

# ONE

*Chancellorsville, Virginia*

*May 3, 1863*

*JACOB*

The first minié ball ripped into Corporal Jacob Hammond's left hand, the second, his right knee, each strike leaving a ragged gash in its wake; another slashed through his right thigh an instant later, and then he lost count.

A coppery crimson mist rained down on Jacob as he bent double, then plunged, with what felt like a strange, protracted grace, toward the broken ground. On the way down, he noted the bent and broken grass, shimmering with fresh blood, the deep gouges left by cannon balls and boot heels and the lunging hooves of panicked horses.

A peculiar clarity overtook Jacob in those moments between life as he'd always known it and another way of being, already inevitable. The boundaries of his mind seemed to expand beyond skull and skin, rushing outward at a dizzying speed, hurtling in all directions, rising past the treetops, past the sky, past the far borders of the cosmos itself.

For an instant, he understood everything, every mystery, every false thing, every truth.

He felt no emotion, no joy or sorrow.

There was peace, though, and the sweet promise of oblivion.

Then, with a wrench so swift and so violent that it sickened his very soul, Jacob was back inside himself, a prisoner behind fractured bars of bone. The flash of extraordinary knowledge was gone, a fact that saddened Jacob more deeply than the likelihood of death, but some small portion of the experience remained, an ability to think without obstruction, to see his past as vividly as his present, to envision all that was around him, as if from a great height.

Blessedly, there was no pain, though he knew that would surely come, provided he remained alive long enough to receive it.

Something resembling bitter amusement overtook Jacob then; he realized that, unaccountably, he hadn't expected to be struck down on this savage battlefield or any other. Never mind the unspeakable carnage he'd witnessed since his enlistment in Mr. Lincoln's grand army; with the hubris of youth, he had believed himself invincible.

He had assumed that the men in blue fought on the side of righteousness, committed to the task of mending a sundered nation, restoring it to its former whole. For all its faults, the United States of America was the most promising nation ever to arise from the old order of kings and despots; even now, Jacob was convinced that, whatever the cost, it must not be allowed to fail.

He had been willing to pay that price, was willing still.

Why then was he shocked, nay *affronted*, to find that the bill had come due, in full, and that his own blood and breath, his very substance, was the currency required?

Because, he thought, shame washing over him, he had been willing to die only in *theory*. Out of vanity or ignorance or pure naivety, he had somehow, without being aware of it, declared himself exempt.

Well, there it was. Jacob Hammond, husband of Caroline, father of Rachel, son and grandson and great-grandson of sturdy, high-minded folk, present owner of a modest but fertile farm a few miles south of the small but industrious township of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, was no more vital to the noble pursuit of lasting justice for all than any other man was. In any larger scheme, neither his life nor his death would truly matter.

He knew his wounds were grievous, that a quick death was the most merciful fate he could hope for, and still he wanted so much to live, to return to his beloved wife, to his child, to the modest but thriving farm that shone in his memory, fairer than heaven itself.

The sacrifice was terrible, unspeakably so.

Was it worthwhile?

Jacob pondered that question, decided that, for him, it was.

The country had splintered, bone and blood, perhaps never to be mended. It was far from the ideal set forth by those bold intellects who had gathered in Philadelphia back in '76, in a blaze of fractious brilliance.

Somehow, in the sweltering heat of a Pennsylvania summer, and yet no doubt cooler than their collective temperaments—out of dissent, out of greed and ill humor and stubbornness and all manner of other mortal failings—these remarkable men had forged a philosophy, a glorious vision of what a nation, a people, could become.

To Jacob, bleeding into the ground, in the midst of an endless war, that goal seemed more distant than ever, hopeless, even impossible.

And still, had he been able, he would have fought on, died not just once but a thousand times, not for the country as it was, but for the noble, sacred objective upon which it had been founded—liberty and justice for all.

Whatever the cost, the Union must hold together.

So much hung in the balance, so very much. Not only the hope and valor of those who had gone before, but the freedom, perhaps the very existence, of those yet to be born.

In solidarity, the *United* States could be a force for good in a hungry, desperate world. Torn asunder, it would be ineffectual, two bickering factions, bound to divide into still smaller and weaker fragments over time, too busy posturing and rattling sabers to meet the demands of a fragile future or to stand in the way of new tyrannies, certain to arise.

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal..*

That belief, inspiring as it was, had chafed the consciences of thinking people since it flowed from the nib of Thomas Jefferson's pen, as well it should have.

Like many of his contemporaries, the great man himself had kept slaves.

The inherent contradiction could not have escaped a mind as luminous as Jefferson's, nor could the subtle difference in phrasing as he wrote those momentous words. He had not written that *some* men were created equal, but that *all* men were.

Strenuous opposition to the indefensible institution of slavery had been raised, of course, but in the end, expediency prevailed. Representatives of the Southern colonies, with their vast fields of cotton and

other valuable crops, would face certain ruin without their millions of unpaid laborers. They had refused to join in the rebellion against Great Britain if slavery was outlawed.

Since the effort would surely fail without them, the concession had been made.

But what was the value of freedom if it remained the province of white men while excluding all others?

Alas, the question was too big for a man in the process of dying, alone and far from home.

There was nothing to be done, save letting go. In the deepest recesses of his heart, in that calm place beyond fear and pain and fury, Jacob prayed that the will of God be done, in this matter of countries and wars.

Then, with that petition made, he raised another, more selfish one. *Watch over my beloved wife, our little daughter, and Enoch, our trusted friend. Keep them all safe and well.*

The request was simple, one of millions like it, no doubt, rising to the ears of the Creator on wings of desperation and sorrow, and there was no Road-to-Damascus moment for Jacob, just the ground-shaking roar of battle all around. But even in the midst of thundering cannon, the sharp reports of carbines and the fiery blast of muskets, the clanking of swords and the shrill shrieks of men and horses, he found a certain consolation.

A whisper of hope. Perhaps he'd been heard.

He began to drift then, back and forth between darkness and light, fear and oblivion. When he surfaced, the pain was waiting, like a specter hovering over him, ready to descend, settle upon him, crush him beneath its weight.

Consequently, Jacob again took refuge deep inside, where it could not yet reach.

Hours passed, perhaps days; he had no way of knowing.

Eventually, because life is persistent even in the face of hopelessness and unrelenting agony, the hiding place within became less accessible. During those intervals, pain played with him, like a cat with a mouse. Smoke burned his eyes, which he couldn't close; it climbed, stinging, into his nostrils, chafed his throat raw. He was thirsty, so thirsty. He felt as dry as last year's corn husks, imagining his life's blood seeping, however slowly, into the ravaged earth.

In order to bear his suffering, Jacob thought about home, conjured up vivid images of Caroline, quietly pretty, more prone to laughter than to tears, courageous as any man he'd ever known. She loved him, he knew that, and his heart rested safely with her. She had always accepted his attentions in the marriage bed with good-humored acquiescence, though perhaps not with a passion to equal his own, and while he told himself this was the way of a good woman, he sometimes wondered if, to Caroline, lovemaking was simply another wifely chore. Yet another duty to perform, after a day of washing and ironing, cooking and sewing, tending the vegetable garden behind the kitchen house and picking apples and pears, apricots and peaches in the orchards when the fruit ripened.

Jacob was not the sort of husband who took his wife's efforts for granted. Whenever possible, he had lent her a willing hand, little concerned with what constituted "women's work"; he hadn't been above changing a diaper, gathering eggs or hanging out the wash.

No, work was work, whether it fell to a man or a woman to do it. As a farmer, though, he'd had fields to plow and harvest, livestock to tend, tools and wagons to maintain, and even with Enoch's help, getting all that done took every scrap of daylight and, often, part of the night.

