

DUST AND HEAT

by

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(Under the Direction of Reginald McKnight)

ABSTRACT

On Christmas Eve, 1919, Prescott Freeman returns to his home in Kingston, GA. Having fought in the First World War, Prescott brings with him memories of the horrors he witnessed in the Meuse-Argonne offensive. In a series of flashbacks, Prescott, on a quest for redemption, falls in love with a beautiful young Russian, Natasha, while he is serving President Woodrow Wilson during the Paris Peace Conference. He leaves the conference in 1919 to take her back to Russia, where they are caught up in the civil war in Siberia.

While at home in Kingston, he confronts the materialism that his father, Thaddeus, represents. Thaddeus is obsessed not only with the accumulation of wealth, but with an increase in power. The latter obsession manifests itself in terms of class conflict. He and a sharecropper, Morgan Ledbetter, both leaders of their clan, allow their families to disintegrate as a result of their pursuit of wealth.

Prescott visits an old friend, a newspaperman named Marcus Stokesbury, who has written a memoir, an account of J. J. McPherson. The memoir becomes a novel within a novel. J. J. also confronts materialism and the struggle for power in the gold and silver fields of Virginia City, Nevada. He, too, embarks on a quest for redemption.

The two storylines merge so that it becomes apparent how the materialism of the Captains of Industry during the Gilded Age spreads throughout American society by the 1920s. The era, however, provides only a backdrop. The focus is on individuals like Prescott and J. J., who are willing to exert their independence and endure the dust and heat.

INDEX WORDS: Southern Literature, Georgia Literature, World War I, Paris Peace Conference, Russian Civil War

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DEDICATION

For my wife, my son, and my mother.

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INTRODUCTION

In William Dean Howells's novel *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, Bromfield Corey observes that ““money is to the fore now. It is the romance, the poetry of our age. It's the thing that chiefly strikes the imagination”” (56). Corey's assessment of post-Civil War America is significant. The end of the Civil War led to the dawn of a new era in American business. Cleanth Brooks, R. W. B. Lewis, and Robert Penn Warren point out, for example, that in 1861 the United States had fewer than a hundred millionaires, whereas in 1875 that number jumped to more than a thousand (1197). These millionaires were, for the most part, the nouveaux riches. Their focus in life was to make money and they considered themselves well-equipped to survive in the economic jungle. These Captains of Industry, also known as Robber Barons, believed they owed the public nothing. In fact, it was not surprising that William Vanderbilt asserted, ““The public be damned”” (qtd. in Wright et al. 249). Devotees of Herbert Spencer's Social Darwinism, the new millionaires saw the postbellum economic world as survival of the fittest.

Kyle Mondale, in my novel *Dust and Heat*, is one of the nouveaux riches. It is no small matter of interest that he acknowledges his familiarity with *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. He sees a portion of himself in Silas: ““Quite frankly, some people who have had money in their families for generations look down their noses at businessmen like me and [J. P.] Morgan. I guess they think because we had to work for what we have, our hands must be dirty. Lapham really wants to rise to that level of social acceptance that I

don't think I've found yet'" (74). Essential to this quest for social acceptance is the building motif. Silas builds a house that burns before completion. Similarly, Mondale and his friends build magnificent cottages on Jekyll Island, the coastal playground of the wealthy.

Although he recognizes a similarity with Silas, Mondale is quick to point out a difference:

Lapham lets his conscience control him too much. He doesn't really do anything wrong in his business. He follows accepted business practices.

The fact of the matter is some of us are more capable than others of achieving success; some of us wouldn't know success if it bit us in the ass.

We should take advantage where advantage is given and forget about conscience. (74-75)

In Howells's novel, Silas faces an ethical dilemma; he pursues a moral compass.

Mondale sees such a pursuit as useless. The only pursuit that matters is the pursuit of wealth, and the opinions of people are unimportant. After all, one of his neighbors on Jekyll, J. P. Morgan, is noted for announcing "that he 'owe[d] the public nothing'" (qtd. in Wright et al. 249). In other words, Mondale believes in Social Darwinism, in his ability to make money, and in his preeminent status in the hierarchy of the economic jungle.

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Captains of Industry were obsessed with the accumulation of wealth and, during the first quarter of the twentieth century, the emphasis on wealth filtered down from the nouveaux riches and spread

throughout American society. Therefore, Eudora Welty's recollection of her father's career is not surprising:

It seems to me that my father's choosing life insurance as his work, and indeed he exhausted his life for it, must have always had a deeper reason behind it than his conviction, strong as it was, in which he joined the majority in the twenties, that success in business was the solution to most of the problems of living—security of the family, their ongoing comfort and welfare, and especially the certainty of education for the children. This was partly why the past had no interest for him. He saw life in terms of the future, and he worked to provide that future for his children. (91)

Welty's father viewed success as a means to an end. Many businessmen during this period, however, saw wealth as an end, and they were willing to take any steps to accumulate and safeguard their fortunes.

Such is part of the historical backdrop of *Dust and Heat*. For me as a creative and a scholarly writer, the historical perspective is important. I am often reminded of the dictum set forth by Brooks, Lewis, and Warren that "literature, clearly, does not exist in a vacuum. It feeds on life and life feeds on it" (xvii). I agree that a symbiotic relationship between literature and life exists, and the point where the two interconnect is characterization. At this point the path of discovery begins. I may know how the First World War ends. I may know how questionable the results of the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 are. When I sit down to write about Prescott Freeman, however, I do not know the extent of his involvement in these events, nor do I know the extent of the trauma he suffers in the Russian Civil War. Much of it is a matter of discovery. The process is

similar to that which Flannery O'Connor describes: "If you start with a real personality, a real character, then something is bound to happen; and you don't have to know what before you begin. In fact it may be better if you don't know what before you begin. You ought to be able to discover something from your stories" (106). Without question, my discoveries took me down some unexpected roads. For example, when I envisioned Galen Freeman, I did not know that he would eventually sit in the snow on a hilltop overlooking the Ledbetters' farm while Emma is dying. Nevertheless, when the time comes, it simply is the thing I would expect him to do.

The period when the novel takes place is one I find especially interesting, for its influence reverberates today. Materialism spread throughout society and affected writers as disparate as Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, T. S. Eliot, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, and Arthur Miller. Materialism led to a moral collapse, the decline of society. Symptomatic of society's deterioration is the dispersal of people from the land to the cities. Forgotten is Thomas Jefferson's contention that "those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God" (35) and that "the mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body" (36). With an increasing emphasis on industrialization after the Civil War, many people left the farms for new economic opportunities in the cities. David Shannon points out that by 1900 forty percent of the American population could be classified as urban, with New York City's population in excess of three million people, and Chicago and Philadelphia in excess of one million each (4). In terms of industrial output, he further explains, the United States climbed from fourth among industrial nations in 1860 to first in 1900 (4). Rural-to-urban migration is a subject I find intriguing, for I belong to a tradition that values living on the

land. Both my father's and mother's families grew up on farms in north Georgia and, although I reside in an urban area, I feel I am a part of the agrarian tradition.

The post-World War I era saw a continuation in the movement of the people from the land. There is little doubt that the increasing affordability of the automobile contributed to the migration. Oswald Spengler is unsparing in his denunciation of the migration:

In place of a type-true people, born of and grown on the soil, there is a new sort of nomad, cohering unstably in fluid masses, the parasitical city dweller, traditionless, utterly matter-of-fact, religionless, clever, unfruitful, deeply contemptuous of the countryman and especially that highest form of countryman, the country gentleman. (32)

Spengler's indictment includes many of the ideas associated with modernism: a break with tradition, especially religious tradition; deracination; alienation; hopelessness. Modernism grows out of the horrors of the First World War. Emerging from these horrors, wounded psychologically and emotionally, is Prescott Freeman.

Dust and Heat, Prescott's story, is not a history book. Although the historical backdrop is key, I am interested in exploring the characters and family relationships. Arthur Miller admits that his "plays are always involved with society, but I'm writing about people, too, and it's clear over the years that audiences understand them and care about them. The political landscape changes, the issues change, but the people are still there. People don't really change that much" (L4). One way in which people do not change is their need for redemption. O'Connor argues that "redemption is meaningless unless there is cause for it. . ." (33). For Prescott and J. J. McPherson, there is cause for

redemption. Both carry with them the ineffable horrors of war. Both are trapped within the prison of materialism. Although they do not realize it—and I did not realize it until I finished the novel—they are on an archetypal quest for redemption. When viewed within the context of the era of materialism, the term redemption is ironic, for it involves a payment (Schofield et al. 1214). To be saved from the nightmares of war and the constraints of the new economic order, they must be willing to pay a price.

Prescott suffers emotionally from the carnage of the Meuse-Argonne offensive. That he is a member of the 1st Division is significant. Thomas Shipley points out:

The division insignia is a crimson “1” on a khaki background. This insignia not only represents the number of the division, and many of its subsidiary organizations, but it is further appropriate in that this was the first division in France, the first in a sector, the first to fire a shot at the Germans, the first to attack, the first to attempt a raid, the first to be raided, the first to capture prisoners, the first to inflict and to suffer casualties, the first to be cited singly in general orders, and first in the number of division corps and army commanders and general staff officers produced from its personnel. (451-52)

When he left home in 1917, Prescott was a second lieutenant. He returns in 1919 as a captain. During the Meuse-Argonne campaign, he fights heroically. The color crimson can be perceived as a symbol in the novel. That the 1 on his shoulder patch is crimson signifies the blood that has been shed in battle, the blood that stains his psyche.

According to Shipley, 4,419 members of the 1st Division were killed and 20,657 soldiers were wounded (452). Prescott carries memories of the dead and dying and wounded.

Prescott sees his life as a soldier as a continuation of his grandfather Jeffrey's exploits in the American Civil War. When he observes Kennesaw Mountain from the train, Prescott remembers that Jeffrey had fought there, and "the thought made the pain in Prescott's lower right leg more bearable" (7). Prescott views his relationship with his absent grandfather in terms of an Old Testament/New Testament typology. In other words, Jeffrey is the type, the precursor, and Prescott is the antitype, the fulfillment.

At the heart of the connection between Prescott and Jeffrey is violence. O'Connor recognizes the importance of violence in fiction:

We hear many complaints about the prevalence of violence in modern fiction, and it is always assumed that this violence is a bad thing and meant to be an end in itself. With the serious writer, violence is never an end in itself. It is the extreme situation that best reveals what we are essentially, and I believe these are times when writers are more interested in what we are essentially than in the tenor of our daily lives. Violence is a force which can be used for good or evil, and among other things taken by it is the kingdom of heaven. But regardless of what can be taken by it, the man in the violent situation reveals those qualities least dispensable in his personality, those qualities which are all he will have to take into eternity with him. . . . (114)

Without question, qualities that Prescott exhibits are bravery and loyalty and steadfastness and independence. As a result of his violence on the battlefield, his soul bears a crimson stain, and he finds redemption in his love for Natasha. In a world shattered by the horrors of war, in a world inundated by hopelessness, Prescott turns to

Natasha. He is like the speaker in Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," who affirms to his listener, "Ah, love, let us be true / To one another!" (29-30). There is no one else that the speaker can cling to. In a world of confusion, only love provides an anchor against the raging sea of despair.

Prescott's love for Natasha, however, is not enough to wash away the crimson stain. Against his better judgment, he leads her and a group of Russian émigrés from Paris to Vladivostok. Once again, typology is relevant. Just as Jeffrey fought in the American Civil War, Prescott finds himself in the midst of the Russian Civil War. I find war a good setting in which to develop characters. I concur with Hemingway's position that "civil war is the best war for a writer. . ." (24). Civil war presents the internecine conflict of brother against brother, a fratricidal conflict that goes back to the story of Cain and Abel. When it comes to subjects for a writer, Hemingway, in a letter to Fitzgerald, emphasizes that "war is the best subject of all. It groups the maximum of material and speeds up the action and brings out all sorts of stuff that normally you have to wait a lifetime to get. . . ." (24-25). Hemingway is correct. A battle sequence "speeds up the action" of the novel. For example, the attack in Siberia happens quickly and sets in motion a chain of events involving Prescott.

In the Russian Civil War, the opposing sides are often called Whites and Reds, and these colors are worthy of analysis. White connotes purity and innocence. Prescott and Natasha discover, however, that ironically there is neither purity nor innocence among the White supporters of Kolchak. In fact, the color white, as it describes the snow, takes on the hue of malevolence. Similarly, the Reds, an inimical threat, ambush Prescott

and Natasha and their party. The whiteness of the barren, snowy landscape is blinding; it obscures the boundary lines between good and evil.

Prescott's quest for redemption does not end in Siberia. When he returns to the home place in Kingston, he is still searching. He finds not peace, but warfare: class warfare between his father, Thaddeus, and Morgan Ledbetter, a sharecropper. Southern literature has often presented the South as a garden; the implication is the Garden of Eden. With its emphasis on time and place, my novel fits within the genre of Southern literature. The Freeman farm is a garden, but it is a postwar garden; the fields are desolate. As a result, the garden offers little hope of redemption, for it is full of strife. Andrew Lytle explains:

Indiscriminate appetite would replace the Garden of Innocence, or the suspension of life, however you call it, with a cannibal wilderness.

Appetite is not only carnal. That is vexing enough. There was also in the knowledge of good and evil an appetite for unrestrained power. This would change all the rules of the game. This was no threat to God's power. The threat was to the well-being of His creatures.

Not disobedience, but the sorrow of chaos's return is the lesson the myth of the Garden has for mankind. We of the West have rushed to misconstrue its warnings. The moment the European mind accepted materialism as the summum bonum, that is the dirt of the ground without the breath of God upon it, it initiated the repetitive catastrophes of Babel. The confusion of tongues is the prelude to downfall. (173-74)

Lytle's analysis is perceptive. Although he still lives in the old house, Thaddeus has more or less removed himself from the land. His "appetite" is mercantile. The concrete image of his sitting behind his desk and examining figures in his ledger reveals his position within the environment of greed. The aggrandizement of wealth whets his "appetite for unrestrained power," economic power over people like Morgan Ledbetter. Lytle perceives a new Babel, where "the confusion of tongues" destroys communication. Thus, before Prescott's departure, Galen, a casualty of his father's obsession with wealth and power, sits in the parlor, frozen, unable to speak.

Because he still lives on the land, yet pursues mercantile interests, Thaddeus represents the point at which the landed Southern aristocracy gives way to the new economic order with its never-ending accumulation of wealth. W. H. Auden describes the difference between the two:

A change in the nature of wealth from landownership to money capital radically alters the social conception of time. The wealth produced by land may vary from year to year—there are good harvests and bad—but, in the long run its average yield may be counted upon. Land, barring dispossession by an invader or confiscation by the State, is held by a family in perpetuity. In consequence, the social conception of time in a landowning society is cyclical—the future is expected to be a repetition of the past. But in a mercantile society time is conceived of as unilinear forward movement in which the future is always novel and unpredictable. (The unpredictable event in a landowning society is an Act of God, that is to say, it is not "natural" for an event to be unpredictable.) The merchant is

constantly taking risks—if he is lucky, he may make a fortune, if he is unlucky he may lose everything. Since, in a mercantile society, social power is derived from money, the distribution of power within it is constantly changing, which has the effect of weakening reverence for the past; who one's distant ancestors were soon ceases to be of much social importance. The oath of lifelong loyalty is replaced by the contract which binds its signatories to fulfill certain specific promises by a certain specific future date, after which their commitment to each other is over. (220)

It is clear that Thaddeus has “no reverence for the past,” neither the distant past nor the recent past. For example, “military strategy of a war fought and lost held no interest for Thaddeus” (2). The only strategy that interests him is economic. Lytle contends that “business is rarely any man's whole life. If it is, he is a monster” (182). Thaddeus is consumed with business; he is obsessed with the aggrandizement of wealth. As a result, his family is disintegrating. Similarly, Morgan Ledbetter focuses solely on what he perceives was a financial wrong Thaddeus committed to take his land. Morgan is so committed to money that he is willing to accept five hundred dollars with the understanding that Galen will not be responsible for Emma's child. Morgan's greed leads to the destruction of his family.

As a writer, I am interested in these family relationships, which are oftentimes fragile at best. Lytle sees the family unit in the South under attack (164-65). The specter of materialism respects no family, rich or poor. Without question, the family tradition that is vulnerable is the tradition of the clan. According to Lytle:

The South, particularly the Old West of Tennessee and Kentucky,

experienced an influx of Scottish and Scotch-Irish before and after the annihilation of the Highland clans by the Duke of Cumberland, that archetypal Sherman. This bloc of people brought with them an adherence to the clannish feeling of family, as well as its inbred history of defeat. Their presence gave a distinctive quality to our sense of behavior of the region. The Scotch-Irish were said to keep the Sabbath and everything they laid their hands on. I don't know what bureaucrat so defined them, but the very understanding of themselves was through the family and clan. Clan means children. The chief or captain, as he was earlier called, was kin to everybody under his authority; this is the rule of blood. (189)

Both Thaddeus and Morgan are the heads of their clans. For them, blood is important, but their worship of money tears apart the clan. For example, Prescott leaves the Freeman clan, and Galen becomes mute and is no longer a productive member of the clan. Moreover, Morgan loses a daughter and grandchild. His two sons can only collapse in the sterility of the snow. The clans are falling apart.

My interest in the Southern clan grew out of my appreciation of Faulkner's "Barn Burning." Abner Snopes, the head of his clan, makes it clear to his son Sarty the importance of kinship: "You're getting to be a man. You got to learn. You got to learn to stick to your own blood or you ain't going to have any blood to stick to you" (376). Without a strict adherence to "blood," the clan will disintegrate, whether the clan is rich or poor. Faulkner explains that "it doesn't matter what the people do. They can be land people, farmers, and industrialists, but there still exists the feeling of blood, of clan, blood for blood. It is pretty general through all the classes" (191). The infiltration of

materialism attacks the clan and disrupts it. The reason is that it diverts the attention of the member away from the clan to something external. Thus when the focus of the leader is diverted, the effects are especially pernicious.

Prescott is not the only character in *Dust and Heat* who seeks redemption from materialism. He reads a memoir written by his journalist friend, Marcus Stokesbury. Inclusion of the memoir affects the structure of the novel. I find flashbacks useful for my purposes, for the past intrudes on the present; there is simply no way to escape the past. It is always there. A memoir within a novel, however, is more than a flashback. It is really a novel within a novel.

In the memoir, Marcus introduces J. J. McPherson. Like Prescott, J. J. has seen war and death and, like Prescott, he embarks on a quest for redemption. Living on Kyle Mondale's estate on Jekyll Island, where he is in charge of the hunting preserve, establishes his ties with the Eastern financial establishment. He guides hunts and it should be remembered that the men who go on these hunts are disciples of the survival-of-the-fittest philosophy. For J. J., Jekyll Island is an escape, a sacrifice he has made to bring peace to his old home community in the West. The Mondale estate is a sanctuary, where the grim violence of his past supposedly cannot touch him.

That Marcus writes for the *Atlanta Constitution* is noteworthy because the newspaper in the late 1880s is associated with Henry Grady, whose vision of the New South involves the influx of northern capital. Money is at the heart of Marcus's memoir. When they go to Virginia City, Nevada, to claim the body of Tom Mondale, J. J., Chris Mondale, and Marcus become embroiled in the conflict between those who support the gold standard and those who support the silver standard. Lurking beneath the surface of

the monetary conflict, however, is Social Darwinism. The Captains of Industry support the gold standard, for they see the silver standard as an evil attempt on the part of the lower classes to put more money in circulation, money that they will have access to. Thus the conflict becomes a power struggle.

After their arrival in Virginia City, J. J., Chris, and Marcus encounter immigrants who work in the silver mines. They have come to America to seek a life better than the one they left in Europe. They have come to work on farms and ranches. Materialism, which the gold and silver conflict represents, corrupts their dreams. They see instant wealth in the ore, but the only ones who reap the financial rewards are the mine owners like Wilfred Calhoun and George Cavendish.

J. J., like Prescott, seeks redemption in the love he has for a woman, Eloise Endicott. She offers him hope. When he walks down the street in the rain and he lifts his face upward, it is like a baptism. He returns with a new suit and announces that he is a new man, which is a Biblical allusion (Eph. 4.24). Nevertheless, he continues to carry his Colt pistol. The old man and the new man struggle to claim his allegiance. J. J. and Eloise do not return to the East, which is associated with the new economic order. They remain in the West, a land of new beginnings and hope. Actually, they go beyond the West, to Alaska. There is irony here, for they are going to the gold fields. There is no escaping the clutches of materialism.

When I began to envision Prescott Freeman and J. J. McPherson, I knew they were two distinct stories, yet they were related. I realized that somehow I had to tie them together into one novel. As a result, the idea of the memoir within the novel evolved. Writers have weaved together disparate storylines before. For example, in Faulkner's

Light in August, the stories of Joe Christmas, the Reverend Gail Hightower, Byron Bunch, and Lena Grove may appear unrelated. By the end of the novel, Faulkner brings them together. Similarly, the stories and Prescott and J. J. are related. J. J. comes from a period when greed and avarice are concentrated among a few, the Captains of Industry. Prescott comes from a period when greed and avarice have spread throughout society.

During the composition of this novel, I have felt the influence of my literary tradition, which starts with the King James Bible. Paul has a lot to say about redemption, which is so important to Southern literature and to an understanding of my novel. I am deeply indebted to writers like Faulkner, O'Connor, and Welty for their evocation of time and place. Furthermore, I have been influenced by Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and their editor, Maxwell Perkins. In a letter to Fitzgerald, Perkins contends that "the way of writing which you have chosen and which is bound to come more and more into practice is one where a vast amount is said by implication, and that therefore the book [*The Great Gatsby*] is as full as it would have been if written to much greater length by another method" (qtd. in Berg 83). Both Fitzgerald and Hemingway are noted for "implication," a style which has greatly influenced my own writing.

In my novel I use the dramatic technique of dialogue extensively to develop characters. They become known as a result not only of what they do but also of what they say. In a letter to Marcia Davenport, Perkins advises, "Generalizations are no use—give one specific thing and let the action say it. . . . When you have people talking, you have a scene. You must interrupt with explanatory paragraphs but shorten them as much as you can. Dialogue is *action*. . . ." (446). I find that dialogue, like a battle scene, advances the

story quickly. Dialogue makes the characters come alive. According to O'Connor, dialogue helps to define characters:

An idiom characterizes a society, and when you ignore the idiom, you are very likely ignoring the whole social fabric that could make meaningful character. You can't cut characters off from their society and say much about them as individuals. You can't say anything meaningful about the mystery of a personality unless you put that personality in a believable and significant social context. And the best way to do this is through the character's own language. (104)

I try to create dialogue that is consistent with a character's background. I am attempting to achieve verisimilitude, so I want the characters' language to reflect the essence of their being.

The historical backdrop of *Dust and Heat* is panoramic, but I take the story down to two specific characters, Prescott Freeman and J. J. McPherson. During their quest for redemption, they make choices. As John Milton emphasizes in *Areopagitica*, "I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat" (728). Prescott and J. J. take risks. They choose not to stand still in the face of encroaching materialism. By choosing to set foot on the field of battle, they know that victory comes with a price. They know that victory comes with "dust and heat."

CHAPTER 1

The last time Prescott Freeman walked through Five Points he had not killed a man. That was two years ago. It was a late morning in June and the white heat of summer was already settling on the north Georgia foothills and Prescott had to squint in the glare of the sun rising from the pavement. He wandered the sidewalks that morning waiting for the train that would take him to basic training at a makeshift army camp south of Macon. He fidgeted in front of store windows and checked his pocket watch and thought of the adventure and the excitement a twenty-two-year-old second lieutenant could have.

Now two years later he limped out of the George Muse Clothing Company and stood at Marietta and Peachtree streets in the cold rain of Christmas Eve with a dark brown duffle bag slung across his left shoulder. It was mid-afternoon and the sky hung low and gray and the rain was like the rain in the Argonne—steady, intense, always there. He smelled the grayness he had smelled before. The afternoon was dark and already the electric street lamps shone a milky white. He watched the sparks that flew from the web of electric wires that criss-crossed Peachtree, Marietta, and Decatur streets and the trolleys that click-clacked along their routes with the faces of shoppers barely visible in the frosted windows.

Prescott was a tall man, with dark eyes and hair—just like his grandfather Jeffrey Freeman; that is what his grandmother Deborah had always said. He never knew his grandfather but he wished he had. All his life he had heard about him so it was almost as if he did know him. He knew about his grandfather sneaking under cover of darkness past

the Yankee lines with the woman he would later marry. He knew about his grandfather's exploits on the battlefield, especially at Chickamauga and at Kennesaw Mountain. He knew about his pursuit of Charley Kell after the war. Prescott's father Thaddeus never wanted to talk about those days; he was always too busy poring over his accounts receivables book and plotting economic strategy.

"The war taught some men how to tell stories," Thaddeus once said to him in the lint-filled air of his office in the cotton warehouse in Rome. "It taught some of us how to make money."

Military strategy of a war fought and lost held no interest for Thaddeus. But Prescott never tired of hearing. Jeffrey was not there to recount the stories but others were and Prescott listened and hoped his day of adventure would come.

The narrow sidewalks were crowded with people with blurred faces rushing past him in the rain. Their arms held packages and he knew they did not see him. His dark, sunken eyes stared upward at the red and green Christmas decorations hanging soggy and limp from the lamp posts. He had lost weight. After the wound it had been hard to eat and he knew the family would notice how the uniform no longer fit. He heard the deep throaty blasts of the train whistles rising from the diaphragms of black steam locomotives at Union Station two blocks away and he thought of the rain and the trains and the cattle cars swaying on narrow tracks all the way to the front. Those whistles were different. They were short, shrill blasts like the scream of a threatened bobcat. He felt his feet moving north along Marietta Street to Forsyth, where Union Station lit up the afternoon darkness like a Greek temple ablaze with the fire of the gods. He walked into the cavernous lobby and saw hundreds of men and women and children hurrying to and from

the loading platforms. The leather soles of his boots echoed on the black-and-white tile floor and he stared at the white marble pillars that reached upward forever and at the vault of the ceiling with the skylights that were beyond forever. He walked up to the ticket window.

“Where to?” the clerk, an elderly woman, asked.

“Kingston.”

“One-way?”

“Roundtrip.”

Everyone was in a rush. Travelers bumped into him and said nothing and he smelled the dank smell of cigar smoke. Conductors called out hoarsely from the doors lining the far wall, “New York,” “Cincinnati,” “Savannah,” “Chattanooga.”

“Sir, let me help you with that bag,” a gray-haired black porter said. “Where you headin’, sir?”

“Kingston.”

“Kingston. My, I haven’t been there in a long time.”

“I’m sure it hasn’t changed.”

The porter led him across the wide wooden platform to one of the passenger cars and found him a seat next to a window

“Thank you, sir,” the porter said with a quarter in his hand.

Prescott pulled off his water-blackened trench coat and lay it on top of the duffle bag between his feet. The car was filling up fast with shoppers eager to get to their homes in Marietta, Acworth, and Cartersville. He looked at his reflection in the window and saw

the scar on his left cheek. That bullet had not stopped him. The shrapnel that hit his leg did.

What would his father say? Probably “I told you what would happen. I told you you had no business leaving.” He wondered what his mother would have said. She had not survived the influenza. He stared at his face in the window and felt the emptiness. He wished he had been there but she had not stood in his way. She had been his ally in the fight before the war.

He leaned his head back on the seat and closed his eyes and thought about the return home. They would want to know why he volunteered to stay in Paris. But they would also want to know about the conference. He would tell them but he could not tell them about Natasha because that telling was more than Paris and he could not talk about it. He knew that his grandfather never talked about his war; he never talked about his pursuit of Charley Kell and the day he shot and killed him. He never talked about those things; other people did.

Prescott felt the presence and he opened his eyes. A young boy, maybe six or seven, stood in the aisle next to him.

“My dad’s a soldier too,” the boy said. “He’s not home yet but he will be.”

Prescott looked at the boy and at the young woman who stood beside him. He looked at her eyes and knew and in that ineffable moment of not forgetting she knew that he knew and she gave a gentle push to her son and they moved to the back of the car.

“Mind if I sit here?” a short, round-faced man in his sixties, wearing a wet plaid suit, said.

He dropped into the seat. Despite the cold he was sweating and he wiped his face with a handkerchief. He held a large brown leather case in his lap.

“Nathan Mulberry’s the name.”

“Prescott Freeman.”

“A captain, I see. You just now going home?”

“Yes.”

“Where’s home?”

“Kingston.”

“Mine’s Chattanooga. Gotta be home for Christmas. I think we’ll both make it.”

The conductor passed through the car and collected tickets.

“Captain, you need anything, you let me know,” the conductor said. “Soldiers are special on this here train.”

“Thanks.”

“You can sure tell he grew up on a farm,” Mulberry said. “You see any action over there?”

“Enough.”

The steam coursed through the veins of the locomotive and the whole car shook. It pulled away from the platform and crawled through the yards and Prescott watched as Union Station faded in the mist. The whistle was blowing long and hard and the steam was building up in the great furnace and at the end of the yards the car shook again. Prescott saw the small frame maintenance buildings at the edge of the yards and soon they were lost in the mist also, replaced by small frame houses. The train headed northwest and the rain became heavier. He saw more houses, bigger houses on narrow

lots, their windows ablaze with lights. And soon the houses were gone and there were only trees and the river that awaited them. The car was cold and the passengers chattered as if the effort to talk would keep them warm.

“Damn sorry business, war,” Mulberry said and he bit off the end of a cigar.

“Never had to fight in a war. Guess I’m lucky.”

“Some folks would say so.”

“Wilson should have never got us in that mess. That’s what I say. That your opinion?”

“He did what he thought he had to do.”

“Yeah, well, maybe so. We got enough problems here at home. You know what I mean? Hell, we got too many labor agitators. You know? Well, maybe you don’t. You’ve been gone. Well, we don’t have to worry about Wilson much longer. Who you supporting?”

“Don’t know.”

“Leonard Wood is my man. Great general, good Republican. Of course, maybe you’re a Democrat.”

The train spewed ash and smoke and rumbled across the Chattahoochee and Prescott saw the muddy water gliding beneath the wooden bridge.

“Marietta! Marietta!” the conductor was passing through the car again. “Ladies and gentlemen, we’ll be arrivin’ in Marietta in just a few minutes.”

The stop in Marietta was brief, just long enough for almost half the passengers to collect their packages and step onto the platform. And then the train resumed its northwest journey, ready to cross the remaining flatlands and the hills and ridges which

waited. Prescott stared at the rain and suddenly saw the twin peaks imperturbable in the afternoon darkness. Kennesaw Mountain thrust its peaks into the clouds.

Jeffrey had been here. The thought made the pain in Prescott's lower right leg more bearable. He knew all about it. His grandfather served for a while under Hardee in the Army of Tennessee and in late June on a reconnaissance he rode practically into McPherson's line along the Burnt Hickory Road. Everybody was so surprised that not a shot was fired. But both sides made up for it. Prescott knew it was raining too—it was a Sunday, June 26, 1864, but then the rain was gone and there was only the insufferable heat. When the battle began on Monday, the worst enemy was not the Confederates or the Yankees but the merciless sun. The dead baked on the field leading up to Kennesaw, and on Thursday both sides declared a ceasefire to bury the dead. Then Johnston withdrew to protect his flank. The dead rested in the coolness of the freshly dug earth. For the living there was no protection from the sun. Prescott had known only the rain, the ever-present rain—and then the snow. The rain washed the blood away. The snow let it sit on the surface and then absorbed it.

“You know, a lot's happened here since we got into that war,” Mulberry said.

“Business has picked up. I'm in business. Guess what I got in this case?”

“No idea.”

“Stock. Not just any stock. No, sirree. I'm talking Coca-Cola stock. Yes, sir. One dollar a share and one day you'll be rich.”

“Who says?”

“Well, lots of people. Coca-Cola is the rage. Bet you saw people in Paris drinking it.”

“Who said I was in Paris?”

“I just figured—”

“No, can’t say I saw anyone drinking it.”

“Soldiers are too busy to notice something like that.”

“Maybe so.”

“Coca-Cola is the future. Trust me on this. I know what I’m talking about. I mean—we just had a big meeting—that’s why I was in Atlanta—and everybody was talking about how great this drink is and how people are buying it. Now’s the time. Trust me. This is a surer thing than money on Sir Barton. Now’s the time to invest in the future.”

“I’m always interested in the future. How much did you say it is?”

“Just a dollar a share.”

“Give me three.”

Mulberry’s eyes opened wide. He reached into the case and withdrew several papers with the Coca-Cola logo at the top. He wrote down Prescott’s name and address. Prescott handed him three silver dollars.

“This is your stock certificate, Captain Freeman. Now don’t lose it.”

“I won’t. You said this is the future.”

“I did and it is. Trust me. Take real good care of it. I’ll file the copy with headquarters in Atlanta next week. Sure do appreciate it.”

“Merry Christmas.”

The train rumbled and rattled through Acworth and Cartersville and the Allatoona hills. The train struggled on the ascent and Prescott knew it would not be much longer.

Across the muddy Etowah and across the wide, tumbling Two-Run Creek the locomotive churned. He saw the bend of the creek where he used to fish. When the fish were not biting, he swam. The train smoked past pines and barren oaks and then dormant pastures. The rain grew heavier.

“Approachin’ Kingston, Captain,” the conductor said. “Need any help with that bag?”

“No.”

“Nice meeting you, Captain Freeman,” Mulberry said. “And thanks again.”

The wheels began to squeal and the train slowed. Prescott held onto a seat to keep his balance and he saw the buildings of Main Street flash into view. He stepped onto the wooden platform of the yellow depot and stood at the spot where Andrews and his band of raiders had stood and waited for the tracks to clear. The train pulled away and left Prescott to stare at the town he had left. It looked the same. It was mostly one street, mostly one block of two-story red brick buildings. There were a general store, a bank, a barber shop, a newspaper, a livery stable, and a hotel. The darkness of early evening mixed with the rain and he saw light coming from the windows of the hotel and he crossed the street.

The lobby was small and empty. No one stood behind the desk and the stairs leading to the second floor were silent. He walked into the dining room and set the duffle bag on the floor and sat at a table. He laid his flat garrison cap on the red-and-white-checked oil tablecloth. Connie Lumpkin, a large woman who ran the hotel with her husband until he died shortly before the war, came out of the kitchen and saw Prescott and stopped.

“My God! Pres Freeman! Oh, my God, I can’t believe it!” She wrapped her large arms around him and kissed him on the cheek. “When did you get back?”

“Just now.”

“And you didn’t let anyone know?”

“I wanted to surprise.”

“Well, you sure did. Your folks ain’t gonna believe it! Guess what? We’ve got phones here now—at least some of us do. Maggie Sue is the operator. Let’s ring her. We’ll tell her to put us through to the Hill, provided she ain’t asleep.”

“No, I want to walk home, Connie.”

“Walk? Why, Pres honey, it’s miserable out there. You’ll catch pneumonia.”

“I’ve seen worse, Connie.”

“Well, sure, honey. I guess you have. If you want to walk, well, damn, it’s your right. What can I getcha?”

“You still serve coffee?”

“For you, darlin’, I’ll brew some fresh. How ’bout some food? I’ll cook you up somethin’ nice. On the house.”

“No, thanks. I’ll wait and eat when I get home.”

“I’ll go make that coffee. Take me just a few minutes.”

“No rush. Take your time.”

She disappeared into the kitchen and he let the words the Hill float around in his brain. The farm his father owned, the farm that once belonged to Jeffrey, was now called Freeman’s Hill; to most folks in Kingston it was simply the Hill. The dining room was warm and Prescott stared into the darkness. The family would probably be sitting down

to Christmas Eve supper right about now, Thaddeus at the head of the table. He could see them and they would be wondering.

Rue Alsace, #10

Paris

10 January 1919

Dear Pa,

Hope you and the others are well. I know the holidays must have been hard for you. I cannot imagine Mom not being there. I have been thinking a lot about both of you.

Paris is beautiful. It is almost as if a war had never been fought. The lights are incredibly bright and the Parisians are wonderful. They really appreciate our being here. I have made a number of friends here, soldiers from all parts of the country. I have met this one fellow—Harry Truman, an artillery officer from Missouri, an incredibly intelligent man. You would really like him. Of course, it seems all he ever talks about is this girl back home named Bess. I think he is going to marry her when he returns.

Pa, the real reason I am writing is to tell you I have a special opportunity. I have been asked to stay in Paris and help the president and his staff during the peace negotiations. I am not sure why they would ask a farm boy from Georgia but they have. It is too good an opportunity and I have decided to stay for a while. I know how much you were hoping I could get back soon and help with the business but this is something I have to do. I know you will understand. The sessions are supposed to start in February. Don't

know how long they will take. I will let you know.

Give my love to everyone.

Pres

Freeman's Hill

Kingston, Ga.

30 January 1919

Pres,

Received your letter. Always wanted to see Paris. Your mother always wanted to see it too. Some things do not work out. Do not know why but they do not. I am glad you have the chance to see it. Most importantly, I am glad you survived the war so that you can see it.

Everyone is well and deeply disappointed that you are not coming home soon. We have all been counting on it. I need you in the business. I think the cotton market this year is going to be good, maybe not as good as last year. I can really use your help. You have a good head on your shoulders, so I am not surprised Wilson wants you there. I have always admired him. I even had the occasion a number of years ago to do some legal business with him when he practiced in Atlanta. Ask him if he remembers me. He probably will not. It was a long time ago.

Perhaps the peace conference will not take long but it probably will. The French and Italians are long-winded. At least the Germans will have to keep their mouths shut.

Take care. We love you, son.

Your Pa

Connie brought the coffee and set it before Prescott. He watched the steam rise and he stretched forth his hand to feel the warmth. The aroma was strong. Connie waited as he took a sip.

“You make the best coffee in the world.”

“What about the French? I hear tell they make pretty good coffee.”

“They do, no question. But it doesn’t compare to yours.”

“God, you know how to sweep a girl off her feet—or at least an old woman. Wish I were forty years younger. Can I getcha anything else? Piece of apple pie, maybe?”

“No thanks. Just the coffee.”

“Well, don’t you be leavin’ any money on the table. This here coffee is free. You hear me?”

“I hear you.”

He drank the coffee slowly and stared at the street and saw a Model T rumbling along. It looked like old Millard Thompson, who lived on the Etowah. Prescott had visited his son Chaffey in the hospital which had been set up in a church not far from the Meuse. Prescott remembered that one wall of the church was missing. He remembered

the dim light and the blood-splattered doctors and nurses hurrying from one wounded soldier to another. Prescott walked among the wounded, arms in slings, faces in bandages, the wounded, the dying. He found Chaffey in a corner lying on the floor waiting for the ambulance to take him from the front. A tourniquet above the left elbow had stopped the bleeding; the arm below the elbow was missing.

“Can I get you anything?” Prescott asked. “Water, maybe?”

“No. Just a gun. Let me finish the job the Huns started.”

“Don’t say that. You’re going home.”

“What the hell’s the point going back?”

The white-clad American nurses kept walking past Prescott and frowning. They did not want him there; he was in the way. Ambulance drivers, young men trembling with fear, loaded the wounded on stretchers and disappeared. They came for Chaffey.

“There’s all the point,” Prescott said. “Doris is waiting for you.”

“Doris is waiting for a man with two arms to hold her.”

“You didn’t hear me, Chaff. She’s waiting for you.”

Prescott stared at the bottom of the white coffee cup and heard Chaffey’s voice moaning in the church without one wall. Doris did not wait. She married a salesman from Cleveland and moved north.

With the duffle bag once again on his left shoulder Prescott walked out of the hotel into the darkness and into the rain. He crossed the railroad tracks and headed west. The rain blew cold in his face and the black countryside opened before him. He could not really see the fields but he knew where they were, barren and desolate in the winter, yet home to the bobwhite. Beyond the fields he knew where the forests were and where the

squirrel and deer and rabbit hid. His boots sloshed in the puddles of the dirt road and he walked between the grooves left by wagon wheels. He tasted the cold rain and wiped it from his eyes.

The wind increased. It was coming from the northwest and he hoped it was blowing the storm to the south. But for now the storm held on and his coat became heavy in the rain. He heard dogs howling and farmers shouting “Shut up!” and then the dogs grew quiet. He walked in the rain and listened to the wind howling past the oaks and hickories. He walked on the road that was slick like the road leading to the Meuse on 28 September 1918. He and the men of the 1st Division had heard the bombardment in amazement. The cannon had roared incessantly and they wondered how anyone could survive the screeching shells that hurled themselves into the German fortifications, lighting up the night sky.

“Get that cannon moving!” Prescott said with the rain stinging his face. “The river is just ahead!”

The wheels of the cannon had sunk in the mud and soldiers pushed and grunted and slipped and pushed some more. Suddenly the air was full of the whistle of rifle and machine gun bullets zipping past them and Prescott and his men dropped in the darkness and crawled toward a cluster of trees to seek shelter from the German enfilade. Bursts of light from the ends of the gun barrels showed the Germans’ position and Prescott saw McAdams lying beside the eight-millimeter Hotchkiss.

“Hibbell, fire your weapon! I need cover!”

Both men crouched behind the trees and Prescott waited for a response in the darkness but Hibbell said nothing. He remained crouched behind the tree and bullets

splintered the bark, which flew into Prescott's face. He smelled the sweet sap. Bullets shattered the tops of trees, which came crashing down on top of the soldiers.

"Hibbell, goddamn it! Fire your weapon!"

Prescott shoved the corporal's shoulder and he toppled over. In the darkness with the bullets and bark hurling past him Prescott saw the large bloody hole in Hibbell's forehead. His mouth and eyes were open in wonder. Prescott was suddenly sick. He heard the bullets rip into the trees, into uniforms, into flesh. He heard the shouts and the screams.

Prescott ran from the trees to the Hotchkiss, which was lying on its side next to McAdams. Bullets skirted the ground at his feet. He rolled McAdams out of the way and a cannon burst tore at the crust of the earth and sent it rising upward. He tasted the dirt and loaded the machine gun and began firing. Overhead he heard the screaming shell from a 240-millimeter trench mortar and the explosion in the German lines. Prescott prayed—*Please do not let those shells fall short*. He did not know how long he fired the Hotchkiss but the barrel became hot and the rain hit it and sent clouds of steam rising into the darkness. The shells from the 240 continued to fall and the Germans screamed and the earth shook and the trees collapsed. And then he rose and called to his men to charge. His platoon pulled themselves up and ran into the darkness.

He began to walk faster and the puddles splashed against the legs of his trousers. He passed farmhouses with pinpoints of light darting from the windows into the night. He passed the Johnson place, a small frame house where he had played as a child. Shoop Johnson was one of his closest friends. Shoop was the best second baseman he had ever seen. They had played for the Kingston team and Shoop hit the home run to defeat

Cartersville in '16. Prescott saw the single candle glimmering in one of the front windows. It burned in remembrance of Shoop, who did not make it out of the Argonne.

Prescott followed the road around a bend, past the white clapboard black church and the black cemetery and past Cass Grissom's house. He would have to explain to Cass why Jonas had chosen to stay in Paris. The road began to climb and the duffle bag weighed heavily on his left shoulder. The right leg was burning and he thought about stopping but he kept going, staying between the ruts made by the wagon wheels. The trees were thick along this stretch of the road and he heard an owl deep within the woods. The road became steeper and more slippery. He had to step carefully and then he came to an abrupt stop.

He could see it now—the house sitting on top of the hill, Freeman's Hill. It was a big house, two-story, with one porch sitting on top of the other, but it was not ornate. It had grown up around a central hall. From every window light spread out into the night. He smelled the smoke of the oak and hickory burning in the fireplaces and he knew they would be finished with the Christmas Eve supper and Prescott's brothers would be sitting in front of the fireplace in the big dining room and smoking their cigarettes and pipes and perhaps wondering about their long lost oldest brother. Perhaps they would be wondering when he would decide to come home.

Prescott stood in the middle of the muddy road and stared at the big house on the hill and once again wiped the rain from his eyes. Then he heard it—the bark he had not heard in more than two years. It was frantic, joyful. Rap, his black-and-white pointer, came running from the back of the house, barking and leaping against the trench coat.

"Rap, Rap, good ol' boy!" He said and looked up at the porch. He was home.

CHAPTER 2

“Hey, who’s out there causin’ such a ruckus?” a dark figure standing on the lower porch said and Prescott knew instantly it was his youngest brother Sam. “Henry, if that’s you again, Mandy ain’t givin’ you your Christmas present till tomorrow.”

“Boy, who told you it’s all right to say ain’t?”

Prescott watched his brother bend to try to get a better look in the darkness. He moved onto the steps, into the rain, staring at the visitor with a bird dog at his feet.

“Pres? God, it can’t be! Pres, great God, is that really you?”

Sam jumped the rest of the steps and ran to Prescott.

“Merry Christmas, little brother,” Prescott said and he lowered the duffle bag and hugged his brother.

The other brothers, William and Galen, and Prescott’s sister, Mandy, were on the porch.

“Sam, what the hell’s goin’ on?”

“Galen, stop that cussin’. It’s Christmas Eve.”

“Well, what’s the commotion?”

“What’re you doin’ out there?”

“Who is it?”

“Is it Henry again?”

“You ain’t gonna believe who Saint Nick has brought home for Christmas!” Sam said and he lifted Prescott’s duffle bag.

“Pres? Pres? Pres!” Mandy screamed.

They were all in the rain and Rap tried to stay in the middle of them.

“You folks get out of the rain,” the voice from the door said. “We don’t make our visitors stand outside.”

Prescott climbed the steps and walked across the porch. Thaddeus hovered in the doorway and then wrapped his long arms around his son. The grandmother, Deborah, stayed in the hall and Prescott went to her. She was small, thin, with white hair tied neatly in a bun behind her head.

“Hello, Grandma.”

“I told everyone you’d be home. No one believed me—especially that ornery father of yours. But I knew. Have you eaten?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Well, go upstairs and get out of those wet clothes and I’ll have something waiting for you when you get back down.”

“Grandma still gives the orders around here,” William said.

“You boys hush. Pres, run along now.”

Prescott stood in the middle of the bedroom he shared with William and looked at every piece of furniture. Everything was just as he remembered. Lying in the darkness in the French countryside, listening to the cannon and the whispers of men, he had remembered.

“All your stuff is in the wardrobe just like you left it,” William said. “Pres, I swear to God—I can’t believe you’re home.”

“I can’t either, little brother.”

Prescott sat on the smooth pine bench at the long table in the dining room and Grandma Prescott kept bringing fried chicken, gravy, and potatoes from the kitchen. The family gathered around him and asked questions all at once and he merely nodded his head and ate.

“You’ve lost weight,” Grandma said. “The army obviously doesn’t feed you as well as we do. I’ll make sure you’ve got some meat on those bones.”

“Did you see President Wilson?” Mandy asked.

“Yes, a few times.”

“Did you talk to him?”

“Rarely.”

“What was the fighting like?”

Prescott looked at William and chewed more slowly. He saw Galen, the next oldest brother, sitting at the end of the table listening but not speaking.

