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Distracted by the clanking shackles, moans, and screams that periodically pierced the darkness, Dr. Joseph Bryarly paused in his packing. Asylum residents were receiving their nightly therapies, really nothing more than retaliation for the day's misbehavior. He couldn't believe he had been in this God-forsaken place more than fifteen years. Three thousand miles separated him from his home and his past in Alabama.

His sparsely equipped study was little more than an alcove leading into a sleeping chamber. On this night, a large shipping trunk temporarily served as a makeshift desk, since most of his belongings had already been packed in crates for transport back to America. A flickering flame from a brass candleholder dimly lit the room. Joseph strained his eyes and returned to the letter he'd received three weeks earlier. His hands shook. This message sealed his fate. God had stepped in to take charge of the doctor's life:

RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

January 5, 1863

Honorable Doctor Joseph L. Bryarly,

I trust this message finds you in good health and excellent spirits. Having received no response to my previous inquiries,

I feel compelled once again to request your assistance on behalf of God, your family, and the Confederate States of America. The late Reverend Theodore J. Bryarly, your father and my dearest friend, assured me just before his unfortunate death of your loyalty to the State of Alabama and to the Confederacy.

A commission within the Confederate Army awaits your timely response, with a rank of Lieutenant and all the rights and privileges thereof. Your assigned post will be as Chief Superintendent of Wingate Asylum in Richmond, Virginia, a newly renovated hospital for war criminals and the mentally insane. May God speed your return. I look forward to seeing you once again and sharing stories with an old family friend.

As ever, truly yours,
Jefferson Davis, President
Confederate States of America

Dropping the letter, the doctor removed his reading glasses and sighed. Years of distractions within the confines of Bethlem Royal Hospital had shackled his childhood memories to the darkest corners of his soul ... until now. He was overwhelmed by a rush of emotions, torn between his loyalties to the Confederacy and his hesitancy about returning home. News of his father's death had freed him to accept this commission, just as it released him from his bondage with the past. He would never have considered returning to the South if the Reverend were still alive. He silently prayed to the God of his childhood, a habit he'd never managed to break in times of distress. Each time he prayed, he felt childish—another legacy from his father. *Dear Lord, forgive my hypocrisy. Truly, one man's death has brought peace to another man's soul. As my father has already trusted his eternal spirit to your care, so now I commit my fate into your hands as well ...*

When he rose from his knees, the doctor paced his office for a moment, then left his quarters. He walked down two flights of

rickety stairs to the first-floor wing of the asylum. A frigid north wind howled through barred windows that remained open to ventilate the stench. As always, the ward was teeming with too many people. Along both sides of the narrow hallway, debtors lay on beds of malodorous straw or sat shivering, huddled like cattle, awaiting their fate. Frosty vapors billowed from every mouth and nostril. Fat rats scurried along a foul-smelling trench used to channel away the filth and water. Padlocked doors along each wall hid occupants with more serious histories.

The doctor's presence in the ward was the signal for demented madmen to scream obscenities from behind iron bars. Pressing a handkerchief over his nose, Joseph strained against a thick wooden door and descended into the bowels of what seemed to be hell itself. Hastily scrawled messages scratched into the wall expressed the heart of all Bedlamites sentenced to die in this god-forsaken place:

*Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.
In Bedlam, all hope is lost.*

At the bottom of the staircase, in one of many cramped holding cells, three men stood half naked, shackled to the walls, feet and wrists bound securely, arms stretched high overhead. The poorly lit room failed to illuminate the face of the pitiful wretch in the far corner. The prisoner's head hung limply on his chest and he made no effort to acknowledge his visitor. The doctor paused before speaking. Absorbed in the pitiful sight, Joseph realized for the thousandth time, *The physical resemblance between us is remarkable! We're the same age and height. We have the same lanky build and pepper-and-salt hair. I know that without God's grace, I would be the poor creature condemned to stand in his place.*

"Forbred Lytton," he said, speaking softly as he moved closer, "tomorrow I leave for America."