Oh, but Caroline. Caroline.

She was a pure wonder to Jacob. Her price, if one could've been set, was indeed far above rubies; she might have been the model for the woman described in the thirty-first chapter of Proverbs. She was

certainly virtuous, and she looked “well to the ways of her household, and ate not of the bread of idleness.” Moreover, she stretched “out her hand to the poor” and reached “out forth her hands to the needy.”

Caroline not only met the many demands of marriage and motherhood, she was an active member of the local Ladies’ Aid Society. These women were among her closest friends, all of them determined to serve the Union cause and to sustain and encourage the soldiers who fought for it.

She had written to him about how they gathered regularly in each other’s homes, these warriors on the home front, to make quilts and shirts, mend blankets and knit stockings, bottle fruits and vegetables and other foodstuffs, write letters to lonesome souls in faraway army camps, and to plan campaigns and strategies for the future.

They ventured out into the community, too, cajoling friends, neighbors and strangers alike, willing to beg and borrow, if not steal, whatever items a soldier might find useful—headache powders and other expedient remedies from the druggists, soap and coffee beans and homemade balm for chapped lips and blistered heels from anyone who had them to give.

Gettysburg was a thriving market town, with many prosperous residents and, in the early days of the war, the donations were generous. Merchants gave goods by the crateful, flour and dried beans by the barrel. Farmers brought their bumper crops of potatoes, squash, carrots, onions and turnips to the ladies by the wagonload, often with great slabs of salt pork and crocks brimming with fresh eggs, preserved in water-glass.

He has seen for himself when he was back home on brief leave how all this bounty was carefully sorted and cataloged by the ladies of Gettysburg before being sent on, mostly via the railroads, to a distribution center in Baltimore, from which it would be dispersed to battlefronts and hospitals all over the North.

Of course, as the war dragged on, and the inevitable shortages arose, the flood of goodwill had dwindled considerably, but Jacob knew from Caroline’s letters that scarcity only redoubled the determination of petticoat generals such as his wife. In her words, they simply “pushed up their sleeves and worked a little harder.”

Caroline was no stranger to hardship, and neither were most of her friends.

She was accustomed to enduring trouble, disappointment and heartache, having had more than her fair portion of all those things, and she bore up with remarkable stoicism, the current state of the nation notwithstanding.

The work of farming was fraught with perils; crops could be destroyed by hail or drought or a freak frost, wildfires and plagues of grasshoppers, or made worthless by a drop in prices.

He and Caroline had grappled with several disasters and come through, although not without struggle.

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Still, life had been harder on Caroline than it was on many folks, right from the first.

She’d been only four or five years old when a fever struck, sudden and vicious, carrying off her mother, father and younger sister in the space of a single day. Caroline, too, had fallen ill, but somehow she’d pulled through.

Her paternal grandparents, Doc Prescott and his wife, Geneva, had taken her in and looked after her with all tenderness, but she’d been sickly for some time, and grieved sorely for her mama and papa and beloved little sister.

More losses followed; her grandfather had died recently, and she’d mourned at the gravesides of two of her dearest friends in as many months, both of whom had died in childbirth, along with their infants.

And then, before their precious Rachel, there had been the lostbabies, his and Caroline's, the first midway through her pregnancy, a wizened little creature, bloody and blue, carried away in a basin to be buried, the second, a boy, carried to term but stillborn.

It had been Enoch, God bless him, who had seen to those impossibly small bodies, laid both little ones to rest in the small family cemetery, said words over them, and wept as if they'd been of his own flesh. Later, he'd carved markers for them, sturdy wooden crosses, less than a foot high, with no names or dates.

Now, with his own death so close, Jacob wished Caroline hadn't tried to be so strong or worked so hard to hide her grief from him, from everyone, holding it close and guarding it like the darkest of secrets. If only he'd sought her out and taken her into his arms and held her fast, held her until they could both let go and weep out their sorrows together.

Alas, Jacob's own grief had been a sharp and frozen thing, locked inside him.

There was no going back now, and regret would only sap what little strength that remained to him.

He took sanctuary in the remembrance of happier things, finding brief shelter from the gathering storm of fresh pain. In his mind's eye, he saw little Rachel running to meet him when he came in from the fields at the end of the day, dirty and sweat-soaked and exhausted himself, while his daughter was as fresh as the wildflowers flourishing alongside the creek in summer. Clad in one of her tiny calico dresses, face and hands scrubbed, she raced toward him, laughing, her arms open wide, her fair pigtails flying, her bright blue eyes shining with delighted welcome.

Dear God, Jacob thought, what he wouldn't give to be back there, sweeping that precious child up into his arms, setting her on his shoulder or swinging her around and around until they were both dizzy.

It was then that the longing for his wife and daughter grew too great, and Jacob turned his memory to sun-splashed fields, flourishing and green, to sparkling streams thick with fish. In his imagination, he stood beside his steadfast friend Enoch, once more, both of them as close as brothers gratified by the sight of a heavy crop, by the knowledge that, this year anyway, their hard work would bring a reward.

"God has blessed our efforts," Jacob would say, quietly and with awe, for he had believed the world to be an essentially good place then. War and all its brutalities were merely tales told in books, or passed down the generations by old men.

He saw Enoch as clearly as if he'd been right there on the battlefield with him, instead of miles and miles away. He stood vivid in Jacob's recollection, the black man his father had bought, freed, then hired in his own right to work on the family farm years back, grinning as he replied, "Well, I don't see how the Good Lord ought to get *all* the credit. He might send the sunshine and the rain, but far as I can reckon, He ain't much for plowing."

Jacob invariably laughed, no matter how threadbare the joke, would have laughed now, too, if he'd had the breath for it.

He barely noticed that the terrible din of battle had faded to the feeble moans and low cries of other men, Rebels and Union men alike, fallen and left behind in the acrid urgency of combat.

He dreamed—or at least, he *thought* he was dreaming—of the heaven he'd heard about all his life, for he came from a long line of churchgoing folk. He saw the towering gates, studded with pearls and precious gems, standing open before him.

He caught a glimpse of the fabled streets of gold, too, and although he saw no angels and no long-departed loved ones waiting to welcome him into whatever celestial realm they now occupied, he heard music, almost too beautiful to be endured. He looked up, saw a dazzling sky, not merely blue, but somehow

*woven*, a shimmering tapestry of innumerable colors, each one brilliant, some familiar and some beyond his powers of description.

He hesitated, not from fear, for surely there could be no danger here, but because he knew that once he passed through this particular gateway, there would be no turning back.

Perhaps it was blasphemy, but Jacob's heart swelled with a poignant longing for a lesser heaven, another, humbler paradise, where the gates and fences were made of hand-hewn wood or plain stones gathered in fields, and the roads were winding trails of dust and dirt, rutted by wagon wheels, deep, glittering snows and heavy rain.

Had it been in his power, and he knew it wasn't, he would have traded eternity in that place of ineffable peace and beauty for a single, blessedly ordinary day at home, waking up beside Caroline in their feather bed, teasing her until she blushed, or watching, stricken by the love of her, as she made breakfast in the kitchen house on an ordinary morning.

Suddenly, the sweet visions were gone.

Jacob heard sounds, muffled but distinct. Men, horses, a few wagons.

Then nothing.

Perhaps he was imagining things. Suffering hallucinations.

He waited, listening, his eyes unblinking, dry and rigid in their sockets, stinging with sweat and grit and congealed blood.

Fear burned in his veins as those first minutes after he was wounded came back. He recalled the shock of his flesh tearing, as though it were happening all over again, a waking nightmare of friend and foe alike streaming past, shouting, shooting, bleeding, stepping over him and on him. He recalled the hooves of horses, churning up patches on the ground within inches of where he lay.

