

The illustration depicts a man from behind, standing on a dark, jagged rock. He is wearing a long, olive-green coat with a wide collar and a sash, dark trousers, and tall black boots. His coat is blowing in the wind. The background is a dramatic landscape of snow-capped mountains and a winding river, bathed in the warm, golden light of a sunset or sunrise. The sky is filled with large, billowing clouds in shades of orange, yellow, and purple.

SCOUNDREL
in the THICK

B.R. O'HAGAN

SCOUNDREL *in the* THICK

Vol. #1
The Life & Times
of
Colonel Thomas Edward Scoundrel, USA, Ret.

B.R. O'HAGAN



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Scoundrel in the Thick is a work of historical fiction. Apart from the well-known actual people, events, and locales that figure in the narrative, all names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to current events or locales, or to living persons, is entirely coincidental.

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Thomas Scoundrel in the Rockies

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*For Lesli, my wife, best friend, and partner in
the grand adventure.*

Thomas,

There comes a time in the life of each man, in the face of the wind, in the gut of the fight, when he has but an instant to make his most important decision; will I die as small as I have lived, or, will I live large, without hesitation or reservation.

I have tended to your fevers and watched you heal. I see a boy who has become a man and who has made a damn fine, shining decision. Give me the splendid, silent sun with all his beams full-dazzling, I hear you say.

Good on you, Thomas Scoundrel. You must habit yourself to the dazzle of the light and of every moment of your life.

Do anything, lad, but let it produce joy.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Walt Whitman". The script is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping initial "W".

Walt Whitman
16 April 1865
Meridian Hill

PROLOGUE

Cuernavaca, Mexico, June 1882

The first shot tore through the bedroom door, shredding the hand-carved cherub on the headboard above Diego's pillow. The second shot severed the beeswax candle on the nightstand that he had blown out only a moment earlier.

He did not wait for a third shot. He threw back the covers, rolled onto the cold tile floor and scurried on his hands and knees over to the chair where the trousers and jacket he wore to the engagement party were folded. Out of habit he reached for the holstered Schofield revolver he kept on the arm of his bedroom chair. But, as he shook off the last remnants of sleep, Diego remembered that he was not in his own home, but in a second-floor guest room in the lakeside villa of Don Eduardo Verján, who was both the father of his fiancée Rosalilia, as well as the Minister of the Interior for Mexico, and the leading citizen of the city of Cuernavaca.

More shots rang out. Diego slipped into his trousers and went to the door. He took a deep breath, pulled the handle, and stepped out into the chaos.

His room was at the end of a rectangular gallery that ran the length of the villa, above a flower-filled courtyard. Candles flickered in gargoye-faced wall sconces mounted outside each guest room door, providing just enough light for Diego to make out figures running through the smoke that was billowing up from a fire somewhere below.

Doors began flying open along both sides of the gallery, and he

saw people rush towards the stairs in their nightgowns and robes. They were some of the two hundred guests who had gathered earlier under a starched cotton pavilion on the Verján's sun-drenched patio as Bishop Orozco joined Rosalilia's hand to Diego's with a satin ribbon to seal their formal engagement.

Then they moved to the terraced gardens, where dozens of wicker baskets filled with fresh-cut flowers were scattered among blossoming orange trees and lavender-colored bougainvillea vines. A dozen tables were piled high with platters of grilled beef, lamb, fresh shrimp, melons, savory tamales, roasted peppers and tomatoes, chilled sea bass, and all kinds of cakes and pastries. The smell of jasmine and honeysuckle intermingled with the elegant strains of a string quartet in the soft June air all that afternoon. Now, the sour odor of burnt gunpowder and roiling smoke nearly overwhelmed Diego's senses.

A pistol ball suddenly shattered a flowerpot on the gallery railing, and one of the guests stumbled over the clay shards and fell to the ground. Diego stooped to help the man up as another bedroom door swung open right in front of him. It was the room in which Rosalilia's widowed aunt was staying, but it was not the widow who raced out into the corridor. Instead, the portly Bishop of the city huffed into the crowded passage, tugging his nightshirt down over his pendulous belly. Behind the Bishop, also pulling on her nightgown, was the widow. They joined the crowd running for the stairs, oblivious for the moment that had they been seen like this in any other kind of social setting the scandal would have been the talk of the tight-knit aristocratic community of Cuernavaca for years.

Diego would normally have savored the sight of the famously officious Bishop caught in such a compromising position, but he could only think of getting through the hail of bullets careening around the gallery, down the smoke-filled staircase and into Rosalilia's room.

As for who was doing the shooting—and why—that question would have to wait. Diego knew that Don Verján's home was patrolled by private *soldados* who were paid to keep watch over the homes of the city's wealthiest residents. He hoped that some of the gunfire he was hearing was coming from those guards fighting back against the intruders.

Diego leapt down the stairs, pushing his way through the crush of guests trying to get to safety. When he reached the stair landing, he saw that the massive oak doors that separated the outer courtyard from the inner garden space had been blown off their hinges. It would take a cannon to do that, he thought. At the foot of the stairs a man in dark clothing with a black scarf tied around his face appeared out of the smoke directly in front of him. He seemed to recognize Diego and raised his revolver to shoot. But before he could pull the trigger, a dark object slammed into the side of the intruder's head, and he fell wordlessly to the ground.

Itzcoatl raised his war club and smashed it into the fallen attacker's head once more for good measure. The ancient Aztec weapon was studded with razor-sharp volcanic glass that was embedded into the wood. Diego knew the man would not be getting up.

The old warrior had been roused from his sleep in a warm corner of the estate's great kitchen by the sounds of gunfire, and he had immediately raced to find Diego, whom he had instructed and watched over since the boy was born. Now, Itzcoatl motioned for his ward to follow him outside to safety.

"No," shouted Diego above the din of shouts, breaking glass and gun shots. "First, we find Rosalilia!"

The two men shouldered their way through the crowd of people streaming down the stairs and into the courtyard. Diego had to leap to avoid tripping over one panicked man who lost his footing and slipped into the fountain. There was no time to help him. He sprinted down the hallway and through the open door of Rosalilia's room, where candles flickered on the oak sideboard and the smell of night-blooming moonflowers and sulphur drifted through the broken window. The covers had been pulled off the ornate four-poster bed and were strewn around the floor. On a pillow at the head of the bed, the leather-bound volume of poems by John Keats he gave Rosalilia at dinner was open to the page she had been reading when she was taken.

"*Tecolote*," called Itzcoatl from the doorway, using the Nahuatl word for "little owl" that he called Diego as a child. "Come with me, now."

Diego turned from the bed and went across the hall to Rosalilia's parents' room. A fight had raged here. Two chairs were knocked over, the mirror behind the oak dresser was shattered, and a tall armoire had toppled over. One of the window curtains was burning. Itzcoatl pulled it down and stamped out the flame.

The bed sat on an elevated platform in the center of the room, beneath a large oil painting of the Battle of Chapultepec Castle. That was where the young Lieutenant Verjan and five of his military cadets held off repeated assaults by a company of American soldiers commanded by Captain Robert E. Lee during the Mexican American War, thirty-five years earlier.

Diego approached the bed. The lifeless body of his fiancee's father lay flat on his back, his arms splayed wide. His right hand still gripped the cavalry sabre he had pulled from the scabbard beside his bed to fight off the attackers.

Diego rested his hand on Verjan's shoulder. Rosalilia's mother was not in the room. She and her daughter must be together. He motioned to Itzcoatl, and they climbed out the open bedroom window and into the flame-lit garden to join the fight.

Several dozen people were running through the moonlit garden in the direction of the lake. Diego watched as one of the estate guards knelt and fired at a dark-clad man who was clutching a silver candelabra he had ripped from the dining room ceiling. The .50 caliber bullet caught the robber square in the back, flinging him forward and slamming his body into the high garden wall.

Then, Rosalilia's aunt appeared at his side. She took his arm. "Do you know where my sister is?" she cried.

He shook his head and called out to one of the Verjan servants who was rushing past. "Get the Senora to the lake," he told the man.

Then, a shout. Diego turned to see Itzcoatl on the other side of the fountain. One of his boots was pressed hard into the back of a man lying face down on the ground. His war club was raised high, ready to take another blow if the idiot was foolish enough to try to get up.

Diego splashed through the lily pads in the fountain pool and

joined Itzcoatl.

“This one will speak, now,” said Itzcoatl, “or he will die.”

A pool of blood was spreading on the ground around the intruder’s head. If he was going to speak, it had better be quickly.

“Who are you?” shouted Diego. “Why are you here, and where have you taken the mistress of the villa and her daughter?”

The man raised his head a few inches off the ground and turned in the direction of Diego’s voice. He defiantly spat out a mouthful of blood and teeth, grunted, and turned his head away.

Diego looked around at the scene unfolding in the smoky garden courtyard. Most of the guests had made their way out of the villa grounds and were being guided to safety down the lake shore by four of the private *soldados*. An outbuilding next to the villa was fully engulfed in flames, and two of Casa Verján’s defenders lay dead on the stone porch at the main entrance.

Then he saw the intruders: a dozen or more men in black woolen ponchos who were loading stolen valuables into three horse-drawn freight wagons outside the main gate. A tall man in a buckskin fringe jacket and wide-brimmed hat stood on the seat of the lead buckboard, barking instructions to the men loading the wagons. Diego noticed that his wagon, the only one backed up under the arch, had a small, swivel-mounted cannon clamped onto the tail board. That explained how the doors had been blown off their hinges.

What he saw next made Diego go cold. Two men were lifting a struggling woman dressed in nightclothes over the siderails of the middle wagon. A cloud slipped past the full yellow moon, and in the pale light Diego was able to make out Rosalilia’s terrified expression as the men dropped her into the wagon and then tossed a heavy blanket on top of her.

Itzcoatl saw it at the same moment. He delivered a final blow to the intruder on the ground and came up alongside Diego. The old man was descended from Aztec royalty. He wore his hair in the fashion of Motecuzuma, the ruler of Tenochtitlán who was killed by Hernán Cortés in the early days of the Spanish conquest of Mexico in 1520.

Itzcoatl was as proud as he was stoic; he alone had taught the young aristocrat Diego Antonio de San Martín to ride, shoot, hunt and most importantly, to live as he should also be prepared to die: with honor.

Itzcoatl immediately understood what Diego was contemplating. Though they had only one weapon between them, Diego was going to charge the wagon in which his fiancée was held captive. They would probably die, Itzcoatl thought. He looked down at the heavy club in his left hand. Only one weapon, yes, but it was a weapon of kings. He would take many of the intruders to the afterlife with him.

For his part, Diego also knew what his mentor had in mind. He put his hands on Itzcoatl's shoulders. "You don't have to do this," he said softly.

"I have to do this as much as I have to breathe," Itzcoatl replied.

Diego nodded and began to move towards the wagon where Rosalilia lay covered. Smoke swirled everywhere, and the horses in the stable began frantically kicking at their stall doors. Suddenly, one wall of the outbuilding collapsed in a shower of sparks and flaming timbers right beside them.

Itzcoatl grasped his war club in both hands, and together the two men rushed towards the wagon. A black-clad intruder spotted them, raced forward, and fired his rifle at close range. The bullet hit Diego in the thigh, glanced off bone, and passed through the back of his leg. He spun to the ground, then righted himself and charged on. Itzcoatl's glass-studded club flashed in the firelight, and the shooter dropped. Then, a second intruder fired. This bullet pierced Diego's abdomen and knocked him hard back into Itzcoatl. Both men fell to the ground. Itzcoatl leapt back to his feet, but Diego was unable to stand.

He was losing a lot of blood and knew he would not remain conscious for long. He pulled himself up on one elbow, and, just as the last attackers clambered over the sides of the moving wagons, he saw the man in buckskins grab the reins of his buckboard and snap his horses into motion. Then, the man swung his head in his direction. Diego struggled to see through the fog of smoke and pain that was enveloping him.

The leader made brief eye contact with Diego and smiled. He slapped

the reins again, and his wagon lurched away from the gate and toward the town road that ran along the lake shore.

“Him!” Diego’s mind raged. “How could it be *him*?” Then he fell back to the ground at Itzcoatl’s feet.

The Aztec held his bloodied war club high above his head and straddled Diego’s body protectively until the wagons were out of sight. Then he knelt and cradled Diego’s head on his lap. He clutched the war club in one hand and reached down with his other hand to staunch the flow of blood from Diego’s stomach wound.

“*Tecolote*,” he said tenderly.

The wagons carrying Rosalilia and the Verján family treasures hurtled down the cobbled drive, away from the fires and choking smoke that were engulfing the villa. A moment later they passed a troop of soldiers from the Cuernavaca garrison galloping up the lakefront road towards the scene of the battle. They could not have known about the men in the wagons. But Diego knew.

Just before he passed out, he lifted his head.

“Find Thomas,” he said to Itzcoatl. “Thomas will know what to do.”



ONE

New York City, June 1882

Thomas knew exactly what to do. He gripped the heavy bottle of Maison Clicquot champagne tightly in his left hand, and, without diverting his gaze from his target for a second, swiftly tore the wire wrapping from the cork with his right hand and let it fall on the linen tablecloth.

The next part was especially tricky. His dinner companion, Mademoiselle Annette Lescoux, was chattering on about the Gilbert & Sullivan operetta, *Iolanthe*, which they had attended earlier that evening at the Standard Theatre. It was the first electrically lit musical event ever held in the nation, and the mayor of New York had been on hand to introduce Thomas Edison, the inventor and businessman whose electrification process was transforming the city.

“It’s not that I have any special affection for illumination from oil lamps and candles,” Mademoiselle was saying, “but I do wonder if there is any part of our lives that electricity will not change, and not always for the better. Don’t you agree, Thomas?”

“Some things in this world are in great need of change,” he replied, even as his brain raced to complete the speed, distance and trajectory calculations that had occupied his mind since the Maître d’hôtel had seated them in Delmonico’s quietest alcove.

He raised his eyes from the champagne bottle. “But not you, Annette. Some kinds of beauty are eternal, and I’d wager that there will never be an invention— not from Mr. Edison or anyone else that will ever

change the sense of absolute exhilaration a man experiences while in your company.”

Thomas’s reply elicited two physical responses, each of which he believed was a sign that his campaign to persuade Mlle. Lescoux to join him for an *escapade romantique* at his friend’s quiet country home was advancing nicely.

The first reaction was a subtle blush that began at Annette’s cheeks and spread down her neck before blooming across the spectacular décolletage that was framed so magnificently by her blue velvet dress. The second reaction was a brief, lilting laugh, accompanied by a heightened sparkling in her forest green eyes.

This romance was budding slowly, and, after three dinners and tonight’s operetta, both his affection and his bank account were beginning to wane in the face of unrealized returns on his emotional and financial investment. He genuinely cared for Annette. She was intelligent, independent, witty and accomplished, and the daughter of one of the city’s most successful merchants.

All things being equal, his pedigree simply did not match hers. He was a newly hired junior manager at a mid-size bank with neither family nor social connections. He had kicked around the country—the world, in fact for fifteen years after the Civil War. His main source of income before taking the bank job was the pension he received from the War Department after separating out of the Union Army at the rank of colonel. That he was the youngest full colonel in the history of the army, as well as the acclaimed hero of one of the War’s final great battles, probably explained why Annette’s family had accepted him as a suitor for their twenty-four-year-old daughter. Fame had opened many doors for Thomas. This weekend, he hoped, it might just open one more.



Annette prattled on about the operetta and even hummed the melody from one of its most popular tunes, “*Tripping Hither, Tripping Thither.*” Thomas continued his work with the champagne cork as the waiter prepared their dessert of caramelized bread pudding with

bourbon crème anglaise and butter pecan ice cream on a cart next to their table.

The waiter had been a bit put out when Thomas insisted on de-corking the champagne himself. He had also been surprised that someone as slender (albeit splendidly endowed) as Mademoiselle could consume so many of the rich dishes from the Delmonico menu. She had opened with a bowl of chilled berry soup before sallying on to a plate of satiny Blue Point oysters smothered in smoked bacon and crème. Next came pan-seared dayboat scallops sautéed in lemon, butter, and Marsala wine, followed by a green salad with asparagus tips. Two bottles of Château Gruaud-Larose Bordeaux from St. Julien preceded champagne and dessert, by which time the waiter found it difficult to believe that the young lady was capable of remaining upright. He sighed, completed their desserts, and spooned them into silver bowls before leaving to attend to other customers.

Thomas had pulled and twisted the champagne cork nearly to the top of the bottle. This was the difficult part. He had to let off enough of the bottle's inner pressure to make sure it did not fly out across the room, while keeping just enough pressure under the cork for it to perform exactly as he wanted when he removed his hand and let it take flight.

As Annette lifted the first taste of bread pudding to her mouth, he concluded that the force being exerted by the champagne's carbonation was exactly right. He smiled at Annette and then removed his thumb from the top of the cork. It took three seconds for the power of the gas to overcome the pressure holding the cork in the neck of the bottle, and as he waited for the explosion, he surveyed the dark-paneled dining room and its well-dressed inhabitants. Animated conversation mixed with the tinkle of crystal and stemware. Ornate gas-lit chandeliers cast a golden glow around the room (one of the romantic qualities electric light would no doubt destroy, he thought), and waiters, table captains and kitchen helpers scurried along the narrow aisles between the long rows of tables.

Then, a soft "pop," and the cork missile was expelled from the heavy Clicquot bottle. He expected the cork to travel a foot or two into the

air before alighting gently in the center of the table, just as it had done every other time he had performed the trick. A bit showy, of course, but he knew it was the kind of effort that would please Annette.

