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Preston Diamond:
Conception

For Dusty
My Strength, my foundation.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Chapter 1

Life's blood dripped steadily from the dozen cuts and gashes on Cutler Diamond's body. The wounds varied from superficial to near fatal; if not soon attended, they would inevitably lead to death. Already the handsome face had lost colour, fading from a ruddy, healthy complexion to pale white, then sickly ashen. The stricken man swayed drunkenly on quaking legs, his breathing heavy, his vision blurred.

Grains of sand in the hourglass of life had almost run out for the American.

The Spaniard had humiliated the proud young army lieutenant, drawing him into a duel that the foreigner could not hope to win. Had the choice of weapons been pistols, Christobal Alcares would be dead; however, the Spanish

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preference for duelling was the sword. Neither Cutler Diamond nor his heavy cavalry sabre were a match for the agility and skill of Alcares with his vicious, lightweight smallsword. The dashing, dark Spaniard quickly wore down his blond, blue-eyed opponent, deftly shifting in, easily avoiding the clumsy parries and jabs of the novice. Alcares's acclaim was well known throughout the nobility of Spain; a finesse swordsman, he had trained with the finest in the land. Americans, by comparison, use their awkward swords as clubs. Christobal Alcares drew blood at every thrust. Cutler Diamond was stripped of offence, denuded in defence. The duel became a charade, a cat toying with a mouse; the mouse being devoured alive.

A tiny gallery had experienced a full range of emotions. In the beginning there were shouts and cheers for the daring Spaniard, boos and jeers for the foreigner. But as Alcares taunted and jabbed his victim, the crowd gravitated from fervour to disgust. Among the spectators, three people prayed for the dying man: Señorita Constantina García y Ramírez —the subject of the quarrel— her father, Eduardo García, and an American army officer, Major James Unzer, comrade of the dying lieutenant.

United States President Zachary Taylor had selected a cabal of diplomats to visit Spain, hoping to purchase the Spanish colony of Cuba. Earlier in

the year, the President had thwarted a filibustering expedition; now he wished to discreetly pursue the possibility of a deal with Isabella II, Queen of Spain. Cutler Diamond, a young army lieutenant who had proved his West Point worth in the Mexican-American conflict while serving under then-*General* Zachary Taylor, was selected to accompany the diplomats. Diamond did not question why a military officer of his rank should accompany the elite group of dignitaries.

In the two days of briefing prior to departure, Cutler soon became a favourite among the emissaries. Intelligent, witty and cheerful, the lieutenant's personality naturally attracted people, though he did nothing to purposely cultivate favour. He was a fine physical specimen of masculine youth: tall, well-made, muscular and agile. The officer was handsome with high forehead, square jaw, blond hair and intense powder-blue eyes. Diamond treated others as he preferred to be treated himself; an endearing quality in any individual.

During his tenure at the United States Military Academy, West Point, New York, Cutler Diamond demonstrated particularly high potential throughout his four year training, graduating fifth overall in a class of forty-one. Along with his fellow graduates he was automatically awarded second lieutenant rank.

Cutler Diamond cut his military teeth in the bloody Mexican-American War. He fought under

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the commands of “Old Rough And Ready” Taylor and General Winfield Scott. During the conflict Cutler befriended an officer, a fellow West Point graduate, First Lieutenant Ulysses Grant. Ulysses was a few years Cutler's senior but the pair found solace in each other's company. Grant, like Diamond, was not enthusiastic about his nation flogging a smaller country; superior artillery, resources and command of the American military made the conflict one-sided.

The outset of the voyage to Spain aboard the USS Red Cria had not been charitable from Diamond's point of view. He soon realized that his career in the United States Army suited him far better than life in a naval command. The first week of the rough Atlantic voyage was spent hurling stomach contents over the rail or moaning in aggrieved seasickness upon his bunk. The diplomats were not unkind, many of them suffered similar affliction.

Leaving the Atlantic Ocean behind, seasickness faded as the company sailed through the Strait of Gibraltar and into the Mediterranean Sea. As the fleet naval vessel skirted the Spanish shores en route to Barcelona, the increasingly pleasant climate, incredibly blue sea and picturesque coastline pulled at the heart of the young officer. Never had Diamond dreamed of seeing any part of the world beyond the oceans. What lay in store in this beautiful country?

Queen Isabella II, with her husband, the Duke of Cadiz, had journeyed from Madrid to meet with the Americans in Barcelona. Cutler was surprised to find that royalty is not necessarily synonymous with beauty. Queen Isabella had a pale complexion, a square, almost unattractive face, long black hair and a mannish figure. In her late teens, the royal gowns did not hide a tendency toward obesity. International rumour suggested Queen Isabella did not have a satisfactory marriage. Her cousin/husband did not perform to the expectations of a hot-blooded new bride. The Queen, if gossip were gospel, had occasion to seek entertainment from other sources. As Isabella had a tendency to reward those who earned her favour, the American negotiators had pinned their hopes upon Cutler Diamond fulfilling that need.

No one informed Cutler.

The lubricious emissaries were without audience when attempting to indulge the Queen in their campaign to purchase her Cuban colony. However, just as they had unscrupulously planned, the monarch became fixated with the young army lieutenant. Cutler Diamond remained oblivious; the lady was not only the Queen of Spain, but she was a married woman as well.

A royal fiesta of modest proportion had been organized for the foreign contingent and the American gentlemen turned out in their uniforms and finest. By contrast, their attire was drab compared to the resplendent costumes of Spanish

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nobility and royal court in attendance. The bejewelled Queen sported sufficient wealth on her person to make a down-payment on the United States. Perhaps the regent intended to demonstrate to her guests that she did not personally have a lack or need which would cause her country to sell Cuba or any other of its colonies. She smiled benevolently, at times tolerantly, upon her guests and subjects. As the evening progressed, more and more her attention gravitated toward Cutler Diamond's handsome visage and warm manner. More and more, Cutler Diamond's attention gravitated toward a beautiful lady whom he felt certain must be a Spanish princess.

The lovely señorita was not oblivious to the American lieutenant.

Constantina García y Ramírez was the daughter and only living relative of Eduardo García, a quiet, unassuming man who tended to think at right angles to Queen Isabella. García was an influential aristocrat and he wielded not a small amount of power in the affairs of state as well as international concerns. He had a contingent of followers who supported him, but Isabella controlled the army, which kept García's people from open rebellion. The Queen, in turn, respected García's position, realizing his worth within her government, even though she longed to have the thorn in her side removed permanently.

Eduardo García's inherent powers of observation did not fail to see trouble on the

horizon —not necessarily from a paternal point view— as his daughter and the young American became engrossed in each other's company. García fought a battle of emotions as Constantina naively upstaged the Queen of Spain. The air grew static. Queen Isabella lost her composure and, with her personal attendants in tow, swept out of the palace ballroom in an undignified rustle of skirts. Francis, King consort of Spain, remained oblivious.

Among the emissaries, Major James Unzer drew the short straw. With great reluctance, Unzer informed Cutler Diamond exactly why a shavetail had been included on this tour. The major, who knew he walked on thin ice, turned red with embarrassment as he explained it was Cutler's duty to his nation. Diamond, gobsmacked, flatly refused. If the United States needed a gigolo for international relations, his patriotism was headed south. Though they were disappointed, the abashed diplomats preferred not to continue their argument.

However, a handsome and arrogant young Spaniard in attendance, one Christobal Alcaez —occasional plaything of the regent— expressed exception to the American's advances upon Señorita García y Ramírez. Alcaez, through his affiliation with the monarch, despised Eduardo García, but coveted the nobleman's lovely daughter. After Queen Isabella abandoned her guests, Cristobal Alcaez apprehended Cutler

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Diamond, demanding that he remove himself from the lady's presence. When the lieutenant refused, a short scuffle broke out in which Alcaez received a bloody nose. From an undignified position where the Spaniard landed upon the floor he challenged the foreigner to a duel; the American accepted.

Unfortunately, in the heat of the moment, Diamond did not think to stipulate weaponry.

The Mediterranean sun reserves an especially pleasant caress for Barcelona. The following morning was no exception as the first golden rays of day swept through the quiet plaza. A seaward breeze rustled through palm trees as cool night air clashed with rising temperatures. A handful of early risers had come to the appointed match; curiously, only one of the American contingent had appeared to support his comrade. The remainder of the spectators of this duel to the death were Spanish nobility who had been in attendance at Queen Isabella's fiesta last night.

Constantina García y Ramírez stood, ashen, beside her father. Though no fault of her own, she felt responsible for the impending death of the brave, but foolish, foreign soldier. She despised and feared Alcaez. Eduardo García had tried to reason with the Spaniard, but his plea met with haughty defiance. Proclaiming the duel a senseless murder, Don García pointed out to Queen Isabella that severe repercussions would

fall upon already strained Spanish-American relations. The monarch, unmoved, warned Don Eduardo that his own future stood on quaking soil.

García realized the fuse had been ignited. Isabella's normally taut tether of tolerance had snapped.

Alcares's first two thrusts with his smallsword pierced the skin of Cutler Diamond's right and left shoulders. The American fought back, though in comparison, he possessed no skill at all. When the Spanish swordsman realized the ineptitude of his opponent he voiced his disdain with every slash, slicing through the lieutenant's uniform, gashing skin, ripping flesh. Blood soon soaked the torso; it dripped and flowed on trousers and boots. Both wrists were cut though the major arteries were not yet severed. The evil hiss and sing of the light steel blade etched the eardrums of the onlookers. Between jabs, the Spaniard taunted Señorita Ramírez and Don Eduardo. Though Major Unzer could not understand the language he knew the implication when Alcares offered to fight both Americans at once. Cutler Diamond refused the Major's interfering. The one-sided duel continued, conclusion decided, timing at the whim of Cristobal Alcares.

Lieutenant Diamond's heavy sabre tilted downward. He no longer had the strength to hold it up, much less protect himself. Cutler tried to focus on his rival; the image was distorted as if

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squinting through a glass of whiskey. He felt lightheaded and the world began to spin.

The Spaniard laughed in the face of his defenceless victim then flashed a malicious smile. “*Y ahora, un poco para la señorita.*”¹

Alcares lunged forward with a vicious thrust directed toward the groin of the American. One last burst of adrenalin gave Cutler the strength to move. Instead of leaping aside or stepping back, he turned sideways and launched himself upon the wicked blade. Searing pain screamed throughout his body as the point deflected off his sword sheath and the long thin steel sliced through thigh and buttock. The American twisted his hips, using his bleeding flesh and the scabbard to momentarily lock the Spanish smallsword in place; at the same time the Cavalry sabre described an upward arc in the fashion of a reverse numeral five. The lower curve zipped through the wrist of Alcares's sword arm. Before the nerveless hand could fall free, the sabre completed the curve, moved vertically, then sliced forward horizontally where it encountered the tendons, muscle, flesh and bone of the Spaniard's exposed neck. A sickening crunch and the muffled ring of steel disturbed the stillness hanging over the hushed crowd. The head, attached by one last thread of skin and sinew, lolled to one side and the

1 *And now, a little for the lady.*

body, gushing a torrent of blood, sank to the dry earth.

Cutler Diamond dropped his sword and collapsed beside his dead opponent.

As his daughter and the army major dashed to the fallen American, Eduardo García extracted an ivory whistle from his shirt pocket and gave three shrill blasts. Bystanders did not have long to wonder at this for a spirited pair of caparisoned blacks thundered into the grounds through the near entrance of the plaza. The team, pulling a four-wheeled, low-sided cart with elongated bed, arrived, plunging and rearing, in a cloud of dust. Don Eduardo shouted to his daughter and the officer to load the wounded lieutenant in the conveyance. This was done in utmost haste; Don Eduardo, his daughter and the major scrambled aboard. The driver whipped the horses about. In a rattle of wooden wheels, thundering hooves and swirling dust, the rig and pair disappeared as fast as they had come.

The carter urged the blacks to ever greater speed as they tore through side streets and onto a thoroughfare of Barcelona. Eduardo García, precariously crouched upon the board seat, clinging to the near edge of the wagon box, shouted instructions to the driver. Constantina, trying to stay aboard the skidding, careering cart, ripped swathes of material from her petticoats as she and the major attempted to stem the flow of blood from Diamond's wounds.

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Don Eduardo maintained a constant vigil... there were no signs of pursuit. In the distance the billowing white sails of ships appeared and soon the immaculate blue of the Mediterranean opened before them. The carter eased back on the reins in effort to slow the blacks but their Spanish blood ran high and they fought their bits. The pitch of the wagon's wheels changed as the conveyance left the cobbled streets and clattered onto the wooden timbers of a huge wharf. Snorting, prancing and dripping with sweat the team skidded to a halt at the water's edge.

Two young men scabbled over the edge of the pier and rushed to the cart. First they assisted the señorita and Don Eduardo, then gently lifted the unconscious American from the bloodied wooden floor. Major Unzer assisted in transporting his comrade along the dock where he soon espied a shallow keeled fishing vessel moored below the level of the wharf. As the group proceeded to board the craft, the carter called, "*Vaya con dios, Don Eduardo!*" He touched the whip to his team; horses lunged in their traces and the empty vehicle rattled hollowly along the pier as the fighting blacks raced away.

Once in the boat the two Spaniards immediately grabbed oars and, bending their backs to the task, rowed swiftly away from the wharf. The Major and the señorita turned to their patient while Don Eduardo, fear on his features, studied the area in the direction the wagon had

disappeared. There was still nothing to see; however, on the far edge of hearing, he perceived or imagined distant shouts and the faint sound of running hooves. García silently prayed that Miguel the carter had escaped, for the horsemen were soldiers of the Queen's Army.

Eduardo García did not need any illustrations to help him understand the precarious situation he and his daughter had been plunged into. For months García had stepped lightly, straddling the sword's edge, nurturing Her Highness's whims, knowing, at any instant, fragile relations may explode. The events of the previous evening had ignited the fuse. Isabella felt scorned by the obliviousness of the handsome American and consequently diverted her rage toward Eduardo and his daughter. The nobleman would be divested, probably executed.

Honour would not allow García to flee Spain for his own sake but he feared for the future of Constantina. There was insufficient time to rally the support he would require to save themselves... flight was their sole recourse.

During the fiesta, as he witnessed the fermenting wrath of Isabella, Senior García had considered it prudent to establish personal relations with the foreigners. Hoping to save his daughter, he approached the emissaries a few minutes prior to the confrontation between Alcares and Diamond. Initially the aristocrat's plea evoked chary scepticism. However, when Don Eduardo

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assured the Americans that *they too* may not be spared the ire of his Queen, the contingent became more attentive. Emphasizing Don Eduardo's words, the fight broke out and the gauntlet was thrown; the Americans realized a staggering diminution of their own comfort zone. García advised the foreigners to board their ship that evening with instructions for their captain to position the vessel where it would be free to sail at very short notice. Cutler Diamond could not be dissuaded from the challenge and Major Unzer agreed to accompany him. The American officers would then be in a position to aid García and Constantina in their flight.

The frantic escape had been orchestrated during the early hours of morning. García had called upon his most trusted friends and allies to assist him in fleeing Spain. If the young army officer had not slain Cristobal Alcaez, a contingency plan would have left the dark swordsman no less dead. In the bottom of the boat lay two chests containing all the worldly belongings Eduardo and Constantina would have when they reached America. A small fortune—Eduardo's precautionary emergency fund—lay concealed in a compartment within one of the trunks. The Spaniard's desperation had forced him to place their wealth, their future and their lives in the hands of these foreign strangers.

The nobleman offered up a second prayer, this one for the life of the fallen American.

As the oars of the rowers churned the Mediterranean waters, Major Unzer and Constantina García y Ramírez stanchd the bleeding of smaller cuts, the more severe gashes having been tended to first. Unzer wondered if his efforts had stopped the flow or if his fellow officer had run out of blood. The major glanced up and followed García's gaze. In a cloud of dust, twenty or more mounted soldiers topped a hill along the avenue, high above and to the west of the dock. They were charging toward the shoreline at full gallop. Unzer calculated the distance to the American naval ship anchored out in the bay: the USS Red Cria now lay near enough for him to recognize individuals on board; still a long two hundred yards.

A fury of activity erupted on deck and the accompanying sounds drifted on the air: the harsh voice of the first mate bellowed orders; rigging sizzled through rolling blocks as stiff white sheets ratcheted up the masts; the steady clank of the anchor chain rattled through the hawsepipe; the groaning capstan protested as it paid out heavy cable lowering a cargo net into the sea. Several of the diplomatic entourage leaned over the rail shouting advice and encouragement to Unzer and his companions in the fishing boat.

The powerful arms of the Spaniards stretched taut, muscles rippled on straining shoulders as the small craft leaped through the water. Even as the rowers drew near the naval

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vessel, the band of horsemen swept down the avenue and thundered onto the wharf. Muskets and sabres flashed in the sun as soldiers abandoned their plunging, rearing mounts, then raced afoot across the timbers.

The ship began to move. She swung about as the oarsmen propelled their tiny vessel toward the suspended cargo net.

Soldiers were forming a skirmish line along the pier; an officer stood at the head shouting orders.

Don Eduardo turned to his daughter. In Spanish he said, “Constantina, lie down in the bottom of the boat! Take cover behind the trunks!”

Major Unzer, no stranger to enemy fire, watched calmly as clouds of smoke belched from the rifles. Water sprayed up where the musket balls fell short, then the roar of the fusillade reached his ears. The distance was too far and the Spaniards had not allowed for drop. The next volley would be much closer.

As the men on shore worked frantically to reload, the rowers manoeuvred the fishing boat up to the cargo net preparing to off-load passengers and material into the huge rope enclosure, but the captain shouted down, “The boat! Load the entire boat into the net.”

Rapidly, García translated the order to the oarsmen. Grasping the intent, the stern man dove overboard and swam round, dragging the heavy

mesh under the little vessel. The ship, moving faster, towed the skiff along. The swimmer clambered back into the boat. The army man, lacking proficiency in the seaman's vernacular, shouted, "Hoist away!"

As the capstan reversed and the boat began to rise, the Spanish soldiers released another enfilade. Lead splattered upon the water; a few balls striking ineffectually, thudded against the sides of the ship at waterline.

The net, with its cargo, swung inward and the smaller vessel settled awkwardly, atilt on its keel upon the deck of the American ship. The passengers, bound like fish in a seine, peered out through the mesh and Major Unzer called for the ship's doctor, "*On the double.*"

As the web fell away, Constantina screamed in horror.

Don Eduardo García, blood seeping from a hole in the back of his skull, lay dead in the stern of the boat.

As more sails billowed out and caught the seaward breeze the USS Red Cria moved faster toward open sea. The captain manoeuvred his vessel into a position that placed a slower moving freighter ship between the Americans and the coast line: a defence against possible cannon fire from land. The emissaries did not wish to return fire upon the city for it would certainly lead to a declaration of war; the Cuban Mission had been a

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failure; international conflict would be inexcusable.

The two Spaniards who had risked their lives for Don Eduardo stood in stunned silence as Señorita García y Ramírez clung to her noble father. Sobs racked her body. Tears filled their eyes as the young men crossed themselves and said a prayer. With a softly whispered “Adios,” they climbed upon the ship’s rail and dove into the Mediterranean. Major Unzer watched the ‘boatless’ oarsmen swim toward a slow moving barge and clamber aboard. The swimmers had been screened from the soldiers still lined up on the wharf, they would likely escape undetected.

With the assistance of Unzer and two sailors, Lieutenant Diamond was placed on a stretcher and carried to sick bay. As the ship’s doctor removed impromptu bandages Diamond opened his eyes. He spoke one word, “Constantina...” before again drifting into unconsciousness.

Major Unzer had returned to the deck where Señorita García y Ramírez sat caressing her father’s nerveless hand. He helped her to stand and ordered the stretcher bearers to take Don Eduardo below. The army officer offered to escort the Spanish lady to a cabin but she insisted upon seeing Señor Diamond. The Major took her to the ship’s doctor who immediately utilized her services as ship’s nurse.

Cutler Diamond regained consciousness on two occasions during the first week of the return voyage. The ship's medical man was perplexed as to what kept the injured officer from dying. The surgeon claimed to have "sewn enough stitches to make a new shirt"; blood loss and injuries were "enough to kill an ox" but the lieutenant refused to release his tenuous hold. Fever raged through the torn body and at times Cutler had to be tied to the cot in order to prevent further damage to the hot and angry gashes.

Constantina García y Ramírez stayed by the young lieutenant's side throughout the ordeal, leaving only during the brief service performed by the Captain when Don Eduardo García's body was delivered into the turquoise depths of the Mediterranean. Burial at sea was the only available option as the ship made haste to escape Spanish waters and the señorita accepted this without question. Tears filled her dark eyes as the canvass-wrapped body slowly sank out of sight, but the young lady did not break. She turned from the rail, walked across the deck with proud determination and descended the steps to sick bay. Her actions said, "I have lost my father, I will not lose Señor Diamond."

Perhaps having the lovely lady at his side enabled Cutler to cling to the precious thread of life, for at the beginning of the second week he awoke from fevered delirium to find he held the warm soft hand of his beautiful Spanish nurse. In

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the days to come, Cutler Diamond followed willingly as the señorita guided him along the road to recovery.

As the US naval ship plowed through the tumultuous seas of the Atlantic Ocean, the seed of love, oblivious to language barriers, sprouted, grew and blossomed. Only a few hours before a sailor in the crow's nest espied the approaching eastern coastline of the United States, on the cool deck of the pitching USS Red Cria, the captain joined in wedlock Constantina García y Ramírez and Thaddeus Cutler Diamond.

Chapter 2

The first shot had young Preston Diamond out of bed and running across the floor of his room before he had fully awakened. Another explosion of gunfire from within the house brought him to a halt. There were sounds of a scuffle and muffled screams. The thirteen-year-old opened his bedroom door a fraction, saw nothing, then stepped quietly into the darkness of the upstairs hallway. He crept to the head of the stair, knelt and peered into the gloom below. Why weren't his father and mother aroused? Fear lent caution and the lad waited for something... anything... to give him direction. A groan followed by a burbling cough chilled the boy's blood. Terror gripped his pounding heart. A cautious footstep creaked upon

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the lower landing and slowly, deliberately, more steps followed as someone ascended the stairs.

Somewhere outside, not far from the home, another shot broke the stillness.

Preston could not move. The footsteps were far too heavy for his mother, they were too slow and awkward to be his father. An eerie, jagged shadow appeared as flickering light from the fireplace in the parlour cast its glow upward along the stairwell. The source of the shadow materialized in the form of a hatless, dirty, bearded man, his hair unkempt, his clothes in disarray. Preston could smell his unwashed body and there was something else... it reminded the boy of deer hunting... the smell of fresh blood. The man paused as his eyes came level with the top of the stair. The darkness beyond him was impenetrable but the quivering boy, partially concealed behind the balustrades and looking toward the fire's light, could read the intruder's face; it was filled with a mixture of agony and hate. The eyes occasionally squinched as if fighting pain. As the pupils dilated the man cast about the hallway.

He discovered the youth in a nightshirt huddled at the top of the stair.

The weak glint of metal flashed in the firelight and a pistol came to bear upon the fear-frozen lad. Death and triumph flashed in the crazed eyes; a malicious smile crept across the grizzled face as the finger tightened on the trigger. From below, a hushed hiss of silent death whistled

on the cusp of hearing as a razor edge of steel sliced through the darkness. The attacker grunted as six inches of heavy cavalry sword magically protruded through his rib-cage. His mouth opened but no words came out. The pistol dropped from dead fingers and he tumbled down the steps.

When the noise of the falling man subsided, Preston heard another rasping cough. Grabbing up the dropped pistol he made his way down the stair. The dead man partially blocked the step, the sabre was entangled in the spindles of the railing. An ember burst into flame and the room illuminated. Cutler Diamond, Preston's father, clad in night attire, lay a short distance from the man on the stairwell. As Preston stared in horror, the elder Diamond gasped a long sigh, the body relaxed and his head turned to one side. He had saved his son with his dying breath.

The foot of the stair opened into the parlour but a doorway to the kitchen, dining area and main entrance was adjacent on the right. Across the silent room, the outer door of the cottage stood open, a shaft of moonlight cut out a slim triangle on the darkened floor. A footfall echoed on the porch. Another stranger, as ratty as the first, appeared. "Come on, Roddy! We gotta git the hell outta here afore someone comes alookin'! We'll come back for the kid another time... That Spanish bitch got hold of Wiley's gun and shot him... he's hit purty good... I had to cut her throat

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to save my own hide... damn shame, her goin' to waste... Roddy?"

A muzzle flash lit up the room and the deafening roar of a revolver filled the enclosed space. Roddy's companion caught the slug high in his chest and dark blood pumped out in torrents from the hole. The dead man reeled backward, clawed at the door-jamb and slid to the floor. Smoke filled Preston's nostrils; his ears were ringing. He dropped the gun in stunned shock and his body began to quake; icy fingers of cold ran up and down his spine. Preston had killed a man. In a shocked trance he gazed sightlessly about the room.

Out in the yard the sound of hoof beats reverberated, their urgency snapping the youth alert. Preston leaped over the corpse on the stair, dashed to the door, stepped over the second body and looked down the trail that led up to the farm. A man, coat tails flapping in the moonlight, clung awkwardly to the saddle as his horse carried him away at full gallop. Two other mounts tethered in a nearby grove were rearing up, tugging at their halter shanks. On the flat winter-dead grass between the horses and the cottage, something shone white in the flood of moonlight.

It looked like someone sleeping on the ground....

The Civil War still raged and Colonel Cutler Diamond had been fighting on the side of the

Union since the conflict broke out. Cutler had moved up through the ranks and was pleased to be reunited with his longtime friend from the Mexican-American war, Ulysses Grant, whom President Lincoln had appointed Lieutenant General in command of all Union armies. The two officers had not lost contact between the wars; they had served together in Fort Humboldt, California —Grant's first posting after winning a captain's promotion— and though Ulysses had temporarily resigned from the army to dabble (rather unsuccessfully) in civilian life, he and Diamond had remained friends and correspondents.

Cutler Diamond and his beautiful Spanish wife had travelled to outposts in California, Oregon and various forts scattered throughout the west. The couple enjoyed a modest existence, not necessarily constrained by the paltry army wages Cutler earned because Constantina had been well provided for upon her father's death. After a year of marriage, the Diamond's had been blessed with one child, Preston Eduardo: his mother's joy; his father's pride.

The youngster had his mother's dark hair and his father's powder blue eyes. At an early age he demonstrated an aptitude for learning that could not be quenched by the tattered texts in the hot and dusty little rooms which sufficed as schools at the military posts. Under his mother's tutelage, Preston became fluent in her native

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Spanish; his father, also an educated man, taught the lad *proper* English, though, out of sheer devilry, Preston would often resort to the rough vernacular and mispronunciations of the frontier. The boy learned to ride exceptionally well and possessed an affinity with horses, dogs and, more often than his mother appreciated, wild animals. Injured birds, orphaned babies including a badger, a whitetail fawn and even a little skunk followed Preston around the garrison at various times. Cutler Diamond taught his son, at a tender age, to shoot and understand the capabilities of firearms. The dark haired boy spent hours practising with a .44 rim-fire Henry rifle that his father had purchased when the new lever-actions first came on the market. Preston also grew proficient with the Colt Navy revolver.

Indians often lived near the forts. From them, the amicable young Diamond learned the rough and tumble fighting games practised by the bare-footed youths. The red-skinned natives spared no quarter for the soldier's son and the white boy took his knocks and beatings along with the others. Among these rowdy lads, Preston practised the skill of the throwing knife, bow and arrows.

With the onset of the Civil War, the family had transferred east where they established themselves on a small farm near the hamlet of Conception, Virginia, on the south bank of the Patowmack River. Using this base, Colonel

Diamond could be with his wife and son when home on leave or addressing military matters near the Capitol. He *felt they would be safe here*. As fighting grew more intense, opportunities to return became fewer, for General Grant relied heavily on Colonel Diamond's knowledge, intuition, topographical understanding and, most importantly, his rapport among the troops.

During this time, the Capitol saw a massive influx of new inhabitants. The infrastructure could not cope with the burgeoning population. Food, housing and sanitation were in short supply. Crime ran rampant. Many Washington refugees made forays into the countryside in hopes of scavenging a meal or raiding the agrarian neighbourhood. The secluded Diamond farm, across the river from, but in close proximity to, the seething hub, received its share of vagrants, beggars and thieves. Preston's mother always tried to help in some way, though when Colonel Diamond was away, she privately feared for her own and Preston's lives. The starving transients were grateful for what she could give and individuals did not become a repetitive plague. But there were *so many* lost souls: ruffians, wounded, deserters and homeless.

Nowhere was safe anymore.

Cutler Diamond was home, on his second night of a four day leave, when the murderous attack came.

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Grey dawn scotched the sun. During the night, cloud and mist had drifted over the land, erasing moonlight, ushering in a dampened chill. A lone dispatch rider galloped up the long, treed lane to Colonel Cutler Diamond's farm. There was an urgency in the horse's pace that preceded the pair.

No one noticed their approach.

The messenger drew rein as he entered the yard. Two saddled and tethered horses in a cove of maples whickered a greeting across the dull stillness. The door to the house stood ajar, a body lay sprawled on the porch. Nearer, between the home and the horses, a figure knelt on the ground beside a prone body clad in white.

The hard ridden mount snorted as its rider urged the animal nearer to the kneeling person. Dismounting, the messenger held firmly to the reins as he led the horse slowly toward what he now recognized as a boy dressed in a nightshirt. Beside the youth lay a beautiful dark haired lady in satin evening attire. A horrible pool of coagulated blood stained the gown and the hard ground where she lay. The boy's eyes were open but he was focused a long distance—in time—from the spot where he knelt. The messenger spoke but there was no response. He touched the lad's shoulder and the stiffened form tipped over.

“Chilled!” the rider gasped. “The kid's half frozen!”

Releasing his hold on the reins, the man scooped up the numbed form in his arms and rushed to the house. Ignoring the grizzly scene of two more bodies, he laid the lad on a low couch, covered him with a blanket and frantically fanned the dead embers. Realizing the futility in this, he took his time and soon had a proper blaze roaring in the fireplace. The stranger shifted the sofa nearer the flames, opened the blanket so the heat would funnel toward the frozen boy, then raced out into the yard. His horse had not strayed. The messenger leaped into the saddle and spurred away down the lane even faster than he had arrived.

A company of soldiers raced up the lane to the Diamond residence within two hours. Smoke of the dispatch rider's fire still funnelled from the chimney. The pair of horses stood tied in the maple grove; the lady lay in the yard. A man's twisted and blood soaked body was stretched in an awkward fashion upon the stoop. Two more dead men, one a stranger skewered and wrapped in a ball on the stairwell, the other —Colonel Cutler Diamond— lay in an encrusted pool of blood on the parlour floor.

The boy was gone.

A thorough search of the house and surroundings did not turn up the missing youth. The soldiers assumed that hypothermia had numbed his brain and he had died of exposure or perhaps fallen in the river. The detail of soldiers

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—several of whom had served under Colonel Diamond—hardened to the ravages of war, wept openly when loading the Diamonds' bodies on a light supply wagon. They wept for the loss of their comrade; they wept for the sickening realization of what their world had become. No one remained immune to the abominations of the conflict; barbarous work such as this further accented war time's degradation of humanity.

Large holes were left unfilled following an abbreviated investigation; there was insufficient time and manpower to pursue the details of the Diamond murders. No one knew the two dead men: there was no indication they were from Confederate or Union forces; *deserters* was the consensus. Conjecture held that they had come to the farm intending to rob. Cutler Diamond had defended his family and died from wounds suffered. Apparently nothing had been stolen so the inquiry concluded there had been no survivors on either front.

In civil war, justice and civilians suffer.

Two people did not accept the findings of the abortive investigation: one, a close friend of Cutler Diamond; the other, Colonel Diamond's thirteen year old son.

Chapter 3

As Preston Diamond's stiffened body warmed, his thought processes began to function. He did not know how he had arrived upon the sofa in front of the roaring blaze in the fireplace. Initially he thought his father had placed him there. Slow recollection filtered into his chilled brain—it wasn't a nightmare—he feared to look behind him for he knew what must certainly await his gaze. He could smell death. Alternating chills and flashes of hot fear coursed through his trembling frame. One thought hammered at his instinct of survival: The killer whom Preston shot had said, *“We'll come back for the kid another time...”*

And one man, a wounded person whom Preston's victim had referred to as Wiley, had

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ridden off in the moonlight. Would he “*come back for the kid*”? Was he, at this moment, lurking out in the yard, hiding in the maple grove or one of the outbuildings, watching, waiting for Preston to emerge from the house? Preston's mother must have wrested a gun from the assailant, but how badly had she wounded him before the second man murdered her?

The boy shuddered and forced himself to look around the parlour. His father lay just as Preston had seen him last night. In the grey light of day the reality was so much harsher. Now it was morning, there had been no nightmare; nothing could change it now; no one on earth could put things back the way they were. Fighting tears, he staggered to his feet and reeled to the doorway. With deliberate caution Preston opened the door a crack. Squinting through the narrow slot, he saw the shoulders and head of the dead man on the porch; further away his mother in her white nightdress lay in the yard. He wanted to run to her, to wake her up. A horrible lump rose in his throat, he choked back the sobs. Through his tears he saw a band of horsemen—they looked like soldiers—sweeping into the lane. Were they coming for him?

Preston slipped barefoot into his boots, grasped his father's heavy army coat, picked up the revolver from the floor and escaped through a rear window of the cottage. A dense wood lay near to the back of the house and Preston dashed

into the trees undetected. From a vantage point in the brush he watched the proceedings in the farm yard. There were six mounted soldiers in Union colours milling about. In the distance a wagon and pair approached the farm; the driver also wore a blue uniform. These men were from Colonel Diamond's Union Army, but the young Diamond could place his trust in no one. "There is no one left..."

"...No one left."

He thought of his father's long time friend, fondly known to Preston as 'Uncle' Ulysses or simply Uncle Lyss. How he wished to see that man ride up. But the boy had heard his father mention that General Grant was a few days ride from Washington. He could not possibly be here now.

Preston brought up his knees to warm his bare legs and shivered in the warmth of the greatcoat; the scent of his father lingered in the coarse muslin lining. The soldiers tied their horses and the wagon rolled into the yard. Across the distance Diamond could hear the low voices of the army men. Shouts erupted when two of them entered the house. People scurried about as if searching for something or someone. Ignoring their calls, Preston shrank deeper into the undergrowth as he realized who they sought.

The boy knew the woods as well as the birds and animals who lived there. And, like the animals, he could hide or escape without

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detection. With ease, Preston eluded the half-hearted search that ensued. Returning to his original location, the young Diamond watched as his parents' bodies, wrapped in clean white canvass were loaded onto the wagon bed. Shallow graves had been dug for the murderers and they were unceremoniously rolled into the holes. Two young soldiers shovelled the dirt in upon them; no markers or prayers were issued. In formation—three mounted army men ahead and three behind—the company led and followed Colonel Cutler Diamond and his wife Constantina. The two rearmost soldiers led the riderless horses of the killers.

Silent sobs convulsed the young boy's body. Hot tears gushed from his powder blue eyes, soaking the sleeve of his father's greatcoat. He cried and cried until there were no more tears to come, then fell asleep with an aching yearning in the pit of his stomach like gnawing hunger in a starving man.

Two huge, round, tear-filled eyes watched from a distance.

Rufus Tweed was born into servitude and had been a slave for most of his thirty-something years. The black man's date of birth had never been properly recorded, but he knew it was during the presidency of John Quincy Adams, an early opponent of slavery. Most of Tweed's working history concentrated in the agriculture industry; a

farm labourer. In the late fifties while 'employed' on a family operation near St. Louis, Missouri, he was manumitted.

Tweed's emancipator had abandoned a career in the army to pursue interests in civilian life. These various endeavours were financial disasters and the farming enterprise in Missouri left him destitute. However, though times were extremely difficult, the farmer and his wife had treated their slaves fairly; Rufus, in turn, cared for and respected his owners. Upon receiving his freedom, the illiterate Rufus memorized one particular line of his emancipation paper: "*The Court therefore finds that said Rufus Tweed is absolutely a free person of color in this State or elsewhere...*". He also converted to memory the signature of the farmer who had signed his release from bondage.

Mr. Tweed found it difficult to hold a job as a free man. Not for a lack of ambition or insubordination, the work he found tended toward seasonal and Rufus suffered through several lean years; *freedom is not free*. With the advent of the Civil War, along with thousands of other freed blacks, Rufus Tweed gravitated to Washington D.C. There was no employment available here and living conditions were abysmal. Late one afternoon in March, while idly watching a unit of blue-coated soldiers riding along Pennsylvania Avenue, Rufus recognized an officer at the head of the column: It was the farmer from Missouri, his

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former owner. Tweed dog-trotted after the riders. Upon reaching the Whitehouse, the officer separated from the group, riding his horse to the President's stables while the others continued on. Rufus caught up to the bluecoat just as he handed the reins to a stableman. The Union officer smiled broadly upon recognizing his former slave.

Fortune smiled on Rufus Tweed that afternoon for the farmer cum army officer had a comrade who might be in the market for a labourer on his small holding across the Patowmack, in Virginia.

Tweed followed the directions given and the black man's luck continued; Colonel Diamond was at his home when Rufus arrived. Cutler listened to the labourer's plight, read the signature on the emancipation paper and hired Rufus immediately.

Cloud had burned away and the sun had tracked itself to mid afternoon when Preston Diamond awoke from emotional exhaustion. He found Rufus Tweed sitting nearby, his big arms hugging knees to chin, a tattered hat clutched in his hands. Tracks of tears were evident on the face of the black man; he wore sadness like a loose-fitting second skin. Preston realized again that he had not been dreaming. His voice quavered, "I guess you know what happened, Rufus?"

The black man nodded. "Oh Press, I don' know how come dey's daid, but I see'd dem so'jurs

atoten' yo Mammy and Pappy away in dat wagon. I see'd dem so'jurs buryen' dos' mens an' I see'd yo 'as ahiden', so I guessen', Rufus, he ought be astayen' sca'ce, too."

"I don't think they were after us... but I didn't think anyone was after my family before last night ... They killed my father, Rufus... they killed my mother too... they were coming for me... one was coming up the stairs after me... and Papá ran his sword right through him... but Papá died too... and then another man came in the house calling for the man Papá killed..."

Preston's head hung down and he gasped for breath. "He said he'd slit my mother's throat. I shot him dead, Rufus. I shot that murdering bastard right through the heart!"

The hired man drew back upon hearing the lad's vicious outburst, but he spoke soothingly. "Press... Press... dat's all righ' you kil' that bad man. He was acomen' af'er yo."

"What are we going to do now, Rufus? We have to do something; there's at least one more out there. I saw him ride away, but I think he was hurt pretty bad. The man I shot said that Mother had taken hold of a gun and shot the other man, so I think Mother put a bullet into him before the other man kill..." He broke off as a new flood of tears gushed from his red and swollen eyes.

Rufus gathered the boy in his arms and carried him through the brush. Preston cried on the big man's shoulder all the way to the house.

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Tweed stood Preston on the porch and said, “We don' haf' a be gwyne in dat house if'n yo don' wan'... On'y we got to be feeden' yo sumpn, else yo gwyne pass ou' from de hongers.”

“It's all right, Ruf,” Preston said with more assurance than he felt. “We'll go in and straighten things out; clean the place up and light the fire. Someone brought me in and sat me in front of the fire this morning, Ruf. Did you do that?”

“No, Press, I dun nufin lak dat. Firs' I see'd yo, yo 'as ahiden' in de woods. Mebbe one dem so'jurs com by firs' an he dun put yo in de house?”

Preston shrugged but said nothing. He drew a deep breath and preceded the Diamonds' hired hand into the cottage.