Jacob forced himself to concentrate. Although he couldn't see the sky, he knew by the light that the day was waning.

Was he alone?

The noises came again, but they were more distant now. Perhaps the party of men and horses had passed him by.

The prospect was a bleak one, filling Jacob with quiet despair. Even a band of Rebs would've been preferable to lying helplessly in his own gore, wondering when the rats and crows would come to feast on him.

An enemy bullet or the swift mercy of a bayonet would be infinitely better.

Hope stirred briefly when a Federal soldier appeared in his line of vision, as though emerging from a void. At first, Jacob wasn't sure the other man was real.

He tried to speak, or make the slightest move, indicating that he was alive and in need of help, but he could do neither.

The soldier approached, crouching beside him, and one glimpse of his filthy, beard-stubbed face, hard with cruelty, put an end to Jacob's illusions. The man rolled him roughly onto his back, with no effort to search for a pulse or any other sign of life. Instead, he began rifling through Jacob's pockets, muttering under his breath, helping himself to his watch and what little money he carried, since most of his pay went to Caroline.

Jacob felt outrage, but he was still helpless. All he could do was watch as the other man grabbed his rucksack, fumbled to lift the canvas flap and reach inside.

Finally, the bummer, as thieves and stragglers and deserters were called, gave in to frustration and dumped Jacob's belongings onto the ground, pawing through them.

*Look at me, Jacob thought. I am alive. I wear the same uniform as you do.*

The scavenger did not respond, of course. Did not allow his gaze to rest upon Jacob's face, where he might have seen awareness.

The voices, the trampling hooves, the springless wagons drew closer.

The man cursed, frantic now. He found Jacob's battered Bible and flung it aside in disgusted haste, its thin pages fluttering as it fell, like a bird with a broken wing. The standard-issue tin cup, plate and utensils soon followed, but the thieving bastard stilled when he found the packet of letters, all from Caroline. Perhaps believing he might find something of value in one or more of them, he shoved them into his own rucksack.

Jacob grieved for those letters, but there was nothing he could do.

Except listen.

Yes, he decided. Someone was coming, a small company of riders.

The thief grew more agitated, looked over one shoulder, and then turned back to his plundering, feverish now, but too greedy to flee.

At last he settled on the one object Jacob cherished as much as Caroline's letters—a small leather case with tarnished brass hinges and a delicate clasp.

He saw wicked interest flash in the man's eyes, as he fumbled open the case and saw the tintypes inside, one of Caroline and Jacob, taken on their wedding day, looking traditionally somber in their finest garb, the other of Caroline, with an infant Rachel in her arms, the child resplendent in a tiny, lace-trimmed christening gown and matching bonnet.

*No, Jacob cried inwardly, hating his helplessness.*

"Well, now," the man murmured. "Ain't this a pretty little family? Maybe I'll just look them up sometime, offer my condolences."

Had he been able, Jacob would have killed the bummer in that moment, throttled the life out of him with his bare hands, and never regretted the act. Although he struggled with all his might, trying to gather the last shreds of his strength, the effort proved useless.

It was the worst kind of agony, imagining this man reading the letters, noting the return address on each and every envelope, seeking Caroline and Rachel out, offering a pretense of sympathy.

Taking advantage.

And Jacob could do nothing to stop him, nothing to protect his wife and daughter from this monster or others like him, the renegades, the enemies of decency and innocence in all their forms.

The bummer snapped the case closed, put it and the letters inside the rucksack and grabbed it, ready to flee.

It was then that a figure loomed behind him, a gray shadow of a man, who planted the sole of one boot squarely in the center of the thief's back, and sent him sprawling across Jacob's inert frame.

The pain was instant, throbbing in every bone and muscle of Jacob's body.

"Stealing from a dead man," the shadow said, standing tall, his buttery-smooth drawl laced with contempt. "That's low, even for a Yank."

The bummer scrambled to his feet, groped for something, probably his rifle, and paled when he came up empty. Most likely, he'd dropped the weapon in his eagerness to rob one of his own men.

"I ought to run you through with this fine steel sword of mine, Billy," the other man mused idly. He must have ridden ahead of his detachment, dismounted nearby and moved silently through the scattered bodies. "After all, this is a *war*, now, isn't it? And you are my foe, as surely as I'm yours."

Jacob's vision, unclear to begin with, blurred further, and there was a pounding in his ears, but he could make out the contours of the two men, now standing on either side of him, and he caught the faint murmur of their words.

"You don't want to kill me, Johnny," the thief reasoned, with a note of anxious congeniality in his voice, raising both palms as if in surrender. "It wouldn't be honorable, with us Union boys at a plain disadvantage." He drew in a strange, swift whistle of a breath. "Anyhow, I wasn't hurtin' nobody. Just makin' good use of things this poor fella has no need of, bein' dead and all."

By now, Jacob was aware of men and horses all around, although there was no cannon fire, no shouting, no sharp report of rifles.

"You want these men to see you murder an unarmed man?" wheedled the man addressed as Billy. "Where I come from, you'd be hanged for that. It's a war crime, ain't it?"

"We're not 'where you come from,'" answered Johnny coolly. The bayonet affixed to the barrel of his carbine glinted in the lingering smoke and the dust raised by the horses. "This is Virginia," he went on, with a note of fierce reverence. "And you are an intruder here, sir."

Billy—the universal name for all Union soldiers, as Johnny was for their Confederate counterparts—spat, foolhardy in his fear. "I reckon the rules are about the same, though, whether North or South," he ventured. Even Jacob, from his limited vantage point, saw the terror behind all that bluster. "Fancy man like you—an officer, at that—must know how it is. Even if you don't hang for killin' with no cause, you'll be court-martialed for sure, once your superiors catch wind of what you done. And that's bound to leave a stain on your high and mighty reputation as a Southern gentleman, ain't it? Just you think, *sir*, of the shame all those well-mannered folks back home on the old plantation will have to contend with, and it'll be on *your* account."

A slow, untroubled grin took shape on the Confederate captain's soot-smudged face. His gray uniform was torn and soiled, the brass of his buttons and insignia dull, and his boots were scuffed, but even Jacob, with his sight impaired, could see that his dignity was inborn, as much a part of him as the color of his eyes.

"It might be worth hanging for," he replied, almost cordially, like a man debating some minor point of military ethics at an elegant dinner party far removed from the sound and fury of war. "The pleasure of killing a latrine rat such as yourself, that is. As for these men, most of them are under my command, as it happens. Well, they've seen their friends and cousins and brothers skewered by Yankee bayonets and blown to fragments by their cannon. Just yesterday, in fact, they saw General Jackson...relieved of an arm." At this, the captain paused, swallowed once. "Most likely, they'd raise a cheer as *you* fell."

Dimly, Jacob sensed Billy Yank's nervous bravado. Under any other circumstances, he might have been amused by the fellow's demeanor, but he could feel himself retreating further and further into the darkness of approaching death, and there was no room in him for frivolous emotions.

"Now, that just ain't Christian," protested Billy, conveniently overlooking his own moral lapse.

The captain gave a raspy laugh, painful to hear, and shook his head. "A fine sentiment, coming from the likes of you." In the next moment, his face hardened, aristocratic even beneath its layers of dried sweat and dirt. He turned slightly, keeping one eye on his prisoner, and shouted a summons into the rapidly narrowing nothingness surrounding the three of them.

Several men hurried over, although they were invisible to Jacob, and the sounds they made were faint.