“It was war, William,” Prescott said.

“Who wants to hear about war?” Mandy asked. “It’s over. I want to hear about the French. What are they like?”

“Let’s be more specific,” Sam said. “Let’s hear about the French girls. What are they like?”

“The French are wonderful people, real friendly,” Prescott said. “I think they were a little disappointed we didn’t get there a couple of years earlier. But they were grateful we finally did.”

“What about this League thing?” his father asked and his gray eyebrows arched as they did when he disapproved of something. “It sounds like a good idea, but I don’t

think Congress will ever go for it. Lodge isn't going to support anything that Wilson favors."

"You're probably right," Prescott said. "But I agree—it's a good idea. It's something we need."

"Tell us about Paris," Grandma said.

"It's the most beautiful city I've ever seen, even in the rain, and it rained the entire time I was there. I spent all day in the meetings and at night some of us would go to the symphony or the opera. I couldn't understand a word of the opera but the costumes were real nice."

"Did you have a girl over there?" Mandy asked.

"Sis, why don't we get nosy?" William said.

"I bet you did."

"I had lots of girls," Prescott answered.

"Tell us about them later," William said. "What I want to know is—are you going with us in the morning?"

Prescott lifted a cup of coffee in salute.

"You better believe I'm going."

In the middle of the night Prescott stood at the bedroom window streaked with raindrops and he reached out and touched the cold pane. The rain was still falling but not as hard. He heard the lonely whistle of the train as it sped through Kingston and then

there was only silence. He had noticed his father looked a lot older. His tall frame had stooped and the gray hair had thinned and crept away from his forehead.

“Pres, what are you doing up?” William stirred in his bed.

“Couldn’t sleep. What’s wrong with Galen?”

“What do you mean?”

“He hardly said a word tonight.”

“Hell, that’s Galen. You oughtta know. I’ve seen brick walls say more than he does.”

“Go on back to sleep.”

The room was cold and Prescott looked toward the pasture and saw the dim outline of the barn. He tried to describe the whole scene to Natasha and she said she wanted to come.

Prescott walked in the rain along the Rue de Paix and stepped into the café. He closed the glass door and the bell rang. He saw them at the table sitting in the small wooden chairs and they looked up and waved him over.

“Pres, you don’t look like you’re enjoying international politics too much,” Dave Cantor said.

Cantor was a large man with a red face and booming voice. He was the Paris reporter for the *New York Times*. Truman, wearing his rimless spectacles, was at the table, along with Seth Morris, an infantry officer from Ohio, and a young woman he had not seen before.

“Pres, you look beat,” Truman said.

“Pres, what you need is a drink and intelligent conversation,” Cantor said. “We can supply only the drink. Pierre, bring the newly promoted captain a glass of Chianti. I don’t think you know our guest. This is—hell, I’ve forgotten your name. Seth, you brought her. You introduce her.”

“Pres, this is Natasha Kamorov. I met her and her family about a week ago at a party Patton was having. Your name came up and she said she wanted to meet you.”

“Good evening, Captain.”

“Miss Kamorov.”

“She’s Russian,” Truman said.

“Harry, we would’ve never figured that one out,” Cantor said.

Pierre, the small, elderly owner of the café, brought a glass of Chianti and Prescott lifted it to his lips. The warmth slowly trickled down and he began to relax.

“Well, Captain Freeman of the esteemed 1st, how are the negotiations going?” Cantor asked.

“Dave, I don’t want my comments showing up in the *Times*.”

“You should feel honored to have your comments printed in such a learned purveyor of information.”

“I feel honored just to be in the presence of a learned journalist.”

“Nobody’s ever called me learned before.”

“There’s a reason,” Truman said. “Gentlemen, lady, I must be going. I have to write a letter.”

“Another letter?” Morris asked. “Has it ever occurred to you that gal may get tired of all those letters?”

“No, it hasn’t. Good night.”

Prescott smiled. Truman walked out the door and the bell rang again.

“Harry’s a first-rate fellow,” Prescott said.

“He is a romantic,” Natasha said. “He is very much in love with this woman.”

Her Russian accent was soft yet resonant and Prescott looked into her eyes. They were dark and he wondered why she was in Paris and why she was sitting with these Americans in Pierre’s café drinking wine and listening to inane conversation.

“Where are you from, Natasha?” Prescott asked.

“Moscow.”

“You speak English very well.”

“I speak several languages. And you?”

“I’m American. That means I speak only one.”

“The only one that counts, right?” Cantor said.

“Right. Actually I’ve managed to pick up a little French.”

She was in her early twenties and her dark brown hair was combed straight back and fell close to her shoulders.

“How long have you been in Paris?” he asked.

“My family and I emigrated in December a year ago.”

“Look, Prescott, I need something for a story,” Cantor said. “It doesn’t have to be much, but just something. Is this League thing going to make it?”

“It’s being discussed.”

“Is that all?”

“Talk is all we do.”

Prescott walked with Natasha along the Champs-Élysées in the light rain to the apartment where she and her family lived. In the February evening the rain was cold but he did not mind. They talked little. They stared at the street lamps burning furiously into the darkness and again he stared into her eyes.

“Why did you want to meet me?” he asked.

“Did I?”

“Morris said you did and Morris always tells the truth.”

“I am sure he does. In this instance he does speak the truth. Yes, I wanted to meet you.”

“Why?”

“You are a military hero, are you not? I wanted to meet someone who had killed Germans.”

They stopped at the door to her four-story building.

“*Scheherazade* is being performed tomorrow night,” he said.

“Yes, I know. I would love for you to take me, Captain.”

She opened the heavy door and was gone but the scent of her perfume was still there. It was the fragrance of an exotic land, one he had read about and wanted to visit. He looked at the reflection of his face in the window of the door. He looked at the man who had killed Germans.

For years it had been Prescott’s responsibility on Christmas Eve to trek deep into the woods for the Christmas tree. In his absence William had performed the task. Prescott

walked sleepily into the parlor the next morning and saw the cedar tree in the corner, its candles glowing brightly. Thaddeus never liked lit candles on the tree—“too much danger of fire”—but once again Grandma had prevailed. Prescott carried the duffle bag in one hand and walked to the tree and smelled the fresh cedar.

“What’s in the bag?” Sam asked. “Are you Santa Claus?”

Prescott sat and opened the bag and withdrew wrapped presents.

“Son, when on earth did you have time to shop?” Thaddeus asked.

Prescott handed out the packages and immediately the paper was torn and everyone spoke in concert—“You shouldn’t have!” There were silk and perfume for Grandma and Mandy and ties and shirts for the brothers and a wool fedora from George Muse for Thaddeus, who placed it on his head.

“Very distinguished,” Grandma said.

Thaddeus lifted a large, long package from under the tree and handed it to Prescott.

“But you didn’t know I’d be home,” he said.

“Yes, we did,” Grandma said.

The package was heavy and Prescott raised it to his ear. He heard nothing. He shook it gently. Nothing moved.

He tore, at first carefully and then not so carefully. Suddenly in his hands he held a Remington double-barrel twelve-gauge shotgun.

“This was Grandpa’s.”

“He gave it to me,” Thaddeus said, “and now I’m giving it to you. I talked it over with your brothers several months ago. I said I wanted to give it to you. They agreed you should have it. Merry Christmas, Pres.”

“I think I’m going to cry,” William said.

“Me too,” Sam said.

“You boys never appreciate a special moment,” Grandma said.

“Enough of this talking. Let’s see if that old gun still works,” Sam answered. “It’s time to go hunting!”

“We’re expecting bobwhite for dinner,” Grandma said.

When Prescott and his brothers stepped onto the back porch, the dogs began barking excitedly. Rap ran up to Prescott.

“That dog hasn’t been good for anything since you left,” William said. “Ain’t that right, Galen?”

“Reckon so.”

The wind had pushed the rain to the south and the sun shone brightly on the frozen specks of moisture that clung to the blades of grass. Prescott laid the shotgun with the thirty-inch barrels gently in the crook of his left arm and headed toward the pasture.

“Is your leg all right?” William asked.

“Yes, it’s fine.”

They walked past the barn and crossed the field that led to the Etowah.

“I wish Pa would come on these hunts,” Sam said.

“Pa ain’t much into hunting no more,” William said. “Pres, I sure am glad you’re back. Pa’s counting on you to help run the business.”

“I’m not a businessman.”

They spread out across the field where cotton had grown in the summer. Only scraggly clumps of bushes remained. Sam was responsible for the left flank, Galen for the right, Prescott and William for the middle. The wind swept from the pines across the field and stung their faces but in this moment of doing what they had done every Christmas morning since they were old enough to hold a gun and to know a gun the wind felt good. Galen had just turned twenty, William was eighteen, and Sam was sixteen. Mandy was nineteen and Prescott had a feeling she would be leaving home before the brothers did. The dogs scurried across the field, their noses close to the ground. Rap was the first to pick up a scent. He froze, his back and long thin tail straight.

“This covey’s yours, Pres,” William said.

“Easy, boy,” Prescott said. “Hold the point, Rap.”

Prescott transferred the shotgun to both hands and stepped forward slowly and suddenly there was the maddening rush of wings as two bobwhite quail fled their sanctuary and flew skyward. He quickly aimed and the shotgun exploded twice. The two birds floated to the ground. Rap quickly retrieved the first one and then returned for the other. He picked them up gingerly in his mouth and brought each one to Prescott, who reached down and accepted them and placed them in the back pouch of his hunting vest.

“Good boy. Rap, you’re the best.”

“Well, damn, Pres, you’re still a good shot,” William said.

“Bet those Huns will agree,” Sam said.

“Let’s not talk about them,” Prescott said. “Galen, you thought any more about college?”

“Sure haven’t.”

“How about the rest of you boys?”

“Thinking about it,” William said. “That’s all.”

“Me too,” Sam said. “Grandma says I’d make a good lawyer.”

“That’s because you run your mouth all the time,” William said.

“I can’t help it if I’ve got something to say. Ain’t that right, Pres?”

“That’s right, little brother.”

The field swung toward the banks of the Etowah and Prescott stopped and looked at the swift muddy waters rushing toward the Allatoona foothills. Sherman had thought he had Johnston pinned along these banks. He was wrong.

“Guess the catfish are safe today,” Sam said.

“The day is still young,” Prescott answered.

They flushed more coveys and the shotguns roared and the game pouches grew full. They heard shotguns echoing in other fields across the river. The wind brought more clouds from the northwest and Prescott studied them and thought about snow. The earth was frozen and crunched beneath his boots. They walked from the Etowah and headed toward Two-Run Creek, which flowed into the river. The clouds thickened and grew grayer and the shadows of the hunters no longer spread before them.

A hill with a cluster of pines and brush rose at the edge of the field and at first the brothers did not see the men but Prescott did. In the Argonne he had had to develop that sense of knowing when others were there that did not belong there. He stared at the figures at the top of the hill—there were three of them and they carried shotguns.

“Who the hell’s that?” Sam asked.

William and Galen remained quiet. Prescott stared.

“It looks like the Ledbetters,” Prescott said. “Anybody know why they would be hunting here?”

There was no answer.

The three dark figures walked slowly down the hill and Prescott and his brothers stopped. The two groups of men stood some twenty yards apart. Prescott saw Morgan Ledbetter, a man of sixty who with his grizzled gray beard and bushy eyebrows looked much older. He had his two sons with him. Morgan Ledbetter spat tobacco juice on the frozen earth and the juice lay there and appeared to freeze also.

“Mornin’, gents,” Morgan Ledbetter said. “Merry Christmas. Good day for huntin’.”

“Good morning, Mr. Ledbetter,” Prescott said.

“Didn’t know you was back from Gay Paree, Pres.”

“Got in last night.”

“Bet you had a good ol’ time over there.”

“It was all right.”

“This was always a good field for huntin’ bobwhite,” Morgan Ledbetter said.

“Good place to scare up a rabbit or two. But best for birds. No question. I’ve been hearin’ your guns. Sounds like you’ve had pretty good luck. Don’t surprise me none. No, sir. It’s a great field for huntin’. My pappy loved to hunt this field and I did too. But then I got waist-deep in debt to your ol’ man and he foreclosed, and, being the gentleman he is, he bought it for himself.”

“That’s all in the past, Mr. Ledbetter,” Prescott said.

“Is it, boy? Hell, the past rattles in my bones when I git up in the mornin’. But I guess you’re right. The world’s changed a lot, Pres.”

“Say what’s on your mind, Morgan,” William said.

“Pres, you’ve got a young pup there who ain’t got good manners.”

“What can we do for you, Mr. Ledbetter?” Pres asked.

Morgan Ledbetter pulled his black slouch hat low over his eyes and pondered the question and spat tobacco juice. His sons did not move.

“Like I said, Pres, the world has changed. Bet you don’t know the half of it. Well, Galen, I think you know why we’re here. I wanna know what the hell you’re gonna do.”

Prescott looked quickly at Galen. His brother’s face was the color of wet cotton.

“Somebody want to tell me what’s going on?” Prescott asked.

The tobacco juice flew again.

“Galen ain’t for talkin’,” Morgan Ledbetter said. “Jest as well. The time for goddamned talkin’ is ’bout over. Galen, you hear me, boy? A day of recknin’ is at hand and you gotta stand up and be counted or face the consequences. You go home now and tell your ol’ man what I said. I want an answer and I want it soon. Galen, you hear me, boy?”

“I hear you.”

“Well, you make goddamned sure you pay attention. Tell your pa I’m waitin’ for an answer. Guess we need to get on back home. Been a delight to see you, Pres. Give my regards to your grandma.”

Morgan Ledbetter and his sons backed away and then turned and walked up the hill and disappeared. Prescott turned again. Galen’s lips were trembling.

“I think we’d better head home too,” Prescott said.

He watched the Ledbetters. The old man led his two sons across the field and then they were gone.

CHAPTER 3

Morgan Ledbetter cradled the shotgun in the bend of his left arm and walked slowly along the narrow dirt road. His sons followed silently. He lifted his eyes under the brim of his soiled slouch hat and saw the sun just above the crest of the hills and he stopped and felt the wind rushing from the pines and hickories at the side of the road. The sons stopped and stared at each other and wondered what to do.

“Pop, you all right?” Josiah, the elder, asked.

“Yeah, I’m all right. You boys go on home. I want to walk to the top of that there hill.”

“Why, Pop?”

“None of yer business. Git on home now. Your ma will be worried.”

The boys looked at each other again but said nothing and walked around Morgan, as if he were a large dark boulder suddenly sprung up in the middle of the dirt road. He crossed a grassy field and climbed the hill. It was not a steep climb but by the time he reached the top he was breathing heavily. The top was clear. The timber had been cut many years ago. Thaddeus Freeman had cut it. Hell, he had a right. It was his land.

“No, he didn’t have a right,” Morgan Ledbetter said.

He stood at the top of the hill and saw the thin wisp of smoke rising beyond the trees where his small cabin sat in a clearing. He saw in the distance the Etowah, running muddy after the rains. The sun was burning a golden path in the west and the wind died

and he continued to breathe heavily. He cut a plug of dark tobacco and soon he was spitting juice on the red earth.

“Damn Freemans,” he said and he spat again. “All this land, every bit of it, from here to the Etowah. That was mine. That quail field—that was mine. Thaddeus Freeman had no right to take it. He took advantage. That’s what the son of a bitch did. He took advantage. But he’s gonna pay. He won’t get away with it forever. The son of a bitch is gonna pay. Just because he’s Jeffrey Freeman’s son don’t mean shit to me. He’s gonna pay.”

He heard a dog howl and then there was the lonesome call of the bobwhite. The two-note whistle echoed in his brain and he turned and started back down the hill.

“What would Pappy say if he knew I lost the farm?” he asked and waited for the wind to reply. “I wonder if he wouldda done anything different. Hell no. He was no smarter’n me. Thaddeus Freeman got the upper hand. Pappy couldn’t’ve done nothin’ different.”

He smelled the oak and hickory smoke rising from the chimney and he saw Josiah and Stephen. They were standing in the front yard.

“What are you starin’ at?” Ledbetter asked.

“Nothing, Pop,” Stephen answered and he looked away.

“Nothing, Pop,” Josiah repeated.

“Yeah, you were,” Ledbetter said. “Make sure you milk them cows. You hear me?”

“We hear you,” Josiah said.

Ledbetter climbed the three wooden steps slowly and crossed the small front porch, opened the door, and disappeared inside the cabin. Josiah shook his head.

“I’m worried about him,” Josiah said. “This business with Emma ain’t good. I don’t like what it’s doin’ to him.”

“I don’t like what it’s doin’ to Emma. She’s startin’ to swell up. Everybody’s gonna be talkin’. You know how people in this town like to talk.”

“Don’t say that around Pop. He’ll beat the shit out of you.”

“You think Galen’s goin’ to marry her?”

“Hell no.”

“How come you so sure?”

“It ain’t all that difficult to figure out, little brother,” Josiah said. “He’s a Freeman. We’re Ledbetters. His ol’ man will never stand for him marryin’ Emma.”

“Pop may kill Galen.”

“That’s a possibility. Well, that’s Galen’s problem.”

They headed toward the barn and Ledbetter watched them from the window.

“Those boys are lazy,” he said to Myrtle, his wife.

She stood at the wood-burning stove and fried eggs. Ledbetter liked eggs and bacon for supper and she wanted to please him on Christmas.

“They’re not lazy,” she said. “They’re just young.”

“Where’s Emma?”

“She’s lyin’ down. She ain’t feelin’ well.”

“What’s the matter with her?”

The bacon in the black iron skillet was sizzling and popping.

“She just ain’t feelin’ well.”

“She’s not thinkin’ that Freeman boy is gonna marry her, is she?”

“She loves him, Morgan.”

“Loves him, hell. She don’t know what love is. But she’s gonna know what childbirth is soon enough, I reckon. And young Mister Galen is gonna know what retribution is.”

Myrtle looked up from the skillet and scowled at her husband.

“Don’t you hurt that boy,” she said. “If you hurt him, Thaddeus Freeman will make sure you’re punished.”

“I ain’t afraid of Thaddeus Freeman. I ain’t afraid of that son Prescott neither.”

“You may not be afraid but you’d better respect him. He killed Germans. He knows what killing is all about.”

Ledbetter grunted and dropped into the wooden rocking chair near the fireplace. The embers burned hot and crackled and the heat felt good. He stared at the fire and then at the rest of the room. Only a table and a few chairs. But Myrtle kept everything clean. She set the plate of bacon and eggs on the table. She poured a cup of coffee and set it next to the plate.

“It’s ready, Morgan.”

“I ain’t much hungry.”

“You ain’t sick?”

“No, I ain’t sick. It’s just that it’s Christmas and I’m tired of being a sharecropper, Myrtle. Thaddeus Freeman has what’s mine.”

“It’s over and done with. You provide. That’s enough.”

“The roof leaks.”

“So did the other one.”

“It did? Yeah, I guess you’re right. Never could fix a roof leak. Still—it was mine. The roof was mine, leak or no leak.”

“Morgan, eat your supper. You like bacon and eggs for supper, so that’s what I fixed.”

He pulled off the slouch hat and dropped it on the floor. He saw her—Emma, small, pale, outside the curtain that was a door to her bedroom. Her long red hair fell below her shoulders. She shivered in her white gown.

“Emma, you need to put on more clothes,” he said. “It’s cold in this room.”

“Where’ve you been, Pa?”

She spoke weakly and Morgan stood and moved closer to her.

“That ain’t none of your concern.”

“It is my concern if it has to do with Galen.”

“You’re gonna have to forget about Galen,” Morgan said.

“Never.”

“Emma, do as your pa said,” Myrtle said. “Put on some more clothes. You’ll catch your death.”

“What if I do?”

“Emma, don’t talk like that,” the mother said.

“Did you see Galen?”

“Yeah, I saw him,” Morgan answered. “It was a great afternoon for a hunt. Everybody and his neighbor was out huntin’, and I just happened to run into ol’ Galen. We had ourselves a nice little chitchat.”

“What did you say to him?”

“Just manly talk, that’s all, sweet pie. Are you hungry?”

“No.”

“Must be an epidemic then of not bein’ hungry. Well, let me tell you something, Emma. You’re gonna have to forget about that Freeman boy.”

“He loves me and I love him.”

“He does, does he? Well, it’s Christmas Day and where is he? Has he come here to see you? If he loved you, why wouldn’t he come here to see you? Answer me that, Emma.”

She lowered her eyes and stared at the floor. Morgan heard the whimper and looked away. Myrtle scurried to her daughter and wrapped her thin arms around her. After they disappeared behind the curtain, Morgan walked back to the window and saw his sons outside the weathered barn. They were talking, not laughing, just talking.

“Thaddeus Freeman is gonna pay,” Morgan said. “He’s gonna pay.”

A log shifted on the andirons and a stream of red sparks flew up the chimney. The sons started for the cabin. Josiah carried a pail of milk in each hand.

“I got nothin’ to leave my boys,” Morgan said. “Nothin’.”

CHAPTER 4

The Freemans sat down to Christmas dinner in the late afternoon. Next to Mandy sat Henry Cantrell, who was a year younger than Prescott. Cantrell had known the Freeman boys all his life. He and Prescott had played baseball together on the Kingston team. But now his role had changed. He was no longer just a friend and teammate. He was Mandy's suitor and he was quiet and shy. Mandy was impressed with this change in behavior.

"Henry, you should have seen Prescott today," Sam said. "He still knows how to shoot."

"Yeah," William said, "those bobwhite didn't stand much of a chance."

Grandma Deborah Freeman had fried the quail and laid them on top of the dressing.

"Bet you don't get this kind of cooking in Paris," Mandy said.

"You're right," Prescott said. "It's something I really missed."

"We can't get Pres to say too much about the Paris women," Sam said to Henry. "I think he's hiding something."

"When you grow up," Prescott said, "I'll tell you about the Paris women."

"I like the idea of the League," Henry said. "I'm glad you were there, Pres. I'd like to hear about the conference when you have the time."

Prescott looked at his father and then at Galen. They kept their eyes focused on their plates. Neither spoke. Outside the wind was whistling around the corner of the house and the twilight was fading into darkness.

“Henry, guess who we ran into this afternoon,” William said.

“We won’t talk about that,” Thaddeus said.

Henry glanced at Mandy and said nothing. Suddenly Galen rose and walked out of the dining room. His boots echoed down the hall and then the front door banged shut. During the remainder of the dinner they said little. Mandy reached over and touched Henry’s hand.

After the dinner Prescott walked past the barn to the shop. Thin strands of clouds swirled across the darkened sky and Prescott felt the wind as it bore down on the farm from the northwest. The dogs were busy eating behind the house. He walked quickly but silently. He figured Galen would be in the shop examining the tools. That was his sanctuary in times of trouble. It had always been that way.

“Pretty dark in here,” Prescott said at the door.

Galen stood in the darkness, his large hands gripping the cold, smooth anvil that rose from the dirt floor.

“What do you want?”

“I’d like to talk.”

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

Prescott struck a match and lit the lantern that hung near the door. A yellow light shot across the floor, where awkward shadows spread and mingled with the light. Galen did not move. His head hung low and his hands continued to grasp the anvil.

“I’d say there’s plenty to talk about,” Prescott said. “That wasn’t exactly a social visit this afternoon. What the hell’s going on?”

“It’s none of your damn business.”

“Galen, when I left here, you were my brother. I don’t think that’s changed. What have I done to anger you?”

“You do whatever you damn well please,” Galen said and he released the anvil. His eyes stared cold and hard at Prescott. “You decide to run off and have some adventure, so you go and do it. You don’t think about the rest of us. You don’t think about the farm. All you think about is Prescott Freeman.”

“There was a war to be fought—”

“—And you had to be the one to fight it—”

“—And I had to be the one to fight it. I make no apologies. That was my decision.”

“And to hell with the rest of us.”

“My God, Galen, you’re a grown man. My decision shouldn’t affect you. What’s really bothering you? What’s this business with the Ledbetters?”

Galen looked up at the ceiling and smelled the oil and the leather of the saddles. He was tall, almost as tall as Thaddeus, but leaner. The high forehead shone through the shadows. He turned his eyes from Prescott.

“I’ve been seeing Emma Ledbetter.”

“So?”

“Pa told me not to. I don’t know how he found out, but he did. He had a conniption. He told me never to set foot on the Ledbetter place.”

“And being the dutiful son you are, you obeyed.”

“I got her pregnant.”

Prescott removed tobacco and paper from his coat pocket and began to roll a cigarette. He lit it and watched the smoke disappear in the shadows.

“You know this for a fact?”

“Yeah, for a fact. And don’t ask me if it could be somebody else’s baby. I’ve already been asked that question a time or two. It’s mine.”

“Well, Galen, what are you going to do? Are you going to make an honest woman out of her?”

“Pa said there was no way in hell one of his sons would marry a Ledbetter. He and Morgan have already had discussions. Pa told him there was no way a Freeman would have anything to do with a Ledbetter. Well, Morgan had to be held back. I thought they were going to come to blows.”

“Wait a minute. Pa and old man Ledbetter have had discussions. You make it sound like a business transaction. It’s not their decision, Galen. It’s yours. What are you going to do?”

“Pa told me no.”

“It’s not for him to say.”

“He’s going to offer Morgan five hundred dollars.”

“For what?”

“To shut up. They’ll raise the baby themselves. They won’t come after me.”

Prescott inhaled the smoke and let it drift through his nostrils. He heard the wind outside the weathered wood building.

“That’s what Pa wants,” Prescott said. “Is that what you want? Is that what Emma wants?”

“I don’t reckon it makes much difference what Emma and me want. Pa has decided.”

“Galen, look at me. Do you love her? Does she love you? To hell with what Pa says. Do the right thing. Marry the girl. Don’t make a mistake you’ll regret the rest of your life.”

Galen clutched the anvil and swayed back and forth. Prescott blew out the lantern and went to the door. Galen was sobbing. Prescott had heard other men cry, men he never thought would cry. He had heard them cry for their mothers, for their wives. He had heard them cry in the Argonne, with the cannon bursting overhead and the machine gun bullets ripping apart the earth at their feet. He had heard them cry when they lay on the earth and their blood flowed freely from their twisted bodies. He had heard them cry and now he heard Galen cry and he felt angry and sick.

Deborah Freeman left the dining room and walked down the hall. A glimmer of light shone beneath the door to Thaddeus’s study. She walked softly and remembered. She thought of the day long ago when Jeffrey brought her safely from Atlanta to this house. He told her she would be safe here. And she was. She still wondered how he had led her through the Federal lines. They could have easily have been captured. But

somehow they had done it. But then Jeffrey left. He had to return to the army. Prescott was so much like him. If there was a war to be fought, he had to be in it.

She knocked on the door and opened it. Thaddeus sat behind his mahogany desk, a ledger spread open before him. The lamp at the edge of the desk created more shadows than light. He looked up and motioned her to the chair opposite the desk.

“We’ll be able to sell a lot of lumber to the builders in Atlanta next year,” he said, and he stared at the ledger as if it foretold the future.

“I’m not here to talk about business.”

He let her words sink in and then he closed the ledger. He sat back in the leather chair and interlocked his long bony fingers on his stomach.

“Ma, then what is it you want to talk about?”

“Galen.”

“What is there to talk about?”

“He should marry that girl.”

“Over my dead body.”

“The way you and Morgan Ledbetter are going after each other, it may very well be over your dead body.”

Thaddeus unlocked his fingers and sat up straight.

“There’s no way I’ll permit a son of mine to marry a Ledbetter. Do you hear? Ma, they’re the scum of the earth. They’re nothing.”

“They’re people, Thaddeus. They’re poor people. They don’t have as much as we do. But that’s not necessarily their fault.”

“And whose fault is it? Mine? Morgan made choices, bad choices. Emma made a choice. She let herself get pregnant. It was a bad choice.”

“Wait a minute, son. It wasn’t all her doing. I don’t think even Mr. Darwin’s theory challenges that aspect of life. It takes two to accomplish what has happened here. Galen has a responsibility.”

Thaddeus filled the bowl of his pipe and lit it. He slumped in the chair and inhaled the smoke and smelled the aroma. It was good tobacco.

“The only responsibility Galen has right now is to do what I tell him to do.”

“He’s no longer a boy.”

“He’s still my son. I know what’s best for him.”

“That’s what you said to Pres. He paid no attention. He left. Things turned out well for him.”

“He could’ve been killed.”

“He was willing to take that chance. You have to let these boys take their chances. You have to let Galen marry that girl.”

“Ma, I appreciate your opinion. I always have, always will. But my mind is made up. Now I must respectfully ask that you let me run this house as I see fit.”

“Do you think Abigail would agree with your decision?”

“Please don’t ask me that question. She’s gone. I believe she would support me—”

“She supported Pres—”

“But I believe she would support me in this. She’s gone. I talk to her. I don’t know. I’ve got to do what I think is best for Galen.”

Deborah Freeman rose feebly from the chair. Her blue eyes were tired, faded. She started to leave but stopped and faced her son.

“You’re so much like your great-uncle. He was a good man but he was a hard man. He was all business.”

“I wish I had known him. Without him, our lumber business wouldn’t be what it is today.”

“I told your father I didn’t think it was a good idea to name you after him. I guess your father thought it would help to heal old wounds. But I think it was a mistake. You’ve turned out too much like him.”

Thaddeus opened the ledger. The discussion was over. She left the study.

Prescott stood in the hall. Voices and laughter came from the dining room. The door to his father’s study opened and his grandmother appeared. She looked small and old and she walked stiffly into the dining room. Prescott started to call after her but he remained silent. He saw the dim light from the study. He could talk to his father. He could tell him not to stand in Galen’s way but it would do no good. The house was large, yet at this moment Prescott felt closed in. The walls were too close. He walked past the study. His grandmother had left the door partly open and he saw his father, head bent over his desk, ledger open beneath his eyes. Thaddeus did not look up. Balances and debits. Prescott walked to the stairs at the end of the hall.

He considered joining the others in the dining room, where the talk and laughter grew louder. Instead, he began to climb the rear stairs. Midway up he stopped and listened to the voices. They were indistinct.

Outside the symphony hall the rain spilled from the rooftops onto the crowded sidewalks below. Prescott held an umbrella over Natasha and she wrapped her arm about his waist. Men and women—soldiers and their ladies—poured from the hall onto the sidewalk. Prescott did not hear their talk and laughter. He was aware only of Natasha. She was here beside him. He breathed her delicious scent. It was the scent of a faraway place, a land he had only read about. It was the scent of wildness. There was something about her that was reckless—it danced and sparkled in the depths of her dark eyes—and that something drew him to her.

“Would you like a taxi?” he asked.

“No. This is perfect.”

Yellow halos surrounded the street lamps, and the wind followed the streets and blew the rain in their faces. He held her closer. They stopped beneath a street lamp at an intersection. Taxis and other vehicles rushed past and splashed water. They jumped back and laughed. He looked into her dark eyes and knew it—knew it for a fact, without question. He kissed her and he knew. He was in love with her.

“A princess should not permit an ordinary captain to kiss her,” she said.

He kissed her again, and the people on the sidewalks rushed around them like a river parting at a boulder in the middle of the channel. He ignored them.

“I will make an exception,” she said.

They walked across the street, and a taxi slowed.

“Monsieur?”

“Non, mais merci.”

“It does nothing but rain in this country,” she said.

“I thought you like the rain.”

“I prefer the snow. I miss the snow. Does it snow in Georgia?”

“Sometimes. Maybe once or twice a winter. There may be a few inches. There may be more.”

“That is hardly a snowfall. When it does snow, do you like it?”

“Yes. It is different, something we don’t expect. There are many hills where I live. When it snows, my brothers and sister and I haul the sleds out of the barn and go racing down the slopes. And you should see the bird dogs. They chase us. The dogs have as much fun as we do. But I must tell you—I don’t think I’d like to live in the stuff for six months.”

“You would get used to it,” she said.

They stopped at a café and ordered Chablis. Soldiers and women sat around the small cold iron tables. There was loud chatter. Prescott and Natasha took a table close to the window, and he turned and looked at the soldiers. Only a few months earlier these men had trudged through the deep mud and escaped the whistling bullets and the deadly gas. Now it all seemed so long ago. It was almost as if there had been no war. He turned again to Natasha and leaned over the table and kissed her lips.

For a long time they said nothing. They sat and listened to the others.

“It’s getting late,” he said. “I’d better take you home.”

“Do you have an early meeting?”

“I always have an early meeting.”

“Are you pleased with the way the conference is going?”

“Do we have to talk about the conference? It’s politics and I’m no good when it comes to politics.”

“Harry Truman told me the president values your opinions. He said you have made quite an impact.”

“Harry’s a good guy. He says nice things about people.”

“Do not underestimate yourself,” she said. “If you were to suggest to your president more involvement in Russia, he would listen.”

Prescott lifted the glass of wine and finished it. The door opened and wind and rain followed a man and woman into the café.

“Natasha, at this point there is really nothing else the president can do. There is nothing I can do.”

“The Bolsheviks must be destroyed.”

“No one is willing to invade Russia. The world is exhausted. We’ve just finished one war. No one wants to fight another. Look—I know how you feel. I have no love for Lenin. I don’t think anyone here at the conference has.”

Natasha looked through the window streaked by rain at the people rushing on the sidewalks. They knew nothing about the revolution that had convulsed her country. She wanted to jump from the table and run screaming into the street to make them stop and listen. She wanted them to know about Lenin and the bloodshed. Most of all, she wanted Prescott to know. But she believed him. In the dim light of the small café she listened to

his words and knew the allies would do little. She would not give up hope. There had to be something she could do. Prescott would help her.

“Yes, it is late,” she said.

They walked back out into the rain. Her family stayed in an apartment building two blocks away and as they walked, they held tightly to each other. The strength and excitement and passion of the choral finish of Beethoven’s Ninth still vibrated in their minds and hearts. Suddenly they stood at the door of the apartment building. Lights shone dimly in the second floor windows. Her family would still be up. Prescott doubted that the father, old Andreivitch, really trusted him with his daughter.

“I have heard about you Americans,” the old man whispered in broken English one night when Natasha was still dressing. “I have heard.”

“All good, I’m sure.”

“When it comes to women, no.”

Prescott stood at the fireplace in the parlor and let the warmth soak through the wet uniform. He stared at the small photograph enclosed by a gilded frame. It perched at the end of the mantel. It was faded and the glass in the right corner was cracked. It was a photograph of the czar—Prescott recalled seeing pictures of the czar in the newspapers—with a young girl sitting on his left knee. It was Natasha.

“He was such a wonderful man,” Andreivitch said and he lit his pipe.

Prescott did not answer. Nicholas was not a wonderful man. But he would not argue with the old man. It would accomplish nothing. He continued to stare at the photograph. The expression on the czar’s face was severe. The little girl was smiling.

“I want to return to Russia,” she said. “My friends and I can join forces with Kolchak. I want to fight.”

“No, Natasha, that’s impossible.”

“It is not impossible. Someone has to do something to stop the Reds. I am prepared to fight, to die if I have to.”

The rain was falling harder and Prescott breathed deeply. He looked into her dark eyes, darker than the night itself, and saw the defiance and determination. Whatever he said would do no good. But he would have to try.

“Please listen to reason.”

“I do not want to listen,” she said. “I want to act. I have already discussed this with my friends. We are all in agreement. We must fight. Kolchak is a good leader. I am sure the Reds fear him.”

“I know nothing about this Kolchak fellow.”

“He is as determined as I am.”

“You need more than determination,” Prescott said.

“Yes, I know. I need your help.”

A car sped by and the water rose from beneath the tires and sprayed the sidewalk. This time they did not jump back. They did not move. He continued to stare into her eyes. There were tears and she reached out her hand and touched the sleeve of his coat.

“What do you think I can do?” he asked.

“Will you go with us?”

“Natasha, are you crazy?”

“No, I am not crazy. You can get your commander in Vladivostok—General Graves—to help us. You can persuade President Wilson to order General Graves—”

“I can do no such thing,” Prescott said. “The president is committed to noninterference. His position is firm.”

“You speak like a diplomat,” she said. “That is good. You can convince the president—”

“No, I cannot.”

Prescott stepped back and her hand fell from his sleeve. Suddenly he remembered stories of another country, his country, that had been invaded. As a boy he stood in Kingston’s general store and listened to the gray, bearded old men leaning back in cane-bottom chairs and talking bitterly of those days. They had lost on the battlefield. And then their land had been occupied. It took a long time for the hatred to go away. For some of those old men it never did. They carried it with them to their graves.

Her voice was desperate. Her hand clutched his sleeve and he felt her wildness rushing through his body. He tried to imagine those fingers clutching a rifle and pulling a trigger. She would go without him, he knew. He could not let that happen.

“I will ask permission to escort you and your friends to Vladivostok,” he said. “I may not be able to get permission. I think you are making a terrible mistake, but I understand how you feel. Believe me. Perhaps there is something General Graves can do, but probably there is not. You have to understand.”

The tears were still on her face, but now there was a smile, and it was the smile of the little girl in the photograph who was sitting on the knee of Czar Nicholas.

CHAPTER 5

An hour before daybreak Prescott was out of bed. He stood, fully dressed, at the cold window and watched the faint glow of rose appear above the eastern hills. William was still asleep. Prescott lit a cigarette and saw a dark figure walking toward the barn. It was Thaddeus. Prescott was curious. The Pierce-Arrow roared and pulled out of the barn and sent the chickens fleeing for safety and headed down the drive to the main road.

Prescott went downstairs and found his grandmother in the kitchen.

“Pres, I didn’t expect to see you up so early.”

“Couldn’t sleep. Where’s Pa going?”

“Into town to take care of some business.”

She poured a cup of coffee and handed it to Prescott and they sat at the smooth pine kitchen table. He drank slowly and realized he had forgotten how quiet the big old house could be early in the morning. Grandma Prescott wiped her tired eyes with her hands.

“Do you want something to eat? There’s ham and biscuits.”

“No, thank you. Grandma, I know about Galen and Emma.”

“I figured you did. Honey, it’s hard to keep something like that a secret. I’m sure the whole town knows by now.”

“Is that the business Pa is going to take care of?”

“He didn’t say. I’m sure it is.”

“Pa’s wrong,” Prescott said. “He’s right about a lot of things. But about this he’s wrong.”

“I never want to speak ill of your father, Pres. But I agree. And neither you nor I nor anybody else can do anything to change his mind. Maybe your grandfather could change his mind but I’m not sure even he could. All you Freeman men are the same—hardheaded. You get an idea in your head and there’s no changing it.”

She smiled. The roosters began crowing and Prescott set the cup down.

“Well, the others will be up soon,” he said. “I have to leave for a while.”

“Where are you going?”

“Just down the road. Then I may go into town.”

“Don’t try to interfere with your father. It will do no good.”

“Thanks for the coffee,” he said and stood up.

“Prescott, you are going to stay,” she said and she reached out and touched his arm. “I mean—you’re not going to return to the army, are you? Your father wants you to stay so much. The others are not much good in business. You are. He trusts you. You’re solid. Nobody knows what’s going to happen to Galen after this business is over. You can be a steady influence.”

“Grandma, you’re the rock solid one.”

“I guess there’s no keeping you down on the farm once you’ve seen Paris.”

“Yeah, I think the song goes something like that.”

He walked to the barn. The earth was spongy beneath his boots. Only a few red-streaked clouds hovered on the horizon. The dogs ran to him, as if expecting another

hunt. He went to Sadie, a mare he had ridden for many years, and saddled her. He stroked her mane.

“Did you miss me, girl? You won’t admit it but I know you did.”

He led the mare outside the barn and mounted. He stared at the two-story house. It was nothing fancy but he thought it was beautiful. His grandfather had thought it was beautiful. He knew because his grandmother had told him. After the war his grandfather had almost lost the house and the farm; somehow he had managed to keep them. The sunlight bathed the double front porches and he remembered seeing his mother on those porches, a broom in her hand. Thaddeus had suggested they hire servants to do things like that but she had refused. The house was her domain and she exerted authority over it.

Prescott rode down the drive, following the tracks left by his father’s car, and headed toward town. The morning was still; the wind did not stir. He rode slowly and looked from side to side at the land where he had grown up, at the fields which would blossom with cotton and stand green with corn in the summer. Now the fields looked desolate but that was beautiful too. It was as if he could see their future because he had seen their past.

He heard the distant blast of a shotgun. It came from the Etowah. Somebody was probably hunting squirrel. And he thought of Morgan Ledbetter, the shotgun cradled in his big arms. And he thought of his father, the hatred that coated his words. There was another blast. Somebody was having good luck along the banks of the muddy water.

Not far from the northern edge of town the cemetery sprawled across several small hills. He saw the Freeman plot and he dismounted and walked to the grave. He removed his hat and read the words on the dark gray tombstone: Abigail Stevens

Freeman, 1874-1918, Servant of God, Devoted Wife and Mother. The six-twenty whistled past Kingston on its way to Atlanta and then there was silence again.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be here, Ma,” he said. “But I know you understand. I wish you could meet Natasha. You’d love her, Ma. She’d love you too.”

He looked up at the hill across a narrow dirt road and saw the many small white tombstones marking the graves of Confederate and Union soldiers. Most of them had died during Sherman’s campaign in northwest Georgia. Many of the markers had no names. He knew because he had walked among the graves and tried to imagine what the men were like who were buried there. They were probably not that different from the men he had fought alongside in the Argonne. They wanted to win. They wanted to survive. The morning sunlight shot past the barren branches of oaks and hickories and rested on the cemetery and he remembered the men he had left behind, men who would never come home.

“Natasha is something special,” he said. “She’s a Russian, Ma. I don’t guess you ever knew any Russians. I don’t guess I did either until I met her. I’ve never known anyone like her. She always asks the impossible.”

Ian Bannister brought the sherry and he and Prescott sat silently and examined the walls lined with leather-bound books. Bannister, already gray at thirty-eight, lifted his glass toward the high ceiling adorned with a brightly lit chandelier.

“Here’s to the French,” Bannister said. “They bloody well know how to provide for us.”

They drank and both men lit cigarettes.

“I think it’s a little unusual that the prime minister’s top assistant wants to see me,” Prescott said and sipped the sherry.

“Well, old chap, we’ve heard the most interesting bit of news,” Bannister said. “It seems that you want to go to Russia.”

“Who told you that?”

“Prescott, you cannot keep something like that a secret, certainly not here in Paris with all the world’s great powers congregated.”

“How do my intentions interest the prime minister?”

“As it turns out, we’re having something of a problem with your commanding general in Vladivostok. We think more aid should be given to the Whites in their struggle against the Reds. We know the history of the Bolsheviks and it is not good. General Graves is in a position to do more.”

“General Graves is in a position to do no more than what his orders allow him to do,” Prescott said. “I cannot do anything.”

“If you go to Russia, you won’t speak to Graves about this?”

“No. You should already know the answer.”

“Of course, old chap, I bloody well understand but I had to ask.”

Prescott stood and they shook hands. Prescott walked toward the tall heavy double doors and the soles of his black boots echoed in the large library.

“Prescott, one other thing,” Bannister said.

“Yeah?”

“Do not let that Russian girl talk you into doing something foolish. She strikes me as beautiful but rash and rash is dangerous in the world in which we move.”

“Thanks for the advice, Ian.”

He put the hat back on his head and pulled the coat close about his throat. Although the wind was not blowing, the air had its December chill.

“This Christmas wasn’t the same without you, Ma,” he said and he turned and walked to his horse.

He rode into town and stopped at the office which had the sign *Kingston News* written across the windows. It was still early but he knew that Marcus Stokesbury liked to work early—before the townspeople began wandering in and requesting a story on the birth of a cow. Main Street was deserted. Prescott left his horse at the hitching rail and turned and faced the train depot. The yellow wood shone brightly in the early morning sun.

“Well, I’ll be damned. Pres Freeman home from the war.”

He turned and Marcus Stokesbury smiled and thrust out his right hand. They shook and laughed.

“Marcus, how’ve you been?”

“A few aches and pains. I heard about your leg. How’s it doing?”

“It lets me know when it’s going to rain.”

“Then it’s a valuable asset.”

Marcus was a short, slender man. Wavy gray hair drooped across his forehead and touched the silver wire-rimmed spectacles. His head trembled slightly as if it wanted to tumble from his thin neck.

“The way you’re looking at the depot is the way a man looks when he’s ready to travel,” Marcus said.

“Maybe.”

“You don’t need to be in any hurry, Pres. Folks around here have missed you. Come on in. I’ve got some coffee on the stove.”

They walked inside the newspaper office. It was a large room with more rooms in the back. The sunlight had difficulty skirting beneath the sidewalk overhang, so the office was mostly dark except for the two kerosene lamps Marcus kept burning—one on the large walnut roll-top desk and the other on a table next to the large black printing press. Marcus found two coffee cups in a cabinet near the window and he lifted the chipped coffee pot from the large black potbelly stove that hunched in the middle of the office.

“I would say I make a good pot of coffee but it’s never been one of my enduring talents,” Marcus said.

The office was warm and the steam from the cup rose to Prescott’s nostrils. He looked about the room and observed the clutter of papers on tables and on the floor. Some things never changed. He sipped the coffee and remembered the days of his youth when Thaddeus brought him into town and the first place he wanted to visit was the newspaper office. He remembered the press standing like a prehistoric monster and spewing out printed pages. It was like magic in a fairy tale.

“One of these days I’m going to have to replace that old thing,” Marcus said and he studied the press. “I was working on it when you showed up. It’s temperamental like an old wife.”

“Of course you’re not temperamental.”

“No, of course not. Have a seat, Pres. Tell me about your adventures in the great war.”

They sat in cane-bottom chairs near the stove that burned hot in the darkness and drank the coffee. A farmer sitting on a wagon seat moved in front of the window down the street.

“Not much to tell.”

“That’s not the way I hear it. That’s not the way I printed it. Here—I’ve got a copy here somewhere.”

Marcus rose and shuffled across the floor to a stack of newspapers in a dark corner. He began rifling through them and finally stood up straight with a newspaper in his hand.

“Take a look at this headline.”

He handed the paper to Prescott. The headline ran bold across the top of the front page: “Freeman Decorated for Valor in the Argonne.” He did not read the story. He handed the paper back to Marcus.

“I guess things were pretty bad,” Marcus said and he returned to the corner and laid the newspaper on top of the others.

“Yeah, pretty bad.”

“When we heard you were picked to be a part of the peace conference, we sure were proud. I wrote a piece on that too. What’s Wilson like?”

“Brilliant. I’ve never known anyone with his intelligence. Also idealistic. He envisions a world that quite frankly the other countries don’t seem to give a damn about.”

“Is the League going to make it?”

“We’ve got to deal with Lodge. If Wilson’s name is connected to anything, he’s opposed to it.”

“Will you be going to Washington?”

“We’ll see.”