Dark stains on the hardwood floor faded, but would not be completely erased no matter how hard Preston scrubbed. The lye soap had begun to burn his hands when Rufus gently pulled him away. “Dat's as good yo kin do, Press. Yo bes' be com an' eat sumpn.” Realizing the lad needed to be kept occupied, Rufus added, “Den we bes' go ou' an milk dat Bessy cow. She be bawlin' all af'ernoon, her bag so full.”

Preston said, “We better tend to the horses and mule, too. They'll be needing a drink.”

“Dat's righ', Press, we still gots dem t'ings to do. Nufin' stops for ebber.”

Preston Diamond's youth had ended abruptly; there was no time for the natural

transition from boy to man. A childhood of love and security had been stripped, *ripped* from him. All he had been taught to believe in, to respect, seemed as wasted, hollow sermons now. His young heart beat a dull monotonous ache; throbbing pain and anguish simmered in silent suffering. He feared the days to come. Would there never again be happiness? Had his life—a pleasant dream—become a living nightmare? Were happy memories sacrificed for a world of unending terror? Anger and Vengeance crept in to feed upon his soul.

Vengeance fed upon his soul.

The first night, unable to fall asleep, Preston's active mind mulled it over again and again. Someone had arranged the deliberate assassination of his parents; not simply a robbery by desperate vagrants, a few starving souls seeking a loaf of bread. The men who committed this crime were coached beforehand: they knew how many people were in the Diamonds' cottage; knew Cutler Diamond was home on leave; knew of the beauty and nationality of Constantina Diamond; and they intended to kill the entire family.

Who could commit so monstrous an act?

Why?

The injured man who had escaped wore a frock coat with long tails; they flapped beneath him as he rode clinging to, rather than seated in,

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the saddle. Probably the wound Constantina Diamond had inflicted forced the soldier to ride in such a fashion. Had he been shot through the abdomen? His coat, army issue, was of a less bulky design than the greatcoat Preston's father wore during the cold months. In the moonlight, colour had been indistinguishable but the boy's keen eyesight noted there were no chevrons on the sleeves. There was a shoulder board, the distinction of an officer, though the light had been insufficient and the distance too great to ascertain rank. During his years of living in forts and army barracks, Preston had studied well the insignia of army personnel.

An *officer* referred to as “*Wiley*” by the man Preston killed; could “*Wiley*” be his actual name? A nickname? Was it first or last? Was he a Confederate or a Union soldier? Preston was not familiar with the uniforms of the southern camp other than the knowledge that the soldiers wore grey...

The awkward seating of the fleeing rider puzzled Preston. If the fellow had sustained an injury in the past he would have traded his horse for a wheeled conveyance. No man would deliberately set out on the trail half astride his mount. Conjecturing that the soldier had suffered the wound at the hand of Preston's mother, the boy attempted to establish the next event in the sequence. The man at the door, when calling for the dead *Roddy*, had said, “*he's hit purty good...*”

If Wiley was, in fact, hit hard, what would he do? Was he laying dead along the trail? Did he find a doctor to attend to his wound? Where was the nearest doctor?

“Conception.” Preston spoke the name aloud. There was a medical man in the little village of Conception, a short hike downstream from the Diamond farm. The doctor's office could be a starting point....

Normally, Rufus returned to his shanty in a wooded area about a half mile from the Diamond cottage, but the hired man stayed with Preston in case the lad needed comforting during the night. Sleeping on the sofa by the fire, he heard no sound from the youth though Preston hardly slept at all. In the morning Diamond forced himself down the stairs; his face was tired and haggard, the eyes sunken and red from tears spilled the previous day. Tweed had a platter of hotcakes on the table, beef frying in the skillet.

Pulling out a chair and seating himself at the kitchen table, Preston said, “Rufus, I'm riding down to Conception today.”

“Yo needen' supplies, Press?” Rufus asked as he slid a loaded plate in front of the boy.

“No, I'm looking for a man... the third man that was here two nights ago.”

“Na, Press, don' yo go acourten' no trubble. I b'lieb yo Mammy an' Pappy, dey's countin' on me

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be alooken out for dey son. Mebbe, dey don' want you arunnen' off after no bad mens.”

“I'm just going to check with the doctor to find out if an injured person showed up in the night. Perhaps I'll take a look along the trail, too. Might be something to see....”

Mid stretch for the butter dish Preston stopped and held up his hand to stop the black man's argument. “It's all right Rufus, I know what I'm doing. I know what I've got to do.”

Tweed's face revealed his angst but he held his tongue as he poured a cup of coffee for himself, then a glass of milk for his young companion.

Preston chewed methodically, his taste buds numb. The pair dined in silence. The lad cleaned up his plate but refused a second helping. At length he said, “I should have thought of this yesterday: Washington ought to be brought in close to the yard at night. Since old Ring died, we don't have a watchdog and that mule will let us know if anyone comes near.”

Rufus nodded in agreement but said nothing. The black man's eyes grew large as they followed Preston across the room and watched him lift his father's army issue Colt from the peg beside the kitchen door. The revolver slid smoothly in the oiled holster. Preston tucked the gun in his belt and hung the holster back on the peg. Seeing the grave expression on the hired hand's face, Preston

said, "Don't worry, Ruf, no one will see the gun unless I really have to use it."

"Don' be taken' yo pappy's gun to town, Press. Dey ain't no good gwyne come o' dat."

"It may be no good will come of me if I leave the gun at home. There is someone out there who wants me dead... and I want him dead, too."

"Yo ought be astayen' on de farm wid me, Press. We gots all dem chore an' it be comen' time to maken' plan fo' de crop."

"Rufus, the farm is yours too, now. I want you to be my partner. An owner. You know much more than I about the business and I think, with good management and hard work, there will be more than enough for us to live on. So you go ahead and do what you think is best. I intend to return tonight but I won't be around the place very much until this is settled."

Rufus protested. "Na, now Press, don' yo be atalken' like dat. Dis place is on'y fo' Di'mon folks. Rufus, he stay roun' an he'p but he don' need no share in de crop. I'as alus jus' a hire' man."

"Not anymore, Rufus. You move right on into this house, into..." Preston paused, "...You move right into my father and mother's bedroom. The house mustn't be left empty for too long with all these beggars and homeless passing through." Again he held up a hand to stop Rufus. "I know what I'm doing, Ruf, you can help me best by not arguing."

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The black man could not restrain himself, “Na, Press yo don' want no slave unner yo roof. Asides, what folks agwyne say when dey comes by an' see sum black man worken dis farm an' no Massah? Dey gwyne say, 'dat nigger he kil' dos white folks an' den he take de farm!' Dat's what dey's agwyne say, Press!”

Preston suppressed a grin upon hearing the passionate outburst. “I have no doubt that has happened and will happen again, but it won't happen here, not to *you*, Rufus.”

Tweed looked the question.

“You have your emancipation papers, don't you, Ruf?”

The hired man put a hand to a pocket in his overalls to assure himself. “Yo knows I carry dat 'macipat'on paper ebber where I'm gwyne, Press.”

“Well, your paper is different from everyone else's. It is a *special* one, Rufus.”

Rufus touched his hand to the pocket again. “Why dis one so *e'special*, Press?”

“Because it is signed by Ulysses S. Grant, President Lincoln's favourite general. Nobody within a hundred miles of Washington is likely to cause a stir with a former slave of Lieutenant General Grant!”

The sun had inched its way to mid morning when Preston, armed and ready, turned to the now cold trail. He gave no thought to where it might lead; only to where it would end.

“Never pass up an opportunity to learn something. Always see everything there is to see,” were words of advice his father had given. Cutler Diamond was a patient, observant man; his son inherited these qualities. Preston had learned to look closer, farther, deeper. He studied detail, never failed to heed the obvious. Most of the lad's education had come through the efforts of his parents but the few teachers he had had were baffled by his questions on subjects they themselves had taught for years. Preston's ever-ready but honest “*Why?*” exasperated the pedagogues.

He had intended to ride his horse to Conception, but instead, Preston commenced his search afoot, in the farmyard. The earth had soaked away the blood where Constantina Diamond had fallen and the tracks of the soldiers had erased much of the story, but Preston beagled about until he felt certain he knew all that remained: Constantina had left the house in her night dress for a visit to the privy. She had been abducted at the little outhouse and dragged across the dusty yard toward the maple grove where the two strange horses had been tied. In the struggle, Señora Diamond had managed to wrestle a gun from one of the assailants and shoot him. Though he could not read in the dirt the brutal scene of the second man cutting her throat, Preston was able to fit that verbal admission into the plot.

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Approaching the puzzle from an audio perspective, the young Diamond constructed a theory involving the three shots he had heard: While two men struggled with Constantina, a third waited near the door of the cottage. As could be expected, when his wife did not return to bed, Cutler Diamond went out to investigate. He was struck by a bullet upon opening the door. That blast had wakened Preston. Recollecting the pain in Roddy's eyes and the smell of blood upon him as he climbed the stairs, Preston judged that the man must have been hit by the second shot; it followed soon after the first and was much louder; probably fired from inside the kitchen. Preston could not be certain but it suggested that Colonel Diamond had managed to wound Roddy, apparently with his own gun since Cutler Diamond's revolver had not been used. It hung, fully loaded, in its holster on a hook behind the kitchen door. The third pistol shot came from farther away; Constantina had injured the man named Wiley.

The fourth blast Preston could vividly recall and account for.

According to the blood trails left in the house prior to Rufus and Preston's diligent cleansing, Cutler Diamond, fatally wounded at the front door, could not reach his rifle or revolver—bloody hand prints on the wall indicated this—but his cavalry sword, which young Preston had been practising with before going to bed leaned

against the door frame near the archway leading into the parlour. The man named Roddy had stepped past Colonel Diamond, leaving a trail—from blood of his own and Cutler's wounds—across the dining area and a short way up the stair. Cutler Diamond dragged himself to the sabre, summoned the strength to rise, and, with his last gasp, threw or drove the deadly blade through the torso of the gunman.

So Preston constructed a plausible description of the attack as it unfolded. Patchwork and creativity blended the fragmented plot but it was sufficient for a beginning.

The morning the blue coats had arrived, Preston, from his hiding place in the wood, determined that the soldiers had not been very thorough in their investigation. They had spent less than an hour in search of the missing youth and were at the farm no more than two hours in total. Now he felt hurt and angered that the Union Army could not devote more time in honour of his father and mother. Still, he reminded himself, perhaps those soldiers who were at the farm were now in their own graves. It is wartime.

However, Preston had a lifetime to investigate the murder of his parents. He had to find the wounded person who fled, for that man may be coming back to kill the very last remaining Diamond. Preston needed more data and he wondered if the blue coats' cursory inspection had

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drawn any conclusions or had they simply buried the evidence with no concern for justice?

What evidence did they bury?

Preston walked across the yard and retrieved a spade from the little tool shed beside the barn. He did not relish what lay in front of him but he determined to be as thorough as possible. The ground was soft and the graves shallow. The man referred to as Roddy was in the first excavation. The cool, damp earth had preserved the body. Preston lugged the corpse from the hole and went through the man's pockets and bloodstained clothing. If he had had any identification, or personal effects, the soldiers had taken them. Preston tugged off the scarred army issue holster and extracted spare ammunition from the belt. Two initials, *R.M.* were scratched into the thick leather on the inside of the flap —*Roddy M.*— the name meant nothing to Preston. A bullet hole through the man's side, just below the rib cage, bore evidence that Cutler Diamond had managed to wound Roddy before killing him with the sabre.

The second body had no identification in his pockets or his gun belt. Preston rolled the corpse nearer the first and examined them side by side. There were similarities in build and facial features; they could have been brothers. Revulsion nearly took Preston's breakfast as he studied the dead men. The lower portion of the left sleeve on Roddy's shirt had been ripped away and Preston saw a part of a tattoo. Without

hesitation he rolled the loose material back and revealed the letters R.M. tattooed on the forearm. Preston turned to the second corpse and rolled up the sleeves. On the right forearm he discovered, in a similar style, the inked letters G.M. The possibility of the two being brothers was now a probability. Was that information of any value?

Preston Diamond tipped the bodies back into their respective graves and filled in the holes. He returned the shovel to the shed, then made his way to where the mounts of the deceased had passed the night. Other than normal signs of horses tethered for a prolonged time there was nothing to be learned. Preston found where the third animal had been tied. It was some distance from the other two. Diamond considered the meaning of this. Possibly, the third mount was unfamiliar with the first two. The miscreants would not have wanted their horses making a ruckus and alerting the household; any equine hostilities were prevented. Did this mean the army man who had escaped was less than a casual acquaintance of G.M. or Roddy M.? Perhaps he was another brother who simply had come into possession of a new horse? There were many possibilities.

The trail of the fleeing horse and rider ended abruptly when the pair hit the hard packed lane. The animal was shod, but Preston read no peculiarities in the prints he had been able to discern. The young tracker hiked along the lane and carefully inspected any discrepancy or path

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leading into the trees along the road. Only deer tracks were apparent there. The soldiers and impromptu hearse obliterated any defined track. However, at the junction of the private lane and a public wagon trail Preston espied a deviation from the route taken by the army men. A horse had shied off to the side leaving shod hoofprints in the softer, untraveled shoulder. A boot heel left a deep impression. Preston searched the distance for passersby, then knelt down for a closer inspection. The blotch of blood must have come from the same person that had left the heel mark. Possibly the frock-coated officer who fled had lost his grip on the saddle. When he slipped off, the horse side-stepped and the man landed hard; hard enough to jar blood from his wound. On closer study the boy picked up several more boot prints along the margin of the wagon rutted trail. He found a place where the boot heel swivelled leaving a small trench in the dirt; in a radius typical of a pair of reins, the horse had shied in a circle, apparently nervous of its rider.

Did that mean the horse was unused to blood? How could it be the mount of an army officer and not be hardened to the smells of the wounded and dead? Or was it just weary of the clumsily positioned side-saddle rider? Preston was learning fast in his investigative debut. Only, there were more questions than answers.

The heel prints disappeared, leading Preston to believe the rider had possibly regained his seat

and continued riding toward Conception. Maintaining keen observation, the lad strolled the two winding miles to the village as the sun arched through mid afternoon.

Conception had once been part of the initial District Of Columbia, however the land had recently been returned to Virginia. The Patowmack formed the north eastern boundary of the hamlet and houses sprawled haphazardly along the river banks. The little burg did not boast a huge population; the Civil War had depleted the male side of the equation and many of those young men would not return home. On the other hand, because of the war, similar to Washington DC just across the river, the village had observed an influx of refugees and homeless.

In the brief time the Diamond's had lived in the area, Preston had often come to the town with his mother when she needed supplies. Occasionally his father, when he was home, or Rufus Tweed accompanied Mrs. Diamond if she required assistance with a large order. One time Preston had visited the doctor's office for stitches to patch up a gash on his arm. It was to that office the boy now headed.

Doctor Filmore's clinic was in his home, just a short walk from the business section of the town. The house looked much the same as others along the street; however, it was recently painted. Handy to the entrance was a small woodpile; an axe was stuck in the chopping block and

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woodchips were strewn about. The doctor's personal rig, a sharp looking black carriage with polished oak shaves and black canopy, was parked in a lean-to alongside the building. There were a pair of bays standing with their heads down and hitched to an empty buckboard in front of the clinic. There was no sign of a saddle horse with blood stains on the saddle.

Diamond cast a glance in the box of the buckboard as he walked past. A rough bed of blankets had been made on the wagon floor. Preston surmised an invalid had been brought to the doctor or perhaps a patient was being picked up.

The door to the clinic stood slightly ajar. Preston eased up to the opening, listened briefly, then slipped inside. A murmur of voices came from another room. The conversation grew louder with one angry voice, protesting vehemently:

“You cannot move this man. He is severely injured and will die if his wounds are not allowed time to heal.”

“Ya done yer best, Doc, now it's our turn. You jes' stand back and let us be....”

“I will not tolerate this! Unhan...”

The sound of a solid slap, followed by a dull thud, then a faint groan, reached Preston's ears.

“Christ, ya knocked the old bugger right out, Joe!”

“Never mind that, let's get this crippled bastard out of here a'fore somebody comes in.”

Preston shrunk down behind a reception desk just as the inner door burst open and two blue coated soldiers emerged carrying a patient laden stretcher. A blanket had been hastily tossed over the injured person; across the end of the load lay a stained and dirty blue frock-coat. Preston's eyes grew wide as he noted the sleeve: there was a shoulder board with the double bar insignia of captain. The men did not notice Preston as they manipulated the stretcher through the entrance door and out into the street. Less than gently they hoisted the invalid into the buckboard and slid him along the floor leaving the stretcher under him. One of the pair hopped into the box and shook out the blankets that had rumbled up ahead of the stretcher. Stepping over the seat and grasping the reins he called to his partner, "Okay, let's git Ol' Wiley down to the Alexandria field hospital afore somebody names him a deserter."

The second man boarded the wagon. "Might be he'll die on the way there. You heard what that sawbones said."

"He ain't gonna die, Joe. If Cutler Diamond didn't kill him, nothin' will."

Preston had edged up to the open door so as to see what was taking place. He could hear the conversation quite plainly. At the mention of his father's name, slender fingers stole down to the butt of the Colt. Almost instantly a firm grip seized the boy's shoulder and a soft voice said,

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“Still your hand, son, those blackguards are more than you can handle.”

Chapter 4

Still clutching the revolver grips, the boy turned around slowly. He recognized Conception's only physician. Hair thin and greying, green eyes red rimmed and sunken from extended hours of work, Doctor Filmore wasn't a young man anymore, though he appeared trim, fit and, except for a temporary pallor and lack of sleep, healthy. He smelled of disinfectant. Twisted spectacles rested askew on his nose. A trickle of blood trailed over his forehead, around the left eye, and down a smoothly shaved cheek. Diamond assumed the doctor had hit his head when he fell.

On the street Preston heard the driver speak to the horses, then the grudging squeak of wheels

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needful of grease as the buckboard rolled off along the avenue.

Filmore said, "You are the Diamond boy, aren't you? I put several stitches in your, what was it... leg, or arm, a few months ago?"

Preston nodded. "My arm, sir."

Realization dawned in the green eyes as a shadow of horror passed over the doctor's face. "Folks here thought... we... I mean, we had heard you were missing.... Soldiers passed through here yesterday with bodies on a wagon. The town people heard it was your family...."

"They killed my parents, one of the murderers escaped."

"Oh, God! This war is so terrible! Common folks are turning into murdering beasts! I... I am so sorry to hear of your loss... Mr. Diamond... I..."

"Preston. My name is Preston, *Preston Diamond.*"

"Of course... yes... *Preston...*I remember now..."

The boy studied the older man. At length he said, "You've taken a cut on your forehead. I heard one of those men slap you and then the other one said you were knocked out."

The doctor touched the tender area on his head; his fingers came away with blood on them. "Yes, I tried to restrain them from moving my patient but they insisted... violently."

“Your patient,” Preston asked, “did he arrive here during the night one day ago?”

Filmore said, “I am not at liberty to reveal patient information, Preston.”

“I think he is the man who attacked my mother... she shot him with his own gun. Hit him low down, maybe in the guts or through the hip. I saw him ride away and he couldn't sit in the saddle. Does your *code* prevent you from giving information about murderers and rapists?”

The physician stepped over to the entrance, closed the door, turned to face the youth and said tersely, “Follow me.”

Preston looked around while the physician attended to his minor injury. The modest operating room was nearly spotless, except for the doctor's own blood on the polished floor. A rumpled cot that must have been the patient's bed stood in the middle of the room. Rows of bottles, jars and canisters filled a double shelf that ran the length of one wall. Clean linen and an assortment of polished steel instruments rested on a short counter. Small tin tubs, a wash stand and extra blankets were on a second, smaller countertop at the opposite side of the clinic. Another doorway, probably leading into the doctor's private residence, stood closed. The place reeked of disinfectant, salves, and an assortment of pharmaceuticals.

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Doctor Filmore seated himself in one of two chairs and waved Preston into the other. “What are you planning to do, Preston?”

“Unless you have something to tell me, I have nothing for you,” Preston hedged.

He detected no humour in the doctor's faint smile. “I asked for that, didn't I?”

Preston shrugged.

Filmore puffed out his cheeks and expelled a long breath. “The wounded man did come pounding on my door quite early in the morning; I'd say it was about four o'clock. He had been shot, at close range, through the pelvis. Blood loss should have killed him and I do not know how he was able to stand, much less walk. But no internal organs were damaged and I was able to pluck the bullet out without difficulty. If he had remained in my care, I would give him better than a fifty-fifty chance. Now I am not so certain he will be alive tomorrow.”

“Why did those men come for him?” Preston asked.

“They mentioned something about a desertion charge if the patient was not taken to the army hospital. In retrospect, that may have been a ruse if the injured man is, in fact, one of the killers. In that instance, had there been more people involved, they wouldn't want to risk having the man talking to authorities.”

Preston bit his lip as he considered the statement made by one of the men when they

loaded the patient in the buckboard: “*He won't die. If Cutler Diamond didn't kill him nothin' will.*” Obviously those fellows *were aware* that Wiley had participated in the Diamond Farm massacre.

“Do you have any information about the injured man? Anything at all? I heard one of the murderers referred to him as Wiley... Can you confirm that?”

The doctor's green eyes appraised the youth. “Tell me what happened last night.”

As Filmore listened attentively, Preston recited the painful incident valiantly holding back his tears though a sob escaped when he spoke of his mother. Tears trickled down the cheeks of the doctor when the boy had finished.

“You are a true soldier's son, Preston Diamond. I am glad you were able to avenge your mother's murderer. But I caution you on trailing the conspirators further. A lone boy hunting men of that grotesque nature will stand no chance.”

Preston ignored the advice. “Any information you can give me will help. Keep this conversation between us. It is best if people believe I did not survive the attack.”

“The man's name is Captain Everett Wiley of the Union Army. I found his credentials in a pocket of his trousers; I had to go through his effects in case he died.” As an afterthought, Filmore admitted, “And to ensure payment for my

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services... sometimes patients believe physicians' labour comes free."

"Any indication of Wiley's current posting?"

"I know nothing more than what I have given you. I expect the abductors will take Captain Wiley to the field hospital in Alexandria. It is the nearest."

Next morning Preston rose early, saddled Rascal, a young and fiery gelding, and rode hard to Alexandria. The .44 Henry hung in its scabbard on the saddle; the Colt lay tucked out of view in his waistband; a throwing knife—a gift from an Arapaho youth—was strapped round his calf and concealed under the trouser leg. Rufus's pleadings and predictions of ill fate had gone unheeded. Preston Diamond believed, in order to preserve his sanity, he must not quit... even if it drove him beyond the breaking point.

A burst of rifle fire put Preston on the alert and he rode cautiously through a wooded area in hopes of a better view. The volley was repeated and Diamond recognized it as a military salute. Emerging on the edge of the trees, Preston drew rein when he espied a line of Union soldiers, rifles in hand, standing at attention; a group of army officers, regulars and civilians stood solemnly in a congested circle partway up the sloping, grassy hillside; new gravestones and markers littered the field. Alexandria Cemetery. Two flag-draped caskets were simultaneously being lowered into a

double grave. Preston considered the fanfare: Every day dozens of men were being buried *without* ceremony in graveyards scattered throughout the zone of conflict; why the military funeral with full colours and salute on this occasion? Must be for an officer of high rank or distinction. The double grave....

Colonel Cutler Diamond and his wife, Constantina.

A lump rose in the lad's throat; a choking sob escaped; tears squeezed out between tightly closed eyelids. Feeling the rider's tension, the high-spirited horse fidgeted and danced. Preston backed Rascal farther into the brush, dismounted and held the reins. Alone, he stood silent in gut-ripping, heart-wrenching agony watching the interment of his mother and father.

He wanted to run to them, to stop the shovels, to scream that it was all a lie. "*Don't bury them! Let them out!*" But he remained lost, transfixed, long after the crowd dispersed.

Diamond sensed a slight pressure on his shoulder, the horse snorted and pulled back on the reins. Glancing to the side, he saw his father. Sadness haunted the powder blue eyes but a reassuring smile rested upon his handsome features. Beside Cutler, Preston's black haired mother stood; the light of love shone in her dark eyes. She reached out; fingers as light as shadow brushed the boy's cheek. Preston raised his hand to hers but could not grasp it.

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We are with you, Preston, his father murmured. We shall never leave you, my son.

Constantina nodded and said, *Siempre mi hijo: "Always, my child."*

Preston tried to throw his arms around her but the embrace was empty. He could not hold her; he could not feel her warmth.

Tears formed in the dark pools of Constantina's eyes. A glittering diamond rolled down each cheek. In her native Spanish she said, *We cannot touch you now, you must only feel our love.*

Cutler Diamond drew his wife close and said to Preston, *I am sorry for leaving you, there are so many things we should have shared. Know that the track you have set upon is the right one, for the evil that came to our family lives on. You will see that justice prevails.*

"You will see that justice prevails." Not a command; not a prediction; the words were spoken simply: a matter-of-fact statement.

Preston brushed a sleeve across his blurred eyes and nodded acknowledgement.

Cutler Diamond continued, *You will find information in the military journals I wrote beginning the day of my entrance into the army. The collection contains other documents you will need as well...*

"Can't you give me direction, Papá? Why don't you stay with me? We could do this together..."

With all my heart I wish that could be the way, my son, but we can no longer be of this earth. We will guide you with our undying love and that is how you will know that we are near. Do not be afraid, for Fear is never an ally; it will only confuse your judgement. Remember too, in all things, trust in yourself.

Again Preston sensed the loving touch of his mother's hand on his face. She stepped close and kissed him softly on the forehead; the gentle sweep of a butterfly's wing. His father reached out as if to rumple Preston's hair; a breeze in the willows. *We love you, son.*

Their images faded. Preston blinked and they were gone. He lifted a hand to his cheek, then to his forehead where his mother's lips had caressed. "I love you, too," he whispered.

Rascal grew impatient and Preston was forced to face the present. The grief, the black abyss, receded. Melancholy, a not unkind emotion, crept in. Preston Diamond knew his parents would always be near and that realization gave root to confidence. The lad faced the graves across the clearing; awkwardly, he saluted his father, then blew a kiss to his mother. In spite of his tears, he smiled, knowing they were not truly buried in that cold damp earth. Preston shoved a foot in the stirrup, mounted up and rode back through the woods.

A weary company of mounted soldiers on fagged horses were riding toward him so Preston

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reined off the trail to await their passing. He fell in beside the rear-most of the bluecoats. Fingers crossed he said, “My father is injured and in an army hospital near here. Can you give me directions?”

Cutler Diamond's integrity would never allow him be less than truthful. He coached his only son to follow that example. *“Every lie you tell takes a little away from the man that you could be.”* Preston knew his father would have that wry smile, reserved only for his son, when he heard the boy's fib.

A young private, not many years Preston's senior, pointed to a fresh bandage on his hand. “Jes, come from there. You'll be findin' it down this trail 'bout two mile. Busy place, bunch o' tents, ya cain't miss it.”

Thanking the soldier, Preston wheeled his horse and rode back along the wagon road.

The hospital was a collection of large, straight-walled canvas tents. The grounds reeked with the stench of improper sanitation facilities, horses, blood and death. Groans of pain, cries of anguish and delirious outbursts of the fevered and dying reverberated throughout the camp. Harassed and haggard medical people, many on the run, a few in somnambulate drift, were tending to the sick and injured as best they could. After hitching his horse, Preston asked a pair of young men carrying a stretcher where he might find his father. The lad who responded simply said, “Look

around. No one knows where anyone is. We stop the bleeding, amputate the limbs and bury the dead. We don't keep much records around here.”

Preston did not wish to announce the name *Captain Wiley* for fear of drawing attention or arousing suspicion. It was possible that Wiley was already dead. A washing line of stained linen stretched across a corner of the camp. Preston donned a half-dried smock and assumed the role of medical assistant. He moved through the tents checking occupants of the low-slung cots but it was a futile effort for he had not been able to see Wiley's face at Doctor Filmore's clinic yesterday. Alongside many of the cots various personal articles hung on temporary hangers made of tree branches stuck in the earth. As the hours passed, Preston perused the clothing for a blue frock coat with captain's insignia on the shoulder bands. Often the wounded thought the lad was their son or brother. They asked how things were on the farm; they asked to be taken home. Several times rough hands grabbed at him; terrified eyes stared hollowly from the confines of the makeshift beds. Medics gave Preston orders and he was pressed into service aiding the transfer of patient from stretcher to cot or carrying away a soldier for whom the war was over. Among the dead were a few that looked younger than Diamond.

Preston Diamond was sturdy for his age and could handle one end of the stretcher as well as a grown man. While lugging a body to the

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temporary morgue, he passed near a tent he had not previously entered. He heard a voice speak the name *Captain Wiley*. Stepping up the pace so as to hurry back to the canvas wall, his partner at the rear of the stretcher complained, "It's not a race. We ain't soon gonna run out of dead men."

At the morgue, Preston passed the conveyance to his temporary colleague. "You take it back, I have to talk to someone."

"Tain't none of these so'jurs gonna answer ya," the older lad retorted, but he took the folded stretcher and trudged off.

Making sure to keep his shadow off the tent, Preston sidled up to the canvas wall. The steady thrum of hospital staff mingled with moans and cries of patients. Hearing nothing to advantage, he elected to venture inside. Stepping through the flap at the front, he slipped to one side of the huge tent. A half-dozen smocked individuals were bustling about; Preston blended in while threading his way unobtrusively among the cots. Estimating the position where the voice may have been located, the pseudo medic paused to adjust the head bandage of an unconscious patient. On the temporary clothes hanger, two cots further along, Preston espied a blue frock-coat bearing shoulder boards and captain's insignia. Nerves on edge, Diamond shifted along past the next cot, placing himself directly beside the captain's coat. A name along with brief medical information hung by the

bed: *Captain Everett Wiley*; apparently the medical staff did keep records of the officers.

The wounded man raved in delirium. “She shot me! Roddy, Gilly, get me out of here! She shot me... I'm dying.”

Diamond looked down upon the man responsible for his mother's death. The fellow wasn't pretty: several days stubble growth showed the grey in his whiskers; twin white scars ran down his right cheek like claw marks and a more recent livid red gash stood out on the forehead. Wiley appeared quite short in stature though it is difficult to judge the height of a prone man. The patient did not reek of blood and death as had some of the others Preston had worked with this day; probably Doctor Filmore had been more thorough in his care than the temporary army hospital.

Preston savoured the comfort of the heavy Colt pressing against his middle, the strap of the knife belted around his calf. His hand inched toward his boot; it would be so easy to pull the blade and slit this bastard's throat as had been done to Señora Diamond...

“Lieutenant Diamond, is that you?”

Preston straightened.

“Yeah, that's you, Cutler... only you look so young? Are you still in West Point?”

Preston's blue eyes burned into the fevered yellows of the wounded man. The frail voice continued, “I swore, I'd kill you someday,

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Diamond... I thou... I thought we did... How come you're so young an'..."

Preston glanced away and saw two soldiers threading their way through the confusion of medics, patients and cots. They were the pair who had visited Filmore's clinic yesterday. Preston made to leave but a powerful grip twisted his wrist. "Diamond, I'm talkin' to..."

Chapter 5

The voice trailed off, the hand relaxed and the patient slumped back on the cot. Preston slipped across the aisle just as the two bluecoats arrived. Fearing that Wiley would regain consciousness and identify him, Preston escaped the tent and made his way round to the position he'd held before. Kneeling by the stiff cloth wall, he could hear the conversation as clearly as if he had been amongst the men.

“...it don't look like Ol' Wiley is about to wake up any time soon, Joe. We best not shake him anymore or the sawbones will be raisin' hell with us.”

“Well, the Cap'n din't die on us yet. He made it through that wagon ride yestiday without

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bleedin' to death too. Lucky for him that lady din't shoot off his privates, she come damn close."

"Well, the rapin' ol' bastard ain't gonna be using that for a long time soon. Might be the doctor man's agonna have to lop 'em off anyways."

"They say that woman was some kin' a princess back where she come from. Col'nel Diamond, he brought her here all the way from Spain... Kilt some Spaniard bastard in a sword fight over her..."

"Ya ever see her?"

"Na, but I heerd she's a looker. Ol' Wiley was sure after her. He had a grudge to settle with the Col'nel, but he wanted that woman too."

Preston heard a slap and then another as one of the voices said, "C'mon, Cap'n, wake up. We got some news for ya."

"He's daid to the world, Joe, ain't gonna rouse him up none 'til he's ready."

The eavesdropper was interrupted when an angry voice shouted, "Hey! Why are you lolly-gagging around out here? Get back in there and start toting that stretcher. We haven't run out of casualties yet, leastways not that I've heard."

Startled, Preston jumped to his feet and turned to see a red-faced, blood-stained man wearing the ubiquitous bivouac smock.

"Now git to it!" the man ordered.

Preston bowed his head submissively and slunk away toward another tent.

Certain he was clear, Diamond shed the filthy smock, changed direction and headed to the picket line where he had hitched his horse. Rascal had been impatiently pawing the sod, weary of the raucous camp action, the scent of death and the flies that found sun's warmth sufficient to bring them out of their winter cracks. The boy snugged the cinch, swung into the saddle and rode toward Conception and home. Confident that Captain Wiley would not be discharged from the clinic—unless of course, he died—Preston determined to return the next day. He was frustrated for not having heard “*the news*” referred to by one of Wiley's confederates.

Hunger had filled the gap where his stomach used to be and Preston dug through a saddle bag for the cold lunch packed prior to departure that morning. Though the gelding was eager to trot, Preston held him back to keep the sandwiches from jiggling apart. This reduced speed saved the youth serious injury when he was unceremoniously jerked from the saddle by a taut rope, strung just above saddle height, across the tree-lined trail. Preston had the breath knocked out of him but he regained his feet instantly. In the gathering dusk he saw someone moving along the edge of the trees. Soon a small bandy legged man, his rifle pointed at Preston's midriff, stepped onto the road. The ragged stranger, long past his prime, stepped close and squinted into the boy's face.

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A high voice squeaked, “Why, yer jest a pup, you are! Fine horse for a pup though. I don't cotton to killin' *pups*, I don't, but ya do anythin' foolish, Ol' Betsy here,” he patted the rifle stock, “she'll be ablowin' a hole clean through yer young hide. Got any spare coins with ya? ”

Preston had raised his hands to show the stranger he meant no resistance. Now he shook his head.

“No money, huh? Well, that do seem odd, considerin' the horseflesh an' rig yer sportin'. 'Pears t' me ya might have *somethin'* a poor feller could use?”

The conversational tone switched to a hostile growl. “Now empty yer pockets an' be right quick about it.”

Preston lied again; in a pleading voice he said, “I just have a money belt, but it's empty.”

“Yeah? Ya don't say? How about I take a look at that there money belt jest in case ya missed a half dime or two.”

Diamond nodded and, with noticeably trembling hands, reached to his mid section. Seconds passed as he fumbled with a non-existent buckle. The holdup man hopped from one foot to the other, his overeagerness eventually allowing *Ol' Betsy* to drift off target. The metallic click of a cocking hammer resounded in the stillness; the Colt had appeared magically. The greedy eyes of the highwayman grew large as, too late, he realized what Diamond had done.

“Drop the rifle, mister. I don't cotton to killing *old dogs*, but this Colt doesn't care at all.”

The steady hand and penetrating gaze instilled a quaver in the older man's voice, “Ya cain't kill me afore I put a bullet in ya, boy, so this 'ere stand-off ain't gonna go yer way atall. Now I say ya drop the pistol afore my Betsy gits a notion to vent'late ya.”

Preston didn't flinch. “No sir, I'm betting I can kill you *twice* before you can pull the trigger once.”

Maybe the holdup man really did believe he could beat the lad. Maybe he was so desperate for a bottle of whiskey, a plate of food or whatever else his sour mind craved, that he didn't care. Maybe he simply lacked good judgement. Ol' Betsy's barrel hadn't quite come on target when a hole appeared just below the left lapel of the filthy frock the thief wore. A second hole, half an inch higher, joined the first. The rifle discharged in the dirt as the fellow pitched forward on the trail. The hushed silence that followed was interrupted by the “chink” of spent cartridges landing on the hard pack of the track. Preston dug in his trouser pocket for two of the bullets he had taken from the exhumed corpse yesterday. Thumbing them into the empty spaces in the cylinder of his revolver he jogged after his horse; the gelding had shied away from the shooting.

Back in the saddle, Diamond had time to reflect upon the killing. When he'd shot the

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murderer in the kitchen of the Diamond home, Preston suffered a horror of guilt that made him sick to his stomach; two days later, a similar encounter did not have the same effect. The sordid scoundrel, now laying dead on the trail, had intended to steal the horse and everything else of value; he had shown no compunction in regard to shooting his victim. Preston weighed these thoughts on the scales of what was rapidly emerging as his own brand of justice. He had already lost everything worth caring about. Righteousness, so clearly defined under his parent's direction, now became nebulous. His jaw set in grim determination. He did not wish to become a killer, but he would yield nothing without a fight.

The army would find the corpse and dispose of it better than he could.

Twilight had folded to full darkness but Rascal's unerring instinct brought Preston home. Though the curtains were pulled, Diamond could see that Rufus had a light burning in the kitchen and the smell of wood smoke from the parlour fireplace hung in the air. The lad could not suppress a sob as he thought of the happy times, the comfort, the love shared under the roof of the country cottage. His mother, having lived so many years in army quarters, had been happy to have a place of their own.

Rufus emerged from the house when he heard Washington, the mule, braying. This announcement was soon followed by an exchange of whinnies between the horses in the corral and Preston's mount.

“Dat you, Press?” Rufus asked, ineffectually peering past the yellow glow of a lantern he carried.

“Yes, it's me, Ruf. I have to see to my horse. I'll be right in.

The black man came closer and the beam played on the glistening flank of the gelding. “Na, Press, Rufus he'p yo wid dat pony. He look like he be'n worken' sumpun hard.”

“We came home at a steady pace,” Preston admitted. “He's a good horse for being so young; knew his way back when I wasn't sure where we were.”

Rascal was cooled out and rubbed down. Rufus gave the horse a drink, then tied him in the barn and Preston tossed a fork full of hay in the manger to keep him occupied for the night. Preston ran a lingering hand over Rascal's flank and gave the horse a final pat.

“Have you moved yourself into the house yet, Ruf?” Preston asked.

The new partner hesitated. “I brang sum m' stuff, Press, but I nebber brang ebryt'ing. An' I don' wanna mobe in yo folks' room.”

“Well, you can take your time with that, Rufus. I'm not anxious to walk in there myself.”

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Tweed, holding the lantern high, led the way to the house. The evening had grown cold and Preston relished the warmth from the fire, though another coldness hit him upon crossing the threshold. Rufus noted the pain in his young friend's eyes. "I knowd it be te'bble lon'sum roun' here, Press. Yo folks dey lef' a big hole in all de worl' when dey go."

Preston offered no response as he shucked his coat and hung it on the hook behind the door.

Tweed crossed the kitchen, picked up a wooden spoon from the table and began stirring a pot on the cookstove.

The boy spoke to his friend's back. "I saw them today, Ruf... I saw the funeral... and after everybody went away... Mother and Papá came and stood beside me... they talked to me... they talked to me, Rufus... they really did...."

Preston had not intended to ever tell anyone about seeing his deceased parents. He feared his sanity may be in doubt. Rufus's hand stopped stirring, slowly he turned, the huge eyes growing larger as he faced the boy. Preston bit his lip wishing he had not mentioned anything.

"Dat's de truf ain' it, Press? Yo see'd yo folks t'day?"

"I could see them, Ruf, but I couldn't touch them. They talked to me and Mother kissed me on the forehead. Then they faded away; but I know they are with me... they are here, right now, in this room."

Tweed smiled, his teeth brilliantly white in the dark face. "I knowd dey's here, Press. Dey's here wid dey son."

"You believe me, Ruf? Really?"

