could love him all her life—when she saw him lying there asleep with his dog.

"John," she said through her tears, "you are honest and kind and intelligent, all the qualities I've always looked for and admired in a man."

"Lydia." He bent his head toward her mouth.

With jagged memories of her attack flashing before her eyes, she tried to concentrate on John's gentleness as he kissed her.

After they drew apart, he leaned his head back on the loveseat. "I'm going to have to leave—"

"Please don't rush off," she begged. She took a blanket and laid it over their laps, tucking it around them as they sat before the fire.

"I have matters I must attend to," he said, throwing the blanket off and standing.

"And what might they be?" She tugged at his sleeve, fearful he might have reconsidered his feelings toward her.

He shook his head. "You don't want to know."

"Oh, yes I do," she said, looking up at him with pleading eyes. "I suspect it has something to do with the bridge?"

"It does." He gazed into her eyes for a long moment. He took a deep breath and then told her in detail his plan, and how those on whom he had depended could no longer help. "And if I live through this night, Lydia, I want to marry you."

"Oh, John!" She blushed with pure joy, then said in a firm voice, "It's very clear I must help."

"No!" he said, placing his hands on her shoulders. "It's too dangerous. Mary already died and I couldn't bear it if anything happened to you. There will be gunfire and—"

"I don't want to live if you die." She swallowed a sob. "If you attempt this alone, I feel I will lose you!" she said, her heart pounding in her chest. She took a breath to calm herself, and in gentler tones asked, "If not me, who else can help you, John Martin?"

His eyes bored into hers as he hesitated, gathering his thoughts. "All right," he said in a stern voice. "You must do exactly as I say."

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

The Bridge

An hour before midnight, John and Lydia entered the dry-goods store through the back door. The hallway reeked of the sharp scent of cigarette smoke, but there was no sign of her aunt or uncle.

"Hello?" Lydia called out. And a little louder, "Uncle Matthew?"

"We're up front!" came Matthew's booming voice.

John and Lydia trudged down the hall to her uncle and Elias who sat on hard wooden chairs in front of a potbelly stove. They were drinking strong coffee laced with whiskey, and looked up when the couple entered the room.

"How are you feeling, Uncle Matthew?" Lydia asked, shrugging off her cloak as she and John took chairs around the stove.

"Still having a lot of pain," he said. He stuck a cigarette in his mouth. When he leaned forward to light it with a twig from the stove, he winced.

"I'm so sorry." Lydia moved her chair closer to the stove so she could warm her hands. "How is Aunt Bea?"

"She's asleep upstairs." Matthew clunked his cup down on the arm of his chair.

"And how are you, Elias?" John asked.

"Be thankful you don't have this damn dysentery," he said. One hand massaged his stomach. "It's ten times worse."

"Yeah, sure," Matthew muttered.

"How is Fred doing?" John asked.

"Locked in a Yankee prison, what do you expect?" Elias grumbled.

"He wasn't much good for anything, anyway," Matthew grouched. He sloshed whiskey into his cup from a half-empty bottle. "Too damned skittish. Like an unbroke horse." He turned to Lydia. "Pretty late for you to be out walking around."

John cleared his throat. "Lydia's going to give me a hand with the bridge—"

"What? Are you out of your goddamned minds?" Matthew stabbed the air with his finger. "It's too damned dangerous for a girl!"

"What would your mother have said?" Elias chided.

Fuming, Lydia opened her mouth to speak. John motioned her into silence. "No one else is able to help," he said. "And we have another situation that needs attention."

"What's that?" Matthew demanded.

John told them about Reverend Parks. When he finished he asked them to make sure the preacher didn't follow Lydia and himself.

Matthew's jaw fell open. "Our beloved preacher's a spy?"

"God damn!" Elias gulped his whiskey and then leaned forward on his chair. "You know, he and Lieutenant Wallace were awful close. Too close, it seems!"

"And Reverend Parks is the man who attacked me," Lydia said, her fists balling at her sides.

"What!" Matthew leaped up from his chair, clutched his groin, and sat down. "That bastard. I'll kill him! I swear to God I will!"

"That swine!" Elias said. "Everything's gotten way out of control. Nothing's making sense at all! Fred was arrested and Mary's dead, and now we find out our minister's a spy and an attacker of helpless women?" He shook his head. "John, you should call the whole thing off! When nothing is going right in this world, you don't have a chance in hell of succeeding."

