

Chapter Forty Three

The Forrest Farm

Tuesday, May 11, 7:39 a.m.

"You can pout all you want, Jackson," Lenora Forrest said as she scraped the cold grease from the skillet into an old tin, "but I told you I need you to go with Myra into town."

Jackson leaned against the door frame, looking out through the window pane of the kitchen door. He watched as his father and Hercules trod off into the woods, rifles pointed downward resting in the crooks of their arms. The sun slanted through the trees. Their backs and legs caught the slashes of light as they slipped away into dense shadow.

"I swear, boy, you act as if I beat you," Lenora said, looking self-consciously to Silas, who was gathering the scraps of their breakfast in a pail. "I apologize for his mooning about, Silas. He gets so worked up about doing them grown-up things."

"I reckon I remember what it was like to be a boy," he replied with a polite smile. He looked to Jackson, "Listen here, Jackson, you, me and Herc will go out tomorrow and hunt a little—if it's alright with your Ma—and you can show us how good a marksman you are then."

After having been roughly treated by Silas their first few encounters, Jackson was a bit leery and gave him a suspicious eyeing.

"Why, Mister Silas, I don't suppose you had much of a childhood if you were put into a uniform so young. It really is sad," Lenora offered. She looked to her son.

"Some youngsters do not appreciate their easy lives. Jackson, you should be grateful you are not growing up in a time of war."

Jackson mumbled, "At least then I'd get to shoot something," but when asked by his mother what he had said, he sheepishly replied, "Nothing, Momma."

Silas took a moment to invent a way to come to the boy's aid without stepping in the way of Lenora's motherhood. "Times were different, for sure, but to be wholly truthful, I was not raised in such a fine house with such a good family. I suspect if I had not volunteered, I would have found an even more tragic way to spend my youth."

"More tragic than killing other men?" she asked. "I cannot imagine a worse thing."

"No disrespect, Ma'am, but I volunteered, I was not forced to fight," he spoke softly and respectfully, "and what I came from was setting out to be a whole lot worse than going off to get shot at all day long. I envy young Jackson here in his solid upbringing and I compliment you on giving him such a fine start."

Jackson was stunned at a grown man claiming to envy him, while Lenora stood frozen over the counter with a towel in mid-wipe. She was overwhelmed by his sorrowful tale, his quiet laments, and his earnest compliments of her life. She recalled her distaste of this man and his friend just yesterday, but now she wanted to walk over and give him a motherly embrace.

The floorboards above creaked and Myra descended the stairs with a tray of soiled dishware. "The patient sure has her appetite back!" She clinked the dishes together as she set the tray on the counter.

"Did she eat it all?" Lenora asked, inspecting the remains. "What about Francis? Has she taken anything?"

”She sat up and had a few spoonfuls of the broth, but she would not take but one of the medicine.”

”The stubbornness rising up in her about her medication may be a good sign in itself,” Lenora sighed. She dismantled the contents of the tray. ”You and Jackson better get a’moving. Doctor Holloway may be going off on his house calls before long. You know he has lunch with Widow Higgins at the boarding house every day and he likes to have the day open if they decide to take a stroll later.”

The two women exchanged chortles at the gossip. Silas shrugged his shoulders to ask Jackson what this meant. Jackson rolled his eyes and shook his head, for he did not know nor care about the snickers and chatter.

”Aside from getting whatever Emma needs, remember to ask him how much it would cost to get Francis in hospital in St. Louis,” Lenora reminded the children. ”He said he would look into it.”

Silas set aside his work and dug through his pockets. ”I need to give you some money for—”

”You keep your money,” Lenora said, waving him off. ”We have an arrangement with the doctor and he will be paid, don’t you worry.”

”But Emma is my charge—well, Hercules and my charge—and we intend to pay whatever debts we incur.”

”You can take care of the doctor later, and,” she chided, ”any debt you have to us will be repaid by Hercules helping with the tobacco planting and you giving me some of them recipes you got up in that head of yours.”

Silas laughed and agreed to the terms with a handshake to the matron of the Forrest Clan.

"I think I may go on up and sit with Emma a spell," Silas said as he made his way to the stairs.

"Mister Silas? She said she would rather not have visitors just yet." Myra said, barely containing her delight at having to deliver the news.

Downcast and stunned, Silas asked, "Why? Hercules had just been up to see her before he went off."

Myra's sympathy was feeble. "I hoped to not have to get too specific, but she expressly voiced her aversion to seeing you. She said Mister Hercules is welcome, but ..."

"Why, what in the world have I done to her?"

Myra swept beside Silas as she headed for the door and whispered, "Perhaps she saw us at the table last night and she thinks you fancy me and not her."

He turned, confounded. His open mouth followed her. Jackson grabbed his rifle from beside the door and Myra snatched her bonnet from the counter. Silas stood, blinking idiotically as the two Forrest children walked outside. Myra smiled slyly at him as she backed out and drew the door shut.

Silas in fact *did* know what he had done to Emma, and it was not the innocent rendezvous with Myra that had hurt her. He had spurned her in her time of illness—when she needed a familiar face to smile at her. *His* face. Though they had only met days ago, he knew as well as she did that they forged a friendship—maybe something more—but Emma must be aware of him distancing himself in silent judgment when he found she was with child. He had no way to find out what she knew or how she felt, for she denied him solace as he had denied her.

Sensing his dilemma and dejection, Lenora patted him lightly on the shoulder. "When I take up her lunch, I will put in a solid word for you. Perhaps if you make her something very special, it may oil the hinges, so to speak."

Aside from a heaping platter full of begging and groveling, Silas knew of no recipe to fix his misdeed, for he knew he was guilty on every charge.

Chapter Forty Four

Doctor Holloway's Office

Hickman, Kentucky 8:04 a.m.

Kemper woke up weeping. He could not recall where he was and had no explanation for his sudden outburst of emotions. Over the years, he had become quite numb to unnecessary up or downturns in feelings. He rarely found himself delighted or depressed and he preferred it that way.

Anger, to Kemper, was a far better median to ride through life than happiness or sadness, for both of those other extremes were fleeting. What he had an unlimited supply of in life was anger and desire for revenge.

Yet there he lay, sobbing like a war widow. He had no explanation other than the deprivation of his medicine. With this clear grasp on his situation, reason took over and anger once again was quick to sow and reap.

Daylight crept in from the high windows, but he did not know north from south or if it was daybreak or dusk. He was bound at the wrists, but had been untied and retied with cotton batting around the ropes. The doctor did not want Kemper to lacerate his wrists as he had done his ankles.

So thoughtful, Kemper mused with acidity. A brief test proved the new knot-work was much looser than before. He projected he could wrangle out of the restraints if and when it became necessary. He bided his time and waited for an opportunity to grow.

He looked about the room and saw little changed from his last conscious moments. His clothes still sat, neatly folded in a stack on the bench behind him. He

looked about for his bottles, but saw no trace. A ripple of fear and then despair whipped through him. He forced himself to imagine the doctor pleading for his life. In this waking vision, the Samaritan trembled and sweat at the end of a scalpel as Kemper towered over him.

When he thought about his sobbing and wondered if he had been heard, he noticed the infants were no longer wailing, either. The dark nudge inside him hoped they had died. A brief flicker of self-loathing flared for thinking so darkly, but he quickly stomped on the weak-minded sentiment in case it might catch his mind aflame.

Kemper heard boards creaking outside his room. He lifted his head and focused on the key hole. He saw a key being inserted on the other side of the lock. He dropped his head back and closed his eyes. The door opened and he listened as the doctor locked the door. He lay still, listening to the footfalls coming nearer.

He felt the doctor lifting the bindings around his legs, not testing for security, but gently probing perhaps for signs of infection or healing. The doctor stepped to the cabinets and could be heard rummaging quietly for supplies.

Kemper did not stir or even open his eyes, for he wanted the attempt to free himself to be a full surprise. There was, however, a tension building Kemper knew must be released. He felt a mainspring inside himself wound tightly. The good doctor had no idea how many turns he was applying by keeping Kemper here. One twist too many and the machine would come to life, pendulum slicing through the air, gears interlocking and forcing intricate changes and forward movement. Time was held still, but Kemper's clock could not be stopped forever.

Chapter Forty Five

Hickman, Kentucky, 8:22 a.m.

Not a refined town by any means, Hickman still had pride in itself. Every resident knew every other one as well as they knew their own kin—and for as long. One tragic event solidified their pride and sense of community.

Yellow fever had spread its grip of death far and wide up and down the river, and it found roost in Hickman. The vicious disease swept through the river town just two years prior. Though they said Yellow Jack would not sting Kentucky, sting he did, to the number of one hundred and fifty of its beloved residents passing.

A ravaged populace of strong Kentuckians stood in the face of death and stared him down. They did not flee as they did in Memphis, where the specter of the disease caused over half the town to evacuate, collapsing a healthy metropolis. No, these stubborn folks tended to the sick, even opening a hotel as a hospital. Those who were not burdened by the plague buried the dead and bound themselves even more tightly together, rising stronger, a bastion of hope and promise along the Mississippi bluffs.