Unfortunately, while practice can make perfect, he should have paid more attention to the mathematical aspect of trajectory science than to his seat-of-the-pants formula for the behavior of gasses trapped inside a glass vessel. The cork, it seemed, had its own plan.



A Chinese philosopher once proposed that the outcome of a battle could be decided by something as innocuous as the flutter of a sparrow's wing on the other side of the world. If true, then certainly the likelihood that a lover's tryst might come to pass in a weekend country house could be determined by the flight of an errant champagne cork. But in war, as in romance, chance also plays its part. Thomas knew instantly that both his timing and his aim were off. Once the cork was in motion, however, no power on earth could have prevented what was about to happen.

Annette's spoon was just touching her lips when the cork took flight. He watched in horror as it exploded outward at four or five times the speed he had expected. In that instant he knew that the only question remaining was whether it would hit Annette in the face with enough force to break her nose or chip a tooth, or if it would mercifully bypass her and wing its way across the room to smash some other innocent diner in the head.

The cork picked a third way: it shot directly across the table and lodged securely in Annette's cleavage.

It could have been the sound of Annette's fork hitting her plate that caught the bellboy's attention, or the squeal that escaped her lips as the cork plowed into her bosom. The desk captain had given him an urgent telegram to deliver to a Colonel T. Scoundrel in the main dining room ten minutes earlier. He had a description of the Colonel, and a stick-mounted placard with 'Col. T. Scoundrel' written in grease pencil on it that he had been holding high in the air as he made his way in and

around the tables in the crowded restaurant. He was about to give up his search when he heard a commotion in a far corner of the room.

The boy swung his head in the direction of the sound and saw a beautiful young woman in a revealing dress staring in horror at the cork that was wedged incongruously between her ample breasts. Seated across from her was a tall gentleman whose back was turned to the boy. The bellboy grinned inwardly; he did not need to see the man's face to know that he had found Colonel Scoundrel.

The clattering fork and Annette's yelp startled Thomas into action. He pulled off the linen napkin that had encased the champagne bottle and tossed it across the table to her. Then he jumped up into the aisle to block her from the view of the dozens of diners and staff who were craning their necks to find the source of the hubbub. Annette held the napkin against her chest and discreetly withdrew the cork from its tender resting place. By the time the waiter raced to their table a few seconds later Annette was already composing herself, and Thomas was pouring her a very full glass of the excellent champagne.

Then he poured a glass for himself and settled back into his chair. In any other circumstance, he would have allowed himself to concentrate on the superb crispness and slightly spicy flavor of the dry Clicquot Brut. He would have told Annette how the champagne's blend of two-thirds Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier black grapes gave it body, while the addition of Chardonnay grapes for the other third gave it an unmatched elegance defined by hints of apple, citrus and caramel. And if he was being completely honest, he would also have told her that as much as he enjoyed such a fine wine, he was seldom able to afford it. The pyrotechnics of the past few moments dissuaded him from going down that conversational path, however.

Only moments before he had high hopes that tonight's dinner was leading to a moonlit carriage ride to the country, where a crackling fire, snifters of cognac and a feather bed the size of a playing field was waiting. How *was* Annette going to react to being so indelicately harpooned by the champagne cork? To be sure, in choosing to wear such a low-cut dress she had to know that a good portion of her bust was

going to be on display. On the other hand, Thomas could not conceive of any situation in which a woman would think it acceptable to have her cleavage assaulted as hers had just been.

Had his chance for a country getaway with Annette just been popped by that damn cork? It was time to find out. Annette drained her glass, and Thomas filled it again. As the restaurant returned to normal around them, he cleared his throat and prepared to speak, but Annette beat him to it.

She took a deep breathe, and said, “That was....”

“A stupid and thoughtless action on my part?” he finished, doing his best to hold back a sheepish grin.

Annette put her hand across her mouth to suppress her own smile.

“I was about to say that was perhaps the funniest thing that has ever happened to me, or more correctly,” she added in a whisper, “to my breasts.”

Thomas tilted his head back and let out a great laugh, and Annette clapped her hand over her mouth and nose in an effort to at least appear calm. Her attempt failed, however, and she let fly with a short, snorting chortle that caused him to burst into laughter again. Their waiter, who was returning at that moment to make sure all was well, threw his arms in the air in a sign of exasperated disbelief and marched off to deal with the first well-mannered table he could find. Barbarians!

For his part, Thomas began to relax. There was no doubt as to the meaning of the transformation that the well-aimed cork had brought to Annette’s appearance. Her eyes were shining, her cheeks were flushed, and the very same bosom that only moments before had been unceremoniously pelted by the champagne stopper looked to Thomas to be rising and falling faster and faster in time with her laughter.

There would not be a better moment than this to broach the idea of going to the country for the weekend. He reached across the table and took her hand in his. She looked down for a moment, then slowly raised her head, tilted it just so, and looked deep into his eyes. Her message was unmistakable.

Unfortunately, so was the bellboy’s. He had made his way across the

crowded restaurant and planted himself in the aisle next to Thomas.

“Colonel T. Scoundrel?” asked the boy.

Without turning his head from Annette’s face, Thomas nodded.

“I have a telegram for you, sir. It’s marked urgent.”

He turned to the boy, took the envelope, and reached into his pocket for a dime. The boy happily accepted the gratuity, tipped his hat, and after a fleeting glance back to the exact spot where he had last seen the cork, vanished into the main dining room.

“Would that be work?” asked Annette.

“Not possible,” replied Thomas as he tore open the envelope, “they wouldn’t know I am here.”

The routing history at the top of the yellow paper showed that the telegram had taken three days to shuttle from Cuernavaca to Mexico City, from there to El Paso, then Atlanta, and finally on to his hotel in New York City, where the manager had scribbled a note suggesting they deliver it to Delmonico’s.

The message consisted of three short sentences, and in the moment it took Thomas to read them, Annette saw his expression transform from a lover’s playful, passionate expectation, to the steely-cold resolve of a battlefield commander.

“Diego seriously wounded,” the telegram began. “Rosalilia kidnapped, taken to Colorado. Meet me in Trinidad, CO, your earliest possibility.”

Itzcoatl



TWO

Outside Denver, Colorado

“He is lower than quail shit in a wagon rut, that’s what he is,” grumbled the driver as he crawled out from under the rig the senator had rented that morning in Denver. “All’s he’s got to do is slap him a pint of grease on an axle when the damn thing starts to grinding. Just that one thing and we wouldn’t a gone all busted up out here in the damn middle of nowhere.” For good measure, he spit a gob of wet chew against the spoked wheel he was repairing.

Senator Mack pulled a cheroot and matches from his jacket and leaned back against the rock he had been standing near as the driver labored. This might be the damn middle of nowhere, but it was a sight handsomer than the humid, low-lying swampland he left in Washington, D.C. last week.

The wheel slipped off its axle two hours out of town on a bend in the dirt road where it followed a mountain stream. Meadows thick with lemon grass and sage bordered the creek, spreading gently to the north and south. Mack had seen a bull elk with its harem a few miles back, munching contentedly and without fear in a field dotted with wildflowers. The pine forests that swept up the mountains on either side of the little valley were teeming with game, and he knew the still pools that formed in pockets where the stream twisted and turned would be boiling with cutthroat trout.

They had been traveling since dawn and were still three hours out from the Claybourne ranch house, but they had been traveling on his

land almost since the minute they left town. Every stick of timber, every beef cow, sawmill, range shack, fence post, well-head, and lean-to for thirty-five miles in each direction were Claybourne's, and God help the man who—innocently or not—wandered on to this land to hunt, fish, or camp without permission.

The driver slipped the wheel back on its freshly greased axle and slammed home the hold rod. Then he fetched the horses from the other side of the road and hitched them back into their harness.

“We're ready to be going, Mr. Senator,” he said.

A thick puddle of axle grease had spilled across the passenger seat, so Mack reluctantly climbed up front beside the driver. He felt the complaint of the heavy spring under the seat as he stretched his legs out to the toe board. It was going to be a long journey.

The driver pulled another plug of tobacco from his shirt pocket and released the brake. Then he wrapped a leather rein around each wrist and called to his team. The wagon lurched forward.

“You been out to the Claybourne place before?” asked the driver as the wagon settled into a slow, rhythmic trot.

Senator Mack would normally have ignored—or even punished the impertinence of—a hired hand for being so familiar as to think he could engage a United States Senator in casual social conversation. But, as the wagon swung around what seemed like the hundredth boulder in the road they had encountered since daybreak, he decided that a little talk might help to break the monotony of the drive. Damn, why couldn't Claybourne move closer to town?

“Many times,” he replied. “When we became a state six years ago, Mr. Claybourne hosted a weekend gathering of business leaders and political folk from all across the state to talk about Colorado's future.”

Out of respect for his passenger, the driver gauged the breeze before letting fly with his next cheek full of chaw juice. “It true he owns his very own private railroad car?” he asked.

The Senator nodded. “And the finest wine cellar between St. Louis and San Francisco, and the best stud bulls, too.” Not to mention a stable of politicians, judges and municipal officials, he mused to himself.

Present company included.

“He an English feller?”

“He was born in England to a British father, but his mother was an American,” Mack answered, just as an osprey appeared from nowhere to swoop down to the stream and snag a small cutthroat that had made the mistake of gliding a little too close to the surface.

“His father, was, I believe, the fifth son of an English baronet, which meant he could not inherit any of his family estate. He was sent to America with just enough of a stipend to purchase some land and build a home. Claybourne was just a boy. They settled in Ohio for a few years and then came out to Denver in ’59. Same year I arrived. The town plat had just been laid out, and as quick as they settled in, Claybourne’s father got himself engaged in property development. Turned out he had a real head for it, and by the end of the war he was one of the wealthiest men in the territory.”

“Don’t believe I ever heard about him,” said the driver, “Not in all the years I been here. Kinda strange.”

Mack relit his cheroot and adjusted his legs to find a little comfort in the ceaseless fight between the unforgiving springs under the seat and the endless ruts and potholes that covered the red dirt road.

“Claybourne’s father had a head for business,” Mack continued, “but he liked his liquor, and he couldn’t walk past a card table without sitting down for a hand or two. Real estate he was good at, but gaming, well, let’s say that the cards never much favored him.”

The driver nodded somberly. Business and politics were complete mysteries to the likes of him. But liquor and cards? That’s where the barriers between the classes evaporated. He indulged in both, but by the grace of the God who watched over the foolhardy, he had never had enough money in his pocket to be able to piss away much more than a dollar every now and then.

“Claybourne’s mother died of the typhus the year they came to Colorado, and his father pitched himself down the stairs of a Market Street sporting house a couple of years after the war. Broke his neck.”

“So, the young Mr. Claybourne inherited the boodle,” surmised the

driver. He waved one arm towards the horizon. "And all this."

"More like inherited the whirlwind," Mack said. "The day the guns went silent after Appomattox, his father was worth a fortune. When he died two years later, he was fighting off bankruptcy creditors. He fell far and fast."

The driver couldn't hold back a chuckle. "Right down them stairs," he said. "Course it sounds like he took himself a little ride with one of them sporty gals first. A man could do worse than to die like that."

Senator Mack did not reply. He had known the senior Claybourne quite well. In fact, he had done some legal work for him when he was fresh out of school.

Father and son shared a remarkable affinity for business, but in all other habits and characteristics they were as different as two men could be. The younger Claybourne, Noah, was possibly the most disciplined individual Mack had ever known.

As far as he knew, Noah did not indulge to excess in anything: not drink, or women, nor gambling. That was not to say that he did not take a dip into the vices of the flesh from time to time; but, for him, participating in such activities were more like scratching an itch than luxuriating in the experience. Once the itch subsided, Noah Claybourne went on about his business without regret or any need for self-reflection or recrimination. And he never, not for a moment, lost control of himself or his circumstances. If there was anything remotely resembling a sliver of warmth and compassion within his soul it was evidenced only by his love for his daughter, Hyacinth, whose mother died giving her birth.

Mack knew as much about vice as he did about all the other human frailties that people work so hard to hide, or at least to keep muffled away from public view. He relied heavily on his ability to exploit those frailties to break the will and ultimately dominate the lives of the men and women he had used to vault to political power; first in the rough and tumble days when Colorado was still a territory, then as a force in helping Colorado to achieve statehood, and now, in his role as an acknowledged power broker in the Senate. That Mack himself had

ended up being played by and ensnared in Claybourne's complex web of empire building and political misfeasance was the highest compliment that one corrupt man could pay to another.

They began a slow plod up a long, low hill, and Mack pulled another cheroot from his pocket. The driver struck a match on the side of the wagon and gave him a light.

The senator had given a lot of thought to the nature of Noah Claybourne's character over the years, especially in the last several weeks leading up to tomorrow's meeting at the ranch. Mack had never put anything he seriously valued on the line for anyone's dreams but his own. He attributed his success in politics to that credo. He was sure that none of the others who would be in attendance tomorrow had done so either. On the other hand, he had never known anyone who dreamed as big as Claybourne, including the colossally wealthy railroad tycoons and industrialists with whom he interacted in the halls of Congress and salons of New York City. Noah Claybourne was the only man the senator knew who had the balls and the brains and the money to pull off the scheme they were about to undertake.

On the face of it, no rational person would entrust Claybourne with the power to make or break their future so completely and totally. Mack knew that Noah was more than happy to stand idly by as his associates indulged in all manner of depraved behavior, from kidnapping, to murder, to theft of money and property on the grandest and most outrageous scale. More precisely, Mack thought, he was happy to stand back if the crimes committed by his associates helped him to advance his own circumstances to the next level. The man was a complete cynic and fatalist. He was also supremely self-confident, the true architect of every corner of the world he inhabited.

After dinner at a private club in Philadelphia the year before, the senator and others who would soon be gathering at the ranch sat quietly as Noah expounded on the personal philosophy that underlay the breathtaking scheme they were about to set in motion.

"Romanticism is a fool's dream, love is an addiction, and compassion is a disease," Claybourne began, as waiters poured a rare Sandeman

port and handed out Tabacalera cigars from Madrid. "The purpose of life is to expand, to possess, and to control. Any activity not directly tied to one of those objectives is not simply a waste of time, but, in my belief, a sin."

The senator was not a religious man, but when it came to the topic of sin, he knew himself to be an expert. He had done his best to practice at it nearly every day of his adult life.



The wagon reached the crest of the hill, where the driver reined the horses to a stop so that they could take in the full breadth of the panorama below. They had been traveling east-northeast for nearly five hours, and for most of that distance the rutted path had been gently sloping upwards. Mack estimated they had gained 1,200 to 1,500 feet in elevation. Behind them, to the west, lay Denver and beyond that the Front Range. The road before them pointed east, beginning a descent equal to the elevation they had climbed all day until it spilled into a broad, open valley bounded on the north by a wide creek dotted with stands of plains cottonwoods. As far as Mack could see, rolling grasslands bisected by a multitude of creeks covered the landscape, stretching for hundreds of miles through the region divided by the South Platte and Arkansas Rivers until they melded farther east into the vast expanses of the Great Plains.

Claybourne ranch sat at the far edge of the bountiful rainfall region; the land to the east beyond his estates became quickly and increasingly arid with each passing mile. It was a perfect place to farm, harvest timber, or raise beef cattle. Noah Claybourne had chosen well.

"Langton Hall," he murmured.

"Beg pardon?" asked the driver.

"Langton is the village in Yorkshire where the ancestral Claybournes lived for centuries," replied the senator. "He named his house in its memory, but I'm fairly certain there are no houses like that in its namesake village." He looked down on the house and outbuildings

scattered below. No, he thought to himself, not in Yorkshire and maybe not anywhere.

The road wound down to the gated entry to Langton Hall, still about a half mile distant. Two massive trees had been felled and trimmed, and their bark had been scraped off. They were planted upright about thirty feet apart. A professionally painted signboard stretched from one pillar to the other, with *Claybourne Ranch* painted in three-foot high dark blue letters that were outlined with gold gilding. The closer Mack's wagon got to the house, the more dramatic and architecturally appealing the whole effect became. The barn and stables off to the left were designed in the same style as the main house, and behind them was a brick smokehouse with a metal roof. The two-story bunkhouse for the ranch hands sat one hundred yards to the east of the main house, and next to it was another stable and a wood and post remuda for their horses. Running from north to south behind the bunkhouse was a low ridge beyond which were pens for calving and branding cattle.

Seeing the entire property spread out across dozens of acres when you came over the rise from the Denver road was a sight that visitors never forgot. The senator knew that was exactly the effect that Claybourne intended.



The sun was arcing high overhead as the senator and his driver finished their individual appreciations of the ranch from their wagon seat. Then the driver hopped down and moved over by a tree to do his necessities. He returned a moment later and wadded one final plug of tobacco into his cheek.

Mack stretched his legs and asked himself for the hundredth time if he was sure about what he was doing. There could be no halfway results once he joined forces with Claybourne; it would be win or lose. There would be no draws. Even if Claybourne's plans were executed flawlessly, innocent people would die, two small towns would be burnt to the ground, and governments would be shaken to their foundations.

There could be war, or revolution, or both. He flicked the stub of his cheroot to the ground as the driver climbed back up into his seat. Of course, he could also be rewarded with a staggering fortune and power the likes of which few people could imagine. The risk, he concluded for the last time, *was* worth it.

As the wagon began the descent to the valley floor and the house beyond, a line from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* echoed in his mind:

“There is a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries.”

The United States senator from the new state of Colorado was going to catch that tide.