"I agree!" Matthew refilled his glass. "And I certainly can't condone Lydia's going with you!"

"What's wrong with you two?" Lydia said. "The Yankees have taken over our town, attacked our women, and stolen everything we worked hard to achieve all

our lives. Now we have a chance to do something about it, you both want to call it quits?"

"Damn!" Elias doubled over in pain. "I—"

"We're both loyal Southerners!" Matthew said, his face flushing.

"Nobody said you weren't," John growled. "I'm not backing out. If I have to, I'll blow the bridge myself!"

"And I'm going with him!" Lydia jumped to her feet and reached for her coat. John rose and took her hand.

Matthew sipped his drink, looked at each of them for a moment, and then burst out laughing. "You two young 'uns. What a couple you make! Crazy as loons."

John and Lydia exchanged smiles and laughed in a welcomed release of tension. They resumed their seats.

"So I guess that's settled." Matthew lifted his glass in a toast. "To success."

"I'm going to go lie down," Elias said. "My stomach's getting worse." He shook hands all around, bidding the others good luck and a Happy New Year, and then made his way out, one hand clutching his belly.

"I'm still concerned about your safety," Matthew said to Lydia.

"I'll be fine."

"So what are you going to do if the Yankees catch you and throw you in their prison?" He poured himself another drink and then looked into her eyes. "You're young and pretty, and surely those pigs will rape—"

"Uncle, stop!" Lydia burst into tears. She covered her face with both hands.

"Matthew! Have you no compassion?" John demanded as he gathered Lydia to him.

"We're talking about risking my niece's life!" Matthew exploded. "After you light those damn fuses, you can't possibly row fast enough to get her to safety."

"We'll be going downstream," John said.

"With the current!" Lydia's green eyes blazed with defiance.

"I'll wait on the riverbank with three good horses," Matthew said, ignoring them. "At least you'll have a chance at getting away."

John raised his eyebrows. "How can you possibly do that when you're in so much pain?"

"I'll manage somehow." Matthew said with clenched fists. Tears welled in his eyes. "It's the least I can do."

"I thank you," John said. Picking up a pair of scissors lying on the countertop, he cut the thumb and forefinger off the right hand of his glove.

"To make it easier to fire the Spencer," John explained to Lydia as he pulled out his pocket watch. "All right. I think it's time we got started." His stomach churned, and he struggled to push down the sensation. What if something should happen to her? *Courage, man! The thing to do is to watch her carefully and protect her. Soon it all will be over, one way or another, and either way will be a relief!*

Lydia rose and put on her cloak while John made up a batch of mud in a bucket. Then he grabbed a line of wire and a coil of fuse, threw them in a canvas sack, and handed it to Lydia. Next, he stuffed a handful of cartridges in his pocket, picked up his rifle and the mud bucket, and headed for the door.

"I'll be waiting with the horses," Matthew said as Lydia hugged him.

John shook hands with Matthew, who then handed Lydia a pistol. "Here. You may need this."

She cringed and put the weapon in her coat pocket.

Outside, John held the Spencer by his side and Lydia carried the mud bucket and sack as they strolled down the street. The bitter north wind cut into them, and they passed revelers heading for Elias' bar or one of the other establishments still open. The celebration of the New Year was approaching its zenith.

"You there!" Lantern in hand, a sentry rounded the corner.

John grabbed the sack and mud bucket and set them behind a bush, then slipped the Spencer beneath his coat. He jerked Lydia into his arms and kissed her, drawing her tight against him. Her lips warmed as she met his and

returned their fervor. He ran his tongue over her lips and then entered her open mouth.

"What're you doing there?" The soldier held the lantern higher. "Oh!"

John pulled himself away from Lydia's embrace. "Excuse us," he said, a sheepish grin on his face. "We'll be on our way home."

"Be careful." The man motioned them to pass. "The midnight curfew's almost here, you know."

"We're sorry," Lydia said, and then leaned into John. After they had walked a dozen paces, they turned a corner and stopped. "Phew! That was close."

"Yes, it was." Smiling, he retrieved the sack and bucket. Taking Lydia by the hand, he started down the hill, cut through the cemetery, and came out on the river road. After spotting the burned-out hulk of the tree that marked the spot where Matthew's boat lay, he paused, checking for the approach of riders. Seeing none, he scurried across the road and hurried through a field until they were swallowed in the darkness of trees.