The black man turned back to the stove, resumed a slow meditative stirring and spoke as if talking to the pot. "When Rufus jis' a tad, he nebber got no Pappy an' den his Mammy die. Rufus he lef' all lon'. He go to m' Mammy's grabe an' lay dere an' cry for awful long tam. Dey ain't nobody roun'... jis' Rufus an' de grabe. An' den m' mammy, she 'pear, stan'in' righ' der'. She say, 'Rufus, yo be'n a fine boy o' mine. An' I knows yo gwyne be a fine man, too. I don' wan' leabe my on'y son alone on dis lan', so I come to yo an' I say I be wid yo all de tam. When ebber yo need yo mammy, I be righ' here. I be righ' here so yo ain' nebber lon'y. Sumday dey won't be no mo' slave an' Rufus be free man. Yo mammy agwyne be der' on dat day too, Rufus. Mebbe sumday, dey even be a black man pres'den' dis country too, Rufus. Mebbe dat black man pres'den' be m' boy Rufus an' I be der' on dat day, too. I be wid yo all yo lif' but yo don' seein' me, I be righ' der' wid yo.'"

Rufus's hand had stopped stirring and he turned back to Preston. "Press, I know'd yo see'd yo Mammy an' Pappy. Dey same m' mammy, on'y we cain't be seein' dem no mo' but dey still der'."

Diamond stepped over to the stove, reached up and placed a small hand on the big shoulder. "Thank-you, Ruf. Thank-you for believing me."

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Rufus beamed. He said, “Yo bes' eat sum dis grub. It call' Rufus Stew.”

The stew was hot, spicy and delicious. Preston insisted on washing the dishes though Rufus had trouble accepting the idea. Preston said, “You cook, *I* do the dishes. I cook, *you* do the dishes. That's fair, except my cooking isn't up to yours, so you may have to do most of the cooking to keep us from starving.”

Though the hour had passed for a proper bedtime, Preston located the apple crate of army journals in his father and mother's bedroom and toted them down to the parlour. Rufus watched in silence as Preston tenderly sorted through his father's memoirs. Powder-blue eyes blurred and an errant tear escaped as he recalled watching Officer Diamond meticulously record the daily entries. There were over twenty books in all. Many of them had received rough treatment having literally *gone through the war*. At the bottom of the box he found the first journal; it was entitled “United States Military Academy, West Point, New York.

Briefly scanning the daily entries, Preston began to construct a mental picture of life at the Military Academy. He had always thought his father had gone to West Point for army field training, but the notes revealed that there had been considerable text book learning and college studies as well. It seemed as though his father had enjoyed penmanship and many of the entries were

written as by a skilled storyteller. A page turned and the name *Cadet Everett Wiley* leaped out. Hungrily, Preston studied the entry in detail. Without his being aware, the read switched to a narration; Cutler Diamond's strong and steady voice filled Preston's mind:

“Cadet Everett Wiley has become a thorn in, not only my side, but the sides of half the cadets here at West Point. The man is a born trouble-maker, a constant agitation among his fellows. Though he is without scruples in dealings with colleagues, the man is a boot licking sycophant in the presence of senior officers. His subservience is quite repulsive though the officers appear to lap up the attention like a cat at a bowl of fresh milk.

In stature, Everett is a short man, about five feet and six; sturdily built, he would weigh perhaps one hundred and sixty pounds. Sandy haired, pig-eyed and large-mouthed. His rather grotesque nose is somewhat larger this evening, for today I lost patience with the inveterate scoundrel: In accordance with his pernicious nature among his fellows, I caught Wiley mercilessly whipping a horse. The animal struggled wildly but the cadet had him secure and was laying the quirt on heavily. Upon my demand that he cease the thrashing, Wiley, his blood up from the sport, turned the whip on me. I'm not a man to take advantage of a smaller fellow but I will not stand for a whipping from a sawed-off

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bully either. We had a brief tussle and Everett came away with the swollen nose mentioned previously. I believe I have made a mortal enemy this day, for men of his stature will pardon no slight....

Preston slipped a finger between the pages and lowered the book to his lap. Was this entry the “*information*” his father had referred to? It supplied a motive for Wiley, though the settlement of the grudge had taken nearly two decades. But this knowledge offered nothing in addition to what Preston had already unearthed; nothing to help him *see that justice prevails*. There must be something more, something deeper....

The journal slipped from Preston's hands jarring him awake. Rufus stood nearby. “Mebbe tam yo gwyne to bed, Press.”

Through bleary eyes Preston tried to focus on the black man. “You haven't moved into my parents' bedroom, Ruf. No reason for you to sleep on the sofa when there is a big comfortable bed waiting for you.”

Tweed nodded. “Mebbe sumday. Mebbe firs' I mobe in dat room beside yo, Press.”

On his return to Alexandria the next morning Preston took a circuitous route, avoiding that part of the trail where he had shot the bandit. In the light of day he wished there had been an alternative to killing the old holdup man. In all

likelihood, the fellow was near starving. With the advent of the war, the land had become crowded with misbegotten wretches, rejects and deserters from the armies; fighting, stealing, living hand to mouth on whatever they could get. But Preston knew, had he been clumsy or slow, it would be him, not the holdup man, laying dead upon the road.

“Better him, than me,” Diamond decided.

The young gelding wanted his head and Preston fought to hold him in. Greater pitfalls and booby traps than a lariat stretched across the trail may await the unsuspecting; the possibility of ambush—shoot first and rob later—kept the youth alert, studying the terrain at all times. The animal used more energy fighting the bit than if Preston had put the heels to him. However, should Diamond need to escape in a hurry, the fleet and powerful beast could certainly outdistance most other steeds in the area.

The hospital bivouac appeared exactly the same though the sight affected Preston far more strongly on this day. Sick to the stomach, dry of mouth, he could not swallow the sour taste rising in his gorge as the ghastly heart-wrenching sight overwhelmed him: Humanity reduced to barbarous, maggot survival amid a katzenjammer of squeaking, rattling wagons, neighing horses, soldiers' shouts, cries, groans, and curses; noisome, putrid stench assaulting nostrils; huge, chill-lazy blue-bottle flies crawling, swarming,

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buzzing; grotesque and blackened severed limbs; disease: dysentery, malaria, typhoid; everywhere the dead, the dying; bloodied wounded, bloodied medics. Hell.

Preston Diamond dismounted and tied his horse among a string of others on the picket line. He did not don the smock today, but strolled directly to the outer side of the canvass wall where Captain Everett Wiley lay confined. With dichotic ears attuned to the brouhaha of the surrounding camp and the muffled din from within, Preston strained to hear Wiley's rasping voice. Diamond could not risk having the injured man identify him, for the fevered captain had already made a connection between Preston and his father, undoubtedly from their characteristic, powder-blue eyes.

Although the corner where Preston waited was situated away from the beaten path, he was nonetheless conspicuous in his immobility. Most likely, in less time than he required, someone would question his actions or rather inaction and call him to task. Should the two men who assaulted Doctor Filmore be within earshot they could not fail to recall the similar altercation Preston had the previous day. The boy did not want to be caught or found out.

No identifying name or voice reached the ears of the eavesdropper and Diamond grew anxious. Prolonged patience becomes procrastination; Preston abandoned his post,

swiped another smock from the line and entered the busy tent. From half a dozen cots away he identified Captain Wiley. The man hunkered in an awkward position on the edge of his bed and Preston could read the agony on his haggard face as he tried to rise to a standing position. A member of hospital staff stood near, supporting Wiley's weight and offering encouragement. Again Preston touched the bulge of the Colt tucked in his waistband. The Union officer managed to stand, at the sacrifice of good posture, and the attendant helped him to take a hesitant step. Like a newborn colt, the man began to totter along with the assistance of the medical aide. Preston drew back as the pair shuffled past and then, at a distance, followed them out of the tent. Wiley made his way to a communal outhouse and went inside, the aide abandoning him at the door.

Preston sat on a crate while considering his options: Stroll over to the outhouse, yank open the door and blast Everett Wiley to Hell; wait for an opportunity to slip a knife between the officer's ribs; report him to the Provost Corps....

“Git yer skinny ass offen that box and do some work, ya lazy bugger! Ther's people adyin' round here and yer settin' there wartchin'. Now gimme a hand wit' this stretcher.”

Once more Diamond was press-ganged into the medical corps. The soured stretcher-bearer he partnered with this time did not allow Preston to escape, driving him steadily for two hours. When

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not toting a stretcher, the men were shifting supplies, off-loading wagons or shovelling muck. Preston didn't mind work, but he had more urgent matters to attend. During a trip to the 'morgue' the new medical recruit again espied Everett Wiley's confederates. Preston kept his head down and avoided looking at the soldiers' faces as they stood aside to allow passage of the loaded stretcher. Surreptitiously he watched them angle toward Wiley's hospital wing. He needed to hear what they were saying. An opportunity arrived a few moments later.

“Time for a *short* break,” the whip said. “Meet me back here in ten minutes, or I'll come ahuntin' ya.”

Preston dashed to the now familiar wall of the tent. Nearby stood a tangled assortment of crates and supplies. He busied himself shifting boxes back and forth, stacking and re-stacking the same pieces. No one noticed; you don't have to work... just *look* busy.

The voices of the three companions were slightly indistinct but Preston's young ears filtered out the background bustle. “...What d'ya mean Colonel Diamond 'as in here, Cap'n? They had a big funeral an' buried him an' his missus yestiday. Half th' army was there, they damn near called off th' war for the 'casion.”

A rasping voice croaked, “I'm telling you, I saw Cutler Diamond. He stood beside my bed.”

“Mebbe he 'as a ghost or somethin'. You 'as purty deliriust yestiday, Cap'n.”

“It was no ghost... only he looked younger... his hair seemed dark, but he had a hat on... but... delirious or not I would never mistake those damn blue eyes.”

“Well, yer in real trouble if'n he's ahuntin' ya now, 'cause he's come all th' way back from Hell to find ya.”

“Hol' on a minute there, Joe! Cap'n Wiley may have somethin'... Cutler Diamond's kid.”

A crash followed by sounds of cascading wreckage pierced the wall.

“Watch your mouth!” the hoarse voice broke in. “We don't need to shout our business to the whole Union Army.”

“Ain't nobody listenin', ever'body round here's too sick, daid or busy to hear us...”

“Well, I don't care to be sitting around with a bullet through my crotch while the North is looking to nail my hide to the wall for treason.”

A pause ensued then a voice said, “Anaways... Cyril, what was you thinkin' bout the Diamond kid?”

“Weeelll, could be the boy has come ahuntin. If he's cut from the same bolt as the his ol' man, he's got to have more guts than a slaughterhouse.”

“Well, I know what I saw, even if I was full of the fever. Mebbe you two ought to do some scouting around that farm. The boys were

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supposed to make a clean sweep but things didn't go entirely according to plan... Roddy and Gilly McDonald must have got themselves killed—bloody fool civilians—and I've been crippled up. There has been no proof that the boy actually died, though I heard shots from within the house.”

“Well, that there was the news we 'tended to pass on to ya yestiday, but you was all fevered up an' outta yer haid.”

“What? What news?”

“Jist that they buried the Col'nel an' his wife, an' I talked to one o' the so'jurs that had be'n at the Diamond place after the shootin'.”

Wiley growled in his gruff voice “Well, spit it out man! What did he tell you?”

“On'y that they buried two un'dent'fied civilians an' that the kid had be'n there first thing in the mornin' but he 'as gone when the detail showed up. They don't know if'n he fell in the river or what happened. He 'as jist gone.”

A groan escaped and Wiley's voice rasped with deadly menace. “Joe, Cyril, you two go up to that farm and finish this thing. We have to cover our tracks or we'll be caught with our pants right down before we get any further.”

“...leave ends tonight. When d' we go?”

“Go right now and be back before you are missed.”

None of the conspirators heard the quiet retreat of small feet leaving the side of the tent.

Chapter 6

Rascal did not have to fight the bit this afternoon. Preston put heels to the eager steed and the pair fairly flew down the trail. The rushing wind whipped tears from the boy's eyes and he had to tuck his head to catch a breath. Mane and tail streaming, neck reaching, ears tilted forward, nostrils flaring, hooves beating a steady, pounding rhythm, the racing bay pony never faltered. Preston stuck to the main road until he passed through Conception; Doctor Filmore, who had just emerged from his office, recognized the boy as the horse galloped through the town leaving a thin trail of dust in its wake.

Back in familiar territory, Diamond reined onto a cut-off trail. Guiding the sure-footed mount over treacherous terrain along the river bank, then

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through a quiet wood, Preston gained a few more minutes. At last the gelding pounded into the yard, lathered from bridle bit to tail, sides heaving, but still tossing his head; still raring and rearing to go. Rufus Tweed heard the thrum of the pounding hooves, and he dashed from the barn to meet the excited youth as the bay skidded to a plunging, dusty halt.

Preston swung from the saddle shouting, “We have to get ready, Rufus! Some men’re on their way here to kill me! They’ll kill you, too!”

Rufus grabbed the reins and tried to calm the prancing, snorting bay. “Which way dey comin’? We gots to be gwyne b’fore dey gets here. We gots t’ be hidin’ sumplace.”

Preston, panting, shook his head. “We aren’t running nowhere, Rufus. I’m staying here to wait for them.” He stepped to the side of the horse and extracted the Henry rifle from the scabbard. “You take Rascal up to your cabin; walk him out real good and rub him down. Give him a drink after he’s cooled out. Come back to check on me in the morning.”

“But, Press, I ain’t gwyne leabe yo all ’lone. Dos bad mans gwyne kill yo sho’.”

Preston shrugged. “For certain they’ll try, but I’m not running. These two helped plan my parents’ murder. I’m not letting that rest. Now, clear out before they show up... Rascal and I gained a fair piece on them, but it won’t be long.”

Tweed glanced at the setting sun. "It be da'k soon, Press, dat gibb yo sum hep."

Preston nodded but said nothing more.

The black man swung into the saddle, waved a solemn salute, then trotted the gelding into the darkening trees.

Preston ran to the house, pocketed more bullets for the .44 Henry and for the Colt revolver tucked in his belt. He bolted the door, then crawled through the same window he used to escape the soldiers on the morning they had come to take his parents away. Hiding in the scrub brush where he had eluded the bluecoats, Preston studied the foreground. There were no rays of sunlight, just the growing shadows of evening, but he noted the horses, the mule and Bessy the milk cow in the little pasture beyond the barn. Apparently, Rufus had not had time to bring Washington, the long-eared 'guard dog', to the corral for the night and maybe that was a good thing: the visitors would not have a braying welcome to put them on edge. The little knoll allowed Preston to see into the yard and watch the lane. He tried to guess how the men would mount an attack. They could not know they were expected. Would they boldly ride in, having no caution for a mere boy? Would they ride together? Would there be more than the two Preston had overheard?

A thought occurred to Preston that he should have lit a lantern or the fire in the house. In a

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natural situation, someone would be within the home. The intruders would search there first. His grip tightened on the Henry; probably the odoriferous scum would elect to ransack the place, too.

Preston shivered; was it the evening chill... or... Fear?

“Fear is never an ally...” The words filtered into the boy's subconscious. With an aching heart, he thought about the man he loved so dearly, his hero, his father. What would Colonel Diamond do in this situation? A sensation of warm assurance, like a warm hand on the shoulder descended; self-confidence stole over him and Preston knew that Cutler Diamond was near....

Twilight came.

A horse and rider appeared in the lane.

Preston studied the approach. The man wore a soldier's coat or smock; no shoulder boards or chevrons on the sleeve were visible in the fading light. Neither of the men who had taken Wiley from the clinic in Conception had distinguishing marks of rank or seniority on their blue frock coats. Was this man one of Wiley's killers, Cyril or Joe, or was he here in a different capacity? Maybe he had been sent to rescue the younger Diamond?

The rider halted his horse in the centre of the yard, dropped the reins and walked over to the house. The building blocked Preston's view but he heard unceremonious knocking upon the door and

a voice hailing the house. After a brief pause, there came the sound of aggressive pounding as the stranger attempted forced entry.

These were not the actions of a man with good intent....

The soldier reappeared, made several passes back and forth in front of the house, then sauntered over to his horse. Preston grew perplexed as fading light obscured the man's actions. It looked like the fellow was rummaging in a saddle bag. What could he be looking for? The answer came to light as a Lucifer flared in the soldier's hand. He touched this to something larger and the flames grew strong. The horse danced away from the fiery torch as the stranger turned on a heel then strode in the direction of the cottage.

"The bastard is going to burn our home!"

Without conscious decision, the Henry rose to the boy's shoulder; light from the fire brightened the target. Preston squeezed the trigger....

Apparently, the intruder had had a bottle of kerosene or other flammable in his saddle bag for the torch did not extinguish when it dropped to the ground. Even the force of the dead man's falling body failed to smother the flames; soon his frock coat caught fire. The abortive cremation temporarily illuminated the farm yard.

A shadow flickered near the corrals, something had moved over there....

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Preston hastened to change position, for the muzzle flash from the Henry may have revealed his place of concealment. As he slipped farther back into the wood, the shadow moved again. It flitted toward the barn and disappeared through the open door. In a short while, the fire exhausted the fuel supply, the last flicker winked out and an intense darkness flooded the foreground.

Stealthily, Preston felt his way along the familiar trail. His young eyes adjusted to the blackness as blurred outlines became definite shapes; shadows grew detail. Cautious as a stray cat, Diamond made his way to the wall of the barn. In the silence of the night nothing moved. Ear pressed against the boards he listened for a betrayal of movement from inside the building. The animals, including the milk cow, had all been outside, in the little pasture beyond the buildings. One or several cats may be within, but they usually made no sound...

No sound was what Preston eventually heard; the kind of sound made by someone making *no sound* —a silent suggestion— like clear vision to a blind bat. Something lurked, noiseless, beyond the level of hearing; Preston could feel it. Evil hung in the stillness.

But, could the intruder sense Diamond's presence? Did he know Preston's position?

Rustling straw; the scrape of a boot sole on stone floor; movement. The listener held his

breath. A single, faint but distinct yowl of a tomcat drifted on the evening air.

Preston grinned inwardly.

Light appeared through a knot hole of the barn wall; a chink of metal on metal; darkness.

What happened? Had the stranger attempted, but failed, to light the straw in the barn? Would he try again? Why burn the building when you are inside it? Why *create* a silhouette? More sounds of shoe leather scraping on stone reached Diamond's ears. Now it was farther away, closer to the front door. Preston leaned the Henry against the wall and tugged the Colt from his belt —the revolver would be handier in a closeup encounter. He eased along the building in the direction of the receding boot scrapes. At the corner of the barn, Preston paused... something....

Sudden brilliant light burst in through pupils as large as teacups. Preston's arm involuntarily whipped upward to shield his eyes. Harsh, humourless laughter erupted in his ears. "Found ya, ya little twerp! Shot an' burnt ol' Joe, so ya did, but ya din't save yer scrawny little hide from me."

Eyes adjusting, Preston recognized one of the two soldiers from Doctor Filmore's office: Captain Everett Wiley's accomplices. The man held a dark lantern in one hand, a cocked army revolver in the other. A malicious grin revealed stained, broken and missing teeth as he savoured the moment, taking his time in levelling the gun.

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Horror struck, immobile, Preston watched the hole at the end of the barrel growing larger.

The leer shifted to stunned shock. An agonized grunt escaped; bubbles of blood appeared at the corners of the assassin's mouth. He pitched forward, sprawling face down in the short winter grass beside the barn. The long handle of a hay fork protruded from his back.

Preston said, "You do a good impression of a cat, Rufus."

Chapter 7

Two more shallow, unadorned graves were added to the solemn burial ground on Diamond/Tweed farm. Two riderless nags were stripped of their outfits and let loose down the lane. Two more treasonous murderers were erased from Captain Wiley's company.

As he rode to Alexandria next morning, Preston considered Rufus's part in the attack. The black man's timely intervention had unquestionably saved Preston's life, but Rufus had gone into such a wailing terror that Preston feared one or the other of the armies would come down upon them. "I dun nebber hurt nobody in my whol' lif', Press!" the man had howled. "Dey gwyne hang dis black man fo' sho'. Nobody nebber believ us dat I 'as 'tecting yo, Press. Dey

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jus' gwyne say, 'dat black, he kill a white man and dey fetch up de rope righ' den."

It had taken Preston an hour to stop the mournful carry on. At last, as they shovelled dirt upon the bodies in the quiet darkness, Rufus accepted that it was better he and Preston were burying the intruders than if it was Preston being laid to rest. "You don't tell anybody, I don't tell anybody and the dead men don't talk," Diamond had advised.

Preston's thoughts eventually faded and his attention focused on the present. Though still attuned to self-preservation he, for the first time since his parents' murders, began to appreciate the world around him in a less fearful manner. On this day, the sun, the animals, even the treed and gently rolling land itself, seemed particularly oblivious to the black and evil cloud of war hanging over the human element so bent upon its own destruction. Mothers Earth and Nature would not be held responsible for the inexplicable barbarities mankind inflicted upon his own; the ladies of creation believed humanity had been an error in design by the Master Architect.

Preston felt the warmth of the mid morning sun, saw the blue of the cloudless sky, heard the call of a flock of geese high overhead and began to take note of the creatures stirring in the brush beside the trail; the smell of the earth and trees teased his nostrils and a taste... a taste familiar yet somehow new: the taste of life, of being alive,

rested in his soul. Realization dawned that he had a life to live even though his mother and father would not be there to share it. Diamond avowed to his horse and the creatures close enough to hear that he would finish this task and have it buried with Captain Everett Wiley. He would not throw away a lifetime on useless burning anger and hatred.

“When Wiley is in Hell.”

The hospital camp had not changed overnight, but Captain Wiley had disappeared. Preston searched the bivouac, he even looked in the privy. Queries of the medical staff were useless and Diamond obtained no answers from the corpses in the outdoor morgue other than the fact that Wiley was not among them. Returning to the tent where the bluecoat had been convalescing, Preston, clad again in a blood stained smock, questioned conscious patients in proximity to Captain Wiley's cot. Only one of the wounded had been alert enough to recall the officer. The soldier told Preston that Wiley had fashioned a crude cane from a stout branch broken from the makeshift coat rack and hobbled out of the tent. That had happened at first light and the patient had not returned. The injured man was adamant that Wiley had left under his own steam; no one assisted him.

Preston went out into the bright morning sunshine. The air was fresher than inside the stale

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and stinking tent but it still wasn't conducive to deep breathing. An ambulance with two attendants on the seat and two wounded soldiers jouncing in the back rattled past. The groans of pain overwhelmed the youth and he had to be away. Stashing the smock, Preston slipped through the hubbub and, upon reaching his horse, swung aboard, tightening the cinch as he trotted away.

Cannon and musket fire boomed in the distance as Preston rode cautiously through a pattern of small fields hewn out of the wilderness. He had no plan and no direction. Wiley could have gone anywhere and Preston felt a mild relief to be putting distance between himself and the canvas shack medical unit. When saddling up this morning, Diamond had swapped the fleet gelding he had ridden hard yesterday for his father's big raw-boned cavalry mount. This animal had no fear and, though not as fast as the young horse, was durable and steady. It was during this several seconds of reflection upon his father's pride in the animal that the horse stumbled, then started to limp. Drawing rein, Diamond slipped out of the saddle and began to lead the stud, watching closely to sort out which quarter the dark bay favoured. In a short while Preston discovered the problem: a stone lodged in a shoe, back left leg. As the boy fished the hoof pick out of the little case attached to the rear cinch, his hand passed over the brand and he groaned aloud, "Stupid!"

If Preston were caught riding a U.S. Army branded horse he would have plenty of explaining to do in a hurry.

The pebble was easily extracted and the horse stopped limping within a quarter mile, but Preston now began to fret about being seen on the Union Army mount. The boy's quick mind worked feverishly and he soon concocted a ruse to say he was delivering a message for someone and had to pass it on to the nearest company of soldiers he encountered. Diamond considered, "Who sent the message? To whom should it be delivered?" The story would be more plausible if he had real characters, especially someone of rank. Also, the excuse would be more readily accepted if written down.

Written messages require pencil and paper.

Preston kept to cover until he espied an occupied farmhouse, an anomaly among the vacated and the burned ruins of the pillaged. As the horse picked its way across an open field, the rider studied the dwelling and surroundings: Outbuildings and a small pole corral were in disrepair. A mule, one long ear lazily akimbo, stood partially screened by a tall red cedar. A milk cow, Preston could not tell from this angle whether it was in or out of the corral, chewed its cud and switched its tail. A colourful flock of chickens pecked at something in the yard near the house. Laundry on a line flapped briefly on a passing breeze, then went limp. A small lady in

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long white house dress, bonnet and apron worked at a wash tub near the door of the home.

The incoming rider hailed the house from a distance then rode up slowly. The lady did not seem surprised by his call and Preston soon found out why: a gun barrel protruding through a crack in a dilapidated shed followed his every move. The farmer and his wife had seen him coming.

Only thing, the lady doing laundry could not be the farmer's wife, for she was just a slip of a girl, probably not much older than Preston. The lad had not paid much attention to girls in his young lifetime; they were no different than boys, far as he had determined.

This one was.

She was pretty, though the smile Preston imagined she had did not reach her face. Caution showed in her brown eyes as she brushed a soapy hand across her forehead to remove an errant wisp of reddish gold hair. Diamond was not surprised she failed to invite a stranger to step down from his horse; no one trusted anyone these days and young girls were not brazen in the hinterland. The lady's frequent glance further betrayed the rifle barrel Preston had seen; strangely, the gun covering him did not make him nervous.

As his father had taught him, he swept off his hat, then said, "Hello, Ma'am, I..." His voice broke and he blushed a deep red on his dark features.

The smile was more than he had imagined.

He tried again. "I was wondering if I might have a piece of paper and borrow a pencil for a few minutes. I have to send a message to Lieutenant General Ulysses Grant of the Union Army."

This statement could have been a colossal fib, only it wasn't. Diamond had made the decision as he spoke; other than Rufus, Uncle Ulysses was the only person he would trust. There was not the slightest trace of braggadocio in his voice as he mentioned the North's famous general as casually as if the officer were his... well, his uncle.

The young lady frowned, a hint of embarrassment crossing her features. Before she could reply Preston guessed the source of her shame. "I know folks don't have much to hand in the line of writing materials. If you have none to spare, that is okay... I could peel a piece of birch bark but I don't have a pencil...."

The girl found her voice. "I do... I have a few pages of stationery that belonged to my mother. It's... it's quite pretty, came all the way from England."

"I can pay you," Preston offered. "I don't have much, but I could give you a half dime. It is kind of important that I send this message to Unc... to Lieutenant General Grant as soon as possible. Of course, if you're on the Confederate side you may not want to help the Union Army...."

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“It's not that, I'm not choosing, I've lost a brother on both sides.” She reached a decision, “I'll fetch the paper.”

The cavalry horse stood patiently while Preston, using a short slab board across the saddle horn for a table, wrote a brief note on the fancy stationery. The paper was a light rose colour and had a hint of lavender, not the sort of letterhead normally addressed to an army general. Diamond extracted a half dime piece from his breast pocket and handed it to the girl along with her pencil stub. Her eyes grew wide at the sight of the coin.

Preston misinterpreted. “Isn't that enough?”

“No... I mean, no, it's too much... I only gave you a piece of paper....”

“It is special paper and worth more than five cents to me... Um, my name is Preston.”

The smile returned and the sunlight backed away. “I'm Lily.”

The blush returned to Preston's face and he touched a heel to the stud. “Nice to meet you, Lily....”

On the far side of the decrepit little yard he reined in and turned to look back. Her gaze still held him as she stood by the scrub board and pile of washing. Preston waved to her, then saluted the gun barrel still pointed in his direction. He gave the bay its head and galloped for the distant tree row.

Whether fickle circumstance, fair coincidence or confused Fate, it turned out that

C. C. Phillips

Lily should show up again in the near future, but that one vision of the pretty poverty stricken lass standing beside the wash tub would go a long way in easing Preston's nightmares.²

2. *There are special highlights, treasures of an instant, shining 'moments' that stand out in one's memory and last a lifetime.*

Chapter 8

Though Captain Everett Wiley had vanished, Preston now had a direction. The time had come to switch to heavy artillery. It was time to find Uncle Ulysses.

Preston watered his horse at a clear running little brook. Noticing his reflection in a quiet pool he decided to change his appearance in order to present himself to the army. He dismounted and dug a handful of muck from the bank of the stream, then smeared bits on his face and clothes trying to make his outfit look more worn and ragged. The wool cap took on a soiled appearance and his dark hair hung in greasy tendrils. The bay did not look the part but Preston could do nothing about that now.

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The boy no longer kept to the trees nor sneaked quietly through the shadows to avoid the Union Army, but actively sought the troops, hoping to locate a dispatch rider or a man of rank to pass on the letter. He was careful not to inadvertently stumble onto the Grey Coats though that army should have been stationed at or beyond the combat area.

The constant boom of artillery sickened Preston for it reminded him of the Alexandria field unit. The medical bivouac would be busy again this day. How abominable that countrymen should rise up against each other in murderous slaughter! How sad that the pretty farm girl had lost a brother on either side. In the heat of battle one may have killed the other without being aware of what he had done. Preston knew for certain that honest soldiers like his father were not among the condemned, but now he wondered, do the perpetrators, the leaders of nations who declare war, do they go to Hell? They ought to.

Now the scream of the heavy shells could be heard as they whistled through the air; a sound like Hell itself ripping apart at the seams; Hades was running out of room. The big stud pricked his ears and pranced in anticipation of the action. Preston was too close to the conflict.

A mounted company of soldiers, Blue Coats, emerged from a treed lane and crossed an open field angling away from the battle zone. Preston swung the big horse, putting it into a gallop so as

to intercept the group. A haggard young man bearing the insignia of a captain led the riders. He did not draw rein or call a halt as the lone rider closed in beside him. The men were dishevelled, hollow-eyed and weary, nodding in the saddle as they rode. Many wore dirty bloodied rags on seeping or dried bloodied wounds; their gaunt and trembling horses plodded on, no longer fearing the black abyss the very edge of which they trod.

The captain's tired eyes brightened. "Union Army horse, sonny, I'll be trading ponies with you. Fact is, I would commandeer your nag even if it wasn't government property."

Preston ignored the awkward statement. Swelling his chest, he said, "I got me a message of the most ut-ter-most importance to give over to the firs' dispatch rider or officer of rank I seen. 'Pears to me you be that officer, Mr. Captain, seein' hows youse don't got no dispatch rider in this here outfit."

A tired sneer crossed the officer's features. "Just who did you bring this message from and who is it for, farm boy? We don't have time for carrying love letters; we're fighting a war and trying to stay alive."

With grimy fingers, the note bearer fished the message from a shirt pocket and offered it to the outstretched hand of the captain. Before releasing the paper the boy said, "M' book learnen' ran out afore I got to readin' but I kin tell ya this

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here note is from Second Looootenant Tweed an'....”

The officer snatched the note. “Never heard of no Lieutenant Tweed....”

“I reckon he's a fresh officer out'en West Point, least ways that's what I heerd. The feller it's intended fer is....”

“General Grant!” The captain reined in his horse and raised an arm to stop his riders. “But it makes no sense... Do you know some shavetail, name o' Tweed? What does this message mean?”

Preston shrugged. “I seen a right shiny officer what ain't got a full beard yet, he could'a be'n Tweed. Anyways, they jis tol' me, 'git this paper to Gen'l Grant'. I already tol' ya I cain't read, so I got no notion what the words is... They gimme a five cents an this here nag an said, 'Git goin.'”

One of the soldiers had sidled up and the captain passed him the letter. Preston protested, “I don' figur' that note is for ever'body to be readin'.”

The newcomer's lips moved slowly, then he reread aloud:

*“Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant:
There is a diamond in the rough. Contact Second
Lieutenant Rufus Tweed, post haste.”*

He sniffed the page, folded it and passed it back to his superior. “Smells sorta nice, like a woman's perfume or somethen', but makes no

sense to me, Cap'n Barnes... Even so... I'd be making certain it got to the General.”

Grinning inwardly, Preston wheeled the stud and called over his shoulder as he put the horse to a trot, “Yessir, Cap'n *Barnes*, I 'spect you will be wanten' to make certain that there note gits to Gen'l Grant.”

Preston heard Barnes groan something about Grant being a long way from here, and the telegraph lines were probably down. He kept on riding, hoping to put as much distance as he could between himself and the company before the army captain remembered his threat to requisition the war horse.

Diamond had left the Union soldiers behind and pointed his father's horse toward Conception and home when ravens congregating in a copse at the far end of a field drew his attention. Carrion—carcasses of horses, cattle, slaughtered wildlife—were in abundance throughout the war ravaged countryside, but Preston felt an urgency to investigate this particular corvidae attraction. He noticed that the birds were loud and flighty; they hadn't settled and this could indicate the presence of something wounded or near death. Approaching the grove, he noted that the ground sloped downward to form a small depression. Trees ringed the perimeter and water of a pond shimmered through the naked branches. The ravens lifted from their perch hurling raucous obscenities at the intruder as they wheeled and

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dove overhead. At the point where the largest concentration of the scavengers had been, Preston espied a large dark object, probably an animal, lying near the water's edge.

After hitching the stud to a sturdy tree limb, Preston broke a path through the tangle and came up beside the fallen creature. He did not spend a lot of time studying the dead, saddled horse, for he heard a groan nearby and sought the source. A Confederate soldier, at least a fellow wearing the grey coat of the rebels, lay stretched out in the tall reedy grass between trees and pond. Dried blood stained the dirty tunic, fresh blood seeped from a hole in the upper left arm or perhaps the shoulder; Preston couldn't tell because of the skewed position of the man's overcoat. He checked the soldier's breathing: it came in harsh rasping breaths and the fellow's forehead was hot with fever; he muttered incoherently.

Diamond retrieved his father's canteen from the saddle, lifted the injured man's head and forced a few drops of water between the puffed blue lips. The soldier swallowed and opened his mouth for more. Preston gave him another sip then eased his head back onto the grass.

The wound turned out to be high on the shoulder. Preston washed it, plugged the holes—the musket ball had passed clean through—with cloth torn from his own shirt then applied a rudimentary bandage using the same material. During the operation the patient, a young man not

much more than a boy, groaned and called out for his mother and father. There were other words he muttered but Preston could make out none except the several times repeated, "Lily".

It was the second time today Preston had heard the name. He was far too astute to believe it a coincidence. The injured rebel may well have been trying to make his way home, at least his wounded horse would naturally do this if it had been from the farm where the wash girl named Lily lived. If Preston's calculations were accurate, the farm lay maybe a mile, certainly not two, to the southeast of this spot. Could he somehow move the rebel without being seen? What if he was caught? A person in civilian clothes, riding a Union Army branded horse, administering to a Confederate soldier could not expect leniency from the Blue Coats.

The sun had less than two hours of light left; already the temperature was dropping. Preston checked his patient: the fellow would not last long without better lodgings than a bed of grass and reeds beside a brackish waterhole. If the fever didn't kill him, the chill of night would. Preston could not risk a fire, he couldn't wait for darkness. There were no options, the wounded man had to be moved. Soon.

Preferring to travel light in case of flight, Preston had left his rope at home. There was no lariat on the dead horse. Using leather straps cut from the cinches and reins of the Confederate

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soldier's gear, then tying the saddle blanket across two fallen trees set in parallel, Preston fashioned a crude travois such as he had seen the Indians trailing to the posts out west. He poked the narrow ends of the poles through his stirrups, hooked the rig to his saddle then carefully loaded the patient on the conveyance and strapped him in.

There was still more light than Diamond felt comfortable with as he led the stud away from the copse; at every plodding step of his father's horse he feared an army unit would come charging across the field. Luck held and the company reached the relative safety of the tree edged border. The clumsy travois prevented travel within the shelter of the scrub timber so Preston continued along in the darker shade and protection as near as possible to the trees. He could not proceed in a beeline and had to follow the rough pattern of the tree margins trending east and south. It was a nerve-racking trip for the rescuer and a painful jouncing journey for the wounded soldier. Preston stopped several times to readjust straps and check on the patient whose groans and mutterings had increased.

Though Diamond approached the farm from a northerly direction this time, and evening was descending, the alert but silent rifleman had him covered before he crossed the yard. The laundry had been removed from the clothes line, the wash tub and scrub board put away. Preston hailed the

house, though he could see someone watching him through a window.

Lily came out, hands on hips and stared suspiciously at the lad leading the horse.

Preston left his hat on, but said, "Sorry to turn up on your step again, Ma'am, but I've brought a wounded man. He kept asking for 'Lily' and I thought he may be an acquaintance of yours."

The frown of suspicion moved over to allow a fleeting frown of fear that, in turn, yielded to a look of open concern. Lily strode to the travois and lifted Preston's coat from the face of the wounded man. "Davy!" she gasped. Turning to Preston, she said, "He's our brother! We had heard he was killed!"

Preston dropped the reins and went to the girl. "We best get him inside. He's lost blood and has a bullet clean through the top of his shoulder. The fever was on him earlier, but I suspect he will have the chills by now."

Lily stood up and waved to the rifle sentry. "Amy! Come quick! It's Davy! He's been shot!"

A young girl, smaller than Lily, but similar in features, tumbled out of the shed, and, rifle in hand, ran to the group. Preston unhooked the makeshift travois, then, using it as a stretcher, he and the young ladies lugged the unconscious soldier inside the shanty. They laid him on a straw mattress resting atop a homemade slab board bed, then the girls rushed about heating water and

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preparing to change the temporary bandages. The rescuer went out to tend to his horse then returned to the shack. Someone had lit a lantern as the daylight had faded. Lily paused from her work and looked at Preston, an odd expression on her face. She said, "Thank you so much for bringing our brother home. I only hope we can keep him alive. I don't know much about doctoring or helping the sick..." She looked around the barren kitchen. "We don't have much for medical supplies either... Our mother died before the war started. Father was killed in a logging accident and our brothers joined the armies. Until you brought Davy back to us, it has been Amy and I here alone." She sounded apologetic.

The truth was, the young family had nothing for supplies, not even any food. Preston met her eyes. "How far is it to Conception?"

"It's about four miles, as the ravens fly... why?"

"I'll ride there; maybe Dr. Filmore can help your brother."

Fear showed in Lily's eyes. "We... I can't pay anyone to help. All the money Amy and I have left is the half dime you paid us today. We couldn't pay a doctor even if he would come." Her voice broke. "Besides, Davy fought on the Confederate side, most people around here would rather he died."

"Dr. Filmore doesn't choose sides. I'll go now to see what he has to say. You keep your

brother warm and alive. He'll be needing water; try to give him warm drinks so the chills don't take him when the fever breaks."

Preston felt he was being bossy and speaking out of turn but, having spent his youth in forts and army barracks, he had experience helping his mother and the army physicians tending the wounded. He turned on his heel and went out to his horse.

The stud, with his ground eating pace and stamina, did not break a sweat on the cross-country ride to Conception. Preston didn't allow the horse to run all out because he was not certain of the terrain nor the exact location of the little town. Also, he had to study his back trail using landmarks he could make out on the horizon in the light of a waning moon in order to be able to find Lily's farm for his return with medical assistance. He mused about the note he had passed on to Captain Barnes. Where would it be now? Surely the message would eventually be delivered. Preston thought about Uncle Lyss and wondered what the General would think when he read the letter. It had been Grant himself who had used the term, "Diamond in the rough," in reference to Preston's lovely mother living in the frontier conditions of Fort Humboldt in California. By the time the note reached the General, he would have heard of the Diamond murders. In his saddle bags Preston found the grub he had packed for the day. He ate ravenously for several minutes then

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stopped, suddenly feeling a twinge of guilt; Lily and her siblings wouldn't have much for their supper. The horse would need forage before long, too.

The physician opened the door a tentative crack on Preston's third knock. Recognizing his guest, the doctor gave a relieved sigh and invited the last of the Diamonds into his foyer. "What on earth have you been doing, Preston? Your face and clothes are black with dried mud; your shirt is in tatters"

Preston had forgotten about smearing himself with muck so as to make himself look a tatterdemalion. Later, he had ripped his shirt up for bandages. Now he realized why Lily had given him that odd look. He merely grinned disarmingly in response to the doctor's query, then explained the reason for his visit.

