

At Shiloh

Jack Blackwood Trilogy, #3

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Chapter 1

The train slowed and chugged noisily up the hill. As it approached a rocky incline, it puffed out thick clouds of black smoke which scattered with the cold evening wind. The train was long, pulling several passenger and freight cars towards the Union Army of West Tennessee. A thin mist of March rain fell, splattering the closed windows. A few miserable soldiers sat on top of the cars, shivering under wool blankets with rifles cradled in their laps.

The expressman had the door of his car ajar and lit a cigar. He studied the rolling hills dotted with budding trees and thick underbrush. He had heard that Tennessee could be dangerous since guerilla fighters had already attacked several trains along this route. This time, he assured himself, there was nothing to worry about, since the train was well-guarded by over fifty Union soldiers. Looking back into the car, he saw the strongbox that was being used by his fellow expressman as a footrest. He thought to himself that there was enough gold there to buy off the entire Secesh army. The other man was reading a newspaper with a trail of cigar smoke rising from behind the sheaves of paper.

As the train reached the crest of the hill, the expressman flicked his cigar out the door and craned his neck towards the front of the train. The engine disappeared over the hill, and the cars began to gather speed as they were pulled over the incline. Suddenly the engine blew out a long warning whistle. The brakes were then applied hard enough to cause the expressman to slam the side of his head roughly against the frame of the door. The guards on top of the train were pitched forward; one slipped between the cars to be cut to ribbons by the iron wheels. With a grinding crash, the engine suddenly left the tracks and toppled sideways on the embankment, carrying the heavily loaded cars with it.

As the train derailed, Major Gardner watched happily through his field glasses. What he saw did not surprise him since an hour earlier this part of the iron rails had been removed by his men. It was a spectacular sight to see the bent iron and cracking of wood as the train rolled on its side like some mythical, wounded beast. Steam billowed from the engine, hiding the broken cars with a cloudy mist. The train had now stopped its death throes, and the cries of the wounded could be heard from the twisted wreckage.

Gardner raised his arm and motioned his small band of men to move forward. It was a ragged bunch of soldiers that crawled out of the underbrush. They looked more like scarecrows than soldiers, but they held their pistols with expert hands.

“Remember, don’t bother to shoot the wounded unless they start making trouble,” he called out. “And only kill the rest of the blue-bellied bastards if they shoot back.”

His two dozen soldiers then began rushing towards the wrecked train, shouting the rebel yell at the top of their lungs. A few dazed Union soldiers crawled out of the damaged cars with their rifles at the ready. They tried to put up a feeble

defense, but they were quickly cut down by a barrage of bullets. The remaining survivors soon raised their hands in surrender.

“Sergeant Raines, tell your men I want those Union boys rounded up and put under guard.”

A shabbily dressed man in a dirty grey coat gave him a lazy salute and began shouting orders at the men. Gardner grimaced and thought it was time to get some of his boys cleaned up. But even though they looked like tramps, he knew they were the best fighters in the world. Nonetheless, he still wished for a bit more spit and polish. A little pride would have gone a long way in making these country boys even better fighters. He pushed those thoughts away and made his way towards the destroyed train.

His soldiers were already looting the broken cases strewn from the wrecked cars - stealing shoes, coats and as much food and drink as they could carry. He was happy to note that Raines had pushed enough men away from the throng to stand guard over the remaining Union soldiers; those who had the strength to crawl clear of the wreckage.

To his delight, the express car was still standing upright. Its walls were twisted at an angle, showing a crack of splintered wood that went the length of the body. It had somehow survived destruction relatively intact, leaving the side door slightly open. As Gardner cautiously approached, the barrel of a shotgun slid out from the door and pointed in his direction.

“Don’t shoot,” Gardner cried out before he dove to the right. His shin painfully struck a rock, sending a burst of pain through his leg. He added through gritted teeth, “There’s no reason to die for your cargo.” As he spoke, he pulled out his Le Mat Revolver and took aim.

An angry voice answered from the car and said, “I saw what you did to those boys – you shot them in cold blood.”

“Now hold on there,” Gardner shouted. He saw Raines coming forward and signaled for the man to stop. “We had no choice in the matter.”

“Well, I’m not coming out until you leave,” the voice answered back. The shotgun still pointed at Gardner threateningly.

Sliding his pistol back into his holder, the major took a step back with arms held wide since he did not want the expressman to panic and take a shot. Once he got next to Raines he said in a low voice, “I want that bastard out of there. Round up some men and take care of him.”

The sergeant nodded, a hard smile set on his face. He walked back to the soldiers who were still busy looting what they could. He then began to push some of his least favorite soldiers into line. When he had a half-dozen men, he said, “I need some volunteers to take care of that guard back there. Any takers?”

No one stepped forward. “Well, boys,” Gardner said angrily, “it’s time to earn your keep with this outfit. If there are any slackers, I’ll be sure to shoot you down where you stand. Now I need that guard out of there, so we can get the gold and get going!”

Upon hearing the word gold, the drawn faces of the six soldiers brightened in anticipation. Pistols were now drawn eagerly.

Raines added, “You heard what he said. Now move it!”

The men scrambled towards the broken express car and began to fire in unison at the battered wood. A shotgun blast answered back, making one of the guerillas fall to the broken ground like a rag doll. Another hurried blast of buckshot ricocheted off the stony ground, causing a few pellets to strike an unlucky man in the leg. He went down on his knees but continued to fire back.

The crescendo of pistol fire rose and fell as men began the process of reloading - paper cartridges were bit off and stuffed into the open chambers. Then measured black powder, a lead ball, and wad were dropped into the cylinders. A short ramrod was squeezed into the barrel, pushing the ball tight against the powder charge. A thin line of grease was placed on the cylinders to stop chain-fires - where the firing of one cylinder could spark the others. Such an explosion could blow a man's hand off if he wasn't careful. Firing caps were then hurriedly placed in front of the loaded chambers. Once the hammer dropped on the cylinder, it would fire the cap, ignite the gunpowder and fire the lead ball. It was a slow, laborious process, but an experienced man could reload his pistol in less than a minute.

Gardner watched as the stream of bullets tore into the wood. Black powder smoke from all the firing rose high in the rain-drenched air. He then nodded towards Raines who started to wave his hands at his men, signaling them to stop the assault.

"Stop firing, stop firing!" the sergeant shouted. The men grudgingly stopped peppering the express car with lead.

A faint voice could be heard coming from the gap of the door. "I surrender - stop shooting."

Raines ran towards the car and pulled the door back. There lay the expressman, lying on the floor with his shotgun lying underneath him. A puddle of the wounded man's blood pooled on the wooden floor. He had been shot in his right arm and in the shoulder. He began to moan. Raines grabbed him by the collar and pulled the man off of the car. The expressman landed heavily on the ground with a grunt and rolled over on his stomach, gasping in pain.

With a tug to his holster, Gardner pulled out his Le Mat and flipped the lever at the end of the hammer. This switched the firing mechanism from the cylinders of the revolver to the single sixteen gauge smoothbore barrel loaded with shot. He pointed it at the expressman and said sternly, "You made a mistake trying to fight us off."

The wounded man began to sob in a panic and tried to feebly crawl away. The guerilla soldiers stepped back as Gardner brought up his pistol and fired. The single blast of buckshot tore open the man's head, leaving a ragged hole. With a final violent jerk, the expressman was dead.

Facing his men, Gardner said, "Now let that be a lesson to every one of you. If you listen to me, you'll get through this was alive. Raines, get that strongbox out and opened."

Raines motioned to his men, and they crowded aboard the damaged car. Inside was an already dead expressman, his neck bent at an impossible angle. The battered body was sprawled on top of an iron-edged strongbox. Raines rolled the corpse off. The rebels then worked together and soon pulled the heavy strongbox out into the open, where it landed heavily on the rocky surface. Searching through

the pockets of the dead expressman, Raines soon found the key and hurried over to open the iron box. With the major waiting impatiently, the sergeant fitted the key to the lock and opened the heavy lid.

Gardner smiled when he saw the stacked gunny sacks inside. With shaking hands, he took the closest sack, untied the top and poured the contents out. The twenty dollar gold coins fell heavily into his hand. The soldiers around him began to murmur excitedly. This was worth the trouble of cutting the rail line, Gardner thought. This was worth the trouble since the Federal government would miss this gold and try by any means to retrieve it. Everything was going to plan.

Raines smiled at Gardner and said, "You were right about them carrying the gold, sir. The boys will be happy."

The major nodded and said, "Get this packed away. We will be moving out as soon as you are ready."

"What about the prisoners, sir?"

"Don't worry; I'll make sure they are taken care of." He looked over his soldiers who were greedily eying the gold-packed strongbox. He said to them, "Now just a little warning, gentlemen, this gold is for Jefferson Davis and the Confederacy. Don't get any ideas about taking some for yourself." He gave them a cold smile and paused before adding, "I know the amount of this down to the last dollar. If any of it goes missing, I'll have the whole lot of you strung up. I'm sure Sergeant Raines here would gladly assist me in the exercise."

He let the words seep in and a look of dismay came across the soldier's faces. He added, this time with a kind voice, "So it's your job to keep an eye on your companions to make sure none of it goes missing. Understand? But don't worry, once we deliver this gold, we'll all be heroes."

There was a flurry of agreement as men nodded and began warily eying their neighbors. Gardner knew the men were all robbers at heart, but they also knew that he was a man of his word and would make good his threat.

"Sergeant, carry on."

Raines saluted and began pulling the gold-laden bags out of the strongbox. He began handing two of them to each soldier who carefully knotted the ends together. In this manner the gold was to be split up and carried by each man on the journey back to camp.

Walking past his guards, Gardner went to where the prisoners were being kept. There were some two dozen of them, some who were heavily bruised from their unexpected ride off the rails. They looked at him with hatred in their eyes. The low sound of moans could be heard from the nearby wrecked passenger cars.

Eying them with distaste, Gardner said, "We have come for what we wanted. Now I suggest you start walking back north, because we don't want you in Tennessee anymore."

The prisoners stood to make their leave, but one asked, "What about them? What are you going to do with our wounded friends?"

"They will be taken care off," Gardner replied stoically.

With those words, the prisoners began to shuffle slowly down the line as the rain continued to fall. Gardner caught the eye of one of his men and gave him a nod. The man nodded and lifted his rifle to fire. With the squeeze of the trigger, the shot struck one of the prisoners in the back. The rest of the guerillas joined in and

opened fire on the bedraggled group. The remaining Unions soldiers began to run and a few of the guerillas gave chase, hooting and hollering at the easy prey.

“Raines!” Gardner called out. He waited impatiently for the harried sergeant to run up.

“We’re ready to go, sir. The gold has been dispersed to the men and they are ready to move.”

“Set fire to the cars.”

“Sir?” Raines looked over the cars and shook his head. The sound of gunfire began to abate as the last of the prisoners had been hunted down.

“I gave you an order, sergeant. I want those Union boys to fear us. I want them to curse our names and have every man ride against us. The more men we draw to us, the less they have to fight General Johnston. Now go to it.”

“But those men are wounded.”

“If you don’t follow my orders, then I’ll find someone else who will.”

“Very well, sir, I will see that it is done.” Raines face looked gray as he ordered a few of his men to gather some broken oil lanterns. It took some pushing and threats, but the men eventually complied. Though it was raining lightly, the wooden cars were soon ablaze. The panicked shouts of the wounded inside rose in tempo as the smoke rolled higher in the rain-choked sky.

With an ordered shout and wave, the guerilla soldiers were soon running back to their mounts hidden deep in the trees of the forest. There they saddled up. They left, following a grinning Major Gardner. A cloud of smoke hung heavily behind them as the rain misted on the mud-soaked trail. He was happy to strike a blow against the hated Northerners. Soon his name would be known throughout the land. The north would revile his name while in the south he would be known forever as a hero.

Chapter 2

Leaning against the scarred wooden bar, he looked down at his empty glass and shoved it towards the bartender. Jack felt like hell, but he didn’t give a damn since it was the first time that he had gotten out of his bedroom for quite a spell. Lately fever had been rampaging through the crowded town, brought by the large encampments of Federal soldiers who were ordered to defend the city from rebel encroachment. Jack had spent the past several days confined to bed, retching in a chamber pot, and having to endure the help of his partner. Ezra was the type who seemed to never get sick. That bothered Jack more than anything else.

The saloon only had a few customers, so Jack’s glass was quickly filled with whiskey. Though this was a squalid place, it had the good fortune of only being a few staggered steps from his office. He was well known here for his daily business. He eyed the few lounging prostitutes with an appraising eye. None of the girls came to see him, but instead stayed talking amongst themselves. The whores here were merely waiting for the afternoon to pass before the evening trade began. At this moment he was not was interested in sleeping with any of them, but he recognized that he must be feeling better if he could even think of sex.

The city of Washington was currently gripped with impatience. The war was going badly for the North and the residents had become resigned to the fact that things were bound to get worse before they got better. Last summer, the Army of the Potomac had been defeated at Bull Run and had spent the rest of the year hunkered down, licking its wounds. The army had since been reorganized by General McClellan who had recently sailed them to the Virginia Peninsula, leaving just a token force behind to defend Washington. McClellan was going to sweep down the peninsula and strike right into Richmond. Once Richmond was captured, surely the war would finally be finished. At least that was the plan.

The front door swung open, letting in some of the chilly March air. Spring was only a few weeks away, but winter still had a weak hold on Washington. With a little curiosity, Jack turned to see who had just entered. He was taken with surprise to see Major Calvin Hall, who was looking about the dingy barroom with disgust. Two prostitutes straightened up from their drinks and flashed him a smile. This was hardly unexpected since the major was a well-dressed officer who positively oozed wealth. Jack waved him over.

Jack smiled to himself, remembering the Battle of Bull Run where he had followed Major Hall up a hill against the entrenched Rebels. The major's regiment had bravely followed orders, only to be decimated by the firepower of the defenders. Jack also knew that Hall worked directly for the War Department, taking care of special issues that other officers did not care to handle.

Ignoring the entreaties of the women with a shake of his head, Hall strode over and shook hands with Jack. Looking the detective over, he said, "I was just over at your office. Ezra told me that you would be here, nursing a drink. From what he said, you would still be in bad shape with the flu. But you really don't look that bad to me."

Motioning to his glass, Jack said, "I just needed a little liquid refreshment to get my strength back. I haven't had a drink for over a week now. Until now, I've been too ill to keep anything down."

Hall nodded and said, "Everyone in town has been taken sick by this damned fever. I've been lucky enough to be out of the city on business."

"Would you care to join me for a drink?" the detective asked and lifted his glass up for another sip.

Hall looked suspiciously at the glass. He hesitantly said, "Is the whiskey worth the effort of drinking?"

Jack laughed and replied, "Trust me, I've had worse. But don't let the looks of the place fool you. It's really not that bad of a place to have a drink on a quiet afternoon." Jack knew that for all of the major's snootiness, he enjoyed drinking like anyone else.

"If you say so," Hall said resignedly.

Motioning to the bartender, Jack ordered a whiskey for the major.

He looked the glass over before taking a tentative sip. Hall smacked his lips and said, "Not bad. Not bad at all."

"I must say it's good to see you again, Major."

"I should have stopped by sooner, but I've been a little busy. You seem to have recovered well from your recent wounds." Hall was mentioning the gunshot Jack

had received while trying to stop a crazed soldier. It had been a near thing, and he was lucky to be alive.

"I'm not doing that bad, but business could be better. The winter months are always a little slow, even with a war going on."

"Don't worry; things are about to heat up. But I don't understand how you can live on your sporadic source of income. Do you have some money tucked away in that safe of yours?"

Letting out a chuckle, Jack replied, "Hardly, but we get by on the scraps that come our way. Nonetheless, it is still better than honest work. But now I'm curious, is this a social call or did you have some other business in mind?"

Hall set the glass down on the bar and laughed. "You know me too well, Mister Blackwood. But before I tell you what I came to see you about, I just wanted to thank you for coming with me there at Bull Run. That was a nasty bit of work trying to take that damned hill, but at least we came out of it in one piece. If given the chance, I wouldn't mind giving it another crack."

"It was a near thing." Jack agreed. He then lit a cheap cigar and offered one to the major, who shook his head.

"I've got my own here." He reached into his coat pocket and lit a slender cigar. The fine smell of Virginian tobacco drifted in the air. "Luckily I can still get these from the blockade runners."

"You were saying," Jack said impatiently. The major had the unnerving habit of taking his time of getting to the point.

"I know you're a man who doesn't mind getting his hands dirty so let me get to the crux of the matter."

"Finally," Jack mumbled.

Ignoring him, the major continued on, "I've come to you to offer a job working for me."

"What kind of job?" Jack asked suspiciously. He didn't care to work for the government as a spy – traipsing about the countryside, digging up information that would be filed away and never used.

Looking about the nearly empty saloon, Hall lowered his voice and asked with a whisper, "Is this place safe to talk?"

Jack shrugged his shoulders and said, "It's better than my office since we haven't finished our drinks yet. Go ahead and talk, no one is listening to us except those whores waiting for your business."

Hall laughed. "Very good, Jack, I won't try to be overly secretive. But word has a way of getting around Washington, and the rebels always seem to know our next move. McClellan is already running into trouble at the Virginian Peninsula, and the War Department is at its wits end trying to deal with every bushwhacker from here to Tennessee. There is one in particular that is causing us all sorts of trouble."

"Problems with a guerilla soldier?" Jack said thoughtfully as he studied his friend's face. "Who is it?"

Hall couldn't help lowering his voice even further. He spoke in low, conspiratorial tones. "That's the embarrassing part. It's a Virginian named Richard Gardner. Just two months ago, he used to command a Union Calvary regiment, but the major, as he still calls himself, has since gone to the other side. He knows

too much about our methods and is a constant thorn in our side. Gardner also knows the weakness of every commander and the routes we take to supply the Union army in Tennessee. He is now leading a group of robbers who are daily raiding our supply routes. And just the other day he derailed a train and stole a large amount of gold.”

“And what exactly do you expect me to do?” Jack asked bluntly, though the mention of gold certainly piqued his interest.

“Well, you see he did more than rob the train. Two of our soldiers managed to escape and told us what happened. It seems that after Gardner removed the gold, he ordered the massacre of the prisoners and then started the destroyed train on fire. There were wounded men trapped inside who were burned to death.”

Jack made a face. “So he’s a bastard to boot.”

“The Secretary of War wants Gardner back to be put on trial for treason. The Secretary also wants that damned gold back. It was meant for General Grant to use to pay for supplies and the payroll for the Army of the Tennessee. We’re talking over one-hundred thousand dollars here. The loss has been terrible for their morale.”

“Getting Gardner and that gold would be a hard job to do.” Jack thought of the country that would have to be traveled through while guarding an unwilling prisoner. It would take a small army to locate the guerilla camp and capture a single man among many.

“That’s why I thought of you. I offered up your name in the last meeting I had concerning this little matter. There was an immediate interest after I told them of your exploits leading that troop of cavalry at Bull Run behind enemy lines. You are a resourceful man, and we need someone like that for this type of situation.”

Jack studied his cigar butt before dropping it and grinding it out with his boot. “How much?” he suddenly asked.

“How much what?” Hall asked, clearly perplexed.

“Money. How much money am I going to get? I’m going to need a few men and horses to get there in one piece. There is no guarantee I could get close enough to even take him without some shooting involved. I will be in his country, and his scouts will know every inch of the area. But for the right kind of pay, I could make an attempt to capture him. But it’s going to take plenty of money to convince a few bounty hunters to take that kind of risk.”

Holding up his hand, Hall said, “Please, Jack, say no more. That’s not what I had in mind at all. We want Gardner back in one piece. If we could capture him using troops, we would have already tried that method. But as you said, they know the territory better than we do. I must admit that some of the hotter heads at the War Department wanted to rush in and kill the whole lot of them. But I had another idea. I managed to convince them that there was a better way to get Gardner and the gold back.”

Jack motioned for the bartender to bring another round of drinks.

“Are you sure you can afford it?” Hall asked after the bartender refilled the glasses.

“Don’t worry about me, I’ll be rich by the time I’m through working for you. Now you had better tell me of this plan of yours. At this rate, I’m not sure I can handle another whiskey.”

Hall smiled faintly and said, "Two years before the war, my niece, Rose, got married to some trader by the name of John Wallace. I'm afraid to say that my younger brother was never good with finances and couldn't offer much of a dowry for her. So she had to take whatever man came along. This Wallace then moved down to Tennessee taking Rose with him. They bought a house in the town of Stanton and started a business selling guns. Everything seemed to go well for them until this damn war broke out. It seems that her husband got involved with the wrong bunch of people."

Jack studied the bottom of his glass and said "Gardner?"

"Correct. The Union isn't just fighting armies. There's also men willing to fight for the Confederate cause but don't bother to wear the uniform. Major Gardner leads such men. The newspapers are filled with stories of these bastards. Since Wallace was a gunsmith, he provided arms for these bushwhackers. Against Rose's protests, he went and joined up with them. Apparently he wasn't much of a horseman and ended up getting killed in a raid."

"You seem to know quite a lot about the situation down there," Jack said. "And what happened to your cousin Rose after all this?"

"Luckily I've still managed to keep in contact with my niece. Through letters sent at great risk, she tells me that Major Gardner has setup a camp outside her town. With her husband's death, she has been treated with great respect by the rebels, though I suspect it's her stores of shot and gunpowder they are most interested in. I recently received a message from her that Gardner has the gold hidden there."

"Are you sure she can be trusted?" Jack drained the glass in front of him and felt a little drunk. "She could be used for feeding you false information."

"She is a good girl that I've known since I was just a lad. If anything, Rose hates the guerillas and blames them for the death of her husband. She has ingratiated herself with Gardner, and he spends plenty of time with her."

"That would be reason enough for me to suspect her even more," Jack replied as he motioned for the bartender to fill up his glass once again.

"I trust her, Jack. She has given no false information yet, and she will be an important part of my plan."

"Well, let me hear it. What do you propose to have me do?"

"You will pose as a cousin of hers named Nathaniel Hall. He is a real cousin of mine, and I can tell you enough of the family history to get by. Ten years ago, he went to California and hasn't been seen since. He was always a wanderer, and we assumed that he ran into some type of trouble out there. He is just the type of person that you would like—a born troublemaker." Hall grinned at Jack and continued on. "You will go to Stanton as a trader of guns—we will provide these guns at our expense—who is interested in selling to the Confederate Army. You are to go to Stanton and stay there with my cousin. This will give you access to Major Gardner. Once you've found a way, you can take Gardner back with you along with that gold."

"You make it sound easy, but it is a fool plan," Jack said quietly.

"I beg your pardon?"

Jack retorted angrily. "How exactly am I supposed to haul an unwilling prisoner and enough gold to tempt any man? I'll be a target for every bandit within two

hundred miles. Plus Gardner's men will be trying to catch up with me the entire way. The last time I've checked, no one has made a wagon that can move faster than a horse."

The few bar patrons took notice of this outburst and started to watch the conversation with interest.

"Jack, keep your voice down," Hall said smoothly. "I never said it would be easy. You can take Ezra with you. He can pose as your manservant. You are a resourceful man, which is the reason why I picked you. If you can't get Gardner back to us, then I see no reason why he couldn't meet up with an unfortunate accident. I know your methods, and I may not always approve of them, but they still serve their purpose."

"Now you're just trying to flatter me," Jack said. But he was becoming interested in this matter. They hadn't had a case for a few months, and he was beginning to feel restless. Perhaps it was just the remnants of his fever, but the impossible idea of stealing gold back from a bunch of robbers while kidnapping their leader had a certain appeal to it.

"There's one more thing that may be of interest to you, Jack. When Gardner left our side, it was found that he was bribed to leave. A man gave the major shelter, allowing him to escape. From what I was able to gather from my spies, Gardner was helped along by someone named Ethan Davis. You know him, don't you?"

The mention of Davis brought back a series of bad memories. Davis was a kidnapper and blackmailer who had deserved no pity. It had been a near thing but in the past, Jack had bested Davis. But he had been sure that this Rebel spy was dead and was surprised to hear that he was still alive. "I know him," Jack finally admitted.

"By all accounts he was supposed to be dead by your hand, but word was getting around about a master spy named Davis. We would like to see him permanently removed."

"As would I," Jack agreed. "If I ever see him again, I'll be sure that he is really dead this time."

"Good, well that is settled then. My cousin Rose has already been told that someone posing as her cousin is coming to stay with her. She will give what assistance she can."

"Let me ask you, Major, what else can you tell me about this cousin of yours? What kind of woman is she?"

Hall smiled with the confidence of a gambler about to win a large stake. He knew he had Jack hooked and sealed the deal by saying, "She was a beautiful girl even when she was young. When she got older, Rose broke every suitor's heart when she decided to marry that fool Wallace. Word is that she has gotten even more beautiful with age—if you want to call twenty-six old."

"I'll work for you," Jack said with false resignation. "I'll go down to Stanton and get that gold back. If I can't capture Gardner, I'll make sure he ends up with a bullet instead."

"Good man. Come by the War Department tomorrow morning, and I'll see you are outfitted with money and the right equipment. Can you convince Ezra to come with you?"

“Perhaps. He has a little problem with a lady friend, and I’m sure he wouldn’t mind getting out of town before her father stops by to discuss the matter.”

Hall laughed. “Good. I’m afraid I must leave you for now. Go home and get some rest until tomorrow.” The major slapped Jack’s back before leaving the barroom. The eyes of the whores followed him as he left. Two of them slipped out the door to tempt him further.

Beckoning the remaining prettiest girl to join him, Jack ordered another round of drinks for the two of them. He was feeling stronger already and was looking forward to leaving this city. He clumsily kissed the whore’s ear and gave her a friendly squeeze as he put his arm around her. It would be a pleasure to see Davis again and kill him.

Chapter 3

After pulling the dress over her head, Rose Wallace studied herself thoughtfully in the full-length mirror as she smoothed the cloth down. Picking up a brush and running it through her brown hair, she looked closely at the reflected face. Crow’s feet were just beginning to show on the pale smooth skin of her face. It was a shame to age, she thought, but in the end it really didn’t matter. There was nothing she could do about it, so why worry? She never thought of herself as a beauty, so somehow she was always surprised how men seemed to flock to her.

After the recent death of husband, she was shocked to see that loathsome pastor Horace at her doorstep. It was one thing for him to come on church business, but after a few visits, his consoling words soon turned to marriage. He looked so hopeful in his frayed and dirtied black jacket that she almost didn’t have the heart to turn him down. But she declined his proposal nonetheless and hoped that was the end of that. She was actually glad when Richard Gardner showed his intentions, for he was at least feared by everyone in town. This stopped the amorous advances of the pastor and the hungry looks of the local blacksmith, Elijah.

She hated this town and the idle gossip that had only intensified since the war had begun. Rose knew that the townspeople still had suspicions of her, which was only natural because of her northern roots, but still she found the whispered rumors annoying. If they had known she was passing information to her uncle Calvin in the War Department at Washington, it would only be a short time before she found herself dangling from a noose.

She had to stay here at Stanton if she wanted to keep on making a living on her own. She still had her deceased husband’s business, and the since Federal army could never hope to completely seal off the Tennessee border, the black market in guns and powder was thriving. Through her trusted employee Miguel, she was able to send messages to her uncle in Washington. Her employee traveled north, dodging Union and rebel patrols and returned each time with his heavily-laden wagon. This was the only way to keep their shop stocked.

Deep in thought, she smoothed down the sides of her hair and then arranged the silver necklace around her neck. She knew that Richard was coming over this

morning, and she wanted to look her best for the man who was in love with her. She really didn't know if she was in love with him, but she was admittedly taken by his energy and directness. The soldiers listened to him and were willing to follow him to the ends of the earth. She felt momentarily guilty trying to get information to pass to her uncle, but it gave her a thrill to play the part of a spy for the country she still loved. Just last night she had received a note from her uncle, and in his short, cramped writing was a bold plan that she must soon act upon.

There was a solid knock at the front door, and she felt her breath catch. She felt like a young school girl again, blushing at the thought of love. "Now be serious," she said to herself. "There is no real reason to feel this way. I must consider my Uncle Hall's wishes." But she still scurried to the door and opened it before her maid Elsie had a chance to leave the kitchen.

Major Gardner was waiting, impatiently tapping his foot against the doorsill. Once he saw Rose, his face softened and he gave a little bow to her. "My word, you do look beautiful this morning. I was hoping to catch you at home."

This was his little joke, for she always expected him at this time of day. It was a little respite before the daily business of the camp took him away. Rose enjoyed entertaining him immensely since he always had a kind word for her. She stood back and opened the door wider to let him pass.

Rose said graciously, "Please come in, Richard. I was just making some tea for us."

He was well-dressed with his coat neatly buttoned and his pants immaculately creased. He strode into the front parlor with his hat held loosely. It was a tidy room with a plush rug laid before a crackling fire. A few of her deceased husband's amateur sketches adorned the wall. Waiting patiently until she sat on the sofa, Gardner took the chair across from her.

"How are you this morning?" he asked respectfully. His face was locked on hers as if expecting some bad news. He always seemed to carry an earnest look pinned on his face like the weight of the world was on his shoulders.

She felt herself blushing when she replied, "I am well, Richard. How goes your war?" She was always afraid to ask him direct questions of a military nature with the fear of him recognizing that he was being milked for information. But he never refused to answer her and always replied in an unguarded manner.

"I have a good group of men. When we had a chance to count up the gold we last took from those blue-bellied soldiers—not a single piece of it was missing."

"Well, that is good," she replied. "What do you propose to do next? You seem to have been in town for quite a while. I expected you to ride out soon and continue your raids."

"I'm afraid I've been waiting for further orders. I've been sending out some patrols here and there to harass the enemy, but I'm still hesitant to move out with the main force until we have been given some further information on where to strike next. He is always most explicit on this point."

Rose wished she knew who he was talking about, but Gardner was surprisingly cautious about revealing the man who was giving him orders. Rose weighed her words carefully before speaking. "I do wish you would be careful. You know that I would hate to lose you to a bullet like my poor husband. So please don't take too

many risks.” She was hoping he would give her some detail of the next place he would strike, but was not surprised by his non-answer.

“Don’t you worry, I’ve been through plenty of trouble before. Those Union boys don’t have a chance getting me.” His tone wasn’t boastful, but stated simply by a man who seemed confident in his own ability.

At a loss for word, Rose poured out two cups of tea from the pot. She stirred in spoonful of cream for herself and then pushed Richard’s cup towards him. He always took it black. She could see him looking at the cup thoughtfully.

She said, “I should have mentioned this earlier, but my cousin Nathan is going to come visit me soon,” she said.

“Your cousin?” Gardner asked suspiciously and locked his eyes on hers. “You never told me about him. Is he a Northerner like yourself?” His tone was serious as if it was some type of contractible disease.

“Oh, he’s too old to be conscripted into the army, but he still is interested in our plight down here.”

“That’s to say he’s interested in our money?” Richard said with a momentary grin.

“Well, like my husband, Nathan is an expert with arms. He was planning to bring some down here to the shop for me to sell. Once I told him about the amount of business I was doing, he seemed most interested in helping me. There are some new types of weapons that he managed to get out of the federal armory that seem most promising.”

Gardner suddenly looked interested as he said, “What kind of guns?”

“There is a new carbine that will be issued to the Union Calvary. It is a repeating rifle of a new type of manufacture. He didn’t go into any details but mentioned it was superior to any other design he had ever seen. He would gladly show it to you.”

“Your cousin Nathan may be speaking of the new Spencer Carbine. I would definitely be most interested in seeing that. When do you expect him to visit?”

Rose could tell that the mention of the rifle had interested Gardner since he was always looking for new ways to fight on horseback. She replied, “He has to travel all the way from Pennsylvania and dodge the Union patrols on the border. I was surprised his message was able to get to me, but Miguel always manages to find a way to get through. It should only be a few more days until he arrives in town.”

“We must speak further of Miguel someday. I’ve wondered how you’ve kept that store of your so heavily stocked. Every other store has empty shelves, but you continue to supply us with the cartridges we need.”

“Miguel is most adept at sneaking through the countryside. He knows every trail from here to Kentucky where his brother lives. If any message comes from my family, they know where to reach him.”

“Just how close are you to this family of yours?” Gardner asked. Rose could feel her throat tighten in panic by this sudden interest. “You seem oddly well-informed by them.”

“Oh, I was always my father’s favorite,” Rose said quickly. “My family was sad to see me move down here with my husband. Even with this war, you have to find ways to keep in touch with your own kin.”

The answer seemed to satisfy Gardner since he said, "Well, just be careful. You know the town was already suspicious of you when you moved down here. They would love to find a reason to hate you even more."