"Here's the boat," John said, guiding Lydia over to where it was hidden along the Red River. Within minutes they had reached the Cumberland and were rowing upstream, hugging the shoreline. Water sloshed against the bow.

"It's a strong current for this time of year," Lydia said. "And a starless night."

"We won't be hidden for long." John glanced up at the moon hovering behind a bank of dark, drifting clouds. Here and there opaque patches of white broke through and sent accusing fingers of light skittering across the water's surface toward them. He was left with an ominous feeling.

"Is that a ship?" She pointed at a dark mass near the opposite shore.

He peered at the thin trail of smoke spiraling upward from the center of the object. "It's probably the weekly gunboat firing up for its journey to Nashville. Keep rowing."

Their movements synchronized, Lydia and John dipped and pulled at their oars until the bridge loomed large above them. There were four huge pillars.

East of town the long, strident blast of a train whistle pierced the quiet, while across the river came a barked order.

"This is eerie," Lydia whispered as John turned the boat and headed for the pillar where he had prepared the openings.

"Sh . . ." He held his finger to his lips and pointed upward to a guard pacing along the trestle. The man's cigarette glowed bright orange with each puff.

When the moon passed from behind the clouds, a shimmering array of light fell upon the water's surface. John and Lydia continued to row against the current, struggling to keep the boat beneath the bridge and out of sight. They reached their objective as a door slammed in the guard's shack above them.

The wheezy blast from the train sounded again, closer this time. A light flickered on the gunboat, and hoarse shouts drifted across the bright, moonlit water. John calculated if he could somehow blow the bridge with the train on it, the channel would be blocked for months. Then, he thought: *Hood can go to hell! I'll blow the bridge before the train gets to it. That way innocent people won't be killed.*

"Hold the boat steady," John said as he lifted the kegs of gunpowder over the gunwale and set them next to the column. After removing the stones he had previously loosened, he inserted all six kegs and slapped in the mud, tamping it down and making sure the fuse had not been buried. Perspiration dripped into his eyes as he stretched out the coiled wire and anchored one end of it to a block. He spliced all the fuses together and climbed back into the boat. *I hope to God we've got enough powder to blow the bridge!*

"Row slowly back to shore," he instructed Lydia.

As her oars dipped into the water, he looped the fuse around the wire, feeding it out and keeping it taut.

"Damn!" he muttered as they reached the last column.

"What's wrong?" Harsh moonlight accented the fear on her face.

"I'm out of fuse, and we're still fifty feet from shore." He secured the wire to a block at the base of the nearest pillar.

Above them the tracks vibrated and rumbled as the engine, tender, and first cars of a train rolled onto the bridge and stopped. Soldiers jumped down and scurried from one end of the train to the other. The engine spun its driving wheels and started backing onto a siding.

"What're we going to do?" she whispered. The moon was so bright it lit the fear in her eyes.

"Nothing." He motioned her to remain still. "Don't let the boat bang against the piling."

Signifying the start of the New Year, gunshots sounded from the center of town. They were accompanied by the pealing of church bells. John leaned over and whispered "Happy New Year!" in Lydia's ear. She turned to meet his kiss.

Across the river the gunboat cast off its lines and headed into the current.

"Hey!" A man called out from above. "Someone's down below! In a boat!"

John's guts twisted. Enough fuse or not, he had no choice now but to light it. Striking a match, he held it to the fuse. Like a child's sparkler bright pinpricks of fire burst around his hands.

"Let's go!" He grabbed the oars and plunged them into the water as the burning fuse crackled and popped toward its target.

"You!" a soldier shouted, pointing. "Stop!"

As John looked up the man shouldered his rifle. A second later came a sharp report, and a ball ripped into the water ten feet from the boat. Lydia screamed.

"Lie down!" He pushed her to the floor of the boat. She scrambled to her knees.

"We'll never make it if I don't row!" Snatching her oar from him, she bent to the job, both hands held in a chokehold on the handle. Another shot drilled into the river, and a spray of water rained on them.

They rowed harder than John thought possible, not speaking until they rammed the rocks along the shore. He held the boat steady with the oars until Lydia clambered out, and then he jumped and stumbled, plunging into the icy water.