THREE

Trinidad, Colorado

The southbound Santa Fe steamed into the Trinidad depot a half hour late. Its locomotive braked to a halt twenty feet from the telegraph office, where newly appointed city marshal Bat Masterson was half-asleep in a wooden rocker on the deck next to the track.

The town of 6,000 had been quiet the night before, so Masterson took advantage of the unusually civil behavior by the cowhands, miners, professional gamblers, drunks, prostitutes and others who typically packed the saloons and gambling halls lining Main Street. Instead of arresting brawlers or tossing drunks out into the street, he settled into his usual table at the Imperial for a long night of faro, before walking down to meet the noon train from Wichita.

Bat was counting the peaks in the snow-dusted Sangre de Cristo Mountain range while he waited for the train. Tall and rugged and narrow, they formed an unbroken line of summits and ridges that dominated the horizon from north to south. Most of the other mountains he had observed in his travels rose gradually from valley floors, beginning as low foothills that swept higher and higher for miles before they became real mountains. This stretch of the Rockies was different; there were no foothills at all. Instead, the solid rock mass of the Sangres pushed straight up more than 7,000 feet above the valleys and plains. The dramatic mountain vista was one of the features that attracted the twenty-nine-year-old lawman to the city, along with the temperate,

semi-arid climate. The booming gambling scene was a plus, too.

He had never settled in one place for very long, but if he were to put down roots, Masterson thought, Trinidad might be it.



The engineer climbed down from the locomotive, and Pullman attendants swung open the passenger car doors and unfolded their steps. In a minute the platform would be a beehive of activity with porters offloading luggage, passengers disembarking, and barkers from the local hotels and saloons shouting out invitations for the tired, thirsty travelers to visit their establishments.

Masterson frequently met trains coming into town, as much out of curiosity about who was visiting as it was a professional duty to look out for anyone whose preferred brand of trouble might be more than even a wide-open town like Trinidad would care to welcome. The engineer had learned not to pull out of the depot towards the coaling site until the marshal signaled that none of his passengers were going to be ordered back onto the train before their luggage made it to the platform.

It was a telegram he'd received from his counterpart in Wichita about one of today's passengers that prompted the marshal to pay extra attention to the folks who were about to disembark. The Kansas lawman explained that he had engaged a questionable-looking man in conversation at the station and said the passenger had introduced himself as a retired Army Colonel. A damn sight too young for that, wrote Masterson's associate. Looked to be in his early 30s. As for the name the passenger gave, Thomas E. Scoundrel, what the hell was that all about?

"*Bat,*" the marshal wired, "*I believe you have an accomplished confidence man headed your way. If he was landing in my jurisdiction, I'd tell him to pack it back on the train, and head elsewhere.*"

Masterson smiled to himself as he read the telegram. He did know Colonel Scoundrel's name, and something of his reputation. The story of his heroics at the battle of Pebble Creek Ridge was well known, and the marshal had also heard about a duel of honor in New Orleans

that resulted in the death of a wealthy businessman, and a South Seas venture gone bad that culminated in a shootout with a gang of Pacific Island natives in, of all places, an uptown New York City art gallery. Confidence man or not, Colonel Scoundrel was someone Masterson wanted to meet.

The first passenger onto the platform was Felipe Baca, whose family had founded the town just over a decade ago. No one—especially Baca—had expected the tiny settlement to grow the way it had. Masterson tipped his bowler hat to Baca, who smiled and waved in return. Several members of Baca’s family came down the steps, followed by an oily-looking man accompanied by two young women who Bat expected would be looking for employment in one of the half-dozen bordellos that fronted Main Street. No law against that, of course, but the man would bear some watching.

Several more locals debarked the passenger cars. Then, a tall, lean man with broad shoulders and wavy brown hair stepped onto the platform, just a few feet from Masterson. He had hazel eyes, a tanned, open face, high cheekbones and a determined jaw. He set down a well-worn leather valise, looked around the platform, and immediately realized he was the object of Masterson’s scrutiny. Instead of turning away, he smiled, and nodded in the city marshal’s direction. Bat pulled back his coat so that the silver badge pinned on his vest would be visible. This was a test; Masterson could tell a great deal about a person by the way they reacted when they discovered that the compact man in the fashionable bowler hat and three-piece suit was the law.

Colonel Thomas E. Scoundrel took note of the display of authority. He grinned, touched his finger to his forelock, and then turned to fetch the rest of his luggage from the porter.

The marshal approached and said, “Would you like me to hail a hansom cab, Colonel Scoundrel? It’s a bit of a walk to the hotels.”

Thomas wasn’t surprised that the marshal recognized him. Doing his job, he supposed. “That’s kind of you, thanks, marshal...”

“Masterson,” Bat answered. He waved to a driver who was standing by his horse and cab alongside the depot. The driver gathered up

Thomas' bags and swung them up into the hansom.

"Where will you be staying?" Masterson asked.

"I'm meeting a friend tomorrow at the Grand Union Hotel, and from there, on to Denver."

"Fine restaurant at the Grand," volunteered Masterson. "Somehow they managed to steal a French chef from a hotel in New York City. I can vouch for his seared elk back-strap in a Bordeaux glaze. Nothing like it anywhere."

Thomas made a mental note to try the specialty. Then he extended his hand to Masterson. "Perhaps we will meet again while I am here," he said.

"I'm sure we will."

Thomas stepped up through the folding wooden door and into the cab. He instructed the driver about the hotel and settled back in his seat. Then, a tap at the window. He cranked the glass down.

"I should have mentioned," said Masterson. "If you favor a game of faro, the tables at the Imperial are honest, and their wine cellar is first-rate." He raised his hand goodbye and nodded to the driver. Thomas raised his hand in return, and the cab trotted away from the depot.



It was difficult to believe that Trinidad was little more than a wind-blown way station on the Santa Fe Trail between Missouri and New Mexico until a few years ago. Today, dozens of handsome multi-story buildings, many built with locally quarried stone, stretched for blocks along Main Street. At the edge of town was Webster Brown's General Livery & Sale Stables, next to Tony's Market and Steam Sausage Factory. Moving into town, Thomas saw the signs for Mather's Druggists, and, pleasantly, H. Detmers & Co. Wine Merchants & Purveyor of Fine Kentucky Whiskies. The cab trotted past butcher shops, sash and door retailers, physician offices and bakeries. Midway down the street the lineup of saloons and gambling houses began in earnest. Tim Carney's establishment boasted louvered bat-wing doors topped by a

sign that said, “*These doors never close.*” Next door was the Tivoli Saloon, with a colorful banner promoting “*Handsome and Orderly Club Rooms,*” followed by Jake’s Brunswick Saloon, Mac’s Place, The Boss Club, Collier & Gillmans, and, as promised by the marshal, the Imperial Saloon.

By the time the cab reached the Grand Union Hotel, he estimated they had passed nearly two dozen saloons and gambling houses, plus an unknown number of shadier businesses who knew better than to advertise their wares in a town that was clearly on the cusp of becoming civilized.

The Grand sat at the intersection of Commercial and Main, and boasted a three-story dun-colored stone façade that covered most of the block. Four dark green canvas awnings stretched out over retail display windows, and the main entrance to the saloon at the front corner sported fluted stone pillars that rose above the rooftop to a crowning sculpture of an eagle, above which flew the American flag. The hotel entrance on Commercial Street featured three cobbled stone columns supporting a second-floor balcony. At the top of the columns was a twenty-foot-wide signboard topped by another flagpole, this one bearing the scarlet red standard of John Conkle, the hotel’s owner.

He paid the hansom driver and handed his bags to a hotel doorman. Inside, fans in the high-ceilinged marble and walnut lobby pushed a cooling breeze around the room. To the left of the reception desk were frosted glass doors leading to the bar, while the entry to the hotel restaurant was to the right. The bar doors swung open just long enough for the aromas of cigar smoke, fresh sawdust, and spilled beer to drift into the lobby.

The doorman deposited his bags at the desk, where a middle-aged clerk was making notations in a ledger. His empty left sleeve was pinned to the side of his coat, a sight Thomas had seen a hundred times since the end of the war. His friends in the regiment used to say—only half-jokingly—that if a flea bit you on the ass in the presence of an army surgeon, you’d never fill out the backside of a pair of trousers again after the doc was done treating you. The truth was almost that gruesome; doctors had no way to prevent wound infections like sepsis or gangrene, so

preventative amputations were the order of the day on the battlefield.

The clerk greeted him and swung the registry around. He wrote his name and New York hotel address under the clerk's watchful gaze.

"Colonel?" asked the clerk in a thick southern accent. "Yankee colonel?"

"Battlefield commission, northern Virginia, last week of the war."

The clerk pointed to where his left arm should have been. "Chickamauga, southeastern Tennessee, '63." He chuckled. "The history books say we whupped you boys, the best damn victory the Confederacy enjoyed in the West. Course, 18,000 of us butternuts ended up wounded or dead to pull that little miracle off. I don't remember any of us dancing the jig when your General Rosecrans and the Army of the Cumberland called it a day, that's for damn sure."

Thomas smiled. "Victory is a funny thing. On that we agree."

He paid for two nights in advance and followed the bellboy up a single flight of dark tile stairs to a second-floor room where he unpacked his two sets of clothing—his only sets, he reminded himself—before going over to the window and pulling the curtain aside. With all the carriages, buckboards, horses, and pedestrians streaming up and down Trinidad's main street, he could very well have been in St. Louis or Chicago, not in a dusty corner of the high desert in the middle of the vast American west. Itzcoatl would find him soon. He would get news about Diego and learn why Rosalilia had been kidnapped and spirited away to Colorado.

He pulled his revolver from the valise, checked the action, and gave the empty cylinder a spin before pulling out a box of cartridges and loading them into the gun, one by one. Then he put the pistol back into his bag and set it on a side table next to the bed.

He slid a chair over to the window and closed the curtain halfway. Then he poured a glass of water from the nightstand carafe and sat at the window to watch and wait.

Victory *was* a funny thing. His whole life was proof of that.



FOUR

Dinwiddie County, Virginia, March 1865

Brigadier General Horatio Yoke was having none of it. No, by God, not a bit. Not after what it had taken for him to keep his regiment out of the shadow of harm's way for nearly three years. Those preening West Point battlefield commanders were welcome to their shiny campaign medals. For Yoke, every day that passed without the sound of a single shot being fired was what real victory looked like. And now this.

"Say that again sergeant?"

"General Sheridan sends his compliments, sir," said the messenger, "and directs that you decamp with all due haste. You are to move your infantry units up to the line, double quick, and join up with General Merritt's Third Division, right here."

The sergeant handed General Yoke an official dispatch envelope, and then pointed to a spot on the map he had unfurled on the General's camp table. "The junction at Five Forks. Your regiment will support the cavalry assault on the rebs right flank. You will secure and hold this section of the South Side railroad. That will close the rebs supply line and choke off their only evacuation route."

"The early reports I got this morning about the action at Dinwiddie Court House suggested we had Pickett's men on the run," said Yoke. "And with Petersburg surrendered, I expected Lee would be ready to lay it down."

"Sir, when I left the lines five hours ago, General Sheridan's forces were fighting delaying actions and doing their best to push Pickett back

towards Five Forks. They're advancing on his flank. General Warren's V corps have arrived to reinforce, and you will be a part of that action."

Yoke ran his hand through his hair and barked at his adjutant, Captain Morrison for a cigar.

"Sergeant, you have delivered your message. Now, please inform General Sheridan that the 109th Ohio will do its part, as we always do." He lowered his head in thought before continuing. "And please tell his aide, Colonel Brandman, that I will personally see to it that his son will be on the tip of the spear that we ram down Johnnie Reb's throat. Oh, and sergeant," added Yoke. "Stop by the mess tent and get something to eat. Then have them send someone to clean up my dinner dishes."

The sergeant saluted, pulled the tent flap aside, and stepped out into the bright afternoon sunshine. Major Rolande set down his cigar and brandy and stood up from the table where he and Yoke had been making plans for their respective returns to civilian life when the war ended—any day now, if the rumors were true.

"Sheridan has 20,000 men he can throw at Lee and Pickett," he said, almost to himself. "What the hell does he need with us? We've never had a full regimental complement of ten companies, and not one of the six companies we do have is at full strength. We have maybe six hundred men in this whole command."

"Five-hundred-eighty-four as of yesterday," replied Yoke. "And fewer than one hundred who can lace their boots by themselves, let alone load and fire a weapon. The question is, what is Sheridan playing at? He may not know the reason I organized this regiment in '63, but his commanders sure as hell do, considering we have been hiding many of their sons from battle for years."

Rolande looked down at the location on the map where Sheridan had ordered them to march at double speed. Unlike General Yoke, he had been in combat. He knew the smells and the sounds and the otherworldly horrors that brew in the belly of pitched battle. He had stepped over the charred and twisted bodies of soldiers so maimed and disfigured that it was impossible to tell if they belonged to Union or Confederate forces. It had only taken a few days on the front lines for

him to conclude that what mattered was not if you wore blue or gray, or supported this line of politics or that one; what mattered was survival.

When he heard the stories two years ago about a ghost regiment that had been organized to protect the sons of politicians, judges, bankers, and industrialists who had been so unfortunate as not to be able to buy their way out of service, Rolande determined to find it. He was not a coward, he told himself. Far from it. Instead, he was a man who was determined to survive this damn war.

He found Yoke and his loosely organized regiment a few weeks later. They were waiting in reserve behind Major Benjamin Butler's 33,000-man Army of the James as it launched the Bermuda Hundred Campaign to disperse the Confederate government at Richmond. The campaign went on to fail, but Rolande found the home he had been looking for.

Yoke kept ahead of the game by virtue of being privy to intelligence that only the most senior commanders received. In fact, if President Lincoln decided where to commit an army to battle, Yoke usually found out about the plans even before Grant or Sheridan were officially informed. That was the benefit of being the protector of the powerful. Civilian and military aides to the President and the Secretary of War had a vested interest in seeing to it that Yoke remained far from harm's way, and they paid handsomely for the protection Yoke provided their sons.

For the past two years Yoke's regiment had been in constant motion, always in such a way as to mask the fact that their primary momentum was always away from battle, not towards it. The 109th would march to within a mile or two of a major engagement and sometimes commit a single company of one hundred battle seasoned men to participate in a few small skirmishes. Those men's families, of course, were not wealthy enough to pay for their boys to be hidden away.

Then, using the information he had been secretly given about the strategy conceived by field commanders for that battle, Yoke would recall his company from action and wheel his regiment well to the rear of whatever regiments or brigades were about to be thrown into

the thick of the conflict. The fact that after action reports consistently mentioned that the 109th Ohio had been kept in reserve yet again during battle did not raise eyebrows in the field command tents, or in the offices at the War Department. That is exactly where they were supposed to be.

“The order for us to move up to the lines comes from Sheridan himself,” said Rolande. “If he asked for us specifically, it was for a reason. And if we don’t show up and engage as ordered, he will know, and we could be looking at courts martial, and years behind bars in federal prison. Can Colonel Brandman do anything about it?”

“He will get the message about his son,” replied Yoke, “and he will cover us in whatever way he can. But you are right that if Sheridan himself made it clear that he wants the 109th at the front, a lot of people will be watching what we do.” He was certain that there were some officers who knew of his game and who would have loved nothing more than to find a way to force him onto a battlefield—preferably on horseback, leading the first bloody charge.

The general removed his jacket and hung it on a peg. He poured a brandy and stared glumly at the map.

“There might be a way,” Rolande volunteered. “What if, just for the sake of argument, we are engaged by the rebs only an hour or so after we move out? Let’s say a reb cavalry patrol finds us by chance, and attacks. We take defensive positions here, at this bend in Pebble Creek.” He pointed to a spot on the map a quarter mile away. “When we send a company to flank them, our men report back that an entire reb infantry column and artillery company are only an hour behind the patrol...”

“Meaning we would have no choice but to swing far around them, miles around them, before we could make the march to Five Forks,” Yoke finished.

“By which time, with any damn luck at all, the engagement would be over,” said Rolande. “The after-action report would detail how we were slowed down by a couple of regiments but were able to finally fight our way out and double-time it to reinforce General Warren.”

“Colonel Brandman would see to it that the report makes it clear that we fought like demons,” chuckled Yoke. “Heroes, every damn one

of us—especially his son.”

The tent fell quiet. They understood, without saying it, that if they undertook this scheme only to see it fail, it wouldn't mean just a court martial. They would hang by the neck for treason.

“What we do in the next hour will make or break us,” surmised Yoke. “There's no time to overthink. We've got to be quick about it and be ready to fill in the blanks later.”

“Captain Morrison,” said the general. “What do you see as the biggest obstacle to such a plan?”

“That would be figuring out a way to find the right rebs who we can invite to play along,” replied Morrison. “Not exactly like extending an invitation to a cotillion dance.”

“I don't know about that,” said Rolande. “Every Johnnie Reb from here to Atlanta knows the war is over. All except for the ink on the surrender document. They want the same thing as we do: to get home with their sorry backsides in one piece. We just need to find a way to help a few of them do just that.”

It was getting stuffy in the General's tent, but until their conversation was complete the heavy canvas door flap would have to remain closed.

Yoke emptied his glass and handed it to Morrison to refill. “What's that chaplain's name? The one who joined us after Petersburg; he stutters like the devil.”

“Landston,” said Major Rolande. “He bunks with Company H.”

“Isn't his brother also a chaplain?”

“A reb chaplain, yes sir, he is. Probably with one of Pickett's regiments.”