Dr. Filmore listened attentively then said, not unkindly, "Honestly, Preston, there isn't much I could do if I went out there tonight. The bullet passed through, the wound has stopped bleeding and the patient is resting... or he has died. I'll give you bandages, healing powders and an elixir for the fever. At this point, you can do as much for the soldier as I can."

The doctor followed Diamond out and stood by as he stuffed the bundle in his saddle bags. "Captain Wiley was here today. He was brought here by a Union soldier."

Diamond stiffened, then, still facing his work, said, "You should have killed him."

"My professional oath would not allow me to do such a thing. They may have suspected that I knew something, for they watched me every minute and I couldn't get away to alert the town sheriff, but he would have been worse than useless anyway."

"Was Wiley on horseback?"

"No, he arrived in an army ambulance."

Preston fastened the strap on the saddlebag then turned, "Probably the rig was stolen from the Alexandria unit. He would do something like that, trying to save his worthless hide while honest soldiers died on the field... Did you treat him? Is he going to live or will my mother's bullet give him the slow and painful death he deserves?"

"I treated him. And, I cannot explain it, but I believe the man will make a recovery. He may be semi crippled for the rest of his days, but he'll live."

"Well, if I have anything to say about it, 'the rest of his days' won't be that many. Which way did they go when they left here?"

"I'm not sure, the soldier drove the rig toward town centre."

"Dr. Filmore, can you tell me what the other soldier looked like? That wouldn't be breaking your creed or what ever it is you live by?"

Filmore hesitated, then said, "He was tall... reddish-blond... sort of a handsome man; clean

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shaven... his clothes were dusty from the trail but neat... he didn't appear to have been of the soldiers who are fighting on the front. I am not familiar with the insignia of the army, but the coat he wore had chevrons on the sleeves.”

“Did you notice how many?”

“Two... no, three; there were three chevrons on his sleeve.”

“A sergeant; enlisted man. Anything else? Any names mentioned?”

“No, nothing other than that he paid my fee for administering to the Captain. I was surprised at that.”

Preston apologized, “I'm sorry, doctor, I had forgotten to pay you for these bandages.”

Filmore protested, saying he hadn't been hinting at that and couldn't accept, but Preston gave the surgeon four bits. He swung into the saddle, looked down at the physician and said, “I may need your services again and won't have money on hand.”

Chapter 9

A thin beam of light traced the frame of the door but the windows were dark when, much later, Preston rode up to the farm shanty where Lily and her sister lived. The mule did not acknowledge the newcomer's arrival, a contradiction to the braying cacophony raised by Washington at the Diamond/Tweed place when Preston rode into their farmyard. Lily called softly from within when Preston tapped gently on the door. She let him into the house then quickly closed the door. "Amy is asleep; Davy hasn't regained consciousness. The fever has lifted and I've been trying to keep him warm. He's shaking like to fall off the bed."

"Dr. Filmore gave me some stuff, but he couldn't come tonight. I also stopped at home and

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fetches a few things to help you through... Our farm is two miles the other side of Conception; that is what took me so long."

"I had begun to think you may not return. You don't owe us anything."

Preston shrugged. "Only, I said I would be back."

The significance of that statement was not lost on the young lady. "Do you always keep your word, Mr. Preston?"

"Diamond, my last name is Diamond, the first is Preston...um... I suppose we Diamonds are known to keep our word. What is your last name, Lily?"

She held out her hand. "Lily Brannigan. As you probably have figured out, Davy and Amy are my brother and sister."

He took the small hand and, though the skin was rough and reddened from lye soap, it felt soft and warm to Preston. He held it longer than an introduction may require, but Lily did not seem to mind. He liked the sound of her voice, too; it was melodious and she spoke as though she had a good education. "I'll bring the stuff in and, if it's alright with you, I'll stay until morning in case there is something I can do to help your brother... I know a little about tending to bullet wounds."

Lily smiled and said, "Of course! you must stay, I couldn't let you leave at this hour of the night."

In spite of the Union Army brand, and the fact that the stud had already travelled many miles on the day, Preston had not switched horses while home. Rufus had tended to the animal, rubbing it down and giving it a feed of grain while Preston gathered up essentials that he felt may assist Lily and her family. He also borrowed cash from his parents' 'cookie jar' and collected a rope from the barn. The heavily packed army mount had made the return trip in the darkness without faltering. He seemed to know the destination and took Preston to the doorstep. There had been no patrols along his route; Diamond had pulled up once hearing the distant drumming of hooves, but the rider did not pass near him. Maybe it had been a messenger carrying a note to Lieutenant General Grant.

Preston stripped the pack from the saddle, then took the rig off and stood it on the decrepit veranda to the side of the doorway. Though the horse was unlikely to wander, Preston put hobbles on before turning him out on the sparse grass near the yard. The Brannigan's mule didn't bother to make acquaintance.

Amy was rubbing the sleep from her eyes and Lily was yawning with fatigue when Diamond brought his grip into the shanty. Both girls came wide awake and did not try to hide their pleasure when Preston opened the pack to reveal the contents: comestibles, blankets and Dr. Filmore's medical supplies.

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“Don't your parents mind you trotting off with their pantry and linen closet?” Lily asked.

“Er... no... I'm sure they do not mind at all.”

“Well, you must thank them for us. Brannigans aren't ones for charity, but Amy and I are truly grateful... Things haven't been easy these past few months: We've mostly survived on milk and eggs, and the occasional chicken, but we didn't want to kill off our laying hens. Amy is a pretty good shot, but the deer have been slaughtered or run out of the country because of this cursed war. Maybe Davy will heal up quick and things will be all right again.”

Preston was glad the soliloquy had ended on a different note than it started. “We had best poke a few sticks on the fire and heat water. Let's clean up your brother's wound again and put Dr. Filmore's stuff to use.”

Amy said, “I'll fry up some victuals.” Catching a stern glance from her sister, she added, “in case Davy is hungry when he wakes up.”

Davy did regain consciousness while Lily and Preston were swabbing out the wound. His eyes flew open wide and he stared first at the stranger then turned to his sister. “Lily... am I home... or... or have I died?”

The soldier passed out again not hearing Lily's soft reply as she brushed a tender hand over his hot forehead.

“I heard Davy! Is he awake?”

“Only for a moment, Amy. He's gone back to sleep now.”

The breaths were so shallow, Preston feared the patient had died, but he could feel a weak heart beat. “Dr. Filmore said to give him plenty of liquids and keep him from moving around for a few days. I don't think that musket ball broke any bones, just tore the muscle on its way through. It's going to be stiff and sore for a long time.”

“We'll nurse him back,” Lily said. “We had thought we lost him weeks ago. Now that he's here, we won't lose him again.”

Preston yawned and said, “You've both had a turn... if it's alright with you, I'll roll out a blanket on the floor here beside the bed. If he wakes again I will hear him.”

With the light of day, Lily's words gained conviction. Her brother awoke and carried out a raspy but coherent conversation for several minutes. It was obvious that he distrusted Preston's presence; however, he drifted off again before Lily could explain.

Diamond felt he should be going home. Rufus needed help and he had done nothing around the farm since his parents' demise. The campaign against Captain Wiley had stalled; Preston needed more information and he couldn't just walk into a Union Army camp and start asking questions. He would have to wait until General Grant was available. He split a pile of wood for

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the Brannigans and was saddling his father's horse when Lily came out of the house and said her brother was awake and wanted to talk to him.

A faint touch of colour had returned to Davy's cheeks. He had shed the ashen death mask. "Are you a Blue-belly?" he asked without belligerence.

"My father fought for the Union... He was a career soldier: West Point graduate; fought in the Mexican-American War... So, yes, I'm a Blue-belly or at least the son of a Blue-belly... are you a Reb?"

"I was, now I'm out of it. Our side is on the run, we're losing ground to the north. Our brother Daniel, fought for the Blue Coats; I just found out from Lily that he was killed. I hold no grudges, I just wish it would end."

Lily, standing to one side, said, "I wish it hadn't started... It's so horrible!"

"We'll just have to start over Lily. Our parents had nothing when they got here, but they worked hard. If they hadn't died so young, they would have succeeded. Everyone is in the same mess now. We still have the farm, we'll finish what mother and father started."

The invalid closed his eyes a moment and two tears squeezed out from between the lids to trace a wet path down his cheeks. "God! Daniel killed... I hope it was a Confederate boy who shot him...."

“Davy!” Lily cried, “how can you say such a thing? Mr. Diamond is standing right here and if it wasn't for him, you would be dead, too!”

The soldier looked bewildered for an instant. His lips moved as if repeating the words. “Oh! No! That isn't how I meant it. Some of our boys, including me, have seen Blue-bellies shooting their own soldiers... I just hope Daniel wasn't shot by a Blue-belly traitor.” Davy winced again and his breaths became ragged as he continued. “That's how I got shot. I saw a Blue-belly, an officer, aiming his musket at, I think, his superior. I shot the bloody traitor and then I got hit myself....”

Preston's voice held a tremor of excitement, “You actually saw an officer attempting to shoot one of his own soldiers?”

Davy tried to sit up but lapsed back on the bed with a heavy groan. “Yes, that is what I saw. I'm not certain of the rank, but it *looked* to me like they were both officers... You know, a guy doesn't have much time to look around... when he's under fire... but I'll swear... I swear I saw that much and... I know of two other stories....” The voice trailed off and his eyes closed. “I'm so tired...” He muttered a few more words then fell back to sleep.

Diamond looked sharply at Lily. “I've got to know more about this... I... my parents... I have to find out everything your brother knows about these back-shooting traitors.”

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“Preston, what is it? You aren't making sense. What about your parents? What did you mean to say? And, when you told Davy about your father's army life, it sounded like he was gone. Is he...was he... was he killed?”

It was more than the boy had wanted to say, but the words tumbled forth of their own volition: “My father was a colonel, serving under Lieutenant General Grant. He was murdered... murdered by a bluecoat officer and two other men; they killed my mother, too.”

The third Brannigan sibling came into the house toting a bucket of water. Seeing Lily with her hand covering her mouth, a look of horror on her face, the younger girl hastily set down the pail and stepped to her sister's side. “What is wrong, Mr. Diamond? What did you say to my sister?”

Lily's hand dropped to Amy's shoulder. “Your mother and father were murdered? When? Where?”

Preston did not want to go through the nightmare again. He said, “They were attacked... Please Lily, I cannot talk about it. I've said too much and I pray you won't repeat this to a soul. It isn't over; I'm looking for someone... Maybe your brother can help me.”

“Unsaddle your horse, Preston. Davy may wake up soon and you can talk to him then. You don't have to leave....”

Preston considered a moment. “What are you going to do, Lily? I don't see that you have

enough food or supplies to nurse your brother and feed yourselves for more than a few days. What if your brother goes into a coma or dies?”

“We'll manage somehow. Davy had a few coins in his coat. We have enough to help us along for a little while.”

“How are you going to get to town? It isn't safe to go alone and you cannot leave your brother unattended.”

Lily's eyes filled with tears. She had been fighting the truth for a long while.

Preston's heart went out to her. “Lily, Amy, I can help... if you'll let me. Let's harness your mule and take that light wagon to town. I'll stand good for a load of supplies, enough until Davy is back on his feet and able to work. By then the weather will be warm enough to start a garden and sow a crop....” Lily opened her mouth to speak but Preston continued: “My father thought the war would be over by spring; your brother said the the Confederate army is losing ground. Things will be better soon, but not soon enough if you don't accept help... Please... the information Davy may have will be all the payment I could ask for.”

Lily began to cry.

Chapter 10

There were several pairs of hungry eyes watching the wagon load of essentials as it rolled out of Conception. Two youngsters were driving a mule and the freight was substantial for a single draft animal. The eye owners wondered how far those kids planned to haul that bounty; accidents and trouble along the trail were not uncommon these days...

...Two of the watchers sought their horses.

Once out of sight of the village, Diamond retrieved his father's mount from a grove where it had been tied. He had opted to bring the horse along to assist the mule if necessary, but had concealed the animal near town to avoid questions regarding the Union Army brand. The Brannigans owned two sets of harness, but had lost one half of

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their team. Pairing the saddle horse with the mule, Jerome, was out of the question; the warhorse was not broke for dray work and the mule had shown a dislike toward the new arrival. Preston figured to hitch his rope to the wagon and dally up to the saddle if the horse should be required to assist. Lily drove Jerome and wagon; Preston swung aboard the stud.

The country roads in this sparsely settled area ran along the borders of, for those with a good imagination, a rectangular pattern, tending toward north and south/east and west. Corners were not readily identifiable as ninety degrees though a compass needle may, eventually, indicate that such a turn had been made. The land had gently rolling hills with easy slopes that the mule handled without strain until, about a mile from the Brannigan farm, the convoy encountered a higher knoll that Preston felt would be too much for the tiring draft animal to tackle alone. The rider strung out his rope and hitched the big horse to the wagon. Lily urged Jerome forward and the group successfully attained the summit, then stopped for a breather. Preston removed his rope, coiled it up and strapped it on the saddle.

Bad company emerged from the brush parallel to the trail.

Preston recognized one of the ruffians as a man he had occasionally seen loitering in Conception; the other, sporting a marked white scar along his left cheek, was a stranger; the land

was overcrowded with those. *Respectable* would not be an appropriate word for either as they sat their horses in jeering silence. Overconfidence overruled sound judgement for their guns remained holstered. Preston didn't appreciate the local man's sneer, but he hated the leer the stranger directed toward Lily.

The Conception reprobate spoke first. "Well, well, you two young'uns 'specten to set up yourselves a nest somewheres? Youse shore got a passel of stores there. Might be youse'd share?"

"Might be you'd share the lady, too," said the stranger.

The raiders had edged closer as they spoke, now only the low bed wagon separated them from the boy on the cavalry horse. Lily's eyes were huge, fear clung to her like a veil. Preston recalled his vow following the encounter with the old horse thief: *'He did not wish to become a killer, but he would yield nothing without a fight.'* Staples were not worth killing or dying for, but Lily....

The holdup men had not seen a short-gun about the youth's person and must have been confident the kid would not be able to pull the rifle from its scabbard before they could draw their side-arms. They had never seen a fast draw; such things were unheard of. Preston had neither heard of, nor practised, hauling a gun out in a hurry either, so the surprise was complete when a fully cocked Colt revolver appeared in his hand. "We aren't looking for *trouble*, but I have six pieces of

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it to pass around if you fellows are. So you may as well head back to Conception. If you leave now you won't have to travel in the dark.”

With the shoe on the other foot the thieves were inclined to study their intended victims more carefully. They had seriously underestimated this boy who calmly aimed that deadly gun without so much as a tremor in his hand or break in his voice. Sadly though, there is one in every crowd; even if the crowd consists of only two or three people.

Mr. Conception shouted an anguished, “*Nooo!*” as his partner went for his gun.

Fast draw wasn't common; neither was slow-motion; had a replay been available it may have looked something like this:

Preston's bullet caught the gunman just above the thigh, ripping through gun belt, flesh and grazing the pelvic bone, tearing him from the saddle as it went. As he fell, he triggered the three-quarters drawn gun, burying a half ounce of lead in the hub of the off wheel on the wagon; the stricken man's horse reared in fright; Jerome bolted; the man from Conception had trouble with his pony as the riderless mount plunged after the mule; the cavalry stud flicked one ear forward, the other back, and Preston brought the revolver to bear on the remaining assailant as he sawed reins to regain control.

About fifty yards farther along, Lily hauled up on the lines and Jerome stopped (because mules aren't stupid) just ahead of the steep descent

on the down side of the knoll. The free horse, stirrups flapping, disappeared over the ridge. Half-Fast-Draw lay in the wagon track, moaning loudly in the sudden stillness.

The mounted assailant bawled, "Don't blast *me* out of the saddle, kid; I ain't reachen' for no gun."

But the fellow on the ground was.

Preston shifted aim, intending to destroy the gun, but the hurried shot went high. It shaved skin and shattered bone of the index finger knuckle then burned a jagged streak along the back of the outlaw's hand. A scream ended in a whimper as the fellow rolled up in fetal position and lay trembling. Once more the smoking barrel turned toward the man from Conception. His hands had moved; they were high in the air. Empty.

"Reach down with your left hand and pull your gun out, real slow, then drop it on the trail."

The man willingly complied; Preston noted the hand was shaking like the very last aspen leaf.

"Now get off your horse, on this side, and kick *both* those pistols toward me."

Without averting his gaze, Preston called, "Lily, can you see that runaway horse?"

A tremulous voice said, "Yes, it's coming back up the hill."

"Can you tie that mule to a tree, then lead the horse over here?"

From the corner of his eye Diamond watched as Lily clambered down from the wagon.

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Mr. Conception, now on the ground, had his hands in the air, palms outward. Preston repeated, "Shift those guns toward me with your toe, then step back."

Lily's face was white and her whole body was shaking as she approached, leading the errant pony. Preston said, "Alright, Lily, stop before you get that horse between me and these hoodlums. I want you to pick up their guns and take them back to the wagon. Just drop the reins; since it came back, I doubt it will run off again. I'll join you in a minute."

After the girl had started back up the trail, Preston addressed the uninjured holdup man. "Neither of you has a rifle so I'm guessing you aren't packing extra short-guns either... is that a fact?"

"No, no, kid, we got no more guns, an even if I did, I sure as hell ain't about to pull one on *you*."

"See to your friend, I don't think he's too bad off. He should be able to ride back to town."

The fetal fellow managed to stand with assistance. The lecherous leer had been replaced with a repentant scowl. Blood soaked his trousers on the wounded side and the hand looked a mess. Preston said to him, "I don't especially resent your thieving, these are hungry times, but I considered using that second bullet to cool your interest in ladies. I won't forget your face, mister. If ever I hear of you laying a hand on a woman, I'll hunt

you down and empty my gun into you... and, it will be the *last* shot that kills you. Now get on your horses and leave us alone.”

The Conception man loaded his partner into the saddle then climbed aboard his own horse. He took up the reins of both mounts then turned in the saddle. “You be'n more than fair with us, kid. Most anybody else, in your boots, woulda' shot us both and took our horses.”

Still training the Colt on them, Preston stared impassively. The fellow sighed, touched heels to his horse and led the way down the hill toward town.

Preston Diamond had learned a valuable lesson: The fellow who has his gun out first has a definite advantage.

As Preston rode up to the wagon, Lily climbed down from the box and took a few hesitant steps to meet him. “I... I heard what you said... Thank you for not killing them... I could see in your eyes... Perhaps... if I hadn't been here... If I hadn't been here... they would be dead, wouldn't they, Preston?”

Diamond thought of his mother lying bloodied and murdered. No man should ever be excused for violence against a lady. He shrugged. “If they had touched you, they would be dead.”

As the little cavalcade approached the farm, Amy ran across the yard to meet them. “Davy is awake! He's been eating food and drinking water

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on his own!” The tomboy caught the back of the wagon and scrambled up. Her eyes grew big as she surveyed the load. “Holy cow! Lily, you must have bought out the general store!”

Lily glanced at Preston. “Mr. Diamond bought out the store and then he saved our supplies from robbers.”

Amy erupted with rapid-fire questions, allowing no time for answers. The older girl parked the wagon near the step, then asked her sister to tend to the mule. “I’ll tell you all about it when we are finished with the work.”

Preston swung down from the saddle, looped the reins around a broken post and, as he loosened the girth, said, “I’ll have a chat with your brother while he is awake and then help offload these supplies. You needn’t start without me. If you could give my horse a short drink, Amy, I’d be obliged, but don’t unsaddle him... I have to head home tonight.”

“We can handle the light stuff, Preston, you go on in and see Davy.”

Davy Brannigan still lay on the bunk, but he had managed to sit up with several worn pillows tucked behind to hold him upright. More colour had returned to his features and the eyes had an alertness that was not there earlier. Preston assumed Amy had given the patient a scrub: he needed a shave, but his face was clean. His expression was one of reserve as Preston came to the bedside.

“How's the shoulder?”

Brannigan attempted a shrug, winced and said, “Well, I doubt I'll be forking hay or digging potatoes for awhile... but... if you hadn't found me, I'd be dead now. I don't know why you saved me. I owe you my life.”

Preston's gaze caught and held the wounded man's eyes. “My father was a soldier long before this war broke out. He told me men of the opposing side are right and just in their own convictions, too. War doesn't prove a point, you know, and *might* does not always make *right*. Papá said, 'If we fail to help a fallen foe, we are less a man than he was.' My father, Colonel Cutler Diamond, would have done no less for you than I did.”

Lily came through the doorway with two sacks of dried beans. She placed them on the floor below a small set of cupboards, turned to go back out, but paused as she heard Davy say, “Amy told me you had lost your parents in this war. I'm sorry.”

“They didn't die in the war, they were murdered.”

Davy slumped into the pillows. “Amy didn't tell me that. Was it recently?”

Preston looked at Lily. As before, horror masked her face and her hand covered her mouth. “Too recently... our home was attacked by three men; one a Union Army officer.” Preston's voice

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caught, "I... I don't care to talk about it. It's only been a few days."

The room was silent.

Preston felt he had to say more, he had to get Davy Brannigan to tell his story. "That night, with his dying breath, my father killed one man; my mother wounded another."

"Where were you? Did they try to kill you too, Preston?" Lily asked..

"They intended to wipe out the Diamond family. I shot the third one... dead. The wounded one, the officer got away."

"Bastards!" Davy spat, "Shooting their own soldiers." His eyes widened, "You said your father is *Colonel Diamond*?"

"Was," Preston replied bitterly.

"From what I've heard, Colonel Diamond's men would follow him through Hell. It just doesn't make sense that a fellow officer should kill him." Davy shook his head in disbelief. "And you're the son of Colonel Cutler Diamond? Your father is almost as famous as old 'Unconditional Surrender' Grant."

"The two of them have been best of friends since the Mexican War. For as long as I can remember, I've called General Grant Uncle Lyss."

Amy had returned from her errands and stood close to Lily. She said, "Davy, you said Mr. Diamond was a four-flusher when I told you he had written a note to General Grant."

“Looking back, I guess that must have sounded pretty far fetched. I didn't consider it so at the time,” said Preston.

Davy stifled a yawn and slid down into his blankets.

Preston couldn't keep the urgency out of his voice. “Mr. Brannigan, I need to know the circumstances of your killing that officer and I'd like more information about the two other instances you mentioned in which Union people shot their own.”

“Well,” Davy began, “I was planning to be a hero. I sneaked up on the Union command when the fighting was hot. I think Colonel James Unzer was in charge. I wouldn't know the fellow, but I'd heard he was an old campaigner from years back. I thought our unit would have a fighting chance if that man was eliminated. I seen him, he was an older fellow, fifty or so. Just as I was settling in for a rather long shot, I saw another fellow, a bluecoat, sneaking up behind Unzer; he hunkered down and took aim right at his own colonel! I saw bars on his sleeves and figured he was a man of rank, too. He was taking his time, looking around kind of sneaky like, so I had a couple seconds to think it over. I considered letting him shoot the colonel, then I would kill him. But that old officer just didn't deserve to be shot in the back by one of his one people, and, to be honest, the other was closer, so I shot him instead.”

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Lily said, “Then they shot you. And if Preston hadn't found you, you'd be dead; no *hero* about it.”

“Well, they didn't shoot me on the spot. I got back to my horse and then I took the ball. I rode for all old Jake could muster but he must have got hit, too. Last I remembered was Jake plowing through some trees... and then I woke up here.”

Lily explained, “Jake was one of our horses. He must have been trying to bring Davy home.”

Amy said, “Poor old Jake. We lost him and Jerry, too. Now Jerome is the only critter we have except for Lilac.”

The older girl seemed compelled to explain further, though Preston wasn't concerned for the loss of Brannigan's livestock, “Jerome and Jerry were our mule team; Jake was our riding horse; and Lilac, she's our milk cow.”

“Jerome, Jerry, Jake, Lilac and Lily...” Preston turned back to the invalid. “What can you tell me about the other incidents?”

“Spotters for the 'Sharp-shooters', that's the Confederate Army's long-range target men—they have special built rifles that can shoot a man off his horse at eight hundred yards— these spotters use telescopes and they claim to have seen men of high rank shot by their own people. One was at Shiloh and the other one at Vicksburg, I think....” Brannigan's voice trailed off.

Preston knelt beside the bed, “Did you hear any names? What was their rank?”

Davy closed his eyes, “No, I can't recall mention of names, I think the one at Shiloh was a general.”

Lily stepped to the bedside. “Davy, you best get some more rest.”

The wounded man acquiesced, he lapsed into a hoarse whisper. “That's all I can remember now, Mr. Diamond... I hope... I hope it will help you....”

As Preston arose, Amy said, “I watered your horse, Mr. Diamond.”

“Thanks, Amy. Please, call me Preston.”

He turned to Lily and said, “You Brannigans appear to have received a good education here on the edge of the wilderness; you don't talk like most people in these parts.”

“Our mother was a teacher back in England. She insisted that we learn to read and write; I suppose proper speech and manners were grilled into us as well.”

Amy said, “Mother's wish was that we should not become 'barbarians'.”

Lily asked, “What about you, Preston? You apparently have an education, too?”

“My mother and father taught me...”

Preston changed the subject. “Let's shift that wagon load into your house before the deer mice pack it off.”

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Everyone's 'load' lightened as the trio toted the supplies inside. Amy's whoops of glee as she peeked into every sack and carton were equal to a dozen kids on Christmas morning. Davy Brannigan managed to stay asleep throughout the commotion.

Lily followed Preston out to his horse when the job was completed. Tears glittered as she said, "Preston Diamond, we are so very grateful for all you have done."

Diamond smiled and his brilliant blue eyes shone. "I'm happy to have been able to help. You are really nice folks. And I thank you for helping me wi...."

His words were cut off as Lily stepped close and kissed him full on the lips.³

3. *There are shining 'moments' that stand out in one's memory and last a lifetime.*

Chapter 11

The cavalry stud had carried Preston more than two miles before the red flush faded from his face.

Rufus Tweed was overjoyed to see the young Diamond return. In his enthusiasm, the big fellow almost capered about the horse and rider. "I knowed yo be gone long tam, Press, but ol' Rufus, he worri'n an fret'n: Mebbe dis tam dat boy don' come back."

"Well, I am sorry for being gone so much, Rufus. I'll see to Papá's horse and then you and I can make plans for the farm."

Rufus's eyes lit up at mention of the farm, but he made no comment. Instead he asked, "Mebbe yo got de hongers, Press?"

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“Yes, Rufus, if you have any on hand, I could eat a few helpings of that Rufus Stew.”

The black man was so excited to be discussing farm work and making plans for spring planting that he made the conversation rather one-sided. Preston listened without interrupting, but he wondered at the man's ardency; after all, Rufus had handled all the duties and decisions for the Diamond farm since his arrival. Reliable and completely capable, the worker had done as he thought best; Cutler Diamond, a career soldier with no agrarian experience, had not interfered. The hired hand was known to the merchants of Conception and they also realized the regard the Diamonds held for their helper. Rufus ran the farm.

Realization elbowed Preston in the ribs: The new season would be a new beginning for Rufus! Preston had insisted the black man was now a full partner in the farming operation. He was no longer a hired man; he was a farmer. No doubt it would be the biggest event since the former slave's emancipation. Anticipation must have had the fellow chewing his nails down to the first knuckle.

Preston's smile caused Rufus to slow his chatter, a flicker of concern crossed his round face. “Yo okay wid dat plan, now, Press?”

“You bet, Rufus. Whatever *you* think is good for me. Maybe we want to buy more livestock? Another cow? Pigs? Chickens? Goats? We'll make this place prosper.”

“We don' got 'nough money to be buyin' all dem animals. We gonna grow good crop dis year; mebbe nex' year we buys one mo' cow.”

Preston said, “If you want a cow, we'll buy one right away.”

“Nah, Press, dis farm gwyne be good farm sum day. It got de bes' dirt an' water an' all dat we need. But we don' spen' money dat de farm don' pays. We make de farm grow sum mo' ebbry year an' den little mo' tam, de farm pay mo' an' mo'.

The Diamonds had not been extravagant people. Because they were often on the move, they had not accumulated “stuff” nor spent foolishly. Señora Diamond had a wardrobe of fine clothes that travelled with them from post to post. When Cutler Diamond had bought the little farm along the Patowmack River, he hoped to permanently settle his family and had promised his beautiful wife “a house fit for a princess.” No doubt Constantina would have had that home, but the Civil War stalled Cutler's plans; it stalled the plans of an entire nation. Now, Señora Diamond would never have her castle.... Preston knew the family had wealth but the fact had never influenced him one way or the other. Life was easy for a boy of thirteen years old. Why complicate it with money? Now Preston accepted the advice of his partner and friend. The hidden 'cookie jar' in the farm house contained enough money to buy all of Rufus's dreams, but Preston decided to follow the black man's advice. He did

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insist they should buy chickens and Rufus liked the idea.

Next day, the partners drove the mule and wagon up to the former hired man's shanty. They loaded the remainder of Rufus's effects, then set to work dismantling the old cabin. Washington made three trips hauling the lumber home. The following day, Rufus and Preston rebuilt the structure to be used as a hen house. Enquiries in the village led them to a farmer who had chickens for sale. A dozen laying hens and a rooster were transported home and locked in the new coop.

Mid-week, a late snow storm swept in from the north-east, burying the farm in a foot of white slush. New projects were postponed and Preston passed a couple of rough days in the formerly happy home. Memories and sadness tortured him. Nighttime, alone in his room, he could hear the reassuring murmur of his parents talking downstairs. Once he crept out of bed and sat at the top of the stair, but the voices vanished. Sleep would finally come when he concentrated on the memory of a pretty farm lass standing beside her washing tub. House-bound during the day, after the necessary outdoor chores were completed, he found solace in the study of his father's army journals:

“Today I passed a few hours in discussion with my new acquaintance, First Lieutenant Ulysses Grant. One has to be cautious in

C. C. Phillips

expressing opinions contrary to those of our leaders, but I believe Lieutenant Grant is opposed to this conflict with Mexico. He appeared openly grieved by the shocking atrocities our soldiers (more specifically the volunteers) have subjected the Mexican civilians. Reports are singularly distressing, however I have no first hand observation as yet. I do not know how I might react should I encounter this (rumoured) abusive behaviour...”

Preston had often heard of how the friendship between his father and Grant had evolved. They had initially met on the battlefield.

He skimmed through the pages:

Our regiment swept through a small pueblo this morning. The Mexican force offered little resistance. We bivouacked on the edge of the village. This evening I heard distressful screams coming from one of the adobe homes and hurried to investigate. First Lieutenant Wiley and a volunteer were viciously abusing a young Mexican girl. My temper got the better of me. I beat them both senseless. Because Wiley holds a higher rank than myself, I may face a court-martial. Ulysses says he will speak for me. The man is quite polished and I believe he will smooth over the incident. In any event, I shall never condone Wiley's actions.

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Several days later:

Our company encountered a brief flurry of resistance today but the Mexican forces, so inferior in tactics and weaponry, were soon routed. We suffered ten casualties, they lost nearly a hundred soldiers and many more were injured. Prisoners were taken, but we haven't the facilities to deal with them. I would be satisfied to have them disarmed and released.

General Taylor visited our camp. He addressed the report of my beating a superior officer. Fortunately for me, Lieutenant Grant spoke in my defence and the tables were turned on Lieutenant Wiley. The general sternly dressed me down for striking a superior officer, however he worked himself into a rage when reprimanding Wiley for his conduct. Lieutenant Wiley's old grudge against me has renewed force. The man was dripping venom when I chanced to see him looking at me. Ulysses has warned me to "cover my back."

Captain Everett Wiley was not mentioned again for the duration of the Mexican-American War. Preston assumed that the officer had been transferred or injured and sent home. His father's words further explained a motive for Wiley's vengeance; it also intimated why Señora Diamond had been taken as well.

After the entries concerning the war, Preston followed his father across the Atlantic and read a behindhand entry of the fight with the Spaniard, Christobal Alcares; the death of Preston's grandfather; and his mother's escape from Queen Isabella. Daily entries were sketchy during Cutler's seasickness en route to Spain and absent during his convalescence on the return voyage. When Cutler was able to write again, the notes focused on his '*beautiful nurse*' and soon, his new bride.

Happy times were spent during Diamond's posting at Fort Humboldt with Captain Ulysses Grant. It was there that Cutler was promoted to First Lieutenant. Preston's eyes filled with tears when he read: "*Last evening, Lyss came for a visit (he is so fond of Constantina's Spanish cooking). He quite accurately labelled her 'a Diamond in the rough.'*" How often Preston had heard this term whenever his parents talked of Uncle Ulysses.

The well travelled apple crate contained genealogical records from both his mother's and his father's side of the family; the former in Spanish, the latter in English. Preston was literate and fluent in both languages. The last of the Diamonds, Preston now made a solemn vow to maintain the honour of his father's name. He found other important documents as well and diligently reviewed all the papers. He found a handwritten will, witnessed by Ulysses Grant. The contents inevitably named Preston the soul

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heir. His mother's wealth, a small fortune in Spanish gold, was secured in a bank vault in Washington, DC.

In the same folder, there was a sealed envelope bearing a name written in Cutler Diamond's elegant script: Ulysses S. Grant. Only the name was included, no address accompanied the letter. Preston could only guess at the contents of the missive but he felt certain it had to do with the event of his father's death. Had Cutler suspected that someone was hunting him? Did he know Señora Diamond's life may be in danger? Maybe not, soldiering is not a secure occupation. But Preston believed there must be more direction written in the journals. Perhaps he should skip the intervening years and begin at the time of Cutler Diamond's engagement in the Civil War. The decision made, Preston dug through the diaries and, to be on the safe side commenced reading the book for 1860. As the years neared the present he perused the writings more closely. His father had moved up the ranks over the years: Cutler became Major Diamond at the outbreak of the current conflict; two years later, General Grant promoted him to Lieutenant Colonel; in mid 1864, his last promotion, Colonel Diamond: associate and advisor to Lieutenant General Grant.

From September, 1864 Preston read the following:

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Today I encountered former West Point colleague, Everett Wiley, who now holds the rank of Captain. We have not crossed paths since the Mexican War, however, our differences in the past have not been forgotten. His venomous hatred for me was ill-concealed. The years have not been favourable to the officer; he looks, at best, a decade older than other West Point mates I have met in recent years.

Diamond turned from the book, hoping to read between the lines: Cutler Diamond held rank of Lieutenant Colonel while Wiley had only moved up one grade from the First Lieutenant promotion he'd received during the Mexican/American War. That realization must have chafed the little officer's self-esteem and would have fostered further anger. On another point, Preston wondered, how, or when, did Wiley become informed of the beauty of Señora Diamond? Did he actually see her or was he simply going on hearsay? From the words he had heard while hiding at the top of the stair that night, Preston deduced that the ruffians who died during the attack on his parents knew of Constantina Diamond beforehand; the beautiful lady could have been offered as enticement for the civilian rogues who assisted Wiley. And later, Cyril and Joe, Captain Wiley's soldiers who came to Diamond farm for a visit and wound up staying, spoke coarsely of Señora Diamond, too; Preston

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had overheard their conversation through the tent wall. In the same conversation they had referred to Wiley as a *rapin' ol' bastard*.

Unseeing, the boy stared at the journal. He saw his father's crumpled body at the foot of the stair; his mother laying dead on the cold, damp earth in the yard. Tears of sadness steeped with tears of anger trailed down his face. Preston Diamond renewed his vow of vengeance: he would personally escort Captain Everett Wiley to a 'very special' hell.

Chapter 12

The late winter sun rose with renewed warmth as determined rays roused resistant crystals of frost from the depths of the wagon ruts leading up to Diamond/Tweed farm. Icy dew drops transformed into wavering wisps of mist, then vanished under the onslaught of a breath of breeze. Soggy remnants of slushy snow in shaded areas, under trees, or in depressions where light did not reach, began to trickle and shrink. A preview of spring.

Diamond led Rascal from the corral, tied him in front of the barn and methodically went about the business of saddling. Though there still remained much to do on the farm, as always there would be, Preston could delay no longer. Today

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he would take up the trail of the injured Captain Wiley.

In the short week (made shorter by the storm) since the boy's hiatus from the hunt, he and Rufus had accomplished a fair amount of work: in addition to the construction of the hen coop, the barn roof had been patched, harness mended, equipment repaired. The pair had cut and peeled saplings for corral rails, replaced damaged poles in the existing enclosure and built a second, larger pen. Rufus's songs filled the air as the freed man poured his soul into the work; he planned to begin working the ground as soon as the fields dried sufficiently.

Preston would not be there to help.

Rufus did not attempt to dissuade his young partner. Over the past few days, he had witnessed the haunted, screaming torture in the boy's eyes, saw the damp tracks of wretched tears, watched the burning seething anger and sensed the smoldering fires of vengeance as a regiment of conflicting emotions marched through Preston's scarred and scared mind.

And Rufus prayed.

A man of strong emotion, tears filled the black fellow's huge eyes as he held the reins and Preston swung into the saddle. "Yo got to watch yo back, Press. De comin' after yo now. It ain' righ', dem mens murd'ren yo fambly, an' I knowd yo be doin' de righ t'ing now, Press. I don' knowd why yo got dis all on yo shoders an' n'body hepin'

yo, but las' nigh', m' mammy, she tol me, de Lor' he watchin' ober yo, Press. M' mammy she tol' me dat las' nigh'."

Preston took up the reins and touched his friend's hand. As the gelding danced away, Diamond said, "Thanks, Rufus. I'll be careful... I'll be back."

Rascal wanted to go and the rider gave him his head. The wind on Preston's face and the freedom of the pace fanned smoldering embers and rekindled the fire of youth temporarily dampened by melancholy and haunting memories. In a few minutes the gelding had carried him within sight of Conception, and though the animal fought the bit, Preston reined in and brought the horse to a walk. Diamond kept his eyes open for trouble as he sorted his thoughts.

The previous night, Diamond had determined a direction though, today, destination remained vague: In the final entries of Cutler's last journal, he had found the information his father had spoke of at the field cemetery near Alexandria. Cutler Diamond had known, or strongly suspected, that a treasonous clique had formed within the blue-coated Army:

"There are persons within the Union Army who are responsible for the deaths of our own commanding officers. A traitorous conspiracy runs deep, our senior rank are being murdered.

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Though the Confederate 'Sharp-shooters', with their long range rifles, have accounted for many casualties, including officers, I am convinced that these snipers did not shoot General Taggart at Shiloh. The report of Major Stevens' killing on the battlefield at Vicksburg is highly suspicious as well (there are too many conflicting stories, none of them entirely plausible). This morning, I received a report that Brigadier General Monroe has been stabbed to death while studying a topographical map in his field tent. I find it quite inconceivable that 'a Confederate soldier sneaked into camp and knifed the general' in broad daylight. How convenient, 'No witnesses were present... junior officers could not account for the murder.' More evidence is required, however, my immediate duty is to preserve the lives of those in my command and this does not permit time for an investigation. Foremost, I fear for the life of my dear and trusted friend, Ulysses, but I also believe President Lincoln may be in danger.

If my men can take this hill in the next several days I shall ride to Washington. I must discuss this with General Grant at the earliest moment....

Colonel Diamond's notes correlated the report Davy Brannigan had given. Preston had scrutinized the journals and shook out every leaflet and paper in the apple crate, but he had not found any names or additional information

concerned with a possible conspiracy. Perhaps Cutler had confided in his wife while home on leave, but Preston had heard nothing. The fact that his father would take time for leave under these critical conditions seemed totally out of character as well. Colonel Diamond's notes stated an urgency to talk with General Grant, but when Cutler was home, he had mentioned that Ulysses was still at Richmond. Had he been awaiting Grant's return to Washington?

Perhaps the letter addressed to Ulysses Grant would contain more information. Preston slipped a hand inside his coat, and touched the envelope tucked in the pocket of his shirt; his father's unfinished journal lay in one of the stuffed saddle bags.

Toward General Grant was the direction Preston had chosen to ride.