“Get this piece of dung out of my sight before I pierce his worthless flesh with my sword for the pure pleasure of watching him bleed,” the officer ordered. “He is a disgrace, even to *that* uniform.”

There were words of reply, though Jacob couldn’t make them out, and Jacob sensed a scuffle as the thief resisted capture, a modern-day Judas, bleating a traitor’s promises, willing to betray men who’d fought alongside him.

Jacob waited, expecting the gentleman officer to follow his men, go on about his business of overseeing the capture of wounded bluecoats, the recovery of his own troops, alive and dead.

Instead, the captain crouched, as the thief had done earlier. He took up Jacob’s rucksack that Billy had been forced to leave behind, rummaged within it, produced the packet of letters and the leather case containing the likenesses of Jacob’s beloved wife and daughter. He opened it, examined the images inside, smiled sadly.

Then he tucked the items inside Jacob’s bloody coat, paused as though startled, and looked directly into his eyes.

“My God,” he said, under his breath. “You’re alive.”

Jacob could not acknowledge the remark verbally, but he felt a tear trickle over his left temple, into his hair, and that, apparently, was confirmation enough for the Confederate captain.

Now, Jacob thought, he would be shot, put out of his misery like an injured horse. And he would welcome the release.

Instead, very quietly, the captain said. “Hold on, Yank. You’ll be found soon.” He paused, looking serious. “And if you should happen to encounter a certain Union quartermaster by the name of Rogan McBride, somewhere along your journey, I would be obliged if you’d tell him Bridger Winslow sends his best regards.”

Jacob doubted he’d live long enough to get the chance to do as Winslow asked, but he marked the names carefully in his mind, just the same.

Another voice spoke then. “This somebody you know, Captain?” a soldier asked, with concern and a measure of sympathy. It wasn’t uncommon on either side, after all, to find a friend or a relative among enemy casualties, since the battle lines often cut across towns, churches and supper tables.

“No,” the captain replied gruffly. “Just another dead Federal.” A pause. “Get on with your business, Simms. We might have the bluecoats under our heel for the moment, but you can be sure they’ll be back to bury what remains they can’t gather up and haul away now. Better if we don’t risk a skirmish after a day of hard fighting.”

“Yes, sir,” Simms replied sadly. “The men are low in spirit, now that General Jackson has been struck down.”

“Yes,” the captain answered. Angry sorrow flashed in his eyes. “By his own troops,” he added bitterly, speaking so quietly that Jacob wondered if Simms had even heard.

Jacob sensed the other man’s departure. The captain lingered, taking his canteen from his belt, loosening the cap a little with a deft motion of one hand, leaving the container within Jacob’s reach. The gesture was most likely a futile one, since Jacob couldn’t use his hands, but it was an act of kindness, all the same. An affirmation of the possibility, however remote, that Jacob might somehow survive.

Winslow rose to his full height, regarded Jacob solemnly, then slowly walked away.

Jacob soon lost consciousness again, waking briefly now and then, surprised to find himself not only still among the living, but unmolested by vermin. When alert, he lay looking up at the night sky, steeped

in the profound silence of the dead, one more body among dozens, if not hundreds, scattered across the blood-soaked grass.

Sometime the next morning, or perhaps the morning after that, wagons came again, and grim-faced Union soldiers stacked the bodies like cordwood, one on top of another. They were fretful, these battle-weary men, anxious to complete their dismal mission and get back behind the Union lines, where there was at least a semblance of safety.

Jacob, mute and motionless, was among the last to be taken up, grasped roughly by two men in dusty blue coats.

The pain was so sudden, so excruciating that finally, *finally*, he managed a low, guttural cry.

The soldier supporting his legs, little more than a boy, with blemished skin and not even the prospect of a beard, gasped. "This fella's still with us," he said, and he looked so startled, so horrified and pale that Jacob feared the kid would swoon, letting his burden drop.

"Well," said the other man, gruffly cheerful, "I'll be a son of a bitch if Johnny didn't leave a few breathin' this time around."

The boy recovered enough to turn his head and spit. To Jacob's relief, the boy remained upright, his grasp firm. "A few," he agreed grudgingly. "And every one of them better off dead."

The darkness returned then, enfolding Jacob like the embrace of a sea siren, pulling him under.

## TWO

*Washington City*

*June 15, 1863*

*CAROLINE*

Nothing Caroline Hammond had heard or read about the nation's capital could have prepared her for the reality of the place—the soot and smoke, the jostling crowds of soldiers and civilians, the clatter of wagon wheels, the neighing of horses and the braying of mules, the rough merriment streaming through the open doorways of plentiful saloons and pleasure houses.

She kept her gaze firmly averted as she passed one after another of these establishments, appalled by the seediness of it all, by the crude shouts, the jangle of badly tuned pianos and rollicking songs sung lustily and off-key, and, here and there, fisticuffs accompanied by the breaking of glass and even a few gunshots.

More than once, Caroline was forced to cross the road, to avoid rows of ox carts and ambulance wagons and mounted men who took no evident notice of hapless pedestrians.

A farm wife, Caroline was not a person of delicate constitution. She had dispatched, cleaned and plucked many a chicken for Sunday supper, helped her husband, Jacob, and Enoch Flynn, the hired man, butcher hogs come autumn and worked ankle-deep in barn muck on a daily basis.

Here, in this city of poor manners, ceaseless din and sickening stench, the effects were, of course, magnified, surrounding her on every side, pummeling her senses without mercy.

Runnels of foaming animal urine flowed among the broken cobblestones, and dung steamed in piles, adding to the cloying miasma. On the far edge of her vision, she saw a soldier vomit copiously into a gutter and felt her own gorge rise, scalding, to the back of her throat. The man's companions seemed amused by the spectacle, slapping their retching friend on the back and chiding him with loud, jocular admonitions of an unsavory nature.

Seeing the disreputable state of these men's uniforms, intended as symbols of a proud and noble cause, thoroughly besmirched not only by all manner of filth, but by the indecent comportment of the men who wore them, sent furious color surging into her cheeks. Only her native prudence and the urgency of her mission—locating her wounded husband, possibly lying near death in one of Washington City's numerous makeshift hospitals or, if she'd arrived too late, in a pine box—kept her from striding right up to the scoundrels and taking them sternly to task for bringing such shame upon their more honorable fellows.

How dared they behave like reprobates, safe in the shadow of President Lincoln's White House, while their great-hearted comrades fought bravely on blood-drenched battlefields all over the land?

She was mortified, as well as aggrieved, but her anger sustained her and kept her moving toward the rows of hospital tents just visible in the distance.

Toward Jacob.

She thought of the newspaper clipping listing the dead and wounded tucked away in her reticule. She'd read the list over and over again from the moment the newspaper had been placed in her hands, read it

during the day-long train ride from Gettysburg, the small, quiet town in the green Pennsylvania countryside she had lived in, or near, all her life.

By now, the clipping was tattered and creased, an evil talisman, despised and yet somehow necessary, the only link she had to her husband.

The information it contained was maddeningly scant, listing only that, among others, a Corporal Jacob Hammond had fallen in battle on May 3, almost six weeks ago, at Chancellorsville, Virginia. She had learned from others that any casualties from his regiment had since been transported to the capital to receive medical attention.

As the granddaughter of a country doctor and sometime undertaker, Caroline knew what her husband, Jacob, and others like him would have to endure if they survived at all—crowding, filth, poor food and tainted water, too few trained surgeons and attendants, shortages of even the most basic supplies, such as clean bandages, laudanum and ether. Sanitation, the most effective enemy of sepsis, according to her late grandfather, was still virtually nonexistent.