“Do you know if he is an honest man?” asked Yoke.

Rolande spit a little brandy back into his glass. “Well, if it runs in the family, he is probably one of those men of the cloth who like the cloth on their back to be made of silk. Landston sure does. So, even if his reb brother is \$20 worth of honest, I expect that a few hundred Yankee greenbacks would probably help him see the higher light.”

“Captain Morrison, find Landston,” said General Yoke. “Ask him if he knows how to contact his brother, and if he can do it right now. Could be he is only a few hours ride from here.”

“Have Landston tell his brother that if he can find a dozen—no, make it two dozen—rebs who would be willing to feint an attack on us at dawn tomorrow that we will pay each man jack of ‘em \$100 dollars in fresh Yankee green. Confederate dollars won’t be worth a spoonful of warm spit in a couple weeks. They just have to ride over the ridge to the east of us, holler like hell, wave their battle flag and fire a few rounds into the air. They need to be seen and heard, that’s all. ‘Course,” he added with a sly smile, “when the manure settles, and all this is over, we will dress up the report a little to make it look like we were under heavy and sustained fire during their attack.”

Rolande shook his head. It was one hell of a risk. At the same time, the rebs surely knew that their cause was lost. One hundred dollars in Union cash would go a long way to getting a rebel soldier home, and in style. Better to end the war with a stomach full of food than one full of sawdust, or worse: grapeshot. Finding a few graybacks who might be amenable to such a practical arrangement shouldn’t be so hard.

“And when the skirmishers ride away, our scouts will report that a whole god damn rebel brigade is coming right up behind them, headed straight for us,” Yoke continued. “We’ll pay our scouts to make that report and then keep their mouths shut until they sail through the gates of perdition. Every other man in the camp will only know that a reb attack really did come from over the ridge. They’ll see it happen. And they’ll see us repel Johnnie. Hell, I might lead that charge myself. Our men will believe what the scouts say about the advancing column, they will watch us throw the skirmishers back, and that’s the tune they will sing for the rest of their lives.”

Rolande and Morrison nodded in assent. It was as solid a plan as any other they could think of.

Yoke turned to Captain Morrison. “Requisition \$500 from the paymaster for your parlay with Landston and make damn sure he understands that money is for his brother. He needs to leave within the hour, and make sure he has a solid mount. Get him a small white flag, too, in case he gets stopped by sentries. A few dollars to those boys, and he should pass through the lines without trouble. Then, get the clerk in

here and tell him to bring the regimental record books for the past year. We've got some old tracks to cover and some new tracks to lay."

Morrison threw open the tent flap and hurried off to find the chaplain. Yoke and Rolande turned back to the map. There was a lot of planning to be done.

A moment later the sentry appeared in the open doorway. "Kitchen lad is here, sir," he said. He stepped aside for a tall, shaggy haired youth in a long cotton apron holding a canvas-sided dish collection tray.

"Private Scanddrél reporting," said the young man.



FIVE

Dinwiddie County

Thomas gathered up the cups and dishes from General Yoke's tent and carried them through the camp to the open-air mess kitchen. The rain that had turned the path to mud was letting up and the soldiers of the 109th were coming out of their tents to sit on camp chairs, smoke, eat, write letters home, or just jawbone in the late afternoon light.

The mess boy had always liked this time of day, especially the way the sky transformed in the golden hour, just before dusk. Scrubbing out pots and pans and butchering chickens for Sunday dinner weren't his idea of real soldiering, of course. When he joined the army six months earlier, he had the usual romantic notions of war that most young men harbored when they heard the fife and drum, saw the glint of sunshine on brass uniform buttons, and watched the orderly march of troops as they filed down main street during Independence Day parades.

It took all of about a week after signing up at a federal depot outside of Cincinnati to disabuse the seventeen-year-old of any notion that he had joined King Arthur's Round Table in pursuit of some grand and glorious cause.

He had yet to hold—let alone fire—a rifle or pistol. He had been shooting on the farm since he was six, and pretty much everybody back home said that he could also ride a horse with the skill of a Comanche warrior. That was the army's loss, he figured. The fact that he hadn't been allowed to mount a horse, help move or fire artillery pieces, or even join in infantry drills pretty much rounded out his overall disappointment with military service.

Sergeant O'Hanlon ran the mess and was as solid a regular army soldier as Thomas had met. When the big Irishman learned that Thomas could read and write, as well as speak fluent French and a smattering of Latin, he pulled the boy from kitchen duty for two hours every afternoon so that Thomas could write letters for the men in his company who had no education. That was most of them, he quickly learned.

The regiment never settled in one spot for more than a week, but each time they relocated, the layout of the new camp remained unchanged; seventy or eighty tents—including the regimental commander's—were lined up in two tight rows at one end of the camp. Then, a wall of horse corrals, freight wagons, artillery caissons and limbers, and assorted rolling stock were in such a way as to form a barrier between what O'Hanlon called "Fort Gentry" and the one hundred fighting men in Company B he called "The Pugilists."

"The gentry do get better chow and more frequent laundry," O'Hanlon told Thomas on the boy's first day. "But if ever this dandy regiment of ours should find itself going toe to toe with the rebs in a real donnybrook, you'll thank the livin' saints that you are bunked with boys who can fight, and not with them high-born, silk-waisted cockereels over there, not a one of whom could buy his way to the upstairs sportin' rooms of a New York whorehouse if'n he had a pocket full of gold eagles."

Rumors of the impending collapse of General Lee's army had been running through the camp for days. As Thomas loaded General Yoke's dirty dishes into the soapy water of one of the huge cauldrons that were kept simmering over wood fires laid in trenches, he found himself hoping that, for once, maybe the scuttlebutt was true. The war would be over, and with it, his dishwashing career. Someday.



Captain Morrison roused the general at 2:00 a.m. "Landston's back from the rebel encampment," he said.

Yoke swung his legs off the cot and took his jacket from Morrison's outstretched hand. Major Rolande put a match to two more lanterns,

and the night duty sentry poured steaming coffee from a porcelain pot.

Yoke took a cup and sat at the table. A moment later the tent flap parted, and Landston stepped in. The general had never had much use for the florid-faced pastor, but if the man had done his duty this day, it would be the perfect capstone to the 109th's story, or at least to the version of the story that Yoke hoped to sell to the War Department in the months ahead.

But the moment Yoke looked into the chaplain's eyes, he knew the man had failed. "Tell me," he growled.

"I made it past the pickets without trouble," began Landston. "As you said, a couple of dollars speaks loudly these days. One of them escorted me to the camp, which I swear looked like it went on for miles. Line after line of artillery pieces, a thousand or more tents, horses lined up farther than I could see."

Major Rolande shot the general a worried look.

"And then?" asked Yoke.

"We found my brother at the chaplain's station. He was more than a bit surprised to see me, of course. I laid out your offer right away. Five hundred dollars for him, \$100 each for two dozen men who would make a false run along the ridge outside our camp, the whole thing."

"And how did he take it?" asked Rolande.

"He was subdued," said Landston, "I didn't expect that. In fact, he seemed downright perturbed. He stepped outside the tent and sent a passing soldier to fetch a major named Elijah. We caught up on family news for a few minutes, and then the major arrived."

The chaplain paused and pointed at the coffee pot before continuing. "Major Elijah got right to the point when I told him the purpose for my visit," he said, as the captain poured coffee for him. "I'll be taking that \$500 off your hands," was pretty much the first thing he said."

"Son of a bitch," muttered Rolande softly.

"And then?" asked Yoke.

"And then he surprised me. He said, 'Preacher, you have terrible timing. If you had come to me with this scheme a week ago, I'd have been on it like a fly on warm syrup. But that was before the fights at

White Oak Road and Dinwiddie Court House these past several days. We pushed your boys back, thousands of ‘em. And now we are massing our forces at Five Forks, where, God willing, we will smash Sheridan and send him packing to hell, or at least force him to sit at the table to sign a peace treaty that is favorable to the Confederacy. We have the wind at our back, and our boys know it. I believe we are going to pull it off tomorrow. That’s how I see it.”

“But he still let you go,” said Rolande. “Why?”

“He wanted me to bring you a message,” replied the chaplain. “He said, his exact words were, ‘Extend my compliments to General Yoke. Our scouts told us three days ago that y’all were camped at Pebble Creek, but given your reputation for fleeing instead of fighting, we didn’t figure it merited our time to root you out. ‘Course, if your plans still include a forced march to Five Forks to support the engagement there, I expect my commander will be inclined to go ahead and pay you a visit at first light.”

General Yoke flung his coffee cup against the tent wall. Whatever he did now, he was in one hell of a pinch. If he stayed put, he would be facing off with a seasoned reb regiment, maybe two, in just a few hours. If he tried to flank their advance and join up with General Warren at Five Forks as per his original orders, the reb cavalry would know exactly where he was headed and run him down. And, if he turned tail and ran towards the relative safety of the eastern woods, he would be branded a traitor and a coward and face a general court martial for sure.



Yoke sent the chaplain back to his company and asked Morrison to have the sentry wake up the clerk. Then he motioned to Morrison and Rolande to sit with him at the table.

“Gentlemen,” said the general. “I know two things: first, there is always a way forward. Always. Second, there is a bank in Philadelphia that has been holding onto every payment made to us by the families of almost four hundred soldiers sleeping safely out there tonight like

they have been every night since we organized this regiment. I have no intention of giving that money up.”

The other two officers nodded in agreement. It was everything or nothing from this moment on.

“Your thoughts?” asked the general.

Captain Morrison had an idea. “Running away means prison and financial ruin,” he said. “But trying to outflank a rebel cavalry regiment means capture or death. That leaves us with only one choice: we make a stand.”

He began pacing around the tent as he talked. “Now, we know that most of the linen-breeches boys out there aren’t strong enough to wring so much as a single drop out of a milk cow’s teat. They will be of no use in battle. At the same time, we cannot allow them to be captured, not this late in the day. They are our fortunes, and that’s how it is. There is only one course of action regarding our charges: we must get them organized and get them the hell out of here. Towards the east and safety. Right now.”

He paused, took a last drink of coffee, and then poured brandy into the cup. Yoke and Rolande held out their cups, and the captain filled them to the rim.

“My thinking goes this way: we send our charges to safety, and we pick a rendezvous spot a couple days east and tell them to wait until we arrive.”

“And we do what?” asked Yoke. “The three of us lead the one company of fighting men we actually have against a full regiment of rebel cavalry and infantry? Where’s the profit in that?”

Morrison smiled. “Oh, there will be an attack, alright. And our best men will be in it, right up to the end. But you won’t lead that attack, General. And neither will you Major, nor will I. No, gentlemen, the attack will be led by our regimental colonel.”

Yoke shook his head. “We have no colonel, and there sure as hell isn’t time to get approval from Sheridan to get one transferred here.”

“Granted, sir. But we don’t have to borrow one from another brigade. We can make our own goddamn colonel, here, right from inside our

own ranks. A battlefield promotion.”

Yoke and Rolande were silent. Then Rolande said, “Assuming we get that colonel....and I don’t know that any man above the rank of private would be stupid enough to agree to the job, but assuming we do, and further, if he leads a charge right into the teeth of the advancing rebs, how the hell is that going to help the three of us? Anyway, what chance would our men have of getting out of there alive, let alone of winning the day?”

General Yoke chuckled softly. “But that’s the point, isn’t it captain? They’re not supposed to get out alive. They’re supposed to die, every one of them. In fact, for this to work, they have to die.”

Morrison nodded, his face dark and solemn in the pale lamp light.

“And when they ride over that ridge to attack the rebel force, the three of us will watch safely from the tree line two hundred yards to the east until it’s over and done. Shouldn’t take but a few minutes if what Landston’s brother said is true and half the Army of Northern Virginia is on their way to stomp us out,” he said.

Rolande picked up the thought. “When it’s over, we can bruise ourselves up a bit and tear our uniforms to look like we have been in a big fight. Then we work out the details of whatever story we are going to tell while we ride to join the rest of our regiment waiting in the hills to the east.”

“We’ll be heroes,” said Yoke in a hushed voice. He set his cup softly on the table. “One hundred men will die so we can have that title,” he whispered in a voice that was almost tinged with regret. But only almost. Then he raised his cup into the air.

“Here’s to the heroes of the 109th Ohio,” he said in a strong, clear voice. The three men emptied their cups.

“Now, let’s find our new colonel.”



SIX

Trinidad, Colorado, June 1882

The summer breezes that flow down the icy ridges of the snow-capped Sangre de Cristos and across the Purgatoire River valley in the afternoons are gifts to the people of Trinidad. These *brisas* blunt the withering heat that builds up on the Great Plains to the east and the deserts to the south, cooling the hot city streets each evening when the sun goes down.

Thomas had nodded off in his chair by the window in the muggy hotel room. Then, right on time, a gentle wind began to drift through the curtains. It was nearly spent from its long journey off the mountains but still carried enough alpine frost on its breath to rouse him from his sleep.

He pulled his watch from his waistcoat pocket and saw he had been napping for nearly two hours. He pulled the curtain aside and looked down on the busy street. Despite what he had told Marshal Masterson, Thomas had no idea when Itzcoatl would be arriving, or if he was already in town. The telegram he received at Delmonico's five days ago simply said he should get to Trinidad as quickly as possible.

He had arranged for a cab to take a most disappointed Annette home from the restaurant before returning to his hotel. He penned a resignation note to the bank, then packed his few belongings into a single bag before taking the elevated line outside his hotel to the New York Central Railroad terminal to begin his journey west. The trip from New York to Chicago, on to Wichita and through to Trinidad took four and a half days. He assumed Itzcoatl would know that timeline. Now, he

could only wait for Diego's man to make his appearance.

He washed his face in the nightstand basin, checked his wallet, and put on his coat. He would take dinner early and then walk along Main Street in hopes of encountering Itzcoatl among the throngs of people moving up and down the boardwalks. He stepped towards the door and then paused to do something quite uncharacteristic. He stood in front of the oval mirror above the dresser and took stock of the reflection peering back at him.

He had never been one to dwell on the past. He had made more than his share of mistakes, and he understood his own nature well enough to know that he would make plenty more. Even so, the dark hazel eyes that regarded him from the mirror showed no hint of any sense of contrition for anything he had done in his life, including the men he had killed or the women he had loved. He learned long ago to forgive himself—and most other people—for simply surrendering to the sins of the flesh to which all humans are heir by virtue of their primitive animal natures.

Diego once keenly observed to Rosalilia that Thomas could be counted on for only two things: he would always be there to help a friend, and, in the pursuit of his next romantic entanglement he would toss common sense out of the lady's bedroom window the first time he climbed through it.

He was quick to take a bet, the first one to sit down at the gaming table, and the last to leave. The game was the thing to him—in cards, and in love. He was no fool, of course. He understood full well that the next petticoat chase and the one after that would end as they always did, just as he knew that his pockets would be nearly empty tomorrow when the morning sun streamed through the saloon doors, and the dealer called the last hand. It didn't matter. For Thomas Scoundrel, the sun was always going to rise on new opportunity. He was an adventurer and soldier, not a farmer or shopkeeper. And he was under no illusion that he would survive to a ripe old age.

He regarded himself in the mirror. Sixteen years had passed since he mustered out of the Union Army. In the span of a few days his name and age had been officially changed, his rank had skyrocketed from kitchen

boy to colonel, and he had fought—and won—a decisive victory against rebel forces in which he was badly wounded. When he was discharged from the hospital in late April of 1865, he was a hero with no past, a military officer with no formal education, a wanderer with neither family nor friend to confide in.

He was also the beneficiary of a breathtaking criminal scheme concocted without his knowledge or approval; but, if he ever made public what he had learned about General Yoke and his co-conspirators at Pebble Creek, it would have meant the loss of his lifetime annuity and perhaps even prison. In the dangerous days following the assassination of President Lincoln, the revelation of how Yoke had kept the sons of so many prominent figures out of harm's way while hundreds of thousands of ordinary Americans were killed or maimed in battle would have torn deeply into the fabric of a nation that was already reeling from the loss of its great president.

He allowed himself a slight smile as he contemplated the face in the mirror. The crinkles around his eyes had deepened from years on horseback on the plains and prairies, and his nose had never fully healed after being smashed by the handle of Chief Varua's war axe in Tahiti. The rebel bullet that chipped his rib and tore through flesh and muscle still caused pain if he over-exerted his back, while fragments of the ball that shattered his left hip in a New Orleans duel six years ago could take his breath away when they pressed against the deep nerves, especially in winter. For a man in his early thirties, he thought, he had garnered quite an impressive catalogue of injuries.

He ran a hand through his hair, almost as if to push the moment of self-reflection back into the deep recesses of his mind. He picked up his revolver, then thought better of it and returned it to his bag. He locked the door and headed down to the lobby. He was hungry, and the wine-braised elk back-strap that Masterson had recommended sounded like a perfect meal.

The hotel lobby was busy, but the clerk was able to make eye contact with him through the line of people heading into the restaurant, and Thomas went over to the desk.

“Injun feller here for you a half hour ago,” drawled the former reb in a tone that Thomas knew was meant to convey displeasure.

“Yes?”

“My boy was off delivering a bucket of beer, so I didn’t have no way to let you know. And a’course, we don’t let red men wander ‘round the premises, if you know what I mean.”

“The gentleman is Aztec,” said Thomas. “Member of the royal family, in fact.”

The clerk snorted. “Royalty? Well, I’ll be, Colonel, that is a first for us. Mexican high muckety-muck right here in our little burg. Never seen one with a head of hair as white as his, that’s for certain. He weren’t gussied up like a king, I can tell you that. Couple weeks of road dust on his boots, too.”