"I have no reason to fear as long as you are here to protect me," she replied coyly. As much as she hated to say the words, she knew they were true. His stern countenance and demeanor was enough to frighten the meek people of this wretched little town. As long as he stayed here, she had little to fear since Gardner was above suspicion and his approval provided protection from the petty suspicions of the town.

"My dear, I am glad I can provide such protection to you." His face briefly softened as he said, "And that provides me with an opportunity to ask you a question of the most personal nature." He cleared his throat. "I want to ask for your hand in marriage." He then got down on one knee and took her hand.

His words were hardly surprising to Rose, for she was expecting such a proposal from this stern-faced major. But she couldn't help blush and cover her mouth with her free hand.

Gardner appeared to take her silence as a rejection and quickly said, "I know you lost your husband just a short while ago. But you are a beautiful woman who has held me spellbound since we first met. If you marry me, I promise to keep you safe from harm. You will be well cared for and..."

She cut him off by saying, "My dear Richard, I know very well of your feelings for me. And I share them too." She squeezed his hand. "But you have such a dangerous life right now. I'm not sure I could bear to lose another husband." Those words were true. She wasn't sure if she could handle such a loss again in such a short period of time. "Can't we wait until this war is over before we make any such decision?"

With a sigh, the major stood up and gave her a little bow. "You are right, my dear. My heart has gotten away from me, and I should be more considerate of your feelings. I will take your words and keep them in mind until the day we can plan more freely. When I think you are ready, I shall ask again and pray that the answer is yes." He sat back down, looking quite glum.

Rose quickly leaned over and put her arms around him. She kissed him gently on the lips. She whispered, "It will be." Suddenly feeling confused, Rose dropped her arms to her side and smiled graciously at him.

Gardner stood again, put on his hat, adjusted it, and said, "I'm afraid I must leave you, for duty calls. But if you shall have me, I shall stop by again tomorrow."

"You are always welcome. I will be waiting here for you," she replied gently. She watched as he bowed again and made his own way to the front door. Rose now felt unsure about the duty she had promised her uncle. How could she put Richard into such danger? She felt like rushing out and confessing everything to him. But she stopped herself, knowing she only had a little more time until this mysterious stranger would come. She could perhaps wait a little bit longer before telling Richard everything. Maybe she could convince the stranger to leave, and the major would never need to know of her duplicity.

* * * * *

Gardner resisted the urge to slam the door behind him. Instead, he closed it gently and took a moment to compose himself before riding back to camp. Damn that infernal woman, he thought to himself. She continued to spurn his advances, but he really knew she was beginning to wilt under his constant attentions. He wondered to himself if she really did love him, or was it the fear of being a Northerner stuck in this suspicious town? It really didn't matter either way since he wanted her and wanted her badly. She had money, good looks, and enough respectability to make it worthwhile. She came from a good family and in his heart, he knew that after the war, she would settle down with him to start a new life.

Smiling at that idea, Gardner hiked himself up on his horse and made the quick journey to the camp he had setup outside of town. It was situated on a small open field, with a large paddock to keep the horses protected from wildlife. A number of weather-beaten tents provided a home for the men who could not find a billet in this small town. His lived in a tidy farmer's cottage that he had commandeered for his own use. The owner was a frail old man who gladly took the few dollars to move out and live with his sister. The house was simply furnished but was a perfect place for a bachelor to live.

When he came to a stop, an orderly saluted, ran up to take his horse, and told him that his guest had arrived. Gardner slid down off his mount and began to brush the dust off of his pants and jacket. It was important that he looked good, since he was about to meet the man who he answered to. Nervously adjusting his hat, the major strode into the cottage.

In the front room, a man was sitting with a cane resting on his side. He had the look of southern aristocracy – a high forehead, carefully combed blonde hair and a neat, light-colored suit. He looked out of place sitting on the rough, straw-stuffed sofa. Davis had taken the liberty of mixing himself a drink which he held loosely in his hand. Looking disdainfully at Gardner, he finished the drink with one long gulp before setting it down on the side table.

"Mister Davis, it's good to see you," Gardner said with an offer to shake the guest's hand. "I've been waiting most anxiously for your arrival."

Ethan Davis brushed the hand aside and came straight to the point. "I take it you still have my gold safely hidden away."

"Yes, Mister Davis, it's buried in the front yard here as you instructed. The gold was buried in open view of everyone and near enough to the camp that no one can take it away without being seen."

"There wasn't any trouble getting it?"

"It was waiting on that train exactly as you said it would be. I lost two of my men, but that's really a small price to pay for that much money."

"Very well said, but it is imperative that you keep it here for a few more days more. I'm still arranging transportation to another location."

"I would happily provide the means for you to do so," Gardner offered. He didn't really want to see that gold leave, but at this point he didn't dare to cross this man. Ethan Davis had a network of spies that crossed from the very top of the Northern states to the deepest Southern hideouts. Any attempt to steal from him would be a death sentence, unless the thief was resourceful enough to go beyond the reach of this man.

"That won't be necessary, Major. I am expecting a military escort from General Johnston himself. As to be expected, he has taken a great interest in this money," Davis replied coolly. "This gold will be delivered to him and will used against the Yankees."

Gardner suspected that Davis was lying but had no proof as of yet. Davis may be an upright gentleman when it came to his loyalties, but he had to be tempted by this large amount of money.

Davis then tried to soothe Gardner and said, "Do not worry, Major, I will pass on your role in this matter. You will be amply awarded for your troubles."

"I wouldn't expect anything less from you," the major replied.

"Now I have come here to discuss another matter. I have a new task for you that will tax your resources. This mission is of utmost importance to General Johnston. I have told him that I knew the right man for the job. I shall hope that you will not be a disappointment." Davis drew out a folded map and spread it on the low table before the sofa. He motioned for Gardner to sit down and began to tell him of his plan.

* * * * *

"It's a fool plan," Ezra said.

They were in Hall's office inside the War Department, going over the details of the plan to get them to Stanton. Getting Ezra there had been difficult enough and he sat there, listening stonily until the end.

"Now Ezra," Hall said placating, "what are your concerns?"

"A thousand of them—for one, you are asking the impossible. The two of us could hardly expect to make it back here with a wagon of this here stolen gold. If you haven't heard, there's a war going on. The Union patrols are going to be heavy in that area. If we do make it past them, then the rebels will be sure to find us. I'm sure they won't be too friendly towards us either."

"I'm sure the Major here recognizes the difficulty of our task," Jack said. "But we can at least try."

Ezra shook his head. "It's not worth risking my life for," he spat out. "Anyways, I'm a fugitive and if captured, will be forced into slavery again."

Drumming the desk with his fingers, Jack slyly asked, "So tell me, when are wedding plans?"

Ezra stared hard at him, his lips curled with disgust. "There are no plans. It's just a slight misunderstanding."

"You may believe that, but does the girl's father share the same idea?" Jack asked.

Hall said, "Jack here told me of your plight. Perhaps some time away from Washington would be for the best. It will give you some time for the air to clear."

Ezra spat out, "In future, Jack, I would like my personal business to stay that way."

His partner shook his head and smiled. "I apologize, my old friend, but I was just passing time with our friend here. I meant no slight. But what he says makes sense—it might be better for you to disappear for a while. Anyways, no one would dare take you off to slavery, especially with the kind of firepower we will be packing."

Ezra let out a sigh. After another moments silence he finally replied. “Okay, but I want it known that I’m against this whole idea.”

Hall laughed. “Very good, Ezra, I’ll make a note of that. Now let’s go take a look at this new Spencer Carbine. I’m sure you’ll both be impressed. It’s a marvel! It has a spring-operated feeding mechanism which can feed seven rimfire cartridges into the breech. The cartridges are interesting in themselves—they are factory-made and hold forty five grains of black powder, primer and bullet in a single ready-to-fire case. This will be the wave of the future.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” Jack said, unconvinced.

Chapter 4

Lying uncomfortably on a bed made out of a few sacks of mail, Jack raised his head and looked over at Ezra, who was still busy playing poker with Miles, the expressman. They both had furrowed brows as their elbows rested on the barrel, acting as a table, between them.

The train lurched along the rails, and the lights of the oil lamps swung side to side, casting moving shadows in the inside of the car. Jack groaned, rubbed the back of his neck and pulled himself up. He really felt in the pains and aches that come with age—and from sleeping in an unfamiliar place. The motion of the car and the chaotic squeaks had also stopped him from resting in peace. He felt simply awful and now wished that he had stayed in Washington where at least there was a proper bed.

Ezra looked up from his cards and gave his partner a welcoming nod before returning his concentration to the game at hand. They had found the expressman Miles Ames a friendly fellow who was glad for the company on this long trip. Passing the time smoking and taking the occasional nip from Jack’s flask, they quickly became friends as the miles unreeled underneath their feet. There was little to guard on this trip—just a pile of soldiers’ letters and some boxed provisions held in the freight cars. The passenger cars were also loaded with recently recruited soldiers being transferred to their new posts.

The train had already snaked through Harper’s Ferry, past the place where Jack had tried to kill Ethan Davis. He remembered lying in wait, watching the train trestle over the river where Davis tried to escape. Jack had shot the spy in the leg, causing Davis to slide off the horse and fall into the Potomac River below. How could anyone still live after a fall like that?

Lighting a cigar, Jack continued to watch the card game. After a quick glance at his pocket watch, he saw it was just after six in the morning. “I don’t know how you two can keep playing cards through the entire night,” he commented.

Ames looked up momentarily and answered sharply, “Ezra here got all of my savings. I’m just trying to get some of it back before you two are forced to leave.”

Jack barked out a laugh. He knew Ezra was slick when it came to playing poker and wondered how much he had taken from the expressman. “I warned you, Miles. Ezra can even teach me a few tricks when it comes to playing cards. I would just give up while you can and take the losses in stride.”

"I still have a chance," Ames replied quickly. The hand was soon finished with him losing. He threw down his cards in disgust as Ezra took the pot.

"You're on credit now," Ezra said simply. "That was your last dollar."

"I wouldn't have believed it until I saw it," Ames said humbly. He stood up and stretched. A pot of coffee sat on the pot belly stove, and he gingerly picked it up to pour himself a cup. Taking a sip, he made a face and then opened the side door to dump out the old coffee. The late winter air tumbled noisily into the car, clearing out the stale cigar smoke and closed air of the night.

Jack leaned against the car wall and watched as Ames started to make a new pot. The train was still moving at a good clip. He wondered how much longer before they reached their designated drop-off point.

Pulling out some sandwiches from a leather pack, Ezra went and sat at the door with his feet dangling over the side. Feeling hungry, Jack went to join him.

"It's a beautiful country," his partner commented as they watched the rolling hills pass by.

Early spring Dogwood flowered heavily along the rail line that snaked through the hills and valleys of Kentucky. Jack concentrated on eating his food and recovering his sleep-laden thoughts. Ames then brought them each a cup of freshly brewed coffee. Ezra looked as if he had something on his mind as he stared out.

The detective hesitantly asked his partner, "You haven't said much about this here expedition of ours. You aren't having second thoughts are you?"

The black man gave a quick smile and answered with a mouthful, "I still think it's a fool idea." He took a swallow of coffee before continuing. "There isn't much chance of success."

"I agree with you. On the face of it we have no chance of getting either the gold or this traitor."

"Then why take it on in the first place?"

"I was bored," Jack replied with a laugh, knowing this attitude had a way of annoying his friend.

"Your boredom is going to get us killed someday," Ezra snapped back.

"Now don't get angry. What Major Hall is asking of us is not totally impossible. There may be some circumstances that arise that will favor us. Once we get to the town we will have the information necessary to make a better decision. Anyways, worse comes to worse, we can always just shoot the bastard in the back and make off with what gold we can find. From what we were told, there's enough there for both of us to never have to work again."

Ezra nodded slowly. He said slyly, "So we're really going there to see if we can steal the gold for ourselves?"

The detective looked to see that Ames wasn't listening and then replied, "Of course we are. I'm sure the government won't mind if a little bit goes missing. Anyways, there's no reason to believe they will get any of it back. We are their last chance, so how can they know if we end up keeping some of it for ourselves?"

Taking another bite from his sandwich, the black man nodded. "Well, Washington was feeling a little crowded, so I'm willing to take a chance at it. But I'm not sure how I feel about playing servant for you. Just don't get too carried away ordering me around."

“Don’t worry, Ezra, it will only be for a few days. Where we are going there are only a few slaves. Tennessee never had much use for them.”

Taking his last bite, Ezra threw the crust of bread out of the door. He said in a worried voice, “You know it’s a concern of mine that I am recaptured and sold off.”

“That was a long time ago, I’m sure you have been forgotten by now.”

“True, but I still don’t like going this far south. I’ve seen what they do to captured fugitives.”

“There’s nothing to worry about, it’s only for a few days. If there isn’t any hope of capturing Gardner, then we’ll just pack it up and leave. Perhaps the information we find will be enough to help Hall retrieve his gold. Either way we won’t take any risks unless we have to.”

“I’ve heard that before,” Ezra said sarcastically.

The train gave a sudden lurch as the brakes squealed loudly. Jack was thrown hard against the side of the open door. Ezra managed to scramble away in time, pushing himself back into the car.

“What’s going on?” the detective shouted to Ames.

“I don’t know,” the expressman answered. “We won’t be stopping for coal for at least another hour.”

The brakes dug in further, and the piled up cargo toppled over into a jumbled mess. Jack picked himself up and ran over to a trunk with the key in his hand. He unlocked it and pulled out a shotgun which he quickly tossed to Ezra. Reaching for the Spencer carbine, he quickly began to load it with cartridges. As this was going on, the train grounded to halt.

“You had better get that rifle of yours, Ames,” Jack shouted. “I reckon this is a trap.”

“I do believe you are right,” Ezra said as he craned his neck out towards the front of the train. “It looks like a tree was dropped across the rails up ahead. There was a sudden crack from behind them and the sound of a falling tree hitting the ground. “And someone just dropped a tree behind us.”

“This has happened on this line before,” the expressman said nervously. “The guerillas robbed the train after shooting it up. I heard all about it from one of the survivors. We should take the fight to them before they kill us all.” He started to make his way for the door with his Springfield musket in hand.

“Hold on there, man,” Jack said. “We’re best protected here. Anyways, I have a little surprise for those guerillas with this here Spencer.” He patted the side of the wooden stock. “Now I want you to watch the connecting doors while Ezra watches the other cargo door. Shoot anyone that isn’t wearing blue. I’ll take the side door here and keep them busy.”

“If you say so,” Ames gulped.

Ezra merely scowled and went to his post.

As the others took up their positions, the detective rested on the floor. With one hand, he slowly slid the door shut until only a foot of space was left open. He then began scanning the tree line, looking for movement.

The silence was suddenly broken as a cry went up and gunfire erupted. From the nearby trees, a group of six horsemen thundered out with their pistols firing wildly at the train. Jack concentrated on the lead rider and fired. He swore to himself as the shot went wide. He pulled the trigger guard lever and cocked the

hammer as the group charged towards the stationary cars. Firing again, Jack hit a straggler who slid off his horse with a scream, falling into a crumpled heap. It only took a moment of time to have the next cartridge ready to fire. The detective found that the weapon was difficult to handle at first, but he knew he was getting better with each shot.

The train guards fired sporadically back, hampered by the long loading times of their rifled muskets. But it was enough to stop the initial charge. The raider's pistol fire subsided as they fell back, retreating into the depths of the forest.

"See anything out there?" Jack asked his two companions.

Ames nervously shook his head as he peered out through the barred window of the front connecting door. "I can't see anything but the next car."

"Nothing over here," Ezra said calmly.

Jack looked carefully over the ground and said, "Good. I suspect they are interested in the contents of this car in particular. They probably think we are carrying payroll. They will have to hit us next before the soldiers in the passenger cars can get organized."

His words were true soon enough as a small band of guerilla fighters ran out of the cover of the bushes with pistols in hand. Jack counted eight of them and they were headed straight towards the express car. The lead man wore a pair of dirty overalls and had a long straggly beard. Jack pulled the trigger of the Spencer rifle and the raider fell, clutching his chest in agony. It only took a moment and the detective was able to fire again and again into the rushing fighters. Suddenly the hammer snapped on nothing and only then did he realize he was out of cartridges. But the effect of his gunfire was enough to have scared some sense into the guerillas. By now they had dropped to the ground for cover, only to sporadically return the murderous hail of fire.

A bullet ripped through the wood of the side door, luckily not hitting anything inside the car. Another shot hit the floor near the detective; the bullet ricocheted off of a metal fitting, smacking loudly into the roof above. Jack rolled over, finding some safety behind the closed portion of door and began reloading the carbine. His hands shook slightly as he looked up at Ezra, who just cracked a smile. Once Jack was done reloading, he peered past the open doorway and saw four men lying on the ground. Two were completely still while the others were crawling back towards the safety of the woods. That left four more to be dealt with.

Ezra's shotgun suddenly fired, tearing through the thin wood door he was watching. "I got one of them," he shouted triumphantly. The shotgun blast was loud in the enclosed space of the express car, making Jack's ears ring.

Because of the gunfire, a cloud of black powder smoke filled the inside of the car. Jack coughed and watched as Ames pulled back the hammer and fired through the barred window.

"A little help here," Ames said with a quaver in his voice. He dropped to his knee and began the long process of reloading. "I think I got one too, but I couldn't tell," he said after spitting out the wadded end of the cartridge.

Jack ran over to his position.

"Are you holding out, Ezra?" he shouted over to his partner.

"I'm fine. They were trying to get in through this door, but I gave them a going away present."

With those words, a smatter of gunfire started. A guerilla was firing his pistol through the front connecting door of the car. The bullets punctured the wood, hitting Ames. He fell down to the floor while Jack spun out of the way, falling to his knees.

“Damn it!” the detective shouted and brought his Spencer up to fire. He fired back, quickly emptying the seven bullets into the door and surrounding frame. There was a shout of pain and then the sound of a body slamming hard against the next attached car. Ezra’s shotgun went off again. Now it was quiet except for the moan that escaped Ames mouth. Ignoring the expressman’s pleas, Jack kicked the bullet-torn door open and saw an unmoving man lying crumpled on the ground. His eyes stared into space as his hands clenched tightly around the wound in his chest. Cautiously looking down, Jack saw another wounded man, who was slowly crawling away.

It appeared the raid was over. Union troops from the passenger cars were already lining up in order. They soon began firing orderly barrages into the tree line. With practiced precision, the soldiers fired and reloaded as the sergeants screamed out commands. The bullets smacked into the sparsely leafed woods, sending up birds high into the sky.

Turning his attention to the car, Jack found the expressman being tended to by Ezra. Ames’s face was white with shock, his left arm soaked with blood.

He gave them both a faint smile and asked, “Did we get them?”

“You did a good job, soldier,” Jack said softly. Ezra shook his head and moved away so his partner could get a closer look.

The arm had been hit below the elbow, and the shattered white of bone could be seen under the bloody scraps of flesh. The hand hung at a funny angle. Unbuckling Ames’ belt, Jack pulled it free and pulled it around the top of the arm. He pulled it tightly, using the leather strap like a tourniquet to cut off the circulation. Ames tried to look at his wound, but Jack pushed him back down. “Hold on,” he said as pleasantly as he could. “Just sit still and rest.” He doubted if the expressman was going to be able to keep his arm, but kept that information to himself. It was more than likely an army doctor would have to amputate it.

“My arm, my arm,” Ames groaned as his right hand tried to search out the wounded appendage.

Jack pushed the searching hand out of the way. “Sit tight until the doctor arrives.” He wasn’t sure if there was a doctor on this trip, but Ames was beyond any care he could give him. Reaching in his coat pocket, Jack pulled out his flask and tipped some of the whiskey into Ames’ mouth. This seemed to help, for the expressman let out a sigh and closed his eyes. His breathing was shallow, but the etched mask of pain had left his face.

“Will he live?” Ezra asked in whisper.

“I think so,” Jack answered back in a low voice. “But he’s going to lose that arm for sure.”

Ezra took out a roll of bills from his front shirt pocket and counted a few off dollars. He stuffed them into Ames’ coat. “I feel bad taking money from a cripple,” he mumbled.

With a shake of his head, his friend said, “The doctor will probably steal it anyways.”

After they had seen Ames safely into the care of an army doctor, they watched as the soldiers began clearing away the fallen trees off of the tracks. As the men worked, a quickly gathered squad was kept busy patrolling through the woods. After the trees were pulled off with the use of chains, and the soldiers loaded up again, the train built up steam and continued on.

They rode in the express car for another day until they neared Hopkinsville. It was a small town located north of the border of Tennessee. It had a number of places to buy horses and dry goods. Major Hall had suggested they use this place for supplies, since it was out of the way and often used by smugglers.

As the train slowly slowed to round a tight curve, the two detectives pushed their belongings off of the express car. The well-packed case of weapons landed hard but did not break open as it skidded over the ground and ended upside down in a ditch. Then they each took their turn. Jack slid off of the moving car only to land hard on his knees. Ezra was more graceful and managed to keep his balance without any undue incidents. After the train pulled away, the luggage was quickly gathered and dragged into the underbrush.

“We have to find a better place to hide than this,” Jack suggested.

After some searching, they found a nearby spot that would do. It was a deserted location away from any trails. There they camped overnight, sleeping on the cold ground without a fire. The next morning, Jack went by himself to Hopkinsville, leaving Ezra to stand guard over the guns. Though the detective was given some suspicious looks, the gold in his pockets soon cleared any troubles with the locals. There he bought two good horses and a pair of slow-moving mules to carry the heavier gear. He also bought some extra food, a few bottles of whiskey, and enough tobacco to see them through for a few days. After leaving the city, he was careful not to be followed. Gold, though accepted currency anywhere in the world, could also draw men of a criminal nature. He rode back to rejoin his partner, where they loaded up the mules. It took another solid day of traveling south, dodging Union patrols, before they made it over to the Tennessee border.

Western Tennessee was different than Jack expected. Instead of limestone hills, they found a low plain, covered with trees and the occasional swamp. It was good country for growing tobacco, and so they came across several little farms along the way. The inhabitants of this land mostly kept to themselves, fearful of running into some vengeful force from either side of the war. Jack and Ezra had to skirt along the Tennessee River until they found a passable ford. The waters were high from the spring flood, and it was wet work ferrying the mules across. Afterward, they continued traveling in the rough direction of the town of Stanton.

Chapter 5

“Are we lost?” Ezra asked with annoyance.

“I wouldn't exactly say lost,” Jack replied. He was staring at a split in the trail, not sure which way to go. “I just don't know exactly where we are. The problem with this countryside is that all the trails look the same.”

"Stanton is supposed to be just a few miles south of the river," Ezra said. "How hard can it be to find?"

"I don't know—I've never been there before. Let's try this way," Jack said, pointing to the right. "If we get lost, we can always backtrack."

The detective nudged his horse forward. They were in a forest, thick with trees and underbrush. The trails were all poorly marked. The last time they had seen any sign of civilization was a few miles back when they had come across a small farm. No one was present, so there was no chance to get directions. Nonetheless, they plunged forward, trusting the road they were on would eventually get them to Stanton. Instead the trail had petered out, turning into a rutted path. With the coming of night, it wasn't going to get any easier finding their way. They had been hoping to get to Stanton that day, but now it appeared to be too late for that.

"Shouldn't we stop for the night?" Ezra suggested.

"I suppose you are right, though I was hoping to push through tonight. I'm getting a little tired of traveling." Jack suddenly slowed, reining his horse to an easy walk. It was twilight now; the shadows of the trees had turned the path into a dark tunnel. Even still, it looked like there was something moving ahead. He drew out his Starr pistol.

Once Ezra saw this, he had his Colt Navy at the ready.

"Stop right there!" a voice suddenly boomed out. "You're covered on both sides, so don't try anything."

From out of the underbrush came a large man, his form nothing but a gray shadow against the trees.

* * * * *

Taking a sip of his hot coffee, Gardner let out an exhausted sigh. He was sitting on the old, dilapidated sofa that the previous owner had left behind. Shifting uncomfortably on the worn springs, he thought of Ethan Davis. He had left early that morning with his entourage of bodyguards. It had been a difficult visit, but it would only be a matter of a few days before Davis returned to take the gold away. But still, it was a moment of brief respite for Gardner.

Davis was always asking question after question concerning Gardner's tactics and the supply situation. To be asked those questions from a mere civilian was frustrating and tedious. A master spy understood little of military operations and knew nothing of the hardships the men faced day after day. Too bad Davis ultimately controlled the purse strings, since with the right amount of money, Gardner knew he could whip up enough guerrillas in Tennessee to stop an entire Union army.

Gardner put the coffee cup down and pulled himself up off the low couch. He rubbed the bottom of his back, feeling the pain of the years. If only Davis didn't know the exact amount of gold that was buried out front, then he could take some for himself. It was tempting to disappear down to Mexico never to be seen again. Perhaps he could convince Rose to come with him. He smiled to himself, thinking of finally having her for himself. But he knew she was a respectable woman who was still honoring the memory of her dead husband. It was too bad, since the pair of them would make a formidable duo.

He let out a snort at the thought of John Wallace. That man had been a fool, expecting to be able to ride with these grizzled hunters and take on a bunch of trigger-happy Union soldiers. On the entire journey, the gunsmith had caused nothing but grief to his men.

Gardner thought back to the day that John Wallace died. He was a poor rider, but, for some reason, hurriedly agreed to join the planned raid on a wagon train of supplies. He bragged of his fighting prowess, but throughout the long trip to the wagon trail, the man had whined about the weather and the amount of food that was doled out. His constant complaints had eventually drawn much derision from the rest of the soldiers. It was only a matter of time before they started calling him names right to his face.

By the time they had reached the spot they were going to spring their ambush, Wallace was in a foul mood and couldn't follow even the simplest of orders. Gardner had ordered him to stay behind and just observe the action, but the gun shop owner would not listen. When the wagons had approached, Wallace jumped on his horse and clumsily attacked on his own. A Union soldier riding guard killed him with a single shotgun blast.

With Wallace's foolish attack, they had lost the element of surprise. Another man had died for that mistake. However, the attack still went on as planned and they succeeded in taking the much of the supplies. But Gardner had the grim task of bringing the body of John Wallace back to his widow. On the other hand, the men were happy that the return trip was not filled with Wallace's constant complaints. Gardner smiled to himself, remembering the lies of honor and sacrifice he had told to Rose. The men behind him had managed to stifle their laughter, for though John was a fool, he still had sense enough to marry a beautiful woman. And who would want to insult such a woman?

Lighting a cigar, he took a few tentative puffs. There was a rapid knock at the front door, which ruffled his composure. The door opened before he could respond. In rushed his orderly Patrick. He clearly had something urgent to report.

"What is it?" Gardner snapped angrily.

"Last night, one of our patrols found two men who were brought back this morning as prisoners. One calls himself Nathaniel Hall and he is traveling with his Negro manservant. The two captured men claim to know Missus Wallace, but the patrol was still suspicious of them. They were also transporting a box containing a number of guns."

"Well, where are they?" Gardner asked impatiently. He was curious to meet this cousin of Rose's. He was even more curious to see this Spencer carbine that he had only heard rumors of.

"I had them brought here for your inspection, sir. They are waiting outside for you with Sergeant Raines standing guard." The orderly went and opened the door for the major who donned his hat before going outside.

Gardner noted that it was another sunny morning with only a few clouds. In front of the house was the patrol waiting on horseback. They looked tired and saluted sloppily when they saw him approach. Raines stood, holding his horse, with his pistol held loosely in front of him. The two prisoners had the disheveled look of travelers who had come a long way. One was tall and middle-aged, obviously relieved to finally meet someone in command. Gardner paid little

attention to his Negro servant, but noted the man stood calmly with a scowl fixed on his face.

With his arms outstretched in greeting, the major approached them and said, "You must be Rose's cousin, Mister Hall."

The man answered back gruffly, "I am at that, sir, but this is not quite the welcome I was expecting. I'm here on business, not to be treated in such a way by your men."

"Rose told me you would be coming. I'm Major Gardner, and I admit I should have warned my Sergeant here to be gentler in his dealings with you."

Hall shrugged. "My cousin wrote a few kind words about you. I am very pleased to make your acquaintance, sir."

"I hope you will accept my apologies for my oversight. I've been most busy as of late."

"I accept them provided you return my horses and goods to me." Hall's voice had the hardened confidence of a man used to getting his way in life.

Some warning bell went off in the back of Gardner's mind. There was something worth watching with this man. He said uneasily, "Everything will be returned to you soon enough. I will have my men drop off your luggage at your cousin's house." He motioned for the patrol to leave.

"Good," Hall said sourly.

"If you will walk this way, I will show you to your cousin's house. You will find it a most beautiful place, especially this time of year. Her garden is something to behold."

"I've always found Tennessee to be beautiful, though it's been a number of years since I've had the good fortune of traveling here," Hall said. His servant followed a few paces behind as they walked out of the camp.

Gardner strode next to the tall man, feeling slightly inferior in height. Hall had long strides that he found difficult to keep up with. His first impressions of this cousin of Rose's weren't good, but he had learned from experience to wait and see before finally making a decision about a man. He was someone who seemed concerned about business first, and this behavior was something that he could understand.

* * * * *

Rose was out in the front, planting some flowers in her small garden. It was pleasant to be on her knees, digging into the black soil and feeling the spring sun on her back. Tennessee certainly stayed warmer than Maine and she enjoyed the shorter winters down south. She then saw three men walking towards her home

Of course she immediately recognized Major Gardner, but she did not know the tall man striding purposefully next to him. She immediately knew that this must be the man sent by her uncle to impersonate her cousin. The man had a long coat and held his hat in his left hand, slapping it absentmindedly against his knee. His expression did not look friendly in the least, but had the faraway look of a man comfortable in his own skin. She couldn't help liking the face and wanted to know what stories could create those wrinkles of worry on the forehead.

Behind the stranger walked a black man lugging a saddle bag. He had an intelligent face marked by scars. He scowled at the backs of the men walking in

front of him. He was well-dressed though a little bit scruffy, like he had been traveling from afar.

Standing up, Rose brushed the dirt off of her hands and went to meet them. As they opened the white wooden gate, she forced herself to smile.

Gardner said, "Rose, I brought your cousin here to see you."

"Oh, Nathaniel," she cried out and went to hug him. "It's been so long I could scarcely recognize you."

He put his arms stiffly around her and gave her a cautious squeeze. "My goodness, Rose, it has been a long time. You look more beautiful than ever."

She grinned and said, "I count at least fifteen years since I've last seen you. Everyone in the family thought you were dead. What ever happened to you?"

"Has it been fifteen years already? I remember you as a skinny, freckled girl who just couldn't keep her hands out of my mother's cakes. My, how you have grown since." The man playing the part of her cousin laughed stiffly. "I'm really sorry I was gone so long, but I had some interesting times out in California. There will be plenty of stories to tell." He quickly looked over the grounds and added, "It's a shame what happened to your husband John, but I see he left you a fine little house and a business too."

Rose saw Gardner look upon their conversation with guarded jealousy. She hoped he did not hear the insincere tones of their words, for she could not see how their playacting would fool anyone. She said earnestly, "John managed to provide well enough for me, but I still miss him ever so terribly. Any day now, I still expect him to come walking through that front door."

"That's understandable, Rose. It takes some time before one can accept such a loss. I heard that you were trapped down here surrounded by strangers. But you seem to have made a good place for yourself here. And I'm sure the major is glad for your company."

"The major here has been most kind to me. I almost feel part of the town now."

Gardner gave a little bow and reached for her hand. He gave it a quick kiss and said, "I really must get back to camp, my dear. I'll leave you two, so you can spend some time catching up. You must have plenty of old family history to go over."

"Thank you, Major, for bringing him here," Rose said graciously. This time she knew her sincerity was genuine. "Make sure to stop by soon."

"Don't you fret, I'll be back here soon enough. This afternoon I will want to see your cousin's firearms that he has for sale. I trust his trip down here will not be wasted."

"You and your business," Rose laughed.

Hall said to the major, "Once I am rested and have had lunch, I will send word to you via Ezra here. You will be simply amazed by this new rifle. The Spencer Carbine will change the course of history."

With a smirk, Gardner said, "Save your sales pitch for me this afternoon, Mister Hall. I will be at your service then." He closed the gate behind him and began walking back to the camp.

Letting out a sigh of relief, Rose continued to talk as she watched the Major's retreating back out of the corner of her eye. She was still suspicious that he knew everything and watched for any telltale sign. In the meanwhile, she said sweetly to this stranger, "Let me show you around the house, Nathan. You can consider it

yours while you are down here visiting. I had my maid Elsie get a room ready for you and I've found a place for your servant too." She saw the major stop at the crest of the path and give a final wave before disappearing over the hill.