They finished the coffee in silence and Prescott saw a stream of golden sunlight manage to sneak under the overhang and dart toward the roll-top desk, where more stacks of papers competed for space. Prescott remembered writing articles for the paper when he was in high school. He knew they were not any good but Marcus ran them anyway. There was the article about Martha Swearingen’s brother Conrad, who deserted the South during the war and fought under Grant. He returned to Kingston only once—for Martha’s funeral. Everybody wondered whether he would come. In fact, nobody knew who notified him. But sure enough he got off the train one hot July morning just in time to walk to the Methodist church, where the preacher was about to speak kind words about Miss Martha. The old lady never married. Her sweetheart was killed at Gettysburg and she wore black crepe the rest of her life. Conrad Swearingen sat at the back of the church. He was an old, withered man and most of the people sitting in the church did not recognize him. He accompanied his sister’s body to the cemetery and stayed until the grave was closed. Then with bowed head he returned to the depot and waited for the

train. Prescott stood not far from the grave and in the unbearable heat he heard the whispers. Word spread that the old man was Conrad. Prescott followed him to the depot.

“I write for the paper,” Prescott said to him inside the depot. “Mind if I ask you a few questions?”

“Go away, boy.”

“Just a few.”

“Well, go ahead and ask—if I had it to do over again, would I? That is what you want to ask, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir. Something like that.”

“You’re damn right I would. End of interview.”

Conrad Swearingen turned away and stared out the window at the tracks and waited for the whistle of the northbound. Prescott walked across the tracks to the newspaper office and in the darkness he wrote the short article. It was mostly a description of the funeral and the burial and the old man who had not spoken to his sister since 1861. There was only one quotation but it was enough. Marcus was lavish with his praise. Prescott thought it a weak story but Marcus never agreed.

“How did the baseball team do this year?” Prescott asked.

“Mediocre at best. They could have used your arm. They handled Acworth pretty well but Rome killed them. Hang around till spring. They need you. More coffee?”

“No, thanks. Can I help with the press?”

“I think it just needs more oil. I’ve got some in the desk. If you don’t mind, you can hand it to me.”

Marcus stumbled across the floor to the press and began turning the crank that fed paper against the plates. Prescott went to the desk and opened the top drawer but did not find the can of oil. He opened the second drawer and started to close it but hesitated. A stack of white pages lay in the drawer and he lifted them.

“Marcus, what’s this?”

“What’s what?”

Marcus straightened and squinted in the dim light and saw the pages in Prescott’s hands. He wiped his greasy hands on a green rag and walked toward Prescott.

“Oh, it’s not anything,” Marcus said.

Prescott flipped through the pages.

“It’s a manuscript, Marcus. Is it a novel or a memoir?”

“Hard to say.”

“You’ve put a lot of work into this.”

Marcus’s handwriting was cramped and Prescott had difficulty reading some of the sentences.

“I’ve been working on it at night. After Anne died, I needed something to do. The house was so big and quiet and the writing took my mind off—things.”

“What’s it about?”

“It’s about the most amazing man I’ve ever known.”

“Who?”

“J. J. McPherson.”

“I’ve never heard of him.”

“That’s not surprising. Most people haven’t.”

“Do you mind if I read it? I mean—right now, here. I won’t get in your way. I’ll just sit back here in a corner with a lamp.”

“Are you sure you want to read it? I mean it’s nothing special.”

“Yes, I want to read it.”

Marcus found the can of oil in the bottom drawer and Prescott took his cane-bottom chair and manuscript to a corner next to a stack of newspapers. He set a kerosene lamp on a table next to him. Outside people were moving noisily along the wooden sidewalks. Occasionally an automobile backfired and a train roared past the depot. Marcus busied himself with the press and Prescott began reading.

CHAPTER 6

My name is Marcus Stokesbury and I am a newspaperman. Newspapering runs in my family. Both my father and grandfather were editors. My father, actually, was more than an editor. He was accomplished with the camera. During the war he not only recorded a history of the great battles in words, but he also recorded a history of the carnage in photographs. Along with the work of Mathew Brady, Clyde Stokesbury's photographs are frequently alluded to by scholars of the military campaigns. But this story is not the story of Clyde Stokesbury. It is not the story of Marcus Stokesbury. And it is not the story of the newspapering history in the Stokesbury family, though without question newspapering figures prominently in the story that ensues. This story is about J. J. McPherson, a westerner who somehow ended up on the coast of Georgia. But before I take you to meet J. J., I must take you to the origin of this story.

In 1889 I was a young reporter for the *Atlanta Constitution*, a grand newspaper as vibrant as the city whose name it shared in the masthead. During those days Atlanta was growing by leaps and bounds. Every day a new house or a new commercial building rose from the red earth. War was a fiery remembrance only in the mind. If you looked around town, you found few reminders. The town was bigger and stronger than it was in 1864 when General Sherman left his calling card. It's not that folks didn't remember; they just didn't have time to dwell on the memory. Quite simply, there was too much money to be made in manufacturing and transportation and construction to sit around and mope about the Lost Cause. Of course, the accumulation of wealth was not limited just to Atlanta. It

was something of a national obsession. And why stop with your first million? There were more millions to be had.

During those days an editor named Henry Grady led the *Constitution*. You may have heard of him. In addition to being an editor, he was an ambassador for the city of Atlanta. He traveled throughout the North and gave speeches about the great things Atlanta and the South were doing. We were not looking back. We were looking forward. And even though General Sherman was a little careless with matches, we were determined to build and keep on building. His speeches led to Northern investments, which led to more growth and more investment and more growth. I guess you understand by now his role as ambassador. Anyway, Grady had a way with words. But, above all, he was a newspaperman. He had a special gift. He knew exactly what readers wanted and when they wanted it.

I remember the day in early November of 1889 when he summoned me into his office on the third floor of the *Constitution* building on Forsyth Street. The building was just up from Union Station and all through the day we could hear the train whistles blowing long and hard and from the windows overlooking Forsyth Street we could see the black smoke rising as if from a hundred fires. It was late in the day and I was sitting at my desk. I had just finished a story about the impact the Southern Alliance of farmers was having on state politics and was ready to rush up to Union Station and catch the train for my home in Marietta.

“Stokesbury, step in here a moment,” Grady called from his office.

He sat behind his desk but he stared out the window. I had seen that look on his face before, that faraway look. He was thinking about a story and I knew that somehow I

was going to be a part of it. I waited at the door to his office for what seemed like an hour and suddenly Grady leaped to his leap—that was Grady; all his movements were sudden—and grabbed his hat and coat from the hall tree in a corner and laid his hand on my shoulder.

“Stokesbury, you look like you could use a drink. I know I could. Come on.”

Well, so much for the train to Marietta. We walked hurriedly down the stairs and went out onto Forsyth Street. It was a particularly bitter evening, I recall. Large, dark clouds rolled in from the northwest and a light rain was falling. The rain wasn't so bad. It was the wind. It blew in our faces and turned our noses red but Grady didn't mind. He was on a mission and I hurried at his side. We walked five blocks to the Commerce Club, a two-story dark granite structure that welcomed only members. I was not exactly a member of Atlanta's elite but I was a guest of such a member. The doorman welcomed Grady warmly and took his hat and coat and then merely nodded at me. We went into the bar and Grady ordered bourbon for both of us.

The bar was dimly lit and cigar smoke hung thickly in the air, much like gunpowder hanging in a valley where the wind doesn't reach it. The walls were wood-paneled and the tables scattered across the floor were crowded with men, the men who were making the important decisions for Atlanta in those days. Grady offered me a cigar.

“Last night I thought about an idea for a story,” he said and he puffed on the cigar and lifted the glass of bourbon. “I've been meditating on it all day and I think it has potential. You ready for a new assignment?”

The room was filled with a quiet chatter, as if Atlanta's decision makers did not want the editor of the *Constitution* to be aware of their schemes. Even though his attention was directed toward me, I knew he was listening and remembering.

"What do you have in mind?" I asked.

"Ever heard of Jekyll Island?"

"Yeah. It's somewhere off the Georgia coast."

"Right you are, Marcus. Do you know what's going on there?"

"No, sir, I can't say I do."

Grady puffed deeply on the long cigar.

"You might say a building boom is taking place, but it's not the kind you'd think of. No, it's entirely different."

"In what way?"

"America's elite—financial elite, that is—are building mansions on the island. I guess they consider it their escape from the Northeast. Jekyll Island has become their playground. I'm talking about men like Morgan, Carnegie, Mondale. I don't have to tell you America has a fascination with these millionaires. America's children want to grow up and be like them. As far as I'm concerned, I just want their money invested here. But that's beside the point. There's a story here. Readers would like to know how America's financial royalty spend their Christmas—and the amazing thing is they're spending Christmas practically in our background. Marcus, I want you to travel to Jekyll Island and report on what a Jekyll Island Christmas is like for these people. They live the kind of life the rest of us only dream about. Well, I want you to report on that dream, what it's really like. When I was in New York last year, I had the opportunity to meet Kyle Mondale.

He's a personable fellow. Just don't tell him you favor unions. He and I spent most of one evening talking about the future of the South. I've wired him and asked his permission to put you up for a few days. He's looking forward to it."

"When do I leave?"

"Just a few days before Christmas. You'll be there over the holiday."

"I've never been to the coast."

"Mondale told me Jekyll is a paradise."

"With all that money there, it'd have to be."

On December 21 I boarded a southbound train at Union Station. I remember it was a cold day and the sun had difficulty peeking through the gray clouds that skirted toward the east. As the train rumbled south toward Macon, I watched the red brick manufacturing buildings and the neighborhoods surrounding them fade, to be replaced by farmland. The land here in the Piedmont was no longer rolling. The pastures stretched level as far as I could see. Then I realized this was the land Sherman and his troops had seen in '64. I was following their trail—south to Macon, where I transferred to another train, and then east to Savannah. It was a long, tiring trip. The click-clack of the wheels on the tracks contributed to the boredom. I was sleepy but sleep would not come. I stared at the flatlands. Sherman's march to the sea—this was the route he took and I tried to imagine the thousands of blue-clad soldiers marching and riding east so that they could present Savannah as a Christmas present to Lincoln.

"We must not dwell on those days," Grady once told me. "There's no money to be made in the past, only in the future. And what this region needs right now is money."

It was hard not to remember, though, especially when I looked through the frostbitten window at two solitary chimneys, forlorn remnants of the home that had once stood there. I could imagine the Federals driving the family out and then torching the place. At least those were the accounts I had heard.

When I reached Savannah, I had to transfer to another train—this one heading south to Brunswick. But there was a delay and I had the opportunity to wander the streets of Savannah. The layout of the city was perfectly proportioned, certainly not like Atlanta. The oldness of Savannah hung in the air. The city spoke to me—you are from Atlanta and I am older than you and I am more civilized than you. It was true. Atlanta was young and vibrant and eager to grow. I had the feeling Savannah was happy just the way it was.

By the time the train arrived in Brunswick, a thick mist rolled in from the Atlantic and mingled with the salt air. The train conductor gave me directions on how to get to the dock. He said I would have to get a ferry to take me to Jekyll. I carried my grip along the streets, which were mostly deserted. Sunlight had faded and the mist and the fog clung to me like a wet yellow topcoat. I came to a small group of low-slung frame buildings and walked along the wooden wharf. There was a small building, practically a hut, at the end and a dim light flickered in a small window. The waves sloshed against the pilings and I looked into the blackness and knew the ocean was there.

“Excuse me,” I said after I opened the door. “Is this where I get a ferry to Jekyll Island?”

An old, white-whiskered man rose from a couch on the far wall and adjusted the spectacles on his slender nose. He stared at me as if not quite sure I was real.

“Yes, sir, you’ve come to the right place. A little late for a ferry ride.”

“I didn’t see a closed sign on the door.”

“Don’t be a smart aleck, sonny. You must be from up north.”

“I’m from Atlanta.”

“That’s about as bad. Normally a ride costs two bits. For you it’ll cost a dollar.”

“Does the trip include dinner?”

“Do I look like a cook, sonny?”

“Then I’ll pay two bits.”

“You’ll pay what I say you’ll pay. A dollar.”

“Well, let’s go. I want to get there before next summer.”

“Smart aleck.”

The old man disappeared through a door and returned in a few minutes with two young men.

“These are my sons,” he said. “They help row us across. They also throw smart alecks overboard.”

“Glad to meet you.”

The ferry was small, barely big enough for a couple of horses and maybe a carriage. The two sons positioned themselves with long poles on either side and the old man stood at the rudder. The ocean was rough. The ferry rose and fell with the waves and the wind hurled the salt spray in my face.

“What are you comin’ here for?” the old man called out.

“I write for the *Atlanta Constitution*. I’m working on a story.”

“Newspaperman, huh? I might’ve guessed. Who you goin’ to see?”

“Mr. Mondale.”

“Thought you might be goin’ to see McPherson.”

“McPherson? Who’s he?”

The two sons and the old man looked at each other and grinned.

“You ain’t heard of McPherson?”

“Can’t say I have.”

“J. J. McPherson. That’s his name. He works on the Mondale place. He’s in charge of the hunts they have there.”

“What’s so special about him?”

“Nobody knows anything about him. He’s a complete mystery—except for one thing. He’s the best damn shot I’ve ever seen. I guess that’s why he runs the huntin’ preserve. He don’t say much. But if you want to make your stay worthwhile, I suggest you look him up.”

The ferry bobbed up and down and I stood at the edge. I had not had dinner and I suppose it was a good thing. I did not see the outline of the island until we were almost there. A large dock with a kerosene lantern suspended above it lay in front of us. Several men suddenly appeared and took the line that one of the sons threw to them. I climbed out of the ferry and bade farewell to the old man. He simply smiled and disappeared in the fog.

“You must be Mr. Stokesbury,” a man in a dark suit and overcoat said. “I’m Laughton Ames, Mr. Mondale’s secretary. I have a carriage.”

In the dim yellow light cast by the kerosene lantern swaying from a thin wire above the dock it was difficult to tell whether Laughton Ames was young or old. I had the feeling, maybe from the sound of his voice, that he fell somewhere in between. We sat in

the back of the carriage and the driver, who tipped his hat to me, gave a sharp crack to the whip and suddenly we were thrown into motion. The wind was still brisk and I tasted the salt in the air.

“How was your trip, Mr. Stokesbury?” Ames asked.

“Long.”

“Yes, I’m sure it was. Have you ever been to Jekyll before?”

“No. In fact, this is my first trip to the coast.”

“I’m sure you will love it. Everyone who comes here loves it.”

Everyone who has money, I thought, but I kept this thought to myself. I had an image of Kyle Mondale. I had never seen a photograph of him but I had read about him. He had extensive railroad holdings in the Northeast and Midwest. He had also dabbled in steel, if one can be said to dabble in steel. In fact, according to what I had read, steel more than anything else described his character. When the workers struck for more pay and fewer hours at his plant in Pittsburgh, he hired the Pinkertons and persuaded the governor to bring in troops. The confrontation outside the gates to the mill was bloody. Twelve workers and two Pinkertons were killed. But in the end Mondale prevailed. The workers capitulated. So I had this image of Mondale. I pictured him in my mind as a large lion of a man. I suspected his face wore a perpetual scowl and the words that came from his mouth came with a growl. I almost knew his hands were large and when they became two fists, the world had better watch out because Kyle Mondale meant business. When Grady first mentioned his name to me in the bar of the Commerce Club, I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up straight. Christmas with Kyle Mondale held little appeal but I had to agree with my editor. There was a story here. Readers would be

interested to find out how their financial heroes celebrated the holidays on this island off the Georgia coast.

“How long have you worked for Mr. Mondale?” I asked and already I was in the reporter’s frame of mind.

“More years than I can recall. I started on the railroad in Chicago and worked my way up. If you want to work and if you do a good job, Mr. Mondale will make sure you move up. And that’s what we all want to do, isn’t it, Mr. Stokesbury?”

“Oh, most definitely. Moving up in the world is what we all want.”

The horse maintained a gentle trot and in the mist I could discern the tangled limbs of giant oaks creating a canopy over the narrow road. It appeared something gauze-like was hanging from the limbs.

“What is that hanging—”

“Spanish moss,” Ames said. “You’ll see a lot of it along the coast.”

We approached what appeared to be a village. A number of large houses, their windows ablaze with light, greeted us on the left and right.

“Many of our friends live here,” Ames said. “They represent some of the finest people in America. Mr. Mondale’s cottage is closer to the beach.”

At a crossroads in the middle of nowhere the driver turned us toward another cluster of oaks. To the right large mounds of sand peppered with tall vegetation rose. On the other side of the mounds the ocean roared its presence.

“Those are dunes, Mr. Stokesbury,” Ames said. “They protect the island. We in turn protect them.”

“That’s mighty thoughtful.”

The road curved and suddenly I saw what Ames had referred to as Mondale's cottage. Obviously his definition of cottage and mine differed sharply. It was a large, two-story residence. It appeared to be brick but in the mist it was difficult to tell. As was the case with the cottages in the village, every window sent bright light into the misty darkness. Smoke from the many fireplaces hung in the air.

"This is quite a cottage," I said.

"It's comfortable, Mr. Stokesbury."

"I can see that it would be."

The driver halted the carriage at the front door and Ames offered to take my grip.

"That's all right," I said. "I can manage."

Another man, whom I took to be a butler of some sort, was waiting at the door to take my hat and coat.

"The name is Carter, sir," the butler said and he led me into an entrance hall that was big enough to hold the house I called home in Atlanta. "I am at your service, sir. Mr. Mondale is expecting you."

Carter was an elderly gentleman but he walked quickly and he led me down the hall to a pair of heavy doors. I glanced over my shoulder and Ames was gone. Carter knocked but once and then pulled open the doors. He stepped aside so that I could enter.

"Stokesbury, we've been expecting you!" another elderly gentleman said but I had the feeling this elderly gentleman called all the shots. "Please come in. Sit by the fire. Would you like for Carter to bring you a brandy? Perhaps you take bourbon?"

"Bourbon would warm these bones."

"Carter, please see to it. Sit, Stokesbury, sit."

I sat in a leather wing chair next to a massive fireplace in which the coals burned hotly and immediately I felt the warmth creeping into my body. The room was lined from floor to ceiling with leather-bound books. Mondale and I shook hands as if we were old friends and had not seen each other in many years. He looked nothing like the image I had cast in my mind. He was small. No scowl covered his face. He smiled warmly. His hands were hardly large, yet the grip was firm. It was this one aspect of his appearance—the firm grip—that confirmed my suspicion that he was hard as steel. You might not think it when you saw him but here was a man that meant business. He was a millionaire and he owned a lovely cottage on Jekyll Island.

“You had a pleasant trip I hope,” he said.

“Yes. The trains were right on time.”

“That’s good. I’ve invested in the Western and Atlantic so it’s good to know they’re running on schedule.”

Carter brought the bourbon and handed a glass of brandy to Mondale. When he sipped the drink, a pale flush rose in his pallid cheeks. He gave the impression of someone who did not get outdoors often. Strands of silver hair lay on top of his head.

“I’m impressed with your cottage,” I said and I tried not to choke on the word.

“Thank you, Stokesbury. I’m glad you approve. A lot of my friends come down here. Old J. P. himself has a place not too far from here. You’ll probably run into him.”

“I’d like that.”

“Tell me—how’s Grady?”

“He never rests. He’s always onto something.”

“He’s my kind of man. That’s the kind of man that makes this country move forward, Stokesbury. Never satisfied. When he got in touch with me about this story idea of his, at first I was reluctant. But then I thought—wait a minute, Grady has a good idea. When people read about us, when they think about the hard work that went into creating what we have here, some good will certainly come of it. So I said yes.”

I drank the bourbon and considered that Grady’s motivation for the story was nothing like Mondale’s idea. I noticed a book lying on the table next to Mondale’s chair. It was Howells’s *The Rise of Silas Lapham*.

“How do you like *Silas Lapham*?” I asked.

“Howells is an accomplished realist. No question about it. There are aspects of Lapham’s situation I can definitely relate to.”

“Like what?”

“Somehow I get the feeling that the interview has begun.”

“Just curious.”

“Well, you see, Stokesbury, those of us who have made money in recent years, the years after the War, we’ve had to struggle to find our place in society. Quite frankly, some people who have had money in their families for generations look down their noses at businessmen like me and Morgan. I guess they think because we had to work for what we have, our hands must be dirty. Lapham really wants to rise to that level of social acceptance that I don’t think I’ve found yet. But then it doesn’t really matter that much to me. Of course, there’s another aspect of the novel I don’t care for.”

“Which is?”

“Lapham lets his conscience control him too much. He doesn’t really do anything wrong in his business. He follows accepted business practices. The fact of the matter is some of us are more capable than others of achieving success; some of us wouldn’t know success if it bit us in the ass. We should take advantage where advantage is given and forget about conscience.”

I stared at the fire and let his words sink in and mingle with the bourbon.

“Is the rest of your family here?” I asked.

“Chris is in medical school in Boston. He arrives tomorrow. Tom is out west somewhere. Nevada, I think. He won’t be home this year. Don’t ask me what he’s doing but whatever it is, he’s making money. He has a greater gift than I ever had to make money. And, believe me, Stokesbury, money goes to the people who have the gift of creating ideas and working to achieve them. I get tired of hearing some people complain about their sorry stock in life. Who’s to blame? Me? Hardly. Let them work as hard as I have.”

I raised my glass in assent.

“Well spoken, Mr. Mondale. But tell me. I’m curious. When I was coming over on the ferry, the old man said I should be sure to look up someone called McPherson. J. J. McPherson, I think he said.”

Mondale lowered the glass and the flush was gone from his cheeks. He stared at me and then smiled.

“By all means, you should meet Mr. McPherson. He’s a first-rate fellow. He manages my game preserve. I host a lot of hunts this time of year. Mr. McPherson is

responsible for organizing everything. Because of him, we have without question the best hunts in the South.”

“The old man on the ferry told me McPherson is quite a marksman.”

Mondale studied the liquor in his glass as if to find an answer lurking somewhere near the bottom.

“I suppose a man in his position would need to be an excellent marksman. You see, some of the people who visit us have never fired a weapon. Mr. McPherson has to teach them. To teach them effectively, well, he has to be good himself. Now doesn’t he?”

“I’m sure he does.”

Mondale reached for a dark blue rope that hung near his chair and gave it a pull. In only a moment Carter stood before us.

“Carter, I’m sure Mr. Stokesbury would like something to eat. Will you take him to the dining room?”

“Most certainly, sir. This way, Mr. Stokesbury.”

I realized I had been dismissed, so I rose and said good evening to my host and followed the dutiful butler out of the study, down the long hall to the dining room.

CHAPTER 7

The bedroom I occupied was on the upper floor of the cottage and the window commanded an excellent view of the rear grounds and the stables in the distance. The wind was driving the fog and mist toward the mainland and I caught a glimpse of starlit sky among the broken shards of cloud. I opened the window to let some fresh air into the room and a breath of coldness struck me in the face. I looked toward the stables. A dark figure walked slowly to the fence and climbed across it and then disappeared inside the barn. I did not see him again that night and I wondered whether the figure was J. J. McPherson.

Sleep did not come easily. In the darkness I lay on the soft goose-down mattress and stared at the high ceiling and thought about the Pittsburgh strike and the little man downstairs who was responsible for putting a violent end to it. He just did not seem like the type who would call in the Pinkertons and the troops. But then his conversation revealed a determination that was not reflected in his physical appearance. I did not like him. I would be glad when I gathered my material and returned to Atlanta.

The sunlight streamed through the window and disturbed what little sleep I had. I struggled to open my eyes and then I heard men's voices in the distance. They sounded as if they came from the stables, so I quickly rose and went to the window. A half dozen men holding shotguns and smoking pipes and cigars stood just outside the fence and joked and laughed with a tall fellow who stood on the other side of the fence. I remembered seeing the silhouette of a tall man the night before and I wondered whether

this could be the same one. He opened the gate and the others followed him across the field behind the barn. I watched them until they disappeared in a thicket of trees. Some fifteen minutes later I heard the first shots.

Before I left the window I glanced at a group of funny-looking trees close to the house. I had seen pictures of them—palm trees. I could not say I thought highly of them. They paled in comparison to the hickories and oaks and maples and pines I was familiar with. The foliage drooped from the top of the trunks and I wondered what you could do with a tree like that. It was no good for shade. I doubted seriously that you could get lumber out of it.

A knock sounded at my door.

“It’s open.”

Carter appeared with a tray and a cup of coffee.

“Mr. Mondale requests that you have breakfast with him, sir.”

“Of course. I’ll be right down.”

I went to the wash bowl on the dressing table and splashed water in my face. Then I drank the coffee and for a few minutes I felt as if I had gotten a good night’s rest. I went downstairs and found Mondale in the dining room. A plate of eggs and ham was waiting for me.

“Good morning, Stokesbury,” Mondale said. “I trust you slept well.”

“Most definitely, sir. A very comfortable bed.”

“My wife would be pleased. She chose all the beds. Well, she chose all the furniture. She would be pleased. I hope we didn’t wake you too early.”

“Not at all. I was already up.”

“That’s good because you see, Stokesbury, if you are to paint an accurate picture of life here during the holidays, you must know that the day starts early. Already we have a hunt underway.”

“I saw a group of men at the fence.”

“Those are investors I do business with in New York. It’s good business to have them down here for a friendly hunt.”

“There was a tall man—”

“Wearing a black wide-brimmed hat?”

“Yes.”

“That’s the man you’re wanting to talk to. That’s J. J. McPherson. I spoke with him earlier this morning and told him of your desire to meet with him.”

“His response?”

“He shrugged his shoulders, more or less. Stokesbury, there’s something you have to understand about McPherson. He’s a quiet man. He doesn’t crave attention. He prefers to be left alone. But he said if you’re bound and determined to interview him, he’ll comply. You must understand, though, there are some things he may not want to talk about. You have to respect that.”

“I do.”

“I know you do. Grady wouldn’t have sent you if you weren’t capable of such respect.”

“When do I meet him?”

“This afternoon. Late this afternoon. After he returns from the hunt. Give him a chance to relax a bit. These hunts are tiring endeavors.”

Suddenly a loud booming voice erupted in the hall. Even the old man started.

“Hello! Is anybody home?”

“Chris? Chris? Is that you?” Mondale asked. “We’re in the dining room.”

Chris Mondale walked leisurely into the dining room and the two men embraced.

The younger Mondale was taller than his father, auburn-haired, and muscular. His face was round and had the look of someone who had never shaved.

“Chris, I wasn’t expecting you till much later in the day.”

“The ship encountered no difficulties. I caught an early train out of Savannah.”

“It’s good to see you, son. How are things in Boston?”

“Things are better here, I assure you.”

“Chris, I want you to meet a guest,” Mondale said. “This is Marcus Stokesbury.

He’s a reporter for the *Atlanta Constitution*.”

“I’m pleased to meet you, Mr. Stokesbury,” the son said.

“The pleasure’s all mine. Your father tells me you’re studying medicine.”

“Making an attempt. Tell me, Mr. Stokesbury, you’re not going to put us in the newspaper, are you?”

“More than likely.”

“You’ve heard of his editor, haven’t you, son?” Mondale asked. “Henry Grady.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Grady wants his readers to know how people like us spend Christmas on this golden isle.”

“Do people really care?” the son said.

“Yes, I believe they do,” I said.

“And Mr. Stokesbury has heard a little bit about J. J. He wants to talk with him,” Mondale said.

The father and son exchanged glances and I tried to decipher a meaning but was unsuccessful.

“I’m not sure J. J. is a good subject for an interview,” the son said.

“Why is that?” I asked.

“Well, he just doesn’t say much. Naturally quiet, I guess.”

“What’s this news I hear about the Foxhall girl?” the elder Mondale asked.

“What have you heard?”

“Things are getting serious.”

“I never said so. She might have. Strange things get in the papers. I guess you know all about that, Mr. Stokesbury.”

“I’ve found that strange people cause strange things to get in the papers.”

“Well said, Stokesbury,” the father said. “Son, have you eaten?”

“Yes, sir. I had breakfast on the train.”

“Surely not like the breakfast we have here? Shall I summon Carter?”

“No, sir, I’m fine.”

Later that morning I sat at the small desk next to my bedroom window and wrote. The fire in the fireplace dwindled and only hissed when a charred log moved. From my chair I had a clear view of the stables and the pasture. McPherson and the hunters had not returned.

JEKYLL ISLAND—Christmas on this golden paradise off the Brunswick coast is like Christmas anywhere else. It is about family.

This island was once home to the Indians. It was once home to the Spanish, later to cotton and rice plantation owners. Today it is home to America's wealthiest families.

They come here during Christmas. And, yes, their celebration, like so many others, revolves around family.

Of course the setting is different from others. Take the Kyle Mondale family, for example. Their setting is a substantial home, referred to as a cottage, and it sits in the middle of a hunting plantation. No, they don't raise cotton here. They raise quail and deer and turkey. A fortune made in the railroad and steel industry can pay for a lot of wildlife.

My pen hung over the page and I thought about the steel workers in Pittsburgh and I thought about the food they would have for Christmas dinner. I doubted it would be quail or venison or turkey. I laid the pen down and left the room.

I walked down the winding staircase to the main hall and listened to the silence of the house. I had not seen the son since he arrived early in the morning. I found it an anomaly that he was preparing for a career in medicine, a career devoted to the care and well-being of others—an anomaly because the old man just did not strike me as the kind of individual interested in care and well-being.

Outside, the sunlight was deceptive. A cold east wind blew off the Atlantic and the palm trees swayed violently. I walked along the narrow sandy road that ran alongside the pasture fence. I kept my gait brisk to avoid freezing. Soon the house behind me was

gone and the road veered away from the pasture. I continued to follow it. Before me rose the dunes with the sea oats swaying to the music of the wind. I climbed a dune and was stunned.

Before me stretched the wide expanse of the Atlantic Ocean. I had never seen anything so enormous. The waves were rolling in and the crash of the breakers was loud and continuous. I saw on the horizon the small speck of a fishing boat. I could not tell whether it was going to or traveling from Brunswick. I had expected the water to be a deep clear blue. I had seen pictures of the ocean in books and the water was always blue and clear but this water was more gray than blue. The waves were not as large as I had imagined. But the roar was there just the same.

I stepped down the dune and the sand got in my shoes. I walked onto the beach and the wind that came with the waves tore at my coat and stung my face. I watched the water slide effortlessly onto the beach. It brought small shells and then retreated, only to advance farther the next time. The beach was wide and long and I felt as if I were the only person on the face of the earth. Standing alone beside the ocean will do that to you. It is a complete loneliness, nothing approximate about it.

“It’s quite a sight, ain’t it?”

So much for being alone. The voice startled me and I stumbled in the sand. I turned to confront a tall, lean man smoking a cigarette. The fire at the end of the cigarette was almost gone. His face was angular and deeply lined. Bushy hair, once blond but now graying, dipped below the black wide-brimmed hat. He was not a young man, yet his grin was boyish and unassuming.

“I didn’t hear you come up,” I said.

“Hard to hear anything when the tide’s coming in. I like to come here when the waves are breaking. I like the sound. There’s not another sound in all of creation like it.”

“Are you J. J. McPherson?”

“I am. You must be the newspaperman from Atlanta.”

“Marcus Stokesbury.”

“Pleased to meet you. Do people really call you Marcus?”

“They do. Why shouldn’t they?”

“In some parts of the world a name like that could get you in a heap of trouble—unless, of course, you know how to handle yourself.”

“I know how to handle myself.”

McPherson grinned.

“I’m sure you do, pardner. Nevertheless, I think I’ll call you Stokesbury. Mr. Mondale told me you wanted to talk with me. I wasn’t expecting to find you here, though.”

We struggled to make our voices heard above the roar of the waves.

“Can we talk now?”

“Not here. Let’s go to my cabin. I’ll put a pot of coffee on. I have to warn you, Stokesbury. I ain’t much for conversation.”

We left the beach and I had a hard time keeping up with his long, sure strides. During the walk to his cabin, he remained true to his warning. He did not say a word. We left the roar of the waves behind us, yet the wind followed. It was a brisk wind that brought the chill of the Atlantic in December, the kind of chill that cut through your coat and flesh and wrapped around your bones. So I was glad when we entered his cabin. It

was small. Somehow I expected a man with his responsibilities on the winter estate of Kyle Mondale to occupy more substantial quarters. The house consisted of only three rooms. The exterior was rough and contained what appeared fragments of seashells. Later I would learn that this material was called tabby.

Two spotted pointers reclined next to the hearth and immediately with tails wagging they greeted me by sniffing my shoes and trousers.

“Let the man be,” J. J. said.

“They’re beautiful,” I said. “Have you had them long?”

“Since they were pups. You know bird dogs, Stokesbury?”

“I grew up on a farm in Floyd County. That’s northwest of Atlanta.”

“There’s nothing any better than a good bird dog except a good horse, I reckon.”

After he tossed chunks of wood into the stove and set the coffee pot on top of it, he rolled a cigarette and lit it from a long, narrow strip of kindling in the fireplace. The room was dark. Nevertheless, it was not difficult to see that J. J. McPherson did not go in for the latest in home fashions. The cabin was sparsely furnished. I sat in one of the two cane-bottom chairs not far from the fireplace. He poured the coffee into two tin cups and we both sat and let the steam rise into our faces. We tilted the chairs back on their rear legs and we drank and the warmth attacked the chill.

“Good coffee,” I said.

“Coffee’s the only good thing that comes from that stove. I ain’t much of a cook.”

“Nor am I, Mr. McPherson. Is there a Mrs. McPherson?”

He looked over the rim of the tin cup and then stared at the fire.

“No, not any more.”

“So you were married?”

“Yeah, once.”

“Where is she?”

“She’s dead, Stokesbury.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

He removed the wide-brimmed hat and curly hair lay close to his head. He drew a long puff from the cigarette and inhaled deeply.

“You want a cigarette?” he asked. “I’ve got tobacco and paper. You’ll have to roll your own.”

“I don’t smoke.”

“My wife used to tell me I should stop.”

He stared at the fire and his eyes were seeing something beyond the red flicker of flames curling around the oak and hickory logs.

“Do you mind if I call you J. J.?”

“It’s all right by me.”

“You don’t object to a few questions, do you?”

“That’s what I expect from a newspaperman.”

I reached inside my coat pocket and withdrew a small notepad and pencil.

“How long have you worked for Mr. Mondale?” I asked.

J. J. thought over the answer.

“It’s been more than seven years,” he said. “Don’t hardly seem that long.”

“How did you two meet up?”

“Through a mutual acquaintance, you might say. He was looking for someone to manage his game preserve and I knew something about firearms and game. Things have worked out well.”

“Are you from these parts, J. J.?”

“No.”

“Where are you from?”

“I’m from a lot of places, wherever the wind blows.”

“I don’t guess we can be more specific, can we?”

“No, I don’t guess we can.”

“Well, how many hunts do you have in the winter?”

“If you’re talking about friends or business associates of Mr. Mondale, maybe a dozen or so each winter. On top of that, I take the family out a number of times. Chris especially loves to hunt. He’s a good marksman too. I’ll take him hunting several times while he’s home.”

“What about his brother?”

“Tom’s a good shot, not as good as Chris. Of course, I’m sure you know Tom is out West somewhere. I don’t see too much of him any more.”

“What line of work is he in?”

“You’d have to ask Mr. Mondale.”

“How did you become such a good marksman?”

“Practice, I reckon. When I was young, I had plenty of practice.”

“Did you fight in the War, J. J.?”

He finished the cigarette and flipped the remains in the fire. It quickly became consumed in flames. Sparks flew up the chimney. The flames crackled in our ears.

“That was a long time ago, Stokesbury. I don’t talk about the War. In fact, I think I’ve talked enough.”

I rose and set the tin cup on a wood table next to the stove. I put the notepad and pencil back in my coat pocket. The dogs stared at me from the hearth. J. J. remained in his straight chair.

“I’d like to go on one of your hunts,” I said.

“I’m planning to take Chris tomorrow morning. You’re welcome to join us. I’m sure Chris won’t mind.”

“Thanks, J. J.”

I started for the door.

“Stokesbury.”

I stopped and turned.

“Yes.”

“When I go hunting, I don’t answer questions.”

“I understand.”

I closed the door and walked outside into the cold. The smell of wood smoke was heavy in the air and I saw the two-story red brick mansion at the end of the drive. Old man Mondale was standing on the lower porch. He was staring in my direction. When he saw me, he turned and disappeared inside the house.

CHAPTER 8

JEKYLL ISLAND—No Christmas visit to this island paradise would be complete without a quail hunt.

We rose before dawn and met Mr. McPherson at the stables, where the pointers and setters were as eager as we to start the adventure. I was joined by Christopher Mondale, the son of my host; Laughton Ames, personal secretary to my host; and Miles Riggington, one of Mr. Mondale's business associates.

Mr. McPherson provided the shotguns. Christopher Mondale had his own.

"We'll work in pairs," Mr. McPherson said. "If you're on the left, you'll shoot the birds flying on the left. If you're on the right, you'll shoot the birds flying on the right. Be sure to let the birds get up in the air. The dogs jump pretty high sometimes. I don't want you shooting the dogs."

We walked across the pasture, past a marsh, and then across another pasture toward the middle of the island. We could not hear the ocean but the air was salty. We could smell it. We could taste it.

The dogs worked beautifully. I grew up hunting the bobwhite quail and suddenly I felt like a child again on my first hunt. There is a sense of magic about this place. Money can do that. It can create magic.

There is an indelible sense of excitement when the dogs hold their point and you move slowly forward. You know that at any moment the birds will rush into flight. You hold the shotgun before you, ready to aim.

The flutter of wings takes you by surprise. The birds are quick. They are fast. There is no time to think. You aim and shoot. The dogs do the rest.

We had a good morning. Plenty of quail for a delicious dinner. Mr. McPherson knew exactly where the quail would likely be. I must admit my marksmanship was a bit off. After all, I had not fired a gun in many years. Mr. McPherson provided helpful suggestions. He never condescended. He is without question a professional.

I finished the article in my bedroom and went downstairs. The house was quiet. Twilight was settling on the island and already the entrance hall sat in darkness. I went to the front door and opened it. No one was on the porch. I turned and saw her.

It was only a glimpse. I thought the darkness deceived my eyes. She stood at the end of the hall and quickly vanished in the dining room.

“Hello. Who’s there?”

There was no answer. I quickly walked down the hall and went into the large dining room. It was empty.

“Mr. Stokesbury, are you lost or are you hungry?”

Ames stood behind me.

“Neither. I saw a young lady in the hall. She came in here.”

“A young lady? Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“Nothing unusual about that,” Ames said. “Carter employs a number of young ladies to do work in the kitchen and around the house. I’m sure you’ve seen them.”

“Actually I haven’t. Where is Mr. Mondale?”

“He had to go into Brunswick on business. He’ll return shortly. Perhaps you would be comfortable in the study.”

“Perhaps.”

Ames escorted me to the study and closed the door. His steps resonated down the hall. The study, like the hall, was dark. Only the lamp on the desk burned dimly. I thought about the young lady I had seen. She was not dressed in the manner of the hired help. The dress was much too ornate. Ames’s explanation did not satisfy me.

The door opened and Chris appeared. He was surprised to see me.

“I’m sorry, Stokesbury,” he said. “I didn’t mean to intrude.”

“No intrusion. I’d welcome some conversation. The house is awfully quiet.”

“Yes, it can be. I like to come in here to smoke. Do you mind?”

“Not at all. Please go ahead.”

We sat in the leather chairs close to the desk and I felt the elder Mondale’s presence, even though he was in Brunswick or perhaps on the ferry crossing the channel. Chris lit a pipe and the sweet smell of the tobacco rose with the smoke into the darkness.

“I just had an interesting experience,” I said.

“What was it?”

“I just saw a lovely young lady at the end of the hall. She saw me and disappeared. I mean—literally disappeared. Ames told me she assists Carter. But she didn’t look like a—”

“Someone who would work in the kitchen.”

“Exactly. You don’t have a sister, do you?”

“I’m not aware of a sister. I do have a mother.”

“When will I get to meet her?”

“You won’t.”

“I don’t understand.”

“She doesn’t come here,” Chris said. “She remains in New York.”

“Doesn’t she like it here?”

“She loves it here.”

“Then why does she stay in New York?”

“Because the girl is here.”

The pipe smoke hung in the air above our heads. Chris’s eyes did not meet mine.

He stared at the empty chair behind the desk.

“We may have money,” Chris said. “But we’re subject to the same foibles everyone else is subject to. Does that come as a shock, Stokesbury?”

“No.”

I wanted to say that in my mind more money equaled more foibles but I decided to save that observation for another day.

“Chris, I won’t write about this.”

“That’s your decision, Stokesbury.”

“Does everyone know about the young lady?”

“I’m sure they do.”

“Including J. J.?”

“J. J. and I haven’t talked about it. But he knows. And now you know. If my father finds out that you saw her, he will be very unhappy.”

“With me?”

“No, with her. When we have guests, she’s supposed to remain—”

“Out of sight.”

“Yes, you might say that. She must not have known you were in the house.”

I wanted to talk to the girl but knew it would be difficult. I imagined her working in a railroad office or in a Northeastern textile mill owned by Mondale. I saw her working fourteen hours a day at a loom in stifling heat and one day Kyle Mondale went strolling through the building to inspect his investment. He observed the thread streaming through the looms. He ignored the heat. He saw the young girl.

I was surprised Chris talked about it. I was, after all, a stranger in his midst. More than that, I was a newspaperman. Yet he talked and he stared—at the empty chair behind the desk.

I wanted to talk with Grady. Sending a story over the wire was not good enough. I wanted to talk with him. How much did he know about Mondale? Probably more than he told me. Did he want me to write about the Christmas the wealthy really celebrated? How about the Christmas Mrs. Mondale celebrated in New York? She was a family member I wanted to interview. Maybe next year.

The main Christmas dinner was served on Christmas Eve. While Carter and his staff prepared the finishing touches, I stood on the front porch and stared through the darkness at J. J. McPherson’s small tabby cabin beyond the stables. A small, dim light

shone in the front window. I wanted to know more about him. I wanted to know what he would do on Christmas. Probably he would treat himself to a hunt by himself.

“So you’ve had an opportunity to meet J. J.,” Kyle Mondale said.

He closed the door behind him and walked up next to me. He too stared at the barely visible light emanating from the cabin window.

“Yes. He’s a fascinating figure. Also a bit secretive.”

“He’s a good man, Marcus. Life deals some of us harsh hands. Some of us throw the cards down on the table in disgust and surrender. Some of us try to make do with the hand we’re dealt. You’ll never get any excuses from J. J.”

“I never asked for any.”

“I’m sure you didn’t. Marcus, there’s something else I want to talk to you about.”

The wind came off the Atlantic and I buttoned the top button of my overcoat.

Mondale paid little heed to the wind.

“Marcus, I’ve been told you saw a young lady in the house.”

“I did. The house is not haunted, is it? If so, I’ve really got a good story to write.”

“No, it is not haunted,” Mondale said. “She is a friend.”

“Mr. Mondale, you don’t have to explain.”

“You recall Persis in *Silas Lapham*?”

“I do.”

“She suspects Silas is having an—”

“Yes, I recall.”

“And of course she is wrong. Things are not always as they appear. Am I as clear as the fog we have here on the island?”

“Are you acquainted with Howells?”

“Oh, goodness yes. We’ve known each other for several years. I know Clemens too. I’ve considered inviting both of them down for the holidays. If they come, you’ll have to be sure to return.”

“Most definitely.”

“So—we’re all right about the girl?”

“It could have been a shadow. I’m not sure.”

“It could have been. Indeed, yes. Well, Marcus, I’m sure dinner is about to be served. Let us go in. What do you say?”

Carter prepared wild turkey and quail and I must admit I have never had better. At the long table in the dining room, Kyle Mondale presided at the head. I sat on one side and Chris sat on the other. The girl I had seen was not present.

“I wish Tom were here,” Chris said.

“He’s the great adventurer,” Mondale said. “He’s involved with this gold-silver thing out west.”

“What gold-silver thing?” I asked.

“Marcus, some of us are great believers in the gold standard. It is the only sure way to bolster the monetary system. But there are some who want to adulterate the system. They want silver to support the system. Now you probably wonder what that means. Well, it means more money can be minted. Some people—many people—are not equipped to work hard to make their money. They’re either lazy or dumb. So they want the government to mint more money so they can get their hands on it. They’re trying to subvert natural law, Marcus. Some of us are better suited to survive monetarily. The

government has no business weakening my position to help those who are ill suited for survival.”

“That’s quite a speech,” Chris said.

“You know I’m right. Aren’t I right, Marcus?”

“I must admit I have problems with this natural selection process.”

“Marcus, think of all the species that have come and gone. Think of the dinosaurs.

They all had problems with this natural selection process.”

“Father, it’s Christmas Eve.”

“So it is. Merry Christmas.”

In the light of the chandelier the wine sparkled and we toasted each other.

“Does J. J. ever join you for Christmas?” I asked.

“No, never,” Mondale answered. “He prefers to be alone. Chris, when do you have to return to Boston?”

“Day after tomorrow.”

“So soon?”

“I want to stop in New York.”

Mondale chewed slowly and took a long sip of wine.

“Yes, you should stop in New York.”

I felt uncomfortable. I would have preferred to be sitting in J. J.’s cabin, drinking his coffee, and listening to his vague replies. Suddenly Ames stood at the door. He held a small piece of paper in his hand. His face was ashen in the bright light.

“I’m sorry to bother you, Mr. Mondale.”

“It’s quite all right, Ames. Is something amiss?”

“I’m afraid there is.”

“J. P. is not here, is he? I did not invite him.”

“No, sir. It does not concern Mr. Morgan.”

Ames stepped into the dining room and faltered. For a moment I thought he was about to fall. He regained his composure and walked up to the table. With trembling hand he held the piece of paper.

“There is some bad news, sir,” Ames said.

Mondale took the paper and adjusted the spectacles on his nose. He began to read. His hand dropped and the paper fell to the floor.

“Father, what is it?” Chris asked.

Mondale did not answer. His eyes focused on an empty chair at the table. Chris reached down and lifted the paper. He too read the message.

“Marcus, I’m afraid you will never have the opportunity to meet my son Tom,” Mondale said. “He is dead.”

I have never witnessed the look that appeared in Chris’s eyes. Disbelief, horror, grief.

“How did it happen?” I asked.

“He’s been killed,” Mondale said. “There are few details. I’m not sure details at a moment like this really matter. He was in Nevada. He’s dead.”

Chris leaped from the table and hurried out the door. His footsteps went quickly down the hall. The front door slammed shut.

“Mr. Mondale, I’m so sorry,” I said. “Is there anything I can do?”

“No, but thank you, Marcus. Ames, will you have Carter clear the table? Dinner is over.”

The old man was stunned. He stumbled out of the dining room and Ames mumbled instructions to Carter and his staff in the kitchen. I sat alone in the dining room.

“Mr. Stokesbury, there is a wire for you also,” Ames said.

Once again he stood at the door. He had produced another piece of paper. Without saying anything else, he walked to the table and handed the paper to me. I unfolded it.

“Marcus. Grady died of pneumonia yesterday. Sorry to send this news at Christmas. I know how much he meant to you.—Harris.”

Ames turned and left once again. I read the wire several more times. It could not be true. How could a man with Grady’s energy be dead? Harris was his right-hand associate editor. Shortly before I boarded the train for Macon, Harris walked up to my desk.

“I’m concerned about him,” Harris said.

Harris was a large man. A bushy mustache drooped over his upper lip.