A pretty chestnut mare standing between the wooden shaves of a canopied buggy at the clinic watched with mild interest as Rascal and Preston trotted past. He wondered where Captain Wiley and the “*tall, reddish-blond, sort of a handsome...*” bluecoat described by the physician had disappeared to when they left Filmore's place over a week ago.

Preston's jaw clenched; he hoped Wiley was alive and in plenty of pain wherever he may be.

The chosen road would lead first to Washington. Preston intended to find news of General Grant and then find him. Though the

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issues were inevitably tied together, Diamond had decided to temporarily abandon the vengeance trail in favour of delivering the letter his father had written and, more importantly, Cutler's words concerning a conspiracy.

The missive written on Lily's lavender scented stationary may have been lost or intercepted. Had he received it, Uncle Ulysses could not fail to understand the message nor would he ignore it, but the man was President Lincoln's top general, firmly locked in the throes of a civil war; there would be little time for his own family let alone the son of a friend. It could take months.... That same 'son-of-a-friend' now considered how insignificant his appeal may appear in the eyes of Uncle Lyss.

Conception Landing lay on the south-east side of the village, or, more accurately, the village sprang up north-west of the landing: someone had to cross the river before the town could be built. The barge that carried passengers, freight, animals and vehicles across the wide Patowmack was inbound, about a quarter mile out, when Diamond reined into the clearing along the shore. Several people had arrived ahead of him and Preston nodded a solemn greeting. A black couple and three ragged children huddled in silence on a small floating dock moored along the shore. Two bluecoats squatted on the ground holding the reins of a pair of hip-shot horses; though they made no

comment, the soldiers cast envious eyes upon Preston's gelding.

A farm wagon hitched to four horses and loaded with bulging grain sacks pulled into the landing; a farmer drove the team while a second man holding a rifle sat on the load behind him.

Preston returned his gaze to the ferry. It had swiftly cut the distance. The boat rode low in the water, its deck had little free space. At the stem, a bearded man, dressed in rough clothing and slouch hat, held the halter shank of a saddled and nervous bay mare. The captain of the barge, also sporting a growth of whiskers, stepped past and growled something Preston could not hear. From his vantage point astride Rascal, Diamond briefly scrutinized the load: two blue coats stood beside two more saddled horses; four walk-on passengers were seated on their duffel; a varied assortment of cargo lay strewn and heaped along both rails; besides the captain, there were two crewmen. The horse at the front reared and the bearded man's hand rode up the shank seeking a tighter grip as the animal came back down. "I told you to hold that bloody horse!" the boatman growled. The man on the halter did not seem at all troubled by the unruly horse, nor the shouts directed his way. The iron-on-iron screech of protesting heavy hinges broke across the distance from barge to shore as the operator cranked on a winch, allowing the beaver tail to fold down into docking position. The river slapped and swirled around the wooden

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ramp as it touched the water. The mare's eyes rolled but she didn't fight. Preston could now see that she had four rather exaggerated even white socks.

A pair, driven by two young men, and pulling an empty buckboard, swung into the landing at a trot. The nigh lad hauled on the lines and the team pranced to a stop. His partner hopped down, made his way to the front and began tying the horses to a snubbing post. Diamond surmised they were the barge's freight crew.

When Preston again focused on the boat it was only feet from the landing. The swarthy boatman, heavy rope in hand, timed his leap to shore, then quickly moored the barge to a sturdy pillar. Diamond glanced around and noticed the bearded chap keenly studying him; more accurately, *studying Rascal*. The stare shifted to meet Preston's gaze. The slouch hat dipped to cover the man's shaded eyes, but Preston caught the slightest wink of recognition.

Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant.

Chapter 13

He wanted to shout; he wanted to cry; he wanted to laugh; he wanted to run away, to hide; instead, weak as a still-wet pup, Preston silently slumped in the saddle; pent up waves of strain, grief, and misery washed through his tortured soul and trickled away down into the Patowmack, leaving him atremble with utter, blessed relief. He was no longer alone.

The mare at the front was led off the boat first and she made a much exaggerated leap to clear the ramp, coming up short on the shank as the owner's firm hand kept her under control. He coiled the lead, gathered the reins and, as the bay tried in vain to dance away, swung into the saddle. The two bluecoats disembarking nodded silent acknowledgement to the Union soldiers who were

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now preparing to board. Neither pair offered any indication of knowing the civilian passenger now astride the troublesome mare, but Preston would have bet his gelding and saddle that they did.

The man with the beard swung his mount close enough to the ferryman to drop a coin in the outstretched hand, then expertly backed the green-broke mare away and turned her toward Preston. "Excuse me, young man, could you direct me to a *Mr. Tweed*? I believe he lives in, or near, Conception? I have an urgent message for him."

"Yes, sir, I know a Mr. Tweed. If you'd like to follow me, I can take you to his house."

"How very fortunate." Waving a gesture with an open palm, he said, "Lead on, my good fellow."

The flighty young mare rolled her eyes and tossed her head, eager to be shut of the barge. Rascal, still full of energy, had to be held back too, as the riders started off. Preston noticed that the bluecoats who had been on the boat swung into their saddles and followed behind at a distance.

Out of earshot of the ferry, Preston blurted, "Uncle Lyss, I was coming to find you!"

Ulysses smiled and said, "It was a lucky chance for us to have met just there. I recognized your horse first, I was there when Cut... when your father bought him."

When the youth didn't respond, his companion continued, "I am sorry, Preston. There has been so much killing... so much death over

the past four years... even so, I cannot find words to express my deepest sorrow at your loss. It won't help to know that I share your burden, for I loved your parents with all my heart. Cutler Diamond has been... and always will be... my true and trusted friend."

"One of the killers is still alive, Uncle Lyss! Mother shot him, but he got away. He's a Captain in Union Army, he's...."

The pair had covered the short distance from Conception Landing to the edge of the village. No one was nearby, but Grant held up a hand. "Hold on, Preston, the streets have ears in Virginia. Wait until we are through the town before telling me your story. Is there any reason to avoid being seen with me and," he jerked a thumb to indicate the followers, "those two behind us?"

Preston reined in. Though he could think of nothing specific, he said, "I know a longer way that misses the town."

Once out of view of townsfolk, the restless young horses were allowed a faster pace. Preston led the group a circuitous route along a treed lane and out into an open field along the south and west sides of Conception. The mounts were slowed to pass through an untracked brush-choked stretch, then given rein as they broke out into the open. Soon the path connected with the wagon road that angled toward Diamond farm; the riders pulled rein again and slowed their horses. The soldiers

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were tagging along, but they had lost a little ground.

Grant patted the neck of his mare. "I've always been a fool for buying a good horse even though I can't afford it, but this one, Socks, was worth every penny. I intend to keep her for a long time."

Preston said, "Papá bought this horse for me. His name is Rascal."

Ulysses's kind eyes looked deep into the powder blues of the young Diamond. "Okay, Preston, if you feel up to it, I need to hear the entire story. If, at any time, you want to stop for awhile, that's alright. We can continue later. But I must know everything you can recall."

Grant's face reflected his emotions as he listened to the boy's grim and gruesome nightmare. Tears welled up in the General's eyes. Shadows of dark anger flitted across the swarthy features and the soft kindness Preston had known so well returned when the narration was complete. The horses had made their way along the wagon track and turned down Diamond Lane. Uncle Lyss remained silent as the pair rode into the yard.

In the distance, the ring of an axe sounded as they neared the farm; now, about a half mile northwest, from the direction of the river, Rufus could be seen leading Washington toward home. The mule was in harness and had a limbed log in tow. First the mule, then Rufus, saw the riders coming into the yard. Preston took off his hat and

waved it high in the air. Rufus waved back and Washington brayed his welcome.

Preston said, "Rufus bringing home a log of ash for firewood... I've asked Rufus to become a half-owner in the farm. It's too late to change my mind, but do you think I did the right thing, Uncle Lyss?"

Ulysses thought a moment. "I don't believe you could have found a more honest or capable partner, Preston. I think it is an excellent idea."

For the first time since seeing Ulysses, Preston thought of the letter and the will. "I know you witnessed my father's will. Could you do the same for an official record of Rufus owning the farm?"

Grant said, "Well, I'm not an official in that capacity, however, I believe my signature may carry some weight. Of course I will witness it for you."

The riders reined up in front of the barn and swung down from their saddles.

Reaching in his pocket, Preston withdrew the envelope. "This is the reason I was coming to find you... I thought you were too busy to come to me..."

General Grant accepted the letter and motioned to the two escort soldiers who had stopped their horses at the edge of the yard. As they rode near, he said, "Ride up to that higher ground, there, and there," he indicated first one and then the other, "and keep a lookout. The man

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headed this way with the mule knows we are here. I shall be in conference with this young gentleman for a few hours. I intend to be on that ferry going back across the river this evening.”

“Yessir.” They saluted and rode in the direction of the ridge.

Preston said, “If you like, I’ll see to your mare while you read Papá’s letter.”

When Preston emerged from the barn where he had tied the mounts, Grant was staring at the paper but did not appear to be reading. He looked up. “Your father has written two letters, Preston. The first is dated four years ago, after the start of the war. In it he has requested that I look after you and your mother in the event of his death. Being the thorough man he was, he also allowed for the possibility that your mother would not survive him. So... young man, as per your father’s wishes, you are in my charge until you are grown up. I can never be the father you have known, but I swear on Cutler Diamond’s name that I shall honour his trust.”

Before Preston could answer, the jingle of traces announced that Rufus had reached the yard. Grant said, “We’ll say hello to Rufus, then you and I can continue our discussion. I have more questions now and even fewer answers.”

The black man was overjoyed to see “Missah Grant.” He wore a smile as wide as the Patowmack as he pumped the General’s hand. Ulysses was obviously pleased to see his former

slave as well. Rufus said, "T's gwyne put dis mule in de co'ral, den I be fixin' sum grub fo' yo's... An' it sho' good t' see yo back home so soon, too, Press."

Rufus insisted upon taking a lunch to the sentinels on the ridge. In his absence, Ulysses and Preston talked. Grant had many questions about the night of the murders and the army's subsequent investigation. Preston had told Grant nothing about his own adventures after the army left.

"When I received your message, the one from 'Lieutenant Tweed,' I was shocked. The report of your father's death had stated that you and your mother had died the night of the raid. It is war time, but our soldiers should have been much more vigilant in their investigation. Colonel Diamond was a highly distinguished officer; he and his family deserved a better effort from the Union Army. I shall have questions upon my return to Washington."

"I hid from them, Uncle Lyss. I was afraid. I didn't know if they were after me, too. Maybe I wasn't thinking straight... but I saw a bluecoat ride away that night."

"Now, you heard the name Wiley? You saw his insignia? Those men with Captain Wiley... they were not in uniform? They weren't soldiers of either army? How do you know they didn't have uniforms?"

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“The detail that came and took Papá and Mother away buried the killers on the far side of our yard. I dug them up. They were brothers.

“Uncle Lyss... I... I've been on the trail of Captain Wiley. He has to pay for what he did to my mother and father.”

“Preston, for God's sake, lad, you are thirteen years old. You can't go hunting armed killers.”

Diamond corrected, “I turned fourteen today or yesterday, Uncle Lyss.” Then he told the rest of the story.

Grant's jaw sagged, his eyes opened wider as he listened. The boy kept the killing of the intended horse thief, Rufus's part in the second raid at Diamond farm, and the saving of Davy Brannigan, a Confederate soldier, to himself. When Preston had finished, Grant shook his head in disbelief. “So, there are four dead men, two of them Union soldiers, buried in a corner of your yard? You... a boy... granted, the son of Cutler Diamond, but still a boy... You have killed three men?”

Preston was glad he hadn't mentioned shooting the ruffian who tried to steal Rascal. Now he said truthfully, “Yes, Sir.”

Grant slipped a hand inside his coat and extracted the two letters from Cutler Diamond. Opening the second, he said, “I have wondered at times about the deaths of our officers, but I have been too preoccupied with battle to delve into it.

What you have told me, and what Colonel Diamond has written in this report, now removes all doubt from my mind.”

“There's more....”

“What? What else, Preston?”

Diamond squared his shoulders and looked straight into General Grant's eyes. “I found a wounded soldier, I took him to a farm and they patched him up. He told me that he saw a Union officer aiming to kill a Union colonel. It was Colonel Unzer, I know of him because he was Papá's friend, too. But the soldier shot the traitor who was figuring to shoot Colonel Unzer.”

Grant interrupted, “Hold on a moment. This fellow you found wounded, shot an officer of his own side?”

“No, Sir. He shot a Union officer, Sir. He... the man I saved... was a Confederate soldier.”

Grant chuckled. “I know exactly what you are thinking. Trust me, in your shoes, both your father or I would have done the same thing.” He added, “And, you don't have to call me sir.”

Preston excused himself for a few minutes, then returned with his father's most recent journal. He also brought a pen, ink and a sheet of paper. “Uncle Lyss, if you could tell me what to write, I'll make up a paper for Rufus being half owner of our farm.” Indicating the journal, he said, “This book shows that Papá knew there were traitors in the bluecoat Army. Maybe you will find something in it that I missed.”

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After General Grant wrote his signature on the document, he perused Colonel Diamond's journal while Preston read the two letters. The original letter, as Ulysses had said, pertained to the guardianship. Cutler Diamond, well aware of Preston's thirst for learning, wanted his son to have a well-rounded education. He did not suggest that the boy should follow in his father's footsteps, for Cutler believed the life of a soldier would not satisfy Preston's inquisitive nature. "... encourage him to learn something about everything that takes his fancy, from the work of tradesmen, to law and politics. Give him access to arts, language and culture, for he has been denied this during his early life in forts on the frontier...". The latter sentence reflected the wishes of Constantina Diamond, for she had wanted her son to realize the noble lineage of his Spanish grandfather. Colonel Diamond had ended the dissertation with a reference to the the will and estate for which Ulysses had been named executor: "*In the event that Preston should reside under your roof, Lyss, use a portion of his inheritance to ensure that your own children have the same opportunities.*"

The second letter echoed Colonel Diamond's conviction that a conspiracy had developed. Cutler had written the message knowing that he may not be alive to deliver it in person. He had not sent it via messenger lest it should be intercepted, thus alerting the conspirators. Again

he expressed concern for General Grant as well as President Lincoln.

Ulysses stopped reading the journal as Preston placed the letters on the table. “Your father had orders to meet me in Washington. He came home on leave to await my return. I could not join him at the appointed time, so I sent a messenger. It would have been that dispatch rider who found you and brought you into the house that morning.”

Rufus knocked on the door, then entered noiselessly. Preston held up the freshly inked deed. “It's official, Rufus, you are a half owner in Diamond/Tweed Farm.” He pointed out Ulysses writing. “This signature will look the same as the one on your emancipation paper. No one will question it.”

Grant stood and shook the black man's hand, and with a warm smile, said, “Well, Mr Tweed, you aren't a free man anymore... you're a farmer. And in my limited experience that isn't freedom.”

Chapter 14

Again the ferry boat was incoming when Preston, Ulysses and the two soldiers returned to Conception Landing. General Grant had decided to take Preston to Washington and set him up there. “Mrs. Grant travels with me when she can. We find a safe place for her and the children to stay as near as possible to my command; it isn't a great deal different from your life in the forts. But you've had enough of frontier living and, in accordance with your father's wishes, I'll find quarters for you in the capital. When this war is over and I am settled, you will move in with my family.”

Preston had been reluctant to abandon his search for Captain Wiley, but he considered that there may be a thread to trace in DC. Maybe

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someone knew where the wounded traitor had gone. Maybe Wiley was in Washington now. It seemed unlikely the fellow would return to Conception, in any event.

Diamond knew the war had thrown the Capital into a state of turmoil. His parents had taken him there twice in the last two years. The trips had been army business for Cutler and an outing for Constantina, but Preston had been appalled at the horrendous living conditions. Homeless crowded the streets, children were sick and starving, horses and soldiers were everywhere. Preston did not doubt that General Grant would find accommodation for him now; Uncle Lyss was the president's right hand man.

Preston was astride Rascal with his father's cavalry mount in tow. Good horses were in high demand and General Grant had deemed the stud to be Union Army property. Rufus was left with the mule and an older mare the Diamond's had purchased with the farm. Cutler's cavalry saddle remained on its post in the Diamond/Tweed barn.

When the cavalcade had left the farm, one soldier rode ahead about a hundred yards and the other trailed the same distance behind. Grant had stood in the stirrups to study the four mounds of fresh dirt just beyond view of the trail. He said nothing and his features showed no emotion when he shifted his focus to his young companion. They rode in silence, allowing the horses a faster pace. This time the company rode through the

town. Preston noted that Doctor Filmore had a buggy, a different one from the other day, and a saddled horse, a dark coloured mare, picketed in front of his clinic. He wondered if the good doctor had seen any more of Captain Wiley.

The same gruff fellow who had been at the helm on the morning trip was steering the boat when it coasted to shore this afternoon. There were four civilian passengers incoming; two on foot, two mounted. No one other than General Grant, Preston and the two soldiers were waiting at the Conception side. Soon, the freight crew arrived to meet the barge.

The bearded boatman glared as his passengers debarked then growled at the others to stand by until the freight was unloaded. Ulysses cautioned Preston, "Don't pay the ferryman until he gets you to the other side."

On this crossing, Preston noted, there were a different pair of crewmen, one black, the other white; they helped the freight people transfer cargo from barge to wagon and vice versa. The exchange went quickly and soon the surly Captain motioned the new passengers aboard. He muttered something about Grant's bay mare as she balked at being led onto the boat. The boat was loosed from its moorings and the crew hauled the boat into deep water. A rider on a hard ridden horse raced up to the river and called for the crew to come back, but the ferry captain ignored him.

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The boat was about two hundred yards out when Preston again looked back at the shore. The freight wagon had left the landing; the late arrival had hunkered down behind the mooring pillar. His legs and a fraction of the lower torso could be seen on either side; he was peeking around the piling but his head was obfuscated by the rifle he aimed toward the barge. Preston shouted for General Grant to duck down but at that instant a puff of smoke rose from the gun barrel, a deadly whizzing hissed past Preston and the ferryman took the bullet in the head. The delayed report of the rifle boomed across the water as the barge captain pitched overboard into the swirling Patowmack. Rifles were jerked out of scabbards and the bluecoats opened fire on the sniper. Socks, the general's mare, started plunging and rearing. Preston fought to hold Rascal as he tried to avoid the kicking, squealing bay. From the corner of his eye Diamond watched the rifleman. He wasn't preparing for another shot; in the midst of the soldiers' bullets, he calmly stood up holding something in his hand that did not look like a rifle; there was a silver flash of steel as he raised both arms over his head and swung down.

An axe.

With two vicious strokes he severed the heavy rope that crossed the river to guide the ferry.

The black crewman momentarily released his grip on the cable and when he grasped at it again, the unexpected tug of the line knocked his

head against the stanchion; his eyes rolled into his head and he fell face first onto a pile of feed sacks. The white lad also let go, and now stood dazedly watching the current take the boat..

Ulysses barked, "Man the ropes! Soldiers to the ropes."

Preston grabbed the reins of the bluecoats' horses as the men scrambled to assist the lone conscious crewman. The ferry, having lost its tether on the south shore, swung with the current and swept down the river. Preston could see that Grant's strategy was to keep the north shore end of the barge anchored to land, but pulling directly into the current with the keel propulsion out of position was a losing battle for the men on the ropes. The boat was atilt and drifting faster downstream than it was toward shore. The river was climbing aboard; a widening stream made its way through the cargo strewn on deck. General Grant, still holding the halter shank of the trembling mare, shouted more orders. "Preston, fetch the horses to the centre and rear of the boat. Try to hold 'em there." The mounts were nervous and the antics of the green broke bay were agitating them further. Ulysses tugged a revolver from his coat and shot the mare dead. Preston quickly sorted through the three pairs of reins and found the halter shank belonging to the cavalry stud; he led the big horse forward and the others trailed in a tight group. There was no fear in the eyes of the warhorse and, as Preston had hoped,

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the bay helped to steady the others. Hoofs slipping on the slanted deck, the animals scrambled astern. With the weight of the four remaining mounts positioned as Grant had directed, the boat slowly righted itself.

The frazzled tail of the line rope could be seen trailing beside the ferry; there wasn't much left. But the swinging ferry was now nearer land and the current was less. Grant stepped over his dead horse and swept up the mooring rope from the deck. Hastily he fashioned a loop around the land line ahead of the men fighting with the thick cable. The General managed to throw two more half-hitches round the rope and, pulling it tight, slowed the pay-out of the line. Gradually it caught and held. Sometime during the melee the black cable man had regained consciousness and was doing his share on the rope. Ulysses said, "That'll do."

The ferry rode fairly evenly until it swept into the shallows near the river bank. Water dammed up ahead of the raised beaver tail ramp creating more pressure on the straining line cable and the mooring line. Both lines held and gradually the flow raised the prow of the boat enough to shift the vessel closer to shore. Finally the ferry came to rest about thirty feet from the willow lined bank.

"Lower the rear ramp," Grant ordered the deck hands. "Soldiers, cover the shoreline, watch for an ambush on this side." In a softer tone he

said, "Preston, take my rig from this dead mare and put it on your father's horse. You can drop the reins; those horses aren't about to trot off this deck now."

Grant paced up and down the deck, occasionally pausing to peer into the willows on the near side and checking the far shore for activity there. The distance was nearly half a mile, and there was no sign of the axeman. Ulysses helped Preston tug the cinches and stirrup from the underside of the dead animal. Cutler Diamond's warhorse was outfitted with the mare's rig; Grant swung into the saddle. From this higher elevation the general could see farther into the thick brush beside the grounded ferry. After a moment he motioned to Preston to mount up then ordered the soldiers to do the same.

From Rascal's saddle Diamond studied the seemingly impenetrable shore line. Though he saw nothing his keen ears caught the sounds of activity in the willows. "Uncle Lyss, there is someone coming."

Grant said, "There ought to be two more privates awaiting our landing on the Washington side. Can you tell if they are moving steadily or trying to hide their approach?"

The noise had become a steady crashing, drawing nearer. Before Preston could respond, Grant said, "Yes, I can hear them now. It must be our men but keep a sharp eye. Take nothing for granted."

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Crashing became splashing and two bluecoats on horseback appeared about a hundred yards downstream from the marooned ferry boat. As their horses struggled upstream to the stranded passengers, General Grant led the way off the barge. The cavalry mount gathered his feet, leaped over the ramp and plunged into the river. Rascal tossed his head and fought the bit but he followed the stud and Preston involuntarily hoisted his boots as the Patowmack swirled around his stirrups. The third horse clumsily made the jump into the water but the fourth lost footing and took a spill on the beaver tail ramp. It went in sideways and the soldier was unseated. The current caught him and he could not touch bottom. Preston was closest and he swung Rascal in front as the soldier swept by. The bluecoat caught Preston's outstretched hand and was able to grasp a stirrup. The water was Virginia winter cold and the fellow was turning blue by the time Preston and Ulysses had hauled him up on the back of the stud behind the general. The riderless horse managed to right itself and, half wading, half swimming, struck out for shore. By this time the soldiers coming to the rescue had arrived; Preston recognized them as the pair who had boarded the ferry when Grant arrived at Conception Landing this morning. Grant ordered them, "Catch up that mount and go fetch the boat crew to shore."

Preston looked back at the ferry settling in the muddied water; it was a sorry sight; the dead

mare lay in the midst of waterlogged freight and the two stranded crewmen looked as forlorn as a chained up hound.

Grant led the group downstream and found the muddied track where the soldiers had entered the river. The horses were put up the slippery bank, fought their way through the willows and reined in in a small clearing. The extra men were let off the horses and, as the wet and shivering bluecoat made to climb into his saddle, Grant advised, "You best build a fire and dry your duds or you'll be catching the fever."

Preston considered asking Uncle Lyss if this was the reason for not paying passage ahead of time, but decided to hold the thought. Instead, he edged Rascal closer and said, "General Grant, I saw the man aiming and I hollered just before he fired. I don't think he was shooting at you. The bullet went over me; I think he may have hit where he was aiming; I think the ferryman was the target."

Grant studied Preston a moment. "He would be a right poor shot to miss me by that much... Maybe he was aiming at you?"

Chapter 15

Trailing behind General Grant on the short journey from the Patowmack to Washington, Preston Diamond debated whether the rifleman had been aiming at him. If he had been, and missed Preston, then probably Rascal would have been hit. When the bullet whistled overhead, the boat captain was standing on a freight box beside the slab board partition that passed for a pilothouse; just prior to that he had been hunkered down inspecting the cargo. Preston pieced this together and decided the sniper had waited for an opportune chance to kill the boatman. Why?

Darkness had settled as the cavalcade proceeded down the avenues of the capitol. The streets were crowded with all manner of people; many had no home to go to. The two men from

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the ferry crew had been left at the landing. Grant told them that a Union Army detail would be sent to return the ferry to service in the morning. Most ferries and bridges were now in the hands of the northern forces and Grant did not want any interruptions in transport if Confederate troops should rise up again. The four bluecoats went to an army barracks and Preston continued to follow General Grant. They put their horses up at a private stable then Ulysses led the way to a large house with a gas lamp burning over the porch, a fan light shining above the door.

“This is our home when the family are with me in Washington. I stay here whenever I return for meetings and emergencies at the capitol. Right now, though, Mrs. Grant and our children are housed near Richmond where the battle against General Lee continues.”

Preston had stayed at the Grant residence on the two occasions his parents had brought him to Washington, but this was not the same home. “Who is living here while you are away?” he asked.

“We have a maid and a butler who keep the house. It would not do, in these times, to leave the place unattended.”

Next morning, Preston awoke to the sounds of someone pounding on the main doors. He quickly dressed and made his way down the stair. A messenger had come for General Grant.

Ulysses was tugging on his boots as Preston entered the foyer. "I have to see President Lincoln, Preston. I may not see you again before I ride to Richmond. These emergencies are more common than not so last night I wrote a letter for you to read and then present to a lady who is a friend of mine. She knew your parents. Martha, our maid, will take you there. I have given you another name to use until this business is settled or until I can be with you. Instead of Preston Diamond, you will be Adam Forsythe."

As he slipped into his army greatcoat, Ulysses apologized again for his untimely departure. He ruffled Preston's hair before stepping through the door. "I will report your father's findings to the President. We shall serve justice upon these traitors."

The closed door held Preston's blank attention for a full minute. He had not anticipated being alone again so soon. Someone entered the room and a soft voice behind him said, "Mr. Grant is a very busy man. I know he is sorry to have left you."

Preston turned.

"I'm Martha," the lady said. "I was out when you arrived last night."

"Oh, yes," Preston said. "The butler chap told us you were away. Unc... Mr. Grant said he had a letter for me. Have you seen it?"

Martha found the note but Preston did not open it immediately. He took it to his room then

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washed up and combed his dark hair. He came back down to the parlour and Martha called him into the kitchen. She had fixed a hot breakfast and now served it on a china plate.

It was good food; a change from, but not necessarily better than, Rufus's cooking. After the repast, he went upstairs and read the note. It was addressed to Mrs. Rebecca Unzer and, as he read, Preston decided that Uncle Ulysses must be quite familiar with the family. Grant had explained the circumstances and also expressed the wishes Cutler Diamond had imposed on Ulysses himself. Mrs. Unzer was to provide lodging for "*the young Forsythe lad*" and etcetera.

Preston Diamond had an assumed name.

It would be the first of many in his lifetime.

Uncle Ulysses had not introduced Preston to the Grants' butler the previous evening and, apparently, Martha did not know Preston's name either. When he met the maid again, *Adam* introduced himself with an apology for not having done so sooner.

With his grip in tow, Preston walked with Martha the few blocks to his new residence. The Unzer's had a cottage style house, much smaller than Uncle Lyss's home, but well kept. White with a blue roof, it had a picket fence, flower boxes (bereft of growth at this time of year) and a wide front porch. A buxom grey haired lady, with a flush on her round face and perspiration on her brow, answered the knock. Mrs. Unzer called

Martha by name and invited them into her warm kitchen. There was a fire in the stove and an aroma coming from the warming oven that made Preston's mouth water. They were offered seats at the table. The hostess made a pot of tea and, while it steeped, excused herself as she read the letter from General Grant. Preston met her gaze as she looked up from the note. After a moment, she smiled faintly and said, "Adam, is it?"

Preston noted a twinkle in her eye. "Yes, ma'am," he said.

"Well, *Adam*, if we're going to get along, you call me Rebecca. And I want you to know, I consider your being here a favour to *me*, not a favour to Ulysses." She reached across the table and shook Preston's hand.

Rebecca Unzer was one of the few people you like instantly and will never have to change your mind about.

After the tea, Martha took her leave and Preston asked Rebecca what he should do with Rascal.

Mrs. Unzer opened the warming oven and extracted a hot apple pie. "Before we worry about your horse, *Adam*, I think we best be feeding you. You look thin, child."

Preston was halfway through a thick slice of pie when Rebecca said, "*Adam*... I'm not sure if that is your first name or not, but I will tell you something I do know: If your last name is Forsythe, I am Marie Antoinette."

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Adam stopped eating, the fork suspended halfway to his mouth. 'Guilty' was written all over his face.

She patted his free hand. "I can see Diamond in your eyes. You're Cutler Diamond's boy."

There wasn't an abundance of responses waiting on the tip of his tongue, so Preston shovelled the forkful of pie into his mouth and resumed chewing.

Rebecca laughed. "Colonel Unzer and I have known your parents for a long time. My husband longer than me. I was there to meet the ship when your father brought his new bride home from Spain."

Preston swallowed his pie. "Major James Unzer was the best man when the Captain of the ship married my father and mother. I read that in Papá's army journals. Mother has told me the story, too.

"I remember them coming down the ramp. Your mother was so beautiful. Your father was having difficulty walking because of his injuries. He was thin and sickly pale but I could see how handsome a man he was. When Major Unzer—my husband was a major in those days—introduced us, I was so taken by the blue of your father's eyes. I had never seen such striking colour... and now, I see those beautiful blue eyes again."

Tears lurked in the blue eyes now. In a husky voice, the lad said, "Preston. Rebecca, my father and mother named me Preston.

Mrs. Unzer did not wrap her arms around Preston or make a fuss. She said, "Colonel Unzer told me about your tragic loss in the last letter I've had from him. He said that you were presumed dead."

Preston told her about his cryptic message to General Grant and the chance meeting at Conception Landing. He said nothing of the murders nor any of his subsequent adventures. Mrs. Unzer asked no questions. Her only comment, "If Ulysses prefers that you use a different name, I am sure he has his reasons. Colonel Unzer and I will keep your secret, *Adam Forsythe*."

Rebecca Unzer started Preston's cultural learning that morning. The pair took a long and roundabout stroll on their way to the stable where Rascal had been put up. Diamond had a hundred questions, and more, regarding the Capitol, the history and architecture of the buildings, even the numerous gardens and grounds. He recognized the Whitehouse and asked about the fire at the Lincoln family stables. They walked past Ford's Theatre and Preston told Rebecca that, along with his mother, father and the Grant family, he had seen two performances there. She asked if he enjoyed the plays and, noting Preston's

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enthusiasm, promised to take him to a performance soon.

Rascal was moved to a nearby stable where Colonel Unzer kept his horses. Rebecca fussed with a proud pair of matched dappled greys. She said her husband had bought the team as a twenty-fifth anniversary present. They were no longer young, but the horses were well-groomed and in fine fettle. "I can't handle them, but Colonel Unzer always takes me for rides about town and sometimes out into the country when he has time." Preston offered to drive the team if she ever wanted to go somewhere. "I could take you out to our farm if you'd like, Rebecca." And she said, "I'd like that, Adam Forsythe."

The opportunity to go for a carriage ride came sooner than either Rebecca or Preston expected.

For the second morning in a row, Diamond was awoken by a pounding on the door. It was still dark as he scrambled into his trousers and rushed to the kitchen. In the pale light of a gas lamp outside, Preston saw Rebecca, with a hastily thrown shawl over her night dress, standing at the opened door talking to someone. She closed the door and turned with a paper in her hand. Preston hurried to light a lamp.

As she read, Mrs. Unzer's face paled and she settled lower in her chair. Preston stood by

C. C. Phillips

quietly. She looked up and he saw fear in her eyes. "Colonel Unzer has been shot."

Chapter 16

Preston went to her. “Is he?...”

“No, he isn't dead, or, wasn't when the dispatch was sent. I don't know how badly he is hurt...” Rebecca handed Preston the note and put her hands to her face. Preston knew she was fighting to keep her composure. As he read, she said, “This has happened before... Colonel Unzer will be okay... I... I have to get to him...”

Referring to the note, Preston said, “This says he is in a field hospital near Alexandria. I know where it is, Rebecca. I can take you there.”

She moved her hands, a tear escaped and slipped down her cheek. “God bless you, Preston.”

“I'll fetch the team. Where's your carriage?”

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Preston dressed, tucked the Colt in his belt and raced down the alley to the stable. He fed a cupful of oats to the greys, set aside a small bag of grain to take along and harnessed the team while they ate. He pulled the Henry rifle out of its saddle scabbard and tossed it in the carriage, parked in a shed attached to the stable. For an instant, he wondered what Mrs. Unzer would say about the guns, but he knew the area and only a fool or a desperate man would travel unarmed. Rebecca came out of the house as Preston brought the vehicle round to the front; she had blankets and a food basket. Preston hopped down and took the load. Rebecca went back into the cottage and returned with more blankets; she had a double barrelled shotgun under her arm.

The lady gave directions as Diamond drove the team through the quiet, dawn-lit streets. The pair wanted to go, and when the avenue opened up, Preston let them trot. They were long stepping horses and the light carriage flew down the trail. In under an hour they had reached the Patowmack and a landing known as Citadel Crossing. It had been the site of many battles as Confederate troops fought to advance on Washington. Union soldiers were on duty and bluecoats operated the boat. It ran day and night. Dispatch riders were used extensively because, with the onset of the war, the telegraph lines were seldom operable. Preston assumed the messenger who had come to the

Unzer house had crossed here only an hour or two earlier.

The ferryman had untied the mooring ropes and the boat was moving when Preston reined in the horses at the shore. Mrs. Unzer stood in the carriage and shouted to a private, "Halt that boat. I am the wife of Colonel Unzer and he has been wounded. I must get to him as quickly as possible."

The ferry reversed, the beaver tail was lowered and two mounted soldiers gave up their positions to allow the carriage to board. The men on the ropes pulled the boat across the river in record time. Neither Rebecca nor Preston offered to pay the ferryman and no one suggested that they should. On the opposite shore they waited while forward passengers disembarked, then Preston slapped the lines across the backs of the greys and they were off again.

The sun was up and the chill of night was slinking off into the shadows. Preston slowed the pace. Rebecca reached behind the seat and fetched out the basket. They ate in silence and the driver kept a vigil on the road ahead. They encountered several civilians and one company of soldiers. Mrs. Unzer learned from a bluecoat captain that her husband was alive, but the fellow did not know the Colonel's condition.

Preston wasn't exactly certain of his whereabouts on this road but he knew he did not have to go all the way to Alexandria to reach the

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army hospital. He turned onto a less used trail and proceeded down it, hoping to find something familiar. The sound and smell of the hospital camp preceded the sighting.

Rebecca hurried off to find her husband; Preston minded the horses. A fellow, wearing one of the blood-stained hospital smocks, trotted up and relayed a message that Mrs. Unzer wanted Adam to come to her. Diamond followed the aide through the reeking tangle to a small tent. Colonel Unzer was on a cot inside.

The colour had drained from Rebecca's cheeks and the wounded man beside her was pasty faced and ashen. Preston saw that the patient was awake, however, except for the eyes, he looked dead. An army doctor standing beside the bed offered no comment when Mrs. Unzer, in a firm tone, said, "Colonel Unzer has been shot through the chest. The good doctor here has removed the bullet but says there has been a lot of blood lost. We must move James to a hospital in Washington straight away."

Diamond guessed there had been a heated discussion between Rebecca and the medic. He also assumed Mrs. Unzer won the argument. The doctor now told the aide who had brought Preston to the tent, to fetch a stretcher. With the Colonel's wife overseeing every movement, the patient was transferred from the tent to the carriage. A bed had been prepared in the bottom and Unzer was strapped in, as comfortably as Rebecca could

make possible, with his feet protruding from under the seat and his head propped up at the back end of the conveyance. While she fussed over her husband, Preston found a slab board and placed it across the box so he and Mrs. Unzer would have a place to rest their feet without stepping on those of the patient. The doctor offered advice but Rebecca cut him off. "I appreciate all you have done, doctor, but I know what is best for him now." To Preston, she said, "Alright, Adam, let's take your father home."

Colonel Unzer had passed out during the transfer. He did not move or groan as the grey pair pulled the makeshift ambulance away from the pitiful hospital camp. Once on the trail, Rebecca said, "We'll have to go slow, Adam. It will be a long trip, but we must not start the wound bleeding again." Constantly looking over her shoulder, she kept an eye on her patient. After they had travelled a mile or so, she turned to Preston, "James thinks he was shot from behind. He fears it may have been one of his own unit. He was desperate to leave the army hospital lest some traitor should murder him in his bed."

The sun had passed the mid afternoon point, and a gathering cloud bank portended a dim evening. At the plodding pace he had set for the team, Preston doubted they would reach the ferry before dark. He said nothing to Rebecca, but well he knew what could happen on these backwood trails in the daytime; nighttime would be worse.

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Mrs. Unzer may have been thinking the same, for she said, "If we encounter another Union company, I shall coerce them to provide an escort."

The carriage reached the main road to Alexandria without incident. Preston heaved a silent sigh and Rebecca called a halt to check on her husband. Preston heard Unzer groan something and Rebecca came to the front for a canteen. "It's cold tea," she said, "but it's all we have and he needs liquids."

Preston checked the harness and horses then fed them from the small bag of oats he had brought along. The team was holding up well, but Preston knew they would not be up to a run if something went wrong. He gave Mrs. Unzer a hand up into the carriage and scrambled to the seat next to her. He pulled the Colt from his belt and laid it between them. Rebecca reached under the seat beside her husband's leg and withdrew the shotgun. The greys, refreshed with the short break and a feed of grain, were eager to move on.

It was now dusk. Rebecca agreed with Preston that the carriage lamps should not be lit for they did not wish to attract attention. The sound of a running horse reached their ears; the rider was coming up from behind. As the hoof beats grew louder, Diamond shifted the lines to his left hand and gripped the Colt in his right. A figure, leaning forward and low in the saddle, swept by shouting, "Good evening!" as he went.

He was a young lad, a bluecoat. "Dispatch rider," said Preston.

There was no moon.

Darkness fell like a black blanket.

Diamond had to strain his eyes to pick out the ears on the team; their heads were blobs. Numbed nothingness closed in like a womb around a fetus. Night creatures ceased to move; time stopped and the mute horses plodded on, seemingly without moving forward.

Colonel Unzer moaned a couple of times but Rebecca advised Preston to keep going.

A short time later the greys began to fret and snort. They balked several times then refused to budge. Eyes straining, Preston eventually made out a dark shape, pitch black against the dull black of the wagon road. Something lay stretched across the trail. Revolver in hand, Diamond stepped to the ground. The dark shape became more definite; it looked like a body. Small wonder the team would not step over it.

The Colt cocked and ready, Preston made his way to the victim and knelt down. "Someone is hurt or... or dead," he called to Rebecca.

The flare of a match burst upon the darkness and pale yellow light spread in a small circle as Rebecca lit one of the carriage lanterns. Preston noted several things immediately: The prostrate figure was the young dispatch rider who had galloped past Preston and Rebecca an hour or so

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earlier; he had a lot of blood on his shirt; he was dead. "He's dead. Shot."

Mrs. Unzer climbed down from the carriage. She did not come forward to view the unfortunate soldier, but went to check on her husband. "Move the poor boy to the side of the road. The army will find him and make a proper burial."