"Good job, miss," the man said in a low, guarded voice.

She took a step back from this stranger and said, "He's gone now. Tell me, what is your real name?"

"Jack Blackwood," he replied softly, obviously still suspicious of being overheard by unfriendly ears. "I was selected by your uncle Calvin to come here to get back that Union gold. You should have been warned of my coming." He said the last part as a statement not a question.

Rose wasn't sure that she could stand another masterful man in her life. Major Gardner was more than enough. She said stiffly, "Yes, my uncle told me of his fool plan. I'm not sure how he expects to get that gold back."

Jack's eyes softened. He said, "I'm sorry to presume too much, miss. We've had a long difficult journey here. It's not often in life that I've had to pretend to be someone else."

The black man that Rose had assumed was just a servant gave a polite little cough.

Jack said, "Ah, where are my manners? This is my partner, Ezra Miller."

The black man gave a polite bow and said, "I am pleased to meet you, ma'am."

"Likewise," Rose replied politely as she could. She wasn't sure what to make of these two. They were unlike anyone else she had ever met before. She said cautiously, "I'm sure you are both tired. Perhaps you need some time to rest before lunch? I can give you some more details afterwards."

Jack nodded. They then followed her into the house. Her maid was waiting at the door and with a curtsy, brought them to a bedroom.

Rose watched them leave and felt even more divided than ever between the family loyalty to her uncle and the love she felt for Richard. Meeting this Jack Blackwood did not help the matter any further. His manners were most direct and she thought he was rather rude. But yet she had seen some kindness in that unyielding face and that held some future promise. She laughed at her own girlish foolishness and felt younger than she had for a long while. Why did she have a sudden interest in this sad-looking man with his unknown secrets? Her curiosity had gotten the better of her, and she decided she wouldn't tell Richard anything yet.

Chapter 6

Jack saw Ezra sitting on the edge of the bed, yawning and looking at him speculatively. He watched lazily as the detective unpacked the cases that were dropped off by Gardner's men.

"Aren't you going to give me a hand here?" Jack asked impatiently.

Ezra snorted and replied moodily, "I'm just here playing the part of your servant. Please don't expect me to actually be one. I have to take care of my own things at the servant's room—if you want to call a barn a proper place to sleep."

Giving his friend a cross look, Jack continued to stuff his clothes into an old dresser placed against the wall. It was a small room with an even smaller bed. It was crammed with the second best furniture of the house and smelled musty. Ezra was an overly proud man, Jack thought, but there was no reason to needle him any further since they were both tired from the journey from Washington. No matter what happened, he knew he could count on his partner when the cards were down.

Though he had only caught a glimpse of Stanton, it was decidedly a scruffy little town. A main street, muddy with water, ran straight through an open area with buildings on each side. A number of small houses were located on the side streets, and these seemed to be in good condition. The town itself was surrounded by a light forest with a few farm houses and barns dotting the landscape in the distance.

Returning his thoughts back to the present, Jack decided to change the course of the conversation. He asked Ezra, "So what do you think so far?"

"Oh, you mean Missus Wallace? She's a beauty to be sure, but she really isn't my type."

"You mean, sober?" Jack grinned.

Ezra ignored him and said, "I sure could go for that Elsie though. She's really something."

Jack nodded. Elsie was a blonde creature with a fine figure and a beaming face. Though slightly plump, she had a nice little body that would draw the attention of any full-blooded male. It was a wonder that she hadn't been taken away by some local suitor.

His friend went on and said, "The way they were looking at each other, I would hazard a guess that Missus Wallace's heart belongs to that Gardner fellow. But I would bet that you would still have a chance with her if you put some effort into it. You never know at this stage of the game since widows make the best brides for a man like you. They're already used to living with a husband and don't expect perfection from their beau."

Rolling his eyes, Jack said with exasperation, "Damn it, Ezra, I was talking about the situation in this here town. I don't think we have the time for chasing women. Do you think we have any chance of recovering that gold or getting that bastard Gardner back to Washington?"

His partner laughed. "Don't worry, I've given it a little thought, and it will be very difficult. But at least he roams this town without a bodyguard, so he must feel safe enough here. That sergeant of his appears to be a difficult man if we had to tangle with him, but putting him out of the way wouldn't be that hard. Those types are all bark."

Jack couldn't find any argument there. He said, "We shall have to wait and see what happens. You spoke of the love between Rose and Gardner. Do you think there is any chance that she would betray us?"

Ezra merely shrugged. "It's hard to say where her loyalties lie. It would be easy to go over to the enemy if you were surrounded by them. However, she knew we were coming, so the fact she hasn't betrayed us yet is something to consider."

"Well, she certainly was eager to play the part of my loving cousin," Jack said dryly. He had detected a strained nervousness in her voice as she was introduced

to him. Perhaps she felt strange betraying Gardner or was it fear of the major himself? Personally he had found her quite beautiful and did not want to believe that her interests lay with someone else. As for the so-called major, Jack thought the man was self-preening ass. Jack had met that type throughout his life and he had little time to listen to such weaklings. Well, it wasn't his intention to be friends with him.

Ezra interrupted his partner's thoughts by saying, "Perhaps we should see what she has to say about Gardner before we jump to any conclusions."

Jack nodded and shut the dresser drawer.

* * * * *

Rose met them in her simply appointed parlor. It had a fine, thick rug that Jack had guessed was imported from out East. It certainly didn't have the rough look of being locally made. She indicated a low sofa to sit at while she stood by the door to make sure they were not overheard.

Seeing her suspicious actions, Jack asked, "Don't you trust your maid?"

"She is from these parts while I'm always seen as a Yankee stranger. I'm afraid that any out-of-the-ordinary action on my part would set her tongue wagging. Word travels fast in Stanton, and they would love to tar and feather me right out of this town."

"I see," Jack replied. Only then did he really begin to appreciate her position. She was surrounded by strangers and had no one to confide in but the friendly Richard Gardner. Little did she know that they just weren't here for the gold, but to take away the only other person she could trust. Who knew how she would react if they kidnapped the major. It was hardly a consoling idea, but he had been in worse situations before. Once again he and Ezra would just have to make the best of it.

Before returning to her post at the door, she poured out some lemonade and then distributed the glasses.

Drinking, Jack made a face and said, "What can you tell us about the current setup here in town?"

"Nothing has changed here since my last letter to my Uncle Hall. Gardner's men are still encamped here, though regular patrols are being sent out. I'm surprised since they are normally all out looking for easy targets—mostly supply wagons."

Jack merely nodded and said nothing. The lemonade was sour and he wished for something stronger. A bit of whiskey would hit the spot right now, but this girl didn't look like the drinking type.

"It sounds as if the major is waiting for something," Ezra commented.

"I should mention one thing," she said shyly. "Richard had a guest at his house that just left this morning. The man was there for a while, and I only saw him from a distance. He walked with a limp and seemed to have Richard's ear. I have no idea who it was, but the major seemed quite nervous about his visit."

"Why do you say that?" Jack asked.

"Well, Richard normally visits me at least once a day unless he is away. This visitor was obviously important enough for the major to forsake his daily visits. He gave me no explanation as to why."

Jack felt a quick pang of jealousy, wondering why he even felt that way. So this jackass major was busy wooing Rose. As usual, Ezra was right. He shot his partner a glance and saw a crooked smile on his friend's face. "I see," Jack said blandly, hoping not to betray too much disappointment in his voice. "Well, never mind that, Missus Wallace, what do you know about the gold?"

She smiled and said, "That's easy enough. I learned that it is buried in the front of the major's house. In fact the whole town knows about it by now. When the soldiers came back, they were bragging about the load of gold they had stolen from the Yankees."

"Isn't that a bit dangerous for him?" Ezra asked. "It could be taken by anyone in the town."

She laughed and said, "You don't know Richard. Stealing from him would cost you your life. It would be a death sentence for anyone fool enough to try. His men are loyal and would track down the thief. People are simply afraid of crossing the major, so there is no reason for him to hide the money."

To Jack's ears, her words sounded like a proud boast—the words of a woman speaking fondly of her lover. And the next words out of her mouth clinched his hunch.

"I'm afraid there is little that you gentlemen can do here. Perhaps it is best that you leave tomorrow after you have concluded showing him that carbine of yours. With time, Richard will only grow suspicious. He will have you killed once he finds out the truth."

"As long as you keep our secret, don't worry about us," Jack replied coldly. He put down his empty glass. "We'll spend a few days looking around to see what we can do. If we can't accomplish the task given to us by your uncle, then and only then will we leave."

"But you can't stay," she said frantically. Her beautiful face was lined with worry, her hands fidgeting restlessly.

Jack said quickly, "I'm afraid we must stay, Missus Wallace. How would it look if we turned tail and ran back to your uncle with only a few scraps of information? We will have to be cautious for a just few days and learn as much as we can. There is no reason for you to be worried, we will be on our way soon enough."

"Very well," she replied with resignation. "But please be careful. I don't want to have your blood on my hands."

"There's enough blood already in this damn war," Ezra muttered.

Rose nodded and said, "I have already seen my husband brought back dead—shot by a Yankee soldier. My uncle expects too much from me after that." She looked down at the ground and the faintest beginning of tears could be seen in her eyes.

"I'm sorry," Jack said, his voice softening. He couldn't help but feel protective towards this woman. She had already endured the loss of her husband and now she had to handle this delicate situation without giving them away. It was no wonder she looked unusually pale and anxious. Jack wondered how much longer she could face the strain. "Look, Missus Wallace, this war has been hard on everyone. I've lost a good friend and seen men in the prime of their life cut down by murderous gunfire. We'll just have to get along the best we can."

She looked up and gave him a faint smile. "I will try," she said.

“Good. Now I will have to get ready to see this major of yours. I’m sure he will be happy to see this rifle I brought with me.”

Chapter 7

Sighting down the barrel of the carbine, Gardner looked through the sight at the glass bottles that had been set up some fifty yards down the field. He squeezed the trigger, and the shot felt true. A bottle shattered and fell off of the fence. He pulled down on the trigger guard, cocked the hammer and fired again. He worked rhythmically at a good pace, quickly firing all of the loaded cartridges. In the end, four of the bottles had been shattered while three of his shots had missed.

“That’s some fair shooting, Major,” Hall commented enthusiastically.

“The action feels a little clumsy,” Gardner said. He examined the compact carbine again before he passed it over to Raines. The sergeant gave it a good appraising look and aimed experimentally down the sights.

Hall said, “I agree it does take a while to get used to, Major, but it is worth the trouble if you think about it. Granted, the firing rate is a little slower than the old Colt repeating rifle, but it is the reloading time that makes all the difference.”

“Show us,” Gardner said. He found the eager salesman talk bothersome, but wanted to know everything about this new type of rifle.

Hall explained, “Just think, there will no longer be any need for men to bite paper cartridges or use a ramrod.” He took out seven brass-encased cartridges from his coat pocket and showed them in his callused hand. “Everything, including the percussion cap, is inside this cartridge body.” He handed them over to Raines and then showed him how to load the cartridges into the buttstock of the rifle.

The sergeant quickly picked up on the loading method and was soon firing the rounds in quick succession. Six bottles were broken by his quick accurate shooting. Gardner knew that Raines was an expert shot who had hunted since he was a small boy. “That’s amazing, sir!” the sergeant proclaimed with astonishment.

“Raines here is right,” Hall said. “Imagine the firepower you would have if you bought just a few of these. Why you could decimate an entire Union regiment with only a handful of men.”

Gardner imagined swaths of Union soldiers falling like wheat falling from a farmer's scythe. But still, the carbine would eat up ammunition quickly. If Hall was the sole supplier then he would become dependent on the man. “And I suppose you would be supplying all of the cartridges to us?” he asked.

“Well, it’s not exactly something you can make at home, Major,” Hall smiled. “It takes precision machinery to turn out these cartridges. Really, there are only a few shops up north that can handle the making of these.”

“It’s something I would have to consider if I end buying them from you. I don't want my soldiers expending ammunition more than they need to.”

“I can guarantee a hundred rounds of ammunition per carbine you buy. I will be able to easily supply more as needed. I’ve also heard that the Federals are afraid

their soldiers would go through too much ammo if they used these rifles. In my book that's never been a problem. In a bad situation, you can never have enough firepower."

"Mister Hall, my men prefer their pistols when riding. They're so much better for working close with the enemy."

Hall smiled again and nodded. "I agree with you, Major, since I always carry a Starr myself. It's quick and deadly when fighting on horseback. But the pistol makes a poor weapon if you're trying to hit something faraway. A pistol, using the older ammunition, also takes longer to load than this carbine, and those seconds can cost you your life. Now I'm not suggesting you give up your pistols at all, but use this carbine to supplement your arsenal."

"I see your point," Gardner replied. "What do you think, Raines?"

The sergeant hemmed and hawed before answering, "That's one hell of a gun, sir. We could ambush those damned Union soldiers from a further distance if we had a few of these in our hands. It would also be easier to lay down covering fire in the situations where we are forced to retreat."

The major knew his sergeant was right but still found himself annoyed by this Mister Hall. The man spoke to him with condescending tones and Gardner also suspected that Hall's intent with Rose went beyond just a family interest. He could see no resemblance at all between the two, and he could swear they were glancing at each other guiltily when they first met. "Let me ask you a question, sir, just how exactly did you get to selling guns?"

Pursing his lips, Hall answered, "Let's just say I was the black sheep of the family."

"It was my understanding that your family is rather rich. You have neither the bearing nor manners of a gentleman."

"Major, where I come from, that would be construed as an insult. However, I will let it pass since I agree that I am decidedly not a gentleman. If you must know, I had a disagreement with my father over a dance hall girl and ended up running away with her."

"Tell me what happened."

"I was sixteen at the time. Well, it turns out that my old father was right about her," Hall laughed. "At the first hotel we stayed at, she left me. She also took all of my money. I was penniless, but too proud to return home to face my father. So I decided to go ahead and face life on my own. I did a couple of years in the army and after that, I spent some time out in California trying to make my fortune."

Gardner thought that Hall's words seemed true enough since he had the look of a scoundrel. "I gather you did not succeed in that venture," the major chuckled. "You must have had a most interesting life so far. Tell me about your time in the army. I'm curious what you did for them."

"It was out West. I was in the cavalry for four years as a scout. It was work that served me well later in life. I can tell you there were a few bandits out there who wished they never tried to rob me."

"I see. So you just aren't a city boy trying to make a few dollars off of me? You should be using your skills in a more profitable capacity." Gardner really didn't expect much from this Yankee, but an additional experienced man who could ride was always needed. Perhaps there was more to this person than first met the eye.

Hall just shrugged, holding the unloaded carbine in his hand.

“Perhaps you could give us a demonstration of your marksmanship?” Gardner asked. “Raines, go setup some more bottles for Mister Hall to fire at.”

The sergeant grinned as he went to setup some more targets. He pulled some dusty bottles out of a crate and balanced them carefully on the split rail fence in the distance while Hall began reloading the rifle.

Hall waited until Raines was back and said, “I’m a little rusty, and you have to understand that I’m not really familiar with this weapon yet.” He pulled the barrel level to his eye and sighted down it. With quick and smooth reactions, the seven bottles shattered one by one.

Raines whistled in appreciation.

Gardner was surprised and could only say, “Now it is my turn to compliment you, Mister Hall. That was some fine shooting indeed. You truly are a humble man if you can outshoot Sergeant Raines here and not brag about it. If you can ride as well as you shoot then you would be an invaluable addition for my little private army.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about taking potshots at my fellow countrymen,” Hall said carefully.

“Hell, ask the sergeant here. I’m not trying to appeal to your patriotism or some silly talk of Southern Rights—let’s just look at this as a simple business proposition.”

Raines interjected, “Major Gardner is right. Some of us ride to rid our country of you damn Yankees, while others go for a chance to make some money. I must say we did rather well for ourselves taking that Federal gold.”

Gardner shot Raines a stern look in an attempt to caution the man to be quiet. There was no reason to tell this man everything yet. “Don’t let the sergeant mislead you since none of us are going to retire wealthy from these raids. But I will tell you that there is a fair amount of money to be had that we end up spreading around. I look after my men and make sure they are paid well. You see, I don’t want any regular army recruiter taking my talent away.”

His face tightened up with thought, Hall said, “I’m not sure what to say.”

“Think it over for a while. Perhaps you could join us on our next little raid and see what we do? If you don't think you can handle it, then there's nothing lost.”

“I would be happy to at least go along and observe. Up north we’ve heard so much about the guerilla raids. The army is going crazy trying to protect every mile of road and track from their attacks.”

“Good enough, Mister Hall. The Union army is currently just west of us. We’ve been making minor raids against their supply wagons routes and various patrols. We have to do anything we can to slow down their army. You can go on the next one with us. I will have Raines stop by and tell you before we are ready to go. But be warned, we will be leaving on short notice—I am waiting for some of my men to return and give me news of the enemy’s movements. Perhaps, in another day or two, we will be ready to go on a major attack.”

“I will be at your disposal,” Hall said.

“Good, Mister Hall,” Gardner said and he clapped him on the back. “After that we can talk some business about those carbines of yours. Now why don’t you go back to Rose and make sure to send her my regards.”

"I will at that, Major," Hall said and he made his leave carrying the carbine over his shoulder.

Gardner watched Hall's back as he left. Turning to his sergeant, he said, "So what do you think of our Mister Hall?"

"I don't trust any Yankee," Raines spat out.

"Neither do I," Gardner said softly.

* * * * *

"So how do you like my friend Richard?" Rose asked Jack as she put down her glass. She said these words to placate her maid Elsie who was hovering around the dinner table.

Jack looked up from his plate and winked. "He seems to be a fair man to do business with."

Picking at her food, she said, "And he liked that new gun you were showing off to him? Soldiers and guns! That's all I hear about these days."

"It would seem that he is interested in the Spencer, but he wants me to prove its use to him."

"Whatever do you mean by that?"

"He wants me to accompany him on a raid into enemy territory."

She could feel Elsie's eyes on her as she carefully said, "And you agreed to do this, cousin? Please remember what happened to my husband John."

"Don't worry, Rose," Jack replied confidently. "You friend Richard has guaranteed my safety."

Rose forced herself to smile. She said, "His word is good enough for me. I almost forgot to mention that I'm having a little get-together tomorrow night."

Jack grunted noncommittally and continued eating.

Continuing on, Rose said, "Seems your visit here has stirred up this little town. Several of our more prominent members wish to hear what news you have from the north. What we hear is usually second hand. I'm sure they would like to hear your views on the matter of the war."

"I wouldn't think they would like to associate themselves with a Yankee."

"I guess they will just have to deal with it," Rose smiled. "The mayor and his wife will be coming. Also Elijah the blacksmith and his friend Frank, who runs the dry goods store. I hope you don't mind being the center of attention."

"I don't see why I should mind. This is your house and if you wish to parade me about, then I can only agree to my cousin's wishes."

She was pleased by his kind words and said, "Would you care to join me in the parlor for an after-dinner glass of wine?"

Jack smiled back at her and said, "I would prefer some whiskey if you have any in the house. I'm afraid I've never had the nose for wine."

"Elsie," Rose asked, "Do we still have some of John's whiskey tucked away in the cabinet?"

"Yes, ma'am," Elsie replied dutifully.

"Bring Mister Hall here a glass and I will take some wine. After that, you may retire for the night. I won't need your services for the rest of the day."

"Very good, ma'am," Elsie said as she scampered off to the kitchen.

Rose let Jack take her by the arm and walk her to the parlor. It was good to have a man living in the house, and it made her feel safe again. Her dead husband John was no lion, but he knew how to keep her happy with his small talk about the business of the day. She wondered if this man here could provide the same sort of comfort. She knew it was a foolish idea but was still tempted by the thought nonetheless.

They sat down across from each other with Jack on the sofa. She took the straight-backed chair which made her sit up stiffly. She felt uncomfortable but didn't want to give this man any ideas by sitting too close to him.

After Elsie brought in the drinks, Jack pulled out his cigarette case. "Do you mind if I smoke?" he asked politely.

She didn't even allow her husband to smoke in the house, but she found herself nodding her head and saying, "Please, go right ahead."

He lit a cigarette, inhaling deeply with a pleased look. "I'm sorry, I've been rather rude. I forgot to offer you one."

"I've never smoked before. I was always taught that it's a filthy habit."

"It is at that," Jack nodded sagely. "But it gives you something to do with your hands."

She surprised herself again by saying, "Please, let me try just a small puff." She leaned over and took the cigarette from between his fingers. She noticed that his hands were worn, with scarred knuckles. Holding the cigarette clumsily, she took a discreet puff only to let out a racking cough. "I don't know how you men do it," she gasped as she returned the cigarette to him.

"Oh, it gets better with practice. I've known a few women who have smoked," he replied.

"Well, it's hardly a habit I will pick up any day soon. Tell me, I couldn't help noticing your hands. How did you get all those marks on them?"

He studied them for a moment and replied, "It's been a long hard life, cousin of mine. I've seen plenty of fights and hard work." Finally taking a drink, he made an appreciative face. "Your husband had good taste in whiskey."

"He often traveled to Kentucky and found alcohol useful for conducting business. He rarely drank when he was alone."

"I drink alone too often," Jack said quietly with a note of sadness.

"Tell me, how could you be alone?" She knew the question was impolite, but she wondered how such a strong man could not have anyone else in his life.

He frowned and studied the glass in his hand. "I was married a few years ago. My Mary was a sweet woman, and we were very happy together."

Rose was sorry to dredge up these painful memories but asked, "What happened to her?"

"We had a little farm down in southern Illinois. The neighbors, who lived a few miles away, got sick and Mary went to take care of them. She was always trying to help others. In the end, she ended up getting sick herself and came down with a terrible fever. There wasn't anything I could do, and she died in my arms." He said the last words quietly as if the events had happened to someone else.

"I'm sorry," she said. And she meant it.

"It's alright. It was a long time ago."

“Then we do have something in common. We were both married and lost the other person in our life.”

“I guess so,” he said blandly as he took another sip of whiskey.

“Tell me, have there been any others since?”

“Oh, a few,” Jack replied.

She felt a sudden rush of unexpected jealousy.

“But nothing ever lasted,” Jack went on to say. “They were the wrong women at the wrong time of my life.”

“You should never give up. The right person will come along someday.”

He finished his drink and said, “You may be right. Now I’m afraid I must leave you for the night. It’s been a long day, and I need to get some rest.” He stood up and gave her a small bow before leaving.

Rose sipped her untouched wine and found she didn’t really care for the taste at that moment. Perhaps it was time for her to also retire for the evening.

Chapter 8

Snapping his eyes wide open, Jack took a deep breath. He listened carefully to the creaks of the house. He reached over to light a match. The flame momentarily brightened the dark room as he leaned over to light the oil lamp on the side table. The oily light flickered dimly, casting dark shadows against the wall. Inside his jacket, he found his cigarette case. Lighting one up, he leaned uneasily against the headboard and thought of the dream he just had.

He had been back at his old farm in Illinois, searching through the small cabin for his wife. In the dream, he knew that she was gone forever, but he couldn’t help but search through the little homestead. The curtains were blowing fiercely as the darkness came. In the corner of his eye, he saw the swirl of a long black dress. Running after it, he went out into the night. The moon was shining blood red. The surrounding farm was quiet. Not even the chirp of a cricket broke the stillness. He turned as he heard the barn door shut. He frantically ran over and tugged it open. Inside was a circle of candles around two sawhorses that held a simple pine coffin that was closed. It was the same coffin he had built the very day she died. He leaned over and opened it only to find her best black dress. She was gone.

He hated that dream. After Mary died, he had that dream every night. Week after week it dragged on until he thought he was going crazy. Enough whiskey kept the nightmare away until time had faded the memory of it. It had been years since he had last had it, but its return brought back a sour taste in his mouth. It was that damn Rose, dredging up old memories that best stay forgotten.

Tapping his ashes on the floor, Jack pulled himself out of the bed. Even in the chill of the morning his forehead was wet with sweat. He wiped it away with the sleeve of his nightshirt. He pushed back the curtains and scraped the frost away on the panes. He saw that it was grey outside. The blackness of the night was gone and morning was just an hour away. Opening the window, he threw the stub of his cigarette to the ground and gratefully breathed in the fresh air.

Leaving the window open, he went and got back into bed. He was tired but his mind was too active to sleep. He thought of his encounter with Gardner yesterday. He wondered why the major invited him to go on that raid. Perhaps Gardner was suspicious and wanted a way to test him. Or perhaps it was jealousy. Here he was inside Rose's home, while the fool major would give anything to be in the same position. Jack lit another cigarette, but stopped inhaling as he heard the squeak of floorboards.

Listening intently, he heard muffled footsteps outside his door. It sounded as if someone was listening outside and then left. He exhaled. Smiling to himself, Jack thought that it could be Rose. Perhaps she was outside, wondering if he would repulse an invitation to share a bed. He laughed to himself – more likely it was the maid Elsie on some early morning errand or sneaking back from seeing a lover in town.

Rose was a damn fine woman—too fine for the likes of him. He could understand how she would fall for someone like Major Gardner. He was a man who knew all the proper social graces a proper gentleman must know. But nonetheless, it was a shame that Rose could be in love with such an obvious ass. Well, there wasn't much he could do in the little time he had here. She could hardly be expected to go back to Washington with him and leave everything here behind.

He heard footsteps again, but this time he recognized the heavy footsteps of Ezra. There was a quiet knock at the door.

"Come in," Jack answered.

It was Ezra alright. He came in grinning and shut the door. With a nod he sat at the foot of the bed. He had a tired look on his face, but his eyes were bright as if he was hiding a secret. "I thought you were up. I could smell the smoke."

"What have you been up to?" the detective asked suspiciously.

"I guess I have to take back everything I said about this trip. It was worth coming down here after all."

Jack groaned. He knew he was about to hear something he didn't want to know. "Okay, I'll bite. Tell me."

"While you were off having your after-dinner drink with Missus Wallace, I was trying to get comfortable out in the barn. I wasn't looking forward to keeping company with the horses on a cold night, but Elsie came out to give me some supper. Let's just say she stayed for a while and kept me warm."

So that who was sneaking past his door. "I'm not sure if I want to know this. You had better hope she keeps her pretty mouth shut until we leave."

His friend laughed and said, "Don't worry, Jack, she's a real quiet girl unless she's with me."

Jack laughed. "That's not what I'm worried about. If she goes and gets with child, then half the county will be here to string you up."

With a shrug, Ezra dismissed his partner's worries. "We'll be out of here long before that will be a problem. She is a friendly girl and wanted to know everything about the big city we came from. I played my part and didn't tell her anything that she didn't need to know."

“Well, I’m glad you got something good out of this trip. Last evening I spent just a few minutes with Rose and then made my excuse to get some sleep. It was a long day. I don’t see how you could spend all night awake.”

“I tried to sleep, but she wouldn’t let me,” Ezra laughed. “Face it, you’re just getting too old.”

“I prefer to call it wisdom,” Jack grinned.

“Look, I can tell that Rose likes to have you around. But you’ll have to move a little quicker if you want to make a good impression with her.”

“Don’t be a fool,” the detective grumbled and changed the subject by asking, “What are your thoughts on Major Gardner inviting me on an excursion with his troops?”

“After you told me about it yesterday, I gave it some consideration. I think you are right in your thinking that the major is trying to test you.”

“But for what purpose?”

“Either he suspects you are a spy, or he has some other motive.”

“Like what?” Jack asked.

“I’m sure you noticed his jealousy concerning Rose. Perhaps he wants a chance to kill you on this trip. Look what happened to her husband when he went out with the major. The man was brought back dead. Just make sure the same doesn’t happen to you.”

Jack gave this some thought and answered, “Do you think I should I go with Gardner? I wish you could come with me to act as my backup.”

“You’re supposed to be Rose’s black sheep cousin. You had better go, or he will become more suspicious of you. It’s likely that he just thinks you’re a mean old bastard who is only interested in money.”

“Well, he’s got that part true,” Jack answered gruffly. He knew that his partner was right, but he didn’t like the idea of leaving his back unprotected with this band of guerillas. He would have to play it by ear and always be on guard. “I’m afraid I’ll have to end up shooting some Federals.”

Ezra shrugged and said, “If they aren’t friends of yours then you don’t owe them a thing.”

“And you call me a mean old bastard?” Jack asked with a laugh. He really was worried about fighting the Union troops, but he knew he would have to do whatever was required to save his own skin.

The sun had come up now, and the room grew lighter. Jack snuffed out the lamp and got out of bed. “I suppose I should dress and have some breakfast with Rose. If I am called away by Gardner, I expect you to keep your ear to the ground and find out what you can. Watch and see how many guards are left at their camp. Perhaps we could find the best time to dig up that gold.”

“While you were off shooting with the major, I was able to visit the town. They didn’t pay me any attention, and I visited some of the shops there. As long as people thought I was shopping on your behalf, they didn’t seem to mind. It seems that the blacksmith Elijah was a good friend of Mister Wallace. Once he died, his attentions were most serious with Rose. The town pastor was also interested in her.”

“Plenty of gossip in this town,” Jack commented.

“The smaller the town, the more the gossip. Seems the people here aren’t too happy with having Gardner and his men here. With the events up at Fort Henry and Donelson, some people think the tide is turning against the rebels.”

Jack nodded. Those two forts were taken by General Grant in February. It allowed the Federals to move their boats down the Tennessee and Mississippi River. The loss of those forts caused Johnston to retreat into the western side of Tennessee. He had lost prestige and over ten thousand men to the daring attacks.

“Word is they want Gardner to leave before the Federals take the rest of Tennessee.”

“This is all very interesting. Perhaps the people here could provide us with some help.”

“I’ll see what I can turn up,” Ezra replied glumly. “But don’t expect much.” He left to get some breakfast.

Jack shaved and dressed before going to the dining room. Elsie was there, putting down plates and silverware. She had tired eyes but looked at the detective with embarrassment. She giggled nervously as he sat down to drink his coffee. He dug into the eggs and started in on the toast when Rose came to join him.

Jack rose and pulled the seat back for her. He sat down again and studied her from across the table. She had a rested look of someone who had slept peacefully through the night.

“I trust you slept well, cousin,” Rose said with an unexpected smile.

“Well enough,” he replied simply. She almost seemed to know that Jack had spent an uncomfortable night. He smiled at her before starting in on the bacon. “That Elsie of yours is a fine cook. I’m surprised she had enough time to make us breakfast this morning.”

Elsie’s face turned a bright red, and she quickly scampered off to the kitchen.

“Yes, she’s a popular girl alright,” Rose said. “Half the families would like to have her as their maid.”

And half the men in the town probably already have had her, Jack thought to himself.

Rose went on and said, “She’s a good cook. I just wish I could afford more help around the house. It’s not good for the two of us to be alone here in these uncertain times. Who will be here to protect us if this town is pillaged by soldiers?”

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” Jack replied. “This town is small enough to be of no military importance.”

“I hope you are right,” she said with little conviction.

“I was thinking of visiting the town today. Would you be willing to show me around?”

“I was planning to go in and buy a few items for the party tonight. It will give me a chance to show you my little shop.”

Chapter 9

The town of Stanton was little more than a main thoroughfare with several small one-story buildings built on each side. The road itself was a rutted dirt

track, but at least there was a wooden boardwalk that kept pedestrians out of the worst of the spring mud. As Jack walked with Rose at his side, he could only see a few inhabitants out, running whatever errands that kept them busy. But upon the sight of a seeing someone new in town, many of them stopped to gawk.

"I guess they aren't too used to strangers," he commented to Rose.

She laughed. "Yes, they are rather provincial. I'm still considered an outsider even though I've lived here since my marriage."

"I'm surprised no one came and swept you off your feet. There can't be a woman as beautiful as you around here."

"Now you are just flattering me. Of course I've had my suitors since the death of my poor husband, but I really didn't think any of them were suitable for me."

"Except for the major?" Jack asked sharply.

She took a moment, staring at him, before answering. "Perhaps it is because Richard and I are both outsiders to this town. Maybe that would make you understand my reasons why I love him."

"Perhaps," he replied without much conviction.

Rose then stopped and pointed to a nearby store. "This is it—the little business that keeps food on the table and the roof over my head."

It was hardly an imposing place—it was made with the most base materials, but the wood frame was painted with a fresh coat of white-wash and the picture window was clean, showing a display of pistols inside. Through the window, Jack could see racks of guns, a counter, and a man standing inside.

"Who is that?" Jack asked.

"Miguel, of course. He worked for my husband and decided to stay on to help me. Let's go inside, and I'll make the introductions."