One truth emerged from this trauma and even from the late war. A city's real strength and place in the modern world and the future lay in the children. That is why Hickman loved and nurtured the young, rich or poor.

Myra and Jackson descended the bluff and weaved along the avenues of manicured lawns, bright red brick houses with white wooden trim, paved streets on central avenues and even a lovely park or two built amid old trees that had seen the town grow up around them.

An atmosphere of endurance and timelessness slowly pulsed in these old river towns. Though the trains had slowed boat traffic and commerce, though long-time residents may seek greener pastures elsewhere, though the river may sometimes rise and threaten to wash it all away, there was a quiet assurance that towns like Hickman cradled gently in the spring breezes. As katydids buzzed and flung themselves from blade of grass to branch, as dogs barked lonely yelps in the lazy sun, these towns looked out on the rolling waters, sure they would always be. While the rest of the country heard the clang and rush and crash of progress, Hickman heard nothing but a distant thunder of a far off storm they were sure would pass them by.

These ancient oaks and elms towered over the two youngsters, providing huge patches of shade as they cut across the park toward the doctor's house.

Dinsmore Elkins, the haberdasher, waved to the children as he crossed their paths on the way to his shop on Clinton. Though Edgar Forrest was considered an odd and rough fellow by many, his children were spared their father's label and were well-liked by the general populace. They were the future and they were shined upon. This is also one of the reasons Jackson was indulged when he tromped all over the town with his rifle. He was allowed such freedom, for one day, he may be one of Hickman's great leaders. Besides, the image of a young Kentucky boy racing about with a long rifle was simply too powerful a nostalgic elixir to deny. The old folk drank it up.

Jute Parker, one of the few town layabouts, removed his cap and hailed to young Jackson from a bench near the rear of the park. In his typically indolent manner, he waved, but did not, of course, rise from his shaded sanctuary.

"That man . . ." Myra said, shaking her head in disapproval, "he just sits there like he is too pooped to pop. It ain't even hot yet and he makes it seem like August has telegraphed and said it was on it's way."

"Well," Jackson replied to Myra as he returned Jute's wave, "he'll be a movin' like mercury soon as Sheriff Dobbs comes along to roust him. Dobbs abides no vagrants—no matter the heat."

Jute waited until they got nearer when he said, "Hey ho, Jackson! Bell's shop just got in some fresh shiners—in case you was thinkin' of dippin' your rod in the river later!"

Jackson was about to pass him by when he was shocked by a round mass of purple flesh around Jute's eye. "I bet them shiners ain't as big as the one around your eye." He usually had a more respectful tongue in his mouth when he spoke to his elders, but Jute was a drunk and in Jackson's mind, it made him ripe for ribbing.

"Aw, now Jackson, you oughtn't tease me so," Jute replied, touching the bruise. "I got this respectably this time."

Myra was growing impatient, she lifted her chin in the direction of the doc's and tugged at Jackson's arm. "Let's go. Momma made clear we wasn't to dawdle." She was almost set to release some sour comment upon Jute but by the way he gingerly poked his face, she didn't have the heart to injure him further. He was not a bad man, and like so many folks in Hickman, he too had been scarred by the fever's brutality. His mother and wife had been among the victims of the yellow fever two years back. Since then, he spent most nights sleeping his liquor off in the cemetery by their graves.

Jackson sensed a story in Jute's comments, so he plucked himself from Myra's fingers, folded his arms with rifle in the crux of an elbow and stood at ease. "Respectably, huh? How you mean, Jute? I figured you just got in another fight over a bottle at the saloon."

Jute chuckled and shook his head. "No sir, not this time. I got this-un by way of some feller what survived the wreck last night. Well--he survived the wreck

yesterday, but the doc done found him in the woods nearby and had me help bring him back to the doc's office. We carried him up from the woods and he was sleeping all peaceful like, but as soon as we got him inside, he done went wild and started swingin' on us both. Doc managed to duck, but I was too slow." He reached up to poke his bruise again, but forgot which eye it was and poked at the healthy one for a second before noticing. He glanced up under sly lids to see if the children had noticed. "He was goin' on and on about some other fellows who was supposed to be on the boat, but Doc put him under real quick and got him tied up for his own safety."

Jackson shared a questioning glance with his sister. "You say he was looking for some fellows was on the boat with him?"

"Didn't I just say those words?" He wrinkled his face at Jackson and looked to Myra for help with the fool child. "Didn't I just tell him that?"

Myra ignored his need. "Now I heard there were no survivors." She slipped an elbow into Jackson to keep him quiet while she poked around the drunk's brain.

Jute rubbed the back of his neck as if that was where the puzzle lay. "Well, doc told me a few three men had made it. He said he done looked over one and he was real sickly. He told them to take the fellow somewhere dry in town, but now that I think on it, he didn't tell me no more than that."

Myra pulled on Jackson's arm more insistently. "We need to get to doc's and get that medicine for Francis."

Jackson knew she was in a hurry, and not just for the medicine, but he pulled free once more to ask, "You sure this fellow was from the wreck?"

"Now when did you get so thick-headed, Jackson?" Jute asked, real concern blooming in bloodshot eyes. "I just told you--"

"We got to go, Jute," Myra interrupted. She tucked her arm through Jackson's and threw her head over her shoulder to hurriedly add, "I hope your eye gets better."

"Why thank you, Myra!" He rose as the two walked away. "You always was the kindest of the Forrest lot."

They got a few steps away when Jute began to follow. "You know, I think I best come along, just in case that fellow is still feelin' a little cranked up. I would sure feel bad if he got loose and was to try and hurt you all. He caught me off guard the one time, but I am sharp and onto his manner now." He straightened up and strode behind them with purpose, though weaving a little.

Myra glanced back, making sure Jute was not too close to hear. "Silas and Herc said there were no survivors except them, the girl and the black fellow. Could they be mistaken?"

"No," Jackson replied as he locked his sights on the doctor's house. A seriousness arose which she had not seen in her little brother before. "I was there, remember? Myra, I sure hope the doc didn't tell nobody the boys came to our place." He was calculating events as they neared the house. "They said the law may be looking for them from St. Louis."

"You think this fellow Doc has trussed up is the law?"

"I ain't sure, but we best ask the doc what really is going on. I fear this don't bode well for Mister Herc."

"Or Silas," Myra added quickly.

No one mentioned the girl.

Kemper lay still and struggled to not react as Doctor Holloway poked at the lacerations on his ankles with a drug-soaked swab. The pain was but a pin prick compared to other wounds in his life, but it was a surprise for he had his eyes closed still.

He was lightly rocked back and forth as the doctor sat on the lower edge of his cot and reached across to untie his other leg. Kemper risked alerting the doctor as he carefully twisted his hands in the restraints at his sides.

The doctor gave no sign of noticing as he unfurled the last of the bandage, tossing it up into a pan on the counter. Kemper looked down and saw the doctor bend ever closer to the wounds, dipping another swab in a tincture bottle.

Rose bushes grew tall on either side of the Doctor's front porch and they greeted the Forrest children with their perfume. A long, wooden ramp with sturdy hand rails for the wheelchair-bound patients ascended from the curb up to the porch.

Myra and Jackson clomped loudly up the long grade with Jute scuffing his feet close behind.

As Myra came to the door, she turned to Jackson. "You have to wait out here. Momma said you ain't had the measles yet and those twins may still be contagious."

Before Jute could bring up the rear, Jackson noted, "But I need to ask the doc if he told anyone about the boys coming to our home. And we need to find out who this fellow is that Jute helped bring here."

Myra raised the knocker and brought it down twice lightly. "Don't worry, I will find all that out right after I get the medicine. Trust me."

Jackson sat on the edge of the porch, legs dangling. He carefully rested the rifle butt in the ground below and leaned the barrel against his legs. His hat came off next as he placed it beside him on the porch.

Jackson leaned over the edge of the porch inspecting the shadows of the space beneath.

"You gonna have to knock harder than that," Jute offered idly, leaning against the wall, trying to decide if his hands should go in his pockets or folded across his chest.

Myra peered through the window beside the door, but could not see beyond the drawn curtains. She hesitated knocking again. "I do not want to bother the twins if they are sleeping."

"Porter says them sisters of his don't never sleep—even if they ain't sick," Jackson said as he hopped down into the dirt and crouched low to better survey the crawlspace.

Doctor Holloway heard the knock and sat up. Kemper looked at him from behind, the doctor's head turning toward the front door and then slowly turning towards his patient.

His gaze was curious at first, but when he locked eyes with Kemper and found him awake and aware, he flicked a glance at Kemper's legs, then saw him working his hands from the wrist bindings, but it was too late for the good doc.

Kemper drew his right leg back, swung it down hard on the back of Holloway's neck, then used his feet to pull the doctor in closer, wrapping his legs completely around the man's head.

The crazed patient released his death-grip on the throat only long enough for the doctor to answer his question. "Where are they?"

The doctor slapped at Kemper's legs, croaking out, "Whoooo?"