The messenger's pockets had been turned out, the holster was empty and there was no sign of his mount. Shot for his horse and saddle. As Diamond began to drag the body, an envelope came into view. He stooped to pick it up, and found two more messages. Blood, mixed with the dust of the trail, had stained all three. He stuffed them in his pocket, then deposited the young soldier out of the way of traffic. Preston arranged the body in a respectful manner, went back to find the lad's hat and covered the dead face.

Colonel Unzer was awake. Preston could hear the couple talking in low tones and though he would have liked to extinguish the lantern, he said nothing. He pulled the soiled letters from his pocket: One had a seal and was addressed to a Brigadier General Engels, Washington; a second had a seal but the envelope had been torn and was addressed to a Mr. Chester Bateman; the third had no seal nor envelope; it was a single sheet of paper addressed to Corporal Peters at Citadel Ferry Crossing. Curious as a cat, Preston unfolded the Peters letter and read the hastily scrawled message:

C. C. Phillips

The severely wounded Colonel Unzer has been removed from Alexandria field Hosp. He will be travelling with his wife and son in a carriage, drawn by two grey horses. They will be at Citadel sometime this evening.

The note was signed with a single letter: K.

Preston extracted the second letter from the envelope that had been torn open. It was addressed to a Chester Bateman at an address in Washington, no rank or army designation were included. This seemed odd as the army did not make a habit of transporting civilian correspondence. The writing was neater than that of the first missive:

*Proceed at earliest possible opportunity.
Advise JWB*

F

Mrs. Unzer returned to the side of the carriage and, with Preston's help, climbed aboard. He joined her on the seat and she blew out the lantern. Palpable opaqueness momentarily blinded them. Happy to escape the smell of blood and death, the horses moved ahead and their pace quickened.

Preston had committed the messages to memory and he recited both to Rebecca. The second made sense to neither of them, but the note

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to Corporal Peters had serious implications. If the dispatcher had gotten through, would Peters or someone else be waiting for the Colonel? Knowing what he did and suspecting even more, Preston could not doubt the message had an evil origin. He said, "Rebecca, I think they have planned to stop us at the landing. Someone intends to make sure Colonel Unzer is... does not get to Washington."

"Adam, we have to get him across that river tonight. He must have proper care, and very soon."

Preston considered for a few moments. "They don't know we are coming. The message never reached them."

"But if any of the soldiers are on board that were there this morning, they will know I am Mrs. Unzer. I made that all too clear."

"They don't know that we have the Colonel with us, though," Preston argued.

"There will be lights, someone will find him."

"There are the lights now!" Preston pointed, but his gesture was lost in the darkness.

They gazed at the distant glow; reaching the river should have been a relief, now it could be suicide.

Preston snapped his fingers. "Rebecca, your husband is dead!"

"No, he..."

“Until we get across the Patowmack, he is. I'll run ahead on foot and see where the ferry is now. If it is parked on this side, we can go straight on board. Otherwise we'll wait back here in the dark and then move up. When the time is right, we'll light the lanterns, cover Colonel Unzer from head to foot and drive up to the crossing.”

Rebecca smiled in the darkness and touched Preston's hand. “Alright, I'll be a new widow, so you'll have to cover your ears.”

The greys were near to stumbling when, at last, the carriage was unhitched and the pair were led to the barn. Though exhausted himself, Preston gave both horses a thorough rub down and fed them well. Mrs. Unzer's wailing still rang in his ears. She had set up such a ululation that the beleaguered ferrymen beat their previous record on the crossing. If Colonel Unzer had made any sound to suggest he was not dead, it could not have been heard above Rebecca's carry-on.

The Colonel had awoken again on the road from Citadel Crossing to Washington. His wife had Preston stop the team while she visited her patient. Back on the seat she had said, “Take James to our house, Adam. He insists, and, if I cannot keep him alive, he is not destined to live.”

Next morning, Diamond got out of bed and padded softly around the house. He looked through the open door of his hosts' bedroom:

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Colonel Unzer dozed fitfully and Rebecca snored in a chair beside the bed. Preston smiled. James Unzer was a tough old soldier, with the care and attention coming to him now, he would pull through.

By the time Diamond came back from checking on Rascal and the grey team, Rebecca was up and bustling about in the kitchen. She looked exhausted but her smile was back in place. “God bless you, Adam. You have saved my husband's life.”

“It was you who got us across the river, Rebecca. That was the difficult part.”

“Adam, Colonel Unzer wants to talk to you... and don't pretend to be anything other than Cutler Diamond's son. He'll know the instant he sees you.”

The Colonel was less ashen and his eyes held an alertness that had been absent at the army hospital. Mrs. Unzer knew her husband well, for, after studying Preston a moment he said, “You'll be Cutler Diamond's son.” His voice was a weak, rasping croak.

They talked longer than Mrs. Unzer appreciated; she tut-tutted several times while fussing over her husband, fluffing pillows and straightening blankets. After he listened to Preston's abbreviated story, Colonel Unzer agreed that Adam Forsythe was a good enough name, for the time being. At Unzer's request, Preston fetched the letters he had removed from the dead

dispatcher. The wounded officer couldn't hold the paper, so Preston read the opened missives aloud and showed the colonel the sealed envelope. Unzer said, "Deliver this one to General Engels as soon as you can. I don't recognize the seal but I'm glad you didn't rip it open. I don't know this Corporal Peters, but in light of what happened to me, I think you were right in avoiding him. Chester Bateman is not a name I know either, nor do those initials —if that is what they are— mean anything. I've never seen a dispatch letter that wasn't signed properly."

Rebecca became insistent her husband have rest and shooed Preston out of the room. She gave him directions and Diamond set off on foot to deliver the messages. Brigadier General Engels was in conference and the messenger was redirected to Capitol Hill. Overwhelmed by the grandeur and enormity of the Capitol, Preston failed to act incurious as he was ushered to a seat beside a pair of closed doors and told to wait until the meeting was over. Several other people arrived and took up chairs along the wall, too. When the door opened, Preston glimpsed a tall thin man with sharp features and a dark trimmed beard. Cutler Diamond had pointed this fellow out when the family had visited Ford's Theatre two years ago: President Abraham Lincoln.

The foyer began to buzz as messages and verbal exchanges took place. Preston did not know General Engels, but he knew the single star

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insignia. He stepped up to the only brigadier general he saw and offered the envelope. He tried to avoid the general's gaze for fear that he would again be recognized as Cutler Diamond's son, but Engels showed no sign. He opened and read the letter immediately. With a preoccupied wave of dismissal he turned from Preston and strode back into the meeting hall.

Preston breathed a sigh of relief when he emerged into the sunshine of the east side. He turned to gape at the Capitol again; an image of Rufus and the little cottage on Diamond/Tweed farm crossed his mind. How hard to believe he was only a few miles, by the raven, from home.

The other letter, the one addressed to Mr. Chester Bateman, would not have been difficult to deliver, but it never happened. Preston found the house just a few streets away from General Grant's home. An open buggy, drawn by a single horse, was parked on the street in front of the residence and Preston decided to study the place. Colonel Unzer had expressed misgivings about the strange message and now Diamond considered it may have a connection to his father's suspicions, too.

In the woods at Diamond farm, Preston had learned the value of staying still and concealing one's profile. "Avoid being obvious, don't skyline yourself," his father had advised when he and Preston had hunted together. The application worked well on wild animals with their keen senses; it ought to work on humans, too. With his

back against a tree trunk, still as a cat at a mouse hole, a few houses beyond the Bateman home, Preston waited. He tried to sort through the previous thirty hours of his life: Unzer had told his wife he was in danger at the hospital. This morning, the colonel had told Preston the shooting may not have been enemy fire. (Did Colonel Unzer know that Davy Brannigan, a Confederate soldier, had saved him from a turncoat's bullet less than three weeks ago?) The notes found on the dead dispatch rider were a mystery. Whoever *K* was, he had to have seen Preston and Rebecca at the army hospital for he described the carriage and pair. *K* knew where the buggy was bound and that the colonel was on board. Was it the doctor? The aide? (Certainly not the doctor, for he had saved Unzer's life. Why would he do that and then set Unzer up for an assassination?) Preston decided there would be plenty of other people in the camp who knew Colonel Unzer was wounded; senior officers were big news in army quarters. Someone else then. The second note was no less confusing. *Proceed at earliest opportunity. Advise JWB* Signed, simply, '*F*'. Proceed with what? Who was *JWB*? Who was *F*? Preston rubbed his face. Few answers, just more questions and now...

...Another question: Why was Captain Everett Wiley coming out of Bateman's house?

Chapter 17

Diamond swore under his breath. He was afoot, Rascal was in the stable and the Colt revolver was in his room at the Unzer home. Cold fury grew as Preston watched the captain. Wiley trudged along with the aid of a cane. He shifted his hips, one side at a time, instead of taking strides. He reached the buggy and Preston could hear the groans from thirty yards away as the soldier struggled into the conveyance. Once seated, instead of flicking the lines or speaking to the horse, Wiley picked up a whip and lashed the animal across the rear. Preston gritted his teeth, but remained motionless, blending in with the tree trunk, as the buggy wheeled past.

Wiley turned at the end of the street, disappearing from view as the clatter of wheels

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faded. Preston turned his focus on the house. When, after an hour of vigilance, no one had emerged from the door or glanced out from either of the two curtained windows, Preston decided the place was now empty. Did Wiley live there? No, he had a horse and carriage parked out front. Perhaps there was a back door and Chester Bateman had gone out that way.

Diamond made his way back to his new home. Traffic was heavy on the side street and Preston saw a few people on foot filing toward Unzer's house. Several more were gathered in front of the cottage talking in a group. Had Colonel Unzer passed away? As Preston drew near he noticed that most of the people were smiling. Rebecca stood among them talking animatedly. Preston slipped past and dodged into the house. Voices came from the bedroom and Preston peeked through the doorway. Colonel Unzer saw him and said, "Ah, Adam, do come in for a moment. It seems that rumour of my death has reached the Capitol."

On stepping through the door, he saw Brigadier General Engels seated on the chair that Mrs. Unzer had spent the night in. Engels gave no indication he had met Preston less than two hours earlier. A busy man, Preston mused.

After Unzer made the introductions, the general shook Diamond's hand. "Mr. Forsythe, I commend you on your bravery for I fear we really

would have lost our James without your daring rescue.”

“Thank-you, sir.”

“Before he left for Richmond yesterday, I spoke with Lieutenant General Grant in strictest confidence. He told me about you, Mr. Forsythe, I know your true identity. I knew it when you delivered the message to me this morning. With the most heartfelt sorrow I extend my sympathy on the terrible loss of your father and mother. I assure you, we shall crush this traitorous abomination and bring severe justice to the perpetrators.”

Preston's jaw worked twice before he could get the words out. “Thank-you again, and I hope so, sir.”

Colonel Unzer said, “Adam, you have information we need. Did you deliver the note to Bateman?”

Before Preston could answer, Engels interrupted. “On the subject of notes,” he slid a hand inside his coat, “I have this letter from General Grant.”

He passed the envelope to Preston. It had Grant's seal and no one had tampered with it. The message, addressed to Adam Forsythe, contained instructions for Preston to cooperate with Brigadier General Engels: “...please repeat to Engels all the information you have given me and allow him access to your father's journals if he so desires. Your testimony will be the the proof we

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need to launch the investigation. And, Adam, I think you should also inform General Engels of those events you have neglected to tell me.” It was signed Ulysses S. Grant; Preston recognized the writing. Following the signature was further proof unlikely to be guessed: (Uncle Lyss).

Preston folded the note and put it in his pocket. He watched Engels closely as he said, “Uncle Lyss has asked me to help you with an investigation into reports of treason within the Union Army.”

Engels jerked his head. “Uncle Lyss? Lieutenant General Grant is your uncle?”

Diamond decided the note was not forged.

Returning to Colonel Unzer's question of whether the note had been delivered, Preston told the officers about seeing Captain Wiley at Bateman's house just minutes earlier. This information required a brief explanation as to where Wiley fit in. Both men agreed that the Captain must be found and subjected to military interrogation. Engels said Chester Bateman was a civilian and businessman of some import in DC. However, before the discussion went much further, Colonel Unzer's speech slowed and his words slurred; his head sank back on the pillows and he drifted off to sleep. Engels and Preston left the room, closing the door behind them.

Rebecca, having dispersed with the overhasty sympathy contingent, prepared tea while the lad and the general talked in the parlour.

Brigadier General Engels said, "I must hear your entire story, Adam. However, I should like you to repeat it in Colonel Unzer's presence. General Grant has warned me against including too many people in this investigation. Obviously Unzer is trustworthy, but at this time we do not know who else we can trust within our own army. Soldiers talk, often too much, so it may be some time before I can select a detail to pursue Captain Wiley. For the same reason, I cannot send orders to his superior, for Wiley may become suspicious and run off; undoubtedly he would inform his cohorts as well. I apologize to you, for I know you want immediate justice served upon that man.

Mrs. Unzer brought in the tea and a plate of cornbread but she did not stay. Preston could hear her in the kitchen as Engels sipped and read the notes that should have gone to Bateman and Corporal Peters. Engels had no inkling who or what the initials F, K and JWB stood for. Repeating the same reasoning for allowing Wiley to remain at large, he said Peters would not be ordered back to Washington either. He apologized, saying, "Until we can gather more information, our hands are tied." Preston Diamond asked if Captain Wiley was reporting for duty. General Engels did not know, but surmised that the wounded man must be on medical leave.

To Preston, it seemed unbelievable that the powerful Northern Army, now standing on the edge of victory, could have their collective hands

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tied so securely that they could not move within their own jurisdiction. He thought of Wiley hobbling to the buggy, then senselessly whipping the horse; he saw Señora Diamond lying dead on the ground; he heard Cutler Diamond's last breath.

“Your hands might be tied, General Engels, but mine are not,” Preston said.

As Uncle Lyss had done, Engels warned Preston against hunting Wiley. “Besides the fact that you will surely be killed, Adam, taking the law into your own hands is breaking the law. Alone, you cannot win.”

Rebecca appeared in the doorway, hands on hips. “Brigadier General, Adam will not be alone. I will help him.”

Despite further protestations from the military man, Rebecca and Adam did not back down. Rebecca said, “You haven't heard his story, sir. I have only had pieces of it myself. But I know his pain and I've heard him in the night. If you were suffering like this young gentleman is right now, you could never walk in a man's shoes if you did nothing at all.”

The brigadier general left Unzer's house with a promise to expedite the investigation. Rebecca closed the door behind him, then turned to Adam. “Maybe I didn't have quite enough adventure yesterday. How about you?”

Preston went to his room and cleaned the Colt.

Rascal hadn't stretched his legs for awhile and he was being difficult as Preston guided him through the busy streets and avenues of Washington. The unfamiliar din and bustle kept the spirited gelding on edge and his rider had to keep a tight rein; even at that, the front shoes touched only lightly upon the road. Preston Diamond, or Adam Forsythe, had no destination, but he had a rudimentary plan. He would search this city from one end to the other and, if necessary, back again, until he found Captain Everett Wiley. And, while he searched, he would familiarize himself with every street, alley or dead end in the four quadrants. Preston had no illusions, the task ranked second only to finding the needle in the hay stack, but it was doing something, and, it was an outing for Rascal.

Diamond searched for an open top buggy with white wheels and a green box. A single sorrel mare had been between the shaves when Wiley had driven the buggy this morning. Unless the captain abused the horse beyond its endurance, chances were the mare would continue to pull that buggy. Horses, buggies and bluecoats were in abundance all over the city, however, if Preston could locate the particular combination he sought, the number of matches would be fewer.

Before starting out with Rascal, Preston had walked to Chester Bateman's residence, hoping, on the off chance, that Wiley had returned. Though he watched from the shadows for nearly an hour,

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no one visited and he saw no movement within. Diamond returned to the Unzer home and reported to Rebecca; they had agreed that Adam would keep her informed of his whereabouts. If he located Wiley, he was to come back for Mrs. Unzer. During Preston's absence, the colonel had awoken and a messenger had come to the door. The message was from Brigadier General Engels:

Captain Wiley has been granted temporary medical discharge from the Union Army. His current location is not known. Signed Brig. Gen. Fremont Engels.

Colonel Unzer knew Wiley and was able to provide additional personal information, some of which Preston already had: Wiley had no wife or family; he had been a soldier since graduating from West Point; he had fought in the Mexican American War; he had spent time in Fort Detroit and New York. Unzer did not know if Captain Wiley had ever been posted in the West.

Now, mounted on Rascal, Preston rode along Pennsylvania Avenue heading away from the Capitol. Being a bachelor and career soldier, it was unlikely the captain had a house of his own; he may be rooming with someone while on leave. With this in mind, Preston commenced his search in a residential area; more accurately, a shanty town. Poverty was everywhere; the neighbourhood reeked of disease and human

waste. Despair hung in the air like damp smoke. Gaunt and sullen men turned their backs, hollow-eyed women, with rag clothed children clinging to them, stared vacantly as the young lad on the prancing horse rode past. Mostly black, some white, all were homeless and hungry.

Captain Wiley would not be here.

The next quadrant appeared more affluent, certainly less affluent. Houses were neater, streets less crowded, less filthy. There were alleyways behind the homes, a few houses had stables. Preston scoured the back streets in search of a green buggy with white wheels. He found twelve in total.

Diamond did not feel comfortable peering into private stables in search of a sorrel mare. But the notion occurred to him to investigate the livery barns and public stables. Probably Wiley had rented the buggy; he would not have had use for one when he was able to straddle a horse. The first barn he came to had a sign advertising equine accommodations and, for rent, saddle horses, draft horses, wagons, carts and carriages.

It took but a few minutes to check that the open topped buggy in question was not among the rentals. Preston checked two more livery stables before daylight failed him. He made his way to Pennsylvania Avenue and rode home.

The search resumed the next day. And the next.

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Brigadier General Engels came by in the evenings to confer with Unzer. Between the wounded officer's moments of rest, Adam Forsythe delivered his story almost in its entirety. After hearing him out, neither Engels nor Unzer made mention that Preston should let things lie. They knew the youth would have to be enchained, imprisoned or dead in order to stop him.

On the fourth day, across the street from a livery barn, Preston found Wiley, the sorrel mare and the rig.

Chapter 18

From his perch astride the young gelding, Diamond ran an eye over the row of vehicles for hire. At the far end, a sorrel mare, in harness, was being backed into the shaves of a green, open top buggy. Preston stood in the stirrups; it had white wheels. His pulse quickened. The man handling the horse was not Captain Wiley, but Preston guessed he was a stable hand. Shifting Rascal to a less conspicuous vantage point, Preston studied the area. There were many people moving about on the thoroughfare that ran perpendicular to the side street where he and Rascal now stood. Holding the gelding and his patience in check, Diamond waited. The stable hand now had the mare hitched to the buggy and proceeded to lead her onto the street. At that moment, a man with an

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awkward gait shuffled into view. It was Captain Wiley and he now took the street toward Preston and the stable boy.

Diamond slipped off his mount and led him away. He ducked into a short alley, tied the horse and returned to peer round the edge of a building. Wiley handed something over —Preston guessed it was money for the rig— and climbed into the buggy. Preston saw him reach for the whip but did not wait to see it strike. He ran back, freed his horse and swung into the saddle. Rascal reared up on hind legs then bolted down the alley in pursuit of the disappearing buggy. The stable boy dodged aside and cursed as the pair thundered by.

The avenue was far too busy for a fast pace and by the time Preston reached the thoroughfare, Wiley had already reined in and was adjusting to the flow of the equine traffic. In this congestion, the light rig could not have outrun a man on horseback. Diamond slowed the gelding and followed the buggy at varying distances.

A fellow will imagine a thousand ways that the hunt will go, but when you are in the midst, nothing imagined resembles reality. Preston sat rigid in the saddle, his features locked in grim determination, like a frown on a portrait. He reached inside his coat and loosened the Colt. His mind was clear, his hands were steady.

Unaware of the rider behind him, Wiley proceeded in the direction of the Capitol. Where would he go? Where and how should Preston

intercept him? Adam Forsythe had agreed to fetch Rebecca if he located the bluecoat; Preston Diamond was not going to allow the traitor out of his sight.

Preston realized he couldn't just ride up to the buggy and shoot Wiley in the head. He had pictured himself doing that so many times, but now, something inside him argued against such an act. Unzer and Engels had tried to impress upon Adam that, if he were taken alive, Wiley might be 'persuaded' to confess and name his associates in the conspiracy. The officers had also reminded Forsythe, in the eyes of the law, killing Wiley would be murder.

Where the knife edge met the whetstone, Wiley's death was all that mattered to the orphaned son of Cutler Diamond.

The buggy turned left off the avenue and proceeded down a quieter street. Preston reined in behind a slow moving cart heaped with feed sacks. He could see over the load and kept a steady watch on his quarry. Wiley's path had led them back into familiar territory; Preston recognized General Grant's house. Was Captain Wiley headed for Chester Bateman's place? No, they had already passed by that section. Surely, the officer must be near his destination now; he didn't have much room before running up against the Patowmack River. After crossing two more streets, the pursued vehicle took another turn to the left. At that moment, the feed cart he had been

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using for a screen, abruptly veered to the right. Preston was left in the middle of the street, in plain view. The buggy disappeared behind a house on the corner. Diamond cocked his head, there was no crack of a whip or clatter of wheels and running hooves; he had not been detected.

The alley that Everett Wiley had taken ran behind the Unzer home. Panic seized Preston. Maybe the traitor had come to finish someone else's work? Maybe he was here to murder Colonel Unzer!

Preston could have stepped out of the saddle, hitched his horse and pursued his victim on foot, but he did not want to be separated from Rascal in case Wiley grew suspicious and escaped in the buggy. He viewed the alley in his mind's eye: The stable where the Unzers kept their greys was half way down the alley; it was nearer this end than the Colonel's residence. Preston decided to ride as far as the stable.

It took precious minutes to thread his way down the back lane. He was able to use back yards and trees to hide his approach. By craning his neck, he could see the right side of the buggy parked just beyond the stable. Captain Wiley must be within a house or two of the Unzers. His destination was obvious to Preston.

Diamond swung out of the saddle, drew the revolver from inside his coat and eased ahead. The greys in the barn may have sensed their comrade, for one of them whickered softly. The

mare hitched to the buggy answered, but Rascal, with Preston's hand over his nose, said nothing. After tying a loose knot to hitch his horse to a tree, Preston stepped round to the front of the stable and came up behind the buggy. Wiley was not in sight. Diamond took one extra moment to find a broken limb and shove it between the spokes of the buggy wheel, then crawled through a gap in the trees and reappeared in Rebecca's garden.

Still no Captain Wiley, but the back door of the cottage stood ajar. Hoping he wasn't seen through a bedroom window, Preston launched himself across the yard and squeezed tight to the wall beside the doorway. He peeked in; saw nothing. He listened; heard nothing. Where was Mrs. Unzer? Was the Colonel asleep or... or was Preston too late?

A faint scraping sound reached his ears. It came again. Wiley's shuffling steps inside the house! A more solid footstep preceded the opening and closing of the front door. Someone had entered the house from the street side. Preston heard and recognized the rhythm of Rebecca's steps; she was in the kitchen. Where was Wiley? Diamond cocked the revolver and crossed into the parlour. Wiley was pressed against the opposite wall near the open archway that separated kitchen and parlour. He held a knife above his head, and, at that moment, Mrs. Unzer stepped into the room.

The knife plunged downward.

The Colt bucked in Preston's hand.

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The blade fell from useless fingers as Captain Wiley was slammed into the wall then slithered to the floor leaving a trail of blood down the door jamb.

Rebecca screamed.

Colonel Unzer bellowed from the bedroom.

Smoke and the smell of burned powder filtered through the parlour.

Wiley lay writhing on the floor, his left hand clutching a wounded right arm; blood pulsed between his fingers. Preston's ears were ringing from the blast as he stepped across the room and pressed the gun barrel against Wiley's forehead. The injured man stopped groaning and turned fear filled eyes on his captor, but the fear instantly turned to venomous hatred as he recognized the burning blue eyes. "Diamond." He spat the word like someone expecting sugar but tasting salt.

Preston eared back the hammer. In a flat, expressionless voice, he said, "Go to Hell, you murdering traitor."

A hand touched Preston's shoulder. Rebecca said, "No, Adam."

The colonel bellowed again from the bedroom.

Mrs. Unzer said, "We're all right, James, I'll be there in a moment." To Preston, she said, "Please, don't kill him like this, Adam. It's murder."

Preston stepped back but did not ease up the hammer on the revolver. He kicked the knife out

of reach and said to Rebecca, "Take his gun, check him for more weapons."

To Wiley, he said, "If you make a move, I'll shoot the other arm."

The bluecoat started a retort but Preston said, "And if you open your mouth, I'll kick your teeth down your throat."

Brigadier General Engels was in a closed conference at the Capitol when the doors burst open and Colonel Unzer's wife marched into the room with two security people tugging at her arms. Now the general, accompanied by three officers, was hustling to keep up as Rebecca led them out onto the grounds on the east side. Ahead of them, a crowd had gathered around a green buggy drawn by a sorrel mare. There were two people aboard the open top vehicle; one, a bluecoat captain, cringed in the box behind the seat; the other, a grim young man with dark hair, was kneeling on the seat with a cocked Colt pointed at the soldier's head. None of the onlookers were giving odds that the youth would not pull the trigger.

Engels asked no questions; he shouted orders. "Take that man to the guardhouse. See that he has medical attention. If for any reason he escapes, I'll have you men stripped of rank and publicly whipped."

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The arresting officers commandeered the horse and buggy. Watching them leave, Preston felt no relief. This is not the end.

The first night of Captain Wiley's incarceration, an attempt was made on his life. One guard was killed and another wounded. The invader(s) escaped. Wiley was moved to a more secure area. Brigadier General Engels visited the Unzers and talked for a long while with the colonel and Adam. He reported that the Capitol had received word Lieutenant General Grant was making headway against the Confederate force in Richmond. The loss of lives on both sides had been devastating and the siege had dragged on months longer than anticipated, but General Lee was losing ground; a Northern victory was a certainty; the war would soon be over.

Changing the topic, Engels said, "There are few secrets in the army. We spread the story that Wiley was being held under a charge of rape, however, his allies are not to be fooled so easily. They have many ears throughout the Northern forces, especially here in Washington. They now know that we know there is a conspiracy and they cannot afford to let Wiley talk."

Unzer asked, "Are their fears founded? Have you been able to pry anything out of him?"

"So far, Captain Wiley has not been cooperative. He has an attorney, one Chester Bateman; apparently, among Bateman's other

enterprises, he has an interest in law as well. We already suspected Bateman, because his name was on that message Adam brought to us. Anyway, Wiley isn't giving out any information and, with the lawyer he has, we can't make any deals."

Preston listened attentively but offered no comment. He wondered what kind of "deals" General Engels had in mind. If Wiley received anything less than a noose around his neck it would not be good enough.

"We are forcing an early trial. Maybe our people can make Wiley confess on the stand. You, Adam, will be a key witness for our side. Your story alone will ensure a guilty verdict for Wiley. If he is condemned to death, he may confess in hopes of avoiding the hangman."

As he was taking his leave, Engels made another announcement. "The word is out that Colonel Cutler Diamond's son survived the raid. We were cautious to the extreme, but it is not a secret any longer."

Preston said, "Captain Wiley saw me at the army hospital. He recognized me, or, he thought I was my father. He knew, or must have been quite certain, that I was not dead. That is why he sent those two bluecoats to our farm."

"Well, they aren't talking," Unzer said, "and I would not have thought Wiley would admit to anyone that he foiled the job."

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“Maybe the captain somehow found out that I was here, too. Maybe it was me, not you, Colonel Unzer, that he was hunting?”

Engels said, “Well, Wiley must have told someone... unless there is another person or persons who knew Adam had survived. In any case, Adam, you had best be keeping a wary eye. The conspirators will want you dead.”

The echo of the Brigadier General's footsteps on the porch had not faded before Rebecca Unzer vented her opinion on Colonel Unzer. “I wasn't eavesdropping, but I heard what that sap had to say about Adam keeping a wary eye. How can Engels tell us that someone wants Adam dead and then walk out of here as pleasantly as though he had just refused a second helping of pie? If our Adam is the key in sending Wiley to the gallows, why isn't the army here to protect him?”

Unzer slumped in his pillows. Though they never had any children, he said, “I don't know, Mother. It seems that we are all targets.”

Chapter 19

Diamond had mulled over the idea that Wiley had come for him and not Colonel Unzer. Why would the conspirators want Unzer dead? Wasn't having him out of the war sufficient? Yet someone had sent the note warning Corporal Peters that Unzer would be at Citadel Landing. Presumably that note wasn't to remind Peters to wish the colonel well. But, if Captain Wiley had come to Unzer's in search of Preston, others must know he was there, too. Maybe it was time for Adam Forsythe to move. He would have a better chance across the Patowmack than in this city.

Colonel and Mrs. Unzer argued against Adam leaving. "They'll be hunting you on that side of the river, too. The farm won't be safe."

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“I’ll keep moving, they won’t be able to find me because I know the area better than they do. Besides, I’m worried about Rufus.”

Rebecca said, “I’ll come along. You promised to take me to your farm someday.”

“I’m sorry, Rebecca, not now. Neither of us would have a chance in the carriage. I have to be able to outrun them... or catch up to them. And, Colonel Unzer needs you here.

“If they set a date for the trial, or if General Grant returns, send a message to Conception post office. I’ll be in the town sometimes.”

While Preston saddled Rascal and collected his necessary possessions, Rebecca fixed provisions for him to carry in his saddle bags. The wife of a soldier, she knew well what to send on a long trek. She came out to the stable and stood, hands on hips as he tied his gear on and stuffed the bags. There were tears in her eyes and she gave him a motherly hug before he swung into the saddle. “God go with you, Adam. You will always have a home here. When this is over... when this is all over, I want you to come live with us; the Grant’s have enough children and we never had any.”

She watched until Rascal and his rider disappeared around a corner.

At the outset, Preston had thought to take the Conception Ferry. It was closer than Citadel Crossing and he had heard that the Union Army had put the boat back in service. But what would

he find in Conception? He was worried about Rufus and the farm; General Grant's signature wouldn't mean much to men of the calibre Preston now sought. But if Preston were there, he and Rufus would be targets every minute. The farm had been invaded twice already.

When the fork in the road forced a decision, Preston rode to Citadel.

Resolved to cross the Patowmack on the road to Alexandria, Diamond now considered what it was that had made him choose this route. Corporal Peters might be at the ferry, and beyond that were the people who signed their names *F* and *K*. Were they the reason he had changed his mind? It did not rest on a fourteen year old to find the conspirators who had infiltrated the ranks of the Northern Army. Captain Wiley, the man Preston swore to kill, was already locked up. Why would Preston want to become involved further? The answer entered his head, not as a thought, not as a subconscious reminder; it was just there in a clear and unmistakable voice: "*You will see that justice prevails.*"

Cutler Diamond was guiding his son.

Rascal carried Preston at a brisk trot and, in less time than it had taken with Unzer's carriage, horse and rider arrived at the crossing. Evening stillness had slipped in unnoticed; Preston heard the shouts and clamour of the ferry crew before he sighted the river. The boat was on the opposite shore taking on passengers, so he reined Rascal

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into the willows and, screened from view from below, waited for the ferry to come in. Through the budding branches of the willow trees, Preston could discern the tops of canvas wall tents on both sides of the Patowmack. The Union Army had sufficient men bivouacked to cover a Confederate attack on the crossing front and rear. Was Corporal Peters among them?

Diamond saw no double chevrons on the ferry ride. Maybe the corporal was on the day shift. Darkness had fully descended when Preston reached the opposite side of the Patowmack. Rascal had been nervous about boarding the boat; on his last ferry ride, the gelding had had to swim to shore. On firm ground again, the pony was eager to put miles between himself and the water.

There had been no Alexandria bound passengers and Preston rode on alone in the silence. Not wanting to wear down his mount, he held Rascal back, the muffled thud of hooves on dirt became a soothing rhythm. Diamond wondered about the strange events of the crossing at Conception Landing. Why had the stranger shot the ferryman? Did the killer mistake the burly, bearded boatman for General Grant? Grant had been in civilian clothes and he had worn a hat similar to the captain on the ferry. But, the shot was not much more than two hundred yards, surely the man didn't make a mistake? The subsequent cutting of the cable was a question,

too. Why did the stranger do that? Perhaps it had simply been insurance against pursuit.

There had been a horse at doctor Filmore's clinic when Uncle Lyss and Preston had ridden through Conception. Preston tried to recall... no, it wasn't the same horse that showed up later at the landing. The horse the shooter rode that day had been ridden a good distance and not too sparingly either. Preston had not noticed a brand, nor other distinguishing markings on that animal.

The last time Preston had stopped at Filmore's clinic was when he sought help for Davy Brannigan. The doctor had said Captain Wiley was there that day with another man, a reddish-blond, handsome fellow with three chevrons on his sleeve. Filmore hadn't been sure, he had decided on three, but was it two or three chevrons? Maybe it was only two, and the fellow in question was Corporal Peters, perhaps now bivouacked at Citadel Landing. But that did not seem important right now. Preston needed to find the man who sent the letter to Peters; the man whose first or last name had the initial *K*.

Diamond's thoughts turned to the Brannigans. Did Davy get well? What about Amy and Lily? Were the provisions he brought enough to keep them? He blushed in the darkness as he thought of Lily's kiss. He pictured her standing by the wash tub.

He almost didn't get off the road in time when a unit of soldiers came by.

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Rascal heard them first and his head came up. Preston jerked the reins to stifle a whinny. He cut the horse to the left and crashed through the trees along the edge of the road. A few yards inside the timber, Preston stopped the gelding and climbed out of the saddle. He held Rascal's nose and listened. A faint but steady "clunk" drifted on the night. Soon he could hear the jingle of traces and then the plodding of hooves, the squeak of saddle leather. There were more than a few men in this unit. The sounds grew more distinct; grunts and the occasional muttered oath could be heard. Dull light from a waxing moon filtered through feathery cirrus clouds. It wasn't pitch black, but the night was dark. As the company passed by, against the skyline, Preston counted twelve mounted men. Four pairs of long ears indicated two span of mules were in harness and they were pulling something heavy. Near to, the "clunk" became a "clank." An artillery gun.

The unit passed by and Diamond waited until the last "clunk" faded before coming back onto the trail. He wondered why the army was moving a single cannon at night.

The answer to that came about half an hour later when a blast of artillery fire boomed across the stillness. Citadel Crossing was under siege. The crackle of rifle fire, deadened by distance, followed the sound of the heavy gun. The cannon ripped several more rounds off before the din faded. Were Confederate troops making one last

effort to attack Washington? Preston wasn't riding back to find out.

The sound of a creek had Rascal twitching his ears and Diamond decided to make camp. He fought his way upstream, the brush being thick near the water course, and came to a small opening. He slipped the bridle off, loosened the cinches and, holding the halter shank, allowed Rascal a drink from the stream. Preston did not light a fire for fear the light would attract trouble. He dug some of Rebecca's provisions out of the saddle bag and had his meal while grazing the gelding at the same time. He tied the horse to a tree then stretched out on the dead grass with a blanket around him and his coat over top. It wasn't the bed at Unzer's but it would do.

Grey light and the distinct "clank" of machinery told Preston he had woken up alive. He tossed off the blanket and slipped into the coat, then went to Rascal and once again put his hand over the horse's nose to prevent an errant whinny. The military unit passed by out of Preston's view. The patrol was headed toward Alexandria, Diamond decided they had had a successful encounter at Citadel Crossing or they would not have been on the road this morning.

Rascal was given water and a chance to graze while Preston dined on jerky and a biscuit. Mounted up, Diamond elected to cut across country to intersect the trail that went to the army hospital. It may not be a shortcut but he would not

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come up behind the grey-coat unit. The sun had taken a hesitant look at the day, climbed out of bed and then hid behind some low cloud on the eastern horizon. The day wasn't overcast enough to confuse directions; Preston pointed Rascal southwest.

He came out on the trail about a half mile from the army hospital camp and rode on toward it. The place did not have the same bustling frantic stir as on previous visits. The war was winding down; fewer battles; fewer wounded; fewer dying. The dead did not decrease. Preston tied Rascal on the picket line. He dressed in a smock and walked through the camp. No one paid him any attention and he found employment with the scrubbing detail. His plan was to glean any information he could. He would eavesdrop on conversations, listen for names, search through any correspondence he may lay his hands on, anything that may lead to a person who went by the initials *K* or *F*.

The tall lad who had elected Preston assistant stretcher bearer on another occasion, recognized the dark haired youth. "Where ya be'n, Sunshine? Ya jest show up around here when it suits ya? Maybe a wallop alongside the ear hole would remind ya to come a little more reg'lar."

Preston ignored the sneering voice as he sloshed out a tub of bloody water. The sneerer was not to be put off. He stepped in front of Diamond and said, "Hey, I'm talking..."

The sentence was cut short by an *accidental* splash of filthy water on his trousers. "Sorry," Preston said.

'Sorry' wasn't a word the taller kid had any use for. He put up his fists and started dancing from side to side in front of the wash boy. Diamond gave him the rest of the water, then waded in.

The fight was short lived.

Preston cut his teeth in the rough and tumble wrestling of the Indian boys he grew up with in the forts. His opponent here was some kind of pugilist. He handled his fists fast and well and obviously had training. A right jab hit Preston 'along side the ear hole,' a left bloodied his nose. When Diamond ducked inside the fists to protect his face he received a powerful punch to the abdomen. He was lifted off his feet and propelled backwards. Preston managed to land standing and the wind was not completely knocked out of him.

But the scrap was over.

The vicious body blow had landed on the Colt tucked under Preston's coat. The bigger lad, wailing in pain, was cradling a smashed and bloodied fist.

Preston wiped his nose with his handkerchief, picked up the tub and went to the creek for more water. Diamond figured he had gotten off lucky. That kid would have dished out a good whipping if he hadn't smashed his fist. The

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fellow knew how to fight, and Preston decided he ought to study this subject as well.

Chapter 20

She opened the door a thin notch and something leaned hard against it. The rough panel slipped out of her hands; a body fell across the threshold to land sprawled, inert, upon the floor.

Lily Brannigan screamed.

Davy, switching the rifle to his lame left hand, used his right to pull the person inside, then kicked the door closed, shutting out the night. He rolled the man onto his back as Amy brought the lantern near. The hat fell off and a lock of dark hair fell across the youthful face. Amy and Lily cried, "It's Preston Diamond!"

An aide had stopped by to talk to Preston half an hour after the scuffle. "Kenny has been asking for that from one of you smaller lads. He's

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a bully, but a damn good worker. Don't know how he smashed his hand up so bad though. Doctor Kelsey says it's broke.”

Preston lifted his head from the scrub board. Kenny and Kelsey. Where there hadn't been any K's a minute ago, he now had two handed to him. He said, “Must have hit my buckle, I guess.”

Diamond went to find his injured coworker. In the third tent he checked, he found Kenny laying on a cot just inside the entrance. Kenny glared at him but kept his mouth shut when Preston said, “Hey, Kenny, I'm sorry about what happened there. How's the hand?”

No response.

Preston reached in his pocket and fished out a dime novel he had found under one of the empty cots in the second tent he'd searched. “I thought this might give you something to do while you're healing up.”

Kenny growled, “Won't do me much good, I cain't hold it with one hand, an' I cain't read anaways.”

Preston left the tent. Kenny didn't write the note.

Doctor Kelsey was not the doctor who had operated on Colonel Unzer. Preston didn't think he could be tricked as easily as Kenny, either. Diamond found out who Kelsey was without difficulty; everyone knew the doctors. During a break for a bite, one fellow was happy enough to

name them all. There were no other initial K's, first or last.

The medical staff had a tent where they could go to rest up, eat their lunch or just relax when a break in the action allowed. Preston poked his head inside the flap and surveyed the room. It was cluttered with books, cups, lunch containers and medical paraphernalia. A table with papers, ink and pens stood near the middle of the room. There were no people. Diamond looked around the camp, saw no one looking his way and slipped inside the staff tent. He went to the table and shuffled through the writing material hoping to find Kelsey's signature or a piece of his hand writing. Preston held the note written to Corporal Peters and scanned the papers for a comparison.