Jack opened the door, setting off a ringing bell attached to the frame above. He let Rose enter first. Once inside, he saw that the shop was as tidy inside as it was outside. There was Miguel, bowing like a gentleman to Rose, but all the while keeping a steady eye on Jack.

Rose said, "Miguel, this is my cousin Nathaniel Hall."

"I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, *senor*. Any friend of Mrs. Wallace is a friend of mine." His dark Spanish face betrayed little emotion as these words were spoken, so Jack felt as if this new friendship was strictly probationary.

"I'm glad to hear that," Jack replied. "It looks as if you do a good job keeping this place shipshape."

"Thank you. The *senora* here told me that you also deal with guns. But tell me, why do you still use a pistol like the Starr? There are much better designs."

The detective looked down at the gun hanging on his hip. He laughed. "Let's just say I'm sentimental. This gun and I have been through a number of scrapes together. So far it's saved my life more times than I can count."

Miguel nodded. "That's a good enough reason for me. One should stick with the things that prove faithful."

"Would you care to look over the store?" Rose asked.

"I would be happy to," Jack replied graciously.

The next hour, Miguel showed him the various pistols, shotguns and rifles in the store. For such a small town, the number of guns was certainly impressive.

Even more impressive was the amount of gunpowder and shot. There was enough here to supply an army for a small battle.

After he had seen everything, Jack commented, "You certainly keep a good stock here, Rose. I'm not sure why the farmers here would need such an arsenal."

She smiled. "They only use shotguns for hunting. Most of it I sell to the Rebels. Richard and his men buy the bulk of everything."

"From what I've heard, you must be doing good business."

"Fair enough," Rose admitted. "But there is no reason for the two of us to compete for the business of the major. I'm sure that repeating rifle of yours is better than anything I have in stock."

Miguel raised an eyebrow. "I would like to see this new rifle myself. I have heard rumors of such things, but I cannot believe it is really better than the old way."

"I was of the same thought as you, until I had seen it myself. I'm sure we could setup a demonstration for you."

"That would be much appreciated, *senor*."

Any further conversation in that direction was cut off by the arrival of a customer. It was a man with thick arms, a black straggly beard flecked with gray, and piercing blue eyes. He looked sharply at Rose before his attention centered on Jack.

Rose said, "Oh, Elijah, how nice to see you. This is my cousin Nathaniel."

Elijah reached over to shake Jack's hand. The grip was crushing, but the detective merely stared back into the man's eyes, not showing any discomfort at all. Their hands eventually dropped. Jack's knuckles ended up feeling bruised.

Rose went on and said, "Elijah is the town blacksmith."

Jack said, "With a grip like that, I'm not surprised."

"I came to ask you if the party is still on for tonight," Elijah said.

"Of course it is. I only came into town to buy some more food and drink. I never seem to have enough."

"Good. I heard that your cousin was in town. I was hoping to meet him."

Rose smiled benignly and said, "You'll have plenty of time to talk to him tonight. I don't know why you are in such a hurry."

Elijah gulped once and said hurriedly, "Because I wanted to see for myself if this man had any chance of taking you away from me. I can see that he's no threat."

"Hold on there," Jack said roughly, surprised by the man's forwardness.

"We've already discussed this, Elijah," Rose said before the detective could react in a more violent fashion. "I haven't made my mind up about anything in that regard. Now I suggest you leave before you make even a bigger fool out of yourself."

With a scowl, Elijah stormed out of the store, slamming the door shut.

Miguel shook his head. "Be careful with that man, *senor*, his heart is full of hate."

"I will keep your advice in mind," Jack said as he watched the retreating back of the blacksmith.

"Never mind him," Rose said, trying to control her emotions. "He's still upset that I didn't rush over to marry him after my husband died. It will take a while for him to get over it."

"But he will still come to your party tonight?" Jack asked skeptically.

“It would be cruel not to ask him.”

“Perhaps it is crueler for a man to see what he cannot have. Tell me, if you are considered a stranger in this town, then why does anyone bother coming over to your house?”

Rose laughed. “You've been on the road for too long, cousin. In small towns, there isn't much to do. Any chance for drink, dancing and song is most welcome—even if it is at my house.”

* * * * *

As the violin started, the dozen male dancers bowed while their partners curtsied. The music was soon in full swing, with the practiced movement of feet and graceful flourishes of arms and hands. The women were all dressed in their finest with long flowing dresses with just a hint of heaving bosom. The men had their best suits on with starched collars and carefully knotted cravats.

The dance floor was Rose's living room, but the furniture, except for a table that held refreshments, had been removed. The band of violin, guitar, banjo, and bass fiddle filled their air with a thrumming beat that made it difficult to talk. Even with the open windows and front door, the air was thick with the smell of perspiration and perfume. Those not dancing clustered together in groups to talk loudly over the cacophony of music.

Jack found himself in a corner, surrounded by a knot of gentlemen asking him questions about the war.

“So you've recently been to Washington, sir?” asked a chubby man with a red face that had beads of sweat plastered to the skin.

“Yes, I've been through there. It's like an armed camp.”

“How do the people there feel about the war?” asked another man whose stained collar was pinching his sunbaked neck.

“I wasn't there that long,” Jack lied. “But after the Battle at Bull Run, they are most eager for good news. The feeling is the war will end with the Rebel states victorious unless something happens to turn the tide.”

“So it is your opinion that the war cannot last much longer?” the chubby man asked.

“I cannot say, sir. It's been some time since they've tasted victory. Perhaps the bitterness of war will sway their minds towards peace.”

“And how do you feel about peace?” a new voice asked. It was Elijah, the blacksmith. His tone was still unfriendly, but the presence of so many witnesses seemed to have tempered the worst instincts.

Jack shrugged. “I think peace is impossible until one side has been defeated.”

“And what side do you favor?”

“I am a stranger in this town. It is not my place to say in fear of offending someone.”

Elijah pushed the point and asked rudely, “Surely you must favor one side over the other.”

Before Jack could respond, the knot of men around him gave way to a feminine form. It was Rose. She was dressed in a long white gown with silk embroidery. The neckline plunged to a daring low that would have been scandalous anywhere but the most liberal of cities. She offered her hand to Jack who took it.

She said to the assembled group, "I hope I'm not interfering. I do know how you men like to talk politics, but you're supposed to have fun at this party, not make enemies of a man you hardly know. Anyways, my cousin Nathaniel here is of a distinctly non-political bent. Isn't that true, cousin?"

"Of course," Jack heard himself replying.

"Now gentlemen, I suggest you concentrate on enjoying yourselves. Cousin, do you dance?"

"Not very well," Jack admitted.

"Come, it isn't that hard to do," she said with a brilliant smile. She then led him through the crowd and on to the dance floor.

Shooting a glance, Jack saw that Elijah was staring at them, his face set in a mask of pure hatred. None of the other guests seemed to notice.

Rose gently showed Jack the necessary steps. They were soon dancing comfortably with each other, and his confidence grew with every passing moment. Rose's smile was kind, and her eyes were sparkling as he held her close. With her body pressed against his, Jack felt a yearning towards this woman - a yearning that was unexpected in such strange circumstances. He felt as if he could have danced with her forever, each song binding them closer and closer together. But that wondrous spell was soon broken.

The music suddenly died. The dancers stopped. Through the front door came Major Gardner. He surveyed the assembled party-goers with obvious distaste. Once he spied Jack and Rose together, his expression darkened with a fury.

After marshalling his emotions, he finally spoke. "Good evening, Rose," he loudly hailed them. "I am sorry for my tardiness, but I received some unexpected news. Now if I could have a word with your cousin, that would be most appreciated."

Jack followed him outside. The music immediately swelled up again, causing them to walk some distance away. There the crickets could be heard, along with the odd tree frog.

"Well, Mister Hall, I'm glad you are having such a good time with your cousin. But be warned that she is mine."

"So I have heard," Jack replied easily, hoping not to further anger this petty man.

"Just remember to keep that in mind. Anyway I've just receive word that the Federals are gathering close by. I've been ordered to slow them down. I expect that you will still be joining us? We will be leaving early tomorrow morning."

"I will be ready," Jack replied.

"Good. I will have Sergeant Raines notify you when we are ready to leave." Without a further word, Gardner strode off into the night and soon disappeared into the shadows.

Jack returned to the party, disappointed to see that Rose was off talking to her guests.

* * * * *

Much later, after the party had disbanded, Jack was leaning on the front porch railing, enjoying a cigarette. On purpose, he didn't register any recognition when

Rose joined him. But still he saw that she was looking tired but happy from the activities.

“What did Richard want?” she asked.

“We are to move out tomorrow morning,” Jack replied.

Rose had a sharp intake of breath. She said with concern, “I was hoping that you wouldn't go with him. It's dangerous. Just look what happened to my poor husband.”

Jack stubbed out his cigarette and continued to stare out to the blackness of night beyond. “I'm a little more experienced in these matters than your husband was. I'll be safe enough.”

The silence from Rose was deafening. After a minute, she finally said, “You men are nothing but fools. What purpose does this serve?”

He explained, “I don't want Gardner to suspect me. If he thought I was a spy, my chance of living would be even worse than if I went on a raid with him. As I said, you don't have to worry about me.”

“But I do. I may never see you again.” Then from the darkness, her hand wrapped around his; it squeezed his own in a frantic manner. There was an uncomfortable pause and then a moment later, they were kissing in a familiar fashion.

Jack rubbed his hand against the smooth skin of her neck, feeling her long hair tickling the back of his hand. Her mouth and tongue were eager, almost hungry, and he could feel her shake with the nervousness of a virgin on her wedding night.

“Let's go to my room,” she finally said.

Rose led him inside and they went to her room. There they stayed together until Sergeant Raines pounded on the front door.

Chapter 10

Looking through his field glasses, Gardner examined the two Federal soldiers standing guard down the forest trail. By all rights they should have remained hidden, but he could see they were at ease with an entire army at their back. It had taken time for him to crawl through the sparse underbrush undetected, and he felt uncomfortably close to them. From the scout's report, the enemy army was spread out in a large camp. Davis had been right—the army under General Grant was on the move. Davis had ordered him to make an attempt to slow this Federal force down until the army under Johnston could be brought into play. The major sighed to himself at the impossibility of the task. He then began to methodically crawl back to the safety of his men where Raines and Hall were waiting.

It had been a fairly easy trip to the Tennessee River with only a few enemy patrols to hide from. The force of guerillas had covered the roughly thirty miles in less than a day before they had setup camp for the night. Two men stood guard while another man volunteered to scout ahead to make sure they would not stumble upon the enemy in the morning. He had returned in a few hours and stated that the reports had been correct of the enemy's whereabouts. He had seen a massive army that was encamped in a large field. From the direction of the

arriving troops, it appeared that they were slowly headed towards Pittsburgh Landing. Davis had already known of this, and Gardner had marveled at the number of spies that must be reporting to him.

His soldiers had cautiously approached this encampment, leading their horses as they went. His forty men were in good spirits even though they were initially suspicious of Hall. Gardner was surprised to see how good a rider Hall was; obviously the man had not lied about his past cavalry experience. The gun seller also followed orders without complaint and even shared his meager lunch with two men who had forgotten to take their own rations. The major had to admit that his men were slowly beginning to take a liking to this Yankee stranger.

After his crawl through the underbrush, he stood up and carefully brushed the dirt off of his knees. He saw Raines stoically stand where he last saw him—his eyes automatically scanning the land for potential threats. Standing away from the sergeant, Hall looked bored with the proceedings.

“You told me we were going to be attacking a wagon train,” Hall spat out. His face had the same tired look that everyone else shared.

“Well, Mister Hall, it appears I told you a little lie. I’m still not sure of your loyalties and didn’t want the news of our movements to accidentally get out to the wrong people. But the fact is that only Raines here and I knew where we were going today.”

“That’s the whole Army of the Tennessee out there,” Hall continued on as if he hadn’t heard Gardner’s words. “You aren’t expecting us to tear in there and start a fight with the whole lot?” His voice wasn’t one of fear, but incredulity.

“Just wait and see, Hall,” Raines replied dryly. “The major here has a plan and they always work.”

“My sergeant’s flattery shouldn’t be easily dismissed,” Gardner said with a smile. “If everything goes according to plan, we will escape unharmed. Though it seems difficult, I have been ordered to slow this behemoth of an army down until General Johnston is in a better position of stopping it. Now that you are here, perhaps you will give us a hand.”

“I won’t risk my neck unless you willing to pay me for my troubles,” Hall countered.

“I don’t think you have much choice in the matter,” Raines blurted out angrily.

Gardner put up a consoling hand and said, “Sergeant, there is no reason to threaten Mister Hall here. I’m sure he will do as we ask.”

Hall’s face stiffened into a cold mask. He finally nodded. “Very well, since I’m here, I suppose I can help—provided you take another look at the guns I have for sale. Tell me what you are planning to do.”

Suppressing a triumphant grin, Gardner replied, “Ahead there is a picket of two men guarding the trail. Their job, as you know, is to guard the camp from a surprise attack. I suggest we quietly take care of them and then we can bring our horses into action. We will charge into the camp, shoot up the place and with a bit of luck, we can cause a little trouble before we make our escape.”

Hall shook his head. “Those soldiers guarding the trail will be hard to deal with. It will only take one shot, and the entire camp will be warned of our coming. They will then line up in formation like proper soldiers and shoot us to hell and back. Do you really propose we go in there and cut the throats of the guards?”

"That's the idea," Raines grinned.

Gardner said, "Even though we aren't rank amateurs in these matters, Mister Hall, I was hoping you could show us the proper technique."

Raines smiled at Hall's obvious discomfort.

"If you say so, Major," Hall said resignedly. "Tell me what to do, and I'll take care of it, provided you really promise to buy those Spencer carbines from me."

"That's a fair bargain, Mister Hall. I'm sure we can help each other out in that matter. There are only two of them up ahead, and they are looking a little bored. Raines will take the man left of the trail while you take the other on the right. It will be necessary for you to strike at the same time so the alarm is not given out."

"I already know that, but what exactly will you be doing?" Hall asked.

"I will be waiting with the horses with rest of my men. Once you have returned to us, we will make our attack."

"Don't worry, Hall," Raines said nastily. "We've done this countless times before. Those city boys don't hear so good out here in the country. Just stalk them carefully and then move in for the kill. It only takes one good cut across the throat and they'll be quiet forever."

Hall looked at Raines blankly and replied, "I've killed men my share of men, Sergeant. Don't worry, I'll know what to do when the time comes."

Raines chuckled and said, "I hope so."

"Mister Hall, don't take my sergeant's words to heart. He is just worried that you will mess it up and give us away. So don't go away angry."

Hall merely shrugged and said, "I'm not angry and standing here jawing won't get the work done." He turned and stalked off into the underbrush, taking the right side of the trail.

"I don't trust him," Raines said quietly.

"Neither do I," Gardner shot back. "If he does anything suspicious, feel free to leave him behind—preferably dead."

The sergeant nodded and trotted off into the woods, moving quietly as he went. He was an experienced trapper and Gardner wondered how he could be replaced if anything happened to him. Perhaps someday, a lucky Yankee shot could kill him. If he could convince Hall to join them, then it would be good to have a possible replacement for the cantankerous Raines.

Knowing he had little time, Gardner went back to join the rest of his men. He walked quickly through the tangled trees to find them waiting impatiently in the clearing they had found near the trail. The men were busy nervously checking the loads in their pistols and quieting the horses. No matter how many times they did these raids, the men were still keyed up. Everyone knew that it only took one mistake before you caught a bullet. They had ridden with few casualties so far, but the men also knew it was only a matter of time before they ran into something they couldn't handle.

Pulling himself up on his horse, Gardner took out his field glasses and scanned the path ahead. There was little to see with the trees in the way, but the familiar action calmed his nerves. This was a dangerous place to be, and they could be surprised by a roaming patrol at any moment. He wished that Raines and Hall would hurry up and complete the job. He nervously rubbed his moustache and suddenly stopped himself since it was important to the men that he always looked

unfazed by uncertainty. Nonetheless, as he waited, the minutes seemed to drag into hours.

The birds were chattering loudly in the branches above and sunlight glimmered through the young buds. Ahead of them, a sudden shot rang out, and the birds scattered noisily. There was another shot, this one softer than the first.

Damn it! That could only mean that blasted fool Hall went and got himself discovered. Gardner held up his hand high in the air to warn his men to be quiet. It was hardly necessary since they were veterans in this type of warfare, but he did it out of habit.

“Private James, scout ahead and see what’s happening” Gardner ordered in a low voice.

Before the private could reply, a bugle called out, and the distant shout of men could be heard. The shot had warned the Federals that trouble was out there in the woods. It was only a matter of time before soldiers were sent to investigate. The major looked at the private and shook his head to stop him from leaving. Because their location was still unknown, there was no reason for them to break cover yet.

Another shot was fired and Gardner could hear heavy footsteps running towards them. Hall broke through the underbrush, his face heavy with sweat. He ran to his horse and quickly pulled himself up.

“What happened, Mister Hall?” Gardner shouted.

The gun runner pulled hard on the reins and wheeled his horse about. He replied, “They’re coming into the woods! We have to get out of here!”

“I mean what happened to Sergeant Raines? Where is he?”

“He’s dead,” Hall said simply and pointed towards the direction of the camp. “We have to hurry, Major.”

Gardner felt a pang of loss for his old sergeant. He was always there and though they were never friends, his companionship would be missed. “How did he die?” he asked with a sick voice.

“This isn’t the time or place—order your men away from here before we are found. They are marching scads of soldiers straight in here to flush us out. It will only be a matter of time before their cavalry joins in the hunt.”

The men around began to murmur nervously and look about the sparse woods for the best avenues of escape. Pistols were drawn and bridles held tightly in sweating hands.

“Nobody move,” Gardner snarled over his shoulder. “First, I want Mister Hall to tell me what happened. Then I will tell you men what to do.”

Hall gave an exasperated sigh. “Very well, Major, I’ll make it quick. Raines and I were sneaking up into position. He was unseen and drawing close to his man. Suddenly the soldier turned and spat some tobacco out. In that moment he saw Raines and immediately shot him. My man ran towards the camp before I could get him. Using my pistol I then shot the soldier who killed Raines and left before they could bring up reinforcements.”

“A bit of bad luck, eh?” Gardner replied coldly. “But at least you revenged Raines’s death. Now we’ll have to see what we can salvage from this situation.”

The calls of the approaching infantry could now be heard through the trees. The voices seemed to be getting closer. It was only a matter of time before they were

going to be discovered. Gardner did not want to be beaten back by the Yankees, so he barked out, "I want a loose skirmish line!"

"They'll cut us into ribbons," Hall warned, his eyes wide with shock. "The trees are too closely packed together for us to ride together."

"Don't tell me how to run this battle, Mister Hall," Gardner growled back. He didn't like anyone telling him how to fight.

His men complied with his order and they were soon riding in a rough line towards the camp. Tensions were high as his soldiers nervously peered through the foliage, looking for a target. The progress was slow as men rode past trees and the struggled through the thick underbrush. Gardner rode behind them with Hall at his side. It was hard to maintain order and the line of horses soon became broken and disjointed.

They didn't have to wait long before someone started firing. It was impossible to know whether it was their side or a Yankee soldier, but suddenly all hell broke loose. Horses reared up in pain, and men fell off their saddles as minie balls started humming through the air. Then there was a barrage of nearby musket fire that scattered leaves as it tore into the ragged line. More horses and men fell to the ground, splattering it red with blood.

"This is a massacre," Hall shouted. He was tucked low in his saddle with his Starr pistol resting in his palm.

Gardner gritted his teeth, knowing that Hall was right. This was no place for horsemen to be.

They came upon a small group of Yankees busily trying to reload their rifles. The pistols of the guerrillas quickly cut them down. A ragged cheer rose from his men's lips. It was good to see the enemy and fight back and win. They had shown these blue-bellies they weren't afraid.

"I want an orderly withdraw," Gardner finally shouted to his men. "Keep firing in their direction until we can get on to the trail and ride clear."

The noise and confusion was too great for his men to retreat in any type of orderly fashion. As soon as one man saw another turn away from the battle, it became a rout. His soldiers broke away and started galloping away as quickly as possible. Horses bunched up together and fought to find a passage through the close trail.

The Yankee gunfire continued to pour it on with the sound of minie balls breaking the air. The shots were not aimed and only chance took down a rider or a horse. But Gardner could see that the situation was becoming desperate. If the Yankees outflanked his men, then it would be the end. He would be captured and hung as a guerilla fighter.

Hall's voice rang out. He began shouting the men into order. "One at a time, boys! One at a time!"

Gardner watched in amazement as his soldiers listened and actually began streaming single file down the path. Soon Hall ushered the major forward, and the group was moving speedily away from the sound of gunfire. In the distance behind them, Gardner heard a cheer from the Yankee soldiers. He felt his face burn in shame. It was impossible that those blue-bellied bastards had finally beaten him in battle.

Chapter 11

With a groan, Jack slid off his boots and let out a sigh of relief. His body ached. It felt good to be back in Stanton still in one piece. Upon his arrival, he had found the house strangely unoccupied for this time in the morning. No one but the maid Elsie was here. Meeting him at the front door, she was surprised to see him and had only blushed and turned away when asked of the whereabouts of Ezra. She soon left, readily agreeing to make the detective some coffee and breakfast. Jack then retired to his bedroom to change.

He heard footsteps, and his partner came through the door with an excited look.

"The entire town is busy wondering what happened to Gardner and his men," Ezra said. "Everyone noticed they came back with fewer men than when they left. Tell me, what happened out there?"

"Where is Rose?" Jack asked, ignoring the entreaties of his friend.

"She's down at the camp right now. She left her store and went over to Gardner's house."

Jack said angrily, "I'll tell you what happened—that damned fool of a major almost got us all killed. He's so full of himself to think that the Federals could never take him in a fair fight. He's been too busy raiding wagons and gunning down wounded men. Then the idiot decided he could go against an entire army!"

"So it went badly?" Ezra asked eagerly.

With a sigh, Jack said, "There's really not much to say. It was an easy trip there, and we only spent one night camping out. There was a large encampment of thousands of Union soldiers a few miles from Pittsburgh Landing. Gardner was apparently ordered to slow them down."

"Seems like a fool's errand," Ezra commented.

"It was. We were supposed to raid the camp, killing whomever we could, before running for it. Gardner sent Raines and me to take care of the two soldiers guarding a path leading to the camp."

Ezra said, "I was in town and noticed Raines did not return with the rest of the men."

Jack smiled nastily and said, "That's because the bastard is dead. He was about to go in and kill that poor soldier guarding the trail, but I shot the sergeant before he had the chance."

Ezra's eyes widened and said, "That must have surprised him."

With a quick laugh, Jack said, "It surely did. All hell broke loose after that. After taking a potshot at me, those Union boys went running for help. The warning bugle was blown, and soldiers from the camp were rushing out of their tents, heading straight towards me. I ran back to Gardner and told him that Raines was killed by one of the guards. That seemed to make him angry to no end, and he still wanted to charge right into the camp. It would have been suicide. I tried to talk him out of it, but he lined his men up and started riding right into their guns, like the Charge of the bloody Light Brigade"

"He must be brave or a fool."

"I'm thinking he's a small man with big ideas. One nice barrage of rifle fire, and soon enough the major ordered a retreat. We lost eight men just for his pride."

"We? You almost sound proud of them. What about those soldiers they tried to kill?"

Jack carefully replied, "Gardner's men are good soldiers, and they weren't afraid of following orders. With a little real leadership, they could really damage the Union Army."

Ezra asked sarcastically, "But you think Major Gardner doesn't provide the right leadership?"

"Oh, he's not bad, but he's going to be a whole lot worse without his sergeant Raines. As far as I could tell, Raines was the real leader. However the soldiers seemed to like me well enough since I gave them some help in escaping. I really wasn't looking forward to being caught myself. We somehow managed to stagger back here, but it was a near thing, let me tell you. We had to dodge some aggressive patrols the entire day and through the night."

"You're damn lucky to be alive," Ezra said as he shook his head.

Jack suddenly remembered that he had asked Ezra to keep an eye on the encampment. He asked, "And do you have anything to report?"

"Gardner took the bulk of his men with him and only left five behind as guards. So with the losses they took today," he paused, "that leaves thirty-six men, not including the major. The remaining guards didn't do much except gamble and drink themselves sick every night"

"When the cat is away," Jack grinned. He knew the ways of soldiers freed from the eyes of their commanding officers. "So we just have to wait until Gardner goes on another raid. If I can somehow stay here in town with you, then perhaps we can take care of those guards and dig up that gold. With any luck we can leave before anyone is the wiser for it."

"There is going to be two problems with that," Ezra said with exasperation.

"You think they would hurt Rose once they found out it was us?"

"That is one problem. But I'm more worried about you. Since Raines is dead, Gardner will need someone to keep his men in line. You are the obvious choice for the job. Where else is the major going to get a trained military man around here?"

"You may be right," Jack admitted. "But we'll have to worry about it later. Right now I need to have something to eat. Elsie said she would make me something."

"She knows how to cook," Ezra answered with a lopsided grin. "There is one more thing I need to tell you – someone is waiting for Gardner at that little home of his. I didn't get a clear look at the visitor, but I suspect it is Ethan Davis."

That news made the detective pause. He finally said, "As much as I would like to kill Davis, I doubt he would be here in town to give every order personally. Right now we only have to worry about Gardner and the gold."

Ezra merely shrugged his shoulders. They went to the dining room. Elsie was there and she gave Ezra a friendly look as Jack sat down. She poured him a cup of coffee before returning to the kitchen.

"She's a pretty thing," Jack commented.

"And a good cook," his partner added.

Elsie came back with a plate which she dropped in front of Jack. "It's not much, sir, but it will have to do." It was piled high with bacon and eggs.

“That is more than enough,” he said greedily. He gave her a leer over his mug. She really was beautiful.

Elsie giggled, curtsied and fled back to the kitchen.

“Sit down and have a cup of coffee,” Jack said to Ezra in-between bites. The food was good and hot. His partner was right—she was a good cook.

At that moment, Rose hurriedly came in to the room. Ezra, who was about to sit down, remained standing out of politeness. Jack merely nodded at her and continued to eat. He was too damned hungry to care about social conventions.

“Thank God, you’re alright,” she said breathlessly. “Richard told me you were fine, but I had to be sure with my own eyes.”

“Don’t worry, Rose, it will take more than incompetence to kill me.”

“How dare you say that?” her face flushed with anger. “Richard is well-respected for his military feats.”

“That is the story he tells. He may be good at attacking helpless men, but yesterday I didn’t see anything but foolishness on his part.”

“That’s not what I heard. The story that is going around town is that you messed up like a greenhorn, alerted the Yankee army, and went and got Sergeant Raines killed.”

Instead of getting angry, Jack merely laughed it off. Of course the major would make such an excuse. But Gardner was probably closer to the truth than he guessed.

“I don’t know what you find so amusing,” she seethed.

Ezra gave a little bow to her and carefully said, “I think I will be going. There are some other parts of town that I would like to take a look at.”

Jack said, “Be careful, Ezra. Don’t get caught snooping around where you aren’t supposed to.”

“Don’t worry, they just ignore us Negroes.” He chuckled to himself and left. They heard the front door open and the crunch of his feet on the graveled walk.

Rose bit her lip and finally sat down at the table. “I’m sorry I spoke that way to you. You see, I was so worried while you were gone. I kept expecting to hear the worst.”

“I didn’t know you cared,” Jack said flippantly.

She blushed and scowled angrily. “I don’t want to see any friend of my uncle’s harmed in any way. I’m tired of this endless bloodshed. It seems like such a silly thing to fight over – we should just let the South go their own way.”

“That’s not our decision to make,” Jack replied bluntly.

“Are you always so rude with everyone or is it just us women?”

Pushing his plate back, Jack went and stood to look out the large bay window. He lit a cigarette and quickly blew the smoke out. It hit the pane of the window and dispersed against the glass. He said, “Men fight for many things, but men will fight hardest for an ideal. No one wants to see the states separate in such a manner. Now I want to apologize for my short temper. I’m just concerned about your relationship with Major Gardner. He is not the right man for you.”

“Now why do you care?” she asked triumphantly. “I do believe that you are the one in love with me.”

Jack felt his face grow hot, so instead of facing her, he studied the garden outside. He composed himself and said uncomfortably, “You could hardly blame

me after the night we spent together. Rose, I'm getting tired of these childish games. I'm not a young man anymore, and I've never been comfortable saying these kinds of words. So I'll be blunt. I've developed a certain affection for you these past days, and I wish only the best for you."

"Oh, Jack," she cried out. She stood up and ran over to him.

He turned to meet her and took her by the hands. He looked her in the eyes and said, "Will you excuse my boorish behavior?"

"Oh, be quiet," she whispered and kissed him on the mouth. It was a cool kiss that turned hot within seconds. Her arms went around and pulled him closer.

Returning the kiss, Jack felt happier than he had for a long time. It felt good to be with this woman again. After a blissful moment, he pulled back from her arms and said, "What about your Richard?"

"Oh, hang him," she said with a giggle and kissed him again.

"You may be closer to the truth than you think," Jack admitted with a whisper.

Rose dropped her hands away from him and took a step back. "What do you mean, Jack?"

"I shouldn't have said anything, but you have to know the truth. Your uncle Hall has sent me here with two goals in mind. Not only I am supposed to retrieve that stolen money, I also have to bring Gardner back to face a trial. The government wants to try him for treason."

She let out a pent-up breath. "It's foolish for you to try. Let's forget him and this whole war. Take me away from here, and we will never look back."

Shaking his head, Jack said, "I gave my word to your uncle that I would do the best I could. At the very least, I have to get that gold back into the right hands. If you want to help me, then it would only make my job easier."

"I'll do anything that I can," she replied earnestly. "Richard invited himself to dinner tonight, and his guest will be coming with him."

"That could prove to be useful as a diversion. Who is the guest?"

"That's easy - Richard finally introduced me to him when I was visiting the camp. It's a man named Ethan Davis."

Feeling his jaw drop open, Jack said, "Ethan Davis? What did he look like?"

"He has bad limp but dresses well; blond hair and a moustache. Definitely has the air of a proper southern gentleman."

"So it really is Ethan Davis," Jack muttered to himself. So now he had a chance to take care of some old business. This was turning out better than expected.

"Why, is it important?" Rose asked, interrupting his thoughts.

"Not very," Jack lied. He smiled to himself.

Chapter 12

Gardner paced back and forth, gritting his teeth. He could feel Davis's eyes following him as he treaded over the threadbare rug. He had just told the master spy of the disastrous events at the camp raid. With a little bending of the truth, he had managed to twist the story enough to deflect most of the blame onto that bastard Hall.

“So you’re telling me that you failed to slow them down at all?” Davis spat out. He looked angry and clenched his cane tightly.

Gardner eyed the cane warily and replied, “Well, honestly, what do you expect me to do with just forty men? The Yankees could swat us like a fly anytime they wanted to.”

“You’re supposed to be the military genius around here,” Davis countered ruefully. “Pray, what am I to tell General Johnston? Right now he and Beauregard are at the town of Corinth, but they need more time to gather their forces together. I told him that you were the right man for the job. I gave him my personal recommendation that you could do it, so now my reputation is called into question.”

“I’m sorry, but I just don’t have the soldiers available. If you cut loose some of that gold, then I’m sure I could easily round up some more men.”

“That gold is for the rebellion,” Davis said icily. “It is not for you to spend as you wish.”

“I have expenses,” Gardner said. He knew this argument was useless, but he had to make Davis understand the limitations that he worked under. How could he be expected to fight an army with such few resources?

Davis finally sighed and said consolingly, “I know it is hard for you, Richard. Money is tight everywhere, and I understand your difficulties. Good men are hard to find these days. You have a loyal core of fighters that serve you well. Perhaps I expected too much from you and your men.”

“We will do what we can and will always attempt to carry out your orders to the best of our ability.”

“I know you will,” Davis replied soothingly. “Tell me, what are you going to do about the loss of Sergeant Raines?”

“I told you about this Mister Hall. For enough money he may be willing to take the place of Raines. The men seem to respect him enough, considering he is a Yankee.”

“After what happened you expect he would be of some use to you? The way you told me, this Mister Hall was responsible for your lack of success.”

“But he’s an experienced man,” Gardner admitted. “And those are hard to find right now.”

“But perhaps he is just a little rusty? I would like to meet this Mister Hall, and only then I can give you an opinion of him.”

“I took the liberty of inviting us over to dinner at Rose’s. Her maid is a fantastic cook. I’m also sure that you will enjoy the company of Rose.”

Davis nodded. “Ah yes, that magnificent creature. You’re a lucky man. Tell me how did a girl like that decide she wants to marry someone like you?”