“What do you mean?”

“All these speaking engagements up North. He’s wearing himself down. That much traveling takes its toll.”

So Harris was right. I wondered whether he would be the one to write the obituary.

I walked out of the house and headed toward J. J.’s cabin. I doubted that anyone had told him the news about Tom Mondale’s death. I did not know whether he and Tom

were close, but I figured he would want to know. The dim light was still trickling from the window and I knocked on the door. J. J. opened it and appeared surprised.

“Well, Stokesbury, don’t tell me you’ve come for another cup of my coffee.”

“There’s some bad news, J. J.”

He rubbed the curly hair from his forehead.

“What kind of bad news? Is it the old man?”

“No, it’s his son Tom. He’s been killed. In Nevada. They just found out.”

J. J. put on his coat and wide-brimmed hat.

“Where’s Chris?”

“I don’t know.”

“I bet I do.”

J. J. walked hurriedly across the pasture toward the beach. I trailed him; in fact, it was difficult to keep up with him. The moon sat low in the sky and almost touched the tops of the palms that swayed in the wind. When we drew near to the beach, I heard the incessant roar of the waves. They crashed upon the sand, one after the other. The black silhouette of Chris was on top of a dune. He was sitting motionless in the moonlight.

J. J. and I walked carefully up the dune and knelt beside him. The beach and incoming waves were gray in the moonlight. Toward the dark horizon the water was black.

“I was going to visit him next summer,” Chris said and he did not look at us. “We exchanged letters at the beginning of fall term. I wrote that I’d be out there next June. We were both looking forward to it.”

“Tom was a good man,” J. J. said.

“Who would want to kill him?” Chris asked.

“Do you know someone killed him?” J. J. asked.

“The wire didn’t say. But Tom didn’t just up and die, J. J. You know that as well as I do. Somebody killed him. I’m sure it had something to do with that gold and silver business. I read in the Boston paper that things were getting nasty out there. Tom never told me but I know he was mixed up in that mess. It got him killed.”

“We don’t know for sure,” J. J. said.

“I’m going to find out.”

“How are you going to do that?”

“I’m going out there. Somebody needs to bring his body back. He would want to be buried here. While I’m there, I’ll find out what happened.”

The waves crept closer to the dune, flinging sand at us and then taking it back again, to the black depths where the currents ran strong.

“Chris, I know how you feel,” J. J. said.

“No, J. J., I appreciate what you’re trying to say. But you don’t know.”

“Chris, look at me.”

The ocean released its pull on his face and Chris turned toward J. J.

“Chris, I do know what you’re going through. I know what it’s like to lose people close to you.”

Suddenly Chris burst into tears and he buried his face against J. J.’s shoulder. J. J. slowly raised his arms and wrapped them around the young man and the ocean roared its advance upon the beach. Chris pulled himself away and wiped his eyes on his coat sleeve.

“I’ve got to go out there, J. J.,” Chris said.

“What about college?”

“I’ll just finish later.”

“You’ve never been to a place like Nevada.”

“Have you been to Nevada?”

“No.”

“Well, I’ve got to do it. Tom would do the same for me.”

We stood on the dune and stared at the ocean one last time.

CHAPTER 9

December 25, 1889

Joel,

I received the wire about Grady's death. I cannot tell you how devastated I am. When I think of the *Constitution*, I think of Grady. He is—or was—the newspaper. I know it will go on. It will continue to prosper. I am afraid, though, it will have to go on without me, at least for the time being.

It is difficult, Joel, for me to write this. My dream was always to work for the *Constitution*. Grady gave me the chance and I will be forever grateful. The roads we travel take unexpected turns and I suppose I am at one of those unexpected turns.

The Mondale family received some tragic news also. The oldest son has been killed in Nevada and the youngest son is going out there to claim the body and to find out what happened. I intend to go with him. You may say I have no business in Nevada and you may be right. Nevertheless, I believe that the story I came to Jekyll Island to write is moving to a new setting and to a new cast of characters. My job would be incomplete if I were to stop now. Therefore, I am going to accompany the younger Mondale on his quest. I will not be returning to Atlanta—at least, not anytime soon.

This is not a letter of resignation. Then, again, perhaps it is. I simply do not know what awaits me. Give my best to the gang on Forsyth Street.

Marcus

It was long past midnight and I sat at the desk in my bedroom and stared at the letter in my hands. It was not a letter of resignation, I convinced myself. Yet I suspected I would never return to the *Constitution*. I stared out the window at the blackness that draped the lawn and the stables and the pasture. J. J.'s cabin stood as a small outline; not even a light flickered in his window. I folded the letter and sealed it in an envelope.

The lights throughout the house still burned brightly but there was no hint of holiday jubilation. A pall hung over the house and on this night the lights would not be enough to lift it. I found Ames at the front door smoking a cigarette and I handed the envelope to him.

"Will you see this gets mailed?" I asked.

"Certainly."

"Where is Mr. Mondale?"

"He and Chris and J. J. are in the study."

The door to the study was open. The three men stood in front of the fireplace and the elder Mondale motioned for me to enter. I was reluctant but he insisted.

"I'm afraid I've been a terrible host tonight," he said. "I hope you understand—"

"There is no need to apologize."

"I've just lost one son and now it appears I'm about to lose the other one."

"You're not going to lose me," Chris said. "I'll be careful."

"I don't want you to go," the old man said.

"Chris, find Carter," J. J. said. "Tell him to make some coffee."

Chris hesitated but then walked hurriedly past me.

"Stokesbury, close the door," J. J. said.

“I think it’s a terrible idea for him to go,” Mondale said.

“It’s a terrible idea,” J. J. said. “But he’s made up his mind. There’s nothing we can do or say to make him change it. That’s why I’m going with him.”

The words hit Mondale hard. His mouth hung open and he shook his head.

“J. J., you can’t.”

“I must.”

“No, it’s impossible. We should talk. Marcus, I hate to ask you—”

I turned to leave.

“He can stay,” J. J. said.

Mondale walked slowly to the chair behind his desk and sat. Weariness clung to him and he rested his face in his hands. Then he looked up.

“You can’t go,” Mondale said again. “You know the terms of the agreement. We should not even be discussing this.”

“The West is a hard country,” J. J. said. “I know Chris is your son but I feel like I sort of helped raise him. I taught him how to hunt and fish. Look, I’ve given this some thought. I could just sit here and be safe and let Chris run the risk of getting hurt. Or I can climb down from the security of my shelf and do what I need to do.”

“J. J., your loyalty to Chris is admirable—”

“I’m going to do it.”

“If you go west of the Mississippi, you will be shot on sight. You know the agreement.”

“I know the agreement. I’ll take my chances.”

I had no idea what agreement they were talking about. J. J.'s lower jaw was fixed firmly. There was no way Mondale would be able to change his mind. And Mondale knew it.

"I'll keep them both out of trouble," I said.

They stared at me.

"What are you talking about, Stokesbury?" J. J. asked.

"I'm going too."

"The hell you are," J. J. answered. "I bet you can't even ride a horse."

"Have you forgotten what I told you? I grew up on a farm. I can ride a horse."

"Better than you can shoot?"

"Marcus, why would you go?" Mondale asked. "What about your job at the newspaper?"

"Bad news came in a bundle tonight. Henry Grady is dead. He died of pneumonia. I'm not going back to the newspaper, at least not right now. I'm going to Nevada."

J. J. ran his large, weathered hand over the back of his neck.

"All right, Stokesbury," J. J. said. "We're leaving at dawn."

I lay in bed and watched a sliver of moonlight move ever so slightly across the ceiling. It was impossible to sleep. Thoughts of what might await me in a strange land held onto my imagination and slammed shut all doors through which sleep might enter. I had heard tales of life in the West, some purported to be true stories. I gave little credence to these stories. I had read the dime novels, a habit which Grady had chided.

“You don’t believe any of that stuff, do you?” he once asked.

“No, not a bit. But it is entertaining.”

“Well, cover the mayor’s meeting tonight. That should be entertaining enough.”

Grady thought I was wasting my time reading such fluff, yet the stories captured my imagination—stories of cowboy heroes, tall, lean, terse, Spartan in every sense of the word. And they were pretty much alone, even when riding with other cowboys on trail herds from Texas to Oklahoma to Kansas and Missouri. Relationships with other people came hard because they were often on the move. Staying in one place a long time just was not their idea of living.

And then, of course, there were the outlaws. Nefarious creatures, all of them—at least that was the depiction in the novels Grady disdained. Opposing the outlaws were the lawmen, fearless, persistent, and loyal to a code governing their lives. I guess that was one thing that attracted me to the novels—this idea of a code by which they lived, a code that bespoke of honor, integrity, valor in the face of disaster. Such a code once lived in the South. I know because I spoke with men who had once lived under this code, but the war changed everything, they said. While there was once honor, now there was money.

In the summer of ’77 Rufus Pierce came back to Bartow County. I had never known him, just heard about him. He fought alongside Joe Johnston, all the way from Ringgold to Atlanta. He wept the day Davis replaced Johnston with Hood. A man who had fought and bled and killed stood beside a campfire in the darkness and cried.

“We’re whipped, boys,” he said and the others sitting close to him listened fearfully. “Hood ain’t the kind of general we been servin’. He ain’t got ol’ Joe’s brains.”

I know he said these words because men I trusted repeated them to me and when they spoke, the glimmer of the campfire still danced in their glazed eyes.

After the war, after the long walk home, Rufus Pierce stood in front of the two chimneys that had once risen at each end of the simple house not far from the banks of the Etowah. He arrived in the summer of '65 and stood in the sweltering heat and stared at the ruins of the house that had long ago quit smoldering. His oldest brother, Hiram, had already returned and was living in a tent behind the ruins. Three other brothers did not make it back from Gettysburg. Before Hiram died, he told me about the look on Rufus's face.

"It was a look of defeat, yet it was not defeat," Hiram said to me, "because there was determination on his face. He told me there was nothing left for him in Georgia, so he was going West. 'But, Rufus,' I said, 'you don't know what it's like out there.' 'I know what it's like here,' he said. And he left, and I ain't seen him since."

In late spring of '77 Hiram got down sick, really sick, and we all knew he was not going to last long. The last letter Hiram had from Rufus came from a town called Deadwood. We sent a wire to the marshal out there and asked him if he could find Rufus and tell him to hurry home. His brother was dying.

It is a hard thing to watch a man linger in the agony of disease. We did not know what it was, something about his stomach. Sometimes he would groan and almost double over in pain. He had built a small cabin on the spot where the old family house had once stood and the bedroom was small and dark and hot that summer in '77. During those last days the heat seeped through the window early in the morning and soon after came the

flies, swarming around the bed. The stench of sickness and death hung in the air and I could not stay in the room for long. Rufus came, but the funeral was already over.

I saw him at the Kingston cemetery after the other mourners had left. It seemed as if the whole town turned out for the funeral. Flowers covered the mound of earth and Rufus stood there with his black hat in his hands. He looked like an old man, his hair long and gray and the beard unkempt and a shade darker than the hair. I had heard he was a tall man but now his frame was thin and bent.

“I’m Rufus Pierce,” he said.

“Marcus Stokesbury.”

“You’re the one who sent the wire.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m obliged to you, son. I’m obliged for all you and the neighbors done to help my brother.”

“No need to thank us, Mr. Pierce.”

Rufus stared at the grave for only a short while and then put the hat back on and turned to head back to town. I walked alongside him. His gait was slow.

“I can get a buggy,” I said.

“That’s all right, son. I’m used to the walking. I may be slow but I eventually get where I’m going.”

“I can drive you out to the farm.”

“No, that won’t be necessary. Haven’t seen it since right after the war. No point in seeing it now. I signed over all my rights to the farm to Hiram years ago. It goes to his sons.”

It was not really a long walk from the cemetery to the train depot. I noticed he did not even carry a valise.

“Don’t you want to stay a few days?” I asked.

“No. Have to get back.”

We stood on the wood platform and waited for the northbound that would take him to Chattanooga. He cut a plug of tobacco and stuck it in his jaw.

“You know, I would have come sooner but I have a claim in the Black Hills. You ever heard of ’em?”

“Can’t say I have.”

“I used to write to Hiram about the Black Hills. I wanted him to come out there and work with me but he wouldn’t do it. He said he was perfectly happy here and I can’t say I blame him. The Black Hills—well, it’s some of the most beautiful country on the face of the earth—and some of the meanest. You work hard on your claim and if you have any luck, somebody is waitin’ to kill you for it. And if he doesn’t try, the Sioux sure as hell will. Ever hear of Bill Hickock?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I was in the saloon the day this man named Jack McCall came up behind him and shot him in the back of the head. There were several men at the table. Blood splattered every one of them. The bullet even struck one fellow in the arm. I’ll never forget it. McCall was a crazy man. They grabbed him and he was screamin’ and hollerin’ something nobody could understand. That’s the kind of place it is out there, son. One minute you’re playin’ poker or workin’ your claim and the next minute you’re lyin’ face down with a bullet hole in the head.”

“Then why do you stay out there?”

Rufus Pierce stared at the black rails and then at the sky and breathed deeply. It was as if he was trying to remember something.

“There was nothin’ left here for me after the war. Hiram saw possibilities but I couldn’t. I figgered if I was gonna start over, I’d do it someplace else. I didn’t want no reminders of what the Yankees did.”

“Maybe somebody else is working your claim now.”

He lowered his eyes and stared at me long and hard.

“Then I’ll kill him,” he said.

The dime novels about the West never had any characters like Rufus Pierce. He had lost everything after the war and he was still trying to find something to replace all that was lost. There was an edge to Rufus, clearly defined, and you did not cross it.

I never knew what happened to Rufus Pierce. Some folks said that he never made it back to the Black Hills, that he took sick himself in St. Louis and died. Some said he was killed in Deadwood and some said he finally struck it rich and moved to San Francisco. You hear all kinds of things and you sift them in your brain and hope there is a nugget of truth somewhere.

I gave up on sleeping and walked downstairs and saw the light still burning in Mondale’s study but I did not want to talk to him. I went outside and walked toward the stables. A fine cool mist hung in the air and wet my face. A light shone from the window of J. J.’s cabin and I headed toward it. Apparently nobody was sleeping this night. I knocked at the door and waited but there was no answer. I knocked again.

“Come in.”

I opened the door and stepped inside. J. J. sat at the table near the stove. In the dim light of the kerosene lamp on the table he was wearing wire-rimmed spectacles and cleaning a Colt pistol. He had removed the cylinder and he was wiping it with a cloth. The glint of the long barrel in the lamplight fixed my attention.

“What’s the matter, Stokesbury? Haven’t you seen one of these before?”

“Can’t say I have. Have you ever used that thing?”

“Used—in what way?”

“I mean—a gun like that—well, you use it for killing people.”

“Well, Stokesbury, a gun like this is a good thing to have if you need to do any killing. Does that answer your question?”

“No.”

A cigarette that had burned out hung limply from the corner of his mouth. He replaced the cylinder into the pistol and spun it slowly so that a smooth click click click echoed in the room.

“It has a good sound, don’t it?” he asked.

“I’ll trust your judgment.”

“When it comes to guns, Stokesbury, be careful who you trust.”

“I can trust you, can’t I, J. J.?”

“Yeah, Stokesbury, I reckon you can. You know, you oughtta be sleepin’.”

“Couldn’t sleep. Why aren’t you?”

“No time for sleep. Things to do.”

I noticed the three repeating rifles propped in the corner of the room.

“They’re Henrys,” J. J. said. “Fine rifles. Best I’ve ever used. I’ve already given ’em a good cleanin’. If I’d a known you were comin’, I woulda saved one for you. You can clean a rifle, can’t you?”

“Yes, I can clean a rifle.”

“Good man. There in that cabinet next to the stove is a bottle and some glasses. Pour us a drink.”

It was a small cabinet and I opened the bottom door and found the tall bottle of whiskey and two glasses. I poured and J. J. swallowed his quickly. I poured again.

“You know, Stokesbury, as we get older, we don’t sleep as much.”

“That’s what I’ve heard.”

“It’s true. Besides, sleepin’ is a way of visitin’ the place where the past, present, and future all come together. Our dreams are sometimes in the past, sometimes in the present, sometimes in the future. We run into folks who keep moving from the past into the future and sometimes the meetin’ ain’t pretty.”

“J. J., that sounds metaphysical.”

“I don’t know what that means. You ain’t insultin’ me, are you, Stokesbury?”

“No. I wouldn’t insult anyone with a pistol like that.”

He smiled and inspected the bullets lined up at the side of the table. Then slowly he loaded each chamber of the cylinder.

“J. J., that business Mondale was talking about—your not being able to go out West because you’ll be killed. What was he talking about?”

J. J. struck a match on the table and relit the cigarette and inspected the pistol one last time in the flickering lamplight. Then he laid it carefully down and poured another drink.

“A man makes enemies.”

“Most of us have enemies but they’re not trying to kill us.”

“Not everyone’s like you, Stokesbury. Let’s just leave it at that. You’d better try to get some sleep. There’s not much night left.”

I stopped at the door and turned. J. J. sat at the table, a hand on the glass, his eyes on the gun.

I did not sleep that night. I packed the few clothes I had brought with me and then sat at the small desk next to the window and wrote to my sister.

Eliza,

You will not believe who I thought about tonight. Old Rufus Pierce. You never saw him. But, as I am sure you remember, I talked to him after Hiram’s funeral. He was a strange sort. I think living alone in the hills had done something to him. Maybe that is what the West does to a man. It fills him with all these possibilities and then when they do not come to fruition. . . . Oh, well, I do not guess I am making much sense. It is terribly late and it has been a difficult day.

Dearest Sister, I am writing to tell you that I too am about to embark on a journey to the West. I have already notified Harris at the *Constitution*. You may wonder why I am doing this and perhaps one day I will be able to provide a sufficient answer. At the present I can only say this journey is one I must make.

With all my love and with deepest regards to the rest of the family,

Your Brother

Long before daylight I heard steps moving from room to room downstairs, so I gathered my few belongings and left the room. I saw no one in the downstairs hall. I placed the envelope with the letter to my sister on the hall tree, where it would be seen, and went into the dining room and found Mondale and Chris eating breakfast quietly.

“Please join us,” Mondale said, but his voice lacked the warmth such greetings usually possessed.

“Just coffee,” I said.

Outside the windows darkness still clung inexorably to the palm trees. The house was quiet and I did not think I had ever experienced a Christmas so muted. This was not the kind of Christmas Grady envisioned my writing about. The coffee was hot and helped me ward off the chill that hung in the high-ceilinged room.

“Marcus, I’ve been trying to talk some last-minute sense into my son,” Mondale said, and he pushed his plate away; the fried eggs had not been touched. “Do you have any advice?”

“Father, there’s no use talking about it,” Chris said, and he moved his eggs around with his fork. “I’m going and that’s all there is to it.”

“Well, Marcus, any advice?”

“No, sir, I’m afraid not.”

“And you’re still convinced you’re doing the right thing?”

“Yes, sir, I am convinced.”

The old man shook his head and stood.

“I thought during the war the world was going crazy,” Mondale said, and he leaned against the back of his chair. “Americans killing Americans always seemed the height of insanity. I did not care what the issues were. Brother killing brother was insane. I did not fight. Did I ever tell you that, Marcus? There was no way I was going to get caught up in that madness. So what did I do? I paid someone to serve in my place. He was a good lad, only eighteen, a farm boy from upstate New York. He did not really know what he was fighting for. He just knew that he was going to be paid well. There was only one problem. He did not live to spend the money I paid him. He was killed at Antietam. Took a bullet between the eyes. And what did I do? I made money, enough to pay for all this magnificence you see before you. The war taught many men how to kill. It taught me how to make money. But money does not stop the killing. The killing goes on. The money does not stop it.”

Chris did not look up from his plate and the old man turned and hobbled out of the dining room.

“We had better go,” Chris said.

J. J. was waiting for us at the stable. He had saddled three chestnut mares and he leaned against the gate and smoked a cigarette that glowed a bright red in the darkness. He did not greet us; instead, he surveyed us as if meeting us for the first time. Then he appeared satisfied and opened the gate.

“We’re taking these horses with us,” J. J. said. “They can ride in a boxcar.”

We mounted and moved slowly from the stable up the drive in front of the house. In the east clouds shone pink, yet the mist still moistened our faces. Before we headed toward the wharf, I looked at the house one last time. I noticed the curtains in an upstairs bedroom window pulled aside. I saw the girl’s face, hardly visible, watching. The face was white, bloodless. It was a face I would never forget.

CHAPTER 10

Prescott Freeman looked up from the pages. Marcus Stokesbury was hunched over his roll-top desk. With pencil in hand he was proofreading an article. Prescott rose from his chair and walked quietly toward the desk.

“Marcus, I had no idea you were a man of adventure,” Prescott said.

“Have you finished?”

“No. I’m at the part where you’re leaving Jekyll. You never told me you went out West.”

“I’ve waited to tell the story. I figure I need to tell it before I get too old to remember.”

“May I take it with me? I’d like to finish it tonight.”

“A cure for insomnia, eh?”

“Something like that.”

“What do you think so far?”

“This J. J. McPherson fellow—I’d like to know him.”

“By the end of the manuscript you will.”

Prescott started toward the door and saw the photograph of Wilson on the wall. It was a photograph he had seen a number of times—the stern, deeply set eyes behind the wire-rimmed spectacles, the look of intelligence that came from those eyes and reached out and asked for an audience. As far as Lodge and the Republicans were concerned, no audience would be forthcoming.

"I'm afraid he's in pretty bad shape," Stokesbury said.

"Yes, that's what I hear. The stroke took its toll."

"Did you meet with him in Paris? Did you have any opportunities to talk with him?"

"Some. I have to go, Marcus. I'll return your manuscript tomorrow."

Prescott walked onto the sidewalk beneath the overhang and held tightly to the manuscript. The few farmers who milled about Main Street did not notice him and he was glad. He had known most of them all his life but he did not want to talk. The whistle of an approaching southbound train bellowed and he watched the black locomotive brake and belch thick black smoke and stop beside the depot platform. Only a few passengers stepped off and then the mighty wheels ground their way into motion and pulled the load behind them. The train was heading to Atlanta. He imagined himself on the train. He knew his father would try to keep him from boarding a southbound. He was needed at home.

He went in the hotel dining room to get a cup of coffee. Connie was not working. Her sixteen-year-old niece, Abigail, was behind the counter. Unlike her aunt, she did not smile and hardly spoke. He asked for coffee and stared out the window and remembered the photograph of Wilson. No, Wilson was not well. He had not been well in a long time. Even in Paris he was not well.

"Are you sure he feels like seeing me?" Prescott asked.

"No, he really doesn't," Marshall said, "but he insists."

George Marshall knocked and opened the door. The bedroom was mostly dark. A lamp on the table next to the iron bed glowed dimly. Wilson was propped up in bed. He wore a white nightshirt and appeared weak and haggard. He had papers spread out before him and he motioned Prescott to sit in the wing chair not far from the fireplace, where a fire burned hot and the flames licked the logs and sent sparks flying up the chimney. Marshall quietly withdrew and closed the door behind him.

“Don’t come any closer than that chair,” Wilson said. “This influenza may be contagious. At least that’s what the doctors say. I’m not sure they know what they’re talking about. Have you ever known a doctor who knows what he’s talking about?”

“I’m not sure I have, Mr. President.”

“It’s this damn weather, Prescott. It rains all the time over here.”

“Yes, sir. It certainly seems that way.”

“A lot of folks are saying I should not have come over here. Supposedly it’s beneath the office of the president. What do you say to that, Prescott?”

“I think you did the right thing, Mr. President.”

Wilson shuffled some of the papers in his lap, stared at one in particular and shook his head.

“What are the other countries saying about the League?” Wilson asked.

The voice was weak and hoarse.

“We have a chance, sir. I think they’ll go for it.”

“If Russia were here, do you think they would go for it?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

“I’m sure you have an opinion. After all, Russia seems to be much on your mind these days.”

“Has George talked to you, sir?”

“Indeed he has. You should bring this—what is her name?—Natasha to dinner here one night. I’d like to meet her.”

“She would love to meet you, sir.”

“George tells me she’s quite a beauty.”

“I cannot argue.”

“He also tells me she has this obsession about returning to Russia to fight the Reds.”

Prescott did not answer. Wilson lit a cigarette and shuffled more papers and again shook his head.

“Returning to Russia is a dangerous proposition. I imagine you know that.”

“Yes, sir, I do.”

“And you’ve explained all this to the young lady.”

“Yes, sir, I have.”

Wilson inhaled deeply and leaned his head back and expelled the smoke in a steady stream. Then he began coughing. Prescott started to rise but Wilson held out his hand.

“I’m all right. The doctors tell me I shouldn’t smoke but what do they know?”

The coughing subsided and Prescott wanted to move the chair away from the fire; it was too hot but he remained stationary.

“George tells me you want to escort the young lady and some of her friends back to their homeland,” Wilson said.

“Yes, sir. We can meet with General Graves in Vladivostok and from there join a contingent of Whites. At least that’s our plan, sir.”

“Prescott, it’s foolhardy. You’re asking to get yourself killed.”

“I made it through the Argonne, Mr. President. I can make it to Siberia and back.”

“I’m not so sure,” Wilson said and he breathed deeply. “Prescott, the situation in Russia is complicated. I’m sure I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know. Not only do we have troops in Vladivostok, but so do the British and the French and the Japanese. I think it’s important that Russia’s territorial rights be respected. As long as we’re there, I don’t think anybody will try to annex a part of Russia, if you follow me. General Graves has strict orders to maintain our neutrality. As a result, some of our friends are a little upset. They think he should be helping the Whites. Despite pressure, he has followed my orders to the letter. I don’t mind saying, Prescott, that your desire to go there and become involved with the Whites can compromise our neutrality.”

Wilson lifted one of the papers and motioned for Prescott to come and take it.

“It’s a letter from me to General Graves,” Wilson said. “Prescott, I don’t want to release you for this journey—you’re much too valuable to me here—but George tells me you believe this is something you must do, so I’m not going to stand in your way. I’m telling Graves to treat you with all due respect and provide whatever equipment you need for your travels in Siberia.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“You also have to understand that if the Reds capture you, they’ll consider you a spy and execute you. There won’t be anything I can do to stop them. You understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

Wilson’s face shone ashen in the lamplight. He lifted another piece of paper but it did not seem worth the effort; he let it fall on the bed.

“I’ve been hearing stories that Senator Lodge is mounting an offensive against the treaty, especially against the League,” Wilson said and he removed the glasses and rubbed the already red eyes. “You’re a military man. I don’t guess you keep up with political shenanigans.”

“Soldiers have ears, Mr. President. I’ve heard the same stories.”

“This League means a lot to me, Prescott, a whole hell of a lot. We can’t have another war like the one we just went through. There’s only so much horror that the world can endure.”

“Yes, sir.”

“If only I could make Lodge and his cronies see. Any chance you can take him to Siberia with you?”

“I’m afraid not, sir.”

The president smiled.

“No, I didn’t think so.”

There was a sharp knock and the door opened. An American nurse marched into the room and spread out her authority like a blanket. She scowled at Prescott and went immediately to the bed. She poured a dark liquid into a spoon.

“Mr. President, it’s time for your medicine.”

She thrust the spoon into his mouth and he withdrew his face in disgust. She poured another spoonful, which he accepted reluctantly.

“Don’t you have any medicine that tastes halfway decent?” he asked.

“It’s the price you pay for being sick,” she said and there was no smile.

She took a white cloth from a pocket in her apron and wiped the corners of his mouth. She frowned again at Prescott and then marched out of the room.

“Well, damn,” he said, “if that’s the price I pay for being sick, I’d better get well. You know, Prescott, when I practiced law in Georgia, I heard about your grandfather. Let’s see. What was his name? Jeffrey, Jeffrey Freeman, I believe.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Another fine soldier.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Just a different war.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Different, yet the same,” Wilson said and the drowsiness crept into his sunken eyes.

“I’d better go,” Prescott said. “Thank you for the letter, sir.”

“Just don’t get yourself killed. And hurry back. We may still be here this time next year.”

Wilson’s chin sank upon his chest and Prescott rose and walked out of the bedroom. In the anteroom George Marshall sat on a small sofa and stood when Prescott appeared.

“Well, Captain Freeman,” Marshall said, “did you get what you were hoping for?”

“Indeed I did, Captain Marshall,” Prescott said and he held up the letter. “It appears I will be going to Russia.”

“Prescott, you’re a fool. You know that, don’t you?”

“So I’ve been told.”

They went to the elevator and the operator pulled shut the brass-colored screen and door and punched the button for the street level. The elevator jerked into motion and quickly descended. Prescott and Marshall walked into the lobby, where Natasha was sitting by the winding staircase. She jumped to her feet and ran to meet them.

“Did you see the president?” she asked.

“Yes, love, I saw the president,” Prescott said.

“He’s making Prescott the vice president,” Marshall said. “That means he leaves for Washington tomorrow.”

Natasha’s eyes widened with concern and Prescott laughed.

“Don’t believe this fellow,” Prescott said.

“That’s true,” Marshall said. “He doesn’t leave till day after tomorrow.”

Marshall returned to the elevator and Prescott took Natasha’s arm and they walked into the February cold and rain.

“Damn this rain,” Prescott said.

“Is it really true you are going to Russia with me?”

“Yes, dearest, it is true. Everyone tells me I’m crazy.”

“Are you crazy?”

“Yes, I’m crazy.”

He held her tightly and they walked beneath the electric street lamps that produced pale halos in the rain. They walked slowly and he thought of many things—whether he should write to his family, whether Wilson would recover—he had seen what the influenza could do—and whether the trip would really be that dangerous. It was not as if he would be going into combat. But if there were fighting, then he would fight. He had fought before and he would fight again.

They came to their café—they had come here so many times in the past few weeks that they considered it theirs—and went inside to escape the rain. It was early; the theater patrons had not spilled onto the street. They ordered Chianti and drank in silence.

Prescott stretched his leg beneath the table in the dining room but the stiffness hung on. The doctors had told him he would always know when the weather was going to change. As Wilson suggested, though, what did doctors know? He glanced out the window, beyond the depot, and saw a large figure walking along the road out of town. Morgan Ledbetter. What has he been doing here in town this early in the morning? Of course he has a right to come into town. But he is walking as if he has been on a mission, as if he has accomplished something. What the hell has he been up to?

“Captain Prescott, more coffee?” the niece asked.

“Yes, please.”

The girl left and he turned his attention again to the road but Ledbetter had disappeared. Prescott did not think Ledbetter could walk that fast; he had simply vanished. At least he was not carrying that damn weapon.

There was nothing like a Pierce-Arrow. Thaddeus had driven a Model T often enough but the Arrow was special. Just the feel of the steering wheel in his hands gave him a sense of power.

“The only thing special about the thing is it’s expensive,” his mother had said.

But what did she know? She came from the war generation, from the Reconstruction. How could she appreciate the beauty and power of any automobile, especially one like a Pierce-Arrow? It was certainly the proper form of transportation to take him to do what he had to do. The drive into town was short, too short, so he drove up and down Main Street several times. He needed time to think. He wanted to be sure he said just the right things.

Clement Acheson’s office was upstairs in the building next to the bank and Thaddeus climbed the outside steps with great difficulty. Why the hell doesn’t he move to a ground-floor office? He can certainly afford it. Acheson opened the door and led him into his office. Acheson was a large man, larger than Taft as Thaddeus was fond of saying. The attorney sat behind his walnut desk and Thaddeus took one of the two chairs facing the desk.

“Is he going to sit in this other chair?” Thaddeus asked.

“Well, of course. I’m not going to make him stand.”

“I’ll be damned if he sits that close to me.”

Acheson breathed heavily and stood and moved the empty chair close to the bookshelves.

“Now. Is that better?” the attorney asked.

“These books are musty. You ever open a window?”

“Once a decade.”

“I believe it.”

Acheson leaned back in his black leather chair and studied his client. Thaddeus was nervous. No question about it.

“What are you so nervous about?” Acheson asked.

“I’m not nervous. I took the Arrow into town. I’m confident.”

“An automobile gives you confidence?”

“Not just any automobile. A Pierce-Arrow is not just any automobile.”

Acheson opened the folder on his desk and handed some papers to Thaddeus.

“You might want to take a look at these. I’ve put the stipulations in just as you said.”

Thaddeus adjusted the spectacles on his nose and read the papers quickly and tossed them toward the folder. Then he withdrew his pocket watch and checked the time.

“The son of a bitch is late. I should have known.”

“Give him time, Thaddeus. He’ll be here.”

“Did he say anything about bringing his own lawyer?”

“No, he said he doesn’t have a lawyer,” Acheson said. “He said he doesn’t need one.”

Thaddeus laughed and reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a check. He tossed it to the attorney.

“Put that with the papers. That’s why he doesn’t need a lawyer. All he needs is the goddamn money.”

Acheson lifted the check and examined it and placed it atop the papers. Thaddeus checked his watch again.

“Thaddeus, you two should learn to get along,” Acheson said. “You’re both old men.”

“I can still whip his ass.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. Morgan is a large man, maybe not as large as me.”

“Nobody’s as large as you except Taft.”

“Thank you, Thaddeus. Listen—I need to make something clear. I don’t care what your differences are. I don’t want any trouble in my office. And don’t remind me how much you pay me. I won’t stand for any foolishness in here. Do you understand, Thaddeus?”

Thaddeus bit his lip and gripped the chair arms tightly.

“You don’t have to lecture me like I’m a child. I’m not going to start any trouble. Save your speeches for Ledbetter.”

“There won’t be any speeches. I’m afraid the time for speeches is past.”

Thaddeus listened. The stairs were creaking. No, it was nothing. He rose and walked stiffly to the window and looked at the street below. Hardly anyone was coming into town this early. He saw a rider stop in front of the newspaper office. Prescott.

“I’ll be damned,” Thaddeus said.

“What’s the matter?” Acheson asked.

Thaddeus did not answer. His son dismounted, hitched the reins, and walked inside the office. He never understood why Prescott was close to Stokesbury. He himself did not particularly care for him but, then, he did not care for newspapermen. They were always sticking their noses where they did not belong. He was surprised this whole business with Emma Ledbetter had not been on the front page. He could not help but wonder whether Stokesbury knew. But Prescott would not discuss it. To Prescott family came first. Nothing would change that.

“When you went to Ledbetter’s place last night,” Thaddeus said, “what did he say?”

“Nothing much. I told him what you said to tell him. Be here early this morning. He didn’t even ask why. I suppose he knew.”

“You’re damn right he knew. He can smell money a mile away.”

“Well, anyway, he said he’d be here.”

“Did you see Emma?”

“No. Thaddeus, are you absolutely sure—”

“Yes, I’m sure! Don’t ask me again.”

The downstairs door opened and banged shut. A heavy weight settled on the stairs and it grew louder and pounded in Thaddeus’s head. He turned and stared at the door to Acheson’s office. The creaking of the steps stopped and he looked at the door knob. Nothing happened. Suddenly it turned and the door opened. Ledbetter stood before him.

“Good mornin’, gents,” Ledbetter’s bass voice thundered.

Ledbetter walked into the office and slammed the door behind him. Thaddeus stared at him as he would at a panther that had come down from the hills and had destroyed cattle and needed killing. Thaddeus pulled his coat tightly about him and felt the pistol tucked into his belt.

“Good morning, Morgan,” Acheson said, and the lawyer remained seated. “Why don’t both of you sit down?”

Ledbetter dropped into the chair facing the desk.

“I was sitting in that chair,” Thaddeus said.

“I don’t see your name on it,” Ledbetter said and he smiled.

Thaddeus felt the pistol in his belt and walked behind Ledbetter and took the chair next to the bookcases. Acheson did not speak immediately. He stared at the two men, first one, then the other. He looked down at the papers on his desk. He lifted the check and set it aside.

“I think we all know why we’re here.”

“Let’s get on with it,” Thaddeus said.

“Morgan, I have a check here, written by Thaddeus, made out to you, for five hundred dollars. It’s yours with certain stipulations, and those are spelled out in these papers.”

Acheson lifted a set of papers and handed them to Ledbetter.

“We can read them to you if you can’t read,” Thaddeus said.

“I can read,” Ledbetter said.

Acheson cut his eyes at Thaddeus.

“Morgan, the main stipulation, which you see spelled out in paragraph two, is that no one in your family can make any paternity claims against Galen. To put it bluntly, if you accept the check, you and your family are assuming full responsibility for the raising of Emma’s child. Paragraph four is also pretty important. It says that no one in your family, including Emma’s child, may seek a portion of Galen’s inheritance or the inheritance of his heirs.”

“It wouldn’t do him any damn good to seek it because he sure as hell wouldn’t get it,” Thaddeus said.

“That’s enough, Thaddeus,” Acheson said.

Ledbetter raised his bushy eyebrows and turned toward Thaddeus and breathed heavily and Thaddeus touched the pistol in his belt. Ledbetter was silent.

“I’ve tried to make everything in the agreement clear and straightforward,” Acheson said. “Feel free to take your time and read it. We’re in no hurry.”

“Where do I sign?” Ledbetter asked.

“On the last page above your name.”

Ledbetter set the papers on the edge of the desk and Acheson handed him a pen. The scratching of the pen on the last page echoed in the office and Ledbetter shoved the papers toward the lawyer.

“Is that all?” Ledbetter asked.

“That’s all. Here’s your check.”

Ledbetter took the check and examined it closely and smiled. Slowly he stood and faced Thaddeus.

“Tell your boy to keep his pecker in his pants and this sort of thing won’t happen again.”

The red fury rose in Thaddeus’s face; the veins in his neck throbbed; he felt the pistol in his belt and his hands trembled.

“Have a good day, Morgan,” Acheson said.

Ledbetter tipped his hat and walked out of the office and again slammed the door. He descended the stairs heavily and the footfalls grew more distant. The door on the first level opened and closed loudly. Thaddeus’s hands still trembled.

“One of these days I’m going to kill him.”

“Don’t talk like that, Thaddeus. You’re not going to do any such thing. You got what you wanted. You and Galen are free and clear.”

Thaddeus gritted his teeth.

“Yeah, free and clear.”

Prescott finished the coffee, left money on the table, and went outside. The wind had picked up and it sent a chill knifing through his body. He went to his horse and started to mount but suddenly stopped. He saw his father’s Pierce-Arrow, black and imposing, turning onto Main Street. The engine was humming smoothly; unlike so many other automobiles, the Pierce never backfired. Thaddeus sat erect behind the wheel, his eyes straight ahead. He did not see Prescott. The automobile sped down the dirt road toward Freeman’s Hill and Prescott stood beside his horse and wondered. First there was Morgan Ledbetter. Now there was his father. Something was afoot.

Clement Acheson was coming slowly down the sidewalk and despite the chill was sweating. His face was red.

“Good morning, Clement,” Prescott said.

“Morning, Prescott. I need a cup of coffee. Join me?”

“No, thanks. Just had one. I saw Morgan Ledbetter and Pa leaving town. Any idea why they were here?”

Acheson stopped outside the door to the hotel and breathed heavily. He withdrew a white kerchief and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

“Can’t say I do, Pres. Reckon it’s a coincidence.”

“Yeah, I reckon so.”

Acheson bit his lower lip and stepped inside the hotel and Prescott watched him till he disappeared. Coincidence—hardly. Acheson knew. Thaddeus was up to something and it had to do with Galen and Emma.

Prescott mounted his horse and followed the tracks of the Pierce. He heard the whistle of bobwhite in a distant field. It was a lonely call borne on the northwest wind. Then he drew the reins tight and the horse stopped. He listened to the other call. It was the shrill call of the screech owl. In the middle of the day it was not a good sign. At least that was what his grandmother had always told him.

“You hear a screech owl in the middle of the day and somebody is going to die,” she had said.

He had heard it before and his grandmother had always been right. He had heard it in France but only in his dreams and the killing had soon followed. He stared at the

barren oaks on both sides of the road and wondered which tree housed the bird. He listened but the wind was playing tricks with the shriek.

Rumbling down the dirt road was a wagon pulled by two mules, and Cass Grissom hollered “Whoa!” and the mules stopped.

“Pres Freeman! Can’t believe my eyes!”

“Hello, Cass. Merry Christmas.”

Grissom turned his black face toward the sky and listened. The screech owl had grown silent.

“I guess you heard that,” Grissom said.

“Yeah, I sure did.”

“Never like to hear that in the middle of the day. Oh well. Not a thing we can do about it, is there?”

“No, afraid not.”

“When did you get home?” Grissom asked.

“Christmas Eve.”

“What a Christmas gift for your family.”

“I don’t know about that.”

Prescott reached into his coat and pulled out a tobacco pouch and paper and offered a cigarette to Grissom but the old man declined. The wind faded long enough for Prescott to light the cigarette.

“I wish my boy had come home for Christmas,” Grissom said and he removed his dark hat and ran his fingers through the gray hair.

“I was planning to stop by your place.”

“You have word from Jonas?”

“I just wanted to tell you about the last time I saw him. It was in February. He was doing fine.”

“That’s what he wrote,” Grissom said and he put the hat back on. “He said he was doing fine. He could be doing fine here, Pres. I just don’t understand it. Why won’t he come home?”

“He likes it over there, Cass. Paris is a wonderful city.”

“I don’t want nothin’ to do with cities. Oh, they’re beautiful, all right. But they’re sinful. I’m afraid my boy is goin’ to get caught up in somethin’ bad.”

Prescott puffed the cigarette and the wind sent the smoke scurrying away. He stared at the deep furrows in Grissom’s high forehead. Grissom had always looked old to him, had always looked capable. He was a farmer everyone, even Thaddeus, came to for advice. Grissom knew a lot about rotating crops. He had cautioned Thaddeus about relying too heavily on cotton because the soil just could not take it year after year.

“Jonas can take care of himself. You did a good job raising him, Cass. You’ve got nothing to be ashamed of. Give him some time. Jonas just has to find his way. No one can do it for him.”

“I just hope that screech owl ain’t callin’ his name.”

Grissom urged the mules onward. At first they did not want to move but he cracked the reins across their backs and they started forward. Prescott turned in the saddle and observed the old black man, his body bent against the wind.

A wall of thick gray clouds was building in the west and hanging low over the hills. Prescott neared the cemetery and saw the Pierce-Arrow parked at the side of the

road. Thaddeus was standing at the family plot and did not hear his son approaching. Prescott dismounted and cleared his throat. Thaddeus turned around.

“Pa, you all right?”

“Yeah, I’m fine, Pres. Sometimes I just need to stop here and have a little chat with your mother.”

“I saw you leaving town.”

“I had some business that needed taking care of.”

“It must have been pretty important.”

“It was. But it’s all taken care of now. Nothing else to worry about.”

Prescott nodded and returned to his horse. He mounted and Thaddeus stood facing the monument. The wind shook the naked branches of the oaks and hickories and the screech owl shrieked again.

The wind shot across the pastures and open fields and the clouds grew thicker and more numerous. The air was cold and moist and the first flakes of snow, small like pinpoints of white light, began to fall. At first it did not even look like snow but then the flakes became bigger and fluffier. He rode slowly past farmhouses and the bird dogs and hounds stood on the front porches and barked. He liked the snow. It was better than the rain.

Patton raised his glass of Chianti and the other officers joined in. The fire in the black stove burned hot but Prescott was still wet and cold. It would never stop raining.

“Here’s to Russia,” Patton said loudly. “May God protect her now that Prescott Freeman is about to invade!”

“I’ll drink to that,” Marshall said.

Truman’s glass remained on the round table.

“You be careful,” Truman said. “That girl will get you killed.”

“Don’t worry, Harry,” Patton said. “He’ll be careful. Look what he did to the goddamn Germans. God, I wish I could have been there, Pres! I wish I could have seen it.”

“Harry, why don’t you play us something?” Prescott asked.

Truman looked around and saw the old grand tucked in a far corner of the café. He adjusted the rimless spectacles on his nose, stood, and walked briskly to the bench and sat. Then his fingers were moving briskly across the keys and the café was alive with a waltz. Patrons at the other tables stopped drinking and talking and listened to the music flow as powerfully as the Danube itself. Truman finished and bowed to the applause.

“You know, Harry, that’s what you should do,” Marshall said. “When you get back to Missouri, you need to become a musician.”

“Hell, he’s going to do whatever this Bess woman tells him to do,” Patton growled and he poured another glass.

“What are you going to do?” Prescott asked.

“Don’t know for sure,” Truman said. “I’ve given some thought to a haberdashery.”

“No, that’s no good,” Patton said. “Selling clothes? That’s not for you, Harry. Why don’t you stay in the army? You’re a damn good officer. That’s what the rest of us are going to do—right? George, Prescott?”

“Yeah, I’m staying in,” Marshall said.

They stared at Prescott.

“Well, Pres?” Patton asked. “You’re not planning to stay in Russia the rest of your life, are you? I mean—when you get back, you’re going to stay in the army. Right?”

“I’m like Harry. I don’t know for sure. My pa is expecting me to help with the business.”

“Hell, the business will be there forever,” Patton said. “There are wars to be fought, gentlemen. And we’re the ones to fight them.”

Prescott lowered his glass and set it gently on the table and heard the screams of his men in the forest and felt the earth explode beneath him. Patton wanted to be there. Yes, he should have been there.

“I think I’ve fought enough,” Prescott said.

“You think you’re going to escape fighting in Russia?” Patton said. “You think the Whites and Reds are really good friends just having a little disagreement? No, sir. It’s not that way at all. And you’re going to be right in the middle of it. Not a good spot for a man who has fought enough.”

“Although I hate to admit it, Patton is right,” Truman said. “It’s going to be dangerous. You may have no choice—you may have to fight.”

Prescott lifted the glass and downed the drink. The warmth sank smoothly.

“Well, damn, if I have to, then I will.”

Prescott left the officers and walked in the rain to Natasha's apartment. Her father sat beside the fire and read a Russian-language newspaper and did not speak; he only nodded his head in greeting. Natasha led him to the sofa near the window in the parlor. The fire danced in her eyes and her face was flushed.

"You've been standing too close to the fire," Prescott said.

"No, I'm just excited, darling. I've been making a list of the things I must take."

She held a piece of white paper before him and he took it. She had written it in French, so he was able to read it.

"This is not a vacation," he said. "You won't need this many dresses. We must travel light."

Disappointment clouded her face and she took the list back.

"Pres, you must remember. I am a princess."

"I remember. The Reds do not."

She nodded and tore the paper in half. He had noticed that the list did not include weapons. No matter. He would take care of those.

They left the apartment and wandered the sidewalks. The rain was now only a light mist and her face still glowed red in the pale lamplight. The streets were crowded and taxis frequently stopped and the drivers offered a lift but they wanted to walk. He held her close to him and he felt the breathing of her body through her coat. He was crazy to agree to this. Everyone was telling him so and now he was joining in the chorus. He should not put her life in such danger but he could not refuse her request.

Outside the opera house the patrons were emerging. Many officers and their ladies descended the steps but only one spoke his name.

“Pres, I can’t believe I’m running into you,” a young lieutenant said and he came down the steps with a lady holding firmly onto his left arm.

“Jonas, where have you been?” Prescott asked. “I’ve looked around but nobody knew where you were.”