“Did he leave a message?”

“He did, yes sir, he did. Says to meet him at the Torobino. It’s to your left out the door two blocks along.”

“And what is a Torobino?”

“Well now,” said the clerk, “that would be the one saloon in town that might be willin’ to give an injun a sideways glance-if’n he came through the door for a drink and was smart enough to grease the barman’s palm first. He’d have to take his drink out back, of course, what with there being no room inside for uncivilized folks.”

“Something that would never be allowed to happen here.”

“You can count on that fact, colonel, you sure can.” He shrugged the shoulder to which his arm was once attached. “I don’t aim to lose no more parts, and that goes special for my scalp.”

Thomas headed out of the lobby. He turned left and joined dozens of people strolling along the wide boardwalk past shops, offices, and saloons. He crossed the street and walked to the end of the next block to where a freshly painted, false-fronted saloon featured a sign that said, *Torabino, Bongero & Co. General Merchandise & Saloon*. Inside, a long hallway ran the length of the building. To the left was the saloon, and to the right, two separate entrances to the general store. He went through the saloon doors where about a dozen people were seated at tables around

the room. Clean sawdust had just been sprinkled on the floor, and the late afternoon light filtered through a row of windows high up along the west wall, casting long, finger like shadows. An inlaid counter with an impressive mirrored walnut backbar ran the length of the far wall, where a wide selection of liquors was on display. Most of the saloons he had visited in the west offered only two kinds of whiskey: bad, and slightly less awful, plus tepid beer, fiery mezcal and blue agave tequila. If this was Trinidad's low-rent saloon, he thought, he was looking forward to seeing its finest watering hole.

He scanned the patrons sitting at the small tables and the three men standing at the bar before he spotted Itzcoatl's shock of snow-white hair. The Aztec sat facing the street. He wore a blue cotton jacket over a high-collar shirt and pale brown trousers, and, as the hotel clerk had observed, his boots were crusted with dirt and dried mud. Without turning to look, Itzcoatl raised his glass of mezcal into the air in welcome. Thomas sat down, and Itzcoatl poured another glass from the half full bottle and slid it across the table. The old man had the bluest eyes he had ever seen. His brown, weathered face set them off like gleaming sapphires on black velvet cloth. The warrior was compact and lean, but his slight build had lulled many an enemy into a false sense of confidence.

Thomas had once traveled with Diego and Itzcoatl from Cuernavaca to Mexico City to purchase a buckskin Morgan stallion. One evening after dinner they took a walk past the lamp-lit market stalls and open-air cafes of the enormous Plaza del Zócalo. Itzcoatl was midway into a description of how the square had been the ceremonial center for the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan seven hundred years earlier when they were set upon by four dark-clothed bandits. One of the robbers knocked Diego to the ground, and while Thomas traded punches with a second bandit, Itzcoatl drew his double-edged *tecpatl* dagger from his waistband. He grabbed one of the bandits by his jacket and pulled him close. Then he thrust the obsidian knife blade up under the man's jaw, pushed it through the roof of his mouth, and plunged it into his brain. He withdrew the blade and swung the bandit's dead body into the path of the

fourth robber, who was trying to help his companion tear Diego's wallet from his waist. The man was knocked off his feet but got quickly to his knees and prepared to lunge against Itzcoatl's legs to pull him down. Itzcoatl leapt over the bandit, spun quickly around, and dropped one knee onto the man's back. With his left hand, he grabbed the bandit's hair and jerked back his head, while with his right hand he sliced deep across the man's throat with the razor sharp *tecpatl*.

The sound of a pistol firing routed the bandit who was fighting Thomas, and the man fled into the darkened plaza. As onlookers gathered around and two officers of the 1st Military Police Brigade rushed over with rifles drawn, Diego pushed away the lifeless body of the bandit he had just dispatched with his pocket revolver.

It comforted Thomas to know that Diego's protector was a descendent of the legendary Aztec jaguar warriors.



"Your journey was good?" Itzcoatl began as Thomas sat down.

He took a drink of the mezcal and nodded in reply. "Diego?"

"He is alive and is being cared for at his parents' home. He was shot twice; in the leg and here," Itzcoatl pointed to his side.

"What happened? Why Rosalilia? And why Colorado?"

"The day of their engagement was a good day, and the celebration lasted long into the night," Itzcoatl replied. "Many guests had traveled far, and so they stayed the night with the Verjás.

"The attack came when the moon was high over the lake. Three wagons, at least a dozen men. They took down the main doors with a cannon and swarmed into the house. Some went for the silver, but most of the men went down the hall to the bedrooms. Senór Verján was able to get his saber, but he was overpowered and killed on his own bed. They took his wife, and they took Rosalilia."

A woman came out from the kitchen and asked Thomas and Itzcoatl if they wished to eat, and then the old warrior continued his story.

“Diego and I fought as best as we could. We had no guns. I had only my club.”

Thomas had seen the Aztec war club with its volcanic glass shards. In the right hands, he knew it was every bit as effective as a revolver.

“They set fire to the outbuildings to cover their escape. Diego was shot trying to get to the wagon carrying Rosalilia away.”

“And her mother?”

“They had no interest in her and let her go. The *senóra* made her way to the safety of the lake shore with the other guests. She is helping to care for Diego,” Itzcoatl slid a leather wallet across the table, “and, she is doing this.”

Thomas untied the band around the wallet and opened it. There must have been two or three thousand US dollars inside. He slid the wallet back. “I will not take money to help my friend. Please thank the *señora* but tell her it is my honor to stand with her family.”

Twilight was approaching, and a kitchen boy began lighting the wall lamps that circled the room. Itzcoatl smiled and poured a little more *mezcal* into their glasses. “The money is not payment to you, my friend. It is for us to purchase weapons and horses and supplies, and for payment of *la mordida*—the bite—to anyone who can provide us with information about where we can find Rosalilia.”

“That is what I don’t understand. Why did they bring her here? Who brought her here?”

“As the last wagon pulled away from the gate, Diego was able to make out the leader’s face in the light from the fires. He is well known in Mexico, an American mining engineer named Matthew Cord.”

“An engineer? Murdering a senior government minister and kidnapping his daughter? That is insanity.”

The woman returned from the kitchen and placed a bowl of fresh, warm tortillas in the center of the table along with a plate of sweet, sliced *jicama*. Then she handed each of them a stoneware plate heaped with pinto bean salad topped with roasted *chiles* alongside a pork *chile verde* stew.

Thomas asked her for coffee. “Much more of this *mezcal*, and I

won't be of use to anyone. Now, tell me about Cord."

Itzcoatl talked as he ate. "He is an employee of an American named Noah Claybourne who lives on a ranch outside of Denver. He has interests in mining, railroads, cattle, timber, and land speculation. Cord is responsible for securing and exploiting mineral rights across much of northern Mexico, from the state of Sonora in the west, to Tamaulipas and the Gulf of Mexico in the east."

"One company wants to control mining in an area that huge?"

Itzcoatl spooned some chile verde and jicama into a warm tortilla and handed it to Thomas. "Eat it this way," he said. "Claybourne thinks big. There are vast deposits of silver, gold, copper, and zinc spread across the region, which is about as big as the land area of Texas."

"And to secure the rights he would need a license from the Mexican government."

Itzcoatl nodded. "Many licenses, not only from the federal authorities, but also from each state where he wishes to mine."

"Which means he would have to get approvals from Rosalilia's father and the Ministry of the Interior," added Thomas.

"Something that Minister Verján had denied on three separate occasions. Cord is known to treat his local workers like slaves. He pays low wages, disrespects his suppliers, and drives smaller competitors out of business. Mexico is a poor country, Tomás, but we are proud, and we are patient. We will develop our own resources in our way and in our own time."

"And you believe that Cord kidnapped Rosalilia because...?"

"To send a clear message to the next Minister of the Interior. Grant the mining licenses now, or see your family destroyed."

They finished their meal, and the kitchen boy cleaned their table and brought more coffee. Thomas could not help but think about his own days working in the army kitchen, and he handed the boy a 50¢ tip—a good day's wages. "If Cord brought Rosalilia here to Colorado, it must mean that Claybourne is behind all of this."

"That is possible, but we are not certain," replied Itzcoatl. "Diego's family and the Verjans have each made inquiries through a number

of private channels. Claybourne is rich and influential, and he has a reputation for being a hard man of business, but to do something like this would be to expose himself to government investigations that would cause him great financial loss. More likely than not, Cord acted on his own.”

“As a way of pleasing his boss?”

“And to get the job done, which to a *caudillo* like Claybourne is ultimately all that matters.”

Itzcoat pulled a cigar from his jacket, cut the end with his pen knife, and struck a match. Thomas did not smoke, but he called to the barman and asked for brandy to go with his coffee. It was nearly dark outside the Torabino, where the crowds had dulled to a handful of people moving briskly home along the boardwalk. Bat Masterson or not, Trinidad was not a safe place to walk at night. The brandy arrived, and Thomas poured some into his coffee. “Where do we go from here?” he asked.

“I will take the train south, to El Paso del Norte. People and information come cheap in border towns. I will continue to seek answers while I wait there for Diego to join me. It may be several weeks before he can travel. When he does, we will find you.”

“And what will I be doing?”

“Many of the answers are already here in Colorado. Seek out Claybourne. Determine what he knows and find out if he is our friend or our enemy. Then, get word to me, and wait.”

That is the one thing in the world that I am not good at, Thomas thought to himself.

As night gathered around them and the saloon began to come alive, the two old friends finished their drinks, each deep in his own thoughts.



SEVEN

Trinidad, Colorado

When Thomas stepped through the doors of the Imperial Saloon he felt right at home. The high-ceilinged game floor was ablaze with light and noise. He counted three faro tables in the center of the room, two monte tables and a roulette wheel along one wall, plus more tables set up for Chuck-A-Luck, High Dice, and poker.

Dozens of men crowded the gaming tables with more lined up at the bar waiting their turns, bending their elbows with drink, or negotiating for the services of the upstairs ladies whose prices began at a dollar for a quick tickle and went up to \$25 for half a night in a bed with clean sheets. He recognized Lou Rickabaugh, who had leased the gambling concession at the Oriental Saloon in Tombstone, and Bill Harris, the gaming boss from the Long Branch. Trinidad might be small, Thomas thought, but it boasted a first-rate gambling industry that would stack up to San Francisco or Denver.

An hour earlier, he had walked with Itzcoatl to the livery stable to collect his horse and gear. The old warrior would camp outside town and buy passage for himself and his horse on the morning train to El Paso Del Norte, four hundred miles to the south on the Texas-Mexico border. He would wait there for Diego.

Itzcoatl was not much for good-byes. He swung up into his saddle, touched his finger against his forehead, and gave Thomas the traditional Aztec salutation used for both hello and farewell: *“You have wearied yourself, troubled yourself in coming. This will not be forgotten.”* Then he trotted off into the night, leaving Thomas to walk uptown to the Imperial to find a game.

He made his way past the piano player and headed for the bar. As he pushed his way past a boy who was going from table to table selling sandwiches out of a bucket, someone tapped his elbow. He turned to see Bat Masterson alone at a table.

“Marshal,” he said.

“Sit down, Colonel; I can get you a drink faster than they can at the bar,” said Masterson.

Bat tilted his head towards an aproned waiter a few tables over and pulled a chair out.

“Louis,” Masterson asked the waiter, “do you have any of that special Madeira left, the bottles that came from the shipwreck?”

“We do, Marshal, four or five, I believe.”

“Bring one, and a couple of those tall, thin glasses.”

The waiter hustled off through the crowd, and Masterson sat back to light a cigar.

“Shipwrecked?” asked Thomas.

“1840, off the coast of Georgia. The good ship *Able*. All hands were saved, but the consignment of 1800 Madeira they were carrying went to the bottom. And now, this is the damndest thing: twenty-three years later, in 1863, a Confederate ironclad faced off against a Yankee frigate, the fifty-gun *Restoration*, I believe it was. The frigate pulled alongside the ironclad, and that old girl opened up with everything she had. Sustained cannon fire blasted that iron boat for ten minutes, but every shot bounced harmlessly off her hull and dropped into the sea.

“The Yankee captain grew exasperated as hell, and finally ordered the frigate to pull so close to the ironclad that the muzzles of their cannon were touching. He had two satchels of explosive charges prepared in waterproof oilskins to be dropped onto the ironclad’s deck. Two minutes later, the satchels were tossed down. One exploded on the ironclad’s deck, but the other slipped into the sea and exploded deep underwater. The ironclad was still afloat.”

Louis returned with a dark, tulip-shaped bottle and two glasses. He left them on the table as Masterson finished his story.

“It was getting dark, and the ships withdrew so they could finish

their match at first light. As they began to sail off, the reb captain sent two men on deck to survey the damage from the Yankee satchel charge. They were making notes of the damage when one of the men spotted a dozen or so wooden cases bobbing around in the water at their fantail. The Yankee ship was at a safe distance now, so the men called down to the ironclad's captain to come up and have a look-see. The captain was a might perplexed at the sight of the floating boxes, and he ordered a crewman to throw a gaff on one and haul it in.

They tore off the top of the case, and there inside were a dozen of these bottles, wrapped in cloth and packed in hay. Still dry after twenty years in the drink. Seems the satchel that missed the deck of the frigate blew a hole in the side of the *Able* sitting down there in the sand, and the force of the blast popped those boxes out of the hold, where they floated right up to the surface."

Masterson cut away the wax sealer that covered the cork. "The captain had all twenty-five cases hauled into the ironclad and figured he was set up with a supply of sipping port that would last him for the rest of his natural life. That much was true, but as fate would have it, his natural life ended a year later when a boom line caught him square in the neck during a squall and snapped it like a twig. Somehow, God only knows how, the owner of the Imperial got his hand on five of the cases from the captain's family a couple of years ago. And here we are."

The marshal withdrew the cork, which prompted a soft groan from Thomas.

"Bad meal?" asked Masterson.

"Bad memory," replied Thomas as he thought about Annette and the untested feather bed.

Bat poured two glasses of the fortified wine. Thomas noticed pronounced aromas of caramel and coffee in the deep ruby liquid, and the first sip was true to the sweet and spicy flavor that was characteristic of Malmsey style Madeiras.

He raised his glass to the marshal. "A fine choice, thank you."

Masterson topped both glasses off and then stood for a moment to survey the action ongoing in the room around them. The Las Animas

County deputies were on duty in the streets tonight, and so was Bat's brother Jim, who was working for the marshal's office when Bat first arrived in town. With any luck, the marshal would be able to settle into one of the faro games for the night.

"This is quite an establishment," Thomas said when Masterson sat down. "A man could hang his hat here a while."

"It is, and Rickabaugh and Harris pay the owner \$7,000 a month for the rights to run the gaming here, so he'd better keep it that way."

Thomas raised his eyebrows, and Masterson laughed. "The same set up in San Francisco would cost them \$10,000 per month, and even then, it would be worth every copper penny. Where else in the world do you get paid to have men standing in line to hand over every bit of their hard-earned money to you, night after night?"

"You said the tables were fair here. Doesn't the house ever lose?"

The marshal refilled their glasses. "Let's just say the house doesn't lose very often. I usually break even at the faro table, but some of my luck might be decided by dealers who would rather I didn't run them in for running a stacked bank. But don't worry; every jack one of them saw you sit down with me. You will get straight deals and honest counting."

It had been several weeks since Thomas had set foot inside a gambling establishment. New York City had some fine gaming parlors, at least if you liked overstuffed chairs, overdressed patrons, and overpriced liquor. He had always found that the gentility of east coast gambling to be a stifling experience; for Thomas, the hallmark of real gaming was in its ability to heighten and focus all your senses, especially your sense of survival. The banker playing opposite you in Newport, Rhode Island, was unlikely to try to settle a dispute with you over how a hand was dealt by jamming his twelve-inch Bowie knife into your gut right up to the cross guard. He might pay the doorman to toss you out into the street or ask the manager to revoke your gaming privileges, but you didn't have to worry that your balls might be sliced off and tossed to a hungry cow dog, as Thomas once saw happen to an unfortunate card shark at the poorly named Harmony Saloon in Abilene.

Guns were forbidden anywhere on Main Street, but the cowhands,

teamsters, miners, and ranchers tossing their dollars on the green baize cloth of the tables at the Imperial all carried a weapon of some kind, and everyone knew that a simple argument could escalate into a bone-crunching, sinew-snapping, knife-slashing brawl with the turn of a single card. Thomas didn't envy Masterson his job.

"Are you still lined up to meet your man tomorrow?" asked Masterson.

Thomas figured that the marshal probably already knew the answer to that question. It made sense to answer honestly, and in any event, he was beginning to take a bit of a shine to the lawman.

"In fact, he arrived early, and we met this afternoon at the Torobino. He's headed south, and I'll be on the afternoon train to Denver tomorrow."

"You know, about that," began the marshal, "I've wanted to ask you...."

Masterson was cut off in mid-sentence by a young woman who had either slipped or been pushed into his lap. He pulled his chair back to help right her, and Thomas jumped up to assist. The marshal recognized her as one of the women who got off the train from Wichita that morning. She was only a kid, but her pimp had wasted no time in finding a place to ply her trade.

"I am so very sorry," she said in a pronounced British accent before checking her hair and smoothing her dress. "That boy..." she pointed to a young cowhand in a checked shirt and black jeans standing a few feet away, "...has been on me for the past fifteen minutes."

Bat handed her his glass of Madeira. "Can't negotiate a satisfactory arrangement?" he asked.