“I truly have been blessed,” Gardner stated simply. He really didn’t want to get into the particulars of his relationship with Rose. He did not trust men like Davis who had that easy, comfortable way with women. This spy would use any such information to his advantage.

“Mister Hall and Missus Wallace certainly make odd cousins,” Davis said. “You would hardly think they were related just by the age alone.”

Gardner merely shrugged and said, "Rose never went into particulars other than she hadn't seen him for a long time. They seemed to know each other well enough when I first brought him to her."

"Perhaps I can ask them myself," Davis said thoughtfully. After a moment's pause he changed the subject. "About that gold you have buried out front, I've finally come here to get it. I was unable to get the escort I wanted, so you and your men will have to take it to General Johnston's camp. From there it will be his responsibility."

Hiding his disappointment, Gardner merely said, "Good, I'll have it dug up and loaded into a wagon for you." He was angry at himself for not taking his chance at that gold, but then realized that there may be other opportunities.

* * * * *

Rose looked over the dining room for anything that may offend the eyes of her visiting guests. The table was set with her finest china, and she had helped Elsie polish the best silverware. She had a good bottle of wine out and a small decanter of whiskey for Richard to share with that Mister Davis. She heard Elsie busy in the kitchen, and the smell of baking chicken wafted through the open door.

Her thoughts returned to Gardner, wondering if she still loved him. Jack was right about him, but she couldn't help feeling guilty about her sudden change of heart. Richard had always been so kind and was one of the few solaces left after her husband's death. How would she act when he came to dinner? It was a question she did not want to consider, but knew she had to keep up the pretense of love until she could safely leave Stanton with Jack.

There was a knock at the door, and Elsie quickly hurried to answer it. Rose could hear Gardner's voice in the hallway. She steeled herself and forced herself to smile as she heard their approaching footsteps.

Richard came in. Davis limped behind, talking to Elsie, who was blushing from the sight of such a good-looking man.

"Good evening, my dear," Gardner said with a polite bow. He was dressed in his uniform, with a cavalry sword slung on his side. He looked every part the southern gentleman but his presence was dimmed by the charisma of Davis.

The master spy bowed before her and took her hand. He gave it a lingering kiss and said, "I thank you for inviting me to your beautiful home." His manner was brisk and easy as he looked around the dining room. "I see you have laid out a fine table to eat at. I can only be assured the meal will be equally good. I've been traveling for too long and rarely get the chance to eat a proper dinner. This will truly be a change for the better."

Rose found herself curtsying like a young girl. "You are too kind," she said gently. Davis was truly an attractive man who had the charm of a real gentleman. She smiled graciously and showed them to their seats. They waited patiently to sit until she had seated herself.

Elsie poured out the drinks and then stood back, waiting to serve.

Davis took an appreciative drink of whiskey and said, "I was hoping to meet your cousin, Mister Hall. Won't he be joining us?"

She felt the nervousness swell inside and could only stammer out, "H-h-h-e hasn't been feeling too well lately, so he has decided to go to bed early."

Gardner let out a horse-like laugh that she found rather disturbing. "So he couldn't face me another day?"

"Perhaps we should go and see him?" Davis suggested with a hint of slyness in his voice. "Or do you think he is sleeping?"

"I don't think that is a good idea," Rose answered as she attempted to control her emotions. Was this man suspicious of Jack? His probing questions were unsettling, but masked with simple concern.

"Then perhaps we should let him rest," he replied simply. "I would hate to tax his strength any further. But I do know that the major here has some further uses for your cousin."

"Like what?" Rose asked suspiciously.

"Gardner has just lost his sergeant to an unfortunate accident. He needs a replacement and an experienced rider like your cousin is a rare find. Do you think he could be persuaded to join us?"

"I'm not sure," Rose answered evasively.

Elsie broke up their conversation by returning to serve the soup. It was pea soup flavored by onions and carrots. She watched the faces of the men as they began to sample the beginning course.

After a tentative spoonful, Davis nodded appreciatively. "This is a fine soup."

Gardner chimed in and said, "I told you Elsie here had a way with food." She merely curtsied shyly and hurried off to the kitchen again.

"It must be good to have a man around the house again," Davis commented.

"Well this place can be a little lonely. But Richard here visits me every day when he can."

"I do at that," Gardner added as he dipped a crust of bread into the soup. "It is always a pleasure to make my visits here." He slurped noisily on the soggy bread. Rose wondered why his poor manners had never bothered her before.

Davis smiled and said, "But still this house is quite a walk from town. Doesn't that ever trouble you with just Elsie here? I mean a Northerner such as you must be viewed with some suspicion down here in Tennessee."

"My husband died fighting against the Yankees," Rose snapped.

"Mister Davis, what are you driving at?" Gardner asked, coming to her protection.

Davis held up his hand in a placating fashion. "I must apologize for making her angry. I'm merely curious how a woman found herself in such a predicament. Ah, here is the chicken. It does look delicious."

Elsie carried out a silver platter with a plump chicken surrounded by white potatoes. She set it down and let Gardner begin cutting into it.

"That looks to be a fine cut of meat there," Davis said graciously. "Again I do apologize for any unintended harm I may have caused. The passing of your husband must still be a painful memory."

"Don't let it worry you," Rose said quietly as she took a bite. The chicken, as usual, was delicious, but to her it tasted like sawdust.

The spy went on. "I've been discussing the future with the major here, and they were the very reason for my previous words. You see he will be leaving here soon, and I want to see that you are protected from any harm."

“Who would hurt her?” Gardner asked incredulously. “I would kill any man who dare raised his hand against her.”

Davis smiled. “This chicken is amazing—once again my compliments to Elsie. Is this veal stuffing?”

“I do believe so,” Rose answered weakly.

Davis continued, “But to answer your question, Major, I’m afraid that tempers in time of war can run high. Those who can’t strike a blow against the strong will easily attack the weak.”

“That may be true,” Rose admitted, “But the people in this town have never done anything outwardly cruel to me.”

“I should hope not,” Gardner said.

Davis said, “Nonetheless you may want to consider my proposition. We are leaving on the morrow to join up with General Johnston as he advances on the Union Army. I’m having Richard here break up the camp and apply his men to Johnston’s needs as scouts. It would be better for you to come along with us. That way your safety could be guaranteed.”

“How could you ask a woman to live with an army of men?” Gardner said with astonishment. “It is scandalous for a woman of her position to even consider such a thing.”

“Spoken like a true gentleman,” Davis said with a laugh. “But these are difficult times, Major. Her safety would be personally guaranteed by me. No harm could possibly come to her. The only other obvious solution would be for her to return north with her cousin.”

Rose didn’t know what to say and was relieved to see Elsie come in with the sweet potato pudding. She said, “This has been my home for many years, Mister Davis. I shall have to carefully consider your words before I make a decision.”

“Very good, my dear, you have until tomorrow. And when your cousin is feeling better, tell him to stop and see me. I’m most interested in meeting him.”

Chapter 13

With his hand resting on the butt of the Starr pistol, Jack knocked on Gardner’s door. Expecting the worst, he waited impatiently, feeling the familiar tension of an approaching battle. Ezra stood by him with his shotgun held low. This morning they had decided it was best to take care of business and put Davis out of the way. Though the inevitable bloodshed could prove their undoing, it would be better to strike first instead of being caught by this master spy. At least this way, they could go out on their own terms.

On their way to the house, they had to ride past the camp. There men were packing up their tattered tents and cooking pots. Two wagons were piled high with food and goods. A team of tired-looking mules had been hooked up and they waited patiently, munching from a trough of grain. Jack also saw that the garden in front of the major’s house had been recently dug up.

The door squeaked open and a hatless Gardner shoved his face out. "Oh, it's you," he barked. "Come in, and get your man there to help me." The major then walked away from the door, leaving it open.

"Ezra go and help him," Jack said softly as he pulled his gun out of his holster. They rushed in only to find the front room empty. A large traveling case was open in the room. It was nearly packed full of clothing and the odd assortment of goods a man would have on an extended leave from home.

Gardner walked in from his bedroom holding a pile of folded shirts. He looked questioningly at Jack's drawn gun and at the shotgun in the black man's hand. "Is there any kind of problem, Mister Hall?" he asked coolly.

"No—no problem, Major. I just wanted to show you this here revolver. I can get these at half the price you would normally see." Jack slid the Starr back into his holster and acted nonchalantly.

"When we have the time, we can talk guns later. But we are moving out soon. I expect you to come with me." He put the shirts into the case and moved them around trying to make more room.

"Yes, Rose told me a bit about it this morning," Jack said offhandedly.

"It was too bad you couldn't make it to dinner last night. I had a special visitor who wanted to meet you. Once I told Mister Davis about you, he was most interested in seeing you for himself."

"Yes, it is too bad. Exactly where is Mister Davis now?" Jack asked innocently as his eyes scanned the room, looking for any sign of the man.

"A messenger arrived late last night, and Davis had to leave unexpectedly. Now Rose may have told you some of what I am about to say since you were the topic of most of our conversation. Since the death of Sergeant Raines, I need an experienced man to help me deal with the men. I need someone like you."

"I'm flattered," Jack said graciously, "But I'm not sure your men would ever accept a Yankee like me giving out orders."

"They will do as I say," Gardner said firmly. "You gained their respect out there and, over time, I'm sure you will fit in just fine. Your quick thinking got us out of that Yankee trap. If it wasn't for you, we would all have died out there."

Jack shrugged and said, "It was my understanding that you didn't want my services. Word is that you were blaming me for the loss of Raines."

"Look, Mister Hall, I will admit I said some hasty words. But I need your experience, and my friend Mister Davis agreed with me. You will be well-paid and will be given the same rank as Raines—a sergeant. In effect you will be commanding the men when I am not in the field."

Jack paused before answering. Of course he didn't need this job, but he was nonetheless flattered by the offer. "If I take you up on this, you will listen to my military advice in future?"

"I valued Raines's no-nonsense approach. I will value your words in the same manner."

"Okay, I will join, provided Ezra here can stay with me."

Looking him over, the major suddenly noticed the shotgun resting in Ezra's hands. His face turned a little paler as he said, "Your servant can stay with you provided he doesn't carry weapons. You have to understand the men get nervous when they see a Negro with a gun."

“Ezra here may be my servant, but up north he is considered a freeman. I don’t want your men to forget that. He only answers to me and won’t be doing any work that I don’t tell him to do.”

Ezra gave Jack a quick smile that Gardner did not see.

“I will pass that information along, Mister Hall. I will be proud to have you join up with us. But I will require your man’s help in getting my personal items squared away.”

“That won’t be a problem. I suppose I should call you sir now.”

“At least in front of the men. They are a hardy lot and don’t pay too much attention to authority – but they will follow orders if the right man gives them. I’m still trying to instill a sense of discipline into them. It’s been difficult molding such soldiers into a disciplined fighting force, but they’ll get the hang of it someday.”

“Very good, sir,” Jack said. “Are there any orders you wish me to carry out right now?”

“You saw the men loading up their gear outside. If you could direct their packing and hasten their movements, it would be very helpful. We don’t have that much time until we leave.”

Jack saluted and turned to leave. He reached for the door when he heard Gardner call out.

“One more thing, Sergeant Hall,” Gardner said.

“Sir?” Jack answered back

Gardner smiled and said, “Did Rose tell you that Davis and I offered her our protection? That is to say she has been offered to accompany us on our journey to meet up with the armies under Johnston. From there she can travel to Richmond and remain there until the war is done.”

“She did say something of that nature,” the detective answered warily. “But she did not mention anything about Richmond.”

“I thought it would be for the best. I will pay for her stay there until the war is ended. Has she given the offer from Davis any further thought?”

“I’m not sure if anywhere near a battlefield is a safe place for a woman.”

“Rest assured that General Johnston will easily overcome the Union army. Who do they have that can protect them?” he gestured derisively. “That drunken Grant and that insane Sherman? And General Halleck is certainly no leader of men.”

Jack merely shrugged and leaned against the door frame. “To tell you the truth, she gave it some thought and decided she could not refuse the offer. She is busy packing. She’s also decided that she wants to take her maid Elsie with.”

“That’s fine since she should have a servant like any proper lady. After the men have packed their goods, have them send a wagon to pick up her luggage.”

With a tip of his hat, the detective swung the door open and walked out to the camp. That damned fool, he thought. Little did he know that Rose didn’t want him anymore. Little did he know that Jack was going to see him hang. That thought buoyed his spirits.

The camp was in disarray with bundles of tents and clothing stacked haphazardly on one wagon. The other wagon was heavy with barrels and boxes of ammunition. Three soldiers were sitting down in the matted grass, smoking their pipes and looking on as the others worked.

Raising his Starr in the air, Jack fired a round and saw that it had the desired effect as the men jerked their necks in attention. The soldiers went quiet as he said, "I've been asked by Major Gardner to work with you men. I know I can't replace the loss of Sergeant Raines, but I will do the best I can." He saw one man in particular snarl at the idea. He was a rough-looking fellow with a thick unkempt beard and dirty clothing. "Now about these wagons here, I want everything taken out and laid out. We must make better use of the space."

The men all grumbled loudly and gave him some dirty looks as they began pulling everything off.

Jack went over stood behind the men sitting on the ground. He snarled, "Since you three are so rested, you are going to pack the wagons while everyone else watches."

Those words brought some laughs from the other men, and the pace of the work increased. In a few minutes the bundles were stacked on the ground and the barrels rolled out.

Jack looked over the packs and picked out three of the heaviest ones. "Who owns these? They're heavy and take up too much room." Without waiting for an answer he unrolled them and found several well-protected heavy mason jugs. He popped open one of the corks and took a sniff. It was pure moonshine.

One of the men took a step forward. It was the rough-looking man with the disheveled beard. "You're messing with my stuff," he said angrily with his fists clenched together.

"You're messing with my stuff – sir!" Jack snapped.

"Yes, sir," the man replied testily.

Jack took a swig from the mason jar and smacked his lips. "I don't know where you got it, but it's damn good."

"Thank you, sir," the man said proudly. He appeared taken back by the compliment.

"What's your name, man?" Jack asked.

"Daniel Webb," he replied.

"Well, Mister Webb. I'm sorry to do this to such a fine drink." He turned the jug over and began to pour out the contents to the ground.

Webb's face turned red. With a roar, he charged at Jack. Stepping to the side, the detective threw his leg out and tripped Webb, who fell down into a heap. A few men laughed which only caused Webb to be further enraged. He stood up and charged again with his head held low, like a bull. Waiting until the last moment, Jack dodged him and then struck the man in the back of the neck. Webb fell down again, groaning with pain.

"I suggest you stay down this time," Jack said as calmly as he could. He tried to hide his own heavy breathing. This was a big ox of a man, and he didn't want to find himself trapped inside those thick arms.

"I will," Webb grunted.

"I will—sir," Jack added. "And don't let me catch you forgetting it. That goes for all of you. I'm here to help you, but I still expect you men to follow my orders. I know I'm a Yankee, but Major Gardner has seen fit to trust me. I'm not fighting for my home like the rest of you, but don't let that fool you. I was in the army for a few years and I know my way around the battlefield. Just consider me an

experienced hand working for my pay.” He looked around at the men as if daring them to question him. He had picked on Webb on purpose, knowing that standing up to such a man could only cow the rest of the soldiers. It seemed to have the desired effect since they did not meet his eyes but shuffled and instead stared at the ground.

“Good,” Jack added. “Now go and stack those bundles back in the wagon. Pack them in the back and put them in good order.” He took out the remaining brown jugs and tossed them hard to the side where they shattered against the ground.

The men watched as the other two soldiers began to work methodically, placing the belongings in an orderly manner. Instead of helping, Webb stood up and without a look back, staggered away.

“Don't worry, sir,” one of the nearby men said. “When Daniel gets mad it takes him awhile to cool down. He'll be back.”

“I know,” Jack said confidently. He turned his attention to the food which he had loaded into the second wagon. There would be enough room now for Rose's belongings—provided she didn't bring too much with her. After everything was packed away, he ordered two men to drive the wagon over to her house and began loading it. The other wagon was brought over to Gardner's house to take his luggage.

Chapter 14

The covered wagon carrying Rose and Elsie was stuck deep in the mud. It was raining heavily and the spring weather had turned the roads into a thick impassable sludge. The axle creaked heavily as the driver lashed his switch on the backs of the poor mules. The animals strained forward, slipping helplessly on the slick road. This wasn't the first time a wagon has become stuck, and it certainly wouldn't be the last. A portion of the road here had washed out, and the driver had foolishly tried to force the mules through the streaming muck.

“You over there, come and help him,” Jack shouted at four riders huddled close together watching the spectacle.

They gave him a dirty look and then slid off their horses to sink into the mud up to their calves. Cavalrymen didn't like to work this way and Jack could see the hate in their eyes. To some men it was almost an insult to have to dismount.

It was time to show them that he wasn't afraid to get dirty either, so he pulled himself down from his mare. His boots sunk deeply into the mud, nearly sucking them off as he struggled over to the wagon. “Come on, push!” he shouted at them.

“Why can't your servant help?” one of the man asked as he pushed. “You're working us like slaves.”

“Never mind him,” Jack growled. He knew his partner would balk at doing this kind of manual labor. And once he started, then Ezra would soon be asked to do all the hard work for everyone. “Now push!” he shouted at the soldiers.

The men leaned with all their strength against the back of the wagon, their legs sliding crazily about in the mud. With the driver lashing at the mules, the wagon slowly creaked forward. One of the front wheels suddenly pulled out of the rut,

and then the whole wagon was freed. The driver moved the wagon a few feet forward before he stopped to rest the tired mules.

“Good job,” Jack gasped to the men. He said to the driver, “In the future, don’t work those mules too hard. We still have a way to go.”

“Are you alright?” Rose asked from above as the men returned to their horses.

Jack looked up and saw her looking down at him from the covered opening of the wagon. She was wearing a hooded cloak and he found himself noticing how the dark cloth framed her beautiful face. She looked quite pretty and undisturbed by the falling rain.

“I’ll live,” he muttered back.

“Perhaps you would like to ride with us for a moment?” she asked, her eyes filled with invitation.

“Don’t tempt me, missy,” Jack answered back. “That would certainly get the tongues wagging if I was seen hiding away with you and your maid. I’m afraid I’ll have to keep riding along and keep my urges to myself.”

She stuck her tongue out and laughed. “How much longer do we have to go?”

“It won’t be too long,” he lied. They really had several hours of hard riding ahead, and this rain would only slowed them down further. They were planning to run into Johnston’s army by nightfall, but that was highly unlikely in this weather. “But just in case, be prepared to spend the night outdoors,” he told her.

She gave him a sweet smile and Jack could feel his heart warm, even though his feet were wet and cold.

“I do miss my little house,” she said plaintively.

It has been hard to convince her to leave her house, but she eventually agreed on the condition that Jack accompany her. She had packed several large cases, and it took a long time to pare her clothing down to a more suitable traveling wardrobe.

“Don’t worry, you can return to it when this war is over,” Jack said soothingly.

“If it ever is,” she said dryly. “Do you think it will ever be over?”

“Every war ends. One side has to give up eventually.”

“I’m worried that my poor house will be looted or destroyed. I know how I was detested in that town.”

“That’s a strong word,” Jack consoled her. “From what I could tell, they were merely suspicious of you. I’m sure it will all be in one piece if you ever decide to return. If not, then it can always be rebuilt.”

“I just don’t like the idea of them rummaging through my wardrobe and cellar.”

Reaching up, Jack took her hand and gave it a squeeze. “Don’t worry, dear”, he whispered, “at least you’re with me.”

“Sergeant Hall,” Gardner’s voice shouted out from behind him.

Jack quickly released her hand, hoping that the major hadn’t noticed.

“Why is this wagon being held up, Sergeant Hall?” Gardner asked brusquely. He was mounted on his horse, eyeing the two of them. “We will never make it to Corinth at this rate.” The major had been in a bad mood ever since they had left Stanton. He was rough in his manners and speech, treating everyone with contempt. He barely even smiled at Rose.

"I'm just having the driver rest the mules," Jack replied as he took off his hat and shook the rain from it. He slid it back on his head and continued, "We only just got the poor beasts out of that sink hole back there."

"Well, get them going now, they've rested long enough. And make sure to leave your cousin alone—you have enough work to do." With those words Gardner wheeled his horse around and rode to the front of the column.

"You don't think he suspects us," Rose whispered, her voice barely louder than the sound of the rain.

Jack gave her a wink. "He'll have to know soon enough. Now stay dry, and I'll try to convince him to pull off soon. This mud will break some exhausted horse's leg if we don't stop and rest. I think even Gardner can see the sense of protecting the horses from being hurt."

With a cheery wave to Rose, Jack went to the driver and ordered him to go on. The man scowled at him and flicked his switch on the backs of the tired mules. The wagon creaked on, the wheels cutting deep into the muddy road.

As the afternoon wore on, the rain stopped, and a pale sun began to shine through the broken clouds. Though the trees were scraggly and winter-worn, fresh young leaves clung to the branches. The faint chirping of birds broke the gloomy spell and men once again began to speak cheerfully to each other. But even with the weather improving, they were still running late.

Galloping up to Gardner, who had taken to riding in the front of the column, Jack said. "Do you think we should be setting up camp soon?"

Gardner cast a glance behind him and said, "I'm worried about that wagon load of gold we're carrying. The more time we spend out here, the greater the chance of being discovered by a wayward Yankee patrol."

"Little chance of that, Major, we are in the middle of nowhere."

"I would hate to tell Mister Davis that we lost it all due to the concern that you have for your cousin. I know you really want to stop on her behalf."

"It was foolish to bring her with us," Jack said. "This is no place for a woman to be."

"What would you have me do? They would make her life uncomfortable at Stanton if she hadn't come with us—you know that as well as I do."

"You could have sent her north. She would be safe with our family in Maine."

Biting his lip, Gardner's face turned red. He spat out, "You would like that, wouldn't you?"

The men riding next to them turned to watch. Jack decided to play it safe and carefully replied, "I am only thinking of her safety."

"Clear off and let me talk to the sergeant here," Gardner snapped at the nearby men.

Following orders, they slowed down and let the others ride ahead.

"Let me ask you a question, Hall," the major said softly.

"Go ahead," Jack said cautiously. He could see the lines of worry around the other man's eyes.

"What are your intentions with Rose? I could not but help notice the way you have been looking at her."

"I am her cousin, of course I only have her best interests at heart," Jack smoothly replied. He knew Gardner must have seen his hand resting on hers.

They rode ahead a few minutes without saying anything further. Gardner stared off ahead as if in deep thought. The silence was suddenly broken by the major's harsh words. "Understand this, Rose and I will be married soon. There is nothing you can do to stop that. So keep your hands off her and instead concentrate on your job."

"As you say, sir," the detective coldly replied. "What are your orders?"

"Scout ahead and find us a place to camp. Somewhere off this damn mudslide of a road where we can rest the horses and defend ourselves."

"As you say, sir," Jack replied again. "I will leave as soon as I have found my servant." He gave Gardner a quick salute and rode back to round up Ezra. Jack wasn't about to go stumbling into an enemy patrol without some help. He found his partner riding alone near the back, his gray stallion slogging cautiously through the drying mud.

"What's going on, sir?" Ezra asked with a smirk on his face.

"The Major wants us to find a suitable place to camp for the night. I want you to accompany me."

"Yes sir," Ezra replied. Jack wondered at the sudden servility until he saw some soldiers riding within earshot.

They spurred their horses on, riding on the shoulder of the narrow road. The weeds were still wet, but it was better going here than the slick dirt. With a wave to Gardner, they trotted ahead of the column. The two detectives rode this way for a mile or two before slowing down. Since this part of Tennessee was not densely populated there was nothing but forest around them. It reminded Jack of his times in the army when, as a scout, he was able to roam the wilderness for days without seeing another living soul. It let a man think. He missed those moments of solitude.

Ezra interrupted his thoughts by saying, "You have to make sure that you don't pay so much attention to Rose. It's bound to make the Major angry, and that can only cause trouble for you."

"How do you know about this?" Jack asked.

"Word gets around. The soldiers couldn't help noticing the attention you've been paying her. And the major has been in a foul mood ever since we've started. Just lay low until we can find a way out of this mess."

"We should have left and gone back to Washington," Jack said, "But I wasn't about to let Rose down."

"Or leave that gold?"

"There is that. But I'm already fed up with that bastard Gardner. I'll be happy to see him swinging at the end of the rope."

Ezra gave this some thought before answering. "Did you ever think that the major wants the gold for himself?"

Jack nodded. "You are probably right. No matter how loyal a man, there's a king's ransom here—enough money to run to Europe and never be seen again. He couldn't help but have those thoughts."

Ezra shrugged and rubbed the neck of his stallion. "The only thing I know for sure is that I'm tired."

"It has been a long day. But we are in luck—the spot ahead should do fine for our needs."

It was a large field surrounded by woods on all ends. There was a small creek running through the middle that would provide a natural defense against any attacker. Thick bushes grew on the sides of the creek and would afford some protection from the campfires being seen. And after a wet day like this, the men would be glad to have a chance to dry out their clothing. Jack knew it wasn't an ideal site, since it was too close to the road, but it would have to do.

As Jack slid off his mare, Ezra dug through his saddlebag and took out a strip of jerky. He tore it in two and offered a piece to his partner, who gladly took it.

Jack felt sore all over. He still wasn't used to riding all day and was glad for the chance to stretch his legs. "Let's wait here and let them catch up."

"Fine by me," Ezra replied. He dismounted, reached into his jacket pocket for his tobacco pouch. He rolled a cigarette. He lit it and looked over the land. "It's a little close to the road for safety," he commented.

"Whoever is following us, I want to make sure they can find us."

Ezra couldn't help but look surprised.

Jack laughed and added, "We are carrying a wagon full of gold and two pretty ladies. Every bandit from here to Kansas is going to know about it soon enough. I'm not sure if I trust anyone in that town either. I would rather let them come to us instead of being ambushed somewhere along the way. At least here I can spring a trap on them."

"Surely they wouldn't dare attack us. There are too many of us and it would take one hell of a group of bandits to take us on."

"All they need to do is cause enough confusion to stampede our horses off and steal that wagon. That would only take a few brave men."

"Fools more like it," Ezra said blandly and drew heavily on the cigarette.

Chapter 15

Elsie at first found the trip fascinating since she had rarely left the confines of the town. Rose found her babbling narrative about the sights annoying and tried to instead pay attention to the well-thumbed novel she had had brought along. Eventually her maid had settled down into bored indifference as they adjusted themselves to the bumps and groans of traveling by wagon. The rain had at least smoothed the roads, but they had gotten stuck several times in the thick mud. When the evening came, it was a happy moment when the wagon finally ground to a halt. For once they were finally able to get out of the wagon and stretch out the aches and pains.

She noticed the soldiers glancing their way with interest, apparently taken in by the sight of two women not used to rough conditions. Jack soon had the men working - within a few minutes a number of tents were going up, horses led to the back of the field to be fed, and there was even the smell of newly lit fires. She saw that the major had dismounted from his horse, and it was being taken away to the paddock by his orderly. Gardner was stepping carefully around the mud puddles as he made his way towards her.

He called out to her, "Missus Wallace, I'm sorry I haven't been able to give you the attention that you deserve."

"That is quite alright, Major," she replied with a fake smile. For now, it was important to keep him happy.

Removing his hat with a flourish, Gardner said, "It is hard work keeping my men in line. I hope the ride wasn't too uncomfortable for you."

"To be honest, I haven't traveled this far by wagon since Robert and I first moved down to Stanton. It's a little rougher than I remembered."

"Don't worry, my dear, by tomorrow we will be somewhere better. I'm positive that General Johnston will be able to find some reasonable quarters for you and your maid."

"I sure hope so."

"Is there anything that you need to be comfortable?" Gardner asked gently.

Rose found herself hating his cloying questions but managed to smile falsely again. "I'm sure we will be fine, Richard. Hadn't you better look after your men instead?"

"Sergeant Hall seems to be doing a fine job, don't you think?"

Watching Jack, he seemed to be just about everywhere, giving a helping hand. His orders were carried out quickly, and the men seemed to enjoy his company. She nodded at Gardner and said, "He does seem to have a handle on the situation."

The major boasted, "That's why I wanted him working for me. He may not have the mind of a tactician, like myself, but he does know how to keep the men motivated in his own way."

Rose barely concealed a giggle. How could she have ever seen anything in this man? His manner was boorish, and he was so full of himself. Thank goodness it was only a matter of time before she would never see him again. It would be nice to be truly alone with Jack again. She smiled at the thought of last night when they had spent the entire night together. After a night like that, there was no reason to ever leave the bed.

"I wish I could read your mind when I see you smile like that," Gardner said as he studied her face.

"Oh, it's nothing at all. I'm just happy to be standing after being beaten around by that wagon ride. I really would like somewhere dry to sit, but I fear the ground is still too wet."

With a snap of his fingers, Gardner pointed at a nearby soldier. "You there, bring me a dry log for Misses Wallace to sit on. And make sure you don't roll it here. I don't want it getting wet." The surprised soldier saluted and ran off to the woods to find something suitable.

"Richard, it's no bother. I can wait if need be."

"A person like you should never have to wait. Now if you excuse me, I have to go see if your tent has been setup properly. It's going to be a long chilly night." With a quick bow, he put his hat back on and then left.

Rose watched his retreating back and sighed. It was hard to put up the pretense of love, and she hoped that Richard did not catch any slips on her part. Her thoughts were interrupted by the soldier who went off to find her something to sit on. He painfully carried a log over his shoulder which he dropped sulkily in front

of her. She blushed and thanked him for his troubles. He shyly took his cap off and without a further word, went back to join his friends. She sat gingerly on the log and watched the men work.

After everything was set right, Jack came over with Ezra at his side. The detective's face was haggard with exhaustion. He stood uneasily and said, "Misses Wallace, we have a tent ready for you. I had them use a few layers of tarp to protect you from the wet ground. I hope it shall meet your needs."

"Why thank you, Mister Hall," Rose answered back. She gave him a wink and said, "It will be a lonely night."

He grinned back at her and said, "I'm sure you will be warm enough with the blankets. There will be plenty of room for you and Elsie."

"Pray, sit down here and rest for a while. You look terribly tired." She got up and offered him a place to sit on the log.

"I thank you, but it isn't right for a man to sit while a lady stands. I think I'll go rest in my own tent until dinner is ready." He tipped his hat to her and Elsie and then walked painfully towards his nearby tent. It had been a long day of riding. He opened the flap and quickly disappeared inside.

"Is he going to be alright?" Rose asked Ezra.

"Don't worry, ma'am, he's an old campaigner. He will do just fine."

"Make sure to give him any help he needs. He looks so tired."

"Don't worry, it's just been a long day, ma'am. We're all feeling a little tired by now. Now I suggest you and Elsie take a rest while you can. Tomorrow may not be any easier."

"Thank you, Ezra." With a motion to Elsie, who was giving the black man a friendly leer, they both retired to their tent. It smelled musty and even with the extra layers of tarp, the floor felt damp. In fact, everything felt damp. She shivered as she rested on an old wool blanket that had seen cleaner days. Elsie sat down next to her and they listened to the voices of the soldiers around them. Men came and went past their tent. The smell of cooking wafted through the cracks of the tent. Rose couldn't believe how tired she felt and could barely keep her eyes open.

Ezra soon came by with two plates of food. He placed them down on the ground in front of them. It was simple fare of beans, black bread and hot coffee. "Mister Hall told me to bring you some food. There's no reason to get the boys riled up with your presence by the fire. I'm sorry we couldn't offer you anything better, but this is what the men eat on the road."

"Thank you," Rose said as she studied the plate in front of her. Though normally not the type of food that she would enjoy, she soon found herself eating it with gusto.

Ezra also added with a whisper, "Mister Hall suggested you keep this close by." He placed a small derringer on the ground. The metal was well-worn as if it had been used many times before. This was no show piece.

She nodded and tucked it under a fold of tarp. "Please give Mister Hall my regards."

Ezra merely nodded. He looked grim, but he still gave Elsie a wink before leaving

The coffee was weak but hot enough to finally warm her body. As the sun dipped into the horizon, she found herself getting sleepier and sleepier. Elsie put

the finished plates outside to be collected and closed the flaps as tightly as possible as if trying to keep out the chill of the night air. She then moved in next to Rose, and they covered themselves up as much as possible with the two woolen blankets that had been left in the tent. The voices of the nearby soldiers became low as night fell. Somewhere in the distance, a banjo was lightly strummed and soon quiet fell over their little encampment.