There were two articles of interest; one with Kelsey's signature, in which the letter K did not fit at all and a missive addressed to one of the staff. The handwriting on the second appeared to match. Preston pocketed the letter and left the tent unnoticed.

Rather, he thought he'd left the tent unnoticed.

The afternoon was spinning by. The sun, still reluctant, did not burn off the morning cloud cover though rain didn't appear to be an option either. Preston slipped the bridle on his horse, scrambled aboard and cinched up on the go. About a mile away from the camp, he pulled the letter from his coat and began to read as he rode

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along. Now, he realized that, in his haste, he had taken only half of the note. There must have been two pages or more because this portion started in the middle. It was probably addressed to one of the medics for they had exclusive access to the staff tent. The gist of the message was lost, but Diamond determined several items of importance: the sender was familiar with the army camp; was an acquaintance of the addressee; was named Kitty. Preston folded the paper and stuffed it back in his pocket. 'K', as in Kitty; if the abbreviated signatures were using the initial of their first names, who was 'F'?

The bullet hit half a second before the sound of the shot, so it must have come from a distance. It ripped through Preston's right thigh, cut a groove in the saddle and burned Rascal's shoulder. The young gelding broke into a bucking run, and Preston held on until he succumbed to pain and shock. The unforgiving sod, dry and hard, jarred him awake momentarily but he slipped into a black hell again. Pain wouldn't let him stay unconscious. He collected his thoughts, trying to sort out where he was and what had happened. He bit his lip to keep from crying out. Fearing to move lest there be another bullet coming, he forced himself to lay still. A warm wetness was spreading high up on his leg; the pain, searing and intense at first, now diminished to an excruciating burning throb. He became aware of more soreness in other parts of his body; the tumble from the

back of his horse must have been a rough one. Preston slipped a hand inside his coat and pulled the Colt from his belt. With clumsy fingers he held the grip and eased back the hammer with his thumb. He realized a small comfort from the muffled "snick." Then he passed out.

Sometime later, maybe a minute, maybe an hour, Preston thought Rascal had come back when his ear nearest the ground picked up the sound of hooves walking on grass. The horse snorted as it came near and the squeak of saddle leather announced someone was dismounting. He heard the ratchet of a lever, it sounded the same as his .44 Henry. A soft toe nudged Preston and rolled him over on his side. A blurred face came near and peered into his half closed eyes. It was distorted but he could make out a satisfied grin. A rasping voice said, "So, this little diamond has lost its sparkle, what a shame." A warped rifle barrel came into view. Preston couldn't extract the revolver so he just squeezed the trigger and the bullet found its own way out through his coat. Then he passed out.

Diamond knew he hadn't been out for long this time because the smell of powder and scorched cloth were in his nostrils. There was a weight on top of him and he couldn't move. Squinching his eyes against the pain he forced his head to clear. His vision came back to near normal: Rascal was grazing about forty yards away; another horse stood nearer, its mouth

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bleeding, probably because it stepped on the reins. The weight Preston had felt upon regaining consciousness turned out to be someone laying crosswise on top of him.

A dead person.

He shifted sideways and tried to squirm out from under the burden. The pain in his leg amplified and he almost cried out. Biting his lip again, he wormed his way clear. Using the Henry rifle that the stranger had dropped, Preston pried himself erect. It wasn't his Henry, he didn't know whose it was; most likely it belonged to the dead woman at his feet.

His knees buckled and Preston collapsed on the grass. He'd killed a woman! He made himself look at the bloodless face; she wasn't a young woman, older than Señora Diamond but younger than Rebecca Unzer. She may have been beautiful in someone's eyes a long time ago. Was she a mother? A grandmother? Preston averted his gaze and saw that his leg was still bleeding or had started bleeding again. He pulled out his knife and cut away his trouser leg. The wound was deeper than he had thought. The bullet had passed right through the meat of his right thigh. It missed the bone but tore a jagged hole on the exit side. The area around the wound was bruised a dark blue to black, blood oozed from both holes. Preston knew he was in trouble.

Using his knife to rip strips from the lady's skirts he plugged the entry and exit wounds with

cloth. Preston went cross-eyed with the pain and shock of seeing his own flesh mangled like sausage meat. He cut more strips and bandaged the leg as tightly as he could. He lost consciousness several times during the procedure.

Rascal had come near but held back, not liking the smell of blood. Preston used the Henry crutch to get to his feet and called to the gelding. Rascal turned his head to avoid the loose reins and came closer. Preston hobbled away from the body and was then able to call Rascal to him. It took all of Diamond's will power and all of his strength to climb into the saddle. He scanned the area. There was nothing moving, no sign of life, not even a farm house vacant or occupied. Preston was confused. His vision was blurring again. He couldn't remember where the army camp was; he didn't know his directions. And it was growing dark.

Preston nudged Rascal in the flank with his good leg. The dead woman's horse whickered as they moved away, but it did not follow. The gelding walked along at a gentle pace as though he understood that he had to keep the rider in the saddle. Night came, the moon didn't. But it was all the same to Preston Diamond because he was in another world.

The pain went away. A lighter shade of darkness surrounded him and Preston felt warmth, a warmth that comes from within, not of the sun or an evening fire. He watched a white shapeless

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form walking, no, floating, toward him. It reached out, touched his hand and lifted him up; he drifted along, high in the air but there was no fear of falling, he was weightless. Far below, a horse and rider, black in a land of silvery shadow, plodded along a high and narrow track spanning a bottomless chasm. The horse was sure footed but the rider tilted awkwardly in the saddle. If he fell he would be swallowed up in the abyss on one side or the other. The precarious track between Heaven and Hell.

The soft white vision released Diamond's hand and he fell. He dropped down, down, down toward the unsuspecting rider. He was going to collide with the man, knock him off his horse and they would both be tossed into the pit. Preston tried to scream a warning but he had no voice. Preston braced himself for the impact.

He was back astride Rascal. The pain was there, the cold, the night.

The gelding stopped.

Someone stood on Preston's left side. There were two people. The taller one reached up and lifted the reins from Preston's hands. He stepped forward and Rascal followed. The other person, a lady, kept pace at the left stirrup. She held Preston on his horse. They travelled slowly, there seemed no urgency. The lady often glanced up at Preston and sometimes the man looked back but Diamond could not make out their features and they said nothing. The pain in the wounded leg still

throbbled, but it was dull and distant. A heavy tiredness clung to Preston; he wanted to close his eyes; to stop the horse and slide out of the saddle; to give it all up; to go to sleep... to go to sleep.

The lady touched his leg, her gentle caress brought a surge of strength. He had to keep going, he could not let these people down.

A thin yellow line in the shape of a rectangle grew more distinct in the darkness. It was a doorway, a closed door with lamp light glowing around the frame. Preston had seen this before...

Rascal stopped and the stranger who had been leading him dropped the reins. Together, the man and the lady eased Preston to the ground. In the thin orange light cast from the rectangle he recognized their faces.

Cutler and Señora Diamond.

They helped him across the stoop and up to the door. "Papá. Mother," Preston said.

Sunlight streaming through the open doorway, shining in his eyes, brought Preston awake. He didn't know where he was and it took a frantic moment to sort it out. His leg pained fiercely when he attempted to turn over. Lily Brannigan sat in a chair beside the bed. She was asleep.

So, now he knew where he was. How did he get here? Why was he here?

Laying back on the lumpy pillows, Preston tried to remember last night. A dream? Or a

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nightmare? He'd been shot... in the leg. Someone had tried to kill him... a woman. He'd shot her. God! He'd killed a woman! What happened then? He was on his horse. And there was pain; pain was everywhere. And a light, a strange light and then... then Papá was leading Rascal. Papá and Mother brought Preston to the Brannigan house. Where were his parents now? Why weren't they here with him? Didn't they know he was hurt? "Am I still dreaming?" He wondered.

Lily stirred in her chair, her eyes flickered open; she leaped to her feet. "Preston! You're awake!" She picked up a damp cloth and mopped his brow. "Do you know me? Do you know where you are?"

"Hello, Lily." Preston's voice rasped and his throat hurt when he spoke.

"Oh! Preston! You're here! We thought you were dead... the fever, the chills. You turned blue. You turned grey. Sometimes you went so quiet and you didn't move. You didn't even breathe." She started to cry. "We thought you were dead!"

"I was shot. You kept me alive, Lily? I don't remember anything. Except... except... someone led my horse to your door..."

Preston tried to sit up. "My horse, I have to take care of Rascal. He's been standing out there all night."

Lily pushed Diamond back onto the bed. “Davy took care of your horse. It wasn't last night, you've been here four days.”

“Four days? ...The people... the ones who brought me here? Did you see them? Where are they now?”

“No one brought you here, Preston. You were alone.”

“But... how? It was dark, I didn't know where I was... and... my... a man... a man took the reins and led me here. Why didn't he come in?”

Lily mopped his brow again. “There was no man, Preston. Your horse brought you. Maybe it remembered the way from the last time you were here.”

Diamond sank into the pillows. “Maybe,” he said.

Only, Preston had been riding Cutler Diamond's cavalry horse on the previous visits. Rascal had never been in this area.

Chapter 21

Preston Diamond had been so near death when he arrived at the Brannigan farm that Davy thought it best not to try to get him to the doctor. They still had some of the medical supplies Preston had brought from Doctor Filmore's clinic and Lily tended to the wound. Lily and Amy took turns sitting up with Preston during his four days of delirium and unconsciousness.

Diamond stayed at the Brannigan's for two more days and then talked Davy into moving him to Diamond/Tweed farm. Lily argued against it, but finally agreed, on condition that she would stay with Preston until he was better.

Jerome, the mule, pulled the wagon; Rascal was led along behind. Preston endured the jouncing though he made his lip bleed from biting

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back the pain. They stopped in Conception and Lily fetched Diamond's mail. He pocketed the letters, planning to read them when he was settled in at home. Preston refused to go to Filmore's clinic. "He can't do anymore for me than Lily can. And we have supplies at home."

Rufus Tweed anxiously watched the approach of the strange wagon. When he recognized Rascal tied behind, the black man ran forward.

He was torn between joy upon seeing his young partner again, and fear for the lad's recovery. "Oh! Press, Rufus tol' yo, no good agwyne come o' yo ahuntin, dos bad mans. Now yo gon' an' got yosel' shot."

They made a bed in the parlour so Preston wouldn't have to contend with the stairs. Gratefully he eased into the soft covers and fell asleep. Davy and Amy Brannigan took their leave and Rufus made Lily feel at home. She was given Colonel and Mrs. Diamond's bedroom on the main floor. Rufus had not moved in there yet; he had taken the spare room next to Preston's upstairs.

When Preston awoke in the evening, Rufus came and sat by his bed. He had been working on the farm and made a few visits to Conception since Preston and General Grant had left. Several of the new hens Rufus and Preston had bought were laying eggs and Rufus had sold some in the town. On one of his visits to the village, the local law man interrogated Tweed.

“De sheriff he come up to me an' he say, 'Yo got paper dat say yo a free slave?' 'I say yessah, I got de paper righ' here.' He readin' m'paper an' I say, 'Dat siganjure on dat paper is Gen'al Ulysses Grant. Gen'al Grant, he mak' me a free man.' Dat sheriff's eyes dey big as Rufus's eyes an' he say, 'Damn! Dat is sign' by de Gen'al Grant hissel'.”

Preston grinned and asked, “And did the sheriff give your papers back to you?”

“De sheriff he gibb dem righ' back.” Rufus's face stretched into an ear-to-ear smile. “An' den, nex' tam I gwyne back to de town ebbery one sayin' “Dat black man, he a frien' o' Gen'al Grant.' An' in de sto', de's a black girl aworkin'. Press, dat black girl, she asmilin' at Rufus!”

“What is the girl's name, Rufus? Did you ask her her name?”

“Yeah, Press. She call' May-a-belle.”

“Maybe she'll be May-a-Belle Tweed someday, Rufus?”

Tweed's smile stretched a little more.

Preston, having slept most of the afternoon, did not retire when his companions did. He lay on the bed and reread the mail, two letters, that Lily had brought from the post office. One was an official note from the Union Army announcing Colonel Diamond's death. Preston couldn't imagine why they had bothered to send the letter as they had presumed the family dead. The other note was from Rebecca Unzer.

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Dear Adam:

Colonel Unzer is doing well. He is out of bed now and moves about the house. He hasn't ventured out of doors yet, but I am pleased with his recovery.

The day after you left, General Engels stopped by. He was looking for you. He and James talked for awhile but he did not say why he wanted to see you.

We heard that Citadel Crossing was attacked by rebel troops. Our side suffered casualties but I don't know if Corporal Peters was among them.

Engels says that General Grant may be forcing Lee to surrender. If Lee is stopped, the others will not be long in surrendering, too. I do wish this war would end. For long, I have feared for Colonel Unzer's life and now that he is safe, it is you that keeps me awake at night. I had a terrible dream that you were wounded and all alone. Please be careful, Adam. Life is so precious.

*Yours sincerely,
Rebecca*

Next day, Lily took it upon herself to tidy up the house, not that Preston and Rufus were slovenly, but the place lacked the care Señora Diamond had given it. Diamond was able to put part of his weight on the leg. Rufus whittled a

willow cane for him to use and Preston hobbled to the barn before he had to sit down. He feared he might be lame the rest of his life.

Over the next few days, Diamond often thought about the black ride to Brannigan farm. He knew that his parents had led him there, but he told no one. One afternoon he asked Lily to go through his mother's wardrobe. "If there are any clothes that you would like, you are welcome to them. I... I think Mother would like you to have them."

Though she longed to try them on, Lily felt embarrassed to don the lovely dresses. Preston assured her it would be alright. He tried not to stare when Lily first came out of the bedroom dressed in a beautiful gown. He remembered that his mother had worn it to Ford's Theatre on the family's last visit to Washington. His eyes clouded; Señora Diamond had been so beautiful. His father was always proud to bursting with her on his arm. Lily was pretty and she looked lovely in the gown, though she didn't fill it out as well as Constantina. "You look lovely, Lily," Preston said softly.

Lily told Preston she knew how to sew and said she could make the dresses fit her and Amy. "I doubt that I shall ever be at a ball or anything where I could wear the gowns. They are so lovely, Preston. I will cherish them always."

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Preston thought she might kiss him again, but she didn't. He decided he would have liked her to.

Lily only took a few of the clothes and Preston asked that she take more. "Fill the trunk if you like," he said, "and you can keep the trunk, too."

In the end the young lady helped herself to about a quarter of Señora Diamond's clothes; the one small extravagance the Diamond's enjoyed in their nomadic life. Preston wondered if Rufus's May-a-Belle might wear the clothes someday, too.

On the fifth day back at Diamond/Tweed farm, Preston was getting around without the willow cane. The leg was tender and he either limped or walked a hop step. Rufus saddled the gelding and Preston climbed aboard by himself. It hurt but he stayed there. When he saw the blood stained fender and the furrow in the thick leather, Preston recalled the impact of the bullet and Rascal's bucking fit. There was a thin scar on the horse's shoulder. Diamond had been lucky Rascal allowed him back in the saddle that night.

As previously arranged, Davy Brannigan returned to pick up his sister. Amy was with him and she could not contain her excitement when Lily opened the trunk to show off the new clothes. Preston and Rufus thanked Lily for her nursing and all the work she had done. The trunk and Lily's bag were loaded into the wagon, Amy and Davy climbed aboard. Preston offered his hand to

C. C. Phillips

help Lily up, she took it then turned to him. He kissed her.

Davy grinned, Rufus smiled and Amy's mouth dropped open.

Chapter 22

“... nah, I din't hear nothin' about who shot ol' Custus Lien. Could'a b'en just about anybody. When they pulled 'im out'en the river, his head was part blowed off.” The speaker shot a stream of tobacco into the river. “So I'm guessin' he pissed on the wrong wagon wheel.”

“Yeah, ol' Custus... Tain't likely the church was full when they buried 'im. But the ol' coot could run that ferry. I seen...”

Preston sat astride Rascal and waited for the boat to arrive. It was still going the other way when he rode up and, for the past ten minutes, he had been listening to a conversation between the two other passengers who were waiting at Conception Landing. The men, civilians in shabby clothes, were on foot and had taken a seat

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on the floating dock. They were near enough to be heard anyway, but Preston figured they had raised their voices for his benefit. Once in a while, one or the other would glance at Preston to see his reaction. Everybody likes an audience. Preston appreciated the information; he had wondered what had become of the ferryman's body after pitching head first into the Patowmack.

“Oh, wait on a minute, I jist heard another bit o' news this mornin', too.”

“Yeah, what'd ya hear that 'as more important than what I 'as about to say?”

“Somebody done fer Kitty Nails!”

Now the pair had Preston's total attention. He wasn't familiar with the name 'Nails' but 'Kitty' struck a note.

“Bull sheeit! Ya don' say.”

“Yep, some feller found her daid out on the grass there somewheres north of Alexandria. Feller seen 'er horse first, I guess. Then he rid over and taken a look. Damn if it weren't ol' Kitty alyin' there daid. They say she took a slug through the brisket.”

The barge was still tied to shore on the other side. Preston could see horses and bluecoats but couldn't identify anyone from this distance. The Union Army must be overseeing this crossing as well now that “ol' Custus” had been killed. Men were packing freight, but Diamond couldn't say if it was being loaded or taken off.

“God damn! Kitty Nails shot through the brisket.” The speaker looked toward Preston. “Seems to me she had a purty big pair o’ briskets on ‘er, too.”

Diamond deliberately faced their way and flashed a grin. It worked. The gossips knew they were being overheard, so they began to talk louder and embellish their stories.

From the corner of his eye, Diamond watched the chap listening to the news shake his head in disbelief. “So some son of a bitch went an’ nailed Kitty Nails! Well, she was meaner than ol’ Custus Lien hisself. They say she had a man oncet an’ he come home on a binge, an’ she lit into him with the fryin’ pan. Poor bugger nearly died. But when he waked up, he politely took a crap in Kitty’s fryin’ pan, set it in the warmin’ oven, an’ lit outen there. Never heerd o’ him after that. Could be Kitty hunted him down and shot him.”

“Yeah, I reckon likely she did. She up an’ shot a few folks in her day.”

The ferry had left the other side now, soldiers were hauling on the cable.

“She ‘as a good lookin’ dame in her time, too. Come from lots o’ money. Weren’t shy around the menfolks neether... er... so I heerd.”

“I would’na touched ‘er with a ten foot pike pole. She ‘as prob’ly like one them damn bugs what breeds an’ then the mommy bug, she eats the head right off’n that ol’ daddy bug.”

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The men recited a few more anecdotes attesting to the notion that Kitty Nails could be a rather difficult lady if she were crossed. But there was nothing pointing out why she had come hunting Preston. He had wondered about that, too. She must have been at or near the Army Camp. Had she recognized him before she shot him? Maybe she had seen him sneak into the staff tent and knew what he might find; too bad he hadn't taken the whole note. But what was it she had said just before she raised the Henry to shoot him? Something about a diamond... a little diamond sparkling... "*So, this little diamond has lost its sparkle.*" She either knew who she was shooting when she knocked Preston off the horse, or she had trailed him from camp, and shot him for a thief, then recognized Preston when he was laying on the ground bleeding. She had looked into his face before saying anything, perhaps she had heard of the Diamond eyes. Whatever the situation, she knew he was a Diamond, and she wanted him dead.

And that meant that Preston was being hunted.

The freight crew arrived. The ferry touched land and the passengers were unloading. Five bluecoats were running the operation. Two stood at the ready with their rifles as the boat came in, two manned the cables and a fifth operated the rudders and moored the boat. Preston wondered what had become of the displaced civilian crew,

maybe the ride on a runaway ferry had been enough to satisfy their seafaring appetites.

Preston led Rascal aboard. The rough plank deck was still stained from the blood of General Grant's luckless mare. 'Socks' had shown promise and, under Uncle Lyss's steady hand, would have made a fine saddle horse. No doubt, Grant had been reluctant to shoot her, but the lieutenant general and his army survived by his ability to make difficult, split-second decisions.

Diamond's thoughts reverted to Kitty Nails. He pictured her horse, its mouth dripping blood from the bite of the bit. It had been a mare too, a dark bay with two white socks.

Now he knew that Kitty hadn't sent the letter he had found in the medical staff tent at the field hospital. She had written it there and left it on the table. She may have seen Preston leave the tent, probably went in and checked, found the last page missing, and rode off on the trail of the thief. Whatever had been in the first page or pages that he had left behind may have held valuable information, however, it seemed unlikely Kitty would have left anything of importance laying around in plain view. It didn't matter now.

What did matter was that Preston had a strong suspicion who the letter was addressed to.

Though Diamond was weak and sore by the time he reached the Unzer's stable, he tried to be thorough in tending to Rascal before going inside

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the house. Pale and limping when he made his way to the front door, it opened before he knocked and Rebecca wrapped him in a hug. She reacted much the same as Rufus did when he saw Preston and realized he had been wounded. “Adam! You've gone and got yourself hurt! I warned you not to go.”

“I'm alright, Rebecca, just a little sore.”

“I dreamed you had been shot. You were all alone, bleeding and cold.”

“Yes, Rebecca, I got your letter. And your dream came true, I got hit in the leg. But... I wasn't alone, Rebecca... I... I had Rascal and he took me to a farm where I knew the people. They fixed my leg and helped me out.”

Colonel Unzer, using a cane to steady himself, had come to the porch when he heard the voices. He gave Preston the cane and Rebecca helped them both inside.

Once seated in the warm parlour, Preston was made to remove his trousers and Rebecca skilfully tended to the wound, tut-tutting as she worked. “It's a wonder you didn't get the blood poisoning and lose your leg. By the look of this though, them Brannigans must have some know-how when it comes to bullet wounds.”

The colonel ran a critical eye over the wound, too. “You were lucky, Adam, I saw many a young soldier die from less serious bullet holes than that. I don't know why you didn't bleed to death.”

“And, I don't know how you stayed on that horse,” said Rebecca.

Preston fell asleep on the sofa after Rebecca had finished with the dressing. He awoke when Brigadier General Fremont Engels knocked on the door later that evening; the Unzers did not say if the general had been summoned. Preston's colour had returned, but his leg was sore and he favoured it when he walked. Engels noticed the limp immediately and wanted to hear the story in detail.

Mrs. Unzer insisted on Adam having a meal first. She brought a plate to the parlour and while he ate, she poured tea for everyone. Adam put a spoonful of sugar in his cup, gave it a quick stir and, pausing occasionally for a sip, related his story.

Engels and the Unzers listened without interruption. When Preston was finished, Colonel Unzer asked, “Adam, you think her name was Kitty Nails?”

“I think so, sir, from the hand writing and signature and what those men at the ferry said, I don't think she could be anyone else.”

General Engels said, “I've heard or read the name Kitty Nails somewhere... but...”

Colonel Unzer interrupted. “Kitty Nails is from Georgia. I hadn't heard of her either, until a few months back when a report came out to watch for her; naturally, right along with the report, came a dozen exaggerated tales, but between the report

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and the rumours, I figured this much: Years ago she was a southern belle, one with a wild side. She eloped with a no-good, so they say, but it didn't last. Her family are, or were, wealthy plantation owners, kept a hundred slaves, or so it was said. The Nails outfit has fought hard and spent a fortune for the Confederate side. Kitty herself fought no less than her brothers and cousins. A few months back, General Sheridan and his army wiped out a strip of Georgia, fifty mile wide. The Nails were right in the middle. They lost everything. Just around Christmas time, at Savannah, Kitty dolled herself up and walked into a meeting and shot dead two Union officers; one a major, the other a general. She escaped and disappeared. No one doubted but what the North had not heard the last from her."

Engels said, "Yes, now I recall. I received the same report, although I was not privy to the scandalous details." He turned his attention to Preston. "Adam, if it was Kitty Nails you shot in self defence, you have done the Union side a great favour. She may have been one of the people plotting to kill the officers."

"If she put that hole in Adam's leg, he did himself a great favour by shooting her, too," said Rebecca.

General Engels said, "Adam, I've been to visit your hosts a few times since you went back across the river. There have been developments. We expect to hear that General Grant has secured

General Lee's surrender within the next few days. There is still fighting going on in other regions, but the war is all but over for the South. Doubtless you will be wondering about Captain Wiley. He is still incarcerated; there have been no more attempts to kill him or break him out; he has not divulged any information about his cohorts. We have established a date for the trial, it will be April twelfth. Chester Bateman continues to be Wiley's attorney and we are having no luck connecting him as a co-conspirator."

"Do you know anything more about the conspiracy, Freemont?" Colonel Unzer asked.

"We have not been able to make any firm connections. We have no idea who this initial "F" may be. It is assumed, because the message "F" sent originated on the other side, that the person lives across the Patowmack in Virginia. That leaves a very big area."

"What about that Corporal Peters who was intended to receive the letter from Kitty Nails, telling him our James was going to be at Citadel Crossing?" Rebecca asked.

Engels said, "As you know, there was a Confederate attack at the crossing. A half dozen Union soldiers were killed. Corporal Peters went missing. Several bodies were dragged out of the river, maybe Peters is at the bottom of the Patowmack."

Unzer grunted. "And maybe he's riding a Union horse out in Nebraska Territory."

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“Well, he's out of our bailiwick and beyond concern in either case,” said Engels.

After the brigadier general had taken his leave, Diamond asked, “Have you seen anyone lurking near your house, Rebecca? Do you think they are watching to see if I show up again?”

“No, Adam, I haven't noticed anything strange. We have been keeping a close eye, too, because I'm afraid that someone else will come after James.”

Preston said, “Only Captain Wiley knows who, or how many, he planned to kill the day he tried to stab you. According to General Engels, he isn't telling anyone else.”

Colonel Unzer, a half grin on his face, shifted in his chair and said, “Maybe he figured, since he was wounded too, I would be fair game.”

“I don't think the Adam Forsythe name is fooling anyone who is looking for me. I think they will find me here sooner or later and I don't want either of you to be injured.”

“Adam, we are not letting you out of our sight now. Look at you! Barely able to walk; what chance would you have if someone did find you?”

Reluctantly, Diamond agreed to stay for a few days until his leg had more time to heal.

Since the day Preston and the Unzers had returned from Alexandria Field Hospital, Rebecca had kept the double barrel shotgun just inside the

kitchen door. Preston now noted that extra cartridges were placed beside the scattergun.

Preston Diamond's wound responded well under the careful attention of Mrs. Unzer. In a few days he was able to get around with less of a limp. He could walk further between rests, too, but he wasn't up to running or strenuous work. On the second day in the city he walked as far as General Grant's house, the next day Preston made it to Chester Bateman's place. On that outing, he stopped for a rest and concealed himself against the same tree trunk he had used when he saw Wiley come out of the lawyer's house, but no one moved near the premises.

Next afternoon, Preston returned. The street was empty. The sun shone warm, buds were popping out on the trees and grass sprouted tender green shoots wherever the light could reach. Birds sang, flies buzzed, Diamond dozed.

The clatter of hooves and wheels startled Preston awake. A black canopied carriage drawn by a smart looking white mare, dressed in fancy harness, drew up at Bateman's door. A portly fellow with greying hair showing under the brim of his derby hat, well brushed clothes and shiny boots stepped down from the right side. The driver, a younger, distinguished looking chap with dark hair and a drooping moustache, stepped down on the nigh side. He carried a gold painted or plated walking stick.

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The second man's face was vaguely familiar to Diamond. He was certain he'd seen this dapper gentleman before. The older man led the way to the house and walked straight in as if he owned it. Preston decided he must be Chester Bateman.

Diamond waited in the shade as the sun worked its way around the bowl of the tree. The white horse's head drooped and its tail swished half-heartedly at a fly. Several pedestrians walked down the street and passed within a few yards but none noticed him in the shadows. By the travel of the sun, Preston estimated an hour had passed when the man with the gold walking stick emerged. He said something to Bateman as he closed the door, then strode to the carriage. His face held a determined look that was not there earlier. Diamond remained seated until the rig had passed out of sight before climbing to his feet. His wounded leg was stiff and sore from sitting so long in one position. With a painful limp, he made his way back to the Unzer's cottage.

Captain Wiley's trial was drawing nearer and General Engels came again to the Unzer's house. "I have a great fear that Adam Forsythe is in danger. We have to move him somewhere safe until after the trial."

Rebecca said, "Well, Glory be! In the past two months, Adam has lost his parents; Wiley came hunting him in our house; he was shot and wounded out in the wilderness; he is the only link

the military has in this conspiracy; and now, after all that and more, the Union Army decides he should be protected? Brigadier General, how absolutely prompt!"

Engels looked to Colonel Unzer, but the officer's face showed nothing. Unzer may have fought fearlessly for the North, but he wasn't taking the army's side against his wife.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Unzer. I know I should have done something before this. Fortunately, it isn't too late."

"Well, don't you start worrying about Adam now. We will take care of him," said Rebecca.

"Please, Mrs. Unzer, Adam has to be moved. You can't protect him here."

"We can do more than the army, General. If you take him, he may as well be put on a firing line. Colonel Unzer and I will do something, but it's best if you do not even know about it." She crossed her arms and glared at the officer. The general, used to commanding regiments, took his orders without further argument.

That evening, Rebecca Unzer took Preston to live with Martha, the maid, and Hardee, the butler, in General Grant's big house. It was expected General Grant and his family would be returning from Richmond soon. Preston would be safe.

Rebecca talked long with Martha. Preston did not hear what she said but when Mrs. Unzer left the house she gave Preston a hug. "I know

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you won't stay put, and I've instructed Martha not to interfere. I may have to deal with Ulysses for giving you so much tether, but I'm sure you know what you are doing. Remember, I am only a short walk away, come by when you can, and *run* to us if you need help."

Later that evening, hearing footsteps on the stair, the maid sat up in her bed. She listened intently and heard the soft click of the latch as the outside door opened and closed. Martha got up, dressed quickly and slipped out into the night.

It was a shorter distance to Bateman's house from General Grant's than from the Unzers. In minutes, Diamond was slipping through the tangle of shrubbery behind the attorney's house. A light glowed from within and, standing on his tiptoes, slightly back from the window, he could see into the sitting room. Chester Bateman was at a table, smoking a curve stemmed pipe, and reading through a sheaf of papers. There was no one else in the room. Preston could detect no other lamps lit in the home. In his vigils under the tree, Diamond had seen no one other than Bateman and his two visitors; it seemed the lawyer lived alone. The hour was late and no company arrived this evening. After fifteen minutes or so, Bateman set down his cold pipe, picked up the lamp, and left the room. The house went dark; probably the man had gone to bed.

Just as he turned to leave, Preston heard a repeated scraping sound. He listened closer and determined that there was someone approaching down the ally. The steps were slow, deliberate, occasionally dragging on the dirt and cinders; they stopped near the rear of Bateman's yard. Diamond sank into the shadows and waited. Within seconds, the back door of Bateman's house opened and someone stepped out into the darkness. Preston didn't take time to wonder whether there had been a midnight tryst planned, if this was to be a chance encounter, or if Bateman was making a late trip to the biffy. At the moment, all he knew for certain was that he was caught between the back door and the outhouse.

Chapter 23

Chester Bateman's heavy steps masked any sound from Preston as he dropped to his haunches and shuffled back on tiptoe, trying to shift clear of the walkway. The lawyer passed so close the smell of his pipe tobacco assailed Preston's nostrils and he could have easily reached out and tripped the fellow. The door to the privy creaked open and closed softly. Now the stalker in the alley was closer to Bateman than Preston. Not an enviable position at the moment. Across the quiet distance came a dull tapping, more of a mild thudding, followed by a whispered voice that carried better than a shout. "Chester? Chess, that you in there? It's me, John."

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A muffled response leaked out between the slab boards. “Well, yes it's me in here, who the hell did you expect? It's my outhouse.”

“We have to talk and I didn't want to come to your front door. I heard that that Diamond kid may be snooping around.”

Preston's ears were pricked and tuned to highest reception.

“Well, make sure he isn't near here now.”

“No... I don't think there's anyone near, I crept up here kind of slow and quiet and I didn't hear or see anybody. I've been waiting a few minutes and I haven't heard anything either. I was just about to go to your back door when you came out.”

Following a shuffle of clothes, the door creaked again and there was a sound of footsteps. Bateman's gruff voice grated on the night. “A hell of a place to wait for a guy, John. Haven't you heard of privacy? And, speaking of privacy, that Mrs. Doogan across the street told me this evening that someone has been watching my house. It could be that Diamond kid again. She claims he comes and sits under a tree a couple houses down from me. The little bastard was there today while I was gone.”

Diamond winced. He had been so intent on watching Bateman's house, he hadn't considered that someone might be watching him. He was not invisible. It was something to keep in mind.

“Well, he is back here in DC, General Engels told me so just an hour ago,” said the voice belonging to the man named John.

Preston almost choked. Engels was a traitor.

“Is he back at Colonel Unzer's house?”

Bateman's tobacco-rough voice rasped on Preston's eardrums.

“No, that old woman of Unzer's was moving him somewhere. She wouldn't tell Engels where though. That old boot doesn't trust anybody. Too bad Wiley didn't get a knife into her.”

Preston's hand, already resting on the butt of the Colt, tightened on the walnut grip.

“How long has he been back in the city, John?”

“Well, General Engels didn't say, Chess, but I gathered the kid has been at Unzer's for a couple days now.”

Bateman's tone grew louder. “Why in hell did Engels not tell us sooner? That trial is coming up, day after tomorrow. If Diamond shows up there, we may as well walk right to the gallows and save the trial. And another thing, I'll bet the kid knows more than he told Freemont. That bloody general is army soft in the head.”

Preston detected the tension in the visitor's speech. “I've been away for a week, and Engels didn't want to run the risk of being seen talking to you... after all, you are Wiley's attorney. But anyway, Chess, General Engels has come up with a plan. It's risky as all get out, but what isn't these

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days? Freemont is seeing things like you and I now, and he knows that Captain Wiley will break down on the stand. He believes Everett will send us all to the hangman.”

“Is this going to take long? Should we move inside?”

Preston shifted on his heels. His thoughts screamed, “No! No! Don't go inside.”

“No, Chester, if you'd let me get on with it, we'd be done and gone to bed.”

Preston relaxed a fraction.

The lawyer's voice growled. “Alright, I'll say no more.”

“Here is General Engel's plan: If we can't get rid of that Diamond kid before the trial, either you or the general will slip Everett a knife or gun. He can hide it in his sling... he's still wearing a sling, isn't he?”

“Well, his arm is healed up pretty good, but he'll wear the sling if I tell him to.”

Excitement was creeping into John's tone as he recited the plan. “Okay, either you or Freemont will slip Wiley a weapon. He's crazy as a cicada bug when it comes to the Diamonds, so it won't be a problem to talk him into killing the last one. The kid will be there, General Engels is sure of that. So when there is an opportunity, Wiley will shoot or knife the kid. Engels will have his army revolver and he will shoot Wiley right there in the court room. No one will doubt Freemont's

motivation. Wiley will be removed and so will Diamond. No trial.”

Preston heard Bateman expel a long breath. “Just what makes Engels think I can talk Wiley into killing Diamond in front of all those witnesses?”

“You’ll tell Everett that we have all our people in place. There are horses round back, that sort of bunk. You’re a lawyer, Chess, you’ll think of something. You know Wiley, he’ll swallow it all.”

When Preston Diamond crept back into Grant House, he was careful not to disturb Martha or Hardee. If they heard anything, neither came to investigate. Preston slipped under the covers and, though the bed was luxurious, sleep did not come. He reviewed the outhouse plot. How could Uncle Lyss have been blind to the treasonous General Engels? Had Rebecca guessed that Engels was not to be trusted? Or did she not trust the army on general principle? As Bateman had surmised, Engels didn’t know everything that Preston knew, but Diamond could have kicked himself for divulging as much information as he had. Apparently, Chester Bateman and the prowler named John had been informed, to the last detail, of what Engels knew. The parting words between the two were about Diamond’s shooting of Kitty Nails. She had definitely been a part of the

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conspiracy. How many more people were involved?

Then the notion struck Preston that “F”, as in Freemont Engels, could have been the same 'F' that signed the dispatch to Bateman from across the Patowmack. Was Engels at, or near, the army medical unit when Colonel Unzer was hospitalized? Maybe Brigadier General Freemont Engels and the former southern belle, Kitty Nails, were writing dispatches at the same table, at the same time. Also, Preston had been fool enough to deliver into Engels hands the note found with the dead dispatch rider. Diamond had assumed, as had the Unzers, that the message was a confidential Union Army correspondence. Maybe it was part of the conspiracy, too. But why would the messenger be carrying a message *to* Generals Engels as well as a message *from* Engels? It would be a huge coincidence indeed, but Engels could have been in the area unannounced and a legitimate correspondence was sent from the field. He would have had to return immediately though, because he was back in Washington when Preston delivered the dispatch. There must be another 'F', Diamond decided but he wished he could have that sealed message in his hands again.

Preston heard the faintest click of a latch. It echoed on the far side of his hearing. He strained his ears. There were cautious footfalls on the stair, then in the hall; they stopped outside his door. Diamond held his breath; the Colt was across the

room on a chair. It was too dark inside the bedroom to see detail and Preston couldn't pick out the knob on the door. He listened for the sound of the latch... nothing. He slipped out of bed, padded barefoot across the room and took up the pistol. As he edged noiselessly toward the door, he heard the swish of clothing and a soft tread retreating down the hall.

When Preston came down the stairs in the morning, he found that the maid had left a note for Adam Forsythe saying she would be away for a few hours and that the food on the kitchen table was for his breakfast. He searched the house just to be sure she was gone because the rustle of clothing he had heard outside his room had been the swish of skirts. He found Hardee in the back yard passing instructions to a labourer who was working on the fence. The butler was a taciturn chap. He did not volunteer anything extra when saying he did not know where Martha had gone.

Preston had a look at the food and decided he wasn't that hungry. He went out the back door. Hardee was gone and the labourer did not notice when Preston slipped through the garden and, favouring his right leg, stole down the alley. Keeping low and watching for any movement, Diamond made his way to Unzer's stable. He studied the area for a full five minutes, then, following the same pattern as when he trailed Captain Wiley, he made his way into the garden

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and knocked at the back door. Mrs. Unzer opened the door a crack, saw who was there, and let him in.

Both Unzers listened in slack-jawed disbelief as Preston related his eavesdropping from the previous night. Colonel Unzer went into a fuming rage. “I don't know why General Grant presumes the best in everybody. He trusted that turncoat Engels, and now we've been feeding the very snake that's been trying to poison us. If that traitor shows up here again I'll shoot him dead.”

Preston said, “Uncle Lyss has to hear about this, and...”

Rebecca found her tongue. “Adam, we received word just a few minutes ago that General Grant is to be in Washington tonight; General Lee surrendered two days ago—thank the Lord, this cursed war is over— but, Ulysses will be a busy man when he gets here and I doubt there will be a chance to talk to him. He...”

Preston cut her off, “But I have to see Uncle Lyss, or at least get a message to him. I think there may be trouble right inside his house.”

He went on to explain that Martha may have her fingers in the cookie dough, too.

Colonel Unzer said, “Well, she may have been checking on you is all. Rebecca left you in her charge and she might have heard you go out last night and then began to worry whether you had come home.”

Diamond considered the colonel's words; he had to admit to himself that he had begun to suspect everyone. Engels's being a part of the conspiracy had intensified that distrust. He said, "I think there is more trouble on the way. My father was worried for Uncle Lyss and even President Lincoln. I don't think Lee's surrender is going to stop the rest of the war right away."

Rebecca said, "Adam, you cannot go to that trial. These men are desperate criminals and we don't know who to trust. There may be no one in the courthouse to protect you."

Inside his head, Diamond heard the echo of his father's voice. "*You will see that justice prevails.*"

"I am the only one who can tell the story of my parents' murders and that I shall do." He searched the faces of his hosts. "I have to."