She took a sip, and Thomas sat back down.

"He should have been my first for the night," she said, "but when he opened his mouth, I realized he was an Irishman. I cannot abide their lot."

"And you need to *abide* the gentlemen you go upstairs with?" asked the incredulous marshal. "That's a new one to me."

"Well, look at the tout." She took another drink. "Would you go upstairs with the like of him?"

"You've got us there, that's the truth," said Thomas. "I don't believe

that the marshal or I would look forward to that trip, though you should also know that my mother was Irish, God bless her soul."

"But you are a gentleman," said the girl with an air of coyness that surprised him. She *was* new at her job. "And you are the marshal?" she said to Bat. "Dear...am I in trouble?"

"You may be with your manager for turning away a paying customer, but that is between the two of you and is not the concern of the law."

The girl set down her glass and smiled at Thomas and Bat. "Thank you for the drink," she said to Masterson. "And thank you, sir, for your kindness." She touched Thomas lightly on the arm and walked away.

"You make friends easily, Colonel," said the marshal.

Thomas was about to reply when a woman shouted, and people began to scramble away from the bar. He turned in the direction of the commotion and saw the Irish cowhand standing behind the woman they had just been speaking with. He had one arm tightly wrapped around her neck, while in the other hand he held a buffalo skinning knife to her throat.

Before the marshal could draw his revolver, Thomas bolted out of his chair and advanced to within a few feet of the terrified young woman.

The Irishman snarled at Thomas. "Back off now, you tinhorn, you. I have first call on this whore, and you can wait for whatever is left of her when I'm done."

Thomas stopped in his tracks. The cowboy kept his grip on the girl and backed up against the bar. The other customers pulled back even further. He sensed Masterson standing right behind him.

"I can't shoot him when he's holding the knife like that," the marshal said in a low, calm voice.

Thomas half-turned his head and nodded. "Maybe I can have a talk with our friend."

He took a couple of steps closer to the bar. The cowhand shuffled to the left and adjusted his hold on the young woman.

"I have no problem waiting my turn," he said to the Irishman. "But I sure as hell wouldn't want to have to mount a damaged filly. Where's the fun in that?"

His conversation confused the cowhand, who shook his head wildly back and forth before bringing the knife up to the girl's face and pressing it on her cheek, just under her right eye.

"It's her eye I'll be taking, not her poke-basket," said the Irishman. "Next time she sees the likes of me with her one good eye, she'll think twice about ever turning down a son of Dublin again."

"He means it," whispered Masterson.

"Have your revolver ready," Thomas replied.

The girl's eyes went wide with fear as Thomas took two steps towards a table where an elderly man was sitting with a walking cane resting on his lap. Thomas snatched the cane off the startled man's legs and advanced towards the Irishman and the girl.

The cowboy pulled the knife away from the girl's face and pointed it straight out at Thomas, while tightening his grip on the girl's throat with his other arm.

Thomas did not slow down. He walked to within a few inches of the girl, then flipped the cane from his left hand to his right and raised it high in the air above her head. The cowhand's eyes followed the movement of the cane, and Thomas took that instant of distraction to reach forward with his left hand, grab the inside of the Irishman's right wrist, and twist it backwards.

He pushed down hard on the wrist while stepping into a position that put him perpendicular to the cowboy's body, all the while applying more pressure. The move caused the Irishman's right shoulder to pitch forward, and with it, the girl's body, at which point Thomas immediately thrust the cane between them, pushed it behind the cowboy's extended elbow, under his side, and against his chest.

Then, he pulled the Irishman's knife hand high at the wrist and pulled the cane down towards the floor with all his strength. The cane acted as a lever where it was wedged between the cowboy's elbow and chest, and he and the girl tumbled to the ground. The entire series of moves took less than five seconds.

Masterson stepped around them and grabbed the knife from the Irishman's broken hand, and, while Thomas kept the pressure on the

cane, the girl pulled herself out from under the cowboy. The barman helped her to stand and sat her down at a table.

The marshal's brother and a county deputy pushed through the crowd to help haul the cowhand to jail, and Thomas returned the cane to its quite delighted owner before sitting down with Bat, who had a grin a country mile wide on his face. "You spend a lot of time sticking your neck out for strangers?" he asked, as he poured two more glasses of the excellent Madeira.

Thomas shook his head. "It just came on me. Maybe I just didn't like to see a fellow Irishman make such a public spectacle of himself."

"Or maybe that little sportin' gal got you thinking you might not mind making a trip upstairs yourself. Looks to me like she's the pick of the litter tonight."

Thomas looked across the bar to where the English girl was talking excitedly with two of the other ladies. She caught his eye and raised a glass of medicinal brandy in his direction.

"Another time, perhaps," Thomas said. "It had been my intention to sit at faro for a few hours, but the festivities have dispelled me of that particular desire for the moment."

The gaming boss came up to their table, and Masterson turned to speak with him. When he turned back, he spilled a handful of chips on the table.

"Compliments of the Imperial, with thanks for keeping the bloodshed to a minimum tonight. That would be the girl's blood, by the way. There's more cowhands than prairie dogs around here, but a first-rate upstairs lady is a rare commodity."

Thomas sighed; he was going to have to forgo two of his favorite pleasures tonight. He wanted to think through everything he had learned from Itzcoatl and get prepared for his journey north to Denver.

"Can I ask you a question, Marshal, without having to provide too much in the way of an explanation for my inquiry?"

Bat re-lit his cigar and waved to someone walking by. "I'm sure you can, Colonel, if you will do me the reciprocal favor of answering one of

my own.”

“Fair’s fair.” He thought for a moment about how to best to begin his question before lowering his voice and simply asking, “What can you tell me about Noah Claybourne?”

Masterson’s eyes narrowed. “I’m going to assume that this isn’t idle curiosity speaking?”

Thomas shook his head.

“You plan on gunning him down or doing anything else to him a fella in my business might have a problem with?”

“Someone who works for him has done great harm to the family of my best friend. I need to find out what Claybourne knows-and also if he had anything to do with it.”

“Which is where that whole ‘gunning down’ question pops back up, wouldn’t you agree?”

Thomas shrugged. “The general thinking is that Claybourne’s man was acting on his own. But the thing is...” he hesitated. To go any further was to invite the possibility that Claybourne could be alerted to his mission. That could result in Rosalilia’s death. He looked into Masterson’s eyes. He trusted the man, dammed if he didn’t. He couldn’t say why, for certain. He just did.

“My friend’s fiancée was kidnapped in Cuernavaca eight days ago. Her father, who was a senior political figure in Mexico, was murdered. My friend was badly wounded trying to rescue her. I owe him more than my life. He has reason to believe that Claybourne’s people organized the kidnapping and murder. And they are sure that his fiancée was brought here to Colorado.”

The marshal leaned back in his chair. Across the room his deputy stood a drunk cowboy up and walked him to the door, and the piano player got back to work after the fracas with the Irishman.

“And so, you’ve come all the way from New York to figure it out, and just maybe to find your friend’s fiancée, not to mention stirring up a hornet’s nest with the most powerful businessman in the state.”

“That’s pretty much the picture.”

Masterson poured the last of the shipwrecked wine into their glasses.

“My job is pretty easy, Colonel. I keep the peace. The trail hands spend their money on liquor and whores, the miners and ranchers drink and make deals, and the gamblers pray for a run of luck that will get them the hell out of here and off to Chicago or San Francisco. The job is messy, but it isn't complicated. Pays \$70 a month and a small house. I like it. And I'd like to keep it a while. So now, here you show up, asking me to help you to stick your nose into the business of a man who plays cards with the President of these United States. And I'm supposed to do you that favor?”

Thomas smiled. “Sometimes, doing the right thing is enough. All by itself.”

“I promise you that whoever said that in the morning was dead before dark,” replied Masterson. He finished off his Madeira and waved to the waiter to bring food.

The men sat quietly for a moment listening to the sounds of roulette wheels, laughter, banging kitchen pans, and beer glasses slamming on tabletops. Then, the marshal made up his mind. “Claybourne is a bona fide son of a bitch,” he suddenly said. “Owns pretty much everything and everybody in and around Denver. No scruples, no charm. He is relentless: he has railroads, sawmills, freight companies, mines. Hell, he even makes his own dynamite.

“You ever had California wines?” he continued. “Krug and Niebaum make some of the best, but Claybourne owns the biggest vineyards and the most profitable cellars in the state. He sold munitions through his European companies to both sides in the Serbian-Ottoman War in '76, and when the Russians and the Turks went at it in '77, he sold to them both. His hands are dipped in pretty much anything that can make a dollar.”

“Does the list include mines in Mexico?”

“It does, though I hear that the going is tough on the political side. It seems that too many Mexicans would like to keep their minerals on their side of the Rio Grande. Is it mining that your friend is involved with?”

“His fiancée's father was in a position to deny Claybourne's companies the licenses they need to expand operations. With him dead and his

daughter kidnapped, those permits will probably be granted.”

The waiter returned with two stoneware crocks of cold beer, along with a plate of cheese, bread, and apples. Thomas was surprised at how hungry he was after the dance with the Irish cowboy.

“German fella name of Coors makes this beer outside Denver, in a town called Golden,” said Masterson. “It’s delivered fresh twice a week by train. You’ll like it.”

Thomas drank deeply and then tore into the bread and cheese. He wasn’t used to drinking beer cold. It was quite good.

“You’ll want to be visiting Golden to get outfitted,” Bat said. “Major T.R. Rhine has a place just outside city limits where the river forks. Everybody knows him. He used to command a federal armory, and he stayed in the supply business after the war. He provides horses and tack to the cavalry, but mostly he sells guns, grub, and anything you might need out on the prairie, from your tent to your toothbrush. Has a special-built freight wagon that he rides up into the mining towns with. He is a gunsmith, too. A real artist. Rhine is as solid as they come. If you build trust with him, you will have a valuable ally, no matter what kind of nitroglycerine-soaked manure pile you find yourself in.” Masterson clanged his stoneware crock against Thomas’. “And, friend, if you are even remotely considering putting the hurt on Noah Claybourne, you are going to need T.R. in your corner.”

Thomas finished his meal in silence, oblivious to the singsong chattering of the dealers, the out of tune piano, and the catcalls from cowboys shouting at friends who were heading upstairs to take their rides. Bat Masterson finished his beer, lit a fresh cigar, and asked the waiter to bring coffee and brandy.

“And now, it’s my turn. So, just how in the bloody hell did you become a full colonel in the United States Army when you were just....?”

He had trusted only one other person in the world with the answer to that question. He looked Masterson directly in the eyes.

“Seventeen.”



EIGHT

Dinwiddie County, Virginia, April 1, 1865

Camp was breaking up. Thomas could feel it in his sleep even before he heard horses being hitched to freight wagons and sergeants calling to their men to strike tents and load their gear. He threw off his wool blanket and was pulling on his trousers when O'Hanlon's enormous form appeared in front of the small canvas tent.

The sergeant anticipated his question: "Four o'clock, boyo. Two hours 'til daybreak, and not a drop of rain to spoil the morn. It's salt pork and hardtack for the lot of 'em, and barely warmed, at that. Get yer boots on, we've got a kitchen to move."

O'Hanlon disappeared into the blackness and Thomas finished dressing, folded his cot and blanket, and threw his few personal possessions into a haversack. Then he piled them outside and then pulled his tent down, rolled it tight, and lashed it with leather ties before slinging the haversack over his shoulder and tossing the cot and tent into a wagon with "Company M" painted on the side. With that complete, he trotted over to where three soldiers were loading the field kitchen into covered wagons by the light of coal oil lanterns.

He was pulling down a row of five-gallon pots that were strung over a smoldering cooking trench when O'Hanlon and Captain Morrison approached.

"This is Scanddrél," said the sergeant, nodding in Thomas's direction.

Thomas set down the pot he had just unhooked and saluted the officer.

"And you say he can read and write-and speak French?" Morrison

asked O'Hanlon.

"Aye, that he can, sir. And he's good with sums too."

Captain Morrison looked Thomas over. "You might just do," he said, almost to himself.

Thomas shot O'Hanlon a questioning glance, but the sergeant could only shrug and shake his head in return.

"Sergeant, I want this man at General Yoke's tent in five minutes," said the captain. "Have him bring his personal things." Then he turned and walked swiftly off into the darkness.

"What kind of trouble have you gotten yourself into laddie?" wondered O'Hanlon aloud.

This time it was Thomas' turn to shrug.



The 109th Ohio Regiment had been camped at the base of a long, narrow ridge near Pebble Creek for five days. Now, in the pre-dawn chill, nearly five hundred men, horses, and wagons were making ready to move to a heavily forested area about eleven miles to the east. B Company, with eighty-seven men, three sergeants, one lieutenant, and the regiment's only battle-seasoned captain had been ordered to hold and await orders.

Thomas wound his way along the crowded, dimly lit path towards the command tent. Soldiers streamed past him in the opposite direction, their rifles slung, packs full, and bellies rumbling for the coffee, bacon, and biscuits that the kitchen staff would normally be preparing at this hour. Grumbling had been the lot of the common soldier since Caesar's legions invaded Britain nineteen hundred years ago, and Thomas heard plenty of that from the soldiers marching past him.

But, for the first time in weeks, he heard something else too; the dull booming of massed artillery fire off to the west. He had heard this cannonade sound only once before, outside the ramparts of Petersburg. O'Hanlon told him it was a Confederate *Canon obusier de 12*, also known as the "Canon de l'Empereur" or Napoleon, a French

designed smooth bore cannon that could fire either shells, solid cast-iron balls or grapeshot. The Napoleon's range was up to a mile, and Thomas estimated from the sound that the Confederate guns must be fifteen to twenty miles from the camp. One more thing to worry about as he hurried through the lines of horses, soldiers and wagons heading east.

General Yoke's tent was the only one still standing. Lanterns blazed in front of the entrance, where several men were feeding and saddling a line of horses, including the general's personal Morgan-Thoroughbred cross, a huge, coal-black beast named Cornwall.

Thomas identified himself to the sentry and was told to wait. The sentry entered the tent, and a moment later Captain Morrison emerged and waved the bewildered kitchen boy into the general's presence. He stepped into the well-lit tent and stood at attention. General Yoke and Major Rolande were seated at a table on which Thomas noticed a plate of fresh biscuits and a pot of coffee. He wondered who had prepared them, since his kitchen crew had doused their cooking fires almost an hour ago.

At the back of the tent, a gray-haired clerk sat at a small folding table, scribbling furiously across the pages of a thick, leather-bound book.

The three officers looked Thomas over.

"Can he pass for twenty-two?" asked Yoke.

"I would believe that, yes," replied Rolande.

"And you're sure he can speak like an educated man?" continued the general.

"Including, I am told, in the French language," added Captain Morrison.

"That true, can you parley-vous, boy?" asked Yoke.

"Yes, sir. My father was French, and I have spoken it since I was a boy," said Thomas.

"And your father, where is he today?" Rolande asked.

"He is dead, sir."

"And your mother?"

"Also dead, just before I signed up."

“Brothers or sisters?” asked Morrison.

Thomas shook his head. “Just me,” he replied.

Rolande nodded to the general. This boy was by far the best candidate they had interviewed in the past hour. No family, no real profile in the regiment, as empty a slate as they could have hoped to find. And, if he wasn’t fully up to the job, so be it, the major thought. They were out of time. He would have to do.

“Who is his sergeant?” Rolande asked Captain Morrison.

“O’Hanlon, kitchen company. They should be moving out right now.”

The major turned to the clerk. He knew that the one person in the regiment who knew much at all about Private Scanddrél would have to be re-located before today’s business was done. “Write a transfer order. O’Hanlon to the 112th Ohio, effective immediately.”

“And now boy,” Rolande said to Thomas, “you’d probably like to know why you are here.”

Morrison pulled a camp chair over in front of the table and motioned for Thomas to sit down. At the same time, the tent flap opened, and the regimental barber stepped in. He looked as mystified as Thomas had been only moments before.

“Clean this boy up,” Rolande ordered. “Give him a fresh out of West Point cut and be quick about it.”

The barber stood behind Thomas’ chair, pulled out a comb and scissors, and set to work. Morrison sat down at the table with Yoke and Rolande and slid the plate of biscuits over to Thomas.

“Take one, boy, and some coffee,” said the captain, “and listen carefully.”

Thomas accepted a biscuit and slowly raised it to his lips. He was completely baffled by the events of the past few minutes. Yanked from sleep, ordered to the commanding general’s tent with no explanation, and for what? Breakfast and a haircut? War was a damn strange affair. Damn strange.

General Yoke loosened his collar, leaned forward, and began to talk in a soft, almost fatherly voice. “When a conflict as mighty as the one we have been engaged in against the rebs is in its final days, as we hope

to God it is, “he said to Thomas, “the path to the surrender table can go in a smooth, straight line, or it can take a lot of twists and turns. A commander has to be ready for either eventuality.” He sat back in his chair and placed both of his hands flat on the table. For emphasis, Thomas thought.

“This morning the path to Union victory is looking closer and more promising than ever,” Yoke continued, “but, even as we bear down on these rebel bastards for the last time, there is always the possibility—small, but real—that something unexpected can happen at the last minute that can take the wind out of the sails just enough to turn the tide against us. This is one of those moments. And so, today I have been called upon to make some command decisions that to some might look, let’s say, a little strange.”

Major Rolande could not help sharing a smile with Captain Morrison, who, in turn, continued to fiddle nervously with his handle-bar moustache.