Rose was asleep and was soon dreaming of thunder breaking right over her. A loud crack repeated itself as she swung closer to consciousness. Suddenly she felt herself being shaken, and in the dim light of the night, she saw the maid's face clenched with panic.

"Wake up," Elsie shouted, and her urgency was punctuated by the sound of gunfire and galloping horses. The shots seemed to be coming from everywhere at first, with some distant and others sounding quite nearby. A dull thud smacked against the side of the nearby wagon. Rose jerked Elsie down to stop her from getting hit by an errant bullet.

"What's going on?" Rose asked her urgently.

Elsie merely shook her head and continued to hug the ground in a panic as the gunfire rose in a crescendo.

Rose pulled out the derringer and held it close to her body. It was comforting to have the cold steel resting against her palm. She gingerly moved one of the tent flaps back and saw two of the fires were burning high with wood, throwing long shadows across the matted field. Bursts of orange light from fired guns winked from the darkness across the creek.

She was surprised that she couldn't see any of the soldiers under Gardner's command. Suddenly she heard Jack's voice in the distance.

He shouted, "Hold steady, here they come again!"

Across the creek, a mass of mounted horses jumped over the waterway and charged into the encampment. In the shadows of the fire, they were just formless black shapes riding on top of dark horses. Their yells broke the air, and their gunfire swept into the camp. Minie balls thudded against the wagons and tore holes into the fabric of the tents.

A single musket ball whistled by Rose's ear. She immediately dropped onto the ground to join Elsie. The derringer felt hot in her hand as she tightly clenched and unclenched the grip.

Suddenly, the number of gunshots increased to a storm of noise. Men screamed and horses whinnied in pain. Rose heard the galloping horses swing away from the camp. She crawled to the tent flap and drew it back once again. Drawing her breath in shock, she viewed the scene of carnage in front of her. Dark masses writhed on the ground moaning in pain, while a horse to the left of her limped away. A single shot rang out, and the horse went down, giving a pained whinny before lying forever still.

Suddenly a voice she didn't recognize was right overhead. It said, "Are you alright, miss?"

She fired the derringer wildly in the direction of the voice. She heard a grunt and the same voice shouted, "Hold your fire!"

It was only then that she realized it was Ezra that she had shot at. "Are you okay?" she asked fearfully. She felt ashamed by her reaction.

"I'll be fine, but please put the gun down."

She nodded even though she knew he couldn't see her. Putting the derringer down on the ground she said, "Don't worry, it is okay now."

"There isn't even another round to fire, but I just wanted to be sure." Ezra ducked into the tent. His face was hidden by the gloom. "Thankfully you missed. I'm sorry I surprised you like that, but Jack wanted to make sure you were still safe."

"You mean Mister Hall," Rose cautioned him as she looked at Elsie. The maid paid them no attention but continued to frantically grip the tarp on the floor of the tent as if trying to dig a hole into the ground.

"Er, yes," Ezra said regretfully.

"Tell me, who were those men?"

The black man replied blandly, "We're carrying a load of gold. I would think they wanted to get their hands on it. Now wait here until you are given the all clear. I would recommend you stay still and keep low to the ground. There is no reason to have you blundering about and get killed by a stray bullet."

"I nearly did. Why didn't anyone come and warn me before this happened?"

"Mister Hall didn't know for sure that we were going to be raided. He thought they would try to steal our horses, so he put most of the men out by the paddock. When they instead charged in to the camp, we were taken by surprise. Luckily we were able to beat them back without too much loss. Now stay here." He ducked out of the tent and was gone.

Chapter 16

Gardner hated to admit to himself that he was asleep when the camp was attacked. The ripple of gunfire awoke him from his fitful sleep, and he had rolled out of his tent without even his hat on. He first thought the camp was deserted until he saw a boot sticking out of the underbrush. With a kick at the foot, he saw a wide-eyed soldier of his look at him with shock.

"Get down, sir," the private had said.

And with those words a hail of minie balls passed by close enough that Gardner had felt one brush by his cheek. He had quickly flopped to the ground with his heart pounding in his chest.

"What is happening?" he had asked the soldier who was peering ahead.

"Sergeant Hall told me to stay here for the night on guard. It was a might uncomfortable, sir. But one of the guards heard a coming band of horsemen, and then suddenly all hell broke loose."

A few nearby shots went off and Gardner covered his head with his arm until they subsided. "Well, what are we doing here, private?"

"Sergeant Hall told us to stay here and pick off any stragglers." With those words the soldier suddenly lifted his pistol and fired into the darkness. Somewhere a horse neighed in pain. Then they heard the heavy fall of a body as it hit the ground.

Over the barrage of bullets, Gardner suddenly heard the voice of Hall calling out orders. "Over there on the right—three horsemen coming your way!" A number of muskets on that side cracked loudly, but with the major position, he couldn't see what happened. One of his soldiers rushed up to one of the fires and dropped in a load of branches. He quickly ran off as the fire leapt high in the air. The sudden light bathed the little field with a bright glow.

Through the weeds, Gardner could now see a group of horsemen in the distance. They suddenly jumped over the creek to charge the camp. The whine of minie balls snapped through the air, and the pounding of hooves grew louder. The horses were soon clear of the creek and were met by a volley of bullets. He could only watch from the ground where he began to shake with fear. The bile rose in his throat, and he tried not to vomit in front of the soldier lying next to him.

In that moment, the charge broke. The remaining group turned and rode away in disordered panic. Horses and riders were left behind, littering the field in a trail of black blood. The raiders were dressed in dark clothing and now looked like lumps of dirt on the trampled field. There must have been a good dozen men lying there.

A ragged cheer rose from the ranks of his soldiers and snorts of laughter followed the retreating backs. They had won and were thankful to be alive.

"Stay down, you bastards," Hall shouted as some men picked themselves off of the ground. His words made the soldiers stop moving and a silence fell over the camp.

Gardner looked around and could not see where the voice of Hall was coming from. The soldier lying next to him saw his confusion and pointed up at the large tree in the middle of the camp. Now he could suddenly make out a form sitting high on one of the thicker branches.

"I think we got them on the run, boys! They're riding away as fast as they can! But I still want that picket line back in place just in case they come back for another chance." The sergeant's voice was ragged with shouting. He slid down the tree.

With as much dignity as possible, Gardner pulled himself up from the ground and brushed the dirt from his clothes. "Sergeant Hall," he cried out. "Come here this instant!" The major could feel the eyes of his men watching him as the sergeant strode purposefully over.

"Yes sir?" Hall asked. He looked composed and stared back with a hard, cold look.

Gardner could sense the insubordination in the sergeant's posture and this just enraged him further. "Why wasn't I awoken and told about this?"

"I wasn't sure what was going on until it was too late," Hall replied flatly. Anger flashed in his eyes.

"Just remember who is in command here," Gardner snapped back. He could see the men edge closer looking to witness a good fight, so he added, "And remember who's the Yankee here."

Hall seemed to have brushed off the insult and just said, "Your gold is safe, Major. That's what you wanted, isn't it?"

"Back to your posts everyone," the major growled to his men. "Let Sergeant Hall and I finish our conversation in peace." He could see the men leave hesitantly,

clearly interested in this outcome between the two. But they left nevertheless and Gardner was happy to see the impatient look on Hall's face.

"Look, I'm proud of what you did. But you could have least told me that you suspected we were a target of this raid. Who did this?"

"I have my suspicions," Hall replied. His explanation was cut off by Private Webb, who was breathlessly pulling a corpse towards them. A bloody trail followed the dragged body.

"What is it, Private?" Gardner asked.

"Take a look, Major," Webb replied. In the moonlight they could see it was the blacksmith Elijah. His eyes were open but had the glassiness of death. A black scarf hung loosely over his blood-soaked neck where a ball had punctured him in the throat.

"I don't believe it," Gardner found himself saying. He was surprised that the townsmen of Stanton would even dare to attack him.

"Greed will make men take the most daring of risks," Hall commented blandly. "I never liked Stanton anyways."

"I imagine the feeling was mutual," Webb muttered.

Gardner stifled a chuckle. He then shouted an order, "I want all of those bodies brought over here and lined up."

"But I want the pickets kept in place," Hall added with a bark of a command.

The bodies were hauled over—it was a gruesome task—and the masks removed. Gardner recognized several townsmen. There was the butcher's oldest son, a farm laborer he saw working the fields almost every day, and even the brother of the mayor. Those thieving bastards would pay, he thought to himself. All this time they wanted to rob him. Once he was back from Johnston's camp, he would wreak his own vengeance on that accursed town. His thoughts were broken by the sergeant's words.

"What do you want to do with them?" he asked flatly.

"Let the birds have them. They're no longer a concern of ours."

"It doesn't matter," Hall agreed. "I'm sure they will be taken away by their friends once we leave."

"You may be right," Gardner agreed. Without a second thought he ordered, "Have some of the men gather up all the dry wood they can. And get the rest organized; we're going to leave right now and leave those bastard backstabbers a little surprise."

"Very good, sir," Hall said again and turned away to carry out his orders.

The wood was stacked over the rows of dead bodies. Gardner gave the word for the mass of branches to be lit. The orders were reluctantly carried out, but soon a fiery blaze lit the early dawn sky. The men silently watched the fire and only moved when they were harshly ordered to saddle up again.

* * * * *

Gardner sat outside the command tent of Johnston, feeling acutely uncomfortable. His normally well-cared for pants and jacket were spattered with mud and the proud feather on his hat was wilted with rain. Not that anyone would even notice here—this so-called army was nothing but a bunch of rag-tag soldiers

who looked as if they would be more comfortable slopping the pigs. Where was the order and drill as required by the great leaders like Napoleon?

His mind went back to last night and the chaos surrounding the encampment. That bastard Hall didn't even tell him how the men were laid out waiting to ambush. He must have a word with that man and reminded him that his duties were first and foremost to follow orders, not go off on his own. Nonetheless, he had to hand it to Hall in defeating that band of raiders and saving the gold.

"Major, the general is ready to see you," the orderly told him with a tap to the shoulder.

Gardner shook his head with exhaustion and stood up to follow the man to the tent. The orderly opened the flap to let him slip through. Inside the spacious command tent, stood General Johnston and Mister Davis, who were studying a wrinkled map together on a rickety table.

Johnston was a tall man, a full inch higher than Davis. This made Gardner feel insecure as he stiffened his spine to salute. He noticed the general's deep-set blue eyes bore into him.

"Good afternoon, Major," Johnston's said, his voice booming like thunder. "Davis here was beginning to get worried that you would never make it here. We had reason to be concerned."

"That is true," the master spy said quietly.

The major explained, "We ran into some problems on the way. With the rain and all, we were forced to camp for the night."

"Rumor is that you also ran into some trouble last night," Johnston said as he pushed his brown hair back around his ears. His shaggy sideburns hung low to his neck, which was covered with the stiff collar of his splendid uniform.

"Rumors have a way of telling the truth," Davis commented dryly.

Gardner was taken aback by how the speed of rumors traveled. They had only been in this camp for just a few hours. A few careless words from one of his men must have spread like wildfire for it to reach the ears of the General so quickly.

"It was nothing, sir," he mumbled.

With a smile Johnston said, "That's good to hear. I trust that gold has been safely delivered here? We are short on money, and a paid soldier fights better than a penniless one."

"My men are guarding it as we speak," Gardner responded.

"Well then, I shall send my quartermaster to go and retrieve it. Rest assured it will be well looked after. You did a commendable job delivering it to me."

With a guarded smile, the major said, "Thank you, sir."

"Yes, you did do a good job," Davis added. "It must have been tempting to steal such a large amount of money for yourself."

The master spy's tone was flat, but Gardner could sense danger. Was Davis having him watched? "I assure you it was no temptation," the major said carefully, "I can only think of removing the tyranny of the northern states from our backs."

Johnston seemed to take those words to heart and clamped a hand on Gardner's shoulder. "With that attitude we can expect to whip those Yankees at every turn. Davis here told me that you were a good man. Now come here and take a closer look at this map. I'll explain what I have in store for those blue-bellied bastards."

Drawing closer to the table, Gardner looked down at the map and watched as Johnston sketched a finger across a bend of the Tennessee River. "Grant is gathering his forces here at Pittsburgh Landing and is awaiting the arrival of Buell. Mister Davis here has spies waiting to see where Buell is, and we're also waiting for any unexpected movement by Grant."

Gardner nodded.

"Now if they combine their forces, they will truly be able to overwhelm my army. By all accounts they outnumber us at least three to one. If they are given this chance to gather together then we cannot stop their march to Memphis. We will lose the railroad network there and maybe all of Alabama too." He paused to let the gravity of the situation take effect. "But Grant made the mistake of having his back to the river. By concentrating our forces into one massive attack, I see no reason why we shall not prevail. We shall then turn their flank and drive them into the river. They will have to surrender!"

"Our men can outfight them. I've seen it time and time again," Gardner added sagely.

"Well, I'm glad you've made it here since we will need all the help we can get. We have been marching for days and shall engage the enemy tomorrow."

"I see no reason for failure and wish you the greatest success."

"There is one more thing I want to discuss with you. I do have a little job for you and your men," Johnston said.

"And I advise you to take it," Davis added.

"General, whatever you require I shall do," Gardner replied firmly.

"We have little cavalry with us, but I think this kind of fight will require the hard steel of the infantry bayonet. However, I still require some soldiers to ride ahead and be my eyes and ears. Your men are practiced in the art of skirmishing and moving through the forest undetected. Davis here has told me of your exploits disrupting their supply wagons. Your movements have bought us valuable time, and I want to employ you to that advantage."

"Yes sir," Gardner replied. He felt proud of the recognition given to him and was going to prove to everyone that his own special methods of war worked.

"Very well, Major," Davis said curtly, "you may leave now."

Gardner hesitated before leaving. "Sir, there is one thing I forgot to mention. We have a lady with us and her maid."

Johnston looked perplexed by the statement.

Davis merely shook his head and said, "So Misses Wallace decided to go with you after all. I must say I am surprised. I was telling the General here that she was a fine beauty and what a lucky man you were."

"This is certainly no place for any woman of breeding," Johnston said. "But I shall make an attempt to offer her what little we have. It shall be good if you ask her to dine with me tonight. It has been awhile since I've been in the company of a good woman. You will also be invited, as a matter of course."

"Why thank you, sir," Gardner said as he lifted to flap of the tent. He felt happy as he left, walking past the bored-looking orderly. He then headed towards the small field where his men were resting. It was shaping up to be a good day and was he was eager to return to Hall to break the news to him. They were going to be

a part of the attack on the morrow where his men were to be tested in a real battle.

Chapter 17

Leaning forward on his saddle, Jack searched the sparsely-leaved trees with his field glasses. According to the hand-drawn map tucked in his pocket, he should be near the Federal line. The trails here were thick with trees and bramble, a perfect location for an ambush.

It was still early in the morning, and the sun had yet to break over the horizon, but there was still just enough light to see by. He had traveled at least eight miles ahead of Johnston's army, and he still hadn't even seen one enemy patrol. Perhaps the information that Gardner had received from Davis was faulty, and the Union army had already left by using river boats. He just couldn't imagine any army leaving themselves so unprotected. He nudged the horse forward into the bramble-choked path.

Jack wondered how Ezra was getting on. He hated to leave him behind at the camp, but someone needed to stay and watch where that gold was going. He also felt better knowing that someone was watching Rose while he was out looking for the Union army. This was quite the bind he found himself in. How could he warn these seemingly lackadaisical Yankee soldiers that a whole army was about to come and sweep them away? If he tried to tell them directly, they would certainly have arrested under the suspicion of being a spy. He couldn't let himself be held as a prisoner while a battle raged on—he might lose Rose and that damned money.

Pushing a low-hanging branch out of the way of his face, Jack caught the odor of burning wood. He slowed down, knowing he must be getting close to a camp. Pulling gently on the reins, he patted the side of the mare's neck to quiet her down. He then slid off and pulled the horse deeper into the trees. It was time to hide her and go on foot.

Quickly tying the mare to a tree, the detective pulled out the Spencer carbine from his saddle sheath and began slowly moving in the direction he suspected the smoke was coming from. There was a sparse line of pine trees far ahead, which would be a perfect place to shelter from the rain and wind. The smell of burning wood—possibly from the nearby camp—was beginning to sting in his nostrils. Swinging the carbine behind his back, Jack dropped to the ground and began crawling through the dead leaves.

He paused behind a ragged bush, feeling the damp leaves thoroughly soaking his trousers. Rummaging through his jacket pocket, he pulled out his battered field glasses and began scanning the pine trees. He held his breath as he saw a flicker of movement.

It was a Union guard leaning lazily against a tree. The sentry was contentedly smoking a corncob pipe and had the sleepy look of someone who has been awake most of the night. His beard was scruffy, the uniform looked two sizes too large and long hair fell sloppily out of the man's cap. The musket leaning against the

tree had the look of someone who knew how to take care of his weapon. The wood of the stock was well-oiled and the gunmetal shone even in the dim light of the early morning. This was not your average city-bred soldier, Jack thought, but a man who looked as if he knew his way around the country. The detective knew he had to be cautious when approaching such a soldier.

Crawling further along, a few branches under the leaves cracked softly under Jack's weight. He immediately froze and looked up again with his field glasses. The sentry was now standing upright with his gun held with both hands. The man was looking cautiously around trying to find the source of noise. Behind the sentry, Jack could barely make out rows and rows of tents sheltered from the wind by the pine trees. The information that Gardner received from Davis was right after all. Here was Grant's Army of the Tennessee.

The sentry suddenly called out, "I know someone is out there. Come out where I can see you."

Jack laid low on the ground and gently pulled his carbine in front of him. He didn't wish to shoot this soldier, but he couldn't take the chance of being caught.

Soon the sentry called out again, but this time to one of his fellow soldiers. It was another sentry that had gone unnoticed by Jack. The man was deeper in the pines and ran up to his friend with his rifle in hand. The newcomer was a big man with a recessed jaw and wide eyes. He looked uncomfortable in his overly tight uniform. Perhaps they would have been better off switching uniforms, the detective thought ruefully. The man nodded his head as the bearded sentry pointed in the general direction of where Jack was hidden.

Digging into his trouser pocket, Jack dug out a stub of a pencil and used the back of the map to write:

Be Warned, Johnston will soon be attacking in force. Pass the word.

He then pulled out a string from this same pocket and searched the ground for a suitable rock. If he couldn't speak to them, Jack thought, then he would have to find a different way to deliver a message. So he tied the scrap of paper to a fist-sized stone and tightly knotted a string around it.

The two sentries were now coming roughly toward his direction but veering slightly to the right. They were busy searching through the bushes and both had the worried look of men expecting trouble. At some fifty yards away, they were close enough so he could finally hear their voices.

"I tell you I heard something, Jeb," the bearded man said.

His big friend nodded and said, "I believe you, but I don't see nothing."

"Let's at least take a look around."

"If you say so, Willy," the big man answered.

Jack continued to peer through the bushes and waited until they were both looking away from his position. He then tossed the rock as hard as he could.

It sailed up in the air and struck the ground near the foot of the big man. He spun around with his rifle at the ready.

"Hold on there, Jeb," the man named Willy said as he leaned over to look at the rock. "It looks like someone is trying to play a trick on us." He picked up the stone

and untied the string to get at the piece of paper. "What do we have here?" he asked.

"Someone wrote us a note?" his friend said stupidly.

"Can you read?" Willy snapped.

"I know how to write my name," Jeb said proudly.

"Well, that's more than I can say," Willy admitted. "We best hand this over to the sergeant and see what he can make of it."

Groaning inwardly, Jack wondered why he was unlucky enough to have given his message to two men unschooled in their letters. Well, he shouldn't be surprised. He could only hope that they made good with their words and delivered the note to an officer. At worst they would think the whole thing was a joke done by their friends. Then he had another idea.

He watched them turn their backs to return to their posts. He then raised his Spencer carbine and fired. The round hit a tree just two feet above the sentry's heads. They both fell down to the ground and Jeb's musket discharged into the air with a cloud of black powder smoke. Jack wasn't worried about him, but the sentry named Willy had the look of someone who knew how to use a gun.

Before they could make out his position, Jack quickly fired three more times. This created a blanket of smoke which he could use to cover his escape. He then leaped up and ran back towards his horse. His running footsteps crackled heavily in the dead leaves. It was only moments before he heard the report of a musket behind him. The minie ball whistled past his cheek and tore through the branches ahead of him. It would take a moment for them to load up again, so Jack turned once again and fired two more rounds in their general direction. By now they must think any number of men could be out here.

Finding his mare, the detective quickly untied the bridle from the tree and led the horse back to the trail. Behind him, a number of shouts were raised as he pulled himself onto his saddle. With a kick, he was moving away at a trot. He could now hear the bugles of the camp. Jack smiled to himself, feeling that his duty was done—Grant's army had their warning and would not be surprised by the columns of rebels coming their way.

He rode quickly for a mile or two before slowing the mare down to a walk. The sun was just beginning to rise above the horizon, and Jack could see it was going to be a clear day. Already active with the coming of spring, the birds chirped loudly in the trees above. As he cantered along, he reached down into his saddle bag for ammunition and reloaded the Spencer. It was now time to locate Johnston and spin him a tall-tale. Perhaps the general could be convinced to call off the attack if Jack could tell him a convincing story of how the waiting Union army was on high alert. It would be possible for such a story to pass muster if it wasn't for Davis. That man must have a legion of spies keeping an eye on the Union troop movements.

Deep in his thoughts, he almost ran right into a leading column of Johnston's army. The total number of soldiers was staggering and they were marching in high spirits. The men happily waved at him and continued on.

A colonel flagged him down. "Who are you?" the officer demanded.

Jack hastily saluted and remembering his cover, he said, "Sergeant Hall. I'm a scout reporting to General Johnston, sir."

“Very good, Sergeant. What did you see up ahead?”

“Sir, there is a large camp just two or three miles north by northeast of here. I can't tell you how many of them were there, but I saw plenty of tents and pickets.” There was no reason to lie to this officer. They would continue to go ahead no matter what the odds were. He could see the steely reserve of the colonel and the proud, martial air of the men marching towards an unknown fate.

The colonel only smiled and said, “Thank you, Sergeant.”

“Do you know where Johnston is now, sir?”

The colonel waved his hand lazily towards the back of his column. “I imagine the general is somewhere back there.”

“Thank you, sir, and good luck.”

“And you too. This is going to be a glorious day. I can feel it in my bones.” He saluted to Jack, effectively dismissing him.

The detective wheeled his horse around and for a few moments watched the ragged group of soldiers march forward. He knew it was too late to stop this battle. The rebels were moving too fast, and no message from Johnston could stop them now. The soldiers here had the look of undisciplined troops, but he had already seen what they could do at Bull Run. If his message to the Federal army didn't work, then Grant's army would certainly be swept over by this band of determined men. He shook his head in the futility of it all. With a kick, he urged his mare on.

It took another hour to find the general and his staff. Even before that, he had heard volleys of musket fire in the distance. A sporadic rumble of cannon joined in the distant cacophony. Johnston was mounted on his horse and had a stern, studious look as he poured over the map held in his lap. Major Gardner was a few yards behind him with a worried expression.

Johnston looked when Jack rode up.

“Sergeant Hall reporting, sir,” Jack said as he brought his mare to a stop.

“Very well. Sergeant,” the general said in an off-handed manner. “What do you have to report?”

“Sir, I scouted ahead as ordered. I saw the enemy camp with my own eyes. They're right where I was told to find them.”

“Good,” Johnston commented, as if he was just told his dinner was ready.

“Coming back, I passed one of your columns. I imagine that gunfire we are hearing is them.”

“I imagine so, Sergeant. I want you to ride back and tell General Cleburn to proceed as planned. We have to keep pushing the Yankees back until they break. I will be behind him with reinforcements. Do you understand, Sergeant?”

“Yes sir,” Jack saluted. He pulled hard on the reins to wheel his mare around.

“Sergeant, if the Colonel can't make it through, then come find me as soon as you can.”

With a nod of his head, Jack took off on the trail that he had just returned on. It was going to be a long day.

Chapter 18

It was a quick ride back to the site of the Federal camp. The crack of rifle fire grew louder with every step of the mare. This was a poor place for a battle, Jack thought. The growth here was too dense for the armies to see each other. The troops would be firing blindly into the woods with little hope of hitting anyone. He dismounted and carefully walked his horse over a creek deep with winter runoff. After mounting up again, it wasn't long before he was back at the trail leading to the camp. He recognized the stand of pine trees and rode carefully through them, even though the gunfire was still distant enough to be of no concern. But one could never tell where an errant bullet could strike.

As Jack gingerly rode through the littered remains of the camp, the smell of black powder smoke still hung heavily in the air. The camp had the look of being caught completely unaware. It had also been thoroughly ransacked by the rebels - packs were torn apart and contents spread haphazardly over the ground. Everything was in shambles with torn down tents and several corpses littering the ground. They were Union soldiers—some dressed in their uniforms while others were wearing very little. Here and there a moan would arise from a wounded man who did not have the strength to crawl.

A hand shot out. A man on the ground gasped out, "Please, help me. I need water."

With a grim expression, the detective dismounted and pulled his canteen out. To his surprise, he recognized the wounded man as the sentry who had shot at him. Willy looked bad with a pale, sickly face. Blood-soaked spittle dripped from the side of his mouth. Jack got down on his haunches and tipped the canteen into the man's mouth. "Drink slowly," he warned the sentry.

"Thanks much," the man replied with a choked whisper.

"Where are you hit?" Jack asked as he ran his hands over the dying man's bloodied chest.

"I'm afraid I took one in the belly. I won't last long—I've hunted enough deer to know you don't get far with a hole in your stomach." The words poured painfully out. Willy gave a wracking cough which made the skin on his face even paler.

Jack found the gaping wound which was still bleeding heavily. "What happened?" he asked even though he already knew the answer.

Willy reached for the canteen again and took a sip before letting out a long sigh. He then managed to choke out an answer. "There have been some skirmishes the past few days, but nobody really thought those Rebs were any danger. We all thought they were beaten for good. Someone even tried to warn us this morning, but we didn't think it was serious."

"That was me," Jack admitted. He liked this plain-spoken man.

"Ah, well, we tried to carry your warning, but after our sergeant read it he just threw it away. Why didn't you come and talk to us?"

"I was afraid of being taken in as a spy."

"Makes sense, mister. It was nothing but a joke to the sergeant."

"I can understand that," Jack said.

Willy's voice became a little fainter as he said, "The Rebs rushed right up on us, and there wasn't even time for a warning. They caught most of us off-guard. You can see what happened." He let out another wracking cough and then gave a small moan.

The detective watched as the man shut his eyes and quietly died. He then retrieved his canteen from the dead man's grasp. Saddling up, he rode away from the camp, following the sounds of the guns up ahead.

Here and there along the way, he saw individual bodies lying on the ground. There were even a few dead rebels to be found. The northerners hadn't all completely run away—some had stayed to fight it out.

Soon enough, the sound of muskets firing grew deafening. The detective found himself in a little open field. Great clouds of smoke hung heavily in the air as round after round of minie balls were rammed into the barrels, primed and then fired. A ball struck a tree above Jack's head, and he reflexively ducked as the next big cavalcade of firing came. There was at least an entire brigade of rebels marching towards the tree line on the other side. Every few steps they would drop to their knees and fire into the woods only to reload once again. Their gunfire was replied by a sporadic peppering of Union musketry. Here and there a rebel would drop with a scream as he was struck down by the return fire.

Another mass of gunfire blew up a cloud of thick smoke, temporarily blinding Jack from the scene ahead. Behind the line of men he saw a general astride his horse, calling out orders to the officers about him. They were taking the concentrated effort to ignore the minie balls that whizzed through the air around them.

Jack rode up, holding his hat, and bent over his horse to minimize the target area. He hurriedly saluted to the officers before presenting himself to the general. "Sergeant Nathaniel Hall reporting with orders from General Johnston," he said. "Are you General Cleburne?"

"I am, son," the general replied. He spoke with a thick southern accent and his cheeks were clean-shaven.

"Strange place for an Irishman," Jack couldn't help saying.

"It's an even stranger place for a Yankee," Cleburne replied with a smile.

"You got me beat there, General," Jack replied.

"I can tell by your accent, Sergeant. What orders did Johnston wish to convey to me?"

Jack had to shout over the sound of another massed firing of rifles. "You are to move ahead according to plan, sir. If you run into any trouble that you can't handle, I am to find Johnston to bring up the reserves."

"These Yankees, if I can beg your pardon, aren't putting up much of a fight." No sooner than Cleburne made that statement when the rebel line put up a shout and charged the remaining distance into the woods. The sound of gunfire ceased in this patch of forest as the area was quickly cleared of the enemy.

"I see your point, sir," Jack said as he watched the mopping up of the remaining enemy.

"Well, Sergeant, we shall ride ahead soon. Stay with me in case your services are called upon."

"Very good, sir."

"After we are done here, I would like to hear your story of how you came to serve in these Confederate armies."

"It's not much of a story," Jack replied as they rode slowly forward to the next patch of open ground.

The brigade had formed up again and the soldiers—in a thick column—were marching through the trail. The terrain here was rough with trees scattered throughout. Signs of civilization could be seen as they came to a freshly tilled field and farm. There were plenty of places along the way to ambush an approaching army, and the Northerners were putting up a hard fight along the way.

The rebels advanced on the ground ahead, clearing out the pockets of scattered resistance as they moved ever forward. Hours passed and the sun grew higher in the sky. Soldiers tore their paper cartridges, emptied the paper into the barrel and pan, jammed the paper and ball into the muzzle and rammed it down, only to repeat the process over and over again. Bayonets were fixed, and the order to charge was given. Minie balls hummed past their ears and young spring leaves dislodged from the branches above. Thousands of soldiers yelled savagely as they continued to push the Yankees further and further back. It was a hellish scene as the dead piled up on the blood-soaked ground. Many prisoners were taken, and the walking wounded limped back to the safety of the rear.

The brigade eventually came to a tree-tangled sunken road. Here the Union gunfire became even more intense. They had natural cover behind fallen logs and shallow depressions. Near this position, a small peach orchard stood. Petals from tree blossoms rose and fell to the ground from the sheer quantity of lead flying through the air. Cleburne held up his sword and motioned the brigade forward. The men gave a warbling rebel yell as they plunged straight across the field towards the enemy position.

Federal cannons opened up, tearing great swaths into the rebel brigade. It was canister, designed to kill massed infantry charges. It worked thus: a tin canister filled with lead balls was loaded into the barrel and would breakup once the cannon was fired. It had the effect of a giant shotgun, and here it ruthlessly killed man and horse alike. The ground was soon soaked with blood as bodies were torn into fragments by the unceasing artillery fire.

Behind the action, Jack sat high up in horse, watching the action with his field glasses. He felt numb inside from the horror of watching the carnage before him. It seemed like an impossible nightmare that he was witnessing. Perhaps he would awake and still be inside his bed in Washington. Anything was preferable to this hell on earth before him. He began to feel dizzy, and realized he hadn't had a drink of water for hours.

"Stay here, Sergeant," Cleburne snapped at Jack. "There is no reason to risk your life. You shall be needed to get help if I do not return." He waved to his nearby orderly who held the reins for the general as he dismounted. With a wave of his cavalry sword, he ran to join his men.

The rebel soldiers were now prone on the ground, pointlessly firing in the general direction of the entrenched Yankee soldiers. A cannonball shot skipped across the ground and left a bloody trail behind as it knocked over men and horse alike. Wounded soldiers cried out, and the rest burrowed close to the ground, desperately trying to stay alive. Some hid behind the dead bodies of their fallen comrades, using the fresh corpses as cover.

Cleburne studiously ignored the murderous fire and shouted at his men to rush forward. Shot struck the ground near him and a minie ball even plucked his hat away. Cleburne picked it up, brushed it off and continued to harangue his men to

move. The few soldiers that did soon joined the heaped piles of dead. Jack was amazed at the sheer folly and bravery of these men, but could only feel pity since their actions were in vain. Eventually the men began to slowly retreat, crawling away until they were clear of the killing zone. Through his field glasses, Jack saw that General Cleburne was miraculously still alive. The general shrugged his shoulders in vain and then ordered everyone back.

It wasn't exactly an orderly withdrawal as some men ran frantically back to the rear for the protection of the woods. But all in all, the soldiers maintained discipline and marched methodically towards safety. And still the torrent of lead came until the rebels were out of range. There was a pause and a sudden quiet as the Union cannons stopped firing. The silence was only momentary for soon the Federal artillery had reloaded - using cannon balls with their longer range. The iron balls began dropping into the rebel's scattered positions.

Cleburne limped back to his horse and calmly pulled himself up on his horse. He was greeted warmly by his small group of officers. Cleburne's face turned to them with disgust as he said, "This is pure slaughter. I want reinforcements brought up here as soon as possible. Now go, Sergeant, and tell Johnston!"