A weak, raspy voice whispered, "For duty to God and country." Then Forbred Lytton shifted his weight and moaned softly;

the open wounds oozing beneath the shackles caused him excruciating pain.

“I thought, perhaps as a special gift to mark my departure, we could once again visit together—in my quarters.”

The patient slowly raised his head, his face completely covered by his long matted hair and unkempt beard. “Your ... quarters?” His weak voice reflected hope. “Yes. Please!”

The doctor removed all the shackles except for the steel collar bolted around the man’s neck. Using a long chain as a makeshift leash, the doctor led the man through the maze of huddled bodies and back to his quarters. While Forbred Lytton settled himself on a flimsy stool, Joseph quickly bolted the door and let the chain fall loudly to the floor. For many years, these penitent acts of kindness had been the highlight of Forbred’s miserable existence. He knew all too well that after tonight, even this dismal escape from reality would be gone ... forever.

Each meeting was unique. Sometimes the doctor would read stories of the Wild West or tales of adventure in the American South. Many times, the prisoner would read to himself quietly for hours. He was fascinated with the doctor’s medical books, especially journals chronicling the advancements in the fledgling field of psychiatry. These encounters always took place in secret, after the asylum administrator, apothecary, and handlers had retired for the evening. If discovered, the consequences of Joseph’s actions would be severe and might include his discharge from the hospital. Bethlem, as he was all too well aware, was the most notorious hospital in the civilized world—and well deserved its reputation for brutality, inhumanity, and misery. But the doctor couldn’t bring himself to deny one last act of kindness to this man with the brilliant troubled mind.

Joseph rummaged through a crate of half-packed books, removing and replacing various volumes. Finally, he exclaimed, “Excellent! How about this book, Forbred? A wonderful tale of redemption and hope entitled *A Christmas Carol*, written by Mr. Charles Dickens.”

“Begging your pardon,” the patient said painfully, lowering his head, “seeing it’s our last night together and my last time to *ever* receive such kindness, would you read from your journal?”

Joseph gazed into the man’s bloodshot eyes and replied, “Why, yes! A splendid idea.” He replaced the novel in the crate, headed to his bedside table, and returned with a volume from his personal journals, an early account of his childhood adventures in southern Alabama beginning thirty-five years ago. Before he began reading, however, he turned and laid his hand on the man’s shoulder.

“Forbred,” Joseph’s voice was soothing and filled with compassion, “my greatest source of hope in this wretched place has been watching God’s sovereign majesty at work restoring your mind. You must know, my dear brother, that God has forgiven your sins. Whatever debt you felt that you owed to this miserable society was surely repaid long ago. You don’t deserve to remain imprisoned—I know that. Over and over again, I’ve written to Lord Kennington, begging him to approve my request to have you released. However, I have to be honest: I don’t believe he’ll ever allow it.” Joseph added sadly, “My single greatest regret is leaving you, my friend, behind.”

Tears filled both men’s eyes as Joseph opened the volume and began reading aloud from the journal.

“JUNE 12TH, in the year of our Lord 1834. The air seems filled with excitement. For my 17th birthday, the Reverend surprised me with a most generous gift of a new winter coat and enough gold coins to finance my return to the university in the fall. The heaviness of this past year is mercifully lifting; my return home for the summer has found the Reverend in the best of spirits. My father seems kinder now ...”

For many hours the two men escaped the realities of asylum life, transported back many years in time. In his mind, Joseph Bryarly once again walked the backcountry roads around

Andalusia in Covington County. Friends, family, and childhood adventures filled his thoughts and some brought a warm spirit of peace to his soul. *I wonder what it's like back home now that Father is gone? Surely, war has changed things. Where are my old friends? What price will the war cost all of us?*