"Sweet Jesus!" He thrashed about until he found some footing by the bow, snatched the Spencer from the seat, and struggled onto the shore. A bank of rifles barked in unison from the bridge, splattering the thick brush and the water. The burning fuse sputtered onward.

"Run, Lydia!" John shouted, and watched as she took off up the bank.

More shots kicked up the dirt near John. He aimed the Spencer and worked the trigger until, with a scream, a man fell into the water. John continued shooting until the firing on the bridge ceased and he had to reload his rifle.

John glanced at the burning fuse as it snaked across the water and homed in under the open span. He crashed his way up the embankment to the place where Lydia had stopped. With his heart pounding in his throat, he turned to watch the bridge. "Damn! It's only a matter of seconds until—"

The mighty roar of the explosion deafened him as a huge ball of fire billowed up around the columns. The concussion shook the ground and echoed off the hills to the west. When the blast hurled them onto their backs, he covered her body with his own.

Daring to look over his shoulder, he watched as the center span floated high into the sky and hung there for a moment before it collapsed into the river with a thunderous splash. He gasped. Nothing remained of an entire section of bridge except a dark, gaping hole. Splinters of wood and metal chunks, dust and burning embers poured out of smoky whorls, and John covered the back of his head with his arms to fend off the fist-sized pieces of debris that started raining down. He felt Lydia shaking beneath him, whether from fear or excitement he couldn't tell. When the onslaught of fragments stopped, he climbed to his feet, and helped Lydia to hers. She stared, open-mouthed, at the destruction.

"We've done it!" He whooped with joy and hugged Lydia.

"We've done it!" she echoed, and burst into a smile.

Like a comet streaking through the heavens a burning shell passed overhead and exploded in the brush less than a hundred feet away from them.

The banging concussion shook the earth, and a wave of hot air blasted them. John watched in horror as the gunboat pulled hard to port to open fire again.

"Run, Lydia! The next shell won't miss!" Grabbing her hand, he moved diagonally up the bank.

Stumbling over the top of the embankment, he spotted Matthew struggling to hold three restless horses under a clump of trees. The gunboat lobbed another round, and John pulled Lydia flat as it whistled over them and exploded. Raising his head, he spotted Matthew hunched over, gripping his side. A cloud of smoke hovered above his head.

"Let's go, Lydia!" He started for the horses.

"Look!" She pointed as Reverend Parks and a half-dozen cavalymen galloped toward them along the river road. Like ghost riders, their capes billowed behind them. Again, flames belched from the gunboat. This time the shell landed near the cavalry. A Union soldier was blown from his saddle.

John knew he must finish Parks and the cavalry quickly or he and Lydia would hang for sure.

Steadying the Spencer, John fired a flurry of shots and brought down two riders. Reverend Parks, pulling hard on his stallion's reins, turned his mount toward the couple and galloped into John's sights. John squeezed the trigger, the rifle clicked on empty.

"You rebel pig!" Parks shouted, and spurred his horse at John. "The jig is up!"

"Not so, Mr. Emmett Jacobsen!" John jammed shells into the Spencer's chamber.

The pounding of hooves grew close and loud. Parks hunched down low in the saddle and bore down on John and Lydia. When the preacher reached him John swung the Spencer, missing the rider, but throwing his horse off stride. Spurring the stallion, Parks grabbed Lydia and galloped off. She screamed and thrashed at him.

The gunboat boomed and a shell exploded in front of Parks. The preacher hollered and clutched his leg as he toppled from the saddle. Lydia jumped down and ran off.

"Get to the horses!" John shouted to her as the preacher started toward him, dragging his bloody leg.

"You have been a thorn in my side ever since I came to your little burg," Parks called out.

"Go!" John shouted when he saw Lydia had stopped. "Get to the horses!" She ran to her uncle who struggled to stand.

"I'm going to enjoy beating you to death." Parks' harsh voice matched the look of contempt on his face. He squared off in front of John.

"You've only the one good leg, Reverend Jacobsen." John threw a quick right, catching the preacher's jaw and snapping his head back. He followed with a left to the man's diaphragm. The blow doubled Parks over.

"Goddamn you!" Parks gasped. He lunged and drove his head into John's stomach, sending them both crashing to the ground. John rolled free and struggled to his feet. Parks rushed and swung. Regaining his balance, John sidestepped and threw several sharp punches to Parks' head. The blows drove him to his knees. A final punch silenced him.