With a quick salute, Jack took off riding as quickly as he could. It felt good to be clear of the battle if only for a moment. Once he was out of sight, he slowed down to look at his watch. He was surprised that it was just after noon. It felt if he had been up for a week and lived a hundred lives. It was then that he realized he was hungry but his stomach had no appetite. He felt like he needed a bottle of whiskey and a place to lie down for a few centuries.

Chapter 19

Jack rode past the lines of wounded, who were slowly making their way to the back of the battlefield. Some were walking in pairs, helping each other out as they stumbled ahead. Others were carried by friends, but most marched alone in grim solitude. No one seemed too sure which way to go other than away from the sounds of the guns. They looked up in momentary fear when they heard the approaching horse but grew easy as Jack thundered by without stopping.

Torn and bloodied bodies were to be seen just about everywhere with groping hands reaching out for help. Jack's mare jumped over one body only to hear a curse yelled. He shook his head, wondering where in the hell Johnston could be. He headed towards the left flank and soon came across a group of rebels marching towards the action. Their officers shot Jack a questioning look as he galloped past them.

Soldiers in the ranks shouted questions to him, "Where you cavalry going?" or "We got them Yankees on the run?"

He ignored them and rode on until he saw a group of officers conferring together. Jack decided he was in luck when he saw Gardner hanging back behind the knot of men. And there was General Johnston giving out orders. Messengers would come and go, feeding him with the latest information of the battle.

Slowing down to a trot, Jack quickly saluted.

“What is it, Sergeant?” Johnston asked impatiently.

“As ordered, I met up with General Cleburne. We were making good time pushing the enemy back.”

“And then they were forced to retreat?” Johnston said, finishing the sentence.

“Why yes, how did you know.”

“There have already been some other reports. It looks as if the Yankees got some piecemeal divisions together in a defensive position.”

“Yes sir,” Jack affirmed. “I would guess there are at least two-thousand men there. Their fire is coming quick, and I saw a brigade smashed to pieces.”

“Well, don't you worry, I've already sent up some reserves to take care of them. I'll be there soon enough to look for myself. But we are doing well today, and I don't think those Yankees can stop us for long.”

“If you say so, sir,” Jack commented and wheeled his horse to head back towards the front.

“Tell Cleburne that help is coming. Just have him hold the position until the reinforcements come. Also tell him I don't want the enemy breaking out and threatening our middle.”

“I don't think that is going to be a problem, sir,” Jack said. “They look pretty comfortable hiding in there and shooting at us.”

“Major Gardner,” Johnston shouted out. “Where are you?”

Gardner rode up from behind a line of soldiers. He had a wary look plastered tightly on his face. Jack also noticed that his lips were drawn back tightly into a grimace. This was a man trying to control his fear. Perhaps the major wasn't as brave as he made himself out to be. The detective couldn't help smiling at the thought.

“Yes sir,” Gardner said meekly.

“Why don't you accompany your Sergeant? I'll catch up with you soon enough.”

“I feel it is best if I'm here at your side.”

“Nonsense, Major. I need good men fighting for me. I can tell you are getting bored following me around. Go on and join in the fun.”

“If you say so, General,” Gardner replied cautiously and started to ride ahead. He forgot to salute as he left Jack behind.

Jack shrugged his shoulders and gave Johnson a hasty salute. The general smiled at him and said, “There's a good sergeant. Watch carefully after your officer and see that he returns safely to his fiancée.”

“Don't worry, sir—her man will come back for her.” With those words, Jack urged his horse forward and soon caught up to the Major.

Gardner merely shot him a scathing look before staring ahead.

Jack could tell that the major was afraid of seeing a real battle. It was one thing to gun down outnumbered, helpless men and yet another to face them on even terms. This man was about to learn something about real fighting.

“Anything wrong, Major?” He couldn't help himself from asking.

“No, nothing at all,” Gardner snapped back. After a pause he continued speaking with a voice that quavered with fear. “Is it that bad up ahead?”

“There have been a few dead bodies, sir, but I think the enemy is getting pushed back to the river.”

He let out a sigh of relief. "Very good. With any luck this whole mess will be over soon enough. It must be something for you to be fighting against your own countrymen. I never figured war to be like this all. It is so chaotic, and I'm not sure how Johnston even knows what is going on. I mean it is one thing to be in a little battle, but with thousands of soldiers rushing around there is no control."

"Johnston's plan seems to be going well, sir, but I would hazard that most of it has been blind luck," Jack admitted.

"What do you mean?"

"I've never seen anything like it. He brought this whole army sight unseen and marched them right up to the enemy camps. The Yankees were surprised all right and couldn't put together enough men to give them a good fight. Well, that is until now—the enemy has found a natural fort, and they are even supported by artillery. It will take some work to get them out of there."

"I'm sure General Johnston has a plan to deal with them too."

"It had better be good," Jack said.

The crash of guns grew louder as they drew closer to the peach orchard. Already another brigade could be seen to their right, marching towards the sounds of gunfire. Jack and Gardner hung back and watched through their field glasses as the rebels began moving once again across the open ground towards the enemy position.

"That's Stewart leading the charge," Gardner commented as he watched. "I've heard he's a good man to have in a fight."

Union cannons opened up and tore ruthlessly into the marching men. Explosions ripped the earth and flung dirt and bodies alike high into the air. The attack inevitably ground to a halt as men hugged the ground looking for shelter. They rallied once more but soon faltered as the enemy musket fire swept through the ranks. The end result was only scores of bodies littering the field. The soldiers left standing were then ordered to fall back.

"Pointless murder," Jack found himself saying out loud. It felt odd to watch the enemies of the Union die. He felt pity for these rebels even though he did not believe in their cause. But still, they were men, just like anyone else, who deserved a better death than this.

The sun blazed high in the sky and time seemed to pass ever so quickly. Another brigade joined in the attack. The cannons boomed loudly again with the smack of musket fire following behind. Man after man fell from the barrage of lead pouring from the enemy-held ground. Return fire seemed to be useless since targets were hard to discern in the wooded thicket that was hiding the Union soldiers. It seemed like an endless struggle as multiple uncoordinated attacks were made against the entrenched position.

Shifting his glasses over the battlefield, Jack could see a peach tree with a dozen dead men lying underneath. Blossoms torn from the gunfire had covered the dying like snow. He shook his head in disbelief. This was a fool way to run a battle and would only end in despair. Why the rebels continued to attack this hardened natural fort was a mystery to him. Why didn't they just go around and flank them?

His thoughts were interrupted by Gardner speaking.

He shouted, "Here comes General Johnston! He'll drive those damn Yankees out of there!"

Johnston saw them and beckoned them to join him with his entourage. They rode over.

He said, "I see you were right, Sergeant." He pointed to the Federal line. "It will take a determined effort to break them." He had a weary look on his face, but his jaw was set hard with determination. This one spot was holding up his lines from advancing forward. Once the Federal position was broken, he would be free to roll up along their flank and drive them his enemies into the river. Victory was just around the corner.

"Gentlemen," Johnston said to his officers, "you shall ride with me and provide an example for the men."

The detective could see the white nervous face of Gardner look wildly about for a way to escape. Jack felt sick himself, wondering how he ended up in such a situation. It was foolish to be attacking his fellow countrymen in such a manner. He couldn't think of any way out of it either.

Upon seeing the general arrive, the shattered remnants of the brigades gave a shout and began to line up in formation. Officers called out, and the rest of the weary rebels joined their comrades. It was time to listen to their new orders.

Johnston stayed on his horse and silently surveyed the men gathering before him. Waiting until the men were completely assembled, he rode out in front and went slowly down the line with his hat off.

"Men! They are stubborn; we must use the bayonet!" He rode to the center of the line and shouted, "I will lead you!"

A massive yell went up, and the entire line moved forward in a running charge. Their shouting was quickly answered by a mighty discharge of Federal cannon that tore heavily into the ranks of men. A cloud of smoke hung over the enemy position as the cannons fired yet again. Among the rebels, blood misted in the air, and a heavy groan escaped the lips of a hundred men as the storm of lead tore into them. But still the charge went on as they advanced towards the Union line. Here the minie balls tore through the air, and the torrent of fire almost broke the hastily formed lines.

Jack could see all of this from his mount as he rode slowly with the officers in the rear of the attack. They were keeping pace with the charging soldiers ahead of them, riding carefully around the dead and wounded. Gardner was sweating profusely next to him, swearing underneath his breath. His words became louder as they grew ever closer to the sheltered Federal soldiers. Jack found himself shouting too, joining the chorus of the rebel yell. It was more out of fear than anything else. A minie ball thrummed loudly by his ear and another tore at the sleeve of his coat. An open bloody graze materialized on the front right shoulder of his mare and Jack found himself wondering sedately how much longer his luck would hold out. Gardner's mount suddenly buckled and whinnied loudly as it fell forward. The major was a good rider and threw himself clear before the horse collapsed in a heap.

Jack immediately reined his horse to a stop and jumped off to help. A minie ball struck the ground near his foot and ricocheted upward, striking the scabbard of

his sword with a sickening rattle. He found the major lying on the ground, holding his right arm which was bent at an odd angle.

"Are you hurt?" Jack found himself saying even though he already knew the answer.

"I do believe my arm is broken," Gardner moaned in pain. His breathing was hard, his lungs moving like bellows. He said, while gritting his teeth, "If you would be kind enough to look after my horse, I would be much obliged."

Turning his head towards the major's horse, Jack saw it trying to stand without any luck. It was wounded in the chest. Blood foamed from the mouth; the eyes rolling with panic. Another errant bullet struck it in the back, and the horse screamed in pain. Jack quickly pulled out his Starr and shot the poor beast between the eyes. It gave one final twitch before settling on the blood-stained ground.

"Thank you," Gardner said softly, his face white with shock.

Already the charge had been carried away from them, and Jack saw that General Johnston had stopped his horse to watch as the rebel soldiers began to overtake the Union position. The Federals were still putting up a good fight, but nonetheless began to slowly retreat further into the woods.

With a grunt, Jack grabbed Gardner by the legs and pulled him behind the dead horse. It would be a good place to take cover from any remaining shots directed this way. By this time, the major could only nod his head as Jack said, "I'll be back for you soon."

Mounting up, he found his mare was still largely unhurt. He gave her a small kick with the spurs, and galloped it forward to a small knot of officers at the base of the hill. They were leaning over the body of someone.

"Where's the general?" Jack asked as he rode up.

"I fear he's been wounded," a colonel replied with bitter tones, "and most grievously at that."

"General," one of the officers lamented as he lifted up Johnston's head, "Please stay with us."

General Johnston merely smiled at them faintly. They watched as he closed his eyes. He was dead within a minute. The officers shuffled nervously from foot to foot, ignoring the sounds of the battle around them.

A nearby colonel suddenly snapped at Jack, "Go find General Beauregard at the Shiloh Church. Inform him that General Johnston is dead. We await his orders."

Jack saluted and said, "Major Gardner has been wounded and is back there. He will require care, but he should be alright. Tell him that I will return soon." With those words he rode off in search of Beauregard.

Chapter 20

Rose was inside the command tent, sitting on a hard-edged camp stool with her hands resting on the rough table. One of the general's orderlies was going through the papers and would stop to shake his head at the sound of thunder heard in the

distance. Rose thought it was odd to hear a coming storm since she could see the bright early morning sun through the open flaps of the tent.

She had slept surprisingly well last night, burrowed deep under a pile of wool blankets that smelled like horses. Being in a tent was hardly a new experience for her, but it had been a number of years since she had slept outside day after day. The first time had been when she first traveled to Stanton with her husband. It was an exciting trip, being alone with John out in the dark wilderness. It was wholly different than her parent's safe home in the city. Her husband made love to her with wild abandon throughout the long ride, and she had enjoyed the entire journey.

She sighed to herself and smiled at the orderly who stood up with a stretch.

"Would you like some coffee, ma'am?" he asked.

"Why, thank you. Do you think it will be long before the rain comes?" she said pleasantly to make conversation.

"Rain, ma'am? That's not thunder you are hearing, that's cannon fire. By the sound, there's plenty of it."

"Oh," was all she could think of saying. She was suddenly worried about Jack and even felt sorry for poor Richard. She couldn't even begin to imagine what they were going through right now. And General Johnston—he was such the typical southern gentleman with the most wonderful manners. Last night, Richard had escorted her to a little dinner the General threw for his officers. While Johnston regaled her with many of an interesting story, Richard seemed nervous and mumbled his way through the meal. She had a marvelous night listening to Johnston speak humorously on all manner of topics. The various colonels and generals attending were all courteous, though fairly quiet as the night dragged on.

When the general asked Richard pointed questions, he would only answer in monosyllables. Upon reflection, Rose decided that this was caused not only the presence of such a man like Johnston, but the nervousness all men must feel the night before a big battle was to commence. Johnston showed no such misgivings, but continued to talk in a most boisterous manner. Whether this was bravado or what, Rose had no idea. Later in the evening, after being escorted back to her tent by Richard, she had been pleased to tell Elsie all about the evening.

The orderly came back with the coffee and placed it carefully in front of her. "Careful, it's still hot."

She took a tentative sip and asked him, "Have you heard any news of the battle yet?"

The orderly shook his head and said, "The general is out riding with his staff. The only men that will be coming back here will be the wounded. I've seen enough action to know not to trust their stories. They always expect the worst."

"What do you mean?" she asked, not quite understanding.

"Well, the wounded are in an awful state when they come in here—thirsty, tired and feeling ashamed of being out of the fight. Such men will tell you the most terrible tall-tales to excuse their own failures. I should know since I've been on both sides." He massaged his leg and went on, "I can't march right ever since I got this Yankee minie ball stuck in my leg."

"Oh, my dear man, I am sorry."

“That’s okay, ma’am, the general had the good graces to keep me on his staff. It’s a right better place to be than getting shot at. I still miss my old friends—those were good times.” With a frown, the orderly sat down and began sorting through the papers again.

Rose sighed and listened to the distant thunder of the cannons, wondering how she got herself into such a situation. She should never have married John and gone to that forsaken town with him. It was too bad that she didn’t meet someone like Jack earlier in life.

An hour ticked by with her still thinking of her many mistakes in life when her maid came rushing in with tears in her eyes.

“Oh, ma’am,” she cried out.

“What is it, girl?” the orderly asked looking up from his work with irritation.

Rose intervened and asked, “Elsie, what has gotten you so upset?”

She pointed out the tent and tried to speak but the words did not come.

“Out with it,” Rose snapped.

“T-t-the blood,” Elsie managed to stammer out before falling to her knees with a sob.

Standing up, Rose pushed past the maid to look out of the tent. Here and there men were walking towards the hospital that had been setup in the nearby field. The soldiers often walked in pairs, helping each other along the dirt track. Blood was evident on everyone, soaking the uniforms with patches of red. Even from the distance, Rose could see a few had missing arms and cloth-wrapped heads. It was a horrible sight, and she found herself feeling faint. Perhaps it would be better to leave these men to their own fate. But she knew it was not in her heart to do so.

Pulling Elsie her maid off the ground, she said, “Get some water and blankets.”

Elsie seemed to have regained some of her composure. She asked, “But why?”

“We’re going to go help those poor boys,” her mistress responded, full of determination.

The orderly merely shook his head and said, “I wouldn’t recommend it, ma’am. There are doctors to look after the wounded. There is no reason for a woman to be subjected to the horrors of battle. It’s a sight that will scar you forever.”

Elsie nodded in agreement, clearly not liking the idea of dealing with blood, misery, and death.

“It is my Christian duty to help those in need,” Rose snapped at the orderly.

She pushed Elsie forward. They both started rushing towards the field hospital tent to help. The groans of the wounded became louder as they got closer. The air was now thick with a stream of painful shouts and swearing. The thin spring grass in the field was stained red with blood from the countless wounded who had passed by. Men were laid out around the main operating tent, waiting warily to see the doctors inside. A small pile of limbs lay near the entrance and flies buzzed lazily over the fresh flesh.

“Get those blankets,” Rose said angrily. Elsie meekly nodded and began running back towards the camp, sobbing.

Rose decided it would be best to comfort each man as best she could. Even as she went to help, the line of wounded seemed to be growing with each passing minute. She bent over the first soldier she came to. He had been hit in the head and dried blood covered most of his face and dirty blond hair. He would normally

be a good-looking boy, but now only one eye was left. He looked at her with embarrassment.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" she softly asked.

"Miss," he croaked, "I don't think it's right for a woman to see me like this."

"Don't be silly," she said soothingly. "I'm here to help." She brushed the good side of his face with her hand and then began to loosen his jacket to make him more comfortable.

"Thank you," the boy whispered back gratefully and gave her a lopsided smile.

Before she could go on to the next man, a rough voice called out, "What are you doing there?"

She turned to find one of the doctors addressing her. He was wearing a blood-stained leather apron and had his sleeves rolled up past his elbows. Flecks of blood and other bodily remains marked his face and clothing. His face looked grey and exhausted.

Rose replied, "I'm just trying to help. Please don't tell me that this is no place for a woman. These boys here need to be looked after, and I mean to do it."

The surgeon shrugged his shoulders in resignation. "It is no matter to me, miss, but this is hard work that isn't fit for a lady. But we will need all the help we can get. The wagons will be coming back soon with the more grievously wounded."

"I shall be ready for them," Rose stated.

"Trust me, it's not going to get any better as the day goes on. Now you must excuse me." He ducked back inside the tent where the screams of those under the knife soon grew louder.

The day dragged into an endless nightmare as Rose offered what little aid she could. She held their hands and listened to their delirious entreaties. She was shunned by some, but readily accepted by most. She was called mother by a few as they feverishly fought against the clutches of death. The wagons came and went, unloading their cargo of misery. The field became littered with waiting men as the doctors found those few that could be saved by immediate treatment. The others could only wait to die or, against all fates, recover on their own. This once beautiful field had become a scene out of Hell. But never once did Rose stop or feel pity for herself.

Elsie came many times carrying blankets. Her lips were pursed with silent determination as she helped to cover the shivering men who were in state of shock. She dutifully returned each time and gave what assistance to her mistress as she could.

Rose had to walk carefully since the grass was now slick with blood and urine. Flies were thick in the air and every few minutes she had to brush them away from her face. She looked down at her dress and was surprised to see it stained with blood. Swaying dizzily, she suddenly realized that she hadn't had anything to eat or drink for the past few hours. She really felt no hunger, but realized she was terribly thirsty even with the trauma that surrounded her.

A friendly orderly offered a canteen to her. She took a drink of the warm musty water. Putting it down, she looked down the trail leading to the camp and saw Major Gardner being supported between two men. She ran towards him, being careful not to tread on any of the wounded at her feet.

“Hello, dear,” Gardner said as she stopped in front of him. He was clutching his arm, and his face was lined with strain.

“Richard, tell me what is wrong. Have you been hit?”

He smiled faintly and let go of the men supporting him. They saluted him and started the trek back to the frontlines. “I’m afraid it’s nothing serious,” he said. “My poor horse was shot from under me. I was thrown off, and I’m afraid I broke my arm. My chest hurts terribly too.”

She took Richard by his good arm and led him to the last shaded spot available which was still clear of regular soldiers. He gingerly sat down with his back against the tree. He winced in pain and looked as if he didn’t even notice the sea of men in front of him.

He said, “If you could be kind enough to get the doctor for me, it would be much appreciated.”

Looking over the scores of wounded men, Rose said, “I’m afraid they are only treating the badly wounded right now. You may have to wait until they are free to see you.”

“Damn it, Rose, I am officer and demand treatment now!”

The barrage of words hit her like a slap to the face. “Very well, Richard,” she replied coldly. Rose then stalked off to the tent to find a doctor. She realized that Jack was right about the major - he really was an insufferable ass.

The tent was crowded with groaning soldiers strapped to the operating tables. The rough sound of the saw filled her ears as the doctor’s helpers kept the man from writhing in pain and possibly falling off the gurney.

One doctor stood watching the proceedings with a disinterested air. He looked surprised as Rose tugged on his sleeve.

“Yes?” he asked.

“I have an officer outside who is demanding attention.”

“An officer, eh? Is his condition very serious?”

“He was thrown from his horse. He may have a broken arm and possibly a chest injury.”

“There’s really not much we can do for him right now, but I’ll send someone over as soon as I can.”

“He’s by the tree at the edge of the field. I will convey your words to him.” Her words were cut off by the low moans of an unconscious soldier as his bloodied leg was finally removed. The limb was tossed aside as the surgeon began tying off the blood vessels on the remaining portion of the leg. Rose felt queasy as she turned and hurriedly left.

In contrast, the air outside smelled good and fresh. She leaned heavily against a tent pole to breathe it in. Without warning, she began to sob and then sat helplessly down on the ground, wondering about the futility of it all.

Chapter 21

Shifting his weight to his good side, Gardner couldn’t help but let out a groan. His chest felt sore and every time he moved, he could hear a faint snap coming

from inside his ribcage. His right arm was also starting to swell and the ends of his fingers felt numb with pain. Where did Rose go? That damned infernal woman said she was going to bring him a doctor, and it had been over an hour since she had left. His anger began to rise, causing the pain in his chest to worsen.

He looked over the crowded field in front of him once again and watched with disgust at the weakness of the wounded men. He felt ashamed with himself for being out of the action and felt anger at Sergeant Hall for escaping unscathed in the battle. It wasn't fair that a premier soldier like himself should be subjected to this. Why, he hadn't even been shot, but had instead been hurt by that damned horse pitching forward. Gritting his teeth, he felt the rage boiling up inside and wondered how General Johnston was getting on with the battle. As time went by, the sound of the cannons firing had become more sporadic, and the number of arriving wounded was also decreasing. Perhaps the Yankees had finally been routed.

He thought that the battle had been a frightful mess, seeing those scores of men taken down by gunfire. He had seen death before on the various raids, but had never seen so many fallen at once. It was more frightful than he could ever admit to anyone. He was scared and was secretly glad that his part was over. Perhaps if he was given a chance to rest then he could approach a battle again with a braver heart.

The sun was dipping lower in the sky. Finally he saw Rose approaching with an angry-looking man who was wearing a blood-soaked leather apron.

"Is this him?" the man said brusquely. The tone of his voice was rough and tinged with exhaustion. The sleeves had been rolled up and the arms were stained with what Gardner could only believe was dried blood.

This man, the major thought, would pay for his insolence once he was reported to his commanding officer. "Don't speak to me that way," Gardner snapped haughtily.

"Yes, this is the major," Rose said simply. Her face was also tight and her eyes had dark circles under them.

The man said, "Well. Major Gardner, I'm a busy man. I was told by Doctor Hamblin to take a look at you even though there are others in more need than yourself. But I suppose rank has its privileges."

"So you're not even a real doctor," Gardner sputtered with indignation. He was not used to be talked to this way. If he was in better health, he would have struck the man across the face for his insolence. "Look here, I want to see a qualified medical man, not some lackey. What is your name?"

"I am his assistant, Andrew Voigt," the man replied coldly. "Now I suggest you tell me what is wrong with you before I decide to leave to help someone who truly needs it. If your wounds are substantial then you will be assisted as necessary."

"Very good, Mister Voigt, but I will lodge a protest with General Johnston."

"You may do as you wish, Major," Voigt replied without concern. "What are your injuries?"

Gardner felt helpless as he said, "I was pitched off my horse after it was shot from under me. I do believe my arm here was broken in the fall. It seems obvious enough by the swelling. My chest here hurts badly too. I'm having a hard time breathing."

“Lift up your arms over your head,” Voigt said harshly.

Pulling his arms up, Gardner winced as the pain shot up his arms and chest. He could see Rose’s face looking stoically at him. She was obviously angry at him for the harsh words he had used with her. What did the fool woman expect?

Voigt leaned down and began to prod at the ribcage and tugged on the arm. Both motions were painful, and Gardner had to bite his lip to stop from screaming out.

The orderly’s voice was without emotion as he said, “You do have a few broken ribs, Major. You’ll live, unlike most of the men you see before you. Now I’ll have Missus Wallace here wrap up your chest tightly and make a sling for that arm of yours.”

“How long will I be out of the action?” Gardner asked.

“It will be awhile before you can even stand to ride a horse. The pain will be too much for you until those ribs heal up. I suggest you lay low for a few weeks and you will recover just fine. Now if you will excuse me, I must go back and help the doctor.”

“Very well,” Gardner said and waved off the man with his good arm. Voigt turned away and strode quickly back towards the makeshift hospital.

Without saying a word, Rose left and within minutes returned with a pile of linen bandages. She helped him take off his coat and shirt, pulling hard on the sleeves. He did not give her the satisfaction of making any noise from the discomfort it caused. The spring air felt cold against his lily-white chest, and he felt somewhat embarrassed by a woman seeing him in this state.

“Please, Rose,” Gardner said, “I can do this myself.”

“It’s no problem,” she said with a faint smile.

Gardner wondered if she taking some perverse pleasure in seeing him hurt. He could barely believe the idea. He then impatiently sat back and let her wrap the linen around his chest. It didn’t make him feel any better, but the extra support allowed him to sit a little easier.

After she was done, he said, “Thank you, my dear. That helps more than you can imagine. I just wanted to apologize for the cross words we had.”

He felt her stiffen. Rose pushed his shirt back on and then tied two ends of linen together. This sling slid over his arm and then the jacket was put loosely over his shoulders. Gardner sighed and leaned back against the tree.

He continued on and said, “You see, I was disappointed in being carried away from the battle and brought here. It is hard being left out of the fight.”

She hesitated before saying, “Richard we really must talk about our future together.”

He felt a tremor of doubt as he asked, “What do you mean, my dear?”

“It is hard to put into words. But so many things have happened recently, and I’ve been most confused by it all.”

Gardner interrupted her and said, “Don’t worry, everything will work out in the end. I will see that you are brought to a safe place. I was hoping you would want to go to Richmond and wait there until the war is over. But I must say there is no reason why you should be here helping to look after all these wounded men.”

“I like to help if I can. It makes me feel useful. But that’s not what I wanted to talk about.”

Her further words were cut off by the arrival of Private Webb. He was riding his roan, and his bulky body seemed to dwarf even the girth of the horse. Still the man managed to slide down off the horse with surprising speed. He gave Rose a searching look before saluting Gardner. "Sir, I've been ordered by Mister Davis to find you," he said.

"Well, you've found me," Gardner said grumpily. He wondered how Webb came to be ordered about by Davis. "What do you want, Private?"

"Davis has been looking for you. He wants to ask your permission for using us to scout ahead for General Beauregard."

"Beauregard? I thought we were reporting to Johnston."

"I guess you haven't heard, sir. Johnston died. He was shot by some Yankee bastard."

Rose gave out a little gasp.

"Webb, I would prefer it if you would refrain from using such words around Missus Wallace here. But how could Johnston be dead? I saw him with my own eyes just a few hours ago and he was still very much alive."

"It must have happened after you saw him. That damned hornet's nest of Yankees cost us plenty of men."

"What is Beauregard doing now?" Gardner asked, trying to ignore Webb's continued use of foul language.

"It is not my place to say, sir, but right now we aren't doing anything."

"Come help me up," the major commanded. Webb's powerful arms gripped him and began to pull Gardner to his feet. The pain traveled up his side and straight down his broken arm. "Be careful there, man," he managed to gasp out.

"Sorry, sir," Webb replied roughly.

"I must be on my way, Richard," Rose said and turned to leave.

"We shall speak later, my love. You will be out of this nightmare soon enough."

She shrugged her shoulders and started walking back towards the hospital.

"You know, I'll never understand women as long as I live," Gardner said as he was helped on top of Webb's horse.

"I don't think any man ever will, sir," Webb replied as he gently led the horse away.

It was a short ride to Beauregard's command tent. Men were crowded outside, and messengers were coming and going. As they neared, they could hear an argument going on inside. After Webb helped him off the horse, it took some time, but they were able to push through the waiting group of officers. There was Mister Davis arguing with General Beauregard.

Davis said, "I see no reason why we should stop, General. The Yankees are on the run, and this is our best chance to crush them." He pounded the table in front of him to punctuate his argument.

Beauregard was standing at the large map table and looked over the assembled officers before answering, "I have already stated my reasons, Mister Davis. The men are exhausted and scattered. We can resume operations in the morning after they are rested and reorganized."

"I tell you, sir, my scouts tell me that the Federal front is weak. Their soldiers are huddled down by the river, waiting for the riverboats to come and save them.

We control the heights above Pittsburgh Landing and can destroy them only if we act now.”

The general said, “But the enemy artillery there is strong and is already forcing my men back with their continual barrage. The coming riverboats will only add to their firepower. The landing is strongly defended, and it would take too much time in the coming night to organize an attack. I shall speak no further on this matter.”

Davis sighed and sat down. He noticed the major’s arrival and said to everyone, “Here is Major Gardner. His men are the best scouts we have. Let’s at least ask him to take a look on our behalf. If the Yankees are strong, then we should reassemble before attacking. Otherwise we can take a token force and push them into the river.”

Every eye went to Gardner who suddenly felt uneasy by the sudden attention. He found his voice faltering as he said, “I’m afraid I am not able to carry out such orders. I fear I have been wounded and cannot lead my men at this time.”

“I am sorry to hear of your condition, Major. What about your Sergeant Hall?” Davis asked. “Do you think he has the ability to break through their lines and find the truth?”

“He is an able man,” Gardner replied uncertainly.

“Webb, I want you to go find Sergeant Hall and have him report here.”

With a quick salute, Webb left the crowded tent. Davis went on discussing with Beauregard and his officers the need for moving onward. It was decided that Sergeant Hall should scout ahead with at least twenty men—enough to break through any picket line and discover what the defenses of the enemy were like. Perhaps it would be possible to mount a night attack and in the confusion, force the Federals to flee.

As the talking went on, Gardner felt his head swim uncomfortably from the pain. His ribs ached worse than ever, and he found it difficult to stand. He wished he could be excused from this infernal meeting and lie down in peace. But he didn’t dare show any weakness in front of these other officers. Such a failing would only hurt his chance at a future command.

The tent flaps parted again and Gardner saw Hall come in. He looked bedraggled and annoyed. Suddenly Hall stopped. His jaw dropped open momentarily before snapping shut.

“Why hello, Mister Blackwood,” Davis said coldly. “I was hoping he would meet again someday.” The master spy then gave a nod to Webb, who placed his thick hands around Hall’s neck before he could say anything. Soon he was soon stripped of his pistol.

Gardner felt confused by this unexpected turn of events. Who was this Blackwood that Davis was going on about? Surely he must be mistaken. “What is this?” he managed to say.

“May I introduce you all to Mister Jack Blackwood of Washington, DC,” Davis said, his words harsh with hate. “This man here is a detective who works for the Union. He is the man who has foiled me in the past and gave me this limp when he shot me from my horse. Perhaps we could return the favor by giving this spy to the firing squad.”

There was a murmur from the crowd as they watched on.

Jack smiled and said, "I wish I could take that shot back. If I aimed a little higher you wouldn't be here."

"Get him out of here," Davis shouted at Webb. "There is no reason that a Yankee spy should be here any longer. Hand him over to my guards and see that he is safely locked away. I will want to question him at my leisure."

Chapter 22

Webb's heavy fist struck the detective hard in the stomach, causing him to pitch forward even with the two burly men holding him by the arms. Jack coughed and raised his bloodied face again. The beating had been going on for countless minutes, and he wondered how much longer he could last. Webb let out a bark of a laugh and struck at the stomach once more. Bile rose in Jack's throat. He spat it out.

"You're not being very helpful," Davis said. He was standing a few feet away, watching the proceedings with obvious distaste.

Jack managed to smile and reply, "I'm afraid I don't like the questions."

That bought him another blow from Webb. Jack felt his knees buckle, but he managed to stay standing. He wasn't going to give them the pleasure of seeing him crack.

"Hold up there, Webb," Davis said. He limped closer to the detective and pointed his silver tipped cane at his captive's chest while the two men on the side chuckled. "As paid informants for the rebels, my men are always in danger. What does Washington know about me?"

Jack merely shrugged and stared at the ground before him. It really wasn't important what he told Davis, since he knew that any story would be taken as a lie. It was better to say nothing until they tired of the questioning. Darkness was already beginning to fall over the hastily formed rebel camp, and even the sound of the Federal artillery in the distance was beginning to slack. Out of the corner of his eye, Jack saw Davis nod at Webb again.

Even though the detective was ready for it, the massive blow to his jaw rocked him hard. His head spun dizzily. He felt a molar pop out from the top of his mouth. He spat it out and gave a choked laugh.

The words felt thick as he said, "That's all your big boy has got?"