“Out in the countryside. I ain’t the war hero you are. They’re just now letting me come into the city for some relaxation. I want you to meet Mademoiselle Mathilde Cavalier.”

“*Bon jour*,” Prescott said. “This is Natasha Kamorov. Natasha, this is Jonas Grissom from my hometown.”

“What is that on your shoulder?” Natasha asked.

“That’s a black buffalo,” Jonas Grissom said. “I’m in the 92nd, the meanest division in all of France. Pres here will tell you he’s the best shot in Bartow County. But don’t believe it. I am. Pres, I got great news. I’m mustering out next week.”

“Congratulations, Jonas. Your pa will be happy to hear it.”

“I ain’t going home,” Jonas Grissom said and he turned toward the woman beside him. “Me and Mathilde have got things to do.”

“I’m sure Cass is expecting—”

“Why the hell should I go back to Georgia?” Jonas Grissom asked and Mathilde Cavalier released her grip. “I mean—what is there for me? I need to see a little bit of the world. Paris is a great place to start. Wouldn’t you agree, Miss Kamorov?”

“Yes, certainly.”

“I’ll write a letter to Pa. I ain’t too good with letters, though. Pres, when you go home, maybe you can explain it to him.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Prescott said.

Jonas Grissom and Mathilde Cavalier walked down the sidewalk and disappeared in the mist. Prescott watched them.

“He is a nice man,” Natasha said. “I would like to ask him questions about you when you were young.”

“You can ask me.”

“But I am sure he will tell the truth.”

“Let’s go to the café. I need another drink.”

The wind blew the snow into his face and he saw the streaks of white lining the ditch at the side of the road. He kept Stokesbury’s manuscript tucked tightly inside his coat where it would remain dry. The snow swirled around the tops of the barren oaks and flew past the pines but it felt good. He had felt the snow before. There had been too much rain. The snow was welcome.

He decided not to return to Freeman’s Hill; instead, he urged the mare toward the Etowah. He remembered when he was a boy and he watched the snows of January and February sliding from the gray skies and becoming lost in the swift river. The road was becoming slippery and twice the mare stumbled but she regained her footing and he rode across the barren field where snow was clinging to the undergrowth. He came upon a grassy rise and looked down at the river. Above the pines and hickories on the far side of the bend dark smoke rose, did battle with the wind and became one with the grayness. He followed the river toward the bend, where the muddy water dropped suddenly against

gray granite boulders and dissolved into a pool. That is where the trout are, he said to himself. Beyond the pool the river regained its energy and plunged south toward the Allatoona foothills.

The smoke was rising from the lone chimney of a small cabin hidden in the woods only a hundred yards or so from the river. Verlon Freeman, his uncle, lived here. Verlon was older than Thaddeus, taller and leaner. Prescott tied the reins to a low-hanging, snow-covered branch near the small front porch. Verlon was standing at the open door and smoking a pipe.

“So you decided to come see your old uncle,” Verlon said and grinned.

“Hello, Uncle Verlon. You knew I was back home?”

“Hell yes. Even though I’m something of a hermit, I hear things. Come on in. The snow ain’t letting up.”

Prescott climbed the two wooden steps and walked into the room. It was not a large room but it was big enough to serve as a sitting room, bedroom, and kitchen. He pulled off his wet coat, laid the manuscript on a small table, and sat in a rocking chair close to the fire. Verlon sat on the white iron bed and puffed on the pipe.

“Snow came a little early this year,” Verlon said. “Caught me by surprise.”

“Nothing catches you by surprise.”

Verlon smiled and released the pipe smoke into the air. The fragrance was sweet and Prescott remembered that fragrance from the days of his youth when he and his uncle would go fishing in the river.

“How’s your pa?” Verlon asked.

“All right.”

“And your grandma?”

“She’s doing fine. I thought you might have come over for Christmas dinner.”

“Naw. I ain’t much for family gatherings. Never have been. I know it must have been tough—your ma not being there this year.”

“Yes, it was.”

“Your ma was a fine woman, the finest I reckon I ever knew,” Verlon said and he lowered his face toward the floor.

The fire crackled in the fireplace but Prescott felt little warmth. He looked around the room and saw fishing poles standing in one corner. In another corner stood two shotguns.

“Did you go hunting yesterday?” Verlon asked.

“Yes.”

“I thought so. I heard the guns. Must have had luck.”

“I sure can’t complain. Uncle Verlon, how’ve you been getting along?”

Verlon removed the pipe from his mouth and knocked the bowl onto the brick hearth and emptied the dark tobacco. Then he removed a pouch from his coat and refilled the bowl and struck a match and lit it. He breathed deeply until the bowl was glowing red once again.

“I’m getting to be an old man, Pres. Not as quick on my feet anymore.”

“You’re not old.”

Verlon grinned.

“Yeah, afraid so. Old enough. I read about you in the paper. You acquitted yourself well, I’d say.”

“I didn’t think about it at the time.”

“There’s no time to think.”

“You’re right. No time to think. You just have to act.”

The wind howled around the corner of the cabin and Prescott thought for a moment the walls were shaking. He remembered the summer days of his youth when he and his uncle sat on the cool wood floor and sorted through the fishing tackle. Verlon was particular. He had to be sure he had so many hooks of different sizes and so many lead weights and so many cork floats. The interior of his cabin was usually in disarray but his tackle box was always in perfect order. Prescott remembered those days along the Etowah and Two-Run Creek when the heat was a smothering blanket and the water was cold and refreshing. He and his uncle fished until the fish stopped biting and then they swam in the cold current and felt their bodies swept along into the shallows. In those days Prescott heard about war, about the invasion, about all that was lost and all that was gained. He never imagined himself in a war also.

Prescott studied his uncle. Verlon and Thaddeus had not spoken to each other in twenty years.

“What are those papers on the table?” Verlon asked.

“A book manuscript. Something Marcus Stokesbury is working on.”

“Old Marcus is writing a book?”

“Yes. Marcus is full of surprises. Did you know he had been out West?”

“I did. But he never talked about it. Never could figure it out. Seemed like he was keeping a deep dark secret, so I quit asking.”

“Well, now he’s writing about it.”

Verlon shook his head and listened to the wind. Prescott rolled a cigarette and lit it and the two men sat and listened to the howling of the wind and smoked. Then there was a pawing at the door and Verlon rose and opened it. Colonel, a bluetick hound, rushed in and shook himself in front of the fire. Verlon returned to the iron bed and sat.

“Colonel, what do you think about the snow?” Prescott asked and he ran his hand along the wet fur on the dog’s back. “Can he still tree a possum?”

“You bet. He’s still the best huntin’ dog in Bartow County. I’m just too slow to keep up with him now. Anytime you want to take him out for some hunting, feel free to. He’d love the companionship of a young hunter.”

“Thanks, Uncle Verlon. I don’t know how much longer I’m going to stay.”

Verlon rubbed the gray stubble on his chin.

“You ain’t staying?”

“I haven’t decided.”

“Well, if you leave, I can’t say I blame you. Too much shit is going on—if you’ll pardon my French. Of course, you’ve been in France, so you know how they talk.”

“I guess you’re referring to—”

“That mess with Galen. Yeah, I know all about it. My guess is the whole damn town knows about it but your pa thinks he’s keeping it quiet. I’m not going to say anything against your pa—at least not in your presence. I’m sure he’s doing what he thinks is right.”

“I think he’s wrong this time,” Prescott said and he flipped the cigarette into the fireplace.

The hound stretched out in front of the hearth and Prescott leaned back in the chair. He closed his eyes. The wind died quickly and then just as quickly was rushing against the cabin once again. He opened his eyes. The hound was already asleep.

“Your pa is a hard man to reason with,” Verlon said. “Morgan Ledbetter ain’t no better. I’ve always said those two are going to kill themselves some day.”

“Let’s hope you’re wrong. Verlon, you ever get lonesome living here all by yourself?”

“I’m not living here by myself. I’ve got Colonel. And he don’t complain too much. When he does, I just ignore him.”

Prescott glanced out the one window. The snow had almost stopped.

“I’d better be going. I just wanted to say—”

“Either hello or good-bye. Somehow I think it’s good-bye. Something tells me you ain’t staying around. You’ve got something pulling you away from here. A war does that to a fellow. He sees there’s a whole other world out there, one you’ve maybe read about, maybe heard about, but you’ve never seen it. Reading about it and hearing about it ain’t the same as seeing it. Once you see it, it makes it damn tough to hang around in the old places. Am I right?”

“It’s good to see you, Uncle Verlon. Take care.”

“Don’t mind me, Pres. You’re the one who needs to take care.”

Prescott tucked the manuscript inside his coat and went outside and climbed on top of the mare. The wind was blowing the snow off the roof of the cabin and he backed the horse away and turned and left. The trees glistened in the grayness and the fields lay quiet in the whiteness. He looked over his shoulder one last time at the cabin.

Prescott rode slowly and the old stories swirled like the snow-laden northwest wind in his mind. He had never heard the countryside so quiet. Not even a dog was barking. He rode through the Iron Hill community, past the small farms. He saw the McLaren place. Thaddeus held the mortgage on the farm and all its equipment.

“Jeb McLaren isn’t much of a farmer,” Thaddeus said before Prescott left for war. “If he ends up losing the place, it’s just as well. That’s good land. It needs to be worked by someone who knows what he’s doing.”

Prescott rolled another cigarette. The wind reddened his face but the cigarette somehow lessened the sting. The horse stepped through the snow and followed the road it knew so well. Prescott returned home.

Galen pulled the cap low on his ears and stumbled across the snow-covered fields. No one had seen him leave. His grandmother was lying down in her bedroom and Thaddeus had locked himself in his study. Thaddeus had mumbled that he did not want to be disturbed. Then he had slammed the door shut and the lock had clicked. Galen knew that Thaddeus had accomplished what he had set out to do. Galen knew that his father had left early in the morning. And now he was locked in his study. By now he had poured himself a bourbon. He had probably toasted himself for his cleverness in the face of disaster.

The wind pushed against Galen but he kept walking through the snow, up one hill and then up another. When he reached the top, he stopped and looked at the tracks behind

him. The snow was coming down heavy now and soon the tracks would be covered. That is good, he said to himself, and he continued his journey.

Organ music was coming from the Hearstwood place and he listened. At first he thought the wind was rustling strange sounds out of the woods but the hymn became more distinct. Then he heard old man Hearstwood's bass voice singing "Onward, Christian Soldiers." Galen stopped and listened and remembered Sunday mornings in the red brick Baptist church. The Freemans always sat midway to the right. The Ledbetters sat in the back to the left—that is, the Ledbetters minus Morgan, who never came. Galen remembered the Sunday almost two years ago when he saw Emma. He had known her all her life but he had never really seen her until that morning. There was something about the sunlight sprinkling through the stained glass windows and settling softly on her face. During the sermon he kept looking over his shoulder and she pretended not to notice but she did. She smiled.

After the service he found her beside the Ledbetter buggy.

"My pa don't cotton none to Freemans," she said.

"I'm not wanting to take your pa to the carnival in Rome, so I don't care what your pa thinks."

"I've always been partial to a good fair."

"A fair's no good if you're not with the right man."

"You look like a boy, Galen Freeman. Are you telling me you're a man now?"

"I'm telling you, Emma, that I'm the right man."

He helped her into the buggy. Her brothers and mother were suddenly behind him. He knew without turning.

“Wasn’t that a wonderful sermon?” he asked and he tipped his hat to the old lady.

The snow was falling so heavily that he could hardly see the field in front of him. It’s not that much farther, he kept telling himself. The organ music was behind him now and the words to the hymn were a distant memory, locked somewhere in the sanctuary on a warm spring morning when his eyes told her that he loved her and that he did not care what the Freemans and the Ledbetters thought.

He was a man, he said to himself in the snow, and he laughed out loud. A man! And the tears trickled from his eyes and he wiped them before they froze on his skin. He climbed the last hill and stood in the snow and the wind and looked into the valley at the Ledbetter place. The smoke was rising slow and dark from the rock chimney. The roof was completely white. He saw no one.

But she is there, Galen told himself. The afternoon was becoming dark. He felt even colder. He remained on the top of the hill and remembered the spring. Galen stared at the house and did not move.

CHAPTER 11

In the late afternoon the rain came. It was a cold rain, colder than the rain Prescott found in France. The wind tunneled through the mountain passes of northwest Georgia and blew the rain across the cotton fields and corn fields. Brown stalks stood shriveled like old men revisiting the battlefields where they fought in their youth. Darkness was falling with the rain and he felt the throbbing pain in his leg. He should be home. But he did not hurry.

The rain battered the snow on the ground. The snow lost its whiteness but only for a while because the rain slackened and became sleet that pelted Prescott in the face and then became snow again. Prescott pulled gently on the reins and the mare halted. He looked to his left at the old cemetery which was becoming white once more. He saw the hill rising sharply where the Confederate soldiers were buried. In the silence of the snow he could hear them. They were shouting, they were crying, they were gasping. Prescott stared at the Confederate graves and heard the soldiers' voices but the voices came from the Argonne.

He looked to his right and saw the Miller place. It was a small white clapboard farmhouse that sat far from the road. A single candle flickered in the front window. The Millers had also sent a son to France—Bertram. Everybody called him Bert. He was missing in the forest that claimed so many. The snow quickly covered the barren field that led up to the house. Prescott listened. There was still only silence.

His cries awakened him and Natasha's fingers were softly touching his lips. He trembled. The fire was only a mound of glowing embers and he rose from the bed and tossed another log onto the grate and the sparks and embers flew skyward. He returned to the bed.

"Was it the same dream?" she asked.

"It is always the same dream."

He closed his eyes and she wrapped her slender arms around him.

"Can I help?"

"No. I wish you could."

"I will hold you so tight that the dreams cannot grab hold of you," she said.

"Are you that strong?"

"I am that strong. I am a princess. Must I keep reminding you? I have power."

He turned toward her and kissed her lips.

"Now I have tasted power," he said. "Perhaps I can fight off the dreams."

"As long as I am with you," she said and she lay her head on his shoulders.

The hotel room was dark and the fire cast dark shadows of the chairs against the wall. He breathed deeply and the scent of her perfume took him from the room to Russia and again he trembled.

"Love, you are cold," she said.

"No, I am all right."

"Then the dream must have been really awful."

"It was not good."

"You did not die in the dream, did you?"

“Why do you ask?”

“That is the worst kind,” she said. “You must never die in your dream.”

“I will remember.”

“Mrs. Captain Prescott Freeman. I like the sound. Will your family like me?”

“They will love you.”

The ceremony had been small. Wilson had insisted on attending. Prescott did not know an Eastern Orthodox priest but he knew an army chaplain who was Methodist. They stood in the vastness of the cathedral and the words reverberated against the walls and the stained glass windows. Truman was his best man.

“I pronounce you husband and wife,” Major Carlson, the chaplain, said.

Prescott kissed her and then saw her family in the front pew. The mother was crying but the father was expressionless. The old man had objected to the wedding. Wilson hosted the reception in a small room in his hotel. The president looked pale and weak but he could not be dissuaded.

“I’m going to do this,” Wilson said. “Who knows? I may be laying the groundwork for new relations between the United States and Russia.”

“Congratulations, Freeman,” Patton said in the small hotel banquet room and he lifted a glass of champagne. “I’m sure you and Mrs. Freeman will remain in France now, so I think you should let me escort your wife’s friends back to Russia. I could do with a little more fighting.”

“Natasha is still going,” Prescott said.

“Are you serious? Now that you two are married, you need to hang around here till you go back home.”

“She is adamant.”

“Pres, when Bess and I tie the knot, I want you and Natasha there,” Truman said.

“She’ll be a big hit in Missouri.”

“I can see the headline in the *Star* now,” Marshall said. “Wedding attended by Russian royalty.”

“Are you a prince now?” Patton asked.

“Of course he is,” Marshall said.

“That means he will always outrank you,” Truman said.

“Does she have a sister?” Patton asked.

“Prescott, I’d like to talk to you and Natasha a moment,” Wilson said.

Prescott and Natasha followed the president to a corner of the room. The president handed them a box wrapped in plain brown paper.

“I’m sorry about the paper,” Wilson said. “I asked Marshall to find some paper and that’s what he came up with. When it comes to things like this, I’m lost without Mrs. Wilson. Anyway, open it.”

Natasha ripped the paper and opened the box. She withdrew a crystal vase.

“Mr. President, it is beautiful,” she said.

“Thank you so much,” Prescott said.

“You two are the flowers of the future,” the president said. “I thought a vase would be appropriate. I like symbolism, you know. Don’t tell Patton what I said. He’ll make fun of me and have the whole army laughing behind my back. Worse yet, he’ll tell Lodge. Listen, this may not be the most opportune time, but I wish I could say something to make you stay here.”

“Mr. President, you should see the flowers in Siberia in late spring,” she said.

“The snow melts away and the blooms make you forget that winter ever existed.”

“Not everyone gets to take a wedding trip to Siberia,” Natasha said as they lay in each other’s arms.

“Yes, I really feel lucky.”

“Patton thinks you are a prince. Prince Prescott.”

“It sounds like the name of tobacco.”

The back log in the fireplace rolled over and the fire hissed and sent more sparks scurrying up the chimney. Prescott lay close to her and could not believe he was married—to the most beautiful woman he had ever known, and he had known her only a short time. And he was about to take her from the safety of Paris to. . . . To what? He closed his eyes and smelled the freshness of her hair. He never wanted to forget that fragrance. No matter what happened, he never wanted to forget.

Prescott rode slowly up the hill and the snow continued to fall in the darkness of late afternoon. Lights glowed in the windows of every room in the house. Perhaps they would be having dinner and he realized he was hungry. He rode to the stables, where he removed the bridle, saddle, and saddle blanket. He brushed the mare and then fed her oats.

“I bet you’re hungry, old girl, just like me,” he said.

He noticed Henry’s horse in one of the stalls. It would not be much longer till he and Mandy married. Prescott was certain of that. Outside the wind was howling and the

snow was coming down even heavier. He lowered his head, kept his arm firmly against the manuscript inside his coat, and walked from the stables to the house. The entrance hall was quiet. All the voices were coming from the dining room.

“Well, it’s about time you showed up,” Sam said.

They were sitting at the table. Thaddeus hardly looked up.

“Where’s Galen?” William asked. “We thought he might be with you.”

“No, he’s not with me,” Prescott said and he removed his coat and laid the manuscript on the long bench where he sat.

“Well, I wonder where he could be,” Grandma Freeman said. “Thaddeus, did he say anything to you?”

“No, he said nothing to me,” Thaddeus said and he sliced through the ham on his plate.

“Henry, how are you doing?” Prescott asked. “You’re becoming a regular fixture around here.”

The red-haired boy sat next to Mandy opposite Prescott.

“Pres, will you be ready to pitch in the spring?” Henry asked.

“I don’t know. I haven’t thought about it.”

“Of course he’ll be ready to pitch in the spring,” William said. “Now that you’re out of the army, you’ll be ready, won’t you, Pres?”

Prescott looked up from his plate. They were all staring at him.

“I mean—that Rome bunch swept us last year,” Henry said. “They had a big old time. You should have seen them, Pres. Laughing, carrying on. We needed a pitcher who could sit them down at the plate. Man, I’m glad you’re out of the army.”

“Pres, you are out of the army, aren’t you?” Mandy asked.

“Actually, I still am in the army,” Prescott said.

“I figured you mustered out in France,” William said.

“No big deal,” Sam said. “You can muster out here. Maybe we can have a mustering out party.”

“You are mustering out, aren’t you?” Mandy asked.

Prescott looked at her face. The lines in her forehead deepened.

“Yes, he’s staying here,” Thaddeus said. “Stop asking him these ridiculous questions. He’s got a business head on his shoulders, unlike some of you.”

“Merry Christmas to you, too,” Grandma Freeman said. “Right now I’m concerned about Galen. This is no night to be out. Pres, where do you think he might be?”

“I really don’t know, Grandma. After I eat, I’ll go out looking for him.”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort,” Thaddeus said. “Galen is a grown man. He knows how to take care of himself.”

“He might be hurt,” Mandy said. “It’s terribly cold out there.”

Thaddeus bit down hard on the ham. Mandy understood. She lowered her head.

“What are those papers you brought?” Sam asked.

“Something Marcus Stokesbury has written,” Prescott said.

“Is it a novel?” Mandy asked.

“No, it’s more like a memoir.”

“I thought you had to have a remarkable life in order to justify writing a memoir,” Thaddeus said.

“Marcus has led an interesting life,” Grandma Freeman said. “I’m sure he has. He’s probably done things we don’t even know about. Isn’t that true, Pres?”

“Yes, ma’am, it certainly is.”

Prescott covered his plate with ham, mashed potatoes, turnip greens, and cornbread. The flames in the fireplace were dwindling and the room was growing cold. Outside the wind was still careening around the corners of the house. Grandma Freeman shivered.

“Sam, aren’t you supposed to be in charge of the fire?” she asked.

“I’m sorry.”

Sam jumped up from the table and lifted a large log from the log box and tossed it in the fireplace.

“I’ve gotten word the government is going to get rid of some of the ships the navy has,” Thaddeus said. “There may be an opportunity.”

“Pa, you’re not going into shipping, are you?” William asked.

“Maybe. Why not? Of course, we can always dismantle the ships and do something with the metal.”

“That’d be a whole lot of metal, Pa,” William said.

“So it would require a whole lot of imagination. Pres, that’s where you come in. That’s something you can look into.”

Prescott raised the fork to his mouth but halted and then lowered it. He looked at the end of the table. His grandmother was observing him.

“Prescott would rather play baseball,” Henry said.

“Henry, you’re not a member of this family yet,” Thaddeus said. “Until you are, business discussions are off limits.”

“Pa, that’s rude,” Mandy said.

“Your father is just being your father,” Grandma Freeman said. “Henry, your opinions are always welcome.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Freeman.”

Prescott finished his dinner but remained at the table. The others, except his grandmother, rose and went down the hall to the living room. The flames in the fireplace were rising higher and crackling and spreading warmth. He lifted his cup of coffee and drank and heard the door to his father’s study close.

“I probably should go looking for Galen,” Prescott said.

“No, your father is right. Galen will be fine. Never mind me. I’m just an old woman who worries too much about her grandbabies. Besides, where would you look? He could be anywhere. Or he might not be here at all. He might have gotten on board the southbound.”

Prescott nodded his head and drank more coffee. Then he reached into his shirt pocket for tobacco and paper.

“Your mother never wanted you to smoke,” Grandma Freeman said.

“She never wanted me to kill people either.”

He rolled the cigarette and struck a match on the underside of the table. He inhaled deeply and sent a ring of smoke into the air.

“You’re not staying, are you?” Grandma Freeman asked.

“I don’t see how I can.”

“It was always difficult to keep your grandfather here on the farm. I mean, he loved it here on the Hill. No question about it. In the mornings, especially in the spring, he’d walk out on the porch and take a deep breath and smile the biggest smile you’ve even seen. But those spring mornings weren’t enough. He’d have to travel—to Atlanta, even to Washington. And, of course, there was that trip out West. He traveled mighty far to kill a man. When I looked at your grandfather, I never could envision someone who had killed. When I look at you, I feel the same way.”

He lowered his head. He started to lift the cup but he returned it to the saucer.

“There was always something pulling at your grandfather to take him away,” she said. “There’s something pulling you. And I think I know what it is—or, rather, who it is. A young lady. Am I right? What is her name?”

Prescott looked up. His grandmother was smiling.

“What makes you think—”

“Oh, you can’t fool me, Prescott Freeman. No Freeman has ever fooled me. Now tell me about her.”

He crushed the cigarette in his plate and looked away from his grandmother to the fireplace. The logs shifted and the flames leaped higher. From the parlor Mandy’s laughter erupted and then there was silence.

“She’s not just any young lady, Grandma. She’s my wife.”

“Your wife! Prescott, you’re married! Why—where is she? Why didn’t you bring her home for Christmas?”

“Not so loud, Grandma.”

“You don’t want the others to know?”

“Not now.”

“Prescott, why? Where is she?”

“I—I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know? Prescott, you don’t know where your wife is? I’m totally confused.”

“She’s in Russia,” he said. “As far as I know, in eastern Russia.”

“In Russia? How can she be in Russia? Surely you didn’t meet in Russia. I mean—you haven’t been to Russia. You’ve been in Paris all this time. You haven’t been to Russia. Have you, Pres?”

Prescott stood and walked from the table to the fireplace. The wound in his leg was throbbing and he raised his boot onto the rough hearth. The warmth was like a quickly absorbed medicine and he breathed deeply. His grandmother continued to stare at him. She waited for an answer.

“I have been to Russia,” he said.

“I—I don’t understand.”

“I have not been in Paris all this time. I have been to Russia. My wife is still there.”

His clothes grew hot in front of the fire and he lowered his boot. He lifted the black poker and plunged it into the stack of logs. The fire hissed and the flames leaped higher.

CHAPTER 12

Emma writhed on the bed. Her head turned quickly from side to side and her mother lay the cold wet cloth on her forehead. Morgan Ledbetter stood in the darkness, implacable, unyielding. Behind him his sons sat at the table. They stared at the back of their father but they said nothing. Emma moaned and her mother rose and went to Morgan.

“You’d better send one of the boys to get the doc,” she said.

“Is it that bad?”

“You got eyes, don’t you?”

“Could be somethin’ she ate.”

“Damn you, Morgan. That girl’s dyin’, and you ain’t got sense enough to see it.”

Morgan pushed Myrtle aside and stepped to the side of the bed and looked down on his daughter. She opened her eyes and did not see him. She looked at the blackness beyond the window.

“Galen, Galen!”

Myrtle rushed to her side.

“What is it, honey?”

“Galen, Galen! It’s Galen, Momma.”

“No, honey. Galen isn’t here.”

“Yes, Momma, it’s Galen. I know it. I seed him. Oh, Momma!”

Emma moaned and Myrtle rose furiously into Morgan’s face.

“Send for the doc. And send for that preacher fellow. The Baptist one.”

“The Freemans go to the Baptist church. I’ll be damned if I send for their preacher.”

“If’n you don’t, I’ll go myself. You hear me, Morgan Ledbetter?”

He wrapped his thumbs around the strap of his overalls and he turned and walked into the other room where his sons waited and wondered.

“Josiah, I want you to go fetch the doc,” Morgan said.

“Pa, is Emma—is she—I mean—is she going—to—”

“Don’t ask any of your damn foolish questions. Your ma says Emma needs the doc, so go find him. Don’t come back without him. You understand?”

Josiah nodded.

“Stephen, you know where that Baptist preacher fellow lives?”

“Yes, Pa.”

“Go get him.”

Josiah and Stephen stood and put on their coats. They left but Morgan did not see them. He was already returning to Emma’s bedside. He heard the door slam. Myrtle wiped the perspiration from Emma’s forehead. In the dim yellow light of the kerosene lamp the perspiration shone bright.

“Galen, Galen!” Emma shrieked.

She rose suddenly and Myrtle grabbed her shoulders.

“Lay back down now, honey,” the mother said. “Don’t be stirrin’ ’round.”

Emma stared at the window and smiled.

“It’s Galen. He’s come for me. I told you he would.”

“Yes, honey.”

“He loves me. He loves the baby.”

Myrtle began to cry and Morgan looked away.

“Damn Freeman,” he mumbled. “If this here girl dies, I’m gonna kill him!”

“Shut your mouth, Morgan,” Myrtle said.

“I wasn’t speaking to you.”

“I heerd you. And I ain’t gonna stand for that kind of talk at a time like this.

Maybe we should go get Galen. He’d want to know.”

“No!” Morgan said.

His whole body trembled in the dim lamplight.

Verlon stood on the porch and drew deep puffs on the pipe and listened to the wind whistling past the oaks and hickories. The hound sat at his feet as if waiting to go on a hunt. The snow continued to fall and he admired the white blanket that stretched from the steps to the edge of the forest. Deep within the woods a screech owl cried and Verlon cringed.

“Colonel, that’s a sound I hate to hear. What about you, boy? If I knew where that old screech owl was, I’d get my gun and we’d go kill it. Well, we don’t know, so we’d best be getting’ back inside.”

They went into the cabin and he sat on the edge of the bed. He had left the door of the stove open and only the red glow of the fire lit up the room. Colonel curled up on a dingy, torn blanket not far from the stove. Verlon refilled the bowl of the pipe and struck

a match on the sole of his boot. It was good of Prescott to come visiting. Thaddeus would have objected but one good thing about Prescott was that he was going to do what he wanted to do no matter what Thaddeus thought. Verlon grinned.

Verlon wondered what his brother looked like these days. He had heard he was stooped over a bit. No doubt the result of sitting hunched over all those financial books—credits and debits, debits and credits. Thaddeus must have been around when the first dollar was minted. He and money had a special kinship. Well, he could not sit here and fault him for making money. It must be a gift and Thaddeus knew how to develop it. But, damn, making money sure as hell came with a steep price, but Thaddeus had not paid it. Other folks had.

The October chill of late afternoon settled in the valley of the Etowah but Verlon did not notice. He walked quickly along the dusty road that climbed the hill where their tree overlooked the river. It had been their tree for many years. It was an oak, big and full. He had climbed it as a boy. Abigail never would.

“You be careful, Verlon Freeman,” she had said.

She would look up at him and shake her head.

“Come on up.”

“I’m not climbing that tree. And you shouldn’t either. You’ll fall.”

“I ain’t never fallen, have I?”

“There’s a first time, ain’t there?”

By the time he reached the crest of the hill darkness was spreading across the valley and the Etowah flowed dark in the twilight. Across the western sky streaks of thin clouds burned a deep orange. He saw her at the foot of the tree but she was not alone. Verlon drew closer and stopped. Thaddeus confronted him.

“Hello, brother,” Thaddeus said.

“What are you doing here?”

“Verlon, we have to talk,” Abigail said.

“Well, I reckon we do.”

“I’ll make it short, Verlon,” Thaddeus said. “Abigail and I are going to be married.”

Verlon looked sharply at Abigail.

“What the hell’s he talkin’ about, Abigail?”

“I’m doing the talking, Verlon,” Thaddeus said.

“You can do the talkin’ when I ask you a damn question. Abigail, what’s all this about?”

She lowered and shook her head.

“There’s nothing to say,” she said.

Verlon brushed past Thaddeus and walked up to Abigail. Still, she kept her head lowered. In a field on the other side of the river doves were cooing the end of the day. Thaddeus turned and stood beside Abigail. Verlon raised his hand and pointed at the heart, awkwardly carved in the bark of the oak. In the darkness it was hardly visible. He pointed to the VF + AS.

“You remember that, Abigail?”

“That’s what children do,” Thaddeus said. “Abigail is a grown woman.”

“Abigail, I’m speakin’ to you,” Verlon said. “You remember that day? We made promises, right here, beneath this tree. Don’t you remember?”

The young woman looked away. Verlon touched her arm. The sky lost its orange and a sliver of moon became visible. At the foot of the hill the Etowah sloshed and scurried past them on its way to the foothills. Verlon’s hand climbed up her arm to her shoulder and she cried.

“Abigail, won’t you talk to me?” Verlon asked. “Sweetheart, I’m beggin’ you. Tell me this is not happening.”

“I can’t,” she said. “I’m going to marry Thaddeus.”

“But you don’t love him.”

“Of course she does,” Thaddeus said. “Verlon, there’s something you just don’t understand. You never have. You never will. Abigail wants a man who’s going to amount to something, somebody who doesn’t spend every spare minute off in the woods hunting or fishing. Haven’t you heard? We’re living in the age of business. There’s money to be made—a lot of money—but damn, Verlon, you have to work to get it. Chasing a quail or a catfish isn’t going to put money in your pocket. Like I said, you don’t understand. I understand and Abigail understands.”

“Goddamn you,” Verlon said. “Goddamn both of you!”

“Verlon, don’t!” Abigail said and she lifted her tear-streaked face toward his.

“This is just how it’s worked out. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You don’t want to hurt me? Then why are you doing this?”

“I’ve told you,” Thaddeus said. “She wants to marry me. She wants to marry a man with a business head on his shoulders.”

“You don’t love him, Abigail. You haven’t said it.”

“All right. I love him. There. I said it.”

Thaddeus was smiling.

“Don’t take it so hard,” Thaddeus said.

Verlon’s balled fist flew through the air and Thaddeus lay on the ground. Abigail screamed and Thaddeus wiped the blood from his nose. Verlon stared at him and then turned and walked away.

“Verlon! Verlon!”

Verlon walked down the hill and Abigail’s voice followed him until it grew faint and disappeared. He walked across the cotton field which had been picked clean. Promises, he kept saying to himself. Promises.

Verlon tossed a chunk of wood into the stove and rubbed his hands in front of the fire. Colonel raised his head.

“What is it, boy?”

The dog growled and stood in front of the door. Verlon lifted the 12-gauge from the corner of the room next to the bed and stepped onto the porch. A dark figure was trudging through the snow and stopped a dozen feet from the steps. The snow was heavier now and the man was breathing heavily.

“Uncle Verlon.”

“Galen?”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“My God, boy, come in and get warm.”

Galen left his tracks in the snow, but they were quickly covered. Colonel returned to his blanket and Galen stood in front of the stove. His hat and coat dripped water onto the floor, where it puddled at his wet boots. He shivered.

“Thanks for lettin’ me in,” Galen said.

“You’re always welcome, boy. What are you doin’ out in this mess at this time of night?”

“She’s dead, Verlon.”

“Dead? Is Ma—”

“I waited. Saw the doctor and the preacher go in. Saw ’em leave. Saw the boys run out and fall in the snow. She’s dead. What the hell kind of man am I? I just sat and waited while she died.”

By the time Stephen and Preacher Harkness rode up on horseback, Josiah and Doc Evans had already arrived. They shook the snow from their coats and stomped their boots on the porch and went in. Morgan sat in the split-bottom chair next to the fireplace and did not look up. Josiah was at the table; his head rested in his hands. Stephen breathed deeply and immediately felt sick. In the air was the odor of fresh blood. He and Preacher Harkness walked slowly toward the curtain behind which Emma lay.

Warren Harkness had not been in Kingston long. He and his wife and two small sons had come from Kentucky. He was short but his voice was deep. He did not know the Ledbetters. Sometimes the old woman and her children came on Sundays but they disappeared before he had an opportunity to speak to them. The old man never came. And now the patriarch of the Ledbetter clan simply sat in the chair, tilted on its rear legs, and stared at the floor and did not speak.

Doc Evans was an old man. He had lived most of his life in Kingston, so he knew the Ledbetters well. He had brought Emma into the world seventeen years ago and now he was watching her leave it. He pulled back the blanket and sheet. Bright red blood soaked the sheet. Stephen became pale and turned and left. Harkness removed his hat and Myrtle looked up.

“Hello, ma’am,” Harkness said. “I’m Warren Harkness. I’m so sorry.”

“This is my baby, Preacher,” she said and she moved the wet cloth gently across her daughter’s forehead. “I don’t think she can hear us now.”

“She’s hemorrhaging,” Evans said. “I need to get her to a hospital. She’s already lost a lot of blood.”

The breathing was shallow. And then there was silence. Evans lifted her wrist and laid his fingers against her neck. He laid the wrist gently down and checked his pocket watch.

“I’m sorry, Myrtle. There was just nothing I could do. I wish somebody had come for me sooner.”

Evans closed the black bag at the foot of the bed and walked away from the bed. Myrtle leaned down and kissed her daughter’s forehead.

“Dear, Lord,” Harkness said, “I pray that you look down on this family—”

“There won’t be any of that prayin’,” Morgan said. “It’s too late for prayin’. It ain’t gonna bring her back.”

Morgan stood behind Harkness and stepped aside. Harkness nodded in understanding, put on his hat and coat and followed Evans out the door.

“A prayer would have been nice,” Myrtle said.

“For who? It ain’t gonna do Emma a damn bit of good. Let the preacher earn his money someplace else.”

Josiah and Stephen ran outside and collapsed in the snow. Evans and Harkness had already disappeared in the darkness.

Prescott lit another cigarette and did not turn around. His grandmother pulled her chair closer and looked up at him. There were more voices and laughter from the parlor but they seemed to come from a far distance.

“Tell me about her, Pres. What is her name?”

“Natasha.”

“Natasha. What a beautiful name. Did you meet in Paris?”

“Yes.”

He remembered the café and the wine and the rain. There had been no snow—at least, not until Russia. He still heard the mournful strings of the symphony and the warmth of her hand in his. He still felt the touch of her body. He bowed his head.

“Pres, it will help to talk. You can talk to me. You’ve always been able to talk to me.”

“She’s the most incredible woman I’ve ever known. She’s a princess. And she reminded me of her social status many times. She wanted to be here for Christmas. Grandma, I miss her so much.”

“What happened, Pres?”

He pulled a chair from the table and sat close to the hearth. Outside the snow was swirling in the wind and the screech owl shrieked only once and was gone.

CHAPTER 13

Prescott and Natasha left the others in the small hotel not far from the compound. A dozen young men and women had come. For the most part they did not really know why. All they knew was that their homes had been taken and they wanted to fight to get them back. They knew little of other issues and Prescott could not see them surviving whatever they were about to enter. The snow-covered streets were deserted after dark and Prescott put his arm around Natasha. The wind was bitterly cold and they had difficulty breathing.

“Is it far?” she asked.

“No. We’re almost there.”

The buildings of Vladivostok were low, no more than two stories, closely packed together, and the steeply sloped roofs were weighted down by the snow. There were no lights in the shop windows. The gas street lamps shone yellow and Prescott and Natasha walked in the middle of the street where the snow had been partially shoveled away into dunes in front of the shops. He stared at the darkened windows and felt as if hundreds of eyes were staring at them.

“It is not Paris, love,” she said. “Nor is it Moscow. You really should see Moscow or St. Petersburg. I must take you when it is safe.”

He wondered about the safety of the street before them but he said nothing. He thought about the others at the hotel, a small dingy building, but the only hotel that was

open. They depended on him and on Natasha for guidance—mostly Natasha. They would do whatever she told them to do.

“At least the snow has stopped,” he said.

“But not the wind.”

Suddenly dogs barked and Prescott and Natasha confronted a tall wire fence with guards and German Shepherds posted at the front gate. Beyond the fence large barracks-style buildings were barely visible. Prescott smelled smoke rising from the chimneys. A corporal approached and, upon seeing the twin silver bars, stopped and saluted.

“Good evening, Corporal,” Prescott said and answered the salute. “I am Captain Freeman. We’re here to see General Graves.”

“Yes, sir. We’ve been expecting you.”

The corporal returned to the guard station and picked up the telephone. In a moment other guards pulled the wire gate open and Prescott and Natasha entered the compound.

“Please follow me, Captain,” the corporal said.

Unlike the downtown street, dim lights shone through the windows of the buildings. From some buildings talking and laughter escaped into the night. Ice cracked loudly beneath their boots. The compound was large, larger than Prescott had expected, large enough to house nine thousand troops.

The corporal led them down what appeared to be several alleys to a building that was three stories. Lights burned in only a few of the upstairs windows. An officer stood outside the door.

“Corporal, I’ll take over from here,” the officer said and he extended his hand.

“Captain Freeman, I’m Major Clinton Jones.”

“Major, this is my wife, Natasha.”

“Mrs. Freeman, my pleasure.”

“Major.”

“General Graves is expecting you.”

The first level of the building was cold and dark. It appeared to be used mostly for storage. Crates and boxes were stacked almost to the low ceiling. Jones walked briskly and Prescott smelled the stale dust that clung to the boxes and to the floor.

“We don’t have an elevator,” Jones said. “I hope you don’t mind taking the stairs to the third floor.”

They climbed the stairs and on the third floor a series of offices branched off from a main corridor. Most of the offices were dark but Prescott saw small wood desks and more boxes stacked against walls. They came to an anteroom and Jones asked them to wait and then he disappeared into another office. After only a moment he returned and asked them to enter.

Major General William Graves rose from the chair behind his large desk and greeted Prescott and Natasha with a smile and handshake. He was a tall man, perfectly straight. Hair receded from his forehead and thin-rimmed spectacles perched on his long slender nose. A mustache was neatly trimmed.

“Please have a seat,” Graves said and he motioned them to the two chairs in front of the desk.

Jones turned and left and closed the door. Only a few papers dotted the top of the desk. Several bookcases lined the walls. Behind the desk a window overlooked the compound.

“General, thank you for meeting with us,” Prescott said.

“My pleasure. I trust you find your accommodations satisfactory.”

“Yes, General, very much so,” Natasha said.

Prescott reached inside his topcoat pocket and withdrew an envelope and handed it to the general. Graves opened it and examined the paper and then returned it to Prescott.

“Yes, the letter coincides with the information I’ve already received,” Graves said. “I would love to smoke but I hate to smoke alone.”

“I know the feeling,” Prescott said.

The general handed him a cigarette and they both struck matches.

“That is one habit I am going to break you of,” Natasha said. “I am a princess and you must do as I say.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Prescott answered.

The word princess caused the smile to flee from Graves’s face. He smoked quietly and pushed a dark green ashtray toward Prescott.

“I understand twelve people have accompanied you,” Graves said.

“That is correct,” Natasha answered.

“That is quite a liberating force.”

“It is a start.”

“Of what?”

“Of—as you said—liberation.”

“But whom are you liberating?”

Natasha did not answer. She did not like the questions. It appeared the general was setting some sort of a trap and she was not prepared.

A knock sounded at the door.

“Come in,” Graves said.

Jones, accompanied by two sergeants, entered with plates of food and wine which they set on the table near the far wall.

“Thank you, Major. Prescott, Natasha, I want you to join me for dinner.”

The lamp on the desk provided little light at the table and their faces were hidden in shadows. At first they talked little. Prescott was surprised they were being served steak.

“If my troops are going to have to serve so far from home,” Graves said, “then I insist they be fed well. That seems only fair, does it not, Prescott?”

“I wholeheartedly agree.”

The red wine went down slowly and filled Prescott with warmth. He glanced at Natasha. She studied Graves carefully.

“When can we meet with Kolchak?” she asked.

The general poured more wine. The smile apparently had gone forever.

“What do you know about Alexandr Kolchak?” Graves said.

“He’s our leader against the Bolsheviks.”

“How about you, Prescott?”

“Not very much, sir.”

“Natasha, have you ever met Kolchak?”

“No.”

They finished the steak and potatoes and beans and Prescott wondered what the other twelve were having for dinner. There was a black potbelly stove in one corner of the office and occasionally a private would enter and replenish it with wood. The stove burned hot and fierce, yet a chill filled the room. General Graves sipped the wine and considered his words carefully.

“Prescott, I must say I was more than a little surprised when I heard that the president was going to give you permission to come here.”

“How so, sir?”

“When I was told I was going to command this unit in Vladivostok, my orders were clear,” the general said. “We were not to interfere in the conflict between the Reds and the Whites. I have adhered to that policy to the letter. As a result, the Reds think I am aiding the Whites, and the Whites think I am aiding the Reds. As long as they both feel that way, I suppose I am doing my job.”

“I would think so, sir.”

“Your presence, though, presents something of a problem. You’re an officer in the United States Army—and a damned fine one, I might add.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I really wanted to get into some of that action in France. But President Wilson and Secretary Baker had other plans for me. And we do what we’re told. Anyway, your presence can put our policy at risk.”

“Yes, sir, the president told me as much.”

“General, may I speak frankly?” Natasha asked.

“Why certainly.”

“Natasha, let us not be too—” Prescott said.

“He said I can be frank and I intend to be. Why should we be so concerned about what the Reds think of us? The Bolsheviks took over our homes. They caused us to move into exile. It appears to me we should be doing everything in our power to help the Whites gain control.”

Prescott stared at her. Her face was red and her hands were trembling slightly. The general poured more wine into his glass and raised it.

“Natasha, I commend your passion,” Graves said. “But passion in the situation in which we are involved is a dangerous thing. One of my main responsibilities is to keep the TransSiberian Railway running. As long as I’m charged with that responsibility, I’m going to make sure everyone can use it—no matter the political persuasion.”

“The Bolsheviks should not be permitted to use it,” she said.

“Natasha, you seem to think all your countrymen oppose the Bolsheviks.”

“True Russian countrymen do oppose them.”

“That is simply not the case. Natasha, I’m here to help safeguard the territorial integrity of your country. That’s supposedly why the British and French are here too. I wish I could say the same about the Japanese, but I can’t. The Japanese would like to get their hands on eastern Russia. You are aware of that, aren’t you? If not, you should be. As long as we’re here, along with the British and French, the Japanese will not try anything.”

“I’m not concerned about the Japanese,” she said. “You should stop the Reds from using the railway.”

“I’m sorry, Natasha. I can’t do that.”

“Will I be able to meet with Kolchak soon?”

“Before you meet with him, I want you to visit some folks tomorrow.”

“What folks?”

“Some of your countrymen. They’re good Russians—good people, period. I’ve come to learn a lot about your people, Natasha. I’ve come to love them—especially these people. Will you agree to visit them?”

“I do not see the point but I will.”

“Prescott, I’ll send Major Jones for you both in the morning at nine. Will that be convenient?”

“Most definitely, sir. Thank you, sir, for your hospitality.”

“I still wish I could have been there beside you when you manned that Hotchkiss.”

“It’s a good thing, sir, you weren’t. The man beside me was dead.”

Prescott and Natasha walked briskly back to the hotel. The snow was beginning to fall but Natasha did not notice.

“I have not seen you angry before,” Prescott said.

“Then you have been fortunate.”

“I want you to stop—now.”

They stopped in the middle of the street and Prescott placed his hands firmly on her shoulders and turned her toward him. At first she refused to look at him but he grasped her chin and lifted her face toward his.

“Your general is not going to be of any help to us,” she said.

“Natasha, he has to obey orders and his orders are not to interfere. If he were to get involved, there would be an international crisis. Don’t you understand?”

Her eyes grew moist and she lowered her head.

“My people were swept out of power. We lost our homes. Many of us lost our lives. We want our homeland back. That is what I understand.”

General Graves stood at the window behind his desk and smoked a cigarette and stared at the compound below. Prescott and Natasha were walking quickly toward the gate. They do not know what they are in for, he said to himself. They know nothing about Kolchak. They know nothing about the Reds and the Whites. She is leading him into disaster. Graves was weary and he turned and sat in the chair. Only the lamp on his desk burned.

There was a knock at his door and Major Jones entered. Graves motioned him to a chair and pushed a cigarette toward him. They sat in silence and smoked. Prescott was a good man, Graves said to himself. What he did in the Argonne was commendable. What he was doing now was foolhardy.

“Clint, what do you think?” the general asked.

“About those two, sir?”

“Yes, about those two.”

“She’s a beautiful woman. No question about it. According to the file, she is some sort of princess, a distant relative of Nicholas.”

“Yes, and that’s part of the problem.”

“Sir?”

“She thinks all these Russian peasants are going to welcome her with open arms. Little does she know that they don’t give a damn about her and her royal friends. Hell, they’ve been oppressed for God knows how long. She represents their oppression. They’d rather have the Bolsheviks in power than return to what she perceives to be the good old days.”

“What about Kolchak?”