"Silas and Hercules!" Kemper shouted as he gave a violent shake to the man in his grip. He wrested his hands from the bindings and bent forward, deftly replacing his legs with his fingers around the doctor's throat. "The survivors of the wreck! Where are they!"

Myra had lifted the knocker again when they all heard the shouting from inside. "Tell me where they are or I will kill you!"

Jackson jumped to his feet and ran to the door, pushing the others aside. It was unlocked and he threw it open and crossed into the house. Myra and Jute exchanged stunned looks, but the town drunk had a grand moment of sobriety as he stepped around Myra aside, reached in and snatched the back of Jackson's collar just before he darted out of reach.

With a strength he hid behind his liquored up facade, he lifted Jackson, who kicked and thrashed, and turned to place the boy gently by his sister in the threshold. "You two stay put. It may just be this fellow is having a bad recovery, but I will take a look." He lumbered a few steps into the long hallway, stopping at the foot of the stairway leading up to the second floor. "Stay put."

Kemper loosened his grip once more, but the doctor only coughed, tears draining down the sides of his cheek. He stood and pivoted himself so the doctor was now laying back on the bed, his legs curled under. Kemper released his hands from the doctor's throat, clutched his collar with his left hand and slapped him across the face with the right.

"Where are they?"

Nothing but a whimper as the doctor shielded himself from another blow.

Jute hurried down the hallway and turned the corner. He grabbed the door knob and shook it, finding it locked.

Jackson looked at his sister and down the hall. "To hell with this!" He bolted after Jute, leaving Myra stunned.

It only took a second before Myra found her wits and darted after the others.

Chapter Forty Six

Jute was throwing his shoulder into the door as the two Forrest children rounded the corner. He was breathing heavy already and smelled like sweat and sour mash in equal parts. One bash split the wood near the lock and a second one sent the door swinging in with splinters flying.

Without releasing the doctor, Kemper turned to find a big son of a bitch had busted in the door. He looked a little familiar, even with a big black eye, but he couldn't place him. Behind the man, two youngsters looked around his approaching body.

"Where are they?" Kemper howled one last time just as the big fellow snatched Kemper's gown at the shoulders and hauled him back, nearly off his feet.

Kemper tried to keep his grip, but he could feel his fingers slipping. He leaned forward, his face now inches from the doctor's. With all his strength, he shoved his leg straight back, planting his foot directly in the big man's gut. With a grunt and a wheeze, the man stumbled back, arms swinging wildly for purchase on anything. He kept stumbling back, gaining momentum until his back slammed into the medicine cabinet, smashing the glass doors and toppling the contents over his shoulders and down his chest. Several bottles crashed to the floor, releasing an acrid cloud of vapor.

Jute was still alert, though stunned by the impact and the fumes. He shook his head and struggled to get his feet beneath him.

Myra finally found her voice and shrieked.

Jackson jumped in surprise at her outburst, but threw himself in the melee. He dove onto Kemper's back and flung his arms around his throat. Jute came from behind and lifted Jackson off, putting him down to the side.

“Boy, just stay out of this. He done got lucky on me twice, but he ain’t gonna surprise me again—” Jute said as he was charged from behind, his breath stolen.

Kemper rushed them toward the wall and rammed Jute’s head into it. He snatched Jute’s thinning hair and forced his head into the wall another time for good measure. Jute slumped, leaving a trail of blood on the polished wood wall, but he was already turning his frame as he hit the ground.

Kemper spied the scalpel among the doctor’s supplies on the counter. He snatched it up and swiped it once at Jackson as he stepped through the broken glass, returning to the doctor. He did not even notice the shards cutting into his soles as he crossed.

The doctor scrambled backward, still on the bed, but Kemper grabbed his belt and dragged him, bed and all back toward him. Doctor Holloway raised his hands up to protect himself from the glinting blade, but Kemper casually slashed at his palms.

As the doctor howled, Kemper asked him the same question, only this time in a hiss. “Where are they? You tell me now or I will not only kill you, I will tie you down, like you did me, and I will make you watch as I bleed these other three dry. You will see them go and know you could do nothing to save them.”

He twisted the scalpel in the air to emphasize his promised torture.

Doctor Holloway glanced to Jute, who was shaking his head, trying to push himself up to sitting. He looked at Jackson and Myra and “I am sorry.”

“No, Doc!” Jackson spouted

The doctor curled his fingers closed and turned his hands in toward himself, resembling a bloody, pitiful praying mantis. “They are at the Forrest Farm, due south,” he sobbed.

“

Myra took in the doctor's words, their depth like a solid blow. Dread and fear drained her as she swooned. Jackson did his best to catch her, but she was larger than him and he staggered under her weight.

Kemper ignored the children and loomed closer to the doctor, scalpel dripping with his blood.

He tried to roll away but was brought back by Kemper.

"I told you what you wanted! Don't kill me!"

Kemper laughed dryly as he pushed the blade closer to the doctor's face. "You are a fool for trusting me."

Jute rushed from behind, pushing Kemper down onto the doctor. The blade sliced along the doctor's cheek and hacked off a small chunk of his earlobe then was buried in the mattress beneath, but Kemper did not let go of the knife.

The weight from the attack and the shock of the injury was too much for the medicine man and he passed out beneath the pile. Kemper grunted and wriggled beneath the big fellow, Jute landing blows into his back and neck.

He looked back to the children. "God damn it, Y'all! Run! Go tell your people what happened!"

"Jackson, we need to get help!" Myra said, eyes wild, clearly beside herself. "We need to get the sheriff!"

Still pounding away but losing steam, Jute yelled. "Damn it! Go!"

Jackson snatched Myra's hand and before she could protest, he yanked her hard and dragged her out of Doctor Holloway's office.

The Forrest children burst from the office, nearly making the distance of the long ramp in one bound. They hurried out towards the park when Jackson planted both feet and skidded to a stop.

He looked back at the doctor's office, imagining the battle waging inside, then looked off to toward home, imagining the one to come.

He ran back to the house, leaving Myra in a confused muddle. "What are you doing, Jackson? You can't get in that fight. You might be hurt."

Jackson ran around the ramp and found his rifle and checked the powder pouch about his neck. "You run home. Find Poppa and Silas and Hercules and you tell 'em this maniac here is looking for 'em." He swept up his hat and stamped onto his head.

Myra came running to him with wet face and puzzled eyes. "But what are *you* gonna do?"

"I don't know yet, but you gotta warn the men! Go, dang it!" He leaned the rifle back against the porch, turned her in the direction of the farm and gave her a shove.

She ran off, looking back over her shoulder every few strides at her brave little brother.

Jackson could not bear that look in her eyes. It did not convey doubt at his ability, but a fear she may not see him alive again.

Jute had reached his limit and blown himself out. Kemper pushed himself up, with Jute laying on him and threw the man aside. He swung the blade at him, catching only air as Jute stumbled backward. Jute put his foot down on a bottle and it rolled out from under him sending him hard on his ass.

Kemper rushed up and gritted his teeth hard as he threw his bare foot into Jute's side again and again. He felt the man's ribs give under the barrage and Jute passed clean out.

Kemper dashed about, catching his breath and looking through the medicines to find his laudanum. His familiar bottles were nowhere to be found. He hurriedly dressed himself in his old clothing. He wrapped his wrists with a good length of bandages, cutting the ends with the scalpel and tucking them under.

He paced to and fro, wrapping the knife in cotton batting and stowing it in his coat pocket. He walked up to Jute's motionless body and gave him one more good kick. He went to the doctor and thought of finishing him off, but he was certain that if he killed the man, a posse or some such would be dispatched, making his hunt that much harder.

He stepped into the doctor's office beyond and spied his laudanum sitting in a row on the doctor's desk. He ran to them, snatched one up, tore the cork out and downed nearly the whole bottle. He stashed the first bottle then filled his pockets with a fresh store of his elixir. He was truly back on track.

His wheels calmly turned.

He noted how much he loved his laudanum and the blissful insight it bestowed upon him. Equipped with plenty of juice and a shiny new knife, he strode towards the front door.

Outside, dread and panic sloshed inside Jackson as he saw the front door knob turn. Jackson dove beneath the porch, scampering on all fours until the shadows embraced him. The aromas of dank, musty earth filled his nostrils.

Overhead, footsteps clomped away down the ramp. A single shadow rippled across the blazing green grass. Jackson had no way to know if it was Jute, the doctor or the maniac, only that it was one man. He held his breath and his position until the hollow clacking footsteps ended as whoever it was stepped onto the brick sidewalk.

Jackson felt his ammunition pouch digging into his chest as he pressed himself to the dank earth. He peered out from his hiding and realized he had left his rifle leaning against the porch.

Adrenalin poured into his limbs as he scrambled toward the weapon. He reached out and snagged the stock. He pulled the rifle under the house just as he saw the shadow move to the side of the ramp and onto the lawn.

Jackson saw the baggy trousers down and ridiculously large shoes. It was neither Jute or the doctor, he was certain. He forced himself to not think about the other men's fates. Jackson reached the rifle out before him as he lay on his stomach. As quietly as he could (though he was sure it was loud as hell) he cocked back the hammer of his fine long rifle. The wooden stock against his cheek and the cool iron in his hand reassured him, until he remembered he had not loaded his weapon.