Ignoring the taunt, Davis said, "It is Gardner and that damned gold we stole. I bet the Federals want it back. That's it, isn't it?"

Jack shrugged again and waited for the beating to continue. Through his half-closed lids, he could see Davis walking back and forth, swinging the cane and looking to be deep in thought.

The master spy suddenly stopped and said, "You're protecting Missus Wallace, aren't you? It was she who invited you down to Stanton to spy on Gardner. You're supposed to get that gold back."

Jack didn't say anything.

"Perhaps we should get her over here. I imagine she would crack soon enough with a few slaps. A Yankee spy like her doesn't deserve any better."

"You leave her alone," Jack growled and pulled hard on the men restraining him. He almost broke free, but Webb stepped in and struck him hard in the side of the head. Jack fell limp to the ground and fought to remain conscious. His head pounded like a drum and swam with a red dull pain. He was going to get that bastard Webb and tear him to shreds, he thought to himself. He was going to kill him slow and painfully until there was nothing left of him.

"Webb, go fetch Missus Wallace," Davis said.

"You will not," a voice answered. Jack fluttered open his eyes and in the receding light could see Gardner standing there, his back ramrod straight. He had his pistol pointed at Davis.

"I think it best you not interfere," Davis snapped. "You're not feeling well and should be resting."

"I won't have anyone speak poorly of my Rose. You understand that?"

The pain in his head began to recede, and Jack could once again focus on the world around him. He felt the hands holding him slacken as the men listened to Davis and Gardner speaker.

"Major, this is of no concern of yours. I'm merely questioning this here spy that you freely admitted into your command. He was under your employ and has been gathering information that could hurt the both of us. Surely you can see that Missus Wallace must be questioned. You wouldn't want us to think that you had any part of their plans, would you?"

Gardner swayed uncertainly but the gun barrel managed to stay trained on Davis. "I know she is innocent and believes that this man here is really her cousin. It has been a long time since they have known each other."

"You don't know that."

"And neither do you. But I do know I will shoot any man who hurts my Rose. I will find out in my own ways where her loyalty lies. But I can assure you, it is not with this man."

The master spy sighed. "Very well, I will not question her tonight. I give you my word as a gentleman. But please go lie down. You can't be helping those wounds of yours. Go help him, Webb."

The big complied, and the major resignedly dropped his pistol into his holster. Together they both disappeared into the darkness.

It was now dark enough that Jack could barely make out the features of Davis.

"Well, Mister Blackwood, what ever should I do with you? You are no use to me alive, but I'm sure that General Beauregard would take much pleasure in having you shot in the morning. I'm afraid the military still likes to do things by the book. Personally I would rather make sure you are dead than leave anything to chance."

"Here's something for you to remember me by," Jack said quietly. Suddenly, with a powerful lurch, Jack broke free of the men holding him and ran towards Davis with his arm arched back. He swung, hitting his enemy full in the face. They both tumbled together to the ground in a heap. On top, Jack battered at the other's face until he was pulled away by the two burly guards. They began to kick him in the ribs as he tried to crawl away.

"Stop!" Davis shouted. The blows immediately ceased, and the two men stood still, breathing hard from their exertions. "Pick him up," the spy ordered. The strong arms wrapped around his chest, and they stood him up.

Jack stood there swaying with his arms pinned to his sides. The cane lashed out several times, striking him around the shoulders. Compared to the blows of Webb, this pain was nothing.

Breathing hard, Davis said, "Now take him away and put him in the shed. Get some regular army to put a guard over him. They can shoot him in the morning." He then turned and strode quickly away.

"You're lucky to be alive," one of the men said to Jack. "I would have killed you with my own hands. No one gets away with hurting Mister Davis like that."

Without a further word, the guards led him away towards the church. There they found the shed. The few tools inside were removed before they threw Jack inside. He struck the wall on the opposite side and fell to the ground in a heap. The men laughed and slammed the door shut.

In the darkness, Jack held his head in his arms and listened. The shed was a rough structure, and a gentle night breeze whistled through the wide, rough slats. He could hear a pair of feet leaving and then in a while, a number of men returning. They talked in low voices together, and then someone laughed. Soon it was quiet except for an occasional whisper. He guessed that there were two guards outside and they were apparently bored by this unexpected guard duty.

Jack sat there, thinking of some way out. He was surprised by the turn of events and wondered how he could get out of this situation. He wondered if Davis would keep his word and not question Rose. He knew that master spy well enough to doubt it. That bastard would do anything to save his own skin and could easily sacrifice the loyalty of Gardner.

He shakily stood up and fought the urge to retch. He sneaked over to the door, tried the handle and found it unlocked. He began slowly opening the door, planning to make a dash for it, when a bayoneted rifle stuck through the open crack. Jack shut the door, knowing that the guards were watching him carefully. There was nothing to do but wait and hope their attention would wander as the evening wore on.

It was getting later in the night. The shuffles of the guards outside became fainter. The camp outside began to quiet down—only the occasional squeak of a passing supply wagon could be heard. Jack froze as he heard a voice, then a low groan and a heavy thud against the wall of the shack. Soon there was the sound of footsteps running and then a muffled scream. Within moments, the door opened, and Jack saw a shadow standing in front of him. He readied himself to tackle this stranger until he heard a familiar voice.

"Jack?" Ezra whispered.

"My God," his partner said thankfully, "I'm glad to see you."

"Likewise," Ezra said flatly. "Now we have to get out of here before someone comes and checks on these two."

"How did you know where I was?"

"News travels quickly, and it was only a matter of time before I located the church. Mind you, they tend to ignore people like me. I just told the guards I was bringing dinner to you. Before they had a chance, I smashed one over the head, but I had to permanently silence his friend. You see, he was running to get help, and I thought it was better to use the knife than let him do that."

Jack could see the two bodies of his guards lying in the rough grass around the shack. Neither of them stirred.

“Now what?” he asked. “We are surrounded by soldiers. It would only take one of them to stop us from getting out of here.”

His partner shook his head and said, “Come and follow me. I already have this planned out. Or at least I hope I do.”

Just around the corner of the church was an ambulance wagon. Ezra boosted himself up to the buckboard and motioned for Jack to get in the enclosed back. Inside was a long bag holding the Spencer carbine, a shotgun and several pistols. A canteen of water and a box of biscuits were also there.

Jack began to eat greedily. “You think of everything,” he said between bites.

“Worst comes to worst, we can always shoot our way out of any trouble,” the black man said. He flicked the backs of the two horses and they began to trot forward. “We best head towards the Federal line.”

“But between us and them are thousands of rebels,” his friend cautioned.

“That's why I borrowed this here ambulance. They'll let us through if I tell them I am out here to pick up the wounded. For now you'll just have to lie in the back and pretend to be hurt.”

“There isn't much pretense here,” Jack said. “I'm hurt pretty badly. You don't have a cigarette do you?”

Ezra let out a small laugh and reached back through the connecting window with a match and cigarette.

Jack lit it. He watched as his partner threaded his way past patrols and picket lines. They virtually ignored him and let the wagon through without comment. After he had finished his cigarette, Jack suddenly remembered something. He had been too concerned with his own position and had forgotten the big picture. “What about Rose?” he asked as he threw the cigarette butt out.

“I asked her and Elsie to come with us. Rose refused to go. She said she wanted to stay and help the wounded.”

“I see,” Jack said. He was surprised by this turn of events and hoped she would remain safe. This whole situation had become nothing but a mess. There was no chance of getting the gold back, and Gardner was still protected by the sheer number of Rebels. There was nothing left to do now but save his skin and make the best of it.

“Get down,” Ezra murmured, “we're getting closer to the front lines.”

The detective lay down on floor again and listened intently as the wagon slowed down. He gripped the butt of the pistol and waited.

“Where are you going, boy?” the voice said.

Ezra fell into a deep southern dialect and answered, “I was told to get the wounded, sir”

“Good, there's plenty out there. We can hear them moaning from here. You be careful out there, boy, and watch out for those Yankees.”

“Yes, sir,” Ezra answered and the wagon rattled forward again.

Jack let out his breath and eased the grip on his pistol. The soldier had been right - he could hear the chilling sound of the wounded. There were moans, screams and sobs as those too hurt to walk slowly died. The chill of the night

hastened their deaths, but it was still a cruel way to go. He could also hear his partner swear under his breath as the wagon bounced along the rough trail.

“This is Hell,” Ezra whispered as afraid to wake the dead.

“Worse than Hell,” Jack commented. This was a deserted land and neither side dared to move into this area between the forces, lest the fighting start up again.

In another fifteen minutes, by Jack's reckoning, they were clear of the killing field and plunged into a forest track. A command suddenly was shouted out from the gloom of the woods, “Halt!” The voice had the hard accent of a Northerner.

Ezra pulled hard on the reins and stopped the wagon.

Jack stood up in the back and shouted, “We're Yankees!”

“We'll see about that,” the voice answered back. Four armed soldiers stepped out from the shadows.

Chapter 23

“Tie that tourniquet tighter,” the surgeon growled at her.

Rose nodded, resisted the urge to scream with frustration, and tried again. The blood made her hands slippery, and she pulled as hard as she could on the leather loop. With a final effort she was able to close the hasp. Her eyes were now blurry with fatigue, making it hard to see. She leaned dizzily against the table to hold the leg as the doctor used his knife to methodically remove the flesh around the knee. At this point Rose had seen enough not to be affected by such sights anymore. It had been a long morning, and the afternoon looked to be filled with even more horrors. In the distance, the sounds of battle could still be heard. She wondered how much longer they could go on killing each other.

She had woken up that morning still feeling tired from the day before. Her dreams were blood-filled nightmares of the worst kind, and she had gotten little sleep. Maybe it had been a mistake not to go with Ezra to rescue Jack, but she felt bound to help these poor soldiers. These boys with their broken bones and shattered lives deserved any kindness they could get. The medical staff was so short-handed that they even reluctantly agreed she could help inside the makeshift hospital. It was grueling work filled with the screams of those unfortunate to need the bone saw. Even with ether or chloroform, the patients would shout and twitch about. But even though her mind was numb with visions that would haunt her in the future, she was still glad that she had decided to give what little help she could.

The man on the table, though given a rag-soaked dose of chloroform, began to whimper as the bone saw began to cut into him. She reached for the man's hand and squeezed it tightly as the surgeon strained over his work. Soon he was finished and tossed the remnant of the leg to the ground where it was to be collected by an orderly. He then began sewing up the arteries and veins with a needle and cotton thread. At this point the soldier's low moans thankfully subsided as the surgeon finished his macabre job.

“Now,” the doctor said energetically, “we will have to take this flap of skin and make a suitable stump for a future wooden leg. We want this gentleman here to be comfortable if he is to ever walk on his own again.”

Rose nodded numbly and watched as the surgeon began the final task of closing off the wound. He worked quickly and methodically, his hands well-practiced from doing this procedure countless times. She spent the time shooing the flies away and seeing that the patient remained unconscious by applying more chloroform. The first thing she was told was not to keep the rag on the patient's face too long or he would be poisoned by the fumes. But either way, the surgeon had to work quickly once the rag was taken off of the face. By now the soldier's skin was bloodless, and his breathing was shallow but steady. When the doctor had finished, bandages were then wrapped loosely over the stitched up wound, and she finally began to relax.

Soon the doctor stood up, stretching his back. “Thank you for your help, ma'am. Let's see what we have next. But before you do anything else, I suggest you take a moment and get some fresh air—it is getting rather stuffy in here.” He waved at two stretcher bearers who came and gently removed the patient from the table. They carried the unconscious man away with a wool blanket covering the battered body.

Rose stepped outside and was relieved to breathe in air that wasn't fouled with the smell of urine and chloroform. She saw wagons loaded with more wounded, coming down the trail, pushing the walking wounded to the sides. To her ears, the sound of the cannon fire was growing more intense. There was also a new sound—the distant crack of the musket which she immediately recognized. But this was not a single shot, but a whole barrage of them that sounded like fresh pine kindling sparking in a massive bonfire.

She turned to find an orderly standing next to her. He was an old man with a graying beard. A lit cigar was resting in his hands, and the smoke curled slowly into the air. He listened intently to the far off sounds of battle. “Sounds like they're getting closer,” he commented more to himself than Rose.

“Are we in any trouble?” she asked.

The man shrugged and said, “It is no concern of ours, ma'am.”

“But surely the men here will be in danger if the battle should move this way.”

“Don't worry,” the orderly drawled. He tapped the ashes of the cigar using the side of his hand. “Even the Yankees don't make war on the wounded.” He gave a little bow and then returned to his duties.

Rose let out a sigh and looked over the sprawling mass of wounded men arranged around their little tent hospital. How many more would come? And how many more would die here, waiting for help? She brushed back the welling tears from her eyes and went back inside.

The doctor she was working with was looking over a new patient who was sitting up on the table with his shirt off. The soldier's face was shorn and his broad face looked shocked when he saw Rose approach.

“What is she doing here?” he asked with surprise.

“Don't worry about her,” the doctor grumbled as he examined the man's shoulder. “You're lucky to be alive. A few inches shorter and no power on earth could have saved you. That Yankee minie ball went clear through your flesh here,

and there has been no damage to the arteries. You've been a lucky man and should only feel a little stiffness after this heals up.”

“Can I go back soon?” the man asked fervently. “The Yankees are pushing us back, and I want to go help my unit.”

“I don't think so,” the doctor answered.

“Is it bad up there?” Rose asked as she handed over some bandages for the doctor.

“Bad enough,” the patient admitted. He made a face as the wound was probed once again. “Word is we’ve been ordered by Beauregard to withdraw, but the commanders are none too happy with that.”

“And I’m none too happy with your moving about,” the doctor added. “Now sit still, stop jawing, and let me bandage you up. I will not be needing your services for a while, Missus Wallace. I suggest you getting something to eat, and then we’ll be ready to continue in a few minutes.”

“I’m not sure I can stomach anything,” she admitted.

“You need your strength, ma'am. Don't even think of what you've seen here today, just eat.” With a wave of his hand, he dismissed her, and concentrated on wrapping the bulky bandage around the soldier's shoulder.

Rose left the makeshift hospital and began walking towards her tent. From the north, a line of rebel soldiers began running towards the camp. The sound of the musket fire suddenly became more intense, and there was now a flood of soldiers moving past the hospital and through the rows of remaining tents. They looked like devils with their faces stained black with gunpowder.

A soldier with frightened eyes tossed away his pack and pushed Rose aside. She went sprawling and quickly picked herself up to run towards her own tent. Inside she found Elsie huddling on the floor, covered with a wool blanket.

“Oh ma'am,” she managed to squeak out. She was holding the reloaded derringer that Ezra had given Rose, the barrel waving wildly in the air.

“Careful, you fool girl,” Rose said as she snapped the little pistol away from her. “You might shoot someone.”

“What are we going to do?” the maid moaned.

“We are going to stay here for now, silly girl. We will be perfectly safe once we are rescued by the Federal soldiers. They'll be here any moment, so there isn't much else to do but wait.”

“But Yankees! They're bound to do something terrible to us.”

Even with the chaos around them, Rose couldn't help laughing. “Don't worry, Elsie, I'll take care of you.”

“Yes ma'am,” Elsie said, her face still pale with fear. She suddenly let out a scream as the flap of the tent parted and a hand reached inside.

Rose spun around to face this new danger. She lifted the derringer up and was just about to fire until she recognized the face of Richard poking through the opening.

“Put that that toy down,” he said sourly. His face was wracked with pain and he moved stiffly to the single chair resting against the tent pole. He slowly sat down and grunted uncomfortably. “I thought you two would need my protection,” he said gallantly as he could.

“Oh, Richard, you fool. You should have stayed resting,” Rose said. “You must be in terrible pain.”

“It is worse than yesterday,” Gardner admitted. “But I’m worried some Yankee will take advantage of you.”

“There’s no real danger to us. They are in too much of a hurry to bother with two women.”

“You may be in no danger, my dear,” Gardner said, “but I’m likely to get my neck stretched if the Yankees find me here. I need your help in getting me out of here. It is best if we all leave together and return to Stanton. Once there, I can have a chance to regroup my men and pay these bastard Yankees back.”

“But how can we leave? By now all the horses have been taken, and you are certainly in no shape to walk out of here.”

“Nevertheless we must try. Now come and help me.” He stood up and began to limp towards the opening of the tent.

Rose mustered what courage she had left and said sharply, “Hold on, Richard.” She had the derringer up now and out of the corner of her eye saw Elsie looking at the two of them in a state of shock.

He turned and saw the gun pointed at him again. He gulped once and said, “What is it?”

“I want to know what happened to my cousin Nathan.”

“Whatever do you mean?” he replied innocently.

“His man Ezra came and saw me last night. He told me that he was taken away by Ethan Davis, the man that you work for. What did Nathan do?”

“Nothing,” the major said evasively.

“Ezra was going to go off and rescue him.”

“I forgot about him,” Gardner admitted. “But anything Davis did was for Hall’s own good – him being a Yankee and all. Apparently they didn’t trust him, and Davis thought it would be better if your cousin was put somewhere safe for a while.”

“The funny thing is, Richard, I can always tell when a man is lying. I’ve had plenty of practice when I was married to that fool husband of mine. I know who Nathan really was, and I know who he was after. It was you. His name is really Jack Blackwood, and he was sent by my uncle to take care of you.”

“Oh, Miss,” Elsie finally said.

“Quiet, girl,” Rose said firmly. “This isn’t a good time to tell you this Richard, but no time ever is. It would be better if we called off our engagement.”

Gardner’s face fell in dismay and his hands shook with anger. “But, Rose,” were the only words he could say. He then lunged forward and tried to grab at the derringer. His broken ribs made him slow and clumsy, but he still managed to get a hold of the barrel of the gun before Rose could react.

Without even thinking, she pulled the trigger and watched in horror as the end of Gardner’s thumb disappeared in the blast. The bullet traveled on, tearing a small hole in the tent canvas. The major could only stare at his bloodied hand with bewildered shock.

“How could you?” he cried out.

Rose pushed him away and calmly said, “I had better wrap that up before you bleed to death. Elsie, find me a handkerchief in the baggage.”

Elsie looked numbly at her and then slowly responded to the command.

A fine silk one was quickly found. Rose began to wrap the handkerchief around the stub of Gardner's thumb. By this time she felt impervious to Richard's pain. She had already seen too much today to care about such a small wound. Anyways, it served him right for trying to bully her. During this care, he remained impassive and stared blankly at the ground.

Chapter 24

The young Lieutenant Barnes, who had been assigned to the detective, was giving some final orders to the four men carrying a narrow cot for the use of the prisoner Gardner. With a heave, it was loaded up and slid into position inside the car. It had been two days since the battle and Jack was ordered to take the traitor back to Washington by freight car. It was decided that in his medical condition it was best that the major remained as immobile as possible.

The lieutenant pulled himself up into the car and saluted.

"There's no need to salute me," Jack said. "I'm no officer."

"Sorry sir, it's just a habit. We've loaded up everything as you requested. I have to say that General Grant was happy about getting that stolen money back. He couldn't stop talking about the good luck and what it will mean to this campaign. He was willing to give you everything at our disposal."

Jack nodded. The gold had been found inside the rebel camp, still loaded up on the same wagon used to deliver it. Except for Gardner and his men, only General Johnston and his quartermaster knew what lay inside the chest. The fleeing rebels were more interested in taking the horses than looting their own camp. The detective realized that he had lucked out there. He also wondered where Davis could be now. Surely Davis wouldn't let Gardner or that gold out of his grasp so easily. But Grant saw no need for shipping it back to Washington when he had immediate need for it now. .

"Mister Blackwood, here is the prisoner," Barnes said.

It was Gardner with two guards walking at his side. He looked to be in a sad state. His right arm was in a sling, his left hand bandaged up, and he walked gingerly as not to put any undue strain on his broken ribs. A single manacle was attached to his good arm and was held firmly by one of the guards. After entering the rebel camp, Jack had found Gardner cowering on the floor of Rose's tent—a broken and bewildered man who could only stare at him with hatred. It had admittedly been a pleasure to properly introduce himself to the major.

"Bring the prisoner this way," Barnes motioned to the two guards. They had to lift the major up and through the door of the freight car. This motion made him groan with pain. He then shuffled over to the bed and sat down, his face set in a cold mask. The guard released his side of the manacle and then snapped it shut on the part of the bed frame where it couldn't slide free. Handing over a key to the lieutenant, the guard saluted and joined his companion to make their leave.

Barnes studied the key before placing it in Jack's hand. "I trust you will keep this prisoner guarded at all times?"

“Don't worry, Lieutenant, Ezra and I will take turns keeping watch until we get to Washington. After all the trouble I took in getting him, I don't want to lose him now.”

“Well, it is not my place to say anything, but they should have shot him here and now. A traitor deserves swift punishment, and I see no reason to bring him all the way back to Washington for a show trial. It's just a waste of time.”

“I think they want to make an example of him.” Jack turned and met the eyes of Gardner.

The major scowled at him but said nothing.

“Mister Blackwood, it has been a pleasure meeting you. I wish you a safe journey.”

“I take it Misses Wallace has been given a good seat?” Jack asked.

“She is riding in the car with the officers. She will be in good company.”

“I'm sure she will,” Jack grinned. He could only imagine the type of attention she would get from the clamoring officers who hadn't been in the company of a woman for ages. Well, it was better for her to ride in comfort than sit back in this cold freight car with the three of them. It was, after all, going to be a long trip back to Washington.

Barnes jumped down to the ground and gave Jack another salute.

He returned the salute with a smile and watched the retreating back of the lieutenant.

Gardner said, “Mister Blackwood, you seem to have gotten the better of me - for now.”

Jack turned and sat down on a wooden case across from the bed. He said, “I would have been happier to get my hands on Davis.”

The prisoner smiled and said, “But second best is better than nothing?”

“I wouldn't say that—you've been causing enough trouble for those armchair generals at the War Department. They will be happy to see you swing from a rope. But be warned that I wouldn't mind shooting you myself. So don't take any chances with me.”

Ezra came to listen to the conversation and stood by the bed with his palm resting on the butt of his pistol.

Gardner looked nonplussed as he said, “So tell me, Mister Blackwood, what do you do for a living?”

“It's not much of a living,” Ezra interjected.

“Ezra and I are partners. We work as detectives—taking care of those matters that many would prefer go unmentioned.”

“It sounds like seedy work. Does it pay well?” the major asked with apparent interest.

The whistle blew, and the train began to slowly chug forward. The motion was sickeningly jerky at first, but soon they were moving at a good pace.

After the ride had settled down, Jack cautiously answered back, “Does it pay well? Well enough, but mind you, I'm not going to die rich doing it. But it does have its own rewards.”

Ezra snorted and said, “I'm still waiting for my reward.”

The major lowered his voice conspiratorially and said, “Perhaps I can help you gentlemen out.”

"In what way?" Jack asked.

"That gold that you recovered for the Federals—that wasn't all of it."

Jack felt his heart beat a little faster as he said, "So you took some for yourself. Weren't you worried that Davis was going to find out?"

"Yes, that was a concern, but I wasn't going to let all that money slip out of my hands. Right now I'm offering it to you two, if you let me free."

"I'm not interested in making any deal with you, Major," Jack lied. He was interested but did not want to seem too eager. Perhaps there was a way of getting some gold and still have Gardner delivered to the authorities.

"Look, you fool, there is at least ten thousand dollars of Yankee gold that I hid away. You wouldn't have to work for the rest of your life."

"Jack, perhaps we should hear him out," Ezra said eagerly.

"Sorry, partner, but we can't let him go. It will be our necks on the line if they discovered we aided in his escape."

"I give you my word as a gentleman that I shall never tell anyone," Gardner sputtered.

Jack lit a cigarette and stood. He leaned with his back against the wall of the freight car. He could feel the vibration as the car gently swayed back and forth over the rails. "Let me think about it," he finally said and with those words he left. He gave Ezra a nod and went to the door separating them from the passenger car ahead. Opening the door, he stepped carefully between the two cars, watching the rushing track below.

Opening the door, he found that the next car was comfortably appointed. Several officers of varying ranks were sitting around, talking amongst themselves. As he passed, they looked up at the detective with obvious distaste. He found Rose busy talking to a gray-haired colonel.

"Excuse me," Jack said as he saw Rose smile at him.

"Yes, what is it?" the colonel asked.

"I was addressing the lady," Jack replied brusquely.

The colonel's face grew cold as if he was about to let out a torrent of curses.

"Please, Colonel, this is my friend Mister Blackwood who I was telling you about."

"Oh, I see. A high-spirited fellow to be sure," the colonel said as he visibly relaxed.

Rose patted his hand. "Don't worry, Colonel, I will come back and then you can tell me more about your little village. It does sound most interesting." She stood up and gave the detective a wink. She took his arm, and they walked to the connecting doors. Jack opened it and led her out. They stood outside and watched the rushing landscape go by.

After a few moments, she turned to Jack and said, "Thanks for rescuing me from that old bore. I feel sorry for the other soldiers in there. They all want to talk to me but fear of stepping on the colonel's toes."

"I would feel the same way." He grinned.

"Jack, we haven't had much time to talk lately."

He felt an empty pain in his heart. He laughed off her words. Jack said, "I know. But don't worry, we will have plenty of time to catch up in Washington."

“When I heard that you were taken away by Davis, I was sick with worry. And after Ezra left to rescue you, I felt so lonely. But once those wounded soldiers started to trickle in, I knew what I had to do.”

“And by all accounts you did a very good job.”

“Thank you,” Rose replied graciously. “But I feel bad about leaving Tennessee. There are still sick and hurt men to be looked after.”

“You saw the hospital the Federals built. The wounded there from both sides are being looked after quite well. Anyways, there are plenty of opportunities for nursing in Washington. The city is full of wounded soldiers.”

“Well,” she paused looking for the right words to say. “I want to continue nursing. I want to continue to help.”

“I don't see any reason why not. I certainly would respect your wishes in that regard.”

She sighed and looked out at the trees and hills that passed by. “I shall miss my flower garden,” she said quietly.

Jack could barely make out her words and said, “Did you say garden?”

“Yes, why?” Rose replied.

“It is of no consequence. You were about to tell me that it would be better if we didn't see each other for a while.”

“Why I would never say anything like that!”

“But it's true,” he replied. He felt a vague anger boil up inside him and it was his turn to take his eyes off of her. He reached into his pocket and fished around for a cigarette.

Rose said, “Perhaps you are right. You see, I want to devote my hours to the wounded. It would hardly be fair to you if I was gone all the time. Once this war is over with, we can pick up where we left off.”

“That would be for the best,” Jack lied. He stuck the cigarette into his mouth and found his matches. He lit one and managed to cup his hands long enough to light the end. It tasted foul and dried out, but it was still better than talking.

Suddenly the train lurched as the brakes squealed. Rose was thrown unexpectedly forward and Jack reached out. His arms wrapped around her, and he just managed to stop her from falling onto the rails below.”

“Thank you,” she said, breathlessly once she had recovered.

Jack only nodded and opened the door to her car. He said, “I suggest you get back to your seat. That colonel is going to come looking for you sooner rather than later.”

She looked at him briefly and gave him a half-formed smile before slipping into the passenger car. He watched her walk away for a moment and then shut the door. It was time to get back to guard Gardner. He sighed and thought of what could have been. But it was no time to feel sorry for oneself. He had lived through a terrible battle and there was no time for self-pity after such an experience.

Chapter 25

The major looked up at the blue sky and thought that today was a good day to die. The gates clanked shut behind him as he was led into the crowded prison courtyard. The gallows was in the middle of the yard. Its presence weighed heavily on his mind. The pastor next to him mumbled incoherent words alongside him. Gardner found it immensely irritating.

The men waiting in the courtyard grew quiet and stared as he walked slowly surrounded by an escort of guards. Most of the witnesses were soldiers, but here and there civilian dress could be found. Gardner's eyes went over the crowd, and he was proud to see that no one could directly meet his glance. They all looked to the ground as if in shame. But one pair of eyes met his steadfastly. Gardner suddenly realized he was seeing Jack Blackwood, who was dressed in a scruffy brown suit, an unlit cigar dangling from his mouth.

The detective nodded at him.

Gardner raised his manacled hands to return an awkward salute. That bastard came to watch this, he thought to himself. At least there was someone here that he knew - someone to witness this travesty of injustice. But no matter what, he wasn't about to give this crowd the pleasure of showing any weakness.

When they arrived at the stairs of the gallows, Gardner unflinchingly climbed them. Each step was steadily taken, and he reached the top of the platform without missing a beat. The pastor behind him had a harder time and would have nearly stumbled off the sides if one of the guards hadn't caught the old man.

Gardner marched proudly to stand under the noose which was swaying gently in the early summer wind. He ignored the words of the captain next to him and instead watched a few sparrows hopping about on the roof of the prison. The words of the captain suddenly became a question, and Gardner realized he was being addressed.

The captain said testily, "Do you have any final words you wish to speak before the sentence is carried out?"

Gardner paused and composed himself. Stepping forward, he looked over the sea of faces and said, "Let it be known that I went to my death with a clear conscience. What this court accused me of, I do not deny. They call me traitor and have sentenced me to death. But let it be understood what I did do was for my beloved state of Virginia and to bring freedom to those who have no quarrel with you. I have no hatred for you, but I see that you are merely misguided. Even if you do win over the South, you will lose in the end since you will all be slaves."

A murmur rippled through the crowd.

"Mark my words this government of yours will bring you no good. They promise freedom when they bring tyranny. Their aim is to put you all in chains."

"Hang him," a shout cried out from below.

Gardner paused and looked over the crowd once again. They were now looking eagerly towards his death. His eyes hunted across the faces turned towards him and he finally found Blackwood's face. When their eyes locked, Jack raised his hand and saluted.

Gardner took a big breath of air and then said to the captain behind him, "I have nothing further to say. I am ready."

The captain nodded and grabbed the back of his manacled wrists, pulling the prisoner firmly to stand above the trapdoor. A black hood was placed over the major's head and ropes bound his wrists and ankles together.

Gardner's breathing grew faster. He could feel his heartbeat pounding wildly in his chest as the noose was tightened around his neck. He didn't want to die. He didn't want to lie in some forgotten grave, never to be mourned over.

Through the hood, he could hear the priest start to mumble again and he knew he only had seconds to live. "Dear God," he cried out as he heard a wooden squeak. The floor beneath gave away to empty space.

* * * * *

"Are you alright?" Major Hall asked.

Jack slowly nodded as he watched the body of Gardner sway on the gallows. This was a sick business, and he wish he had followed his partner's example. Ezra had declined to come, saying he had seen enough men hanged in his time. But Jack thought it was his duty to see the execution through. Though he was a fool, the major hadn't really been a bad man. It was just a shame that it hadn't been Davis swinging up there instead.

They turned away from the gallows, following the crowd out, past the prison walls.

"The staff at the War Department is proud of what you were able to accomplish," Hall prattled on. "They want you available for some other jobs."

"I'll think about it," Jack replied gruffly. Right now he just wanted to get a drink.

"I thought you would like to know that some of that gold went missing. There was some suspicion that it could have been you. I told them that it was impossible since you had no possession of it at any time."

Jack briefly smiled.

Hall went on, "I suppose Davis used some for himself."

"I suppose so," Jack said. He had a guess where that gold went, but he wasn't about to share that information with Hall.

They walked down the street and turned into the nearest saloon. It was crowded with off-duty soldiers and a few civilians. Jack found a table in the back while Hall went to get the drinks.

His friend returned with a bottle of whiskey and two glasses. He filled the glasses and took a sip. "I wonder how much more they will water this stuff down," he commented.

Jack dumped his drink down his throat and swallowed with distaste.

"Look," Hall said as he poured another shot into the detective's glass. "Rose told me that there were some strong feelings between you two. She really didn't go into too much detail, but I can guess what happened. There is no reason for you to lose any sleep over her. I can tell you that she has always been a stubborn girl, even when she was little. She had a way of twisting men around her finger."

"Oh, I don't find any fault with her decision," Jack said honestly. "Tell me, how is she getting along now?"

"With a few words from me, she's gotten work at the Seminary Hospital in town. She's become a terror there and is demanding better treatment for all the wounded. I tell you she is right popular with the soldiers."

“The work will suit her,” Jack said.

“Rose sends her regards to you and told me she will always remember your visit to Stanton. Once the war is over, she hopes to return to her home there.”

Jack knew he wanted to visit her home too. For underneath her flower beds there was a fortune of gold. Gold buried by Major Gardner with Rose’s permission. That would be a trip worth making.

“What are you smiling about Jack?” Hall asked, looking over his glass.

“Oh, nothing,” the detective replied as he finished off another shot of whiskey.