The stench of open latrines, private and public privies and towering heaps of manure standing on empty lots finally forced Caroline to set down her bag long enough to pull her best Sunday handkerchief from the pocket of her cloak and press the soft cloth to her nose and mouth. The scent of rosewater, generously applied before she left home, had faded with time and distance, and thus provided little relief, but it was better than nothing.

Caroline picked up her bag and walked purposely onward, not because she knew where she would find her husband, but because she didn't dare stand still too long, lest her knees give way beneath her. She tried to locate a central office of some kind, where a clerk might be able to look up Jacob's name in a volume of records and direct her to him, but the effort had been in vain. Frustrated and anxious, she had let herself be swept into the general chaos and disorganization of a wartime city.

Propelled by a rising sense of desperation, she hurried on, through the mayhem of a city under constant threat of siege, doing her best to convey a confidence she didn't feel. Beneath the stalwart countenance, fear gnawed at her empty, roiling stomach, throbbed in her head, sought and found the secret regions of her heart to do its worst.

She had no choice but to carry on, no matter what might be required of her, and she did not attempt to ignore the relentless dread. That would be impossible.

Instead, she walked, weaving her way through the crowds, crossing to the opposite side of the street in a mostly useless effort to avoid staggering drunkards and street brawls and men who watched her too boldly. Having long since learned the futility of burying her fears, she made up her mind to face them, with calm fortitude—as best she could, anyway.

As she'd often heard her beloved grandfather Doc Prescott remark that turning a blind eye to a problem or a troublesome situation served only to make matters worse in the long run. "Face things head on, Caroline," he'd always advised her. "Stand up to whatever comes your way and, if you are in the right, Providence will come to your aid."

Lately, she hadn't seen a great deal of evidence to support the latter part of that statement, but, then again, Providence was under no discernible obligation to explain itself or its ways to questioning mortals, particularly in light of the stupidity, greed and cruelty so far displayed by the human race.

One by one, Caroline confronted the haunting possibilities, the pictures standing vivid in her thoughts. In the most immediate scenario, she couldn't find Jacob, even after the most arduous search imaginable.

There had been a mistake, and he'd been taken to some other place entirely, or died in transit, and been buried in an anonymous grave, one she'd never be able to locate.

In the next, she *did* find her husband, but she had not arrived quickly enough to hold his hand, stroke his forehead, bid him a tender farewell. He'd already succumbed, and all that was left of him was a corpse lying in a ramshackle coffin.

But there was one more tableau to face and in many ways, it was the most terrible of all. Here, Jacob was alive, horribly maimed, helpless, forced to bear the unbearable until death delivered him from his sufferings in days, weeks, months—or years.

If only she knew what to expect, Caroline thought, she might be better able to prepare somehow.

But then, how *could* one prepare for the shock of seeing a beloved husband broken and torn? Suppose Jacob was so disfigured that she didn't recognize him or, worse yet, allowed shock or dismay to show in her face, her manner, her bearing?

She swayed, not daring to draw the deep breath her body craved, lest the dreadful smells of disease and suffering and death finally overwhelm her, render her useless to Jacob just when he needed her most.

And that would not do.

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For what remained of the day and into the evening, Caroline searched one hospital tent after another, pausing at the foot of every cot, forcing herself to look directly into the face of each man. Some slept, gray with the pallor of approaching death, some moaned or wept in silence, staring up at the drooping canvas roof as though they could see right through it to the sky. A few lifted an imploring hand to her, beckoning weakly, another woman's name on their lips.

Others had no hand to raise, and called to her with their eyes.

A touch to a hand, a brow. A kind word. A simple blessing. Perhaps a prayer.

So little to ask.

And so much.

Caroline made an effort to skirt the crumbling precipices of their individual sorrows, lest she lose her footing and pitch headlong into such hopelessness that she might never find her way back to air and light and solid ground.

Back to Jacob.

Because of Jacob, because he was her husband and she was his wife, she pressed on, pausing only long enough to look carefully at each face, if indeed one was visible, and not swathed in bandages, as so many were. In these instances, she studied the forms instead, the shapes and the contours, measuring lines, like a cartographer mapping the terrain.

Most bodies were clearly defined beneath thin blankets or sheets, a fact that was helpful, but sobering, too. Caroline saw too many flat surfaces where there should have been arms or legs, and had to steel herself against a compassion so overwhelming that it threatened to consume her. All the while, out of necessity rather than virtue, she trusted her most private instincts; she would, she *must* recognize the landscape, the hills and hollows, of the one body she knew intimately. Jacob's.

Somewhere, in one of these cots, one of these tents or beyond, in the overflow, he was waiting for her, hoping she would come to him, perhaps calling her name.

She must not fail him.

Time soon became irrelevant; only a driving urgency remained.

As twilight fell, lanterns were lit, their dull glow fading into the ever-thickening gloom gathering in corners and pooling upon the sawdust and dirt floors, like intangible floodwaters, silent and slowly rising.

There were too few helpers, mostly soldiers recovering from wounds of their own, and Caroline had no opportunity to ask if any knew where Jacob was; they were too immersed in the task of tending to the wounded and she *couldn't* interrupt them. Bandaged and gaunt and scarred, but ambulatory, moved among the cots, carrying buckets of water, holding ladles to parched lips, whispering hoarse words of awkward consolation to this one and that. In each tent, a small female contingent served as well, some apparently volunteers, others hired. All wore plain, sturdy dresses and aprons, dutifully laundered but still bearing evidence, however faint, of old stains, along with fresh ones.

These fading spills, Caroline thought, were the marks of their service, macabre medals of their valor.

She watched these women, in passing, as they carried bowls of broth or cornmeal mush to those patients who were able to feed themselves, patiently spooned the food into the mouths of the ones who were not. They seemed tireless in their dedication, and she knew they did far more than serve meals and bring water; they cleaned wounds, changed bandages, removed stitches, administered medicines, took down letters dictated in halting voices and made sure they were posted. Some were sitting by bedsides and she could hear as they read aloud—messages from home, lines of poetry, favorite Bible passages. The women listened to last words and sang familiar refrains, from the most scared of hymns to funny little ditties known to every schoolchild. She knew they did what they could, understanding, as they surely must, that for all they gave, it would never be enough.

And still they were here, among these men, diligently doing their best while leaving other parts of their lives un-lived. Many, she assumed, were widows, while others were the wives or sweethearts, mothers or sisters, of soldiers.

Caroline, although dazed, and feeling somehow separate from herself, marveled at the courage and selfless devotion of all these women, felt the pull of it.

But she kept moving.

Until, finally, she couldn't anymore. Weariness pulsed through her like the beat of a second, much greater heart than her own. And although the smells and the surrounding horrors still sickened her, she knew she herself would have to eat soon, then find a place to rest before she resumed her search for Jacob.

She felt defeated by her own limits, emotional and physical alike.

In those first moments of realization, home seemed even farther away than it was, more dream than recent memory, a place she'd merely imagined.

Rachel. Grandmother. The farm. Jacob, on his last visit home before Chancellorsville.

She yearned for her loved ones now, and for the person she was in their presence, for the peace of the land, so green and open in contrast to this sea of suffering humanity.

Her mind drifted to the beginning of her journey. She had left in a hurry, asking her grandmother to let her friends know what happened.

The railway car had been crowded, the hard, sooty seats filled.

Bolt upright, Caroline had sweltered in her travel cloak the whole way, her bag resting on her lap, her arms tightly around it, careful not to meet anyone's eyes, scooting closer to the window when a corpulent man in a dusty Union uniform dropped into the seat next to hers. He'd smelled of sweat and stale whiskey and rotting teeth, and his bulk pressed against Caroline, trapping her.