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In early May 1863, the Army of Northern Virginia was in high spirits, particularly new recruits like Private Ezekiel “Zeke” Gibson, who grinned non-stop as he marched in column from Richmond toward Fredericksburg. Wagons, cannons, and cavalry stretched for miles on the dusty road ahead. Occasionally, the thick wilderness canopy would break, to reveal masses of troops converging in the distance. Zeke couldn’t wait to see his big brother Billy—it would be the first time in more than two years. Four years older, Billy had been Zeke’s childhood hero, and the younger Gibson knew from sporadic letters that his brother had been involved in every major battle in the eastern theatre since the war began. Ever since the day Billy had grabbed his rifle, ruffled his kid brother’s hair, and kissed their mother goodbye as he headed across the mountains to war, Zeke had counted the days until he, too, could go fight. Anticipating that the war would have ended within two years, his folks had set the age of seventeen as the time when their last remaining child could join General Robert E. Lee’s army—but they were wrong, and Zeke was off to war. His chest could barely contain the pride that swelled within him as he thought, *I’m part of the greatest group of fighting men God ever assembled, the Army of Northern Virginia!*

Zeke’s column of new recruits was dressed in every shade and style of butternut gray. The battle-scarred veterans marching alongside them who were returning to the front after medical leaves; they were dressed in anything they could scrounge. Even the most casual observer could easily identify who was new to war and who was not. As they marched, Zeke noticed one ragged veteran glancing curiously at him from time to time. *When we get our first break, I’m goin’ to find out who that fella is!*

“Are you little Zeke Gibson, Billy’s kid brother?” the soldier demanded to know before the new recruit could approach him.

“Yeah! Who’re you?”

“Whaddya mean, who am I? Nate! Nate Webster, you old coon dog!” The dusty veteran with a week’s worth of beard pounded the boy on the back while spitting a long and impressive stream of tobacco juice onto a nearby bush. “How’re things in Calhoun County? How is it that the state of Mississippi decided it could survive without you keepin’ watch over our womenfolk?”

If possible, the boy grinned even wider than before. “Sure has been a spell, ain’t it, Nate? You’ve changed plenty. I wouldn’t have recognized you if you’d been sittin’ next to me in church! I’m hopin’ to catch up with Billy. Do you know how he’s doin’?”

“Reckon he’s the luckiest man alive. Been in every scrap since Manassas and ain’t got so much as a scratch. I tell him all the time, he’s ten foot tall ’n’ bulletproof. Heck, I done been wounded four times. The last skirmish was the worst. A lead ball plumb near took off my hand.” He held up a stump missing three fingers and a portion of his palm, but wiggled his thumb and index finger and pointed out, “but I can still shoot.”

“Did you get that at Chancellorsville?”

“Naw, McLaw’s division weren’t at Chancellorsville. We stayed put in Fredericksburg—kept them Yanks from crossing the Rappahannock River. Figured them dogs would try sneaking up from behind.” Rubbing the dirty bandage on his hand, Nate continued, “We sure fought like the devil—two days solid, while ol’ General Jackson got ’round behind their right flank. We flushed them Yanks clean back to Washington City!”

“Wow! I can’t wait to see that kind of action!” Zeke said, grinning. *Lord, what an army! Outnumbered more than two to one and still whipped them Yanks proper! The Yanks may have better artillery, but they ain’t got nothing like our General Robert E. Lee. Yes, sir, everybody knows there ain’t nothing and no one that can stop General Lee!*

“On your feet! March!” The orders were shouted down the

line. Nate and Zeke fell in next to each other, so they could talk while they marched.

“Boy, why are you grinning like a mule eating briars?” Nate asked, as the column headed north.

“I couldn’t wait till I turned seventeen!” Zeke confided, nearly trotting along to keep up with the veterans. “I was sure, sure as shootin’, that the war would be over ’fore I got my chance to fight. But I made it!”

Nate looked at the boy with a mixture of humor and sorrow written on his face. “I heard that your Pa got part of his leg blown off at Antietam. And you’re about to get your eyes opened to a whole lot of hurts, things you ain’t never seen before. I’ve seen a heap of our boys from back home blown to bits. Even their mommas wouldn’t have known them. Once you’ve seen that, war ain’t nothin’ you’ll smile about.”

Zeke paused, letting Nate’s words sink in, before he said. “I meant no disrespect, Nate. But I ain’t seen Billy for two years and I miss him something fierce. I’ve always been afraid he’d get killed before I could see him again ... That’s all!”