At the sound of more hoof beats, John reloaded the Spencer and rapid-fired at some cavalry until a shell burst in their midst and scattered them.

"Look out!" Lydia screamed. She pointed with Matthew's gun.

John wheeled around and stared into the gaping barrel of Parks' revolver. The preacher grinned and cocked his weapon. A sharp crack split the air. Parks crumpled onto one knee. A second shot, followed by a third and a fourth, knocked him flat.

A shell sung overhead and exploded behind John, starting a fire in some weeds. John moved to where Lydia stood, still holding Matthew's gun.

"He was going to kill you!" she said, bursting into tears.

"I owe you my life," John said. "Now let's get the hell out of here before the whole Yankee army arrives!"

Another shell screeched overhead and landed on top of Matthew.

"Oh God!" Lydia screamed.

Hurrying to her uncle, they found his shell-torn body lying in a heap next to a dead horse. Tied to a nearby tree, the other two horses skittered back and forth at the end of their reins. The gunboat fired again, but the shot went wild. Lydia began sobbing.

"Let's go!" John took her hand.

"But—"

"He's dead!" He steered her toward a horse, pulled the reins free, boosted her into the saddle, and slapped the horse into a run. The second horse had yanked its ties loose at the blast from the gunboat. He grabbed the saddle, mounting at the trot, and galloped after Lydia as an exploding shell rolled out tendrils of fire that consumed Reverend Parks and the ground all around him.

John spurred his horse, taking over the lead from Lydia. Although his wet clothes had turned to ice, his wildly pumping heart warmed him now. He took a circuitous route that swung far to the north of the courthouse. Lights were on in all the houses, and people stood on the sidewalks talking with their neighbors.

"Hold up a minute!" John ordered, stopping in an alley when they reached College Street. His teeth chattered.

Half a dozen uniformed men galloped past, headed for the river.

Making sure no more soldiers were in sight, John spurred the horse and galloped across the street. With Lydia right behind him, he trotted a block north, and then doubled back through an alley until they reached the horse shed behind the Robertson household. After unsaddling the animals and rubbing them down, John and Lydia entered the house through the kitchen door.

"Congratulations, children!" Mayor Robertson swayed back and forth, a glass of whiskey in his hand. "The bridge is gone?"

"Yes, sir!" Violent shivers wracked John's body. His hair was frozen, as were his coat and pants.

"Have a swig of this to warm you up," the mayor said, offering his own drink.

"Thank you, sir." John shuddered, and the alcohol burned his throat on its way down.

"I'll get you a change of clothes." Lydia rushed upstairs. Minutes later she returned carrying a man's shirt and a pair of pants. "Put them on. They were my brother's."

With the shivers racing through him, John stepped into the pantry and put on the dry clothing. After he dried his hair, he reentered the kitchen. Lydia handed him a blanket.

"Thanks," he said, appreciative of this act of kindness on her part.

"How do the clothes fit?" she asked.

"Fine." He searched her eyes. "How are you faring, my love?"

"I'm glad to be safely home." She reached for his hand as they went to join her father in the living room.

"Uncle Matthew is dead," Lydia said to her father after they were seated. Her face was pale and her voice strained.

"My God! How'd it happen?"

While she told her father the details, John rose and stood with his back to the fire, warming himself. Soon, the shivering in his body subsided. He took another sip of the whiskey.

"That's tragic!" The mayor passed a hand over his face. "Thank the Lord you two are all right!" He sipped his whiskey and shook his head. "I'll have to tell Beatrice. She'll not take the news lightly."

John turned around and faced the fire. To his right something whimpered. "What's that?" he asked.

"A belated Christmas present our family forgot to give you." Lydia came over to him and touched his arm. "Why don't you see what it is?"

He moved past her to the side of the couch where he saw a peach basket covered with a child's blanket. Bending over, he pulled the cover off, exposing a Chesapeake Bay Retriever puppy. The puppy looked up at him with pleading

eyes. Its tiny tail twitched and it broke into a series of excited little yelps. John smiled and picked the tiny animal up. He held it close to his heart, comforting it.

"What do you think?" Lydia's soft eyes pleaded, too.

"I'm at a loss for words," he said, remembering Lady when she was that age. *How similar they are.* He nuzzled the puppy against his face and broke into laughter.