At first, the portly soldier had attempted to engage her in conversation, but besides an initial nod, she hadn't acknowledged him. Instead, she'd stared through the murky glass at the passing countryside.

Though persistent, the stranger eventually gave up, heaving a gusty sigh and shifting about. Her relief was short-lived; she heard the strike of a match, smelled sulfur, then tobacco.

Cigar smoke had bloomed around her in a bluish cloud, stinging her eyes, scouring the back of her throat.

Miraculously, her breakfast had stayed put.

In retrospect, the incident seemed trivial now, many hours later, as dusk approached and she stood in the center of yet another tent, with human misery on every side.

A hand tugged lightly at the fabric of her cloak just then, causing Caroline to start so that she nearly dropped her travel case.

"I hope I didn't frighten you." The voice was feminine and kindly and conveyed a fatigue that no amount of sleep or leisure could cure.

Caroline turned, gripping the handle of her bag more firmly now, and with both hands, not from fear it would be stolen from her, but because neither arm could manage the weight of it without the other.

A slight woman stood beside her, plain as a mud-hen in her brown dress. Her hair was gray and billowing around her wrinkled face, and her sad eyes gazed up into Caroline's face. "Are you looking for someone?"

A cluster of sobs rose suddenly from somewhere deep inside Caroline, and she barely managed to choke them back. "My husband," she said, with difficulty. "Corporal Jacob Hammond. He was wounded at Chancellorsville—I've looked and looked for hours, but I can't seem to find him anywhere—"

The woman patted Caroline's arm, and interrupted gently, "Do you know the name of your husband's regiment, Mrs. Hammond?" she asked.

"Yes," Caroline replied, summoning the last of her dignity. "Jacob serves with the Eleventh Pennsylvania." *The Bloody Eleventh*, he'd called it.

"Ah," the woman said with a little sigh. She brightened, no small feat at such a time and in such a place, and then added, "When possible, we try to keep the sick and wounded with their regiments, for purposes of order, of course, but mainly because they seem to do better if there's someone they might know nearby."

Caroline bent to put down her case. "Can you tell me where the members of my husband's regiment have been taken?"

The woman sighed again. "I can ask," she said softly, her face full of compassion, "but not tonight, I'm afraid. No pen pushers on duty at this hour." She patted Caroline's arm once more. "Come back first thing in the morning, and I'll help if I can."

Everything within Caroline clamored to find Jacob *now*, but she recognized that she had reached the end of her personal resources. "Thank you," she said..

The woman nodded and put out a hand to Caroline, who reciprocated. Strong, calloused fingers, gnarled and thick at the knuckles, closed around hers. "I'm Bessie Engle," she began. "And this tent is number ten. Remember that, or you might not find it again. Be sure you ask for Bessie when you get here, in case I'm out on some errand or off resting my feet."

"I'm obliged, Mrs. Engle," Caroline said, fearing her voice would break.

"Just Bessie," came the reply. Bessie was smiling, but then a frown furrowed her brow. "You have a place to stay, Mrs. Hammond? Some people here to look after you?"

Caroline hesitated, thinking how odd it was that this kindness could bring her so close to losing what remained of her composure.

"No," she said. "I plan to look for a rooming house or, failing that, seek lodging in a modest hotel. Perhaps you could recommend a respectable place—not too expensive?"

Bessie shook her head. "Have you no people at all, here in Washington City?" she persisted.

"Only my Jacob," Caroline replied.

"There probably isn't an empty room to be had in the whole city," Bessie continued. "Not one you'd want to stay in, anyhow. No, it won't do, your wandering around at night all by yourself."

"Oh," Caroline said, deflated. In her hurry to get to the capital and find Jacob, it hadn't occurred to her that there might be no lodgings available when she arrived. After all, the city was so large.

In the next moment, however, she thought of a possible solution. "I'll just walk back to the train depot, and pass the night there," she said. The depot, modest as it was, had walls and a roof. Surely people came and went, and not all of them could be hoodlums and scoundrels. She'd sit up through the night, remain vigilant. She still had a heel of bread, some cheese and an apple tucked away in her travel case, so she wouldn't go hungry.

"Nonsense," Bessie said right away. "Come and stay the night with me and the other nurses. We have a tent, and while it sure isn't much, you'll have a cot to sleep on and people around you."

Caroline, feeling thoroughly grateful, thanked Bessie again.

"You look all done in," Bessie said, clearly gratified that the matter had been decided, and to her satisfaction. "There'll be folks along to relieve me and the others in a little while, and then we'll go on and get you settled. Meantime, come sit inside for a bit, and I'll rustle up some of that mush the men had for supper."

Too tired to argue, Caroline followed Bessie along the wide aisle between still more cots, where men snored or murmured or cursed, quietly or otherwise, to a smaller tent set apart by several blankets suspended from poles, forming a partition. Here were a few chairs, a small stove and two cots covered in crumpled blankets.

Caroline dropped her bag, sat and immediately regretted it, not at all sure she'd have the strength to stand up again.

"I'll fetch that mush," Bessie told her. "You just rest."

"Please don't trouble yourself, Bessie. I have food. Cheese and bread and an apple. I'd be happy to share it with you."

Bessie paused. "I'm obliged for the offer," she said, almost whispering, "but I eat the same as these men do. Wouldn't seem right to do otherwise."

Caroline felt a touch of shame. Her humble meal, packed in the kitchen house at home before dawn that morning, would seem like a banquet to men subsisting on cornmeal mush, hard tack, thin soup and boiled beans. She knew from Jacob's letters that such foods were standard army fare, in camp as well as in hospitals.

Her chagrin must have shown in her face, because Bessie smiled and wagged a finger at her. "You go right on ahead and enjoy your meal," she ordered good-naturedly. "No reason you ought to feel bad about it." A pause. "Just don't go letting any of these poor fellas know what you've had, that's all. Hard on their spirits."

With that, she was gone, off to answer a chorus of calls from beyond the cloth partition.

Caroline sat for a while, then ate part of the cheese and all of the bread, but every bite tasted not of home, but of unwarranted privilege.

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Caroline spent the next morning waiting to hear from Bessie and helping out in whatever small way she could—folding bandages, addressing envelopes to soldiers' families, whatever any of the staff asked her to do. As she worked, she spent time in conversation with another young woman who told her that "a famous writer" known for his kindness and commitment to the soldiers was working as a wound dresser at some of the hospitals. When she heard the name, Caroline immediately recognized it—her grandfather had at least one of Walt Whitman's books in his library, a volume of poetry, she recalled. That brief memory of Doc Prescott brought her both comfort and sadness.

Later, in the moist, weighted heat of midafternoon, she stood at the foot of Jacob's cot, grateful and stricken, wondering if she would have recognized him at all if she hadn't eventually been escorted to this particular spot by a Union officer Bessie knew. Rogan McBride, an acting quartermaster, had searched various records, asked a great many questions, and finally encountered an ambulance worker who remembered picking up a man from the Eleventh during the battle at Chancellorsville. The boy recalled Jacob for two reasons: the soldier had appeared to be dead at first, and scared him and his partner half out of their hides when he moaned, and because of the letters tucked inside his coat, addressed to a corporal named Hammer or Harmon or Hamilton, or some such. If he recollected rightly, they'd taken the fellow to tent sixty-eight.

Now, with Captain McBride as her escort, Caroline regarded her husband.

She might well have passed Jacob by, he looked so very different, with his gaunt face; wild, matted hair; and shaggy beard, and his blank eyes that did not seem to see. There were shadows beneath them, purple as new bruises, and his skin glistened with perspiration. His skull bone protruded, and his chest, bound in grimy bandages, was sunken. It was as though he lacked substance, lacked life.