The courthouse doors were not yet open to the public. A maid in an off-white cotton dress and matching bonnet hurried through last minute polishing of the oak trim in the courtroom. The prisoner had been brought through with his attorney and an assistant; the three of them were ushered into an adjoining chamber. The prosecution—two officers of the Union Army—entered and strode up to a table in front of the judge's bench. The men talked in low tones and whenever the door opened both looked up at once. The light of hope in their eyes went out each time.

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The main witness for the trial could not be found. Without Diamond's testimony, charges of conspiracy in the murders of Colonel and Mrs. Diamond were baseless allegations.

As the room began to buzz with activity, Bateman, his head shiny without the bowler hat, led his troop into the courtroom. The maid was told to leave and she shuffled out with jar of wax and polish cloth in hand. The doors were opened and a large audience began to file in. To the surprise of many, Lieutenant General Ulysses Grant arrived and was given a seat near the front, next to Colonel and Mrs. Unzer. The jury was seated. The bailiff's gruff voice announced the intended arrival of the judge. The crowd came to their feet, Judge Mortimer Jackson entered through a side door and strode to the bench.

Prosecution, hoping to buy more time, delayed the Diamond murder charges against Wiley and proceeded with the charge of the attempted murder of Rebecca Unzer. Brigadier General Freemont Engels, apologizing profusely, made a late entry and Judge Jackson frowned as the general, with a large leather carrying case in hand, made his way to the prosecution's table.

Rebecca Unzer told her story and Chester Bateman had taken the floor to cross-examine the witness when one of the double entrance doors opened sufficiently to allow a young girl to come in. She was the maid who had been polishing the railings prior to the proceedings. Her face was

partially hidden by a paper she held. Her bonnet was pulled down low and she walked with a slight limp. The crowd watched in amused silence as the strange girl walked a determined path toward the bench. She paused at the front row and turned a shy glance to the side, as if not certain whether to proceed. Her eyes met General Grant's. His face flickered a thin smile, but Judge Jackson's face flashed annoyance. He said, "A murder trial is in progress here, child, what is the meaning of this interruption?"

In a high voice, the cleaning maid said, "I have information about a witness." Hop-stepping the last few paces, she reached the bench and passed the sheet to the judge.

Judge Jackson read the message then set the paper aside. "This is a serious accusation, young lady. Are you certain about this?"

The bonnet bobbed and the judge said, "Bailiff."

The court official approached the bench and Judge Jackson, motioning the maid aside, leaned across and whispered to him. Chester Bateman's eyes were shifting nervously and Wiley fidgeted with his sling.

"Of course, sir," the bailiff said. He stepped back and turned to face the accused. "Captain Wiley, please rise and come with me."

The prisoner's eyes darted from side to side like a cornered animal seeking an escape. Suddenly he leaped to his feet; the sling fell away,

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and a cocked revolver appeared in his hand. He tipped the table and it crashed to the floor scattering files, pens and ink across the room. Stumbling through the rubble, Wiley lurched toward the girl. Throwing an arm around her neck, he shoved the gun barrel against her temple. "Nobody try to stop me," he snarled, "or she gets it through the head."

The audience watched in numb horror as the attacker backed toward the doors, dragging the hostage with him.

The front of the maid's dress had ripped open. She had one hand clawing at Wiley's forearm and the other inside the tear in her dress. She did not scream or cry out as she kicked at his shins with her heels.

Judge Jackson's voice boomed out, "General Engels, put up that gun. You'll hit the girl."

At the doors, Wiley, panting from exertion, paused and waved the pistol recklessly over the room. "Don't... follow me... or I swear by all that's holy... I'll..."

The .45 calibre slug entered under Captain Wiley's chin, angled upward through the brain and, on exit, split open the top of his skull; the mutilated chunk of lead lodged in the heavy oak frame above the doors. The deafening blast reverberated through the court room and echoed down the hallways. Wiley dropped the gun, the arm he held around the maid's neck went limp and

C. C. Phillips

he slipped to the floor, pumping blood all down the back of the girl's white dress.

She whipped around; the smoking revolver in her hand came to bear on the dead man's forehead. "...go to Hell, you murdering son of a bitch."

Preston Diamond had finished Wiley's sentence.

Chapter 24

Pandemonium perked, but before it could boil over, Colonel Unzer's voice cut across the courtroom. "Freemont Engels, drop the revolver, or I'll bore a hole right through your heart."

General Grant spoke up beside Unzer, "Bateman, you best keep your hands clear, too."

Both military officers had their revolvers trained on their addressed targets. The court room erupted. Judge Jackson was calling for order but he may as well have been baying at the moon. Rebecca Unzer charged from the witness stand and fought her way up the aisle to where Preston stood, the revolver in one hand, the bloody bonnet in the other.

As Rebecca wrapped her arms around Preston, he let the bonnet drop to the floor and

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clung to her arm with his free hand. Tears were in her eyes as she said, "Oh! Adam, I was so worried they had found you. I thought Captain Wiley would go free, my story seemed so weak when I was telling it on the stand. I knew that lawyer would turn it inside out."

Union military police hurried past and pushed their way through the mob to the bench. Soon they returned, marching the disarmed Engels and Bateman out of the courtroom. As he went past, General Engels glanced up and met Preston's blue-eyed glare. With venomous disgust Diamond spat, "Traitor."

That evening, again relocated to the Unzer's, Preston Diamond enjoyed a much needed soak in Rebecca's big wash tub. He had slept, or dozed, the last two nights in the stable where General Grant kept his horses. He had been reluctant to stay at Unzer's for fear of bringing more grief to them and General Grant's house did not feel right either. Preston had harboured misgivings about Martha, the maid. He had kept his key though, and it was one of Martha's dresses and her bonnet that he had absconded with for the disguise. Besides smelling like a stable, the blood soaked dress was ruined anyway. However, Preston had been informed this afternoon, that Martha wouldn't be looking for that dress. She had disappeared. The cold breakfast she had left for Adam Forsythe had been salted with arsenic and

Hardee, the butler, had sampled it when he discovered that Preston wouldn't be there to indulge. The labourer who had been repairing the Grants' back fence found the butler stretched out on a sofa, groaning in pain. A doctor was able to save Hardee and diagnosed poisoning.

As Preston finished drying himself off, he heard the sound of voices in the next room. He threw on his clothes, tucked the Colt in his pants and walked into the parlour.

"Ah," Uncle Ulysses said. "The man of the hour. Even my maid is out to poison you, young man."

"I don't think you ought to be eating Martha's cooking either, Uncle Lyss. She uses deadly spices."

"Your performance in the courthouse today was admirable. If you had come as a witness the situation may not have turned out in our favour. Chances are, had you shown up as Preston Diamond, you may not have made it to the stand," said Grant.

"Well, Adam isn't safe yet," Colonel Unzer interrupted. "The court will want to hear first hand the conversation he overheard between Bateman and that fellow in the alley. Neither Bateman nor Engels will be able to save their necks so they aren't about to blab. Adam will be required to go on the stand again."

Rebecca said, "And that fellow, John somebody, is out there worried about what is

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coming to him if he is caught. He'll be trying to keep Adam out of the courtroom, too."

General Grant reached in his pocket and produced several folded sheets of paper. "These were found in Freemont Engel's quarters this afternoon. There is nothing incriminating, but there is correspondence here that is inexplicable. Maybe it is in code."

Preston and each of the Unzer's took the proffered pages, read through them, trading back and forth until each had read all the three documents. Colonel Unzer finished first. "Makes no sense to me. I don't think Freemont would have been stupid enough to leave anything laying about that might put his tail in a crack."

Rebecca echoed her husband's words, but Preston said, "Hold on a moment." He went to his coat and dug the crumpled dispatch letters out of a pocket. He selected one and tucked the other back in his coat. Note in hand, he compared the handwriting and showed the others. "There is another person out there, maybe the ring leader. Whoever sent the letter to Chester Bateman, the one who signs his name 'F', is definitely not Freemont Engels. This writing does not match at all."

"He'll be looking for you, too, Adam," Rebecca said.

General Grant said, "There are two soldiers who accompanied me here this evening. They are waiting outside and will be my escort until such

time as this dastardly business is straightened out. I think it is best if Preston moves into my house for the time being.”

Rebecca protested, “But Ulysses, you can't even trust your maid. And you were dead wrong about Engels. What makes you think your guards will be reliable?”

Preston spoke up. “I think Uncle Lyss is right, Rebecca. I don't want you and Colonel Unzer in the middle again. I don't think anyone is hunting the colonel but they will be hunting me. I think the person behind all of this may be fretting for his own hide... and he knows who I am.”

“Do you have any idea who it is?” Grant asked.

Preston shrugged. “Someone whose first name begins with an F and maybe lives across the river?”

So, other than for a good meal and a hot bath, Preston did not tax his hosts unduly. He collected his grip and packed it back to Grant House. Rascal stayed with the greys in Unzer's stable.

Diamond did not see much of Ulysses Grant over the next two days. The general was occupied with reports and general duties. He was at the Capitol most of the day and visited the Whitehouse the first night. Preston did not stay indoors as advised. He roamed the avenues and streets near Capitol Hill, keeping a low profile and

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making himself familiar with the hub of the nation. Twice he slipped in through the back of Unzer's yard and visited with Colonel and Mrs. Unzer. Rebecca made sure he had something to eat. On the second visit the couple asked Preston to accompany them to the theatre the following evening. The presentation, *Our American Cousin*, received high billing and Rebecca thought it would be good education for Preston.

His only good set of clothes were still out at Diamond/Tweed farm and Preston thought he may have outgrown them so Rebecca offered to take him to a tailor for fitting. For the youth, it was an endurance; for Mrs. Unzer, it was an event. Rebecca had never had the opportunity to buy clothes or toys for youngsters of her own, and now, at a grandmother's age, she was overflowing with delight. Colonel Unzer declined to come along. With a wink to Preston, he said, "Mother, make sure you buy the lad a man's clothes. He isn't a child anymore."

Preston grinned and said, "And no more dresses, I don't want to wear one of those ever again."

Rebecca hadn't shopped for young people's clothing, but she knew what to buy and where to buy it. The pair kept watch for trouble but encountered nothing suspicious. In a couple of hours Preston was back at Unzer house, red faced with embarrassment, modelling his new outfit for the colonel.

The colonel laughed out loud when Rebecca told of the tailor's dismay at finding a revolver tucked in Adam's belt when taking waist measurements.

"If it's alright, Rebecca," Preston said, after changing back into his regular duds, "I'll leave the new outfit with you and dress here tomorrow, before we go to the theatre."

Rebecca took the new clothes and brushed at an imaginary speck on the trousers. "Of course, Adam. I'll want to press them for you again, anyway."

Adam Forsythe looked quite dapper in his new outfit and polished boots. Mrs. Unzer was dressed and bejewelled elegantly and the colonel stood tall in his brushed and pressed dress uniform. Since the distance to the theatre was not great, the Unzers and Diamond strolled through the evening light. Gas lamps were being lit and, as the trio drew nearer their destination, crowds were beginning to congregate. There was an air of gaiety on the street; everyone had heard the news of General Lee's surrender. Preston marvelled at the fine carriages, the dandy gentlemen and lovely ladies. He thought of his mother and the fine gown that Lily now owned; Cutler Diamond always told Constantina she was the most beautiful lady in attendance. Invariably, she was.

As the trio became part of the crowd, Rebecca leaned over and whispered in Preston's

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ear, "Pay no mind to the tongue wagging. These people are the worst kind of gossips."

Preston had not noticed anything out of the ordinary until Rebecca had made mention. Now, without staring, he could see the ladies looking at him and, one hand covering their mouths saying something into the ear of the lady beside them. Many of the gentlemen were turned and casting covert glances toward him too. Preston caught the words of a lady who must have learned to whisper near an artillery gun. "That's the boy who dressed in a girl's clothes and shot that murderer in the courthouse two days ago. They say the man had killed the boy's parents..." The Colonel and Rebecca picked up the pace.

Talk didn't bother Preston. He seldom heard, and cared less, what people said about him. Cutler had counselled his son, "*Never sacrifice your own character to please someone else. You are who and what you are, do your best and that will always be good enough.*" The lady with the big whisper was already forgotten by the time Preston entered Ford's Theatre.

As they threaded a path to their seats, Colonel Unzer nodded toward a theatre box where a group had gathered. "President Lincoln," Unzer said.

Our American Cousin was a comedy and the actors had Preston laughing out loud. During a short break between acts, the thought occurred to him that he had not laughed at all in the months

since his parents were taken. He looked at the Unzers. They were so happy together, like Colonel and Señora Diamond had always been. Preston felt a pang of guilt.

The program had advanced to the third act when the fellow portraying the American cousin blurted a line that brought down the house. Above the roars of laughter and applause, a gun shot rang out. Preston turned toward the blast and saw President Lincoln pitch forward in his seat. A dark clad man with dark hair and long moustache was struggling with an army officer Preston had seen seated in the box with the President. The assailant leaped from the balcony, tripped on something and fell to the aisle below. He quickly regained his feet and, though he favoured one leg, limped on the stage.

The audience's applause had turned to mute stupefaction.

Marching across the stage, waving a bloodied knife in the air, the assassin cried out, "Sic semper tyrannus."

Though the phrase was Latin, it paralleled Spanish close enough for Preston to roughly translate: *así siempre a tiranía. Thus always to tyranny.*

The killer, having shouted his line, ducked through a back door and disappeared from Preston's view. But not before Diamond recognized him: he was the gentleman who had driven the white horse and fancy carriage to

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Chester Bateman's house; probably he was the fellow who had the outhouse chat with the lawyer that same night; he was an actor Preston had seen in a play here at Ford Theatre two years ago.

The theatre was in an uproar that made the shooting at the courthouse look like an afternoon tea. Everyone was on their feet; ladies were crying and screaming; men were shouting and swearing; theatre attendants were pushing and elbowing to get up the aisles; President Lincoln's security people were shoving and shouldering to come down; no one was getting to the exit where the murderer had vanished. Preston's hand slipped inside his new jacket and gripped the butt of the Colt.

Colonel Unzer turned and said, "Rebecca, Adam, try to get out of here. Adam, please stay with my wife and keep that Colt loaded. I shall try to get to the President's box, though I can see from here that I am too late."

Adam and Rebecca waited up for him and Colonel Unzer, still in his dress uniform, returned home at midnight. He sank onto a chair, his chin rested on his chest a moment. When he raised his head, Preston read the deep sorrow etched in his features. The colonel looked an old man. He said, "President Lincoln was shot in the back of the head. He is still alive but the doctors say there is no hope. Secretary of State, William Seward, also had an assassination attempt made on his life at

his home tonight. He was seriously wounded but he will live. His attacker was apprehended. We have not captured the traitor who has murdered our president.”

“Do you know who he is?” Rebecca asked. Her voice was low, trembling with emotion.

“People at Ford's Theatre have identified him as one of their own actors. John Wilkes Booth.”

Diamond shifted in his chair. “John Wilkes Booth; JWB; the initials on the letter Mr. 'F' sent to Chester Bateman. He is the person I saw with Bateman at his house. Though I could not see him, he is probably the 'John' I overheard in Bateman's garden...”

Preston sighed. “My father was right. There was a conspiracy to assassinate President Lincoln.”

Chapter 25

Once again, Rascal wanted to run. He had been stabled for too long and fought the bit until Preston reached an area of less traffic and let him trot. They were heading out of Washington and, upon reaching open country, Diamond loosened the reins. Rascal's ground eating stride gobbled up a couple long miles in a short time and he fought to keep on running as Preston hauled back to slacken the pace. At the ferry fork, Preston swung his horse in the direction of Conception Landing. There are areas, towns, that sap one's soul; malevolence lurks; oppressiveness, like a dull ache, descends when you ride in one side and does not lift until you are well clear on the other. Diamond loathed the Citadel Crossing and the road to Alexandria; he hoped never to be forced to

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travel that trail again nor ever be in the vicinity of the field hospital. Rascal may have felt the same, or he sensed they were homeward bound, for he shook his head and whinnied long and loud. On an open stretch, free of trees and possible ambush, Preston put the heels to the gelding. Wind screamed in Preston's ears, tears filled his eyes and he bent low over the saddle, his face buried in Rascal's flowing mane. They left DC behind.

Diamond had told Uncle Lyss and the Unzers that he needed to be away from the city. The murdering, the treachery, the lies and deceit, weighed heavily upon him. He knew the next bullet or knife might be for him, but he wasn't running from that. He had to be alone, to put it all together and reconstruct what had happened in the tortured months since the night his parents were murdered.

A flood of relief had come over Preston when he was released from the burden of the vengeful hatred he carried against Captain Wiley. Rebecca and Colonel Unzer had whisked him away from the courthouse and, in the sanctity of their home, he collapsed on his bed. Unable to keep them inside any longer, tears he thought were gone came back in a flood. He sobbed like a little boy while Rebecca sat on the side of the bed and the colonel stood by. Unzer said, "Let it go, lad, you've carried this load far too long."

And so he cried. He cried for an end to bitter burning vengeance; he cried for a reprieve for a young heart torn and saturated with hate; he cried for a loss he would never recover. Yet these soul-wracking tears were not enough and, even as he wept, he knew it was not over.

Vengeance, he had. Justice, he had not.

Rascal had slowed to a brisk trot and Preston was surprised to see the ribbon of the Patowmack rise into view. Mount and rider had made good time. Diamond rode right on to the waiting ferry and was soon across the river and riding toward the town of Conception. Reining Rascal to the side, he waited as a small wagon, drawn by a single mule, rattled down the trail toward him. Davy Brannigan, standing in the box, held the lines and his two sisters were seated on the load behind him. "It's Preston!" Amy shouted.

All three of the Brannigans were smiling broadly as Davy hauled back on the lines and Jerome stopped. "How's the leg, Preston?" Davy asked.

"Mostly I just limp a little now. How's your shoulder?"

"Good as new. I guess we both had a good nurse."

Preston turned to his former nurse, "And how are you, Lily?"

She smiled and a faint blush brightened her fair features. "I'm fine, Preston."

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“Just look at our 'go to town' dresses, Preston.” Amy piped up. “Lily and I sewed up the clothes you gave us and Davy says we look like princesses.”

“Well, I'd say Davy is right. You look very nice... both of you are beautiful.”

Lily turned a deeper red. She changed the subject. “We saw Rufus Tweed in town just now. He was in the store.”

Amy said, “Yeah, I think Mr Tweed is sparking that girl who works there.”

“May-a-belle. Rufus told me about her, said she smiles at him sometimes.”

Davy said, “If you're looking for work, Preston, I have a contract to cut timber in the wilderness. The pay isn't much, but,” he jerked a thumb to indicate the wagon load, “it buys us supplies.”

The young people exchanged pleasantries for a short while, then Rascal started to fidget. On the inside, Preston was fidgeting too. He bid the Brannigans a good day. Lily invited him to come for dinner sometime and Diamond agreed.

As he rode toward town, Preston reviewed the encounter. No one had mentioned anything about the goings-on in Washington. Maybe the Brannigans hadn't heard; maybe they didn't care. Either way, Preston wasn't about to break the news. Preston decided it had been good to see Lily again; she had done a nice job fitting the dresses for her and Amy.

Just on the outskirts of Conception on the far side, Preston caught up to Washington. The Diamond/Tweed mule was pulling the light wagon and Rufus was sitting cross-legged on a small load. Preston rode up along side. Washington flicked a long ear in acknowledgement of Rascal and Rufus's broad grin spread across his face. "Lordy bless me, if it ain' dat ol' Press. I be'n athinkin' yo be'n in dat city an' yo ain't nebber acomin' home no mo' Press."

"I couldn't stand it any longer, Rufus, and Rascal didn't like it either so we hightailed it home. How's May-a-belle?"

The grin broadened. "May-a-belle, she likin' ol' Rufus mo an' mo'."

Rufus had plenty to show and tell Preston about the farm. The crop was seeded, some of it was poking through the ground. Bessie, the milk cow had freshened; her calf, a bull, was doing well. Rufus had been working in the garden; he'd made the plot larger and had some transplants ready to move out of the house.

The black man was disappointed to hear that his partner would not be staying at the farm for long. Preston said, "I'll be returning to Washington in a week or two. General Grant is coming out to visit with you and he will bring Colonel and Mrs. Unzer with him. The Unzers want to see the farm. I figure to load my stuff in their carriage and go back with them."

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“But, dat ain' righ', Press. Dis farm yo home. We 'as gwyne work it, yo an' me, Press.”

“I'm sorry, Rufus. Papá, in his last letter, asked Uncle Lyss to see to my education. My parents wanted me to have every opportunity, I must not let them down. Besides, Rufus, with a fast horse and good timing on the ferry crossing, it is only a couple of hours from here to there. I'll be back sometimes. I won't abandon you.”

For the following ten days, Preston put his back into working on the farm. But hard work did not sufficiently occupy his busy mind and his thoughts kept going back to the assignment left unfinished: the trail his father had pointed him down. This procrastination kept him out of Conception though he knew he would have to go soon. In the end, motivation paid a visit.

While working around the farm, Preston was never far from the Henry rifle and he'd taken to wearing his father's army holster. Though he said nothing, Rufus cast anxious eyes toward his young partner every time the gun was strapped on. Preston's abdomen was chafed and calloused from toting the revolver tucked inside his belt. Hours on horseback with that uncomfortable bulk had left him raw at the start. Now the skin was hardened and scarred and the gun had become a part of his regular dress but he did not like carrying the piece in that fashion. On the other hand, a youth with a pistol strapped on, in plain

view, is apt to find the trouble he was hoping to avoid.

On the occasion when the man from Conception and the scar faced fellow held up Preston and Lily, Diamond had fetched his Colt to hand in short order. The thieves were caught flat-footed and, if the fool hadn't tried for his gun, twice, no one would have been hurt. The fact that the gun did appear so suddenly gave Preston cause for thought. He realized that situations arise when being able to have a gun in your hand in a quick fashion could well mean the difference between living and dying. Toward that end, he cut away the flap and a part of the army issue holster.

In moments of idleness, he practised pulling the gun out in a hurry, usually without firing. In evenings in his bedroom or in the parlour, with the .45 unloaded, he went through the motion over and over again. The front sight sometimes scraped along the thick leather of the holster so he used a file and modified the shape, then went through a box of bullets making the Colt shoot straight. Preston was naturally quick, and that attribute had often won him a victory over an older and bigger adversary when wrestling with the Indian boys out west. His reflexes served him well in this new enterprise. He was not yet fast, but he soon surpassed average.

Midway through the second week, Rufus had found an excuse to go to Conception for a few hours and Diamond had been forking last year's

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hay in the little mow above the main floor of the barn when a mouldy piece sent him into a sneezing fit. He came down from the loft and, as he stepped outside for a fresh breath, noticed a canopied carriage coming along the lane toward the farm. At first he thought it may be the Unzers—they should be along any day now—but this vehicle only had one horse and it wasn't one of Unzer's greys. There was one person on the seat. Preston pulled the revolver, blew the hay dust off, rotated the cylinder and slid the gun back in the holster.

Upon seeing Diamond in front of the barn, the driver turned his horse in that direction. Preston studied the horse, carriage and driver as they drew near. The man in the seat was a stranger. The horse had no particularly distinguishing features. The vehicle was a sharp looking black carriage with polished oak shaves and black canopy. It was familiar.

Reining in, the stranger said, “Good afternoon, young man! I've come a long way and saw your fine establishment from the main road. I was so captured that I felt I must come down the lovely lane and have a closer inspection. I'm in the business of selling disaster insurance. For a small fee I can guarantee that your home, livestock and buildings are secure against fire, wind and vandals.”

Preston Diamond said nothing, though he had made several observations: the horse had not

come a long way; the carriage, familiar at a distance, he now recognized; the stranger was someone he had seen before though the man was wearing a disguise which, in itself, was a study: the longish yellow hair protruding from under the derby hat was a poor representation of a wig: the man had a kind of colouring applied to his face making lips wider, shade lighter and cheeks rosy. The face also had an unusual bulge, like a squirrel with a cheek full of acorns; the voice seemed unnatural as though he were speaking around marbles. The fellow was a charlatan or an actor.

“Oh, do excuse me,” the stranger continued, “my name is Petruchio Pandolfo and it is my humble honour to serve you. Would you mind, sir, if I were to step down and stretch my cramped legs?”

Without waiting Preston's answer, the fellow climbed lightly, almost daintily, to the ground and stood a moment favouring one leg. Diamond tensed as the stranger reached back inside the carriage but, when his hand reappeared, it was holding a slim walking stick. Had the fellow sported a drooping moustache, Preston would have identified him sooner. However, the stick was as good as an introduction. It was a golden colour.

Using the buggy shaft for support the man came nearer to Preston. “Pardon my intrusion but you seem quite young. Perhaps there is

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someone... er... older I should be talking to about the insurance for this lovely place?"

Diamond shifted. He said, "I have a partner but he is away right now."

The fellow twirled the golden cane; Preston watched as melancholy and evil fought to surface through the painted features. Evil won. The walking stick tipped up; there was a blackened hole in the end.

Chapter 26

A loaded cane was not something Preston Diamond had anticipated, but he was anticipating *something*. As the powder darkened bore on the golden stick rose, he side-stepped, crouched and drew the Colt in one rapid sequence. The cane belched smoke and the hot bullet whined past Preston's ear, thudding into the broad side of the barn; it wasn't the most accurate weapon but, at short range, it could hit that much. The barn wall wasn't shooting back.

Diamond was.

The forty-five calibre slug through chest and spine lifted the visitor off his feet and pummelled him backward. The mare reared up in the shaves, broke and ran in a wide circle around the yard

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then, empty carriage rattling and jouncing along behind, headed full gallop down the lane.

Preston trained his revolver on the stricken man. His eyes were open and he tried to say something but a gush of blood was all that came out of his mouth. Preston spoke the words the dying assassin may have intended: “*Así siempre a traición...* Thus always to treachery.”

Leaning on the shovel handle, Preston Diamond wiped a sleeve across his brow and looked up at the sun. High noon. He tossed the last few clods of dirt on yet another shallow grave. After putting the shovel away and washing up, Preston decided he would wait no longer. He threw his saddle on Rascal, climbed aboard and rode in the direction the mare and buggy had gone.

He caught up with the horse on the outskirts of Conception. She was unharnessed and turned loose in a paddock. The buggy was backed into the lean-to beside Dr. Filmore's house. Preston hitched Rascal in front of the building and walked across the porch.

The clinic door was open a trifle, as it had been so long ago when Preston came here looking for Captain Wiley. Colt drawn, Diamond stepped across the threshold. He left the door ajar. There were no patients, no visitors in the small foyer. Preston listened intently and heard a faint ting-ting-ting. The ting-ting stopped and a voice said, “Come in, Preston, I am in the clinic.”

Diamond did not move. Soon the inside door opened and Dr. Filmore stood there with a spoon in his hand. He had aged almost beyond recognition: the face was drawn and haggard; the eyes were hollow pits with no light in their fathomless depths; even the hands were wrinkled and shaking. He looked like Hell had stalked and caught him on this side of the grave. His voice, reassuring and gentle, had not changed. "Come in, sit down. I've been expecting you. Please close the door, we must not encourage intruders."

Preston holstered the revolver but kept his right hand near the walnut grip. He chose not to sit, but the physician took a seat on the raised cot he used for an operating and examination table. He let out a long sigh. "When the mare and buggy came back empty, I knew things had gone amiss for John. I'm glad. Now it is over. You won't believe me, Preston, but I never wanted harm to come to you or your mother. If I were not such a coward, I would have killed Captain Wiley the night he came to my surgery begging me to save him."

Filmore may have seen a flicker in Preston's eye. "Yes, I know I've spoken of my creed, the sacred oath we physicians take. Well, one time I was an honourable man and a credible physician. Not so in recent times. This war has changed us all and none to the good. But I prayed that you would kill that scoundrel before someone murdered you. That is why I gave you his name

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the first time you came here and also why I told you about his subsequent visit, the one when I had said he'd been brought here by a soldier in an army ambulance.”

Preston nodded.

Filmore studied the silver spoon he had been holding. “I'd like to know, Preston, what did I do that put you on my trail? I've known for a few weeks now that you suspected me. You were a very determined lad. I don't believe that vengeance was your entire motivation, at least not after you killed Wiley in that courtroom. So what led you here, besides recognizing my carriage and mare at your farm?”

A buckboard or other light vehicle rattled by outside, a thud of hooves, probably a single horse followed close behind.

The conversation did not seem real to Preston. It was like he stood in the background, a detached third party, watching himself and the treacherous doctor chat as if discussing a show at Ford's Theatre. How could he be here talking to the man responsible for killing Cutler and Constantina Diamond? The man who had conspired to kill Colonel Unzer and how many other officers? The man behind the assassination of President Lincoln?

He felt compelled to answer. “I rode by here with General Grant and saw a dark bay mare with a peculiar star shape on her forehead and two white socks on her front feet. Later, I saw that

mare again: It was the horse Kitty Nails rode the day she shot me.”

“Ah, Kitty Nails. Yes. She was the spark that lit the fuse. She was the one who brought Wiley back here —there was no handsome soldier driving that ambulance— I lied about that. But I didn't lie about not knowing where they were headed.”

Preston considered what to do next. He couldn't bring himself to shoot this traitor in cold blood, though it was less than the fiend deserved, and he knew it would be folly to take Conception's cherished physician to Conception's useless sheriff: A boy's word against that of the town doctor would certainly be a waste of air. At the moment, the doctor posed no threat to Preston; he had other people to carry out his murders. Biding time until he could think of the next move, Diamond said, “There are several things I'd like to know.”

“Ask away, Preston, it is too late for deceit.”

“The day I trailed Captain Wiley to your clinic, two bluecoats were here. They knocked you senseless. If they were part of your scheme, why did they clout you?”

“They were Wiley's men, not mine. Few people know about me. I suppose they thought it best to move Wiley away from Conception before he was tied to your parents' murders.”

“What about Custus Lien, the ferryman? Did you have anything to do with that?”

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Filmore tapped the spoon on the back of his hand, it made a dull thudding sound. “Oh, yes, another bungled mess that cost an innocent man his life.

“The day you and General Grant rode by here, as you have just mentioned, Kitty's horse was out front and Kitty Nails was in my house. We were scheming something, I can't even remember what. Anyway, she recognized Grant and guessed where you and he were headed. There was another man riding with her that day but he was gone at the time. When he returned, Kitty sent him to the ferry, hoping for a shot at the general. He took my axe and you know what happened after that. I apologize now, for I should not have told Kitty it was you riding along side General Grant.”

Preston thought he heard a faint footfall on the porch. He shifted out of line of the doorway and his hand went to the Colt. “But he shot the ferryman. Why did he do that?”

“The fool didn't know Ulysses Grant from Custus Lien. General Grant was not in uniform you recall so Kitty's shooter guessed. But he guessed wrong. He came back here proud as a peacock that he'd assassinated President Lincoln's right hand man. We soon learned the truth. Kitty shot him dead on their way south that night.”

Filmore tilted his head as if listening for something. He stood up and walked over to the counter that ran along his dispensary. A coffee

cup held down a sheet of paper; pen and ink were nearby. He dipped the spoon in the mug and stirred methodically. Ting-ting-ting-ting. Laying the spoon aside, he picked up the cup and turned to face his guest. "Any more questions, Preston?"

"What is your first name, Dr. Filmore?"

"My mother's maiden name, Franklin... My full name is, Franklin Nathaniel Filmore."

The clinic door opened.

Dr. Filmore looked up and with no trace of surprise said, "Ah, General Grant. How positively pleasing to see you. I drink your health on a battle well fought!"

"The doctor brought the cup to his lips and drained the contents in several deep gulps. He placed the mug on the counter, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and said, "Now, gentlemen, I really must bid you 'good day'."

All at once, Filmore's eyes began to bulge, his tongue protruded and he seemed to be choking. Clawing at his throat, he heaved huge gasps then, half turning, half falling, he made a grab for the operating table tearing the sheet off as he slid to the floor. Grotesque spasms racked his body for a few seconds, then he lay still.

Grant, revolver in his hand, stepped across the room; Colonel Unzer followed him. Ulysses knelt and held his fingers to the victim's jugular vein. "Strong coffee... He's dead."

Preston moved closer, shaking his head slowly as he stared at the body. Doctor Filmore,

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Conception's capable and trusted physician. The kind man who had stitched Preston's arm when Constantina had brought her son to the clinic. There could be no explanation.

Colonel Unzer picked up the paper from the counter and read through it. "The doctor admits his guilt, claims to have set up the whole operation. Damn shame though, he didn't name any of his accomplices."

Grant read the short note and passed it to Diamond. Preston noticed the paper had a round yellow stain from the cup and another, smaller one, from the spoon. After reading the missive, he fished in his coat pocket and pulled out the tattered note addressed to Chester Bateman. Preston was not surprised at what he found; the handwriting matched.

Filmore was "F".

He passed the notes to Grant. "Uncle Lyss, this paper will put that lawyer, Bateman, in a bad spot."

Unzer said, "Rebecca is waiting in our carriage about half a mile up the trail. I best let her know what's happened here. She was worried when we recognized your horse out in front of the clinic. And, though Mother did not appreciate it, General Grant talked her into staying away until we could find out what was happening here."

"So Rascal is responsible for you showing up when you did. I was wondering what had brought in the cavalry," said Preston.

General Grant, mounted on Cutler Diamond's war horse, went to alert Conception's town fathers of their loss while Preston and Rascal escorted the Unzers to Diamond/Tweed farm. The weight of the world had been lifted from Preston's shoulders. Though he would have to stay ever vigilant, at least until after the trial, he knew the worst of the long nightmare was over. He could look at the sun and feel warm inside and out. As they travelled at a leisurely pace, the colonel and Rebecca updated Preston on the latest news from Washington: Bateman, Engels, and several other conspirators, including Martha—the Grants' maid— were incarcerated and slated to stand trial next month; Union soldiers had hunted down John Wilkes Booth and killed him; DC was still reeling from the loss of President Lincoln; Secretary of State, Seward, was recovering well from his wounds; Vice-president Andrew Johnson had been sworn in as president.

Diamond had previously packed up those items he wanted to take to Washington so he had only to throw together his clothes and personal effects. General Grant, riding alongside Rufus driving the mule and wagon, arrived about the time the carriage was loaded. Rebecca had packed a lunch for everyone and they enjoyed a meal before Preston and Rufus took their guests on a walking tour of the farm. Rufus was beaming with pride as he explained which crop was planted

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in each small field. Together the partners related the plans they had for the farm's future.

When it came time to leave, Rufus had tears in his big round eyes. "Yo gwyne back to dat city, Press. Dat ain' no place fo' a boy like yo. Yo comin' on home ebry tam yo thinkin' bou' Rufus."

Preston shook Rufus's hand. "I'll come home often, Rufus. I'll miss the farm and besides, I want to meet your May-a-belle."

Rufus smiled. "Mebbe, yo be alookin' for dat girl, Lily, too, Press."

Grant noticed the fresh dirt as the little cavalcade proceeded toward the lane way. As he had done on his previous visit he stood up in the stirrups for a better view. The old mounds were already grassing over, the new one was obvious. He offered no comment. The Unzers continued down the trail; Preston, then Ulysses, reined in. Diamond said, "Colonel Unzer says the army tracked down and killed the man who assassinated President Lincoln."

"That's right. A detail led by... a Corporal Peters, I think it was. They hunted Booth down; it took them over a week."

Preston reached in his coat pocket again and pulled out the last note, the one addressed to Corporal Peters from Kitty Nails. He passed it to General Grant. "Uncle Lyss, Mrs. Unzer and I must have forgotten to tell you about this. We informed General Engels but, of course, he wouldn't tell you either."

C. C. Phillips

Grant read, then reread the short message. He raised his focus and studied Preston for a few moments. “This note implicates Corporal Peters. Does this mean the man who murdered our president may have escaped?”

Preston tilted a slight nod toward the new grave. “I believe that justice has prevailed.”

The End

Author's note:

This story is a work of fiction, only vaguely following an historical outline. The names of actual people (alphabetically): John Wilkes Booth, Ulysses S. Grant, Queen Isabella II, Andrew Johnson, Robert E. Lee, Abraham Lincoln, Winfield Scott, William Seward, William Sherman, Zachary Taylor are included with no intent to credit, discredit, change or alter the part they have played in history. Patowmack is the Potomac River (the spelling change officially took place in 1931). The ferry crossings of Citadel and Conception Landing are entirely fictitious, they have no geographical placement or representation. The town named Conception is something I fabricated to suit the introduction of the Preston Diamond series. Distance and chronology are manipulated to fit the plot.

The conflict of the Civil War, and the abominable living conditions that brought on typhoid, dysentery and malaria, cost 620,000 lives: North 360,000; South 260,000. These figures represent roughly one-sixth of the northern troops and one-third of the southern force. The south suffered far more direct damage: trade, industry, farming, towns, cities and the lives of the survivors were ruined. Wounds of war are slow to heal and generations passed before the South was back on its feet. The scars will never be erased entirely; change in perspective makes the loss more acceptable today.

Ulysses Grant was an interesting study. He engaged in many bloody battles during the Civil War and thousands upon thousands of his men were slaughtered. Northern critics called General Grant a butcher, however, and this is my opinion, he fought to win and not without compassion. In his memoirs, he said of the Mexican American War:

“I was bitterly opposed to the measure, and to this day regard the war, which resulted, as one of the most unjust ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation.”

These are not the words of a butcher. Nor was Grant's fair treatment of General Lee and his Southern troops in any way indicative of a man without mercy.

During his tenure as a farmer, Grant did emancipate his slave, but that man's name, unless by the greatest coincidence, was not the fictional Rufus Tweed. Ulysses Grant did, when possible,

keep his family nearby during the Civil War. He had a penchant for buying good horses, but I made up the part about him shooting the flighty mare named Socks. That anecdote exemplified Lieutenant General Grant's ability to adjust and react in a difficult situation.

As for the traitors and the conspiracy, President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated and Secretary of State William Seward was attacked the same night. General Ulysses Grant and Vice President Andrew Johnson were targets as well but that part of the plan did not materialize. Four people, one of them a woman, were convicted and together they swung from the gallows. Others were jailed and later pardoned. John Wilkes Booth escaped after slaying Lincoln, he ran at large for twelve days with a \$50,000 reward on his head. Federal troops caught up with him and he was shot. Controversy over whether it was really Booth whom the troops killed surfaced later, but over ten witnesses had positively identified his corpse.

I do not know if it was customary, in 1865, to have so many people identify a body.

C. C. P.

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C. C. Phillips grew up on a mixed farm along the edge of the Great Sandhills region of the Canadian prairies. 'The Hills' provided a wonderland of adventure and enchantment for a growing lad, his dog and saddle horse; the semi-annual two day cattle drive through the heart of the uninhabited landscape were highlights of the year.

As a youngster, Phillips attended a country school for the first six seasons of his formal education, making the three mile trek on horseback, buggy or cutter. It was here that he realized a love of stories and writing under the tutelage of Mrs. Harrison, a young teacher hailing from Britain.

With the family farming operation lacking in capacity, a young C. C. Phillips entered the work force, delving into a variety of occupations. He worked for a manufacturer of lenses for eye glasses, a tire retread plant and in the communications industry. Writing was relegated to a hobby as he turned his attention to providing for wife, son and daughter.

Phillips's adventurous spirit moved him and his family to La Ronge in central Saskatchewan, and from there to Uranium City in the province's extreme northwest corner. The latter, once a thriving mining community of five thousand, had dwindled to a near-ghost town of two hundred. Here, the wildlife, scenery and solitude captured his heart and rekindled the writer's imagination within.

Throughout the course of his life, C. C. Phillips has continued to write. Now retired, he is able to devote more time to pencil, pen and keyboard. The restoration of a pioneer's homestead shack, destined to be a writing retreat, occupies Phillips's moments of leisure. He and his wife currently reside in their country home in southern Saskatchewan.