“You Gibson boys must be all alike. Full of fury when y’all is poked at.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your brother’s something else. As soon as a battle commences, he sets to screaming and hollering—the whole dang time, like he’s havin’ fun! The air is thick with bullets. Folks’re gettin’ shot left ’n’ right. The noise is so loud you think your ears blowed up. And there he’d be, fightin’ like the devil, yellin’ as though the Yanks could hear him!”

Nate paused for long moments as Zeke watched him curiously, then the veteran put his good hand on the boy’s shoulder and added, “This fighting’s scary, Zeke, the first time bein’ the worst. You gotta keep your head, listen to what folks tells you, and y’all might get out of this war alive.”

Once again, Nate lapsed into silence, chewing on his wad of tobacco while Zeke surveyed the countryside with the eagerness

of a puppy. Finally, the veteran glanced up at the boy and was forced to grin in spite of himself. “Well, if your luck is like your brother’s and your Pa’s, you’ll be all right,” he conceded. “Your Pa’s one tough old man.”

“Pa’s doing fine now,” Zeke boasted. “That busted-up leg kept him in bed four months—’bout drove Momma crazy. When he got well enough to move around, she sent him to join up with General Forrest’s cavalry. That way, he can ride a horse and still fight, plus he ain’t so far from home. Last I heard, he was having a high ol’ time raiding and burning Union supplies all over western Tennessee.”

“Forrest’s sure enough one tough ol’ wildcat,” Nate observed. “Reckon he’s the best on both sides when it comes to fighting on horseback—maybe even better than Jeb Stuart hisself.”

For the rest of the morning and into the afternoon, Zeke barraged his friend with questions about the military leaders and battles he’d heard about, and the supply wagons, ambulances, and artillery caissons he was passing along the very long line. *All this commotion must mean we’re getting close to the main army!*

For hours, the column marched through dense forests, across open fields, splashing through shallow creek beds and skirting swamps. Suddenly, late in the afternoon as they neared a clearing in the woods, the earth suddenly exploded with repetitive volleys of cannon fire.

Terrified, Zeke and the other new recruits hit the ground and covered their heads. The veterans howled with laughter. In the clearing, the Confederates’ First Corps artillerists were practicing with recently captured cannons. Grinning from ear to ear, Nate helped Zeke to his feet.

“Man that was loud!” Zeke exclaimed, bending down to retrieve his rifle and knapsack.

“Y’all better check your britches, boys—I reckon I smell something!” another veteran said, howling with laughter at the recruits’ expense.

“Fall in!” The command echoed down the line as the column

moved toward Cedar Fork, where two roads crossed in the middle of nowhere. Several miles later, the column came to rest beside train tracks. Zeke, Nate, and a thousand other soldiers waited in the hot late-afternoon sun for equipment and supplies to be loaded onto flatcars before the men scrambled aboard, filling every inch of every car.

“We’re headed for Fredericksburg!” Veterans passed the word through the ranks. When the last soldier had climbed aboard, the railcars jerked violently and then squealed into motion, causing their passengers to stagger and filling the air with thick black smoke.

The pace of their journey quickened considerably. Before long, the train was rolling past much of the Army of Northern Virginia, dusting riders and sightseers alike with a thick coating of ash. Recruits passed the word that their unit would soon reach First Corps Headquarters, where they’d be dispersed into regiments. Zeke hoped that somewhere in the sea of men he might find his brother Billy.

Sometime around dusk, the train slammed to a halt, sending the men tumbling forward. Anxious to stretch, the soldiers quickly leaped down from the railcars and tried to assemble with their original column. Following the barked orders of a staff sergeant, the men and boys marched in the general direction of the 13th Mississippi.

“This is General Barksdale’s Mississippi brigade, General McLaw’s division, General Longstreet’s First Corps,” Nate explained, as Zeke’s head swung from side to side, hoping to catch a glimpse of his brother. Finally, as the sun began sinking below the horizon, Nate pointed to the flag that announced General Barksdale’s headquarters. “Dang it, Zeke! It’s gettin’ darker than a witch’s outhouse at midnight. Let’s hightail it.”