She thanked Captain McBride without meeting his gaze; he nodded and said he'd come back if and when he could. Soon a patient in uniform slipped into the tent, his left arm supported by a sling.

"We can't give him much water," he said. "Food, neither. He can't swallow much."

Caroline stared down into her husband's face, once handsome and browned by a lifetime of working under summer suns, now gray and so thin.

Jacob had just turned twenty-four on his last birthday, far from home, in a lull between skirmishes and battles, his life barely begun.

"You can sit with him a while if you like," the soldier said. "He might hear you. Hard to tell, but—"

Caroline stood frozen.

For a moment, she imagined hearing herself say, "No, I never found him," to all the people awaiting her return.

"But his eyes are open—" she whispered. But only their color, sky blue, was the same. They used to be expressive, full of mischief; now they might as well have been made of glass.

"Been that way since he got here," the soldier responded sympathetically. "He never closes them. And—" There followed a moment of hesitation that raised Caroline's apprehension a notch or two. "Well, he cannot speak. Caught himself a neck full of shrapnel, and then there's his ribcage—"

Caroline put up a single hand, a bid for silence.

All around them, men were calling out desperately for water, or morphine or ether or death itself. The soldier cleared his throat once more, then went on his way, as the captain had done.

Caroline knelt between Jacob's cot and the one next to it, where a man slept, tossing and turning in the grip of some nightmare, destined to awaken to another, very possibly worse. Beneath the dingy sheet, his form was clearly defined, an abbreviated shape, one leg ending at the knee, the other at mid thigh.

Caroline did not want to learn the poor man's name, or what had happened to him, or who, if anyone, was waiting for him at home. She couldn't bear to know.

She yearned to shut everything out, except for Jacob, until there were only the two of them, alone in the midst of a gray, shifting void. She took her husband's left hand in both of her own and whispered his name.

She saw a tear form in his eye, and knew then that he recognized her presence. She felt her heart shatter. She leaned over and gently kissed his cheek, then his paper-thin lips. His neck and chest were bandaged.

"It's Caroline, my love," she said, when she could trust herself to form the words. "I'm right here, and I will stay with you always."

She thought she saw Jacob's lips quiver, but he made no sound.

Another tear trickled down his face.

Jacob still made no sound, but Caroline knew what he was trying to tell her. He had held on somehow, through all his suffering, waiting for her.

Now, finally, she was here. He could begin the process of letting go.

Caroline's throat constricted, and it was a long while before she found her voice again. When she did, she spoke softly to Jacob, telling him how their Rachel was thriving, how she could recite the alphabet and count to fifty, how she adored her papa and always would. Caroline would see to that, see that he was never forgotten.

She told him she loved him, and that she knew he loved her in return.

She told him that Geneva, her grandmother, sent her love and Enoch sent his best wishes. Then she filled him in on the state of the crops. Finally she recited the comforting words of his favorite Psalm, the twenty-third, her eyes scalding as she finished with "And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

After that, she simply held his hand, stroked his forehead and smoothed his hair. She did not attempt to wipe away his tears, for they were his own, somehow sacred, and he had a right to shed them as he would.

For hours, it seemed she didn't move, disregarding the ache in her knees, paying no mind to the other complaints her body raised.

She could tell by the tempo of Jacob's breathing when he slept, then felt his awakening in her own flesh, a soft, jolting sensation of alertness.

Eventually, a doctor stopped by, although Caroline was only peripherally aware of him, willing him to withdraw from a space meant just for her and her husband. She was guarding that space and wanted to hold on to it without intrusion.

The doctor's words seemed muffled, as though spoken from a great distance.

Jacob's wounds were critical, the doctor told her, but no particular one had been severe enough to cause death. However, her husband could not take proper nourishment because of the injuries to his neck and throat; water and broth had to be administered drop by drop, since even a spoonful caused him to choke. He was slowly succumbing, as he could no longer stay properly hydrated.

Caroline did not look at the doctor, nor did she speak. She simply waited for him to leave.

Still, he continued. It would not be long now, he explained. “The patient’s trials—” did he even know Jacob’s name? “—would soon be over.”

She wanted to scream, “Jacob! His name is Jacob!”

But she didn’t.

Then came the questions. Did she plan to claim her husband’s body personally? Or would she prefer that it be shipped home for burial?

“It.”

“The body.”

As though Jacob had become something other than a person. How was he sure Jacob could no longer hear?

Was she aware that she was entitled to a death benefit? Had she brought burial clothes, or did she prefer that “the remains,” be laid to rest in uniform?

Dear God, the man was offensive. Surely, it was premature to make such decisions. Indecent, even.

If it hadn’t meant letting go of Jacob’s hand, Caroline would have clamped her own hands over her ears, shutting out the torrent of words.

When the doctor finally left, she continued her vigil in silence. She didn’t think about tomorrow, about the answers to the doctor’s inquiries, the preparations, the trip home; none of those things seemed important. Instead, she thought of Jacob, only Jacob.

She knelt beside him and held his hand, quietly bearing witness to their love, having said all she needed to say. The war had changed him. How could it not, after Antietam and the all battles preceding it? After Chancellorsville?

She’d been seventeen when they married. She’d been completely innocent, despite stolen glimpses at some of the etchings in some of Grandfather’s medical books and a head full of storybook fancies.

Jacob had always been tender with her. Didn’t they deserve more time together?

Her Jacob was dying. Everything else was insignificant in the light of that reality.

It was almost midnight, when Jacob gave an almost imperceptible shudder, and then rallied briefly in a way that seemed miraculous, given the hours of silence.

“Caroline,” Jacob said, in a painful croak.

Startled, she gasped, cupping his face in her hands, turning his head ever so slightly toward her, gazing into the depths of his eyes.

She saw helplessness there, and a plea. “Jacob?” she whispered, afraid he hadn’t spoken at all, that she’d imagined the sound of his voice, had somehow conjured up the illusion out of her own longing and despair.

“Come—closer. So weak...”

Eyes stinging, Caroline leaned her head down, her right ear so close to Jacob’s mouth that she felt his flagging breath against her hair and her cheek.

Jacob’s next words were so labored that it hurt to hear them. “They’re—coming. The Rebels. Take Rachel—get away...” He paused then, paused so long that Caroline lifted her head again to search his eyes.

Had he meant they were coming to Gettysburg, to Adams County, and wanted her to leave the farm, strike out for some safer place. That was the one promise she couldn’t make; Gettysburg was the only home she’d ever known, and the land Jacob’s ancestors had settled was their daughter’s only legacy.

But neither could she lie.

Caroline bit her lower lip and said nothing. One of her own tears dropped into Jacob's scruffy beard and glittered there.

She watched, heartbroken, as her young husband, once so strong and vibrant, carried out his last struggle. Still holding his face between her palms, she waited.

Finally, Jacob summoned enough of his rapidly waning life to speak again. "I—have...loved you—dearly..."

Caroline nodded, weeping in earnest now. "I know that, Husband," she said. "And I have loved you as well." As soon as the words were out, she dropped her forehead to his, unable to bear the probing intensity of his regard.

She felt so raw, so broken, as though her flesh had been stripped away, baring every nerve, every private emotion, every secret—even those she kept from herself.

Yes, she thought fiercely, she *had* loved Jacob. She had *loved* him.

His breath moved softly in her hair, like a caress. A low, strangled sound escaped him, though whether it was a laugh or a sob, she could not tell.

"You are—so...beautiful," Jacob said.

She sobbed, clinging to him. "Oh, Jacob, I—"

"Hush, now," he ground out. "Be strong. Promise—me—"

Caroline raised her head, her face wet, and nodded vigorously. "I promise," she said, but even as she spoke, she saw that Jacob was gone, leaving only absolute stillness behind, like a silent echo.