His father had always warned him against running around with a primed rifle. "Boy, you ain't at war, so you ain't gonna need to shoot nothing that cannot wait for you to load. Otherwise, the only thing you gonna be pullin' a bullet out of is yourself."

Edgar's words echoed in his mind, mocking him as he hunkered on the cool loam.

The man turned in place on the lawn, looking perhaps for Jackson and his sister, who had escaped him only moments before.

Jackson stayed put. When he was about to pass out from holding his breath so long, the maniac strode off making for the park across the street.

Mister Elkins, the haberdasher, had returned to the park and was sitting on a bench in the shade, admiring an apple he was about to eat. The madman stopped and asked a question of Dinsmore, who had to pull the apple away from his mouth to answer.

He spoke, but Jackson was too far away to make it out. Dinsmore pointed with the apple in hand toward the northeast.

Toward Jackson's home.

All sorts of terrible images of his slaughtered family crowded in on his young mind. He pushed out the horrible notions, but it was a Herculean effort. After all, this man clearly displayed that he did not care much about pain he inflicted on others.

Jackson saw the madman move off, crossing the park and then headed down Magnolia Avenue toward the bluffs. Jackson slipped out from under the house. He contemplated going inside, but the fear he harbored for his family forced him away, toward home.

Whatever happened to the doc and Jute, it was too late to help them, but he prayed he could get to his family before . . .

As he came toward Dinsmore, he was already yelling, "What did he want? What did you say to him?"

Dinsmore blinked hard to focus on the next nuisance interruption. "Why, Jackson, he was askin' after you all's farm. Ain't that a coincidence? I told him you all was just over there at Doc's, climbin' under the porch."

Jackson took ammunition from the pouch and loaded it into his rifle. "Mister Elkins, go and find the Sheriff."

"Now why would I want to go and do something as silly as all that?" he asked as he finally took a bite of the apple.

Jackson slapped the apple out of Dinsmore's hand, juice splashing the man's face.

"Hey . . ." he said as he watched his lunch go flying off into the grass. "That weren't nice . . ."

"I'm sorry, but *please* go find the Sheriff and tell him what I say!" Jackson said as he stomped off. "Tell him there is a murderer on the loose and he is headed toward our farm!"

Dinsmore did grudgingly rise to go after the Sheriff, but he grumbled plainly, "When did you go and get so mean, Jackson? I reckon it was just yesterday when you was a sweet—"

"Go! Now!" Jackson bellowed over his shoulder.

"But what are you off to do?" Dinsmore asked, his steps starting tentatively.

Bolting across the open expanse Jackson hollered, "I'm gonna follow that sumbitch!"

Dinsmore shook his head as he skulked away in search of Sheriff Dobbs. "Such language. Why, I reckon it was just yesterday . . ."

Chapter Forty Seven

Hickman, Kentucky 9:05 a.m.

Hunting a man proved easier to Jackson than hunting deer. And much scarier, too. Though a man's mind was undeniably harder to figure than a six-point buck's, this fellow with the bloody hands was easy to follow.

It gave Jackson an odd sense of power, greater than he felt when following and bringing down wild game. Men were predictable in the sense they too followed certain routes just as any deer on a trace, but the route this fellow took was the main road between the bluffs and the marshes. Deer took the more direct paths dictated by common sense and shorter distances.

Jackson's prey was already on the road, yet, by taking the more grueling, path straight up the bluff and through the wooded plateau, he knew he was able to get ahead of the man. He forded the creek at the rocky bend and tore through the undergrowth, not especially concerned of his noise, for he knew there was yet much land between him and the man on the road. He knew every rabbit burrow and gulch in this acreage, for this section was the start of the family property.

They were in Jackson's playground, but it was no longer a game. He was not chasing down possums or turkeys for his mother to cook later, he was trying to stop a man from harming his family. A sickening bile rose in his throat. A stitch of pain ran across his lower ribs. He worried if he could rise to the threat and be courageous when the time came for action.

As he neared the point where the road leveled to the plateau, Jackson slowed, mindful of alarming his prey. He looked for the soft, mossy patches to step in and

avoided the long branches that might crack or snap. Any chimneys of sunlight beaming through the canopy above were skirted outright. He kept his rifle closely parallel to his body, left hand gripping mid barrel and right hand around the stock below the trigger. The end of the barrel was above his head yet he eyed it constantly so as to not let it strike the errant branch above. All this was done whilst he simultaneously watched the road to his right.

Jackson found the first pit which signified the real property line of the southern edge of their land. His father had spent many years setting up these perimeter traps and he had bade Jackson and Doodle learn them all by heart. The boys were told they were strictly for wild game, but they had secretly come to the conclusion some of them were large enough to snare, trap or, even in some cases, kill any man who was unfortunate enough to venture too close to the Forrest property.

His father often expressed his distrust in government—local and national—and was often heard espousing his readiness for when "things fell apart." These fortifications were his first defense, but they also brought in a good amount of meat, so any more questionable reasons for the traps were easily explained away.

Jackson found the huge fallen oak near the roadside and ducked behind the moist skeleton. He rested the barrel of his rifle between the bright green algae and the pale plates of bracket fungus that had overtaken the dead husk long ago. Here he trained his aim to the road and awaited the madman. He was not worried for even one moment that he had let the man get ahead of him. Jackson wondered how he may possibly slow down his pounding heart, for it was near to jumping from his chest, through his throat and out into the roadway.

He watched the road intently and did not take his eyes from it. Jackson was close to the swamps across the path and he felt the morning mosquitos as they surveyed the

boy's body for fertile acreage. Jackson merely pulled his sleeves down as far as they reached and closed the collar tightly around his neck.

He heard the familiar faint barking and huffing of a nearby deer. Soon the crackling of branches and slow hiss of leaves against deer hide grew fainter as the unseen animal moved away.

The hollow scraping of boots and the pebbles scattering in the roadway arrived at Jackson's ears first. He did not have a clear line of sight, but saw the odd bowler of the madman slowly bobbing between the branches. Jackson checked his weapon and readied himself.

He realized he had not decided if he was aiming to maim the man or something else. He tracked the fellow with the sights as he quickly tried to come to a decision.

As far as Jackson knew, this man had killed the doctor and Jute and was planning on doing some harm to Hercules or Silas—or both.

Then again, what if this fellow was a friend of the men and was for some reason being held by the doctor against his will? What if he was trying to reunite with them in their travels but panicked from being tied up? Also, hadn't Hercules himself told Jackson some men may be looking for the girl, Emma? What if this was a lawman who—it was too much to think over, so Jackson stopped thinking about it. He decided to merely wound the man to slow him down long enough for Myra and himself to get home and warn everyone.

The fellow was approaching the bend where the road swung east and went for another quarter mile before it turned up north to the property. Jackson had a decent shot at the man's legs but the man's trousers were extremely baggy. Jackson wondered if he could strike one of the bony legs hiding somewhere beneath. He was confident of his marksmanship. He once brought down a buck with a shot that went clean in one

eye and out the other—and from a far greater distance, to boot. He raised the sights, aiming for an upper appendage, when a robin landed on a branch a few rods from him and directly in his line of fire. He snatched a clump of leaves and dirt and threw wildly at the bird, who took the hint and winged away.

When he retrained the sight, the man was gone. Jackson silently berated himself for not taking the first shot. He reasoned the man must have kept straight north and entered the woods. If he found the right path, he would avoid many of the snares and be on route, right toward Jackson's home. The boy leapt to his feet, vaulted himself over the fallen log and tried to close in on the lost prey.

Kemper knew walking right up the main road telegraphed his approach, but by that time, the meddling spies had likely gotten word out, and God knew who was after him. He had taken enough of a risk lighting out for the home on the main road this far, but he had a feeling he was close enough to cut through the woods ahead.

He realized he had no idea exactly where he was or even if he was on the right track. The buffoon in the park may have been suspicious of him and lied, or he could have been the town simpleton who sat sucking on apples and talking nonsense to anyone who wandered by.

Kemper was driven but knew he would be losing strength soon. His last meal was some time ago. He walked straight off the road and into the woods.

Stepping from the sun-baked roadway to the darkness beneath the leafy canopy, Kemper allowed a moment for his vision to adjust. Spots floated about his periphery, but he saw well enough to navigate. He moved ahead. Fifty rods in, he came into a rare clearing and began to move through it. He noticed a low pile of many long, thin twigs laying parallel to each other in the center. He had not noticed it due to the dead leaves strewn over. He was mid-stride and was shifting his full weight onto the downward

step when a shocking thought burst upon him. He hopped aside, landing on his feet beside the cluster of scrub.

He groaned as he bent down and inspected the scene. He lightly pushed down on the pile, causing the whole heap to fall inward. The sticks clacked and the leaves rustled as they struck the bottom. He leaned over the edge of a deep pit lined at the bottom with thick, sharpened wooden spikes. He reckoned he was headed in the right direction, for the trap was not intended solely for some wild beast—nor was it likely the only one. To pass through the suspected gauntlet ahead, his progress must be more closely calculated.