General Yoke pushed the plate of biscuits back across to Thomas. “And that brings us to this meeting and to the reason you are here, Private...I’m sorry, Private...?”

“Scanddrél,” replied Thomas as he scooped up his second biscuit.

“Scandrel. That a European name?” the general asked, ignoring Thomas’s careful pronunciation.

“With two ds. And an accent for emphasis on the last syllable,” said Thomas. “It’s French.”

“Ah, French,” said Yoke. Then, the general turned his head to the clerk at the table behind him and in a loud voice asked, “Are you getting this, Sergeant?”

The elderly scribe kept his head down and simply nodded in assent, writing faster than ever on one page, and then flipping to another to continue writing.

“Damn fine clerk,” said the general to no one in particular. “But he couldn’t hear a grizzly bear break wind if they were sharing the same cot.”

Thomas didn’t join Morrison and Rolande when they laughed at

the general's joke. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to do. So, he finished his biscuit and took another drink of coffee, which, he thought, was a hell of a lot tastier than the swill made from chicory and used grounds that the enlisted men were served.

The darkness outside the tent was softening, and Thomas noticed that the sounds of soldiers and wagons departing the camp was also fading. Daybreak was less than an hour away. While he had no idea why he had been called before the regimental commanders, he did know that whatever was waiting for him when the sun finally peeked over Pebble Creek Ridge, this was not going to be an ordinary day.



The barber finished cutting Thomas' hair and left the tent, and Captain Morrison stepped outside to check the progress of the regimental move-out as General Yoke continued to talk.

"I have never been one for secret, behind the lines shenanigans, or for using agents and spies," he said. "But yesterday, a rebel patrol under a white flag approached our outer sentries and requested a meeting. Those boys were tired and hungry, and there wasn't a pair of decent boots between the six of them. Ragged is what they were, right Major?"

Rolande nodded. "Ragged *and* desperate, sir."

"Desperate, yes, that's the perfect description. They wanted to surrender, and I was inclined at first to accept their offer and have them marched under guard over to Warren's command. On reflection, I decided to take a different course of action. I had the sentries take the rebs to get a hot meal, and I proposed a plan to my commanders designed to take advantage of the circumstance in such a way as to bring us one step closer to an assurance of victory."

"I don't expect you to understand how battle strategy is constructed, son, nor do I intend now to burden you with much detail on how this plan came about, or how exactly it will play out to the benefit of President Lincoln, General Grant, and the entire Union war effort."

Or to *our* benefit, thought Major Rolande.

“Private Scandrel, when you signed your enlistment papers, did you hope, as I believe all young men do, that your exertions in battle might one day bring honor and glory to your regiment, and even to yourself?” asked Yoke.

Thomas perked up. “Sir, yes, I certainly did. I still do.”

Captain Morrison came back into the tent. “We have only a half hour, General,” he said.

“Then let me get right to it, Private,” said the general. “After we fed the reb patrol, we sat them down and made them an offer. If they would gather two dozen of their fellows on horseback an hour after sunrise this morning and feint an attack against us from over the ridge, we would agree to take them into safe custody. They must send one member of the patrol back to their HQ to report that they encountered heavy Federal resistance, and most of the patrol was killed or captured. In exchange, we would provide medical care, food, clothing, and safe passage home for every member of the reb patrol, and even put a few dollars in their pockets. The outrider they sent back to the reb commanders would be allowed to surrender to us later and get the same deal. At this juncture in the war, with the tide of events turning so completely against the Confederacy, it was an offer they were more than happy to take.”

The general was certainly right about one thing, Thomas thought; he could not conceive of any battlefield strategy in which such a wild sounding scheme made sense. On the other hand, his only battle experience to date had been completely culinary in nature. Whatever it was the general had in mind for him, he was certain that it was his duty to obey.

“I can only tell you that the larger plan is for us to make Pickett’s whole reb army believe that when their patrol rides over that ridge this morning they are coming face to face with an entire regiment of first-rate infantry and cavalry. That will give the rebs pause and perhaps provide General Warren’s troops at Five Forks with a bit of a respite from rebel counterattacks. As for us, while the rebs are deciding what to do about our regiment, we will be quietly marching and regrouping to the west along their weak flank. When Warren attacks them from Five

Forks, we will support him and surprise the rebs by crawling right up their backsides while they think we are still assembled and waiting in reserve right here.”

General Yoke was almost impressed by his own completely fabricated little speech. In a different time and a different war, he was convinced that he would have been a stellar battlefield commander.

Yoke stood up and walked over towards the clerk. “Major Rolande, please explain the private’s orders.”

“Private Scandrel, you are about to be given a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to serve your country. We need an officer, someone not known to the rebs, to ride up along the ridge this morning to meet the rebel incursion that we planned yesterday. You are going to be that officer.”

Thomas was stunned. An officer? At seventeen? With no battlefield experience, no training, and no command experience? O’Hanlon was right: what *had* he gotten himself in to?

Rolande read the boy’s facial expression. He smiled reassuringly and said, “We make battlefield promotions all the time, Private. I myself began the war as a lieutenant, and Captain Morrison was a sergeant. George Custer, with whom I attended the academy, was brevetted brigadier general at the age of twenty-three. You are part of a long line of soldiers whose rank has been advanced in wartime for any number of reasons. When your tasks are complete and the war is over, you will be reduced back in rank, but, as our way of thanking you for your heroic effort, General Yoke has agreed that you will muster out of the 109th at the rank of 1st Sergeant. Isn’t that right, General?”

“That’s right, boy,” replied Yoke, “and you can expect enough mustering out pay from the War Department to get a new start back home.”

“And what rank am I to be elevated to with this temporary advancement?” asked Thomas.

General Yoke looked down at the clerk. “Where are you with this?” he asked.

“I have made new entries going back three and a half years,” he

said in a halting voice. "In all I have made eighteen entries for him in the regimental record. The lad came to us at nineteen, a transfer with the rank of sergeant from the 121st. One year later he was brevetted lieutenant, the year after that, captain. After his distinguished performance at Petersburg, you elevated him to major. And, six months ago, due to a combination of regimental organization requirements for officer staffing, and there not being any other officer qualified for the position, you promoted him to the rank of full colonel."

Rolande could not help feeling a bit of a twinge at the comment about there not being any other officer qualified for the brevet. Ruse or not, he had his pride.

For his part, Thomas could only lean forward on his chair, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. Colonel? Good god almighty, what was happening?

The clerk wasn't finished. "Official approval of his rank of colonel in wartime requires the signature of General Grant, of course, just as it would require the President's in time of peace. I have made a journal entry showing that your promotion request was sent to Grant in proper form and time frame four months ago, by courier." The clerk smiled. "Of course, like so many other communications, yours was no doubt lost in the chaos of battle. One of many thousands of dispatches that the War Department will be sorting out for years, I assure you."

A sentry opened the tent flap just as the first gray streaks of morning light began to pierce the darkness. Then the clerk handed General Yoke a sheaf of papers and asked him to sign each of them. The sentry waited for Yoke to finish, and then said, "It's time, General."

Yoke nodded and handed the signed paperwork to Major Rolande, who flipped through it page by page. "And these dates and circumstances replicate what you have put into the regimental record?" he asked the clerk.

"They do, exactly" replied the clerk. "The entries are as complete as you will find in anyone's service records anywhere. Best of all, there is this."

He handed a sheet of thick, oversized parchment to the general for his signature. "It is the most important document of all," continued the

clerk in a tone that indicated he was most pleased with this morning's work. "Regimental stationary, certified watermark, everything."

Yoke signed the paper and handed it back to the clerk. "Sirs," the clerk said to the assembled officers with an almost courtly flourish, "I hereby declare that one Thomas Edward Scoundrel is hereby brevetted colonel of the 109th Ohio Regiment of the Army of the United States of America."

The tent went silent. Thomas felt his eyes water and his throat parch. For a moment, he even forgot to breathe. Yoke, Rolande, and Morrison were quiet too, but more out a sense of relief that their scheme was moving ahead as planned.

At last, Thomas found his voice. He cleared his throat, raised his head, and in a quavering voice just above a whisper said, "But, my name is not Scoundrel."

General Yoke grabbed the certificate he had just signed. A scowl darkened his face, he slammed the document on the desk, and balled his fists at his side. Rolande spread the pile of newly created records on the table and scanned through them quickly. He looked at Yoke and shook his head.

Yoke exploded. "*Scoundrel?* You wrote his last name as Scoundrel on every damn one of these? And in the regimental record book as well? What the bloody hell is wrong with you? Who on earth is named Scoundrel, for the sweet love of God? You might as well have called him Colonel Piss-Ant!"

For the first time in his life, the terrified clerk found himself wishing that he was completely deaf, not simply hard of hearing. He could only nod and say, "I am sorry General. It's what I thought I heard."

"How much time would it take to redo the records and documents?" Captain Morrison asked of the clerk who he suspected would be exiled to the West to fight the Apaches before this day was done.

"Several hours, at least," said the old man. "But I cannot duplicate the formal notice. I have no more parchment stationary." With that, the clerk retreated into a darkened corner.

"We don't have minutes, let alone hours," said Major Rolande.

He and Morrison looked at General Yoke. The general shook his head and sighed. Once again it was up to him to chart a solution to the mess. At this juncture, there was only one thing he could do.

“War asks many sacrifices of each of us, lad,” he said to Thomas. “Today, you give up your name, but in turn you gain five years in age, your rank is advanced, and you are the beneficiary of our respect, our undying gratitude, and the thanks of a grateful country.”

“Stand up and raise your right hand, boy,” he ordered, “and repeat after me.”

Thomas stood and raised his hand. The blood was pounding so loudly in his ears that he could barely make out the words of the oath that he was repeating. He did his best to speak coherently, but he could not be sure that the words tumbling out of his mouth made any sense at all.

“Solemnly...swear...faithfully discharge...constitution...support and defend...so help me...”

Then, it was over. Captain Morrison and Major Rolande faced him and, in unison slowly raised their hands in salute.

To me, thought Thomas, my god they are saluting me.

“Colonel Scoundrel,” said Yoke, “by virtue of my command authority, and on behalf of the President of the United States and General Ulysses S. Grant, I congratulate you. May the blessings of almighty God follow you all the days of your life.”

Thomas’s vision blurred, and he dropped to the dirt floor like a stone.

“Sentry,” said Yoke, “pick the colonel up and splash cold water on his face. It’s time for him to meet his destiny.”



NINE

Pebble Creek, Virginia, April 1, 1865

Thomas shook off the water and scrambled to his feet. General Yoke, his officers, and the regiment's quartermaster sergeant were standing in a semi-circle around him. Folded over the quartermaster's arms were several long, dark blue coats with silver buttons down their fronts.

"Turn around, boy...I mean, Colonel," he growled.

Thomas obeyed, still in a daze at whatever madness was unfolding around him. The quartermaster slipped one of the coats onto his arms, then pulled it off, and slipped on another. "This one will do," he said.

"Shoulder straps?" asked Major Rolande.

The sergeant held up two rectangular strips of dark blue wool, each about two inches by four inches, framed in gold braid. Each was embroidered with a silver American eagle holding an olive branch in one talon and a sheaf of arrows in the other. It was the insignia of a full colonel. "Have them sewn on immediately," Rolande told the quartermaster. "And find him some officer's trousers."

"He needs the right hat," added Captain Morrison.

General Yoke reached over and took Morrison's hat from his head. "Yours will be just right."

Morrison grimaced. Hardees were expensive. His sported a badge in the shape of a brass bugle that was affixed to the front with a woolen cord in cavalry gold wrapped around the crown to form two tassels. The right side of the brim was folded up and pinned to the crown by a

brass eagle badge, and on the left, a black feather plume poked above the crown at a rakish angle. Fortunes of war, thought Morrison, as Yoke stepped forward and planted his hat on Thomas' head.

Outside the tent, the sky was turning from black to dark gray. A sentry carried the last boxes from the tent to a waiting buckboard and climbed up onto the seat. Except for the ninety-two men of B Company and those in Yoke's command tent, the camp was empty.

It took only a minute for the shoulder straps to be sewn onto Thomas' new coat. He slipped on the trousers handed to him by the quartermaster—the best he had ever worn—followed by a pair of slightly worn boots. Someone handed him a belt, and then Yoke himself gave Thomas a light cavalry saber in a metal sheath.

“Can you shoot?” asked the quartermaster.

Under any other circumstances, Thomas would have been thrilled to answer that question. He had yet to even hold a gun in this war.

“I can shoot,” he answered, “and ride.”

The sergeant drew a holstered revolver from an oilcloth sack. “This is the Remington six-shot percussion, .44 caliber, with paper cartridges. Do you know how to load and fire this model?”

“I do.”

“Strap it on, Colonel. And here's a supply pouch.”

The quartermaster handed Thomas a small canvas bag and then stepped back so that everyone in the tent could take stock of their creation. The overall effect of the uniform, hat, and sidearms on the former kitchen boy was impressive.

Hell thought Major Rolande, this boy could pass for twenty-five. No worries on that count. “Just two things now, sir,” he said to the general. “His signed orders and a mount.”

General Yoke pulled a folded piece of paper from his coat pocket. “Your orders are simple. You will take command of B Company at first light this morning and proceed immediately to reconnoiter along Pebble Creek Ridge from the crossroads on the south to the creek on the north. Do not engage the enemy unless engaged. Send a rider to report the enemy troop disposition to me at my field HQ at Turner, three miles due

north of this camp. Do you understand your orders?"

He took a deep breath. One part of his brain was reeling in panic. He understood the orders, but he had no idea how he was going to carry them out. Take command? Reconnoiter? Report back? Yesterday he was cleaning slop buckets and making coffee for five hundred men. Today he would be leading nearly one hundred of them in a complicated scheme that just might get them all killed.

At the same time, he thought, what an opportunity he had just been presented. Yoke assured him that the fix was in; the Johnnie patrol would meekly surrender, he would place them under guard and lead them to Yoke, and that would be it. The war was ending, and he would muster out with the rank of First Sergeant. He would go back to Ohio having accomplished something for the Union, and with a small pension to boot.

"I understand them, sir."

The general handed him the orders. "One last thing, Colonel Scoundrel. To make a suitable impression, you will need the right mount. You will take Cornwall, my personal horse."

Major Rolande and Captain Morrison shared a surprised look. The stallion was like a family member to the general. Surely, he knew that if everything went as it had to, Cornwall would likely not survive the morning. It was clear that General Yoke was looking ahead to the post-war investigation that would look back at this day's events and determine if he had acted properly and in accordance with military law. Only hours earlier he had been ordered to march his regiment to the west to support General Merritt at Five Forks. Instead, he sent most of his command to safety in the east, miles away from the impending battle.

For Yoke's story to be believed at the War Department, every detail surrounding the supposed attack against his regiment by a full rebel brigade, including his decision to swing around to the east instead of making a forced march to the west, had to be militarily sound. Making sure the new regimental colonel wasn't found dead alongside some old farm plug was one of those details. Colonels rode thorough-

breeds, like Cornwall. Yoke loved that horse, but he loved his own hide and the fortune that was waiting for him in Philadelphia even more. The general had done everything possible to cover his tracks. He was leaving nothing to chance; the boy had to die on that ridge, and so did every soldier in B Company.

Yoke motioned for everyone to leave the tent. There was no time to strike it; dawn was fast approaching, and with the first sunlight, the rebs would come boiling over Pebble Creek Ridge. Morrison, Rolande, and the quartermaster climbed into their saddles and waited while Yoke walked Thomas over to where Cornwall stood saddled and waiting.

The general stroked his horse's muzzle. "This is a war horse. Be good to him and bring him back to me."

"I will, sir."

"Captain Hayden and B Company will be along momentarily," continued the general. "Morrison has told them that we have a new regimental colonel. They won't recognize you, and they won't be happy to have a new commander dumped on them like this without notice, but they will respect your rank and obey your orders."

"Let Hayden take the lead up to the ridge. He is a fine officer, and he has faced enemy fire many times. Remember that he is not aware of our agreement with the rebs; there is no need for him to know. He will be ready for a fight, but he will be pleased when the patrol hauls out the white flag and drops their arms. When he asks what is to be done with the prisoners, tell him they are to be taken to me. Are we clear?"

Thomas could only nod. His mind was racing. But he also felt a growing certainty that he could carry this off. Seventeen or not, he knew he was at a crossroad. His Irish mother had sometimes talked about how lightning could strike you without warning, anytime, anywhere, and in any weather. It could kill you, or it could light your way to glory. God willing—and you jump quickly enough—she would say, you could ride that lightning bolt instead of being consumed by its flame.

What took place in the next few hours would affect everything he did tomorrow and every day after that. For the first time in his life, Thomas Scanddrél—now Scoundrel—knew what it was like to take a

hand in shaping his own destiny. He felt the weight of the saber and revolver at his waist and looked down at the silver eagles on his shoulders. Whatever played out on that ridge this morning was going to define his life. And he was fine with that.

General Yoke handed Cornwall's reins to him. "Remember," he said softly, "the rebs are with us today. No one will be harmed. They will play their role, and you will play yours. It's a fine thing you are doing for the regiment and a fine thing for your country. I am proud of you. The President would be proud of you. Now, wait here for Captain Hayden, and do your job."

The general pivoted and walked to the buckboard. He got up on the front seat beside the driver and saluted Thomas. Then, the wagon rolled away into the graying morning.

Major Rolande reined his horse up alongside the wagon. "Brave boy," he said to General Yoke. "Shame he is going to die this morning."

Yoke was a little surprised at the major's tone. His condolence sounded sincere. "It is sad," he replied, "but thousands have died for far less gain in this damn war. At least his death will stand for something."