“He’s a murdering son of a bitch—something else she doesn’t know. In the morning I want you to take her and Freeman to the hospital. I want you to show her those villagers. I told them you’d meet them at the hotel at nine.”

“Yes, sir. What if she insists on meeting with Kolchak?”

“Hopefully the hospital visit will deter her. If not, then we have no choice but to assist her. I don’t like this business, Clint. It’s coming too damn close to compromising our neutrality.”

“If she and Freeman still want to go to Kolchak, we’ll have to provide troops for protection, won’t we, sir? There’s a chance we’ll be fired upon. I can’t say who’ll do the firing.”

“Probably both the Reds and Whites. If you’re fired upon, return fire. I don’t care who you kill. The important thing is to protect our men.”

“Yes, sir.”

They finished their cigarettes and Jones left the office. Graves turned off the lamp and sat in the darkness.

Prescott and Natasha lay on the iron bed in the darkness of the small hotel room and breathed in the cold air. She wrapped her arm about him and slept but he stared at the ceiling. A thin strand of dim light from a street lamp below drew narrow shadows on the walls. He could not sleep. He kept recounting the conversation with General Graves. There was much the general had not said. Just the mention of Kolchak’s name had caused the general’s body to grow tense. He turned and lightly kissed Natasha’s forehead. Damn the cold. Where was the Siberian spring she had talked about?

The dining room of the hotel was surprisingly large and Prescott and Natasha ate breakfast with their compatriots before seven. They did not speak to Prescott but asked Natasha questions about General Graves. Prescott wished they would speak in French but they all spoke in Russian. He had learned a few words, not enough to follow a conversation. They wanted to know what the general was like. They had heard he was willing to aid the Bolsheviks. Was that true? Would he help them meet Kolchak? She listened to each question and answered. Prescott sat and listened.

“Prescott and I have to meet with some of our countrymen this morning,” she said.

“But why?”

“Who are these countrymen?”

“I do not know. Peasants, I suppose. General Graves seems to have an affinity for peasants.”

“Such is what I heard before we ever left Paris. You remember Peter Andunof? He had been here in Vladivostok. He told me the general could not be trusted.”

“Natasha, pay no attention to what Peter Andunof says. He is not reliable. I have heard General Graves will stop at nothing to be fair. He can be trusted.”

“You would trust the fox in the hen house. Natasha, I would watch your step. The meeting this morning may be some sort of trap.”

“There is no trap,” she said. She turned toward Prescott and said in French, “Besides, I have Captain Freeman to protect me.”

Prescott smiled and lifted the coffee cup from the worn and soiled table cloth and stared at their cold faces. They did not trust him. That was their problem. He would deliver them to Kolchak if that was what they wanted but he would get Natasha away from this. He had decided. He had a bad feeling about the whole expedition and the meeting with Graves had done nothing to dispel his worry.

“Captain Freeman, you are a lucky man to be married to such a beautiful Russian princess.”

“Dmitri, you and your friends are lucky that she would risk her life to lead you here. Come, Natasha, we must be going.”

Prescott and Natasha walked down the long dark musty hall from the dining room to the lobby. An old woman stood behind the desk and watched them. When Prescott looked at her, she averted her eyes.

“You do not like my friends, do you?” Natasha asked.

“They care nothing for your safety.”

“Nor do I. I must fight for my country.”

They walked outside and stood on the frozen sidewalk. Most of the shops were not open. A few shopkeepers struggled grimly against the wind and thrust open their doors. The day was overcast and a pall of gray hung over the city. Major Jones was walking along the edge of the street and he raised his hand in greeting.

“Good morning, folks,” Jones said. “How was your first night in Vladivostok?”

“It was fine,” Prescott said. “Where are we going?”

“To a hospital.”

“A hospital?” Natasha asked.

“It’s run by the Red Cross. It’s not far.”

They walked along the street until it veered into a narrow street. Prescott glanced at the shop windows. Shopkeepers who had arrived stopped sweeping their floors to stare at the trio marching in the face of the wind. They were accustomed to seeing soldiers in their city. They were not accustomed to seeing a lady with fur on her collar and hat.

“Prescott, are you planning to stay in the army?” Jones asked.

“I haven’t decided.”

“You should. You have a marvelous career ahead of you.”

“My husband’s father wants him to return home to be a businessman,” Natasha said.

Jones did not respond.

Before they reached the hospital, snow began to fall. It was a wet snow and they had to wipe it from their faces; otherwise it would freeze on their skin. Natasha looked at Prescott and smiled as if to assure him spring was at the next intersection. But spring did not wait for them; instead, a large two-story brick building which was the hospital stood in front of them. The building itself was similar to the one which housed Graves’s office. No sentries stood at the double doors.

They walked inside and shook their coats and passed from a barren room into a large room which had rows of beds. The whiteness of the sheets contrasted sharply with the dim light. Small windows ran along the tops of the walls but admitted only the grayness of the morning. White-clad nurses moved silently from bed to bed. A man in a black suit who was apparently a doctor stood at the far end and stared.

Jones led Prescott and Natasha between the two rows of beds. They stared at the faces of the people covered by the white sheets. They were young, old, men and women. Some of the faces were badly bruised or misshapen. Bandages covered some. There was the stench of blood that Prescott had smelled before and suddenly he was thinking of the makeshift hospitals in France and the moans of the dying. Once again he heard the moans. Some of the bodies struggled beneath the sheets against something that was trying to possess them. The nurses moved quickly and spoke barely above a whisper. Occasionally they stopped beside a bed and tried to restrain one of the bodies in its fight against the possessor. Prescott looked at Natasha. She was pale and walked limply.

They stopped at the foot of one of the beds. A boy, perhaps six or seven, with bandaged head and an arm in a cast, stared at them. A nurse stood stolidly beside him and stared without smiling at the visitors. Prescott smiled at the boy. The swollen hand beneath the cast rose.

“This is Dr. Melakin,” Jones said. “He is in charge of the ward this morning. Doctor, I want you to meet Captain Prescott Freeman and his wife, Natasha.”

“Good morning, Doctor,” Prescott said.

“Good morning.”

The doctor eyed them coldly. He was an old, thin man whose goatee hung like ice from his chin. His gray eyes were faded and his hands trembled slightly

“Where are these people from?” Natasha asked.

“Treblinsk,” the doctor said. “They were brought here yesterday. They’re farmers, poor peasants, doing no one any harm.”

“It matters not to the Bolsheviks who their victims are,” Natasha said and she turned and surveyed the rows of beds. “Their aim is to spread fear until their authority is accepted without question.”

The doctor stared at her and coughed. His hands trembled even more and his face reddened. Jones looked away.

“The Bolsheviks? You think the Bolsheviks did this?” the doctor asked. “The Bolsheviks had nothing to do with this. Kolchak’s men did this.”

Natasha turned quickly back to the doctor.

“Kolchak? Are you certain?”

“Yes, my dear, I am certain. At dawn yesterday Kolchak’s men rode into Treblinsk and shot and beat the men, women, and children. The ones who survived lie before you.”

“But—but—why?”

“The people of the village did not swear allegiance to anyone. They wanted simply to be left alone. Apparently Admiral Kolchak thinks if you do not swear allegiance to him, you are loyal to the Reds. These people know nothing of politics. For their ignorance they have paid a terrible price.”

“Water,” a voice behind a bandage called. “Water, please.”

Soon a nurse approached with a glass.

“No, please,” Natasha said, “let me.”

She took the glass from the nurse and approached the bed. The man’s face was covered with bandages except for the lips. She gently lifted his head and placed the glass next to his lips.

“God bless you,” he said.

She lowered his head and touched the hand lying outside the sheet. She handed the glass to the nurse and returned to Prescott.

“I am ready to go,” she said.

Outside the hospital a sleigh waited for them. General Graves sat in the back and called to Prescott and Natasha and Jones. The driver cracked the whip and the horse started down the street. Prescott lit a cigarette. The snow had stopped and more shops had opened. Still, eyes peered through the windows.

“Where are we going?” Natasha asked.

“Back to the compound,” the general said. “We need to talk further.”

Prescott took her hand and squeezed it. Small boys and girls were running along the sidewalk and laughing. She looked away. When they returned to the compound, the general and Prescott and Natasha entered the large building and Jones went with the driver to the stable. The general stopped beside one of the crates stacked near a wall. He lifted a crowbar and pried open the top. The top squealed and gave way. The blackness of rifle barrels shone in the dim lamplight.

“What you see here in all these crates is quite an arsenal,” Graves said. “These weapons belong to the allies. Another reason we’re here is to make sure these firearms stay in the hands of the allies. We don’t want them to fall into the wrong hands.”

Graves replaced the top and led them upstairs to his office. The other offices were occupied now. Junior officers and sergeants were running back and forth to get signatures on documents. The general closed the door behind them. They sat in the chairs and the general leaned against his desk.

“Natasha, tell me what you think,” the general said.

“The doctor is an old man,” she said. “He could be wrong.”

“Yes, you are right. He could be wrong but he’s not. There are many witnesses. They cannot all be wrong.”

Graves crossed his arms and looked down at Natasha. She frowned. He walked around his desk and sat.

“I find it hard to believe that Kolchak would do such a thing,” she said. “He is supposed to be the champion of the people.”

“That is the image he is trying to project,” the general said. “Unfortunately he is like so many others. He wants power and he will stop at nothing to get it. It matters little to him who gets hurt.”

“The Bolsheviks are no better.”

“I did not say they are. This is a civil war but there is nothing civil about it. I trust your visit to the hospital supports my contention.”

“What do you suggest, General?” Prescott asked.

“I suggest you and your friends return to Paris. There is nothing here for you to do. The peace here, such as it is, is fragile. Your being here jeopardizes it.”

Natasha breathed deeply and stared at the window behind the general. It was snowing again. The flakes were large and suddenly she remembered her youth in Moscow. Those were days of bitter cold and unending warmth before massive hearths where the fires of a nation burned deeply. She and her cousin, Anastasia, would run throughout the palace and across the snow-laden courtyards. They ran past the peasants on the streets but they never stopped and they never listened. And now Anastasia was dead.

“I did not come here simply to turn around and leave,” she said. “I came here to fight. If Kolchak is not the answer, someone else must be. There are many good men in Russia to fight the Bolsheviks and, if need be, Kolchak and his men also. I will find such a man and my friends and I will join his army.”

Graves closed his eyes for a moment and then lit a cigarette.

“Prescott, when we and the Japanese negotiate who is going to do what here in Siberia, I want Natasha to be at the bargaining table.”

Both the general and Prescott smiled but Natasha remained implacable.

“There is a chieftain named Rosimoff,” Graves said.

“I have not heard of him,” Natasha said.

“He refuses to support Kolchak. He’s opposed to the Reds. I have met him. He seems straightforward and honest, as honest as one can be in a civil war. The problem is numbers. His army is small compared to the others. But his troops are intensely loyal. You need to understand, Natasha, he is not royalty. He hated the czar as much as he hates the Reds.”

“Are you implying he will hate me?”

“I am implying nothing. I am merely telling you what he is like. I will not take you to Kolchak, not after the attack on Treblinsk. Nevertheless, if you insist on becoming involved, I will have you escorted to Rosimoff. His troops are encamped about five miles to the north of Treblinsk. I will have Major Jones lead the party. I must emphasize, Natasha, Rosimoff’s position is tenuous at best. Your life—and the life of your husband—will be in danger.”

“Thank you, General. When can we leave?”

“Tomorrow.”

They shook hands and soon Prescott and Natasha were walking in the snow back to the hotel. Outside one of the stores she stopped and kissed him.

“What was that for?” he asked. “I did nothing.”

“I would not be deterred.”

“No you would not.”

“Tonight I love you. Our last night in the comfort of a bed. I will make you remember it.”

Prescott and Natasha and their entourage gathered before dawn at the stables inside the compound. Guards had escorted them and watched them carefully. It had snowed all night and already their footprints were covered. Lanterns hung from rafters and the breath from the horses shone bright like the steam from locomotives. Jones, accompanied by six soldiers with carbines slung over their shoulders, walked into the barn. Natasha wore a long, black leather coat with mink around the collar. Jones stared.

“Looks as if you folks are ready to travel,” Jones said.

“How long will it take us?” Prescott asked.

“Oh, probably a day and a half. Of course the snow’s bad. It may take longer. Also, we may get delayed.”

“Why?”

“We’ve received threats lately. Reds and Whites are unhappy with us. If either group shoots at us, we’ll fire back. You know how it is. Fighting takes time. It could delay us. Where have you put your weapons?”

“They’re in one of the wagons,” Prescott said.

“Good. Your friends can ride in the wagons. Natasha, do you prefer riding in the wagon or on horseback?”

“Horseback.”

Prescott picked out a gray mare and helped Natasha mount the saddle. The horses snorted and pawed the straw-strewn ground. Prescott took in the smell of leather and hay, something he had not done since he left home. He patted the rear flank of the horse and then went to find one of his own. Away from the others he stopped and felt the pistol in the holster. Jones stood beside him.

“Look, Prescott, something I want to tell you. That business about the Reds and Whites taking shots at us. I wasn’t just joking.”

“I understand.”

“We’ll probably have no trouble. But it is a war.”

“I know.”

They rode out of the barn into the snowy darkness and proceeded along a street at the rear of the town. Wood smoke hung in the air. The wagon wheels creaked and there was no talking. An old man delivering milk stopped and watched.

“Damn,” Jones said. “I was hoping we’d get out of town without being seen.”

Prescott rode beside Natasha. She did not smile. She did not talk. Grimness hung on her face as the Russian winter held onto the countryside. From the rear the buildings looked like shacks that had sprung up alongside railroad tracks. The sharp piercing whistle of a locomotive cried and Natasha shuddered. Prescott reached over and touched her hand.

Prescott saw no road. There was only snow. They left the outskirts of the town and entered a wasteland of white. There were no houses, no barns, no fences, no people, just the endless ocean of snow. The clouds hung gray and low but the wind had died. The horses struggled but still they moved on.

“Not like the terrain in Georgia,” Jones said.

“It’d be nice to see a pine tree.”

“We’ll see trees this afternoon. I know a good spot for a bivouac.”

Again they heard the scream of the locomotive but it was far away now. Prescott looked over his shoulder. There was no sign of smoke. He glanced at the two wagons. Natasha’s compatriots sat huddled in two black masses, their heads bowed upon their chests. They did not speak. They did not look at the countryside.

“Not a talkative group, are they?” Jones asked.

Prescott wondered about surprise attacks. There was no place for assailants to hide unless they buried themselves in the snow. But then there would be the trees.

The morning passed slowly. The soldiers followed the wagons and talked and occasionally laughed. Some spat dark tobacco juice upon the whiteness. On the horizon a speck appeared. Prescott studied it—a farmhouse, the first one he had seen since leaving Vladivostok. A thin ribbon of smoke hovered from the chimney and quickly became lost in the grayness of the day. He wondered what kind of people would live in a wilderness like this and he remembered the people in the hospital. He could still see the swollen and bruised faces. He could still hear the low moans. He could still smell the odor of blood. He would never be able to forget those things. He had found them in France and he had found them again in Siberia. The setting could change but the sight, sound, and smell of battle always remained the same.

“How far have we come?” Natasha asked in the early afternoon.

“Many miles,” Prescott said. “I cannot say for sure.”

“I believed in Kolchak.”

He turned and looked at her. Moisture formed in her eyes and he quickly reached over a gloved hand and wiped it from her cheeks.

“You did not know. You had no way of knowing.”

“I had heard he was the great liberator. We were told that in Paris. He would take Russia back from Lenin and the Reds and it was all a lie. He is no better than the others.”

“Rosimoff is different.”

“You believe the general.”

“Yes.”

“I believed the ones who talked about Kolchak in our apartment in Paris.”

“General Graves is different. You can believe him.”

“I am sorry I made you come.”

“You did not make me.”

“Yes. You are such a good boy.”

“I’m just a soldier.”

Tears formed but this time she wiped them and shook her head.

“Tell me about Georgia.”

“Right now it is late spring. The fields have been plowed. They are red in the sun. They will grow the finest cotton and corn you have ever seen.”

“I want to see it.”

“You will.”

“And will you play—this—what you say—baseball?”

“Yes. I will hit a home run for you.”

“What is a home run?”

“You will know when you see it.”

The sky grew even darker but the snow did not come. Prescott saw something else on the horizon. Trees rose like specters in the snow.

“What did I tell you?” Jones asked. “That’s where we’ll bivouac tonight.”

The forest was like an island in the plain of snow. The soldiers pitched pup tents and gathered wood for a fire. Prescott helped Natasha to the ground and they stretched and felt the soreness in their bodies. The compatriots climbed wearily out of the wagons and stood awkwardly near the stack of wood that would soon crackle into a flame. The spruces and firs hovered above them and sheltered them from the wind that was rising in the west. Daylight was fading.

“I need a moment of privacy,” Natasha said.

“Go behind a tree,” Prescott said.

She smirked and was gone. Prescott looked around. Jones had chosen a good spot for the camp.

“How deep is the forest?” Prescott asked.

“Not as deep as it appears,” Jones answered.

“And on the other side?”

“More of what we’ve just crossed. Then there’s Treblinsk—or what’s left of it.”

A sergeant organized pots and pans and tin cans on the ground close to the fire and began preparing the meal. The aroma of coffee drifted among the trees. Natasha returned and wrapped her arm inside Prescott’s. They stood by the fire and the sergeant opened the cans.

“Sir, my name’s O’Malley,” the sergeant said. “I hope you and the missus like beans and soup. They sho’ are good on a night like tonight.”

The lonely howl of a wolf pierced the air and one of the soldiers retrieved a carbine from his horse. Prescott patted Natasha’s hand.

“He is just welcoming us,” Prescott said.

“That’s right, sir,” the sergeant said, and he poured coffee into a tin cup and offered it to Natasha. He poured another and handed it to Prescott. “Them wolves sure make a lot of noise. But they ain’t gonna bother us.”

The sergeant scooped beans and soup into bowls and handed them to the Russians and then to the soldiers. In the bitter cold of twilight the food tasted delicious to Prescott. Even Natasha seemed to enjoy it. The major sat under a tree near them and between bites talked about the mountains of Tennessee. He said he had a difficult time getting used to the endless flatlands covered with snow.

“Give me a tree and I feel right at home,” Jones said. “Well, I’d better post sentries for the night. We’ll leave before daybreak.”

Darkness fell heavily on the forest and the flames from the fire shot skyward and flung sparks into the lower reaches of the trees. Some of the soldiers sat close to the fire and played cards. One soldier sat against the back wheel of a wagon and played a harmonica. Prescott did not know the song. It was slow and mournful. He wished he would stop. The Russians huddled together and seldom spoke. Occasionally they looked at Natasha. Prescott wondered what they were thinking.

“Love, this is our great adventure,” she said.

“Is that what this is?”

“Yes.”

“I had envisioned a honeymoon but not quite like this.”

“We will honeymoon after we are victorious.”

“Let’s go for a walk,” he said.

She was puzzled but she stood and walked alongside him into the blackness of the forest. They could hear the soldiers talking about their cards and complaining about their luck. The wind was whistling among the conifers and Natasha shivered. They stopped and she could barely discern his face.

“What is it, love?” she asked.

“It’s about tomorrow.”

“What about tomorrow? Tomorrow we will meet Rosimoff.”

“Yes. You will deliver your friends to enlist in his army. And then you and I will return to Vladivostok.”

“What are you talking about?”

“We will return to Paris and from there to the United States. I want to take you home for Christmas.”

“Am I to be a Christmas present?”

“Natasha, I am not joking,” Prescott said.

“Love, I came here to fight.”

“I want you to listen carefully to me. I have fought in battle. I know what I am talking about. I get feelings about things—when things are not quite right. And things here are not quite right. Escorting your friends here is all you can accomplish.”

“Love, you cannot tell me what to do. I am a princess.”

“No, sweetheart, not anymore. Those days are over. It is time to go to your new home.”

She turned and ran into the forest. Prescott called after her but she did not answer. He returned to their blankets. The others wearied of talking and playing cards and they went to sleep. Occasionally one of the sentries would toss more branches onto the fire. A chorus of wolves cried and Natasha returned. She wiped tears from her cheeks, yet she smiled. Her voice trembled but her eyes were determined.

“I am ready to go to Georgia,” she said. “I want to see baseball.”

The aroma of coffee brewing on the campfire awakened Prescott. It smelled even better than it did the night before. Natasha still slept. He stood and stretched and headed toward the campfire. Jones walked up.

“Prescott, I should tell you one of the sentries heard something last night,” Jones said.

“What did he hear?”

“He thought he heard some rustling among bushes at the edge of the forest. He said he couldn’t be sure.”

“Is he experienced?”

“Yes. Do you want to turn back?”

Prescott shook his head.

“I’ll have two of my men ride ahead just as a precaution,” Jones said.

Prescott took a cup of coffee to Natasha and waked her gently. Already the other Russians were stirring. Prescott looked at them and wondered.

Several soldiers brought their shovels and tossed snow onto the campfire. The party mounted the horses and wagons and moved slowly north through the forest. Prescott listened. There was complete silence. There were no birds. The wolves were gone. There were just the trees and the party on its way to meet with Rosimoff. He and Natasha rode close to the first wagon. Up ahead, almost out of view, were the two soldiers riding the point.

And the forest ended. Ahead was another endless plain of snow. They spent the morning crossing it. The wind and the snow tore at them as if to drive them back. By late morning they came to Treblinsk, a smoldering ruin. It was a small village and all the buildings had been burned. Near what appeared to be the entrance to a hut a tiny doll lay smudged in the snow. There were no signs of life. The party passed and no one spoke.

Some two miles north of Treblinsk another forest loomed. More spruces and firs rose against the horizon. Prescott reined his horse.

“What is it?” Natasha asked.

He did not answer. The two soldiers riding the point were almost to the edge of the trees. The snow was deep and the horses struggled. White breath rushed from their nostrils.

“Everything appears to be all right,” Jones said.

The rest of the party moved slowly. The snow was beginning to fall and the wind blew the flakes into their faces. Prescott removed his right glove.

“Love, what are you doing?” she asked. “Your hand will get frostbite.”

He reached for the holster and withdrew his pistol.

“Love, you do not need that.”

Prescott watched the two soldiers. They stopped and turned and waved their hands.

“Yeah, I was right,” Jones said. “Everything is all right.”

The party was drawing closer to the two soldiers and the wind was now stronger. It stung their faces but they kept moving. The horses stumbled in the drifts and Prescott glanced at one of the wagons. The Russians still looked grim—except one. Dmitri was smiling.

There was an explosion and a screaming cannon shell burst the snow in front of the wagons. Suddenly the woods on the other side were aflame with small arms fire. The soldiers riding point were gunned down. Jones was hollering orders to his soldiers. Prescott reached out for Natasha but her horse broke free. Another cannon shell exploded in the heart of the first wagon, where the rifles and ammunition were kept. There was another explosion and fire. Prescott’s horse fell and he rolled onto the snow. Jones looked down from his saddle and stretched forth his hand. A rifle bullet ripped through his throat and he fell to the snow and gasped for breath.

“Prescott! Prescott!”

Natasha’s horse was down and she was running toward him. Machine gun bullets splintered the snow and flung it against his body. He ran toward her and fired his pistol toward the woods. A bullet ripped the skin on his cheek and he stumbled and regained his balance. The smell of gun smoke was heavy in the air. The other soldiers sought shelter behind the remaining wagon and fired their carbines furiously.

“Prescott! Prescott!”

It was almost impossible to run in the deep snow and the bullets whizzed past them. The snowfall was so heavy he could hardly see.

“Hurry, Captain!” one of the soldiers yelled.

The machine guns rattled and then there was another explosion. The cannon shell bit heavily into his leg and he flew through the air. He turned over on his stomach and tried to find Natasha.

“Natasha! Natasha!”

The nausea and faintness were gripping his body and his vision was beginning to blur. He strained to see through the smoke. And then he saw her. She had almost reached him. She was lying on her side. Before he lost consciousness he saw the blood, the brilliantly red blood staining the white snow.

Prescott opened his eyes and saw a dim light above him. His vision was blurry and his head was aching. He did not know where he was but he knew he was inside a building. He knew because he felt the cot beneath him and there was warmth, more warmth than he had felt in a long time. There were people standing around him but he could not see their faces.

“Natasha,” he said and he started to get up.

Hands pressed against his shoulders but he could not see the bodies attached to the hands.

“Let me go!” he said. “I must find Natasha!”

“Please, sir, please lie back down.”

The voice, a woman's, was soft and soothing. It was American.

"Where am I?"

"You are in the Red Cross hospital in Vladivostok. General Graves has been summoned."

He closed his eyes and smelled the disinfectant. He opened his eyes again and began to see more clearly. Two nurses stood on either side of the cot and the old doctor stood at the foot. He remembered his leg and he reached his hand down to feel.

"It is still there, Captain," the doctor said. "You were lucky. We did not have to amputate."

Lucky, he said to himself, and he thought about Natasha. He saw her body lying in the snow. He saw the blood. He saw the smile on Dmitri's face. No one else was smiling—only Dmitri. He saw Jones's face with the bloody hole in the throat. Above him a naked light bulb blinked.

"How long have I been unconscious?" he asked.

"Three days," the doctor said. "For a while we were not certain you would survive. You lost much blood."

"And the others?"

"General Graves is coming to talk to you. He will tell you what you need to know."

Prescott closed his eyes. The pain in his leg was scalding and he winced.

"Do you want morphine?" the doctor asked.

"No. I must have a clear head to talk to the general."

Other patients were talking in Russian. He imagined they were talking about him. They were probably wondering what an American soldier was doing here, wounded. Suddenly he thought about the Argonne. He had escaped without a wound. So many had fallen. And now, here in Siberia, he was cut down. He should have trusted his feeling.

“Good afternoon, General,” the doctor said.

Prescott opened his eyes. The focus was returning. General Graves removed his hat and nodded at Prescott. He did not smile.

“I want to know about Natasha,” Prescott said.

One of the nurses brought a chair and the general sat near the head of the bed. The doctor and the nurses walked away.

“After you were wounded, some of our troops managed to drag you to the wagon. There was intense fire but they were able to escape. They could not reach Natasha. Indications were she was dead. I’m sorry, Prescott.”

Prescott gripped the sides of the cot tightly and he closed his eyes.

“They left her?”

“Prescott, they had no choice. You knew what the gunfire was like. We had already lost several of our men. We lost Major Jones.”

“Yes, I know. Who were the bastards?”

“Apparently they were Bolsheviks. We received word that they’re claiming responsibility. They think I’m doing too much for the Whites.”

“So they have Natasha?”

“If she is alive. Our soldiers said she appeared dead.”

“I don’t give a damn about appearances. I saw her before I passed out. She could have been alive. We have to find out.”

“We’re working on it. So far we haven’t been able to learn anything about her whereabouts or her condition. We won’t stop trying.”

“She’s alive, General. I know it. They have her. We must get her back.”

“Prescott, you have my word we will do everything we can. But you saw how vast and desolate the land out there is. Gathering information is extremely difficult. If she can be found, we will find her. I also must tell you that I’ve notified our officials in Paris about the attack. The president has been informed. I’ve received word that you are being ordered back to Paris as soon as you can travel.”

“Back to Paris? I can’t leave—not now, not with Natasha being held. I’m not leaving without her.”

“You have no choice, son. Those are your orders and they come from the highest levels of our government. Look—there is nothing you can do here now. I have many contacts. I stand a much better chance of finding her. The doctor tells me you won’t be able to travel for a week or two. Nevertheless, the shrapnel could have done much more damage. At least you got to keep your leg.”

“He’s already told me how damned lucky I am.”

“And you are.”

The general stood and turned to go.

“We were betrayed.”

Graves stopped and stared at Prescott.

“Betrayed? How do you know?”

“I know. It was Dmitri. I bet he wasn’t killed in the attack.”

“Only four of the Russians made it back with you. He was not among them.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“Dmitri is a Bolshevik? Are you sure?”

“I don’t know what he is. All I know is he betrayed us. The day will come when I find him. And when I do, I will kill him. Tell your contacts.”

CHAPTER 14

The fire was dying and Prescott lifted a rough oak log from the side of the hearth and tossed it to the back of the firebox. The coals glowed a bright red and the log quickly ignited. The red light glowed in his face and he stared into the flames. Grandma Freeman twisted a small white handkerchief in her lap.

Laughter arose in the parlor again and footsteps rushed down the hall.

“Grandma, you won’t believe what Henry—” Mandy said.

Grandma Freeman looked up and Mandy stopped in the door. Prescott did not turn. Mandy stared and the smile vanished. She stepped back and was gone.

The old woman raised the handkerchief to her eyes and then she stood and went to her grandson. She laid a fragile hand on his stooped shoulder. For a moment she was back in Atlanta after the war. The Federal troops had been recalled and the city was rebuilding. Hope clung to the city like a tenacious vine and would not let go. And then there was the shooting. Charley Kell gunned down Jeffrey’s brother and Jeffrey swore vengeance. He followed Kell across the state, across the South, across the Mississippi. He followed him into the West and eventually caught up with him. Jeffrey killed him and returned home and never talked about it. But the thing she remembered most was the evening of his brother’s death. He had stood, bent, before a silent hearth and she had approached him and laid her hand on his shoulder. She could not speak. She did not know what to say. He had become so distant. He was already on the trail of Charley Kell. He

was standing in their home but he was not there. He had already left. She looked at Prescott and she remembered her husband.

The log was an inferno now and the heat soaked through the wool of the trousers into his leg and the warmth comforted the wound. Outside the dogs began barking and he looked up. The clock on the mantel showed ten o'clock.

"Probably a fox," he said.

"Pres, what can I do?"

"Nothing. There's not anything anybody can do at this point. General Graves continued to inquire but he had no luck. She vanished. But I know she's alive. Just as I knew we were riding into an ambush, I know she's alive. She's probably in Moscow—or maybe still in Siberia. That's where they keep their political prisoners."

"Do you want to talk to your father? I think you should."

"No. It would do no good. Besides, he would simply write her down as a debit."

"Pres, don't say such things. Your father loves you."

"And he loves business. You can guess which he loves more. To him everything—everyone—occupies a position on a balance sheet. By the end of the day he wants his assets to outweigh his liabilities. Who can blame him? After all, he's successful. I'm not. The only thing I'm good at is getting people hurt or killed. I have a real talent for that."

"Pres, no, that's not true!"

The dogs barked even louder and he went to the window. There was only blackness.

"I'd better go outside and take a look around."

A loud knock came from the front door and Prescott started down the hall.

Thaddeus stood at the door to his study. William was already opening the front door.

“Galen!” William said. “Where on earth have you been?”

Galen stumbled forward. He was not alone. Verlon supported him and helped him into the hall.

“Galen!” Grandma Freeman called. “Son, are you hurt?”

The family gathered around him except Thaddeus. He continued to stand before his study.

“He’s just mighty cold, Ma,” Verlon said. “We need to get him to a fire.”

“Help him into the parlor,” she said. “Mandy, run upstairs and get him some clothes. These things are wet.”

Sam pulled up a wing chair close to the fire. Mandy returned with an armful of clothes.

“All right, I want the rest of you to leave,” Grandma Freeman said. “Verlon, you stay and help me get him into these warm clothes.”

She closed the door behind them. Prescott leaned against the wall. He looked at Mandy. She was staring at him. He reached into his shirt pocket for a cigarette and struck a match and inhaled deeply.

“Why you think Galen is with Uncle Verlon?” Sam asked.

“No need to ask questions,” Mandy said. “We’ll know soon enough.”

Thaddeus walked slowly down the hall and stood next to Prescott.

“Is your brother all right?” Thaddeus asked.

“Why don’t you go in there and see?”

Thaddeus reached his hand out toward the doorknob and hesitated. Then he grasped it and disappeared. The door closed softly. Wet clothes were stacked on the heart pine floor and his mother and brother were helping Galen into a red flannel shirt. Galen was shivering.

“Brother, you got any bourbon around here?” Verlon asked. “It’ll get Galen’s blood pumpin’ faster. It won’t do mine no harm neither.”

Thaddeus walked to the mahogany corner cabinet and poured bourbon from the decanter into three glasses.

“Ma?”

“No thanks. I’m going to brew some tea. I think hot tea will do a better job of warming him up.”

Thaddeus handed a glass to his brother and to his son.

“Galen, where have you been?” Thaddeus asked.

Galen sipped the bourbon and coughed. Grandma Freeman left to brew the tea. The others stayed in the hall.

“Just watching and waiting,” the son said and his eyes never left the flames.

“Waiting and watching—until the end came. And then I went to Uncle Verlon’s.”

“I don’t understand, son,” Thaddeus said. “You still haven’t said where you were.”

This time Galen lifted the glass and downed the drink in one gulp and set the glass on the floor. A downdraft provoked a hiss from the fire.

“I sat on the hill overlooking Ledbetter’s place.”

“Ledbetter’s?”

“That’s right, Pa. I sat there all evening. It’s a beautiful sight—watching the snow come down in the twilight. Each flake has its own little share of gray daylight and so you have a million little pale lights sprinkling down from heaven and lighting the ground. I had never noticed it before but, then, I had never sat on a hill like that.”

“Why did you go there?” Thaddeus asked.

“I wanted to be close to her. I knew she was going to die. I heard the screech owl. I knew it was crying for her.”

“Nobody was going to die.”

“You’re wrong, Pa. Emma is dead. I sat on that hill and watched and waited. The doc came. The preacher came. They didn’t stay long and then they left. Josiah and Stephen went running out into the yard. They were screaming and crying and they just fell down in the snow. I knew then Emma was dead—the baby too. I killed them, Pa.”

“No, nonsense, Galen.”

“I killed them. Their blood is on me. Blood has always been the most important thing in this family. That’s what I’ve always heard. But now somebody else’s blood is mingled with my blood. Your investment didn’t pay off too well, did it?”

“What investment?”

“The money you paid old man Ledbetter. Just think—if you’d waited a little longer, you wouldn’t have had to pay him a cent. But he got your money. I call that a bad investment. What do you call that, Uncle Verlon?”

“Oh, I don’t know, son,” Verlon said. “It sounds like one of the crazy roads life leads us down.”

“I ain’t used to the liquor,” Galen said. “I’m feeling kind of sleepy.”

Galen closed his eyes and Verlon went to the corner cabinet.

“Well, I am used to the liquor,” Verlon said. “I need to refresh my glass.”

Thaddeus shook his head and stared at his son.

“Thank you for bringing him home.”

“You don’t have to thank me,” Verlon said. “When he showed up at my place, I knew he didn’t need to be out walking in this stuff. Damnedest snowfall I’ve seen in quite a spell. I knew you folks would be worried sick about him, so I loaded him up into the wagon and drove him over.”

Verlon stood next to the corner cabinet and looked around the room. The Christmas tree stood in the opposite corner. Magnolia leaves and pine cones lay on the mantel. He remembered sitting in this room when he and Thaddeus were boys. They would sit with their father in front of the fire on cold winter nights and listen to tales of bird hunts and fishing trips. He could still see the faraway look in Thaddeus’s eyes but Verlon took in every word. He remembered the stories about the panther that had come down from the mountains and cried mournfully in the darkness. Jeffrey had explained that the panther had probably lost its mate and was crying for it. But all the farmers were wary. They got their shotguns and rifles and went into the woods to look for it. They found paw prints along the edge of the Etowah but they never saw the panther. Some of the old-timers still said they heard it in the dead of night.

Grandma Freeman returned with the tea on a tray and looked down at Galen. He slept. She set the tray on a table and sat in the chair near the Christmas tree.

“Well, it’s been a long time since the three of us occupied this room,” she said.

“Verlon, we missed you at Christmas dinner.”

“You know me, Ma,” Verlon said, “I ain’t much for big family gatherings. I reckon I best be on my way.”

“No, wait—” Thaddeus said. “It’s late. The weather’s miserable. We’ve taken care of your mules. You should stay here tonight.”

Verlon bit his lower lip and wavered.

“You’re sure I won’t be any trouble?”

“No. You won’t be any trouble. We’d be—pleased—to have you.”

Morgan Ledbetter followed the parallel tracks in the snow. Who’d be out in a wagon in weather like this? he wondered. He cradled the 12-gauge shotgun in his arm and walked carefully. Any slush on the road had turned to ice. The wind stung his face, especially the red scratch on his cheek left by his wife. She had fought to keep him from leaving. She had clawed at him and screamed and he had hit her and knocked her to the floor. He would not have a woman telling him what he would or would not do. The family was his and he would make the decisions.

He stopped and listened. A demented choir of dogs howled and he spat tobacco juice into the darkness. The road began its climb up Freeman’s Hill and he clutched the shotgun tighter. Lights from the house scorched the snow in the front yard. Two mules and a wagon sat in front of the steps. One of the Freeman boys appeared and led the mules to the barn. From the look of things, all them lights burnin’ so bright and pretty, must be a lot goin’ on tonight, he concluded. He leaned against an oak no more than ten feet from the steps. He pulled a bottle of whiskey from his coat pocket and drank. The

Freeman boy returned from the barn and hurried up the steps. The slamming of the door made Morgan's body tremble and he drank again. He looked at the lights burning in the windows and he saw Emma lying on the bloody sheet, her body pale and cold. He pulled back the hammers and fired into the tree above. The blast shattered branches and sent snow falling on his head.

The blast startled everyone in the house.

"What the hell—" Verlon said. "Sorry, Ma."

Prescott straightened and stared at the door.

"Freeman! Thaddeus Freeman!"

Prescott would know the voice anywhere. His father opened the door to the parlor and came into the hall. Verlon followed.

"Pa, don't go out there," Prescott said. "He sounds drunk."

"Pres is right," Verlon said. "I'll go and see what he wants."

"No, he called for me," Thaddeus said. "I won't let him think he can intimidate me."

"Thaddeus Freeman!" Morgan shouted. "You in there. You hidin' behind your momma's dress? Get your murderin' ass out here!"

Thaddeus opened the door slowly and stepped onto the porch. He saw only blackness. Morgan pulled back the other hammer.

"You want to see me, Morgan?" Thaddeus asked. "Well, here I am. I ain't hiding behind any dress. Looks like you're hiding in the dark. Come out where I can see you."

Morgan stepped away from the tree and stood in the light bursting through the open front door. He caught a glimpse of the others in the hall. He knew they would be

watching and wondering and that was all right. He wanted them to wonder. He wanted them to worry. He stumbled to the front steps and looked up at Thaddeus.

“Emma’s dead,” Morgan said.

“I’m sorry.”

“Truer words were never spoken. You’re sorry, all right. It’s because of you and that goddamned coward of a son that she’s dead.”

“I’m not sure how you figure that. I reckon you’re just distraught.”

“Distraught, hell! I’m going to kill you, Thaddeus Freeman.”

“I ain’t armed, Morgan. Or does that matter to you?”

“Oh, I ain’t come to kill you tonight. I just come to serve you notice. When you least expect it, I’m goin’ to scatter your brains all over Bartow County.”

“At least you recognize I got enough brains to cover the whole county.”

Morgan spat in the snow.

“The day of reckonin’ is at hand. Judgment is comin’ upon you and the house of Freeman.”

“I get my preaching on Sunday.”

Morgan quickly lifted the shotgun and fired the remaining shell. Shouts and screams erupted in the hall. The family rushed onto the porch. The banister at the front of the second-floor porch splintered and fell onto the snow.

“That’s your notice. The next time I’ll aim to kill.”

Morgan faded into the darkness. Grandma Freeman touched Thaddeus on the sleeve.

“Are you hurt?” she asked.

“I’m fine, Ma. He’s just drunk.”

“Let’s call the sheriff,” Mandy said. “We can have him arrested.”

“No, we’re not calling the sheriff. Like I said, he’s drunk. Let’s get inside. It’s cold out here. I can’t believe Galen slept through all the excitement.”

Prescott lay in the bedroom and stared at the ceiling. William was snoring but for Prescott sleep would not come. The heavy patchwork quilts provided warmth and comfort but sleep remained the stranger it had been for many nights. He rose from the bed and confronted the chill of the air. He dressed quietly and walked to the window. The snow had stopped. The plaintive call of a train whistle in Kingston sounded as if it were much farther away. He saw himself on the southbound to await orders in Atlanta. Marshall had told him the orders would go to Ft. McPherson.

“By that time you will know whether you are staying in or mustering out,” Marshall said in the hospital in Paris where Prescott finished his recuperation. “Don’t make the decision now. This is not the time. Go home and think. If you decide to stay in, the orders will be waiting for you.”

Prescott closed his eyes and when he opened them, he still saw the snow—except this time he saw the contorted body of a young woman with her blood sprinkled on the whiteness. In the wasteland of blinding snow armies ambushed and fled and left behind the red stain upon the white.

In the shadows Marcus Stokesbury's manuscript lay on top of the dresser and Prescott picked it up. The pages were cold and he tucked them under his arm and headed downstairs. The stairs creaked loudly. Thaddeus was coming out of the study.

"Can't sleep?" Thaddeus asked.

"No, sir."

"I'm going to give it a try."

"Do you mind if I use your study to read?"

"No, not at all. I'll leave the light on. But be sure to turn it off when you're finished."

Prescott walked into the study and sat in the black leather chair behind the large desk. Thaddeus had closed the large ledger and stacked his papers neatly in several piles. Only the lamp on the desk burned. Shadows stretched across the floor to the books lining the walls. The old house was silent and cold. It had seen its share of bloodshed. He remembered the stories about old McClain, the man who had built it after the Cherokees had left. He had come from Scotland with little more than willpower and the vision of a farm extending from the Hill to the Etowah. His wife did not survive long in the wilderness but he did not give up. His mules pulled up the stumps and he plowed the land and the cotton came and then the corn. His daughter, Katherine, cared little for farming. Her love was music, so he bought a piano.

And then the young man named Jeffrey Freeman showed up, poor, hungry, looking for work. McClain took a chance on him.

“I don’t work slaves here,” McClain told him. “Everything that grows here grows because we planted it and the good Lord saw fit to nourish it with a little rain. I’m not beholden to any man.”

Jeffrey Freeman worked hard. He learned to be a farmer. He learned to deal with insult and the insults were many. Most of the landowners did not own slaves but a few did and they did not like McClain’s attitude toward slavery. A man named Davenport, who had come from Kentucky, taunted McClain. His men taunted Jeffrey in town. The taunts became violent. Davenport coveted McClain’s land and he had him killed, had him shot in a pasture. Jeffrey found him and brought him home and loaded a shotgun. It was not difficult finding Davenport. He was walking out of the hotel dining room with two of his men. Jeffrey stood in the middle of the street and shots rang out. Witnesses swore that Davenport shot first. One blast from the shotgun felled Davenport and one of the men. The other barrel took care of the second worker and the hotel dining room window.

No charges were ever filed. Katherine McClain moved to Baltimore to live with relatives. Before she left she signed over the ownership of the farm to Jeffrey. The land grew prosperous. It received the rain. It received the blood.

“You and the land are one,” McClain had told him. “You pour your soul into it and it pours its soul into you. Sometimes you have to fight to protect it. Some folks will stop at nothing to try to get your land. So you fight and sometimes you die. The land will take your blood and you will always be a part of it.”

Jeffrey had fought and he had killed. The land was Freeman land. Prescott sat in the chair within the silence of the old house and felt the blood of the land running through his veins. He opened the manuscript and read.

CHAPTER 15

The train pulled into Savannah on a rainy December afternoon and after J. J. took care of the horses, we found lodging in the Dorchester Hotel on the waterfront. It was by no means a fancy establishment but Chris assured us the food was first-rate. We were not disappointed. Chris and J. J. went up to the room and I went in search of the telegraph office. I wired Harris we would arrive in Atlanta late the next day. We would have a layover of three hours before heading north to Chattanooga. Perhaps he would have a moment to see us. I wanted him to meet Chris and J. J.

Despite the rain—it was nothing heavy, more drizzle than anything else—I went for a walk. I traversed Oglethorpe Park and took in several blocks. Because of the symmetry of the city, it was impossible to get lost. But the thing that bothered me was the sense of conformity. I wanted to find just one city block—just one—that was different in layout, different in dimensions. But they were all the same. I looked forward to arriving in Atlanta.

By the time I returned to the hotel a message was waiting in the lobby. Harris had responded quickly. He would meet us at Union Station and take us to the Driving Club for dinner.

“What’s a driving club?” J. J. asked.

I dropped onto the bed and smiled.

“It’s a social club.”

“What if I don’t want to be social?”

“Just be yourself, J. J.,” Chris said. “I’m sure it will be fine.”

“They have a golf course,” I said. “Some of Atlanta’s elite are members there. And, of course, the restaurant is exemplary.”

“Well, I don’t know what that means and I don’t play golf,” J. J. said.

“You eat and you’ll enjoy it,” I said.

“Tell me about this Harris fellow,” Chris said.

“Joel Chandler Harris is the new editor of the *Constitution*. He’s a big man, rotund, you might say. He has this large bushy mustache. Some of us call him a walrus—behind his back, you know. He is a fine writer, a great storyteller. It was a real shame to lose Grady but at least we have Harris. He will keep the newspaper growing.”

“You like newspapering, don’t you?” J. J. asked.

“Yes, yes, I do. Once it gets in your blood, you can’t get rid of it.”

“It sounds like a serious illness,” J. J. said. “Well, gents, I suggest we get some shuteye.”

J. J. woke us before daybreak and we headed to the depot to board the westbound. Chris and I took our seats and J. J. went to check on the horses. He cared more about those horses, I think, than most men care about their families. He would later tell me that where he came from a good horse could mean the difference between life and death. I asked him where he came from and he walked away.

The track stretched endlessly across the flatland of the piedmont. On both sides of the car were vast barren fields that only a few months earlier had been alive with cotton. But now they looked dead. J. J. also stared at the desolate fields. The expression on his face was stoic and it seldom changed. I once asked him why he never smiled and he said

it was to keep nosy newspapermen like me asking questions. I figured if he ever wanted to tell me, he would.

We arrived in Macon in the early afternoon and changed to a Western and Atlantic train. Once again J. J. made sure the horses had proper accommodations. The locomotive pulled us northward and we felt the earth beginning to rise from the flatlands. The car was cold and there were few passengers. I looked out the window. In the grayness of the afternoon small hills rose and pine forests came into view. It occurred to me for the first time that perhaps J. J. had never been in a city like Atlanta.

When the train arrived at Union Station in Atlanta, we stood slowly and stretched. Our bodies ached from being on a train all day. Quite frankly, at least as far as I was concerned, I did not care for a dinner at the Driving Club. I felt certain J. J. and Chris shared my sentiments. But Harris was standing on the platform, so we left the car and accepted his outstretched hand.

“Welcome to Atlanta, gentlemen,” Harris said. “Marcus, it’s good to have you back, if only temporarily. My carriage is out front.”

He led us through the cavernous lobby and J. J. looked up at the vaulted ceiling and then down at the marble floor. Chris was oblivious. The carriage took us from Forsyth Street to Marietta Street and then to Piedmont. From there it was only a few miles to the Driving Club.

“I trust you had a good journey,” Harris said.

“Tiring,” Chris answered. “The mission is not the most pleasant.”