As a precaution, Kemper removed his coat, careful to not raise a ruckus of clinking glass from the bottles in his pockets. He he took out the scalpel and carefully slipped it in his trowsers and rolled up his jacket, carrying it before him. He skirted the deathtrap and forged ahead.

Desperation hastened Jackson's pace and slackened the care the young boy took as he pushed ahead to find the madman. Many an errant and unaccounted for twig swung back after his passing, striking loudly against tree or crashing against shrubbery. He winced in self-reproach at each misstep and forced himself to slow his pace.

When Jackson stopped, he listened for and heard some slow movement up ahead. He stepped out onto a trace and moved silently in the empty animal path. He kept low, moved swiftly, scanning for any movement between the trees. In a curve ahead, he saw what looked to be the man's jacket strewn on the open ground ahead. Jackson raised his rifle and crept forward. He came upon the clothing and looked about as he slowly lowered his rifle and knelt on one knee to pick it up.

Behind him to his right, a dense pile of leaves and weeds burst forward.

He saw the mass of foliage cascading off of a figure beneath.

It was too late for Jackson to react as the wild-eyed man rushed him from behind.

Kemper slammed his shoulder into the boy's back, causing him to fall face-first into the center of the path. The impact stole the breath from Jackson's lungs. He lost his grip on his rifle and it flew into the brush.

Kemper stood over the boy, then sat right in the middle of the boy's back, facing his legs. Jackson kicked impotently. Kemper leaned forward and pinned Jackson's right leg to the earth. He held Doctor Holloway's scalpel in his right hand. He tore off the cotton patches with his teeth, revealing the sharp edge beneath.

Jackson squirmed under Kemper's weight.

Kemper lowered the blade, slashing it through the boy's trouser—and across Jackson's Achilles tendon.

North of the impending massacre, separated by a quarter mile of underbrush, clover and thickets of pine, elm and oak, Edgar Forrest grunted under the weight of the ten point buck he carried across his shoulders. The buck was bled but the dressing was to wait until they reached the farm. Edgar made quite a racket, for his steps were shortened by the load bearing down on him. Hercules had offered to tote the game back to the house since Edgar had done the fine work of bringing the game down, but for whatever reasons he kept to himself, Edgar insisted.

"You sure you would not like me to—" Herc asked once more. He carried both rifles so Edgar was only burdened with the deer.

Edgar smiled, shifted the load a bit. "Now, if you keep pestering me, I may begin to wonder if you think I am not in such good a shape. I will manage just fine. That turkey nest should just be up here a ways near the crick."

"Ain't it a bit early for the hens to be layin'?"

”No sir,” Edgar said, slipping in a patch of mud. He kept his balance and went on. ”Now is nigh perfect timing. I want to get them eggs before they get bony. I sure do prefer the taste of a good turkey egg over any old chicken.”

They skirted a tangle of thorny ivy hammocked between two pines when the hounds both stopped dead and barked frantically. They immediately tensed their muscles and were about to bound ahead when Edgar made a clicking sound with his tongue. This silenced the dogs and they obediently rounded out in a wide circle and fell behind the men.

The men stood together picking through the distance to see what had spooked the hounds when they heard a horrifying shriek.

”It’s Jackson! It’s my boy!”

Edgar threw his burden aside and was already at a full five rods away when the deer flopped onto the forest floor. Hercules was right beside him, stretching out his arm to hand off Edgar his rifle. Edgar took it and tapped Herc on the shoulder pointing for him to follow to the left.

”There’s a line of snares up ahead, come this way.”

Herc fell in behind him. They ducked and bobbed through the thick growth yet were still ripped and scratched at their pace. The hounds kept close at heel.

Chapter Forty Eight

Jackson heard the scream and had no idea it had come from himself, for his attention was fully absorbed by the searing pain in his leg. It felt as if a hot poker was shoved into the back of his leg and slowly and mercilessly pushed up into his calf. This was immediately followed by what felt like dozens of tiny snakes with jagged teeth crawling up his leg and chomping away as they squirmed.

Jackson had underestimated many things about Kemper. He could not have assumed this sickly looking fellow had the might to subdue him so completely, but his mind flashed back to the fight at the doctor's office and how fiercely he had battled. What terrified him was his strength. Kemper spun around on top of Jackson and delivered a savage blow to the back of the head, smashing Jackson's face into the ground, blinding him temporarily

"You ain't gonna be hunting nobody ever again, little man," Kemper growled as he effortlessly flipped Jackson onto his back. The boy tried to bring his hands up to his nose, which bled profusely, but Kemper slapped each one away and lifted the young man straight up by his collar.

"You followed a little too closely, boy!" Kemper said as he hefted him off his feet and slammed him against a tree beside the trail. "You one of them that interrupted me at the doctor's?"

Jackson sneezed and coughed blood into Kemper's face. The madman held Jackson up against the tree with his left forearm and wiped his face with his right, scalpel in hand.

"Where are they?" Kemper asked calmly as he pressed the knife against Jackson's neck. "You know what happens when I flick this blade through this vein

right here? I seen a man do it to himself back in Andersonville. His blood shot nearly twenty feet, I tell you. He dropped like a sack of wet cats and was dead before he hit the ground.”

There was a sickening gleam in Kemper’s eyes as he squinted and smiled. Jackson smelled rotten gums in the man’s breath. Kemper snorted as he laughed again, causing Jackson to flinch. The blade was already cutting into his flesh.

”Talk, boy! I have spent all my patience on you already. Where is your house? Where are they hiding?”

Jackson realized he was done. He knew no matter what he said, how hard he cried or pleaded, the outcome would be the same. ”You’re gonna kill me anyway, so how ’bout you kiss my ass?”

This surprised Kemper and his eyes widened. He drew his face away from the boy and gave him a toothy, incredulous up and down assessment. ”That is an impressive outlook considering your current predicament. I have to applaud your bravado, but your courage is wasted. Yes, I am going to kill you and then I am going to kill those two coward rat shit bastards.”

Hercules saw Edgar stop dead, drop to one knee and raise his long rifle in one fluid motion. He himself came beside a tree and shouldered into it with a thud as he raised his rifle and tried to sight down whatever Edgar had seen. There, over a hundred rods away was a man in a bowler with his back to them. Hercules was about to ask what he should do when Edgar fired. The clap of thunder in a barrel rang out and clouds of smoke whipped about the breech and end of the rifle.

There was a thick, wet smack as the bullet ripped across Kemper's deltoid. He lurched forward and groaned. The bullet burst through Kemper's shoulder ripping a small hole in his shirt and spraying blood across Jackson's face and nearby leaves.

The report from the weapon bounced from the trees far away then echoed back toward them, sounding like a string of firecrackers lit a mile away.

Kemper knew it was futile to try locating the shooter. Even if he could, he had no weapon to return fire. He released the boy, who slumped heavily against the tree trunk. He dropped and rolled to his jacket, snatched it up and headed south. He knew it was leading him away from his prey, but whomever was firing at him was in that direction and closing in.

He clenched the handle of the scalpel in his teeth and pulled the useless, injured arm up through the sleeve as he raced along. The wounds to his wrists and ankles and the more serious injury to his shoulder bothered him far less than he expected. It's not to say he felt no discomfort, but knowing he had plenty of anesthetic in his pockets made the injuries far less distressing to him.

Herc closed his left eye and found his target moving rapidly to the right. He drew a deep breath and led his aim out of ahead the man. He fired. The bullet struck a tree beside the man, sending splinters in the air. It ricocheted into the man's bowler, ripping it off his head and high into the air. Flashes of the man were to be seen dashing through the trees, but immediately both hunters were at a run and reloading.

They did not pursue him, but headed straight for where they first heard Jackson's cry. Edgar made another clicking sound to his hounds and the dogs peeled

away and dove into the brush after the man. Their urgent bawling became a distant, unearthly moan as Herc and Edgar drew upon the poor young man.

Jackson sat slumped against the tree, legs curled beneath him allowing his hand to press upon his leg. Only a small amount of blood seeped through his fingers. In a heartrending pose, with blood smeared below his nose and along his chin, Jackson tilted his head up, squinting with one eye open and crooked little smile. "Hey now, Poppa, Herc. Y'all boys showed up just in time," his voice grew shaky and weak, "I reckon if you'd a been a frog's hair longer, I would . . . be . . ."

He fell unconscious and slumped away from the tree. Edgar lunged to his boy and surveyed his grim condition.

Inside the barn, back at the farm, Silas had Emma's horse's leg bent back across his thigh. He was picking around the shoe with a hook as Doodle was pitching off hunks of hay into the stalls. They both stopped what they were doing when they heard the reports from the rifles.

Doodle tossed the fork aside and said to Silas, "Poppa don't like to hunt that close to home, the gunplay spooks the animals—and Momma. I wonder what happened."

Silas lowered the horse's leg and stood, looking out into the thick woods to the southeast. "Perhaps they . . . hell, I don't live here, I don't know."