She dried her tears with the back of one hand. Jacob had always valued dignity, and she would not dishonor him by creating a spectacle in the presence of strangers.

She remained at Jacob's bedside for a long time, and presently someone came for her, murmuring condolences that could not begin to salve her sorrow. Caroline's fingers had to be pried loose from Jacob's hand, though it was gently done, and she was lifted to her feet, supported until she could stand on her own.

She looked back at her husband, saw that someone was covering his face. She knew he would be carried away soon.

And another soldier, sick or wounded or both, would lie in Jacob's place.

Bessie had been summoned, roused from her weary sleep, for she appeared at Caroline's side in her nightgown and a tattered wrapper, her gray hair twisted into a plait and dangling over her shoulder. The effect was oddly girlish.

"Come, now," she whispered, wrapping an arm around Caroline's waist. "You'll see your man in the morning, you have my word. Make your decisions then, child. Not tonight."

Caroline allowed Bessie to lead her away, as though she were a blind person, wandering a maze.

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Only now two days later, in the baggage car, with its slatted sides letting in speckled slices of sunlight, seated on Jacob's pinewood coffin, over which she'd spread her cloak, did Caroline let herself remember the details of what came next. After entering the shadowy confines of the nurses' tent, once Jacob had been carried off, she recalled a cup being placed in her hands and hearing Bessie's quiet urging to drink its contents. She had obeyed mutely. Her shoes were loosened, button after button, and then removed. The drink was syrupy, sweet but slightly bitter, too.

Laudanum, she'd thought.

She had handed back the cup, empty, stretched out on her narrow cot still fully clothed, and given herself up to darkness.

Remembering, Caroline gripped the edges of Jacob's coffin now to steady herself as the train lurched into motion, whistle shrieking a shrill farewell to Washington City, with its living and its many, many dead.

Yesterday, with so much to do, she'd had no time to think beyond immediate requirements. She had refused the modest breakfast Bessie had brought, unable to imagine a time she'd ever be hungry again. She dressed and performed what ablutions she could.

She had feared Jacob would be lost to her, necessitating another exhaustive search, but that wasn't the case. With unusual efficiency, the army had set aside a ramshackle building as a morgue, and he was there.

Caroline had seen Jacob's body, examined every wound. Given a basin of tepid water, a cloth and a scrap of soap after much insistence on her part, she bathed her husband and did what she could with his unkempt hair. At home, she would have washed those light brown locks clean, trimmed away the excess with her sewing shears. She would have shaved off his beard, for Jacob had never worn one, and then asked Enoch to dress him in his Sunday suit.

Alas, she hadn't been at home, but in the capital, on the outskirts of hell itself.

She'd agreed to have Jacob embalmed, considering the journey back to Gettysburg, the viewing and the funeral.

So calm. So practical.

Inside, she'd been screaming.

The embalming process took time but would be done that day, she'd been informed, and there was a small charge.

Caroline had not questioned the fee, but simply paid it, kissed Jacob's icy forehead, and gone to find the paymaster, who would issue her something called a widow's benefit. The sum was nominal, but she couldn't afford to leave it unclaimed, so she found the appropriate tent and, after much waiting and signing of documents, she'd been presented with a draft.

From there, she had proceeded to a nearby bank, and waited again, in a long line of civilians and soldiers, and when her turn at the teller's cage finally came, she had exchanged the draft for currency.

With so much to do, it had been relatively easy to forget the reason behind her errands. After stashing the bills in her reticule and pulling the strings tight, she'd walked to the train station and found someone traveling to Gettysburg who agreed for a small fee to deliver an urgent note to her grandmother, Geneva who lived in town. She relayed the news of Jacob's death, asked that Enoch be told, although not Rachel, since she wanted to do that herself. Unless there was a delay, she would stop for her child at Geneva's house before going home to the farm.

In closing, she requested that Enoch be asked to meet the afternoon train from Washington City the next evening with a wagon and someone to help him load Jacob's coffin.

Having dispatched the message, Caroline had found a modest eating establishment, washed her hands and face in the cramped room set aside for the use of ladies, and seated herself at a table next to a smudged window overlooking the street. She had ordered a bowl of stew and a basket of bread and forced herself to eat, overruling the protests of her stomach. She would need all the stamina she could muster.

From there, Caroline's recollections were blurred. She knew she had returned to the morgue and waited on a bench outside the room where Jacob had lain, with dozens of others, but she couldn't have said what she thought about, beyond the comforting fact that Rachel was safe at Geneva's house.

Eventually, the grim process had been completed, and she'd been escorted to another part of the building, where Jacob rested inside a coffin still smelling of pine pitch. He'd looked better, even handsome, in a clean uniform, his skin a little rosier, though still waxen.

She'd sat with him until a soldier came and made her leave.

Another blank space opened after that; Caroline had a vague memory of finding Bessie, offering to help with the patients.

At some point, she'd returned to the nurses' tent, accepted a light supper served on a tin plate, swallowed another dose of laudanum.

And now, here she was, the following afternoon, aboard the train, perched on Jacob's pine box and surrounded by others like it, some stacked, some resting on the floor, all splintery and marked with hastily scrawled names. Frederickson, Williams, McCullough, Johnston, Beckham.

She thought about their various homecomings, these dead men, so different from what they and their loved ones must have hoped for. Presently, the conductor, an elderly man of small stature sporting a heavy white mustache, opened the door to the baggage car and peered in at Caroline. "You changed your mind yet, Missus?" he asked hopefully. He'd made it quite clear when she boarded that he didn't approve of her riding with the trunks and crates and coffins, especially when there were perfectly good seats up front, in the passenger section. "Train's hardly crowded," he added when she didn't answer. "Seems like there are more folks headed *to* Washington City than away from it."

"I'm fine here, thank you," Caroline said politely. She was aware of the picture she must present, a widow unhinged by sorrow, in need of a wash, a good night's sleep, a change of clothing, brazenly ignoring the proprieties. Before the war, it would have been unthinkable for a decent woman to make a journey of any distance without an escort. Since the Southern Rebellion, the rules had changed out of necessity, but even now, ladies did not ride in baggage cars with their departed husbands.

"Might be spooky in here," the conductor persisted, his mustache twitching a little. "Besides, there aren't any—" he paused, cleared his throat "—facilities."

Caroline did not move. She could make her way to the "facilities" if the need arose, though she hoped it wouldn't, because the cubicles were small and smelly and anything but sanitary.

"Are you afraid of ghosts?" she asked.

The old man reddened, took off his conductor's cap, then put it on again in a show of agitation. "No, ma'am," he said, plainly offended. "There's no such thing, far as I know."

She spread her hands. "I quite agree."

The conductor had no answer for that. He blustered a little, reminded her that she would have half an hour to stretch her legs at the next stop. Maybe buy herself a bite to eat.

She thanked him.

Caroline did not get off the train at the next stop, or the one after that, where two of the coffins were unloaded. The boys sent to fetch them stole curious glances at her, but said nothing.

The conductor brought water, along with two hard-boiled eggs and a slice of bread. Caroline was touched, suspecting he'd meant to eat the food himself.

She accepted with thanks and, when she was alone again, she ate.

There were more stops. Another coffin was unloaded, along with several crates and travel trunks.

"Still plenty of seats up front," the conductor announced, when he returned sometime in the late afternoon to refill her cup with water and offer her a much-read copy of *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

"I'll stay here," Caroline told him.

When he left shaking his head, she stretched out on top of Jacob's coffin, covered herself with part of the travel cloak, and slept.