“I was sorry to hear about your brother. You and your family have my sympathy. Mr. McPherson, where are you from?”

“No place in particular.”

“I see. You know, we have a military installation here named Ft. McPherson. It was named after a Union general. But we don’t mind. All that’s in the past. The future is all that counts. That’s what Grady would say.”

When the carriage turned off Piedmont, I caught my first glimpse of the Driving Club. The electric lights suspended above the drive revealed in the darkness a multi-story, tudor-style granite mansion. Fog was descending so that the gray granite structure had the appearance of an old medieval castle. I expected a knight to ride by at any moment.

We went into the lobby and an attendant took our coats and hats. J. J. was wearing a black leather vest. A pistol was clearly visible at his side. Harris saw it too. We were led to a table next to a high window where we could see only darkness. Only two other tables were occupied and Harris raised his hand in greeting. Walnut paneling graced the walls. A portrait of Joe Brown hung above a sideboard. From the ceiling a large crystal chandelier released a splendor of light.

“During the day you can see the golf course from here,” Harris said. “Marcus, I know you don’t play. How about you gentlemen?”

“I’ve played a little in Boston,” Chris said.

“Can’t say I ever have,” J. J. said.

The main course was roasted duck served on china. Of course, Chris was accustomed to such finery. J. J.’s finger traced the gold outline on the edge of the plate.

“Marcus, I’m looking forward to your dispatches from Nevada. Whereabouts will you be?”

“Virginia City,” Chris said. “That’s where my brother was living.”

“And when you’re finished with your business out there, I want you to come back here, Marcus. You’re a damn good reporter and we need you. The *Constitution* is going gangbusters right now. It’s growing right alongside the city. This fellow Morris Rich is doing real well with his store. Our advertising revenues are way up. I’m going to need more editors.”

“Thanks, Joel.”

The waiter brought a white wine and we drank in silence. I stared out the window and tried to imagine the look of the golf course. I had seen drawings in newspapers but I had never seen the real thing. The city was changing.

“Mr. McPherson, I couldn’t help but notice the pistol you carry,” Harris said.

“Have you ever had to use that thing?”

J. J. finished the wine and set the glass down gingerly.

“Only when I had to.”

“Well, hopefully you won’t have to use it around here.”

“Marcus, I think you should write a profile of Mr. McPherson—with his permission, of course.”

“We’ll see.”

“Another story I want you to think about is the changing face of business,” Harris said. “That’s one reason I wanted to bring you here. There aren’t many folks here tonight because of the Christmas holidays. But after the first of the year this room will be crowded every day. Atlanta’s elite come here and what do they do? They make deals. And not just in here but out on the golf course. Thousands of dollars change hands within

these walls. That would be a good follow-up to your story on Jekyll. Deals are made in places like this. Profits are spent in places like that. Do you think your father would agree, Mr. Mondale?"

"I can't speak for my father," Chris said. "And I'm not a businessman. I'm training to be a doctor."

"I think we'd best be leavin'," J. J. said.

We thanked Harris for his hospitality and we headed for the door. In the lobby Harris grabbed my arm.

"Marcus, do you know anything about that man?" Harris asked.

"What man?"

"McPherson. Have you noticed the look in his eyes? It's a cold, murderous look. There's no mercy there. Marcus, you had better be careful. I don't think you know what you're getting into."

"Of course not. I'm a newspaperman. I'll just follow the story and see where it leads me."

We rode back to Union Station. The mist had become a light rain and the dark pavement glistened in the glare of the streetlamps. We thanked Harris again and returned to the train. J. J. checked on the horses and Chris and I found our seats.

"Marcus, do you like all that talk about business?" Chris asked.

"Listening is a big part of my job."

"Well, I don't. I guess that sounds strange coming from a Mondale. But business is what I hear in Boston, in New York, in Georgia. No matter where I go, that's what I hear. It gets a little tiresome after a while."

J. J. entered the car. The locomotive hissed and roared and pulled away from the platform. Not long after we cleared the yards we were asleep.

I have often wondered about the significance of dreams. I recognize the possibility there is no significance at all. But I consider that possibility small. Perhaps they are the built-up energy of previous experience that must somehow find an outlet; otherwise they may lie dormant within the mind and ferment and fester and manifest themselves in unsavory behavior. I do not pretend to be a specialist in the matters of the brain and, to be quite frank, I have never met anyone who truly was.

I have also considered the possibility that dreams may be a harbinger. They may portend things to come. I am reminded of Joseph in Egypt. Now he was a specialist in these matters. If you wanted to know the significance of a dream, he was the man to see. He could examine the dream and see the future.

And then there is the matter of the nightmare. I think there is more than dammed up experience here although that is a big part of it. The experience is caught up in the flood of emotion. There is a crack in the dam and the flood spills forth and destroys everything in its path. But the nightmare may also offer a glimpse of the future and it is a future we do not want to see. And so we scream and writhe and wake.

The nightmare occurred our first night in St. Louis. Long after midnight I heard the groan. It was so low that at first I thought I had been dreaming. The groan became louder and then there was the shriek.

“No, don’t shoot!”

Chris and I leaped out of bed and expected to confront an intruder. Instead, in the darkness we saw J. J. He lay on his bed with the sheet gripped tightly in his hands. He turned his head violently from side to side and mumbled fiercely. Chris approached him and gently shook his shoulders. J. J. awoke and stared at us as if he had never seen us before.

“J. J., are you all right?” Chris asked and there was worry in his voice.

J. J. ran his hands over his face. Light from the building across the street filtered into our room and touched his face. He was sweating and his hands trembled.

“Yeah, I’m all right. Just a dream.”

I saw the holster hanging on the bedpost.

“J. J., where’s your pistol?” I asked.

He looked at the holster and grinned. He reached under his pillow and pulled out the pistol. The barrel was blacker than the night.

“A man can’t be too careful,” he said.

We went back to bed and I lay in the darkness and wondered.

CHAPTER 16

The odyssey took several weeks. There were countless delays. A blizzard descended on the plains and we had to wait for a break in the weather. And, for some reason, J. J. would abruptly change our schedule and we would have to wait for another train and sometimes he would say he did not like the car the horses would ride in and we would wait for another train. Chris did not complain.

The cars were usually full of passengers, many of them immigrants. They spoke different languages and they seemed as amazed at the countryside as I was. We crossed endless snow-covered plains and valleys surrounded by treeless mountains higher than I had ever imagined. The peaks were topped with snow. I had never thought about mountains without trees. I had never seen any before. The rough rock faces of these mountains spoke of strength and seemed to say if you are not strong, then you had best turn around and go back where you came from.

Our car had several drummers and they represented everything from ladies' shoes to washing machines. The big stores in Chicago that were becoming so important at the time sent them throughout the West and South to sell merchandise. They dressed well. Their shoes always had an immaculate shine. They saw prospects among the immigrants and they took the opportunity to peddle their wares. After all, these folks would need a washing machine before they found a house.

We crossed a lengthy desert in Nevada. Mountains rose on the horizon. It was a hard land and I looked at the immigrants and admired their courage. I also wondered how

many would survive. When the train started its uphill struggle in the western part of the state, we passed tall pines and spruces and firs that dotted the outcroppings of granite. And then the trees became more numerous and a feeling of familiarity sank in. Somehow Harris's warning was a distant memory. Everything, I felt at that moment, was going to be all right.

The train crossed a plateau and the trees still stood majestic and beautiful against a clear blue sky. The air was cold but it was refreshing to see the sunshine bathing the landscape. It had been the custom of the conductor to walk through the car and announce the name of the town we were approaching but for some odd reason the train began to slow and shake and there was no sign of the conductor. The train stopped in what appeared to be a clearing in a forest and all the passengers looked from side to side. Suddenly the doors at both ends of the cars were flung open and several men, bandanas over their faces and pistols in their hands, rushed down the aisle and shouted orders.

"Everybody outside! Now!"

Some of the women screamed and a few children cried but we all did as we were told. I had read about this sort of stuff in countless dime novels. Never had I thought I would be in the midst of a train robbery.

"Let's get a move on it, people! We don't have all day! Just do as you're told and nobody gets hurt!"

The passengers were packed together in the aisle and shuffled to the front of the car. The man behind me was so close he kept stepping on my heels. A young girl holding his hand was sniffing. I looked down and smiled.

"Everything's going to be all right," I said.

“No talkin’, damn it! Move!”

We filed out of the car and stood on the ground. Men with rifles sat on horses and two men walked in front of the passengers with bags and filled them with money and jewelry. I had nothing of value. I was a newspaperman. So I grew a little nervous. I wondered whether they shot people who had no valuables. A young woman and her son stood next to J. J. I did not look at them but I saw their shadows on the ground. A gunman went up to the woman and studied her face.

“Well, lookee here. You’re a fine lookin’ lady. Take off them gloves.”

She complied. A diamond ring shone in the sunlight.

“Yes, sir, jest as I thought. Gimmee that ring.”

“No, you don’t,” the boy said.

He could have been no more than six. He lunged at the robber, who slapped him viciously across the mouth. The boy flew to the ground and the woman screamed and ran to him.

“You boys give train robbers a bad name,” J. J. said.

I had never heard a voice so calm, so quiet, so—deadly—in the midst of adversity.

“J. J., what are you doing?” Chris whispered. “Do you want to get killed?”

The robber stood in front of J. J. and laughed. I watched out of the corner of my eye.

“Well, you got a big mouth, mister,” the robber said. “I don’t cotton to nobody criticizin’ my manners. Maybe I’ll teach you a lesson of the West.”

What happened next took only a few seconds but a lifetime seemed to transpire. The robber lowered his hand toward his pistol but before he ever reached it a hole opened in his chest and blood spurted on the ground. Everybody started screaming again and falling to the ground. The only thing I saw as I sought cover on the tracks under the train was J. J. rolling over and over with a pistol in each hand. A man fell from the roof of the car onto the ground directly in front of me and dust flew up into my face. As quickly as the shooting started it was over. The crying continued and when I crawled out from beneath the train the conductor was running, red-faced, from the direction of the locomotive.

J. J. rose to his feet and held the smoking pistols. Two riders lay on the ground at the feet of their horses. Another rider was disappearing among the Ponderosa pines. A couple of passengers looked at the blood-soaked coat of one of the robbers and ran toward some bushes and bent over. J. J. placed one of the pistols in a holster at his back, a holster I did not even know he had. He proceeded to load the other pistol. And I will never forget this—the calmness with which he did everything. I looked at his hands. They did not tremble. As for me, I was shaking all over. The conductor was out of breath. He was an old, thin man and his black suit hung loosely on him. He stared at the robbers on the ground.

“Mister, you shot all of ’em,” the conductor said.

“No. One got away.”

“But—but—how the hell did you do that? I haven’t seen anything like that since—”

The conductor looked into J. J.'s eyes and then at the barrel of the smoking Colt and he turned toward the passengers.

"All right, folks, back on the train. Excitement's over. A couple of you men put these bodies in the baggage car. Lay down a tarp first. I don't want blood all over the floor."

The young boy was still lying on the ground and his mouth was bleeding. The mother was dabbing the blood with a kerchief. J. J. walked over.

"You're a mighty brave young man," J. J. said. "You ain't a boy. Only a man would have done what you did."

The boy did not cry. He looked up and smiled. And I knew that when he was an old man he would sit with his grandchildren and tell about the day J. J. McPherson shot the train robbers.

The train made its last climb and Virginia City came into view. The immigrants became excited and they started talking in the language I did not understand. I must say I was excited too. I had read about Virginia City and I could not wait to take a tour. But then I remembered the purpose of the journey and my excitement waned. We passed the eastern outskirts of the town. The buildings and houses were small. As we approached the depot, the buildings became larger. The sun was fading behind the western mountains and the air was still awfully cold but at least there was no snow. I looked down the platform and saw men unloading the bodies. Then I saw a large—rotund, you might say—bearded man leaning against the wall next to the ticket window. He wore a brown suit and he had his hat pulled low over his eyes. A silver star shone on the lapel of his

coat. I was surprised he was not down by the baggage car but he seemed more interested in the passengers. The conductor walked up to him and whispered.

J. J. and Chris came down the steps after me and the sheriff walked up.

“Hello, gentlemen,” he said. “Welcome to Virginia City. I’d like for you to come with me.”

With grips in hand, we followed the sheriff around the corner of the depot and up the street. The sheriff took small steps, yet he covered a lot of ground quickly. He had an easy-going way about him and he was always smiling. Nevertheless, I did not think he would be an easy man to like. I looked at J. J. and Chris. Neither appeared happy.

The jail was a two-story red brick building with black iron bars decorating all the windows. As we approached it, people on the sidewalks—and there were many people—stopped and stared at us. For a moment I felt as if they thought we were the train robbers and their sheriff had done his duty and arrested us. He led us into his office and slammed the door behind us. He motioned us to some straight chairs and he himself went behind his desk and rolled a cigarette and lit it.

“Word spreads fast out here about a train robbery,” he said. “My name is Wilkins. Frank Wilkins. Born and raised in Ohio. Saw the light and came west when I was young. I’m paid to make sure people obey the law and when they don’t, I’m paid to make sure they’re punished. I hear that was some kind of fancy shooting.”

He looked at J. J. and continued to smile. J. J., meanwhile, remained stone-faced.

“What’s your name?”

“McPherson. J. J. McPherson.”

“Why haven’t I ever heard of you?”

“Why should you?”

“Oh, it’s simple,” Sheriff Frank Wilkins said. “When a man shoots the way you do, he gets himself a reputation. You see, when a man is as good with a gun as you apparently are, the opportunities to use it just keep coming along. And then you have the reputation. Somehow I don’t think I need to tell you this. I think you already know. Anyway, the citizens of this community owe you a debt of gratitude. We can’t be having desperadoes robbing trains. Those days are past us. By the way, what is your business here?”

“You should be asking me that question,” Chris said. “He’s here because I’m here. My brother was killed before Christmas. I’ve come to take his body home. And while I’m here, I’d like to find out what happened.”

“What’s your brother’s name?”

“Mondale.”

Wilkins crushed the cigarette on the heel of his boot and leaned back in his chair.

“Yeah, I remember. It was unfortunate. Slade is keeping his body. We heard you were coming for it. I’m real sorry.”

“Where is Slade?”

“At the far end of the street. Can’t miss it. He’s not open this late in the day. Best see him in the morning.”

“Just how did my brother die?”

“The same way a lot of men out here die. Your friend McPherson can tell you that. Your brother was shot.”

“Who did it?”

“That I don’t know. A lot of times we don’t know. Virginia City is a rich little town, gentlemen. A damn heap of money changes hands, especially over the poker tables. People get upset and figure a bullet in the back will do the trick.”

“Was my brother shot in the back?”

“I don’t rightly remember. Ask Slade. He’ll know.” Wilkins looked at me. “I didn’t get your name.”

“Marcus Stokesbury. I’m a newspaperman. The *Atlanta Constitution*.”

“Hellfire, you don’t say! Just what this town needs is another writer.”

We stood and headed toward the door. Wilkins remained seated.

“Gentlemen, there’s something I want you to remember,” Wilkins said. “I like Virginia City to be nice and peaceable. I’m sorry about what happened to your brother but I won’t stand for any kind of vengeance-is-mine thing. Do I make myself clear?”

We nodded our heads and walked outside. Chris breathed deeply and J. J. looked up and down the street. The passers-by still looked at us askance. One thing that impressed me was the finery that the townspeople wore. I have always found it useful to observe apparel, for it provides a clear indication of how wealthy a town is. When I looked at these people, I knew that what I had read about Virginia City was true. It was a wealthy town.

The streets were wide and clean. There were many shops and behind each window was an orderly display of merchandise—shoes, suits, dresses, hardware. Darkness had just about made its descent complete and we found what appeared to be a promising restaurant on a street corner. It was called Delmonico’s. At least the name sounded good. J. J. left us to return to the depot to get the horses and lead them to a

stable. Chris and I walked inside the restaurant and found a table far from the door. The room was full of men and cigarette and cigar smoke. They watched us. A waitress, a young woman whose English was broken, recommended the steaks. We ordered three.

“Where are you from?”

“Lithuania,” she said with difficulty. “My family and I come to dis country and work on ranch. But no future. So I come to city and work here. More money.”

“That’s the old spirit,” I said.

She left and I looked around the dining room. I could tell Chris did not want to talk, so I studied the men at the other tables. A few had resumed their conversations but most of them still stared. I smiled and they looked away. When J. J. opened the door and joined us, the staring commenced all over again. There were whispers. J. J. ignored them.

“Chris, there’s something I want you to understand,” J. J. said. “After we make arrangements to take your brother back home, we’re leavin’.”

“After meeting with the sheriff, I’m in no hurry to leave. If it turns out Tom was shot in the back, then I’ll—”

“You’ll what?” J. J. said. “If it turns out he was murdered, he was killed by no-good sons of bitches like those who thought they’d rob a train today. They’re cutthroats. You don’t find too many men like them in Boston. They’d just as soon shoot you down as look at you.”

“They’ve got to be punished.”

“Well, not by us. I promised your old man I’d look after you and bring you home safely. That’s what I intend to do. You ain’t gonna be any damn hero. Heroes out here don’t last too long.”

The waitress brought our steaks and beer. Delmonico's was not the Driving Club but the food was just as good if not better. J. J. and I ate quickly. Chris hardly touched his meal. I lifted the glass of beer and looked at the door. A young woman was standing there, a notepad of some sort in her left hand. She wore a long purple dress. One thing that struck me immediately was her hair. It was black as the feathers on a raven and it fell down to her shoulders. Many women balled their hair at the back of their heads. She walked toward us. There was no hesitation. She was resolute. In her right hand she carried a long yellow pencil with a sharp point.

"Gentlemen," she said. "Which one of you is Mr. J. J. McPherson?"

J. J. looked up from the last of his steak. He squirmed a bit in his chair.

"Well, I reckon I am," he said and he removed the white cloth napkin from his shirt collar and wiped his mouth. He stood and they shook hands. "How can I help you, ma'am?"

"My name is Eloise Endicott," she said. "May I pull up a chair?"

She did not wait for an answer. She pulled a high-back chair from a nearby table and sat. J. J. sat back down and stared at the remainder of the beer in the bottom of his glass.

"I own the *Virginia City Standard*," she said.

"What's that?" J. J. asked.

"It's a newspaper."

"And you own it?"

"You seem surprised."

"Well, yeah, I guess I am."

“Don’t be. It’s 1890, Mr. McPherson. Times are changing.”

“Mrs.—” Chris said.

“It’s Miss Endicott,” she said.

“Miss Endicott, we don’t want to talk to any newspaper folks,” Chris said. “We just want to finish our meal.”

“And who are you, sir?”

“This here is Chris Mondale,” J. J. said. “And this other greenhorn is Marcus Stokesbury. He’s with the *Atlanta Constitution*.”

“The *Constitution*?” she said. “Really? Henry Grady’s paper?”

She seemed genuinely impressed and I began to feel important.

“Well, not anymore. He died recently.”

“I’m sorry. I hadn’t heard. You must come see my operation while you’re here,” she said.

“I would like to,” I said.

“And now, Mr. McPherson, I need to talk to you.”

J. J. breathed deeply. He was the kind of man who did not appreciate pushy women and I would have to say that Eloise Endicott was what would be called a pushy woman. But there was something about her that was hard to resist. Maybe it was her accent. It was definitely Southern. But whatever it was, J. J. was finding it hard to resist also. He raised the glass of beer and finished it.

“Miss Endicott, can I buy you anything?” J. J. asked.

“No, thank you. I just want to ask you a few questions for tomorrow’s edition. I think it’ll be a special edition. Folks are going to want to read about the train robbery and the man who stopped it. Where are you from?”

“Georgia.”

“Georgia? I’m practically a neighbor. I’m from Charleston. Are you originally from Georgia?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Well, Mr. McPherson, I’ve talked with several of the passengers who described what you did. And let’s be honest. We don’t expect our friends from Georgia to be able to handle a gun like that. That’s what we expect our old gunfighters to do.”

“Are you saying I’m old?”

She scribbled something in her notepad.

“Mr. Mondale, you don’t say much, do you?” she said. “What brings you to Virginia City?”

“My brother was killed. I’m going to take him back home.”

She stopped writing and stared at Chris. Her blue eyes sparkled in the lamplight of the dining room. Then she wrote again.

“Was your brother’s name Tom?”

“Yes, yes, it was. Did you know him?”

Again she stopped writing and she gripped the pencil tightly.

“No, not personally. I heard about him.”

“What did you hear?”

“Marcus—you don’t mind if I call you Marcus, do you? After all, we’re brother and sister in journalism—why don’t you help these fellows find a hotel and then the three of you can visit me at the *Standard*. I’ll be working late tonight.”

We pushed back our chairs and stood.

“Do you recommend a hotel?” J. J. asked.

“The Silver Palace is good. Not cheap. But there’s not a cheap place in town. It’s just down the street and the newspaper is up the street at the end.”

She turned and walked out of the dining room and the three of us settled our bill with the waitress and went onto the sidewalk. Rollicking piano tunes escaped the smoky saloons and hung in the cold night air. Men shuffled in and out of the swinging doors and a few brushed past us, whiskey heavy and sickening on their breath. We found the Silver Palace and checked in at the front desk.

“It’s at the top of the stairs,” the man, short, balding, thin-lipped, behind the desk said and he handed us the key.

We climbed the stairs and I looked down. The man was watching us.

Once inside the room J. J. raised the window and the cold air swept in. The piano music was loud and there were talking and laughing and occasional shouting. J. J. lowered the window.

“That woman knew about Tom,” Chris said.

“That don’t change nothin’,” J. J. said.

“Let’s go talk to her some more.”

“Nope.”

“All right. Then Marcus and I will go. How about it, Marcus?”

“I would like to see her printing press.”

“Oh, hell!” J. J. said. “I can’t have you two wanderin’ the streets by yourselves. Then I’d have to haul three bodies back to Georgia.”

We returned to the sidewalk and headed toward the newspaper office. The gas streetlamps were not bright but I was able to recognize the figure leaning against a hitching rail in front of one of the saloons. The cigarette hanging from his mouth glowed red in the dark. His sheer bulk identified him. It was the sheriff. He was watching us. It seemed to be a pastime in Virginia City to pay close attention to our circumambulation.

“Just ignore him,” J. J. said.

“How did you know he was over there?” I asked. “You didn’t look.”

“Didn’t have to. I know his type. He’s got a serious nose problem.”

We walked slowly along the sidewalk and came to the window with *Virginia City Standard* written across the window. We opened the door and a bell rang and a voice came from a back room.

“I’ll be out in a minute.”

Eloise Endicott appeared a moment later with black grease on her hands and nose.

“You came,” she said and she addressed this remark to J. J. “I’m glad. Sit down and make yourselves comfortable. There’s a fresh pot of coffee on the stove. Marcus, can you compose at the new linotype machines? If so, come on. I need your help.”

I followed her past tables on which were stacked previous issues of the paper into the back room. I sat on a swivel stool at the linotype machine and looked at the story she had begun to write in her notepad. She was busy working on the paper feed to her press. It was large and black and good quality.

“That’s quite a press,” I said.

“Mr. Hearst bought it for me and had it shipped here. You see, I was burned out last year. I guess I wrote something that made somebody mad. Mr. Hearst heard about it and took care of securing this building and all the equipment. Can you make heads or tails of my scribbling?”

“Yes. I must tell you I’m not a very good compositor.”

“You’ll do fine.”

I started pecking unsurely at the keys and the metal slugs clunked.

Desperadoes rewrote a page out of the Old West yesterday when they tried to rob the afternoon inbound. Little did they know that J. J. McPherson was one of the passengers.

In a hail of gunfire, McPherson shot the robbers and protected women and children from the ruthless gang.

McPherson, who comes from Georgia, declined to say much about his exploits. In fact, he prefers to let his background remain a mystery. . . .

I finished the story as best I could. Some of her handwriting was difficult to decipher. She thanked me profusely and after she finished working on the press, we went back into the outer office. J. J. and Chris were drinking coffee and Eloise poured some

for me. I sipped the steaming coffee and J. J. rose and took a handkerchief from his back pocket and walked up to Eloise and wiped the grease from her nose.

“Why, Mr. McPherson, thank you. Sometimes I get clear up to my elbows in grease. Not only are you a mysterious gunfighter, but you’re also a gentleman.”

“I’d prefer you not call me a gunfighter,” he said and put the handkerchief with the black smudge back into his pocket. “I run a game preserve for Chris’s father on Jekyll Island. I show people how to hunt for quail.”

“Quail don’t shoot back, though,” she said. “Train robbers do.”

J. J. returned to his split-bottom chair and leaned against the wall. A kerosene lamp burned dimly on a scratched table that was missing some of its veneer. The pianos were still lighting the night with fanciful tunes. I glanced at the window. A large shadow passed by. Eloise looked at the window also and she poured a cup of coffee for herself.

“I need a reporter,” she said to me.

“I have a job.”

“I couldn’t pay what the *Constitution* pays. But think of all the adventure out here.”

“I saw enough adventure on the train.”

We drank the coffee and J. J. lit a cigarette.

“Keep the ashes away from all the newspapers lying around,” she said.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Miss Endicott, what did you hear about my brother?” Chris asked.

In addition to tables, there were shelves lining the far wall filled with newspapers. She went to one of the shelves and flipped through several papers and retrieved one and

handed it to Chris. The story was on the front page. He began to read. I looked at J. J. He was watching Eloise and there was the faintest hint of a smile.

“It says here he was shot during a poker game,” Chris said. “It says he pulled a gun and a man shot him. This can’t be true.”

“Chris, that’s the information Sheriff Wilkins gave me. He supposedly interviewed the witnesses and he concluded the man shot in self-defense.”

“Tom didn’t even play poker,” Chris said.

“It’s possible he took it up once he got out here,” J. J. said. “Men take up a lot of things when they come out here.”

“Tom would never pull a gun on someone. Never.”

Chris read the story again and laid the paper on the table next to him. He stared at the hot potbelly stove and his arms hung limply to his side.

“Who killed him?” J. J. asked.

“Some man I don’t know anything about,” Eloise said.

“What was his name?”

“Ford. That’s all I know.”

J. J. finished the coffee and ran the fingers of his left hand over his chin.

“I’ll make the undertaker show us my brother’s body,” Chris said.

“You think that’s a good idea?” J. J. asked.

“You don’t have to see it. But I’ve got to know if he was shot in the back.”

“Miss Endicott, thank you for your hospitality,” J. J. said. “We’ll be goin’ now.”

We walked back to the hotel and I kept thinking that this was really no place for a young man like Chris. He was almost through with his medical studies at Harvard. He

should be back in Boston now but the obsession of knowing the details of his brother's death had grabbed hold of him and would not release him. He would stop at nothing to know the truth and I concurred with J. J. What good would it do to know the truth? What could Chris possibly do? I looked across the street. The mountainous figure of the sheriff slouched in the shadows and a cold feeling of dread passed slowly over my body.

We went into the hotel and climbed wearily up the stairs. The piano music was less raucous and it was a good thing. We needed to sleep. The hotel was quiet. No voices were heard. I opened the door and went to light the kerosene lamp on the table next to the bed. Chris followed and slumped into a chair. J. J. walked in and closed the door. The click of a pistol hammer being pulled back should not have seemed so loud but in the cold silence of the hotel room it was loud and startling.

J. J. froze. I saw only a pistol, not as big as J. J.'s, close to his head. A man stood in the shadows next to the door.

"J. J., you knew the agreement. If you went west of the Mississippi, you'd be shot on sight."

Any moment I expected the weapon to spew fire and then J. J.'s brains would be all over the floor. But the hammer dropped slowly and the man placed the pistol in a shoulder holster. J. J. turned slowly.

"Archibald, damn you!"

The man laughed and came out of the shadows. He wore a brown suit and derby hat.

"J. J., how the hell are you?"

"Well, soon as I change my drawers, I'll smell better."

“Don’t bet on it. Who we got here?”

“Chris Mondale. And Marcus Stokesbury. Gentlemen, this here is Archibald Miller.”

“Chris, I know your father well. He’s a fine man. And, Stokesbury, I believe you write for the *Constitution*.”

“Well, yes. But how—”

“Oh, I’m paid to know these things. I’m a Pinkerton. J. J. and I are old friends. Chris’s father wired me and said you’d be out here. I thought I’d pay you a visit. The night’s early, men. And there are plenty of good saloons in Virginia City. What do you say we find one and swap war stories?”

I knew then that sleep would have to wait. So we left the hotel again and Archibald Miller led us across the dusty street to an establishment called the Crooked Fork Saloon. There was a long dark mahogany bar and a large mirror flanked by shelves of glasses and bottles that sparkled in the lamplight. Tables littered the floor strewn with cigarette and cigar butts. Few patrons were standing at the bar or sitting at the tables. Upon entering, J. J. stopped and looked from one wall to the next. Stairs led to a landing and then to a second floor balcony defined by a dark wood banister. It was almost as if he did not wish to go any farther but after a moment’s hesitation he followed us to a table in the far corner. The bartender, a short, fat, whiskered man with a pale complexion approached.

“Give us a bottle of Kentucky whiskey,” Archibald said.

The bartender returned with a bottle and glasses and Archibald poured.

“Here’s to the West and your health,” he said.

We drank and Chris coughed.

“Well, son, we can get you water if you want it,” Archibald said.

“No, I can handle this.”

Archibald removed the derby and revealed a balding head. The hair remaining on the side of his head was a light gray. He poured himself another glass and looked directly into J. J.’s eyes.

“J. J., after you and Chris make arrangements tomorrow,” Archibald said, “I want you back on that train for the East.”

“Those are my plans. I’ve already told Chris.”

“Mr. Miller, how do you know about my brother?” Chris asked.

“Well, son, your father mentioned it in his will. I’m awfully sorry.”

“Do you know what happened?”

“No.”

“If I find out he was murdered, I’m not leaving until the killer is prosecuted.”

“Whoa, son,” Archibald said, “this isn’t Boston. Justice is better out here than it was twenty years ago but it still isn’t what you’re used to. Tracking down a killer is hard. You’d best leave it to the sheriff.”

“Sheriff Wilkins? I don’t trust him.”

Archibald looked at J. J.

“Wilkins is the sheriff?”

J. J. nodded. Archibald finished the drink and leaned forward and put his elbows on the table.

“Listen to me, son,” Archibald said. “You let the authorities take care of what needs taking care of. You get your ass back to Boston and graduate.”

“Those sound like my father’s words.”

“Well, they’re my words.”

Sheriff Wilkins strolled into the saloon and walked up to the bar and the bartender gave him a glass of beer. He turned toward us and raised the glass.

“A good evening for a drink,” he said and laughed. “Of course, it’s a better evening for what’s upstairs.”

He walked to the table and grinned at Archibald.

“Archibald Miller. I don’t guess you remember me?”

“I remember. I always remember a face and a wide girth. You give me plenty to remember.”

“I take it these men are your friends.”

“Hell, yes.”

“Your friend Mr. McPherson has already become a famous man in Virginia City. He’s quite an accomplished marksman.”

I looked at J. J. He said nothing. His right hand was beneath the table.

“Oh, he’s more lucky than good,” Archibald said.

“Luck’s the thing that keeps us alive,” Wilkins said.

He finished his beer and set the glass next to J. J.’s and turned and sauntered out the swinging doors. Chris stared at him. I had not known Chris long but he had struck me as the kind of person who did not hate. But the look of hate was in his eyes and his hands trembled.

“J. J., why the hell did you have to make such a grand entrance?” Archibald asked. “Word has spread all the way to Arizona about what happened today on that train. Did you have to do all that fancy shooting?”

“I was tryin’ to keep from gettin’ killed.”

“Couldn’t you have just winged them?”

“Nope. They needed killin’.”

The relationship between J. J. and Archibald intrigued me. I knew there was a story here and I knew it had nothing to do with Jekyll Island.

“J. J., if you don’t mind my asking,” I said, “where did you learn to shoot like that?”

“I do mind.”

“Well, I’m asking anyway. I’ve read about men being fast with a gun. But I had no idea anyone could be that fast. I mean—one moment you were just standing there outside the train car and the next moment there were pistols in both hands. It was almost as if your hands didn’t even move.”

“Marcus, just remember what I said to the sheriff,” Archibald said. “J. J. is just plain lucky.”

We finished our drinks and returned to the hotel. Archibald had taken a room down the hall from ours. Chris took the bed and J. J. and I spread blankets on the floor. It was not comfortable but I did not care. Before I fell asleep I thought about Archibald’s words. Hell, luck did not have a damn thing to do with it.

CHAPTER 17

The undertaker, a man named Slade, was an Englishman. In the front of his establishment he displayed an assortment of tombstones. Most were granite.

“You will be interested to know, gentlemen, since you come from the fine state of Georgia, that this granite is from Stone Mountain, the finest granite in the world,” Slade said.

He went on to explain that the few marble pieces were imported directly from Italy.

“Many of my clients are wealthy individuals. They want style in their life and they want style in their death.”

“We don’t need a monument,” Chris said. “I just want to see my brother.”

Slade was a tall thin fellow with a long crooked nose that looked as if it would fall off his face at any moment. He took in Chris’s words and definitely looked displeased. He thought for a moment and then opened a door at the side of his office and he and Chris and J. J. disappeared down a hall. I chose to remain in the showroom, if that was what it could be called. I ran my hand over the smooth surface of the granite. It was good to know the reputation of Stone Mountain had spread so far west.

The door opened and I was surprised to see Eloise Endicott. Today she wore a green dress and hat but she carried no notepad and pencil. She glanced at the granite and marble tombstones and shuddered.

“I hate coming in here,” she said.

“Then why did you?”

“Because I wanted—because I wanted to know.”

“If he was shot in the back.”

“Yes.”

I heard footsteps and the door swung open and Chris and J. J. emerged from the hall. Chris was pale and he walked past me and out into the street. J. J. looked at Eloise and nodded his head in greeting.

“J. J.?” I asked.

He did not answer. He too walked out into the street and laid his hand on Chris’s shoulder.

I saw little of J. J. and Chris the rest of the day, so I wandered the streets of Virginia City. The town had prospered—no question about that—and not far from the downtown was a row of brick mansions that took me completely by surprise. Elegance could hardly describe the structures. I had read that miners who had struck it rich had built these magnificent homes but I had not expected such opulence. Perfectly manicured lawns, though the grasses were dead now, and perfectly trimmed hedge surrounded the two-story Georgian homes. I looked at the homes and wondered whether the owners had gotten their money from gold or silver. And then I wondered whether it really mattered. After all, money was money.

“Doing a little sightseeing?”

A buggy had pulled up next to the sidewalk and Eloise was driving.

“I’m impressed.”

“Get in and I’ll show you around.”

She drove past many more mansions and she was able to identify the names of each owner. She could even tell me where their mines were located.

“I think I should go into mining,” I said.

“Stick to journalism. It usually doesn’t get you killed.”

“Did it get Tom Mondale killed?”

She cracked the whip above the horse and the buggy moved faster. We left the mansions and traversed the perimeter of the town and went out a road which cut across several hills and valleys. The pines and firs rose high into the sky and I shielded my face from the sun to look at them. The wind was cold but somehow there was the faintest glimmer of spring in the air.

“It’s hard to believe we encountered a snow blizzard on the way out here,” I said.

“It was probably the same one that came through here a week ago. The weather can change quickly. If it catches you unprepared, it can kill you.”

We stopped at the crest of a hill and I looked down into another valley. A clear stream flowed swiftly among boulders and alongside a community of tents and shacks and lean-tos. Young children and women were milling about. Clothes hung on lines stretched from tree to tree.

“That’s the other side of the mining industry,” she said. “You don’t see any men there now. They’re in the mines working. Tonight they’ll come to their shacks and sleep. This weekend they will come into town and spend their money and get drunk. Their

wives and children will not have enough to eat. And then next Monday the cycle will repeat itself.”

“You’re not one of the prohibitionists, are you?”

“In my editorials I am. Don’t look so shocked. You could live without liquor if you had to.”

“Yes, I could. I just wouldn’t be the happy, pleasant conversationalist that I am.”

“Well, take a good look at those people,” Eloise said. “I don’t know that they’ll be here much longer. Their men work in the silver mines. And I’m afraid there’s going to be trouble.”

“Trouble? What kind of trouble?”

“The trouble that Tom Mondale was involved in.”

I turned abruptly in the seat and stared at her. She breathed deeply and studied a small girl playing at the edge of the stream. Even from the top of the hill it was apparent that the little girl’s dress was torn and dirty. As cold as it was she should have been wearing a coat.

“So you do know what happened,” I said.

“Tell your friends to come for dinner tonight at my house. I’ll write down directions.”

J. J. and Chris did not return to the hotel until late afternoon. As it turned out, they had been touring the countryside also, but on horseback. The dinner invitation pleased them but I had misgivings. I felt as if Chris especially did not need to hear what

happened. J. J. was right. Chris would be no match with men who killed simply for the joy of killing. The best place for Chris was on a train bound for Georgia. But it was not my business to butt in. It was up to J. J. to rein him in.

We walked to the edge of the town and veered up a small hill where a small Victorian cottage stood among spruce and pines. A barn stood in the back. We walked up the steps and I admired the gingerbread hanging from the top of the porch. She greeted us and we sat in her parlor. The aroma of frying bacon stirred my appetite.

“I hope you gentlemen like breakfast for supper,” she said. “I guess it’s still the Southerner in me but I love it.”

“Sounds mighty fine,” J. J. said.

She went to the kitchen but returned in only a few moments.

“I’ll offer you something to drink,” she said, “as long as you like water and milk and coffee.”

“Chris here was just developin’ a taste for liquor,” J. J. said. “I’ll wait for coffee.”

It had been a long time since I had had eggs and bacon and biscuits and apple butter for supper. Chris and J. J. had no difficulty with their late breakfast. I could not help but notice that J. J. kept looking at our hostess after almost every bite. Somehow I think she noticed too.

She poured the coffee and we sat in the small dining room in the lamplight and enjoyed the quiet. I had tired of the music coming from the pianos in the saloons. The only sound was the crackle of the fire in the fireplace near the table. The light flickered on our faces.

“Our town has come a long way,” she said. “Next week *Hamlet* will be performed at the playhouse.”

“I saw it in Atlanta,” I said.

J. J. looked toward the window.

“How’s the huntin’ in these parts?”

“Well, I’m not much of a hunter,” she said. “But I hear we have plenty of deer. You should have no trouble shooting one.”

He looked at her again. She smiled.

“Yeah, I reckon I could hit one.”

“Well, as I was saying, the town has made a lot of progress. There’s a lot more to be made.”

“Miss Endicott, I find it hard to believe that you have all newcomers to Virginia City here to your home for supper,” I said.

“I see there is a story here,” she said. “And you see there is one too. That is why you’re accompanying these gentlemen, is it not—to get the story?”

J. J. and Chris looked at me. I only smiled.

“Of course it is,” she said. “I’m competitive. I want the story first.”

“That’s not the real reason for the dinner,” I said.

“No, it’s not. It’s about Tom Mondale.”

Chris lowered his coffee cup and swallowed hard.

“I thought you said you printed what the sheriff told you,” Chris said.

“I did. I printed the official version of events. That’s all I could print.”

“What is the unofficial version?” J. J. asked. “And while you give it, do you mind if I smoke?”

“I’m surprised you would ask, but you may.”

J. J. lit a cigarette and the smoke drifted up toward the darkness of the ceiling. Chris set the coffee cup in its saucer and waited. Eloise glanced at the blackness out the window and lowered her voice almost to a whisper so that we struggled to hear. Nevertheless, we heard and we remembered.

“I am assuming you gentlemen are aware that there has been a struggle for quite some time in this country between men who want a gold standard and men who want a silver standard,” she said.

“I’ve never paid much attention to it,” J. J. said.

“I’m familiar with it,” Chris said. “My father supports the gold standard. What does that have to do with my brother?”

“Yes, your father supports it,” she said. “Most people in his position do. But there are many folks who want silver backing our money, or at least a portion of it. The thinking is that will put more money in circulation. I’m not an economist. But it’s my understanding that if there’s more money to go around, then the ones who are hurting right now will have a little more money to help pay the bills.”

“That’s flawed thinking,” Chris said. “If there’s more money, prices will merely rise. Nobody will be any better off.”

“As I said, I’m not an economist, but I can tell you what the perception among people is. And the perception is that a silver standard will put more cash in their pockets. Wealthy people see it as a survival of the fittest type thing. If it’s meant for the poor

immigrant to become a millionaire, he will have the strength to do it. If he remains indigent, it's nobody's fault. That's life. Natural selection. People like your father—and I do not mean to offend him or you, Chris—see the silver standard as a way for the government to prop up the poor and, in effect, alter the natural order of things. They don't think the government should be doing this.”

“You still haven't said what this has to do with my brother.”

“There's talk a bill is going to come before Congress authorizing the government to buy so much silver each year. That'll cause the price of silver to go up. As a show of force, the silver miners here in Virginia City are planning to ship a trainload of silver all the way to Washington. I've been told they're going to dump it on the steps of the Capitol. I suppose that would create quite a stir. But there are people determined that the train never reaches the desert. They will do whatever is necessary to stop it.”

“I don't believe it,” Chris said.

“These men have stopped at nothing to put down labor revolts,” she said.

“They've had experience in this sort of thing. Your brother understood.”

“How do you mean?”

“A man named George Cavendish lives in one of the valleys northwest of here. I believe he's a friend of your father's. He's also close to Rockefeller and Carnegie. He amassed his fortune in steel and railroads and shipping. His conglomeration has reached into the west and now controls thousands of miles of railroads. Many of these lines are close to the mining fields. And he owns a lot of gold mines. Your brother worked for him as an advisor and purchasing agent. He found out about the silver train and about the plan to stop it. The word I have received is that he was on his way to warn the miners when he

was shot. But there's no way I can prove it, so I didn't print it. It's possible the story is wrong. It's possible the sheriff's version is correct."

"Do you believe his version is correct?" J. J. asked.

"I know Sheriff Wilkins."

"Why would my brother get mixed up in something like this?" Chris asked. "Why would he support the miners?"

Chris looked at each of us but no one spoke. He waited for an answer and then lowered his head. J. J. finished the cigarette and suddenly I was eager to leave. It was as if there were more information than the small room could hold. I wished that Eloise had not divulged what could not be proved. We sat around the smooth, dark mahogany table that she had probably brought from Charleston and knew that the story was true. Sheriff Wilkins had lied. He was obviously an ally of this Cavendish fellow. Or perhaps Cavendish just paid him more money than anyone else was willing to pay.

"Who is the leader of the silver miners?" Chris asked.

"Wilfred Calhoun," she said. "A good South Carolina name."

"Do you know him?"

"Yes."

"Will you take me to him?"

"Chris, I don't think that's such a good idea," J. J. said. "It sounds like all hell's about to break loose and we don't want to be caught in the middle."

"I want to meet the man who represents what my brother was willing to die for," Chris said.

"I can take you tomorrow," she said.

J. J. breathed deeply.

“Well, we’ll be on horseback,” he said.

“I assure you I can stay in a saddle,” she said.

We thanked her for the meal and took our exit. The walk back to the hotel was against a bitter wind from the west. Any feelings of an imminent spring were a distant memory. I wondered what kind of man would kill over gold or silver. It seemed some people were saying their money was better than anybody else’s. If somebody wanted to give me some gold or silver, I would not have turned my nose up at either. Eloise said she was not an economist. I was not either. I was just a newspaperman wanting to write a story and hoping to live long enough to write it.

We returned to the hotel but Chris said he wanted to walk around for a while. J. J. did not think it was a good idea but Chris promised he would stay out of the saloons. So J. J. and I went upstairs to the room. He seemed unusually preoccupied.

“J. J., do you mind a question or two?” I asked.

“If I said no, you’d still ask.”

“Why did Archibald say that if you came west of the Mississippi, you’d be shot?”

“Stokesbury, I reckon he figured anybody with a face as ugly as mine is liable to get it shot off.”

“I’m not sure Miss Endicott thinks it’s so ugly.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I think she likes you.”

“This is a town full of rich men, Stokesbury. She can do a heap better’n me.”

“Just how did you end up on Jekyll Island?”

“The wind blew me there.”

“Must have been a strong wind. One last question. How many men have you killed?”

He sat in the darkness and pondered.

“I don’t know, Stokesbury. And that’s the truth.”

We ran into Archibald Miller in the hotel lobby the next morning and J. J. asked him if he would like to ride along. Archibald had no horse, so he rented one at the livery stable. Eloise was already waiting for us. As I look back on that morning, I must admit that she was a striking young lady sitting straight as an arrow in the saddle. J. J. tipped his hat and rode alongside her. The sun had vanished. Thick gray clouds had rolled in from the west and the wind that accompanied them paid no attention to our coats.

We rode for several miles to an area Eloise said was called the Silver Works. Sheer, craggy mountains formed the walls of a canyon and men with rifles stood at the top of the cliffs and watched. The canyon opened onto a plateau at the end of which was a large, tree-lined mountain with a dark gaping hole in the front. Men covered with dust ran across the plateau and other men stood on the porch of a large house not far from the mine’s entrance. They stared at us and one of them knocked on the door. A large, bearded man appeared.

“That’s Calhoun,” Eloise said.

“And I thought the rays of the sun were hidden today!” he bellowed and I rolled my eyes at Chris.

“Good morning, Wilfred,” she said. “I’ve brought some folks who want to meet you—especially this young man here. His name is Chris Mondale.”

Calhoun’s eyes narrowed.

“Mondale. You any kin to old man Kyle Mondale?”

“He’s my father.”

“And Tom was your brother?”

“He was.”

“Well, you gents git down and sit a-spell. That goes for you too, Miss Endicott.”

We followed Wilfred Calhoun across the barren yard to the house and he offered us coffee. As cold as we were, it was not difficult to accept. The office was full of small desks and chairs and enough dust to fill a sizeable hole. Other men stood near the hot stove but Calhoun looked at them and they left.

“We struck a new vein yesterday,” Calhoun said. “One of the best I’ve seen. You might want to put that in your paper, Miss Endicott.”

“I think I will.”

“Is it enough to fill up a train?” Chris asked.

“You’ve heard about the train, have you?” Calhoun said. “Well, it ain’t no secret. Yeah, it’ll fill up several trains. We plan to make a statement to the folks in Washington.”

“What do you know about my brother?”

Calhoun held the white china coffee cup tightly in a hand that was too small for his body. The handle on the cup was broken and only a sharp stump of the handle

remained. The fire burned hot in the stove and I observed Calhoun. It appeared he was sizing up Chris, as if wondering just how much to tell him. He sipped the coffee and coughed and sipped again.

“Your brother was a fine man,” Calhoun said. “One of the finest I’ve ever known. He had a genuine love for people. It didn’t matter to him whether they were rich or poor. Unlike a lot of Easterners I’ve known.”

“Did he tell you the train was going to be attacked?”

“I’ve heard he was on his way here to tell me that. He didn’t make it. I heard about the attack from other people. No surprise really. Cavendish and men like him don’t mean for the train ever to reach Washington. They control the wealth in this country and they don’t mean for people like us to have any.”