Myra was yelling as she came running up the road from town. As she drew closer, near-breathless, her words echoed loud and clear enough. "Some fellow's cut up the doc! He was askin' after you boys! Jackson says he's comin' this way!"

Lenora came running from the house as Silas and Doodle trotted from the barn. They encircled the exhausted Myra as she panted, leaning over with hands upon her

thighs. "Jackson . . . stayed behind . . . but he said . . . to come tell you all . . . the fellow that slashed up the doc, he fought Jute, he's comin' here."

Doodle was left standing with Myra as Silas bolted back to the barn and Lenora to the house.

Silas slid a bridle on his mount and wrapped his gun belt around his waist. As he buckled in, the two children came to him.

"Let me get our horse," Doodle said.

"No. You stay here with your mother and the girls," Silas replied as he climbed upon his bare-backed mount. "We ain't got time for debate. Get your guns and hunker down and wait to hear from us."

He exploded from the barn and raced right toward the path beside the house. As he sped along, he passed Lenora who was running from the back door, shotgun cradled and open, shells being loaded.

He caught Lenora's eye as he flew past and gave her a grim nod. She nodded back. He glanced back to spy Emma joining the group outside.

She was dressed in a pale blue, borrowed nightgown tucked haphazardly into her trousers, Stetson on her head and pistol in her hand. Despite the dire events unfolding around them, he felt a surge of pride at the vision of her and no uncertain amount of endearment. Silas knew she would help steel the general family resolve, yet at the same time he hoped to stem the tide of any danger before it rose near her.

One last glance back before throwing himself into the woods.

Chapter Forty Nine

The Forrest Property, 9:39 a.m.

Kemper propelled himself forward stopping only briefly to note the location of the hounds. They were coming directly for him and closing in quickly.

One was close, the other swinging up from behind to the north. He judged this as a boon, for he may be able to fend off one at a time, but definitely not two in tandem.

He heard a train sounding its approach to Hickman. He crossed the tracks but knew the engine would not reach his location in time to block the hound's pursuit. He ran toward the river. The thick growth ended just ahead. He knew he was above the river at the northern bluffs. He reached the limit of the woods to find the land dropping off to the Mississippi below.

He chose this place to make his stand. Kemper was unable to fully manipulate his hand and arm, but he could, with the help of his uninjured one, raise it to a defensive height. He wrapped the coat around his forearm and held it as a shield before him.

The first hound came, jaws dripping spit and eyes wild with the hunt. Kemper planted his legs and crouched down facing the onrushing beast.

He felt the subtle brush of the open river breeze against his back.

The hound sprung from the ground as it reached striking distance. Kemper had to admire the fierceness and abandon of the hunter. The animal had invested his whole being into that one attack.

Unfortunately, the play was ill-fated. Kemper let the dog bite into the coat as it flew toward him. In a fluid motion, Kemper dipped to his right and used the animal's momentum to swing him up and out over the river.

The hound released Kemper's arm as he instantly realized his predicament, paws flailed at nothingness and his fearsome baying turned to pitiful yelps as he plummeted down to crash against the cliff walls. Kemper did not have time to note the fate of the first attacker as the second one emerged with similar ferocity.

Kemper made no dramatic acrobatics with this hound. He merely let the pup clamp down on his sheathed forearm as he swung the scalpel up and under the dog's neck. Slashing repeatedly, Kemper forced the dog to retreat. It did not bay, it did not bark. It managed a solemn retreat of only a few rods into the underbrush where it swayed in its tracks and fell dead on its side.

Kemper exhaled heavily. He slumped, grimly noting his exhaustion and the searing pain from his shoulder wound. He unraveled the coat and pulled it on. He fished in a pocket and drank a whole bottle.

As the effects of the injury were slowly lifted, he reminded himself the riflemen would soon be upon him. He turned to face the river and looking down the cliff, he doubted it as a viable point of egress. He held onto a sapling with his right hand and leaned out so as to have a better look below.

Though many trees had miraculously found purchase in the soft sandy cliffs, he doubted any had sufficient rooting to hold his weight.

He noticed the first hound had not, in fact, died. It limped pitifully, far south along the sandy shore.

Kemper was about to lean himself back when the sapling uprooted and lifted in his grip. He tried to shift his weight to compensate, but the thin layers of moist stone gave way beneath his feet. A neat, semi-circular crack formed in the slab of rock. The tiny shelf tilted toward the river and slid downward. Kemper silently rode the rock plate over the edge.

Silas hunkered close to his horse's neck so as to not get knocked off by the flurry of tree limbs. Within minutes, he had located the group. It took him no time to assess what had happened.

"Put the boy on my horse and get him back home," Silas said to Edgar. "Hercules and I will head out for whoever done this."

"Silas, you think they may be in numbers?" Herc inquired as he helped Edgar tie off the boy's wound and get him on the horse.

"No, Herc, I reckon this is one fellow—one crazy fellow. The girl, Myra, said she and Jackson here saw this man attack the doc and another fellow and he was asking after us."

Herc whitened at the news. "I was afraid we would bring danger to these folk's door if we stayed. Damn."

Edgar had balanced the young man face down across the horse's back and was about to lead him away when he turned to the guilt-ridden man. "Listen, Hercules, when I asked you here, I knew you all was being looked for. This here fellow ain't no lawman. This is something worse, if there is such a thing. You are not blamed. I have to go, but once my boy is safe at home, I will return to aid you finding this scoundrel."

"Stay with your family, Edgar," Silas said. "We done been hunted and we done some hunting, too, so you stay and make sure they's all safe. I reckon we can track down one man."

Herc bent and cupped his hands beside the horse. Edgar took the offer and swung up in front of his son. As he trotted away, he said, "He's headed toward the river. Stay to the paths as much as possible, but be vigilant of my traps."

The men both nodded and set off after the fugitive.

Silas drew his revolver and they raced a few rods down the path when Herc spotted the tree he had struck while trying to bring the man down. "Look there, Silas. It's the man's hat. Shot it off his head when I was rightly intendin' to shoot his head off his neck."

Silas picked it up and held it before his friend. "Look familiar?"

"Why, yes, a might, but I can't say exactly who—"

"That rotten son of a bitch, Pie! This is his bowler, dang it."

Silas threw it on the ground and stomped on it. They quickly moved on.

"I did not get a clear look at the man, Silas, but I am damn sure that weren't Pie I shot at. Pie is all round in the middle and has that real shiny pate. When I blew this fellow's hat off, it weren't shiny."

"So whoever this is, he at least knows Pie. Hell, Pie wouldn't give up his ratty hat to nobody . . . not willingly, that is."

They both looked at each other when Silas spoke that conclusion.

Chapter Fifty

The Forrest Farm, 10:01 a.m.

When they returned to the farm, they were not completely empty-handed. Silas held the dead hound draped across his arms and Herc easily toted the dead deer over his shoulder while toting Jackson's long rifle.

Myra and Doodle came out of the house and made a respectful fuss over their pup, taking the carcass from Silas and walking off to the barn. Herc tossed the deer with a thud nearby.

Emma, changed into her own shirt and coat, emerged from the kitchen, weapon in hand. Edgar followed close behind.

"Are you alright?" Emma asked them both. Her main attention was to Hercules, whom she gave a hug, but Silas at least got a polite nod.

Silas knew this was not the time for fence-mending, but by her cold reception of him, he knew he had miles of fence to repair.

"Edgar, I am sorry, but he got away," Herc confessed, shaking his head. He removed his hat and stepped close to Edgar. "The boy?"

"He is fine, 'cept he's probably gonna have a bad limp for a while." He tugged absently at his beard end stared at the ground. He came back to them. "Who on earth was that fellow? Why would he do that to a little boy—not to mention the doc . . .?"

The men looked at each other and then at Emma. Silas addressed them, "We don't rightly know, but we do know he is after us. We tracked him across the railroad and over to the edge of the bluff. That's where we found your hound. The only sign we spotted pointed to him either jumping over or falling off the edge. There weren't

no body, so we figure he's back to the start and either is headed south or north to swing back around."

Herc finished, "That is why we have to go. Now. Emma, if you are not safe for travel—"

"Oh no you don't!" she interrupted. She turned to Edgar. "I truly appreciate your help and this is in no way a comment on your generosity or hospitality," she said before turning back to Herc, "but you two are not leaving me behind. I am fit for travel and we have to stay together."

"I hear what you're sayin', Emma," Herc reasoned calmly with her, "but this here fellow, whomever he be, has made it clear he is looking for us. He mentions me and Silas by name and not you, so perhaps it is best if you—"

She pointed her index finger at him and poked it hard into his chest with each syllable as she said, "It is best if you shove your foot in your mouth and we get moving."

Herc tenderly rubbed the battered spot on his chest and meekly replied, "Yes, Ma'am."

He stepped away from the ball of fire and mumbled to Silas, "Somebody's feeling better."

"Look here, now," Edgar broke in, "I say we all stick together here. You all are exposing yourselves to greater danger if you have this fellow chasing you. Stand your ground here with us. It will be a safer bet."

"We will not risk your family's safety, Edgar," Silas said. "This is not your fight."