"Sir?"

The general lit his cigar. "His death will be in the service of all of those we have protected these past few years," he said. "You realize, major, that the men we sent to safety will lead this nation after the war. They will be the bankers, the industrialists, the politicians, and the judges. They will brush the red man and the deserts aside, and they will build the great cities that fulfill our manifest destiny. No, Major, that boy will die in the cause of something more noble and hallowed than he could ever imagine. A soldier could not ask for a better death."

I doubt if the boy would feel the same, mused Rolande. He looked ahead to where the men and horses of B Company were assembled in the light of a row of flickering torches. Scoundrel's death would stand for something, including the major's personal enrichment. He turned in his saddle and looked back at the kitchen boy in a colonel's uniform standing silently beside the general's horse. As for what his own life would stand for after today, thought Rolande in a momentary twinge of

conscience, that remained to be seen.



Thomas checked Cornwall's saddle cinches and bridle. He noticed the grain bag tied to his side, and he was pleased to see a rifle seated in the saddle scabbard. One of the few useful things he had learned from his father when the elder Scanddrél wasn't gambling, whoring, or concocting another seedy investment scheme, was the art of horsemanship. His father was an exceptional judge of horseflesh, and Morgan-Thoroughbreds were his preferred breed.

As the last echoes of General Yoke's buckboard faded into the approaching dawn, Thomas appraised his horse. Like the best of this kind, Cornwall had strong legs, a well arched neck, laid back shoulders, and a distinctly expressive head. The combination of the longer back, strongly muscled hindquarters and tall, graceful tail added to the impression of strength and robust power. No matter what lay ahead this morning, Thomas was glad to have such a horse under him.

A breeze picked up out of the west, and the eastern sky was light enough now for him to just make out the crest of the long, low ridge he was to reconnoiter. He mounted Cornwall and walked him several times around the command tent. The horse was quick and responsive, and he accepted him from the start. That was a good sign.

Captain Hayden and B Company would join him shortly, and the game would be underway. Could he fool a battle-hardened veteran like Hayden? Would he need to? Yoke's orders were to let the captain take the lead up the ridge. That was standard military protocol. Colonels normally commanded an entire regiment of ten companies, each of which would have its own experienced officer. Hayden would think nothing of Thomas instructing him to take the lead of the single company.

Sergeant O'Hanlon held Hayden in high regard, and that was sufficient for Thomas. The only thing he knew about the captain was that he had been a successful engineer in private life and that he had personally purchased new seven-shot Spencer repeating

rifles for every man in B Company after General Yoke refused to requisition them. President Lincoln had approved the magazine-fed weapons, but senior commanders were reluctant to adopt them because of their cost, the massive amount of ammunition they went through, and the considerable amount of smoke they produced on already smoky battlefields.

Smoke or not, every private in the Union Army knew the story of Colonel John T. Wilder's 4,000-man Spencer-armed brigade. During the Battle of Hoover's Gap in Tennessee two years earlier, they held off 22,000 Confederate attackers with those rifles and suffered only twenty-seven losses against two hundred eighty-seven rebels killed. Thomas had enjoyed watching Hayden's men do field drills in their rifle-green coats with black Goodyear rubber buttons down the front. The odd-looking buttons were a favorite of snipers and sharpshooters because they didn't reflect light and give away their positions the way brass buttons did.



Then, the sounds of voices, and horses approaching. Captain Hayden rode out of the darkness at the head of a mounted column of two dozen men, followed by fifty or sixty soldiers on foot. Thomas steeled himself for the performance and was almost surprised that he did not feel the least bit agitated or stressed.

Hayden rode up to him. He was razor thin, with a short beard and eyes that pierced the darkness like a wolf. The captain halted in front of Cornwall and saluted. As Thomas returned the captain's salute, he could tell that he was being given the once-over by someone who would know the difference between a senior officer and a kitchen boy. This was it.

"Colonel Scoundrel," Hayden finally said in a low, deliberate voice. "My men and I are pleased to meet you."



TEN

Pebble Creek Ridge

In the moment it took for Captain Hayden to emerge out of the shadows and ride up beside him, Thomas formulated his plan. General Yoke had set the table, but it was his mother who made the meal. He could follow the general's orders to the letter and go quietly into an ordinary future, or he could alter the plans a bit and catch the lightning. Only one of those paths would lead to fortune and glory.

"Captain, it is my pleasure," he said. "General Yoke speaks highly of your company, and I am honored to ride with you this morning. I regret we have not had a chance to get to know one another, but I look forward to doing that at mess this evening." The sound and formality of his own voice surprised Thomas. All his life he had spoken with a hint of his mother's County Clare brogue. Now, he only heard northwest Ohio farm country.

Captain Hayden nodded. Nothing that happened in war was routine, but everything that was happening this morning was unusual. He appreciated that the colonel recognized the importance of establishing a solid relationship with his officers.

"Our orders, sir?" he asked.

Thomas was almost startled at being addressed as a superior officer, but he resisted the urge to burst out laughing.

"We are to reconnoiter the length of Pebble Creek Ridge from the southern crossroad to the northern creek, a distance of one and a half miles. General Yoke wants us to observe the presence of any rebel forces that may be marshaling on the eastern flank of the ridge and report

any troop strength and configuration to him at his new headquarters at Turner.”

Hayden looked skeptical. He patted the side of his horses’ nose, and then said, “Begging the colonel’s pardon, and with all due respect, but wouldn’t that task be more suited to a patrol of six or seven mounted men, rather than a company of our size? A handful of men can fade into the brush and go about a reconnaissance pretty much undetected. Ninety men, well, again my pardon, but that’s akin to trying to sneak an elephant into a convent shower room without being seen by the Mother Superior.”

Thomas knew he should remain in character, and perhaps even admonish the captain for questioning the general’s orders, but he could not suppress a chuckle at the vision created by the captain’s imagery.

“Captain,” he replied with a smile, “at this late stage in the war I confess I wouldn’t be surprised to encounter your elephant anywhere; from the other side of that ridge to Robert E. Lee’s washtub itself.”

Now it was Hayden’s turn to smile. Perhaps the new colonel wouldn’t turn out to be a strutting martinet like General Yoke. This morning’s events would tell.

Thomas asked Hayden to summon his lieutenant and sergeants. It was time to call up the lightning. Hayden called them forward, and the four men approached on horseback as the last of the darkness gave way to gray. It would be light in just a few minutes.

Captain Hayden introduced his men one by one. They regarded the new colonel warily; whether warriors lived or died at any moment in battle could come down to the degree to which they trusted their commander. They did not know this Colonel Scoundrel, and more importantly, they did not give their trust and respect to any man who had not earned it in the smoke and fire of battle.

Thomas sensed their reticence. He did not blame them, but he still had to convince them that what he was about to propose made sense.

“Gentlemen, today we have been thrown together under unusual circumstances, and I appreciate that you do not know me. Fairness being a mutual endeavor, it is also true that I do not know

you. Time will resolve that matter, and I trust it will be to our mutual satisfactions.”

Several men made cursory nods, and he continued. “Our orders are to ride up and along Pebble Creek Ridge from south to north, and to report any rebel activity we observe, in detail.”

Echoing his captain, the lieutenant asked, “The entire company sir? Not just a patrol?”

“Those are General Yoke’s orders. Of course, orders can be impacted by events as they unfold. With that in mind, I am going to make a small change to our orders, really more a delay than anything else.”

The captain’s ears pricked up. He leaned forward in his saddle and cast a quizzical glance at his lieutenant. It was damn unusual to make a change to a general officer’s explicit orders, and that applied to a colonel just as much as to a private.

Thomas prepared to take the chance. His spur of the moment plan was based on two assumptions; first, that Yoke was correct, and the rebel patrol would abide by their deal and not fire a shot at the Union soldiers. They would surrender, and then come along quietly as the prisoners of B Company. The second assumption is where things got a bit dicey; if the rebs were set to surrender in any event, why wouldn’t they surrender to a single officer just as readily as they would to an entire company of soldiers? There would be no glory if he simply waited at the base of the ridge as Hayden and his men rode up to the crest and accepted the rebel patrols surrender. But, if he rode up the ridge by himself, with no other union troops in sight, and the rebs surrendered to him alone, *en masse*... that would be a heroic action deserving of attention and accolades. A citation for bravery or perhaps even a medal could not help but improve his status and therefore his prospects after the war. His mother would have understood his thinking; this was exactly what she meant when she talked about riding the lightning.

Dawn would be upon them in a minute, and with the light, the rebel patrol would ride over the ridge to fulfill their agreement with Yoke. There was no time to waste. He let out a deep breath.

“Gentlemen, I will ride to the top of the ridge alone. I will make

a preliminary observation and then signal to you with the Stars and Stripes, which I will carry up the hill. If I do not signal, you will remain here until I return. If I wave the flag back and forth slowly, you will advance as a unit up the ridge to my position. Should I wave the flag in a rapid motion, you will split into three units and get up to the top as fast as hell. Half the mounted riders to the left, half to the right, and the infantry in the middle. Is that clear?"

Hayden and his men understood what their new colonel had just said, but none of them had an inkling what it was about or why a colonel would expose himself like that to potential enemy fire. The captain looked at his men and raised his eyebrows in a half shrug. It was not his place—or theirs—to question the colonel's orders.

Hayden called to the trooper who was carrying the Union flag. The soldier rode forward, planted the flag in the ground next to the captain and then wheeled around and rejoined the line. Hayden pulled it from the ground and rode over to Thomas, who took the flagpole in his left hand.

The captain shook his head and allowed a smile to cross his lips. "You a gambling man, colonel?"

Thomas gripped the flag tightly and reined Cornwall back a bit, which caused the horse to lower and then raise his head. He loosened the strap holding his rifle in its scabbard and adjusted his holstered revolver.

"Not with my skin, and not with the skin of the men I command."

He saluted Captain Hayden, picked up his reins, and touched Cornwall's flanks with his boots. As he galloped away a soft corona of yellow light was edging over the top of the ridge.



Thomas rode out of camp towards the rising sun and Pebble Creek Ridge, about two hundred yards distant. Cornwall moved at a steady gait, picking his way effortlessly around fallen logs and small boulders. It took only a few minutes to cover that distance and begin the gently

sloping climb up through low brush and stands of spring wildflowers. The crest of the ridge was no more than one hundred yards away now, and he held tightly to the flagpole as Cornwall wound his way up a narrow switchback trail that had been stamped out by deer moving up and down the ridge in search of leaves and berries.

The sky was clear and soft, but there were no indications of the rebel patrol that should be making its way up the other side of the ridge. As he went, he thought about how he would contact the patrol and what he should say. Yoke had promised them cash in exchange for their surrender, but he didn't give him any money. Would they be expecting payment right now? And if they didn't get it, what then? Would the deal be off, or had Yoke made it clear that they wouldn't be paid until they were taken to his headquarters? He cursed softly to himself. Why hadn't he asked for more information before he took off up this damn hill?

Cornwall swung around the tangled limbs and trunk of a fallen oak tree just as the sun crested the ridge. The horse stepped around a heavy branch, and they found themselves at the top of the hill. Running north to south as far as they could see was a path of grass, low scrub, and a sprinkling of trees and boulders about fifty yards wide. It was the perfect place to wait for the rebel patrol.

He had to squint his eyes against the rising sun. Then, the horse shook his head rapidly from side to side, and his ears flared back. He strained to see or hear anything out of the ordinary, but the only sounds traveling through the crisp morning air were being made by a pair of angry killdeers skittering along the path as they tried to protect their ground nest.

He patted Cornwall's head, and they headed over to the opposite side of the ridge top. Standing at the edge, he could see for miles across the valley to rows of purple and blue wooded hills that marched beyond the limits of his sight. Much of the valley floor below the ridge was shrouded in morning fog that rolled off the North Fork of the Shenandoah River. He knew that a great battle was brewing beyond the river at Five Forks, where he imagined that Union Generals Sheridan, Merritt, and Warren

were probably completing their plans to deal the final defeat to the rebel army under George Pickett. He found some part of him wishing that he was there in the thick of a real battle with real commanders, instead of role-playing on this grassy ridge, miles from the action.

It was a short-lived daydream. Cornwall suddenly stamped his right hoof hard, three times, and then jerked his head back. He was about to rein back when he saw movement about a hundred yards down the slope. He sucked in his breath as a line of gray-coated Confederate cavalry burst out of the gray fog at a gallop, followed by at least three full companies of infantry advancing at a fast trot. This was not the small rebel patrol he had been told to expect. And the riders and foot soldiers were headed right for him.

Everything around Thomas froze; Cornwall stood stock still, the breeze ruffling the Union flag he was holding died away, and the killdeer ceased their piercing cries.

“God almighty,” he said out loud. Cornwall responded by slowly backing away from the edge of the ridge without waiting for a command. Whatever deal the general had made, the Johnnies were having no part of it this morning. There were at least three dozen mounted cavalry fronting ten times that many foot soldiers surging up the hill. To add insult to the drama charging his way, he could just make out the insignia of a full colonel on the hat of the officer leading the charge. That saber-wielding soldier, he realized, was a *real* colonel.

He wheeled Cornwall and galloped to the other side of the ridge. The rebs would be here in a matter of seconds, and he had few options. He couldn’t outrun dozens of mounted soldiers, and he couldn’t fight them either. He could surrender, but then he would have to watch helplessly as they swept down on Captain Hayden and the men of B Company, who would be outnumbered better than four to one.

He could also wave the flag, as he had told Hayden he would do. Damn, what were the signals? A slow wave for them to proceed up the hill at a steady pace, a fast wave to gallop? His mind raced as he clutched the flag; he had to do something right now.

The first rebel riders poured up over the top of the ridge about

fifty yards to his right. They spotted him immediately and swung in his direction. Thomas reined Cornwall around and raced southward along the grassy path. The Union Flag he was holding unfurled and waved against the brightening sky as Cornwall ran in long, flowing strides and jumped over brush and rocks with ease.

He swung his head around and saw that five or six riders were closing on him. That's when he heard the first pistol shots. He could try to make it to the end of the ridge and into the forest beyond, but it was nearly a mile, and even with Cornwall's strength and speed, escape in that direction was unlikely. Straight ahead, a massive oak tree blocked his path. He pressed his right knee against Cornwall's flank, leaned hard, and pulled the reins to the left. The horse made a racing turn beneath the tree's outspread canopy, circled the trunk, and flew back in the opposite direction right past the startled rebels.

The rebs followed suit; they swung around the oak and followed close on Thomas' track. Seventy-five yards ahead a dozen more riders were strung out across the path, their rifles pointed right at him. To his left, a full company of rebel infantry soldiers were cresting the hill. In a matter of seconds, he would be surrounded by the enemy.

More shots rang out, and Thomas felt a punch to his lower back. He held tight to the reins with his left hand, while with his right hand, he held out the Union flag, waving it back and forth in the clear morning light. Then a hail of gunshots enveloped him, and his left thigh felt like it had been struck by a swarm of angry wasps.

He reined Cornwall to a halt, wheeled, and galloped straight towards the pursuing soldiers. His turn was executed so quickly and so close that he careened right between them before they could get off any more shots.

He sped south along the ridge, waving the Stars and Stripes furiously. He hoped that Hayden could see him, but he also knew that B Company would not make it up the hill in time to help him. Now, he heard rebel yells and the pounding of hooves right behind him, and for a moment, he thought he could feel hot breath spewing from the nostrils of the rebel horses. As he flew past the oak for the second time amid a

barrage of bullets that tore into the trunk and showered him with bark chips, he was sure that his ride was about to come to an end.

In choosing to come up the hill alone, he had gambled that he could catch the lightning. Now all he could do was to ride it until the very end.



Captain Hayden and his men watched as their new colonel headed up the ridge. When he was halfway to the summit, Hayden ordered his men to proceed to the base of the hill, in defiance of the colonel's orders to keep the company together until and unless he waved the flag. Hayden split the company into three sections, with half of the mounted soldiers on the right and half on the left. While the cavalry waited in the brightening morning light, Hayden ordered his infantry to begin making their way up the middle.

The men of B Company squinted against the rising sun and watched as the colonel slipped over the ridge and disappeared, only to re-appear a moment later at a full gallop, with a half dozen rebel cavalry in pursuit. Then Hayden's men heard gunshots and saw the colonel swing his horse around an oak tree and race back to the north.

At Hayden's command, two dozen mounted soldiers drew their Spencer rifles and tore off up the hill, followed by sixty-two infantry men running full out.

All eyes were on Colonel Scoundrel and Cornwall as they flew along the ridge. Hayden thought he saw the colonel hit by pistol fire at least once, and he urged his horse faster up the hill. That was when the men of B Company witnessed the grandest battle scene any of them could ever have imagined or would ever see again. They saw the disc of the sun break above the tree line, yellow and bright in the cloudless sky above Pebble Creek Ridge, and then they watched in astonishment as Colonel Scoundrel reined Cornwall to a stop amidst a fusillade of bullets from the Confederate riders.

He held the Union flag out at arm's length, raised it high above his

head, and pulled on the reins. Cornwall reared back on his hind legs, and for a moment, horse and rider and waving flag were silhouetted against the sun in a tableau that was both magnificent and terrible.

Hayden watched the remarkable scene unfold as he breached the hill. Then, the Union soldiers racing to Colonel Scoundrel's defense saw their new commander topple slowly off his horse, fall into the folds of the Union flag, and drop to the ground. Cornwall took two steps forward, buckled to his front legs, and fell on his side beside his master.