Chris turned and walked to the window and looked out. A cloud of gray dust hung in the air. I supposed he was trying to envision his brother befriending these people, these people who dared to value silver rather than gold.

“When does the train pull out?” Archibald asked.

“End of the week. I’d like to leave sooner but it looks like a storm is coming in over the mountains.”

Calhoun’s forecast proved accurate. It began snowing that afternoon and all the next day. We stayed in the hotel and played cards and Archibald recounted his experiences with Meade’s army in Pennsylvania. I asked J. J. about his experiences in the war. He said nothing. Maybe J. J. talked about his experiences in the nightmares and we just did not know the language he was using. The nightmares returned that night—more

than one. Finally he gave up any attempt to sleep and sat by the window and watched the snow dropping from the darkness onto the frozen street.

On the third day the snow turned into rain and J. J. said he needed to go out. He would leave us in Archibald's able care. He said he trusted Archibald even though he was a Yankee. J. J.'s decision to leave us was perplexing and I went to the window and looked below. It was a cold rain and already the snow was turning into slush near the edge of the sidewalks. J. J. walked down the middle of the street and stopped. It was a strange sight. He simply stopped and lifted his face toward the heavens that were opening upon him. I did not know how long he stood there but it had to be long enough for him to become drenched. And then he disappeared.

The rain slackened in the afternoon and J. J. returned with a large package wrapped in plain brown paper. He also carried a box.

"Well, J. J., did you bring me a Christmas present?" Archibald asked. "You're a little late but I'll take it anyway."

"I need to borrow your room," J. J. said.

"Help yourself."

Again J. J. disappeared and Archibald looked at me and winked. Thirty minutes later J. J. stood before us in a new gray suit and derby. He had shaved. There was a bulge under the coat on his right hip.

"Well, damn, J. J.," Archibald said.

"Look after these fellows for a while, will you?" J. J. asked.

"They don't require much looking after," Archibald said. "This Stokesbury fellow is about the most harmless fellow I've ever met."

“J. J., where are you going?” Chris asked.

The door closed and I went to the window. J. J. was nowhere to be seen.

“You pups just don’t understand,” Archibald said.

“Understand what?” Chris said.

“J. J. is going a-courting.”

We did not see much of J. J. for the next few days. The snow and the rain were gone. J. J. would leave us early in the morning and sometimes he would show up for dinner but usually it would be well after suppertime when he walked into the room. I took those opportunities when J. J. was gone to question Archibald. I found out he was stationed in Washington. It seemed more than a little strange that he would leave Washington and travel to Nevada on short notice, mostly to sit around and do nothing.

“Oh, I’m doing plenty,” he said. “In fact, I’m doing exactly what I’m supposed to do.”

“Which is?” I asked.

“Keeping you boys out of trouble.”

“Why won’t J. J. talk about the war?”

Archibald stared at me and the customary grin faded. He removed the derby and held it in both hands and studied the shadows lengthening on the faded worn carpet. What he knew about J. J. was like some of those gold and silver mines I had heard about that were abandoned. The ore was still there but it was just too much trouble to get it, too expensive. Well, I had not reached the point where it was too much trouble. I intended to

keep mining. Nevertheless, I had a strong suspicion that somebody else was getting the story.

“J. J. has been through a lot, Stokesbury. He’d just prefer not to talk about it. Too painful, you might say.”

“Where’s he from?”

“I can’t tell you. Maybe some day but not now.”

So there was hope, albeit slim, that I would learn the full story but Archibald’s sense of timeliness was not the same as mine.

J. J. came in late that night and stood in the darkness by the window. Archibald stood beside him and probably figured I was sleeping. Chris was snoring loudly.

“J. J., do you know what you’re doing?” Archibald whispered.

“Yeah.”

“Are you sure? You haven’t forgotten you have to go back, have you?”

“I remember. I’m takin’ her with me.”

“What?”

“She said she missed the ocean. She’s from Charleston, you know. She said she wanted to breathe the salt air again and I said I’d take her to the coast.”

“Damn, J. J., you’re too old for this nonsense.”

“Never thought I could feel this way again. I think we’ll hitch us a ride on that silver train.”

“Are you crazy? That train is going to be attacked and you know it. Are you wanting to show off in front of Miss Endicott? Is that it?”

“Maybe.”

“J. J., look at me and listen. Do you really want her to know the kind of man she’s getting mixed up with?”

“I’m a new man, Archibald. I’m tellin’ you Eloise Endicott has made me a new man.”

“Well, you’re still carrying that Colt. I’d say the old man is still pulling mighty hard and not aiming to let go. Besides, Ford is in town. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s in charge of stopping that train.”

“So be it.”

“I ain’t paid enough for this business. I’m going to my room and get some sleep.”

The door closed and I lay and stared at J. J. So the man I knew so little about was in love. I could not help but remember the man who rolled upon the ground beside a stopped train with a pistol in each hand and who calmly shot and killed a group of desperadoes. I found it hard to believe that that man would be capable of any kind of love. But I lay there beneath the blanket and stared at him. He continued to stand by the window and look into the darkness. He was still standing there when I went to sleep.

CHAPTER 18

I never expected to meet George Cavendish. He was one of those men I occasionally read about in the newspapers but not often. Instead, I read about the monolithic corporations he headed. Perhaps his name would not appear in the article. But the trust was Cavendish, and Cavendish was the trust. He was a nebulous figure. I could not envision him in a concrete form.

Wilfred Calhoun invited us to visit the settlement where many of the silver miners lived. Eloise had shown me the village from atop a hill and I was eager to get a close-up view. So the four of us—J. J., Chris, Archibald, and I—rode to the valley and Calhoun pointed out the advantages of living in the unpainted shacks he provided compared with the shacks Cavendish and the gold miners provided. Calhoun's ruddy face beamed with pride.

"Where are most of these folks from?" I asked.

"Mostly from Eastern Europe," Calhoun answered.

When we visited, just as it was when Eloise and I had looked down from the hill, few men were about. They were in the mine hauling out silver to put on a train to take to Washington. Women were throwing clothes into large black pots that sat over fires. One young girl, perhaps seventeen or eighteen, stood on the porch of one of the small shacks. Her dark hair was pulled back tightly behind her head and her arms were full of soiled men's clothes. Apparently her mother stood beside one of the pots.

"That's Anna Kolwolski," Calhoun said.

“You know the names of all your workers?” I asked.

“It’s easy to remember hers. She can speak English. Most of ’em can’t.”

I dismounted the horse and walked up to her. She stood on the top step and looked at me. Her eyes were ablaze with what appeared to be anger and I stopped and removed my hat.

“Good afternoon, Anna,” I said. “My name is Marcus Stokesbury. I write for a newspaper back East.”

“You not a miner?”

“No. I mean—I don’t mine for gold or silver. I mine for other things.”

“I not understand.”

“It does not matter,” I said. “How long have you lived here?”

“Many months. We come to America to farm. We go to California but we stop here and do not leave. There is no farm—only dust and the shiny metal in rock. It makes men crazy. There is no farm.”

Anna Kolwolski was a beautiful young woman, yet the beauty was already fading from her pale skin. The lines in her forehead were deepening. The face was hardening. It was becoming like the hard granite that formed the mountains and canyons.

Chris walked up and nodded at the girl.

“Marcus, we need to be going,” Chris said.

Thunder erupted from the other side of the hill and the anger in Anna Kolwolski’s face was replaced by fear. She clung tightly to the clothes in her arms. Riders, perhaps a dozen, appeared on the crest of the hill and galloped into the village. I looked at J. J. His

hand rested on his pistol. Calhoun laid a rifle across his saddle. The riders stopped and a young man, breathless, sandy-haired, ran up to us.

“Are you Chris Mondale?”

“Yes, I am. What can I do for you?”

“My name’s Michael Cavendish. My wife is having a baby. She’s in a really bad shape. I rode into town. The doctor’s out in the country somewhere. They told me at the hotel I could find you here. They said you’re a doctor.”

“Well, not really. I haven’t graduated.”

“Can you deliver a baby?”

“Well, I can, but—”

“Please, mister, please help.”

“I deliver baby before,” Anna Kolwolski said. “I deliver on board ship coming to America. You, Doctor, you and me bring baby into world.”

Anna ran to her mother and handed her the clothes. Chris turned to the man.

“Lead the way.”

I mounted my horse. I looked at J. J. He was staring at one of the men who had ridden in with Cavendish. Archibald reached out and grabbed his arm.

“J. J., I think you’d better stay here,” Archibald said. “I’ll go with them.”

J. J. ignored him and I helped Anna onto the back of my saddle. We rode away and left Calhoun and the immigrants staring after us.

By the time we neared the Cavendish ranch twilight was darkening the slopes of the mountains where snow still clung. We had to pass through another canyon but Michael Cavendish suddenly stopped, held up his rifle and tied a white handkerchief to

the end of the barrel. He waved it above his head and then galloped across the canyon floor. I glanced at the jagged boulders high above my head but I saw no one. I knew someone was up there and was watching our every move. We emerged from the canyon and rode quickly across a grassy plateau and entered a valley similar to the one where the silver miners lived, except this one was broader. The house was large, one-story, wooden. A wide veranda ran all the way around it. It was surrounded by barns and corrals. Kerosene lamps glared in the front windows. An old man met us on the front porch. He was not especially tall and his frame was emaciated. The skin was drawn tight across his face like wet leather left in the sun to dry and shrink. He chewed on a short cigar.

We dismounted the horses and Chris and Anna followed Michael Cavendish up the wood steps. The old man stepped in front of them.

“What’s that girl doing here?” he asked.

“She’s going to help,” the young Cavendish said.

“Like hell she is. She’s one of them goddamn immigrants. I can smell the silver on her. Send her back where she came from.”

Chris stood on the top step and stared into the old man’s eyes.

“I’ve come to help,” Chris said. “If she goes, I go.”

“Please, Father,” the young Cavendish said.

The old man chewed on the cigar and looked from his son to Chris to Anna. He stepped aside. Chris and Anna and George hurried inside and there was a flurry of orders. Someone was calling for hot water and scissors and towels. Michael came back outside and sat on the top step. He pulled off his hat and looked at the darkened barren ground.

“Gentlemen, this is my father,” Michael said.

“Mr. Cavendish, I’m Archibald Miller with the Pinkertons.”

The old man sat in a wood rocker near the door and his mouth worked furiously on the cigar. He looked at the men who had ridden with his son and they turned and led their horses to the stable—except one, a tall, gaunt man dressed in black. His face was long and lean. His eyes looked out from dark sockets. He and J. J. stared at each other. They did not speak. They did not move. They only stared with the enmity possessed by the deadliest of enemies.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance,” George Cavendish said. His voice was raspy and he coughed. “You boys did some work for me in Pittsburgh.”

“I remember.”

“Goddamn socialists. They tried to take over my steel mill. They were lucky they had jobs. I reckon I showed ’em who’s boss.”

Quiet descended on the yard and J. J. lit a cigarette. Suddenly there was a scream. It was a woman’s scream. There were voices—Chris’s and Anna’s and other women’s. There were hurried footsteps. And then there were more screams. Michael Cavendish put his hat on and stood and walked around the yard. There would be a scream and he would stop and kick up dust and then resume his walk. J. J. smoked the cigarette and did not take his eyes off the gaunt figure who did not come into the light spread by the lamps in the windows.

“Ford, get something to eat,” the old man said.

“Ain’t hungry,” the man said and spat tobacco juice on the dust.

I tried to study the man but it was too dark. Ford—the man who shot Tom Mondale in the back. We had to get Chris away. As soon as he finished his work inside

the house, we had to get him away without his finding out that his brother's murderer, assuming the story was true, was standing only a few feet away. Ford stood like an upright serpent ready to strike. He continued to stare at J. J.

"You're the man who stopped the train robbery," Ford said.

"Yeah, reckon I am."

"I hear tell you're pretty good with a pistol," Ford said.

"Good enough."

"You look too old to be that good."

"Well, not so old I have to shoot folks in the back."

Ford stiffened and even Michael stopped his walk. The old man stood and came to the edge of the porch.

"Nobody's shooting anybody in the back," George Cavendish said. "Have you hired out with them silverites?"

"He hasn't hired out with anyone," Archibald said.

"Well, maybe you'd like to hire on with me," Cavendish said. "I'm always looking for men who can take care of themselves and survive in the jungle. My corporations often need men with your level of expertise."

"I get the feeling Mr. J. J. McPherson is the independent sort," Ford said. "He don't hire on with anybody. Ain't that right, McPherson?"

J. J. flipped the cigarette onto the ground. I had not seen Archibald get nervous but he was practically trembling. He stepped between J. J. and Ford and there were several screams, each one louder than the next. George ran up to the steps but remained on the ground. And then there was a cry. It was the cry of a baby. George ran his sleeve

across his eyes and stood and waited. In a few minutes the door opened and light shone on the porch and Chris and Anna appeared. Both appeared shaken but they smiled. Anna walked to George.

“You have baby boy,” she said. “Strong boy.”

“And Helen?” George asked and looked at Chris.

“Well, she’s about as worn out as I am,” Chris said. “But she’s going to be all right.”

George leaped up the steps and disappeared in the house. Chris leaned against one of the slender columns that supported the porch roof and breathed deeply. Anna turned to him.

“You good doctor,” she said. “You stay in West, right?”

He shook his head.

“I’m not a doctor yet,” he said. “And I’m going to work in a hospital in New York.”

“New York not for you,” she said. “You graduate and come back to West.”

“Chris, we need to get this young lady back home,” Archibald said. “Her papa may not be too happy.”

We went to our horses and mounted. George Cavendish followed us into the darkness of the yard. Ford stood behind him.

“Miller, I don’t know how you’re mixed up with these silverites,” Cavendish said.

“But it ain’t a good thing. A Pinkerton ain’t supposed to be on the wrong side. And what’s a son of Kyle Mondale’s doing with an immigrant girl? You should remember your status, boy.”

“Is that why my brother got killed?” Chris asked. “He forgot his status?”

“I’m sorry about your brother. But nothing is going to change the natural order of things. You understand? Your brother got a soft heart. And this country is no place for something like that to happen. If you throw in with the silverites, you’re asking for trouble. Just remember—what happened inside the house tonight don’t change a thing. That silver train ain’t going to Washington. I don’t care who’s on it. That goes for you, McPherson.”

“Well, you know, I’d kinda like to see Washington,” J. J. said and he stared not at Cavendish but at Ford, “and this seems like a right good opportunity.”

“You stay out of this, you Rebel son of a bitch.”

“Good evenin’, Mr. Cavendish,” J. J. said.

We rode away from the house and I thought about the men who would be at the top of the canyon walls. They probably had rifles and they probably were crack shots. But we did not see anyone. The night was clear and cold and the black sky was full of stars. I found Orion’s belt and remembered nights on the farm when I was a boy and I would sit in a pasture and try to count the stars. Never did I imagine that some day I would be observing those same stars from the vantage point of the silver and gold fields of the West.

We returned Anna to her family and her father, an aging, dust-covered man, vociferously objected to his daughter’s being out late with a group of men. I did not understand a word he was saying but I assumed that was the gist of it. He waved crooked fingers at us and at her and the mother stood calmly by and said nothing. I looked at the man and saw what was supposed to be a farmer. Gold or silver—it did not seem to

matter—had a way of turning men down different roads. For some of us it meant a road to Washington.

The next morning I received a note at the hotel front desk that Eloise wanted to see me. I walked to the newspaper office and was surprised to find another young woman alongside Eloise at the press. The early afternoon edition was running noisily.

“Marcus, I’m glad you could come,” Eloise said. “This is Lela Gracik. She wants to learn the newspaper business. She’s going to keep things up and running while I’m away. I was wondering if you could give her some pointers on composing.”

Lela Gracik, I learned, had also come out of the silver fields. She was a tall, slender, blonde girl in her late teens. Her fingers were long and at first they stumbled over the keys of the linotype but eventually she got the hang of it. She was slow but, then, I was not terribly fast either. I spent most of the afternoon showing Lela the basics of newspaper layout. I found Eloise’s dummy sheets and I began to sketch the layout of pages. She watched the movement of my pencil closely as I drew boxes to indicate where the art and the copy would go. Then I let her try it. I stepped away and found Eloise at a desk in the front office. She was flipping through the pages in her notepad and making notes in the margin.

“Eloise, are you serious about leaving your paper in Lela’s hands?” I asked.

“Yes, of course, I’m serious,” she said and did not look up.

“She’s not going to be able to print a paper by herself.”

“She’ll do just fine.”

“It’s not any of my business, but are you planning to come back?”

She stopped writing and looked out the window.

“I don’t know. I guess it depends on what I think of the ocean.”

I glanced at the back room, the press room, and smiled. Lela would have plenty of time to perfect her newspaper skills.

I walked outside. The street was full of wagons, pulled by teams of mules, rolling slowly to the depot. Each wagon contained a driver and a man riding shotgun. Black tarps covered the cargo. People on the sidewalks stopped and watched. Storekeepers came to their windows to see what was happening. It was like a parade but there was nothing festive about it. It was a grim parade. The drivers talked to their mules and did not look at the people on the sidewalks. Small children ventured onto the streets but no farther than the hitching posts and stared. I looked on the ground and saw the shadow next to me.

“Quite a sight,” Sheriff Wilkins said and grinned. “Even if the price of silver ain’t what it used to be, there’s still a lot of wealth riding in those wagons.”

The wagons rolled by and disappeared one by one around the corner. The eastbound—I had already heard it would be a special with additional box cars—was scheduled to arrive during the night for loading. The drivers and guards would sit up with their shipment. I did not think Cavendish’s men would cause trouble in town. There were better places for that sort of thing.

“Sheriff, if you know there’s going to be trouble, why don’t you stop it?” I asked.

“Well, first of all, I don’t know,” he said and he withdrew a small knife from his pocket and trimmed his finger nails. “But, Stokesbury, something I want you to know and you might want to write about it in your paper back home. When I go in Bailey’s General

Store, I pull out a greenback to pay for my tobacco. I don't give a damn whether the greenback has gold or silver behind it. As long as it's good for what I want to buy, that's all I care about. I'll let the Gold Bugs and silverites fight it out. The strongest will win. And I think we both know who that will be."

"I don't think it's anything men should kill each other over."

"Oh, it don't take much for men to get at each other's throat. Gold and silver is as good a thing as any, I suppose. Stokesbury, when you board that Silver Express in the morning, you'd better keep your head down."

The sheriff laughed and put the knife back in his pocket and crossed the street. The doors to the Crooked Fork Saloon swung open and Ford stepped onto the sidewalk. He saw me and spat tobacco juice. Then he stood next to his horse and watched the wagons. They were lined up along the street as far as I could see. He climbed onto his saddle and rode in the direction of the Cavendish ranch.

I returned to the hotel and found J. J. and Chris sitting in silence. J. J. was at the small table in a corner. He had his two pistols broken down and he was busy cleaning them. Dull gray bullets stood at attention as if to await their orders and their orders would be to kill. When I walked into the room, J. J. did not look up. He was wiping one of the cylinders with an oily rag. Chris sat on the edge of the bed and stared at the floor.

"I've made arrangements with Slade," Chris said. "He'll bring Tom's coffin to the depot at four-thirty in the morning."

"Chris, there's another train that leaves day after tomorrow," J. J. said without taking his eyes from the cylinder. "You and Stokesbury should take that one."

"You're going with the silver," Chris said.

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“Why don’t we all take the next train?” I asked.

J. J. snapped the cylinder back into place and loaded a bullet in each chamber and then moved the cylinder so that there was a smooth click and then he loaded the next bullet.

“I can’t oblige you on that, Stokesbury,” J. J. said. “I need to be on that train.”

“I didn’t know you supported the silverites so much.”

“I’ve never cared for people gettin’ trampled under.”

“There’s more to it than that,” I said.

“There is?”

“It has something to do with Ford.”

J. J. finished loading the pistol and slammed it into his side holster and stared at me. I waited for him to answer but, instead, he picked up the other cylinder and wiped it down with the cloth. I walked up to the table and bent down, practically in his face.

“Listen, J. J., whatever’s between you and Ford is over with. There’s a woman I think you’re fond of and you should consider her.”

“Some things are never over,” J. J. said. “At least not until they’re taken care of. I don’t ask you to understand, Stokesbury. You’re not in a position to understand. Maybe you will be—soon—but I can’t tell you now.”

I was hoping that Chris would support my arguments but he was lost in thought. I was not sure he had even heard a word J. J. or I had said.

“You know, after I graduate,” Chris said, not really to me or to J. J., “maybe I should consider a practice out here. Maybe they do need more doctors.”

“What?” J. J. asked. “Did that silver girl do something to your head?”

“You should have seen her help deliver the baby,” Chris said and he suddenly looked up. “And the look on her face when she held it up for the mother to see.”

Not during the whole journey had I seen J. J. laugh. But he laughed now. He laid the pistol down and laughed. The laugh came from deep within. I stared at J. J. and then I looked at Chris. The strange thing was I laughed too.

CHAPTER 19

J. J., Chris, Archibald, and I met in Delmonico's at four the next morning. We ordered breakfast and quickly ate. The mirth from the evening before was gone. The look on J. J.'s face was all business. He hardly spoke. I had not slept much during the night and fatigue had settled in my body and not even the hot coffee helped me wake up. Outside blackness still lay on the street. No other table was occupied and I was surprised when the door opened. Sheriff Wilkins walked in and sat not far from us and ordered coffee.

"I hear you boys are leaving town," Wilkins said.

"Word travels fast, don't it?" Archibald said.

"You sure this is the train you want to be on?"

"Well, we're eager to get back home," Archibald answered and he finished his coffee. "The name express sounds fast, so we thought we'd take a fast train."

Wilkins rose with the coffee cup in his hand and walked over to our table. J. J. did not look up.

"Gentlemen, I'm going to give you a piece of advice," the sheriff said. "If anything happens, stay out of it. It's not any of your affair. Stay out of it."

We left money on the table and stood and walked past the sheriff. I looked over my shoulder at him. He was staring at the ceiling and breathing deeply. J. J. and Archibald led the way through the early morning darkness. During the night the wind had shifted from the west to the south and the warmth I associated with late spring hung in

the air. All the shops lining the street were dark and in an alley we passed a dog started barking. We turned the corner and headed for the railroad tracks. Steam belched and hissed in the darkness. Two people stood on the platform of the depot. One was Slade and the other was Eloise. Even in the darkness it was apparent that her long dress fit her well. A hat gave her a touch of elegance. Slade approached Chris.

“I’ve already had your brother’s body loaded,” Slade said. “Come and I’ll show you. I have papers for you to sign.”

J. J. walked up to Eloise and tipped his hat.

“So you did come,” he said. “I’ll help you find a seat.”

He took her valises and hat boxes and helped her onto the metal steps of one of the two passenger cars. The wagons hauling the silver had deposited their load during the night and had returned to the Silver Works. Behind the passenger cars sat the box cars loaded with ore. One of the cars contained our horses. Behind the tinder car was a flat car. The black outlines of several men with rifles were barely visible. White steam escaped from the bowels of the locomotive and the deep whistle split the morning air. A buggy pulled up close to the platform. Wilfred Calhoun stepped out.

“Mornin’, gentlemen,” Calhoun said. “Can you believe this warmth? Haven’t ever seen it this early. Good day for travel.”

“Are you traveling to Washington?” I asked.

“No, not me. I’ve done my job. I must admit I would like to see all this silver sitting on the steps of the Capitol.”

“Well, I think there are plenty of seats available,” Archibald said.

“I think I’ll just stay here and wait on the news reports. By the way, you fellows should be safe. I’ve got plenty of marksmen on board. Cavendish would be foolish to try anything. Well, have a good journey. If you’re ever out this way again, come see me.”

Calhoun returned to his buggy and cracked the whip and disappeared around the corner of the depot. Archibald shook his head.

“I’m not a bit surprised he’s not going,” Archibald said. “And I’ll bet you boys something. If Cavendish’s men show up, Cavendish won’t be with them. Stokesbury, that’s something you can write about in the *Atlanta Constitution*.”

J. J. descended from the passenger car and walked inside the depot. We followed him. Kerosene lamps flickered in the darkness and the conductor, a short, square-faced man, checked his pocket watch. His hands trembled.

“I don’t care for this sort of shit,” the conductor said, “not on my train.”

“There should be nothing to worry about,” Archibald said. “Wilfred Calhoun himself has assured us there are marksmen on board.”

“Marksmen? Who the hell are you kidding? Those ain’t marksmen, any more’n I’m a marksmen. They’re just a bunch of immigrants who don’t know one end of a rifle from another.”

“J. J., what do you think?” Archibald asked.

“I think they’ll try to hit us while we’re still in the mountains. It’d be easy to dump the ore into a canyon, where it’d be hard to recover.”

“Where are you from, mister?” the conductor asked J. J.

“Georgia.”

“Well, I don’t mean to be rude. But just what the hell does a man from Georgia know about robbing trains out here in the West?”

The expression on J. J.’s face was inscrutable and Archibald laughed.

“That’s a good one,” Archibald said and he slapped J. J. on the back. “It’s time to take a train trip.”

We went back onto the platform and Archibald headed for the caboose. J. J. stopped and looked at Chris.

“Chris, I want you to stay in the passenger car,” J. J. said. “Do not get involved in this.”

“It may be a little hard not to get involved.”

“You heard me. There are three things you need to do. One—you take Tom back to Jekyll. Two—you return to Boston and graduate. And three—you come back here and hire that silver girl as your nurse. She’s got in your system and there ain’t nothin’ you can do about it. Now go get a seat.”

Chris climbed into the passenger car and I started to follow but J. J. grabbed my arm.

“Look, Stokesbury, I want you to stay in the passenger car and do what you have to do to protect them,” J. J. said. He pulled the black Colt from the holster and handed it to me. “Here. Take it.”

“What?”

“Take it, Stokesbury. And don’t drop it. It’s loaded.”

“But it’s your—”

“I have two or three others. I can’t rightly remember. But, Stokesbury, I just ask one thing. Watch where you aim. I don’t want you shootin’ me. Understand?”

I nodded my head and took the pistol. The grip was cold and smooth. I stuck it inside my belt and J. J. smiled. He turned and walked toward the locomotive. The conductor hollered his “All aboard!” as if the platform were full of waiting passengers. I climbed the steps of the passenger car and sat across the aisle from Eloise. The whistle shrieked again and the cars shook and lunged forward. Chris sat in front of Eloise and managed to smile.

“I can’t imagine why we’re the only passengers,” he said.

“The Silver Express is on its way,” she said.

I reached down and touched the dark brown handle of the pistol and looked out the window. Thin slivers of clouds glowed red in the east. The darkness was slowly lifting.

The car swung back and forth and the clickety-clack of the wheels upon the track made me sleepy. The train began a brief climb and I looked to the north. Mountains rose and the snow on their peaks flashed white in the bright morning sun. Suddenly it felt good to be on a train heading home. Of course it was to be a circuitous route, for I had never planned to travel to Washington. But I could envision the article I would write. Silver Ore Shining on the Steps of the Capitol—I could see the headline on the front page. For a moment I forgot about any possible danger.

The train ended its climb and then started downhill. I looked at Eloise. Her eyes were closed. Chris was staring out the window. Suddenly there was a sound on top of the car. Footsteps. Someone was running. I grabbed the pistol and the back door of the car flew open. A large bearded man holding a pistol ran in. Before I could move Eloise was already standing. In an outstretched hand she held the smallest pistol I had ever seen. The man hardly had time to blink before his forehead exploded.

“Marcus, see what’s happening!” she said.

She withdrew another shell from her purse and loaded the derringer. I walked to the front of the car and opened the door and heard the pistol and rifle shots. Grabbing hold of the railing, I leaned out and looked to the rear. Riders were trying to gain on us but gunfire from the caboose was keeping them back. A horse stumbled and the rider rolled down the side of the hill.

Shots flew overhead and I looked at the flat car in front. Some of the marksmen Calhoun had lauded lay in pools of blood. Mingled among the fallen were the bodies of some of Cavendish’s men. At the far end of the car J. J. stood. He held a smoking pistol in his hand and he stared above me. A black figure like a vulture swooped from the roof of the passenger car onto the flat car. It was Ford. He held a pistol aimed at J. J. and he walked slowly toward him.

“Well, well, if it ain’t J. J. McPherson,” Ford said above the roar of the steam engine. “It’s been a long time, ain’t it, J. J.? I woulda swore you was dead. This time I’m gonna make sure!”

I lifted the long barrel of the Colt and gripped the handle tightly and aimed at the middle of Ford’s back and pulled the trigger. The pistol roared and jerked and Ford just

stood there. I thought I had missed. Slowly he turned and stumbled to the edge of the flat car and then he fell into the nothingness. For a moment I felt sick but then I saw J. J. drop to one knee and I climbed onto the railing and leaped onto the flat car. Blood was streaming down his left arm.

“The bullet musta passed through him,” J. J. said and he grinned. “Damn, Stokesbury, I thought I told you not to shoot me.”

The brakes screamed and the train jerked and threw us onto the floor of the car. The wheels locked and screeched on the rails and slid to a stop on a small plateau of grass and Ponderosa. I helped J. J. to his feet. The blood was dripping down his arm and off his hand. We stumbled among the bodies and I looked at their faces, many smeared with blood. Most of them were young. They had fought for silver and they had fought for gold and now they lay together with pistols and rifles silent at their sides. J. J. also looked at them and then at the pistol he held. He raised it and returned it to the holster on his hip.

We crawled down the steps at the back of the flat car and Eloise and Chris and Archibald were running toward us.

“I’ll see if I can help anyone on that flat car,” Chris said but J. J. reached out a bloody hand.

“You can’t help anyone up there,” J. J. said.

Chris saw the crimson hand and he took J. J.’s arm and pushed up the sleeve and examined the bloody hole.

“Come on back to the passenger car,” Chris said. “I think I’ve had enough medical training to deal with this.”

They walked to the passenger car and I stared past them to the end of the train. We still had all the box cars, all the silver ore. Cavendish's men were nowhere to be seen. Archibald removed a white handkerchief from his inside coat pocket and wiped the beads of perspiration from his red face. The conductor dropped down from the locomotive and walked toward us. He stopped beside the flat car and stared.

"Damn," the conductor said.

Eloise no longer held the derringer. She held her chin high and showed no effects of having just killed a man. I did not think I would ever forget the small outstretched hand and the sharp pop of the derringer and the head flung back with blood splattered on the windows of the car. I myself had also shot a man, something I had never dreamed I would do. Whether I killed him I did not know. He appeared severely wounded but I saw no blood. The fall from the train perhaps had killed him. At that moment I did not know and did not really care. In the bright morning sunshine I was cold and trembling. The spring had come but my body remained in winter. My hands would not stop shaking. And Eloise merely smiled and talked as if nothing had happened.

"When we reach the next town, I'll wire a story to Lela," Eloise said. "It'll sell a few more papers."

I had a story to write but I feared my hand would not stop shaking. Calhoun's men dropped from the box cars and caboose onto the ground and walked slowly to the flat car. They stood beside the conductor and looked at the contorted bodies basking in the sun. Some whimpered quietly and began to climb up onto the car.

"We'll lay 'em on top of the ore," the conductor said. "We'll have to leave 'em at the next stop."

The bodies of Calhoun's and Cavendish's men were lowered from the flat car and carried to the back of the train. It was like a funeral procession but no one said anything to soothe the grief-stricken. The ones who survived carried their friends and brothers and cousins and cast long shadows upon the dust of the land.

J. J. and Chris climbed down from the passenger car. J. J.'s shirt and coat sleeves were still rolled up to his elbow and a white bandage was shining on his arm. He walked to the box car where the horses were. Chris joined us but J. J. disappeared.

"His arm will be all right," Chris said.

I was curious as to what J. J. was doing—even more so when he encouraged two saddled horses to jump from the car. He held the reins tightly and walked the horses up to us. He helped Eloise onto the saddle.

"J. J., just what the hell are you doing?" Archibald asked.

"This is where we part company," J. J. said and he climbed onto the other saddle. "Chris, I promised your father I'd look out for you and I have. You won't have any more trouble. And you've got Archibald—and, of course, Stokesbury. He's mighty good with a gun."

"J. J., put those horses back in the car," Archibald said.

"Can't do it, Archibald. Eloise and I are headin' west and then north."

"J. J., we had an agreement. You're supposed to stay on Jekyll Island."

"I've stayed long enough," J. J. said. "I don't belong there."

"You don't belong here either."

"We're not going to stay here," Eloise said. "We're going to Alaska."

“Damn it, Eloise, talk some sense into him,” Archibald said and his face was sweating again. “I thought you said you wanted to see the ocean again.”

“She didn’t say which one,” J. J. answered.

Chris walked up to J. J. and the two shook hands.

“Give my best to your pa,” J. J. said.

“I will. I hope you know what you’re doing. Thanks for everything.”

I stood beside Chris and looked up at J. J. and I lifted the pistol from my belt.

“No, Stokesbury,” J. J. said. “That’s yours. A little something to remember me by. Are you ready to see Alaska, Miss Endicott?”

“I am ready, Mr. McPherson.”

The horses crossed the tracks in front of the locomotive that was hissing and exhaling steam and they rode north. Archibald mumbled something and kicked the dust with his boots and then stood with his hands on his hips. We stood there a long time and watched them ride until they were just small dark figures on the plateau. The mountains loomed in front of them. The conductor returned from the box cars where the bodies had been laid and said we needed to be moving on. He headed for the locomotive.

“Well, Stokesbury, you’re going to be famous,” Archibald said.

“How do you figure that?” I asked.

“Hell, don’t you know who that was you shot?”

“All I know is his name was Ford and he was about to shoot J. J. How does that make me famous?”

“Stokesbury, you shot the man who killed Jesse James.”

I swallowed hard and turned from Archibald to the two small figures who were about to disappear. Then the conductor shouted from the locomotive to climb aboard. I looked at the cab of the locomotive. The conductor was waving his hands and motioning for us to get on board. I looked again toward the north. J. J. and Eloise were gone.

The train rocked and rattled for many miles before we said anything. Blood still stained the floor and windows of the car and I remembered the bodies of Calhoun's and Cavendish's men lying beneath the sun on the floor of the flat car. And then I remembered the women and small children beside the stream in the village of the silver miners. Tonight they would hear some of their fathers and brothers and sons would not be coming home again. There would be an extra place at their supper tables. They had come to the West to find work on farms and ranches. They had come to live on the land but they had gotten caught up in the frenzy to make money from a shiny metal buried in the earth. They had not really made any money and they did not understand. They had fought for something they probably did not understand. They had fought for something that was not the dream they had sailed across an ocean to find.

Archibald was in the seat in front of me and he leaned against the window and looked back at me.

"Archibald, Jesse James is dead," I said.

"Yes, indeed he is. He was shot in the back by a man named Ford who fired a bullet that had no powder in it."

"I don't understand."

"We—meaning the Pinkertons and the sheriffs and the marshals—couldn't catch old Jesse. No, sir, he was always too fast and clever for us. But we knew we had to get

him out of Missouri. He had the people all worked up. There wasn't going to be any peace until he was gone. After his mother was killed, I got word to him that I wanted to talk. We arranged a meeting in the middle of the night. I remember it was a schoolhouse and I remember how dark and cold it was. I didn't know what to expect. For all I knew, he might come storming in with his pistols blazing away. But then he didn't know what to expect either. I could have been setting a trap for him. But I trusted him and he trusted me. We met in the darkness of that old one-room schoolhouse and concocted a plan. I guaranteed him safety, a new life—if he would leave Missouri, if he would leave the West forever. Ford played right into our hands. I had a suspicion he would love the fame that went along with being the man who killed Jesse James. Before he went to see Jesse, he stopped by Nell's Place because Nell was a friend of his. Nell was a friend to anybody who was willing to pay money. She had a rule in her establishment. All weapons were left in the parlor. None were permitted in the rooms. And while Ford enjoyed the pleasure of her company, one of my men replaced the bullets in his pistol. And I've got to hand it to Jesse. It took guts to turn his back on Ford and wait for the gunshot. He didn't know for sure that the switch had been made. That showed the kind of trust he had. I'm still amazed. I was a Yankee and he trusted me. I stood outside the parlor window and I saw everything. Jesse was straightening this painting above the mantel and Ford pulled out his pistol and fired. Well, Jesse hit the floor and Ford took to running. He didn't wait to see any blood, to make sure he had done a good job. Hell, no, just as soon as he pulled the trigger, he hightailed it out of the house so fast his damn shadow couldn't keep up. Well, we gave old Jesse a good burial. We made arrangements with Kyle Mondale to let Jesse run the hunting preserve on Jekyll. Well, you got your story now, Stokesbury."

I looked from Archibald to Chris. Both were smiling.

“I’m still puzzled about Eloise Endicott,” I said. “I never figured a female newspaper editor could so calmly kill a man.”

“She is an independent woman, isn’t she?” Archibald said. “Well, as J. J. McPherson would say, he needed killing, didn’t he?”

CHAPTER 20

A rooster was crowing and Prescott turned the last page of the manuscript and glanced out the window behind his father's desk. There was no sunshine, only the grayness of the dawn settling implacably upon the whiteness of the snow. He collected all the pages and stood. The rooster crowed again. It was just outside the window. The room was cold but he did not feel it. He did not feel anything.

He walked into the hall and looked into the parlor. Galen was not there. He started toward the dining room and smelled the bacon and heard the sizzle. In the kitchen Grandma Freeman was already preparing breakfast. Soon the others would be up. Soon Thaddeus would return to the study and open the ledgers and compare figures and plot strategy. Prescott felt weak and faint and he welcomed the cup of coffee his grandmother handed him.

"You sat up all night," she said.

"I knew I couldn't sleep."

"What are those papers?"

"Stokesbury's book."

He sat in a split-bottom chair and laid the pages on the large oak kitchen table where his grandmother rolled dough with a long-neck whiskey bottle.

"Grandma, don't you ever get tired of getting up before dawn and making breakfast?" Prescott asked.

“I guess I get tired. But it’s what I like to do. We do what we feel like we have to do. What about you, Pres? What do you feel like you have to do?”

He sipped the steaming black coffee and tilted the chair back on its rear legs. He looked around the kitchen. He could see his mother making the redeye gravy on the wood-burning stove and telling him to leave the country ham alone. A plate full of ham and biscuits would be in the warmer above the stove and he loved to stuff the red ham into the soft biscuits when her back was turned. He sat and sipped the coffee and remembered and pondered his grandmother’s question.

“Pres, I hate to mention this,” she said, “but there is a possibility your wife may be—”

“I know,” he said. “But I have to believe she’s alive. I know in my heart she is. You asked what I must do. I must find her. I will never stop searching.”

Verlon walked into the kitchen and stretched and looked at the bacon and eggs and winked at Prescott.

“Haven’t had a breakfast like this in a while,” he said.

“Well, if you’d come around once in ten years, you’d put some meat on those bones,” she said. “Sit down and I’ll serve you both.”

“How’s Galen?” Verlon asked.

“I looked in on him before coming downstairs,” she said. “He was sleeping. As far as I could tell, he was all right. I was concerned about the influenza. But he didn’t have any fever.”

William and Samuel and Mandy walked into the kitchen and filled their plates and sat around the kitchen table. They talked about the snow and asked Verlon if he had

ever seen a heavier snowfall. He recalled the snow in '01 that came late—the middle of March. At least a foot of snow, he remembered, and it fell on a sheet of ice. As a result, it hung around for a week. Traveling was treacherous. This snow would melt quickly once the sun settled in.

But the sun remained hidden behind the gray canopy of clouds and the wind still howled around the corners of the house. Prescott rose and took the manuscript and walked down the hall. He passed the study. Thaddeus sat behind the desk and wrote in his long ledger.

“Pa, breakfast is ready,” Prescott said.

“I’ll be in directly.”

Prescott walked up the front stairs to his room and stood at the window and stared at the desert of whiteness that had replaced the lawn. It covered everything—it covered the pasture and the roofs of the barn and the shop and clung to the round rough fence posts. He stared at the snow and saw the red cardinal looking for food and he heard the sudden boom of cannon and the crash of exploding shells and the furious staccato clapping of the machine guns. He stared at the snow and saw Natasha lying upon it and the blood spreading upon it and being absorbed into it.

His leg ached in the coldness of the room. He walked to the black walnut armoire and pulled open the door and faced the dark uniform. He touched the red 1 on the shoulder.

Verlon led the mules and wagon out of the barn and climbed upon the seat. Grandma Freeman stood on the veranda and waved goodbye and he urged the mules through the snow and down the hill toward town. The wind blew and shook sprinkles of snow from tree limbs and they fell like white rain. The wheels turned slowly and he cupped his hand around a lit match to light a cigarette. Bobwhite quail were calling from the fields and at the edge of the cemetery doves were cooing mournfully. At the far end of the cemetery a small group of people stood around a mound of snow. It was the Ledbetters.

He stopped the wagon and watched them. The boys had dug away the snow and the frozen earth and they prepared to lower a wood coffin. Milsaps, the Kingston undertaker, stood near the grave. Morgan had probably gone to him at dawn and said he needed a coffin and Milsaps was always eager to provide, no matter what the weather. Verlon looked for a preacher among the group. There was none.

The boys lowered the coffin with ropes and the old woman reached out her hands and Morgan held her back. Verlon could not hear them. He could only see the woman reaching out to the coffin as it was lowered into the frozen pit. Morgan turned around and looked. Verlon felt certain he saw him. They stared at each other across the snow-covered expanse of cemetery, of buried love and hatred, of forgotten dreams and lost hopes. The Confederate graves scaled a small rise not far from the Ledbetters and in the center of the Confederates the flag flapped from a pole of ice and the red shone against the white of the trees. Verlon shook the reins and the mules moved again. Morgan held his wife and looked and his sons picked up the shovels and returned the dark earth to its pit.

Thaddeus sat at his desk and reviewed his proposal to buy ships the navy was going to discard. One of the beauties of war, he said to himself, was the surplus that it created that could then be had at a bargain. Of course, if you were a farmer with a surplus, he muttered, you were out of luck. He had planted his crops with foresight. The war would not last forever. The ships offered a good opportunity. He would either start a shipping line out of Savannah or Brunswick or he would scrap them and sell them at a profit.

He looked out the window. Verlon had climbed into his wagon and was rolling slowly down the hill. It had been many years since the two of them had slept under the same roof. It was really too bad he had taken losing Abigail so hard. He should not have been surprised that day when she told him on the hill overlooking the Etowah that she was not going to marry him. Abigail wanted the finer things in life and hunting and fishing were not going to provide them. Thaddeus had been able to provide them. He had made Abigail happy. He was certain he had.

There was a soft knock at the door and he turned. Prescott stood in the doorway in his uniform. Thaddeus breathed deeply and sat and opened the ledger.

"I knew you wouldn't stay," Thaddeus said. "I hoped you would. God knows I need you to stay. Your brothers don't have an ounce of sense when it comes to business. Somehow I knew, though, that I couldn't keep you here. I guess when you see the world, it's hard to stay here. It's almost as if you've got a damn woman somewhere you can't stay away from."

"Yeah, I guess it is like that."

"Well, where are you heading?"

“Fort Mac. I’ll receive my orders when I get there.”

“Any chance you’ll end up in Washington?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, if you do and if you have any influence on anybody in the navy, put a good word in for me. I’m submitting a bid on those ships I told you about.”

“I have to go, Pa.”

Thaddeus flipped through several pages of the ledger.

“I wonder if my bid is too damn high,” Thaddeus said and he did not look up. “No need to pay more than I have to.”

Prescott turned and walked into the parlor. He expected to find his grandmother in front of the fire. He found Galen. His brother sat before the fire and did not move. Prescott walked up to the chair and laid his hand on the back of the chair.

“Galen, I’m going now. I’m sorry things worked out the way they did. But you’ve got your whole life—”

Galen did not look up. He did not move. He simply stared at the flames crawling over and under the scorched logs. His grandmother stood at the door.

“Don’t worry about Galen,” she said. “We’ll take good care of him. And you take good care of yourself.”

Prescott walked to her.

“I’ll write,” he said.

“Yes, you do that. You should have let Verlon take you into town. One of your brothers—”

“No. I walked from town in the rain. I can walk back in the snow. Believe me—I’m used to it.”

She handed him a brown bag.

“Ham and biscuits,” she said. “You’ll get hungry on the train.”

He kissed her on the forehead.

“Goodbye, Grandma.”

He picked up his duffle bag in the hall and walked out the door. Rap greeted him at the bottom step. He reached down and petted him vigorously and hurriedly stepped into the snow.

Marcus Stokesbury was bent over page proofs when the door opened and Prescott stepped inside. The editor studied the uniform and grinned.

“So the small town isn’t for you anymore,” Marcus said.

Prescott set the duffle bag on the floor and opened it and withdrew the manuscript. He laid the pages carefully on the roll-top desk. Marcus removed his wire-rimmed spectacles and walked to the desk.

“Marcus, that’s quite a story,” Prescott said. “You should think about publishing it.”

“Actually I have. I’ve been in touch with Owen Wister. He’s told me about a young editor at Scribners, a fellow named Maxwell Perkins, who’s looking for new talent. I’m old but I guess I’m new too. I think I’ll send it to him.”

“By all means. It shows a great imagination.”

Marcus looked at the pages stacked on the desk and then at Prescott.

“You think it’s fiction, don’t you?”

“Marcus, I think it’s extraordinarily clever fiction. This Perkins fellow will love it.”

Marcus turned and walked across the dusty and scratched wooden floor to a small black safe near the linotype machine. He spun the dial a few times and opened the door and withdrew a bundle of red cloth. He walked back to Prescott and began to unwind the cloth. The cloth fell onto the desk and Marcus held a Colt pistol with a long black barrel.

“Here, take a close look at it,” Marcus said.

Prescott took the pistol and felt the cold smoothness of the dark handle. He checked the chambers. They were empty. He felt the balance of the weapon. He could almost smell the smoke drifting from the end of the barrel and he could almost see the train robbers lying on the ground.

“So you did kill Ford,” Prescott said.

“No, I didn’t,” Marcus said and he took the pistol and wrapped the red cloth around it. “It turns out I only wounded him. I’m surprised he survived the fall from the train but he did. Somebody else killed him in Nevada. So I wasn’t so famous after all.”

“Did you ever hear from Jess—J. J. McPherson?”

“One letter. I decided to go back to work at the *Constitution*. Harris convinced me to stay on for a while. One day a year or so after I got back I received a letter from J. J. Sure enough, it was from Alaska. He said he and Eloise were married and working a claim and she was expecting a baby. Can you imagine? A baby in the gold fields of Alaska. That was the only correspondence I ever had from him.”

A train whistle cried just outside town and Prescott lifted the duffle bag and shook Marcus's hand.

"Let me know what you're doing," Marcus said.

"I will. Goodbye."

Prescott ran across the street and across the tracks and went upon the platform. The southbound locomotive slowed and the big wheels ground to a stop. He stepped inside an empty passenger car and the conductor took his ticket. He sat on a cold seat next to the window and with his hand wiped away some of the frost. Soon the train was in motion and Prescott stared out the window. The clouds had darkened and the bare limbs of oaks shook in the wind. The snow was falling again.

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