Edgar was preparing to protest hotly when Lenora came from the kitchen struggling with what looked to be a couple extra skins of water and other supplies. She

divvied the spoils up between the three travelers. As she handed Silas a sack of flour, she said, "You all is going to write and send me that cookie recipe, right?"

"Yes, ma'am," he replied. "Listen here, Lenora, I am deeply sorry for your boy—"

She quickly put her finger to his lips. "Don't you go spouting all regretful. At first I judged you harshly and I was wrong. You are a good man and I know you would never knowingly do anything to bring harm to another person." She glanced at Emma briefly to let her words be spread to her as well. "My boy is safe for now and we shall survive this rough time. You all take care," she said, nodding to the other two of his party. She turned and walked back into the kitchen and closed the door.

The sky darkened as clouds moved across the sun, immediately cooling the air several degrees.

The boys still had something to say and neither knew how to broach the subject. Finally, Herc nudged Silas in the back and Silas said, "Herc and I discussed it, and we think it may not be such a bad idea if you all clear out too."

Edgar scoffed, "Son, I ain't never run from a fight in my life and I ain't intending to start at this late date! You must have rocks in your head if you all think—"

Doodle came up behind his father. "Momma says she's going to take Jackson off to Clinton so the doc there can take a look at his leg while you and the rest of us are headin' into town to stay at the boarding house."

Edgar shook his head hard. "I got tobacco to get to ground. I cannot be hiding in town babysitting."

"She said you would say that. She told me to tell you that you can come back in a day or two and get the plants in then." Doodle backed away, expecting further

eruptions. “She said either you wait to put the tobacco in the ground or she will put you in the ground first.”

Edgar flustered at the news, and huffed about for a moment or two, but finally blew his steam off. “Dang her and her bossiness.”

Silas took out a roll of money and tried to hand it to Edgar. “Here, take this. Herc and I done talked it over and we figure it’s the least we could do. You all deserve much more for your help, but . . . It ain’t much.”

This new affront purpled the bearded fellow’s face in anger. “Now you all go too far! You insult me with charity. I done what I done for you out of common Christian fellowship and not for any reward!”

Herc stepped between Edgar and Silas, hoping to calm the older man. “Now, look here, Edgar! This is our hard-earned money and if we offer it as our thanks for your kindness and troubles and you turn us down, well, I might take that as an offense myself.”

He tried to sham being cross with the man in the long white beard, but there was still a small hint of a smile in the corner of his mouth. “You refuse a gift and we might have to start to wrestle around like two drunken brawlers. I don’t know about you, but I’m too old to be rolling on the ground. Why, we may never get up. You know I could whip you, anyway, so hows about you just take the money and we forgo the insulting and wrestling?”

He winked at Edgar and though Edgar fought back a grin, he did not take the money from Silas. Myra, who had arrived in time to hear the exchange, rolled her eyes in the superior manner only an eighteen-year-old girl could and snatched the money from Silas, thanked him and walked away.

Emma watched as the children left the circle to attend to their mother. Silas and Herc moved off to the barn. Edgar stood with Emma for an uncomfortable moment, shifting his weight from foot to foot. He was overwhelmed at the flurry of activity visiting his quiet farm.

He smiled absently at Emma and was about to leave her when she lightly touched his arm. "Mister Forrest, I know we have not had much of a chance to speak, but I feel I need to thank you personally for taking us in. I fear I may not have fared too well if you had not. Thank you."

"Um, you are welcome, Miss. I reckon you are a might stronger than you give yourself credit for, but I considered it a pleasure to offer you rest. To be honest, it was an honor to meet you and your friends there. They are fine men and you could not have found two better fellows to help you in your journey."

She smiled and shook his hand.

He held it for a moment longer so she could not escape his next words. "I do not presume to know what this rift is that has opened up between you and Silas, and I frankly do not want to know more than what my talkative wife has already told me. I will say, though, this is a big world. It is an unfriendly world too, for the most part. Traveling through that world while carrying a silly grudge just makes the journey all the more dangerous. Drop the weight. Put a bridge up over that rift between you and Silas. He cares for you, but he is a man and men make mistakes."

She was stunned at this odd old fellow and his honesty. She had not shared more than ten words with him and when he finally did speak, he spoke so frankly, at first it bristled her, but she knew he was right. It was an unfriendly world and she could not afford to shun those friends she did have.

Edgar released her hand. "Y'all don't have to say anything."

She sighed and kept silent for she had no idea what to say to the man.

”Just think on my words, Miss Emma. You left your home behind for whatever reasons and they are your family now.”

With a tip of the hat, Edgar bowed his head as he went to the house to prepare for the approaching storm.

Inside the barn, the boys had pretty much packed it in and were beginning the saddling of Emma’s horse. She took her saddle from Hercules, bending under the weight, and threw it upon Shot’s back herself. Mere moments later, the trio led the horses out under ever darkening skies. They mounted and Silas gave a long hoot in the general direction of the tobacco barn. Ezra Bean poked his flat face through an open shutter high above and leaned out of the window. He let himself fall forward. He dropped lazily a rod or two and unfurled his long wings. Gliding downward, he flapped his wings hard three times and swung up, launching himself over his fellow travelers and off into the woods.

Emma looked to Herc, ”How does he know which direction we will take when we do not even know yet?”

”I don’t know, Emma,” Herc snorted. ”Maybe we’ll just follow him for a change.”

They set off in single file past the house. The pilgrimage rounded the corner nearest the kitchen when the door opened and Doodle came out. He was carrying his rifle and scanning the property for the mystery assailant. He halted the group, set his rifle against a tree and hefted the carcass of the deer.

He struggled admirably under the weight and approached Herc. ”Poppa said you all should take this.”

Herc wrangled for a grip on the antlers as Doodle slid the game across the back of his horse, just behind the saddle. "He says a buck like this would just be wasted on the two of us. He and I are going to stay here. We are going to see Momma, and the girls off to Clinton and then we are to return here and tend to matters. Way he figures, even if the doc is still alive, he ain't in no condition to care for Jackson or Francis. He don't want to leave the women or the farm, but the farm cannot tend to itself right now and Momma can."

"Tell him his generosity is boundless and appreciated," Herc said solemnly.

"I will. Poppa says to stick to the railroad tracks yonder and follow them to town. When you get to the Dorena Ferry crossing there on the river, tell the ferry captain Edgar sent you and he should take you across to Missouri at no charge. He owes Poppa a boulder-sized favor. Poppa and Momma have discussed it some and once Jackson is tended to, the women will be headin' on up to St. Louis for Francis' treatment. You should have seen Momma's eyes all wettin' up when Myra gave her that money. She cursed you a little, Mister Silas, but she don't get too emotional often and I knowed it touched her. I have no idea how much that was, but she says it can get them there just fine."

"Can you remember a name to repeat to her, son?" Herc asked.

The boy squinted, though there was no longer a bright sun overhead and only gathering thick clouds. "I reckon."

"Tell her to find her way to Romeo Beck at Smitty's on the levee. From there, tell Romeo to lead her to Estelle Rowland at the Hotel Crawford. She is a good friend of ours and your women folk would not be in better hands."

"Yessir," he nodded, burning the information in his mind. "I will tell her."

Herc turned to his friends. "Lenora will be better than any telegram. She can fill Estelle in as to our progress." He returned to the oldest son. "You are a good man, Doodle, and it has been a pleasure meeting you. Please tell Jackson I am sorry he got into this mess and I apologize for not sayin' goodbye in person."

Herc's eyelids fluttered. He turned away quickly and wiped his finger across his eyes. "He don't deserve to be cut up by that fellow and if I get my hands on him, you tell Little Jackson I will set the fellow right. You tell him I will come back this way some day and tell him all about it."

"Yessir," Doodle nodded.

As the line moved again, Doodle called out once more, "I forgot! I forgot to tell you. Jackson came to a few moments ago. Though he made little sense, he did say something Poppa thought you all should know, said it was real important."

Silas, Herc and Emma exchanged brief, puzzled glances.

"Poppa said to tell you Jackson said this fellow was in some place called 'Andersonville,' if that makes any sense to you."

Silas and Herc shared a long glance.

They thanked him and rode down the path.

"What was that news of Andersonville to mean?" Emma asked.

"That place is piled high with ghosts and they always find a way to come back and haunt," Herc replied, though Emma could see he was trying to discern the meaning of the message himself.

"Well, I doubt it was a ghost cut that boy's leg," Emma said.

"Indeed," was Herc's only reply.

Chapter Fifty One

Outside of Denison, Texas, 11:40 a.m.

Alexis swayed in her seat to the hypnotic rhythm of the railway. The gaps in the iron below made deep thinking a struggle and sleep was outright impossible. She pondered sending the rail line's offices a strongly worded letter about the bumpy nature of the tracks in that section of the ride, but her mind drifted on to the end of her tracks. Houston.

At least she had a destination. When she set out after the poor child, Emma, and her two mystery men, she did not have much to go on. Fortune smiled on her, for Estelle finally came to her senses and went to Alexis' father for help. She also was lucky to meet the charming man, Donnie O'Banyon, whose bright smile and warm green eyes lingered in her thoughts.