"The gift pleases you?"

"Immensely."

The puppy's ears pricked up and its barks turned shrill.

"Something's wrong!" Lydia rushed to the window and parted the curtains. Outside, a troop of galloping riders stopped before the house. "God!" she screamed. "It's the Yankees!"

John set the puppy down and started for the back door, then thought better of it and sat on the couch. The soldiers had probably surrounded the house by now.

Footsteps pounded on the porch steps and soon a sharp knocking rattled the glass in the front door.

"I'll get it." Mayor Robertson stumbled toward the door.

"Daddy!"

"What?" He turned around as the knocking increased, turning to pounding.

She gripped his arm and looked into his eyes. "Tell them we've been here all night," Lydia said. "Do you understand?"

"Don't worry, child." He trudged into the hall as the knocking continued. "Hold your horses!" he bellowed.

Lydia sat down next to John and petted the puppy. "I'm frightened, John. What if someone recognized us at the bridge?"

"But we were here all night, my dear," he said as heavy boots pounded down the hall and entered the parlor.

"Good evening, Colonel Harris." John stood up, leaving the blanket on the couch.

"I . . . I," the officer stammered. "I didn't expect to find you here, John."

"He has been with us all night," Lydia said as her father entered the room followed by more soldiers.

"All night?" Harris asked no one in particular.

"That is correct, sir," Mayor Robertson said. "We were having a quiet get-together right here. After Henrietta's death, there's not much to celebrate."

"I'm sorry." The colonel bowed, and then hesitated. "I thought—"

"You have my word as a gentleman," the mayor added, "we were here all evening."

"All right," the colonel said. "Reverend Parks did say he saw John here tonight." He bade them goodnight and left with his men.

"More whiskey?" the mayor asked as hoof beats faded on the street outside. He was smiling.

"Thank you, no, sir," John said. "I think I've had enough for one night."

The mayor poured himself another drink and sat in his favorite chair by the window. Soon, his snores reverberated throughout the room.

"I should be leaving," John said, and started to rise.

"There's a curfew outside," Lydia said. "If you're caught—"

"May I stay while my clothes dry?"

"That will take hours," she replied in a melodious voice. She plucked a single yellow flower from a vase and placed it in her hair. "Come sit with me. My father will sleep through to morning. He always does."

"Now that all this business with the bridge is out of the way, Lydia," he said over his shoulder as he threw several logs on to the fire, "perhaps we can talk about our future."

"Of course." She wrapped a blanket around them after he sat down. "I'm scared to death about killing Parks tonight."

"You did it to protect me," he said. "No jury would fault you for that."

"What we were doing was illegal!" She picked skin off her fingers. "Maybe we ought to flee Clarksville?"

"Maybe." He said, gazing into the fire. "But someone has to be here to pull this town together once this senseless war ends. I'd like to be a part of the process."

"I wonder if it's ever possible for our wounds to heal." Her voice was low, whispered like the wind sighing through the tops of the tall oaks. John was reminded of his dream about Arete on the hills of Thermopylae. He shivered.

"We've got to make the attempt," he said. "That's all anyone can do."

"You could go back to Stewart College and teach about what war really means," she said. "You *are* eminently qualified to speak on that subject."

He nodded. "And I could run for political office."

She smiled. Her hand reached in her pocket and pulled out a solitary rose petal. "I haven't forgotten the day you gave this to me when you returned from the war. Nor have I forgotten mailing them to you and asking, if you were of the same mind, that you return one of them to me, John dearest."

The puppy whined. He picked it up and set it on their laps where they both petted it, stroking its silky ears and soft fur.

"It's like a child," he said.

"Our child." Lydia smiled at him.

"I like that idea, Lydia Martin."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



I am retired after working for the VA Regional Office in St. Petersburg, FL where I was a Rating Specialist (RVSR) on the Appeals Team. I have a BS in Political Science from Austin Peay State University, Clarksville, TN, and extensive graduate credits in Political Science from Rutgers University. An avid reader, I write fiction and non-fiction and have published numerous articles. I am a member of Vietnow, and a contributing editor to their publication. Currently, I am working on several fiction projects, and a self-help book to aid veterans seeking benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). I live in Sebastian, FL with my wife, Barbara, and a vivacious Labrador retriever named

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