She had always been a solo operator, but there was a tug of regret at not taking him up on his offer to join her on this case. She never longed for another's company, though she often missed her family, but this man stuck in her mind and it was a brand new sensation.

Theo Colson was off on the wrong tracks, but at least Alexis knew Emma was safe from him for the time being. But there was a greater danger in the madman Kemper Bidwell. She had received word from her father a man was murdered at the foundry where Emma and the others had hidden. Despite Romeo Beck being accused, there was no doubt in anyone's mind Kemper Bidwell had done it. At least the poor Beck fellow and his daughter were safe under Alexis' father's protection.

Kemper surely had moved on though, for his rage looked to match Theodore Colson's—if not eclipse it. Alexis had to help Emma, but her new mission included warning the men, Hercules and Silas, that a murderer was hot on their trail. She feared Emma may be in more danger than ever just by being with the men who swore to protect her.

Chapter Fifty Two

12:10 p.m.

Emma turned to take in the view of the farm. Though the Kentucky sunlight had vanished, adding a somber pall to their departure, these people and this farm would always shine warmly in her memory. She would recollect the images of her brief stay here with the deep black furrows ready for planting and the safe, cozy room with the softly swaying curtains.

"If I were ever to have a home and family, I truly wish it to be just as this one," Emma said with a sigh.

Herc looked back. "Right you are, except you can leave off the knife-wielding maniac running amok in the forest part."

"Indeed," she said as they filed into the woods. A small cluster of ivy-covered dogwoods enveloped them as they entered. Emma felt another small but potent chapter closing in her life.

Emma had lived like the Forrests once, before her father died, and when she lost that, she never had the hope to dream such an enchanted life could be hers again. True, it was hard work, but it was not as hard a life as being under Theo's thumb.

Leaving behind the smell of freshly tilled soil, spying squirrels running through the trees and gazing at the laundry waving lazily on the line, she knew she wanted that life and realized she herself had to build it. She no longer would rely on others, on grown-ups, as it were, for she must be the one it fell on to come to fruition. She would make this life with the right person.

She looked behind her to Silas, bringing up the trail. He kept an eye on each shadow, ears open for every snap of branch. She felt safe with these two dirty, trail-worn men. She never imagined herself trusting any other man after her father died and Theo unleashed his sickening desires.

At the start of her journey, she was sure all men had such darkness inside—that every set of male eyes that looked upon her was imagining the same atrocities her uncle had actually performed. Yet, here, with these two fine men, leaving another like them behind in Edgar Forrest, she was learning not all men were black-hearted devils.

Though she was still feeling hotly toward Silas, there was an undeniable draw to him in the short while they had traveled together. Not the same draw as she did toward Hercules, though they were both protectors and mentors of road life.

Silas spoke to a deeper, unknown part of her.

She remembered Silas' softness toward her once they began the journey, the care and joy he took in cooking for her. The pride in such a silly thing as picking her out a hat. She thought back to the precipice he teetered upon when he awaited her approval. "It's a Stetson," he had proclaimed, hoping the austerity and renown of the brand might win her over.

Then there was the fact he had saved her life. She tried not to fall under some savior's spell, but the raw emotion he had displayed at nearly losing her to drowning spoke loudly about his quiet, hidden depth. At first, she tried to allot his reaction to the memory of losing his sister so many years ago in the same fashion, but some selfish hope inside her made her want to believe he really cared about her so much—that anybody cared for her so much.

He was cool and distant when he learned of her pregnancy. Her shining knight had dimmed to just a man and men are sometimes petty and shallow in nature.

Yet a hope kindled in the leaving of the Forrest's home. She wanted such a life and she saw how to build it. She had seen a spark in Silas, a kindness and passion that, though whipped about in the recent winds, may yet be fanned into a fine conflagration.

There was a lot of earth between Hickman, Kentucky, and Houston, and Emma decided right there and then she would stoke the fire and see how it burned. She had plenty of time to find out what kind of man Silas really was, but in the meantime, she was still not done having her feelings hurt.

She wondered, as she rocked lazily in the saddle, why he had been so cold to her. Perhaps it truly was the nature of him to judge her so superficially. Perhaps he had not known the nature of her pregnancy and who the father was. Or perhaps he thought she was without virtue and therefore no longer worth his attention.

She spied another look. His cool, blue eyes were kind despite the danger they held in their depths. He had kept his mustache trimmed and had shaved his chin and jawline since their barbering—a concession to his previous wild, unkempt style of tangled beard. His tawny mustache blended with his tanned face like the golden mane of a lion. Intent on his sentry, his lips rested in a soft pout.

Emma watched his broad shoulders rise and dip alternately, followed his strong arms down to his hands. The back of his hand rested lightly on the pommel, the reins loosely cupped in his palm. The ball of his other hand lay on the handle of his pistol, long fingers curled but not tensed.

She had already witnessed him use the weapon in her defense, and though she loathed violence, she respected his judicious use of it. He only drew his weapon when necessary and only fired when prudent. In this, she knew he was not a violent man—he only wielded it as a tool, for he was not a killer but a man who would kill to protect his people.

She could not imagine Silas raising his hand to anyone out of anger or firing his weapon at anyone out of rage.

Then again, she would have thought the same thing of her uncle when she had first known him. But her Uncle Theo was a million miles from being the man Silas was.

Silas glanced up at her, but did not realize Emma was staring at him, clearly still intent on his high guard. He merely swept his dutiful gaze past her. A tinge of anger tweaked at her pride, but she likened it to wanting a campfire to warm only herself. The fire had many purposes. It warmed, yes, but it warmed everyone equally as it also cooked and held off dark beasts in the night.

Emma turned her gaze forward as a pair of rabbits burst from the shrubbery and darted out across the path to dive away seconds later. Looking up, she saw Hercules watching her with a crooked smile and knowing countenance.

Petulantly, Emma snipped, "What is with the cat and canary smile?"

"Oh, nothing," he said as he craned his neck to look back at Silas and then at her with a wink. "Just taking in the scenery, same as you are."

He had a jolly swaying to his rhythm as he forged ahead of them.

Emma flushed at having been caught ogling Silas, but hoped Herc would keep it to himself.

An oak leaf, a withered anomaly in the full, verdant spring, drifted down, spun before her face and settled on her stomach. Immediately, she felt a fool for having such impetuous ramblings of the mind. She picked the leaf off, and flung it to the side. She lay her hand gently on her belly. Though she was not far along enough in her pregnancy as to feel a large bump or some such, she did hold her hand there as she contemplated her condition.

She knew it was foolish to entertain any ideas between her and any man when she carried the inbred bastard child of her uncle. All would look upon her with scorn and pity, as she found herself outside the circle of proper society. She felt guilt at herself for wishing the child inside gone. It was an affront to God and the world, but it was still a child, guilty of nothing. Like her, this baby inside her was innocent of any sin or crime except that of being in the same world as Theo Colson. Besides blood and time, they shared his abuse.

She had heard of an operation that would remove the child. Once the details were learned and the risks evaluated, the notion was entertained no further. She could not bring herself to do it—even if it was an abomination and would cast her down further in the eyes of others. Though half the child was Theo, the other half was her.

Another reason she ran was, away from St. Louis, she could begin a life with the child where no one had any knowledge of their true origins. If it were to be seen through, she reasoned Silas would likely not want be a part of it. How could he ever forget the dark cloud that would surely hang over them?

She had not even given him the chance to get close to her and yet she was already judging his character to be just shy of accepting her and the child for what they were.

Here she had just done what Silas had, hadn't she? She judged him as he judged her.

Instead of dwelling on this, she played with fabrications of her past. She constructed stories strangers might accept. Her husband had been killed while serving with the cavalry out west, or some gruesome mining disaster in Arizona.

She saw herself starting over in Prescott, with her grandfather. In the vision, she walked down the main street of the fine western town, baby swaddled in her arms. She would nod to the townspeople who had taken her in with open hearts. Her

imagination was let loose. They would hail her and come to see the child of the poor widow. In this waking dream, she looks down and listens to the cooing of her child. She draws back the blankets to reveal a purple-skinned demon with jagged teeth and coal black eyes. She shrieks as she drops the inbred monster right there on Main Street.

The frightening daydream brought forth the ultimate fear: that, in truth, the child she bore may be a malformed abomination. She retched and felt as if she must leap from her horse and run—just run, until the earth rose up and wrapped her in its dark embrace. She did not know if she could carry on with this child. She did not know if she could carry on without it. The bile rose and she vomited off to the side of her horse. She wished the child might come up with it, but she knew it did not work that way.

”You need we should stop?” Silas asked worriedly, twisting in his saddle to search her face. ”Herc, perhaps she is not yet recovered enough for a trip.”

Herc stopped in the lead. ”I suppose she would tell us if that were the case.” ”No,” Emma said, wiping her mouth and intentionally avoiding Silas’ eyes. ”I should be fine. I am merely a little nervous about this maniac running around. Let’s get out of here.”