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In a city renowned for its beautiful women, Mary Beth Greene still managed to turn the heads of every man who passed her by. Slender, petite, with a shape that was most often found

only in men's dreams, the freeborn twenty-four-year-old had flawless almond skin, sparkling green eyes set under arched brows, and a smile that could light up a city block if she wanted to. At the moment, she was gently swaying on a porch swing on the verandah of the finest brothel in downtown Jackson, Mississippi. The well-tended brick building sat just two blocks east of the State Capitol building. A cluster of women ranging in age from their teens to early thirties waved fans or chatted quietly as Miss Lou Ellen Pompadour, the madam and surrogate mother to all of these lost souls, busied herself in preparations for another hectic night. When taps echoed in the distance, it was the signal warning the women of the imminent stampede of young, adventure-seeking soldiers. Several women stood to stretch their backs and legs and hurry upstairs to fix their hair and attire.

"Is it time ... *already*?" Mary Beth sighed, adjusting her off-the-shoulder emerald green gown, chosen to compliment her eye color.

"I surely wish I had your blessings," a young friend said, enviously eyeing Mary Beth's curves.

"Yeah, Mary Beth," another woman giggled, "save some of the boys for us tonight."

"That's quite enough, ladies!" Miss Lou Ellen had appeared at the door. "Need I remind you that you are all endowed with grace, charm, and intelligence? Any man would be proud to take any of my girls home with him to meet his mama!"

"As long as he didn't tell her where he found us," a teenager whispered to her neighbor, who hid her grin behind her fan. High class or not, a brothel was a depressing place to waste away a life, any life, even the life of a prostitute—or, as Miss Lou Ellen insisted upon saying, a *courtesan*.

"I wonder what man invented all the funny substitutes we use for the word whoring," Mary Beth Greene speculated aloud, more to herself than to be heard.

"Miss Mary Beth! You know how I detest that *horrible* word!"

"Harlot, tart, strumpet, prostitute, camp follower. What does

it matter? The words all mean the same thing,” the woman pointed out, glancing down the street.

“When I was in Washington,” another woman chimed in, “all those Federal boys called us *Hooker Girls*, on account of General Joe Hooker and his fondness for ... well ... us.”

Mary Beth suddenly grinned and asked, “Hookers?” Then she turned to Miss Lou Ellen. “Ma’am, I now stand with you on your word choice. I believe I do prefer the sound of *courtesan*.”

“Mary Beth,” one of the older women asked abruptly, “why are you still here? You could make your fortune anywhere.”

“Why, the money, sugar.”

“You know perfectly well what I’m asking,” the woman persisted. “You’re from a good upbringing. You’re not like the rest of us. My momma was a pros—” with a look at Miss Lou Ellen, she corrected herself, “—a courtesan, so I’m one. But you ain’t like us.”

Mary Beth pretended not to hear the question. “Now just hush up,” snapped an older woman. “Y’all knows she don’t like tellin’ tales about her family.”

Mary Beth and her defender were the only women left on the porch as the others hurried in to finish their preparations and settle themselves on the parlor settees. Mary Beth turned to her friend and said thoughtfully, “She’s right. I don’t belong here.”

“Mary Beth! You’re the only friend I’ve got. What would happen to me if you leave?”

“I miss the music at the balls in Washington, the government men from all over the country who had interesting things to say, the fancy meals ... and most of all, I miss being treated like a lady,” Mary Beth admitted, thinking aloud. “The word courtesan doesn’t mean what we do; it means a different class of woman, someone who’s graceful and elegant and able to serve as a hostess at grand events, not a prostitute who services wild-eyed common soldiers.”

“Was it a lot different from this?” Susan asked wistfully.

“Dinner and dancing all night. Only a short time for *romancing*.”

“A short time?” Susan chuckled. “Lord have mercy, some of these young farm boys want to pay two dollars and stay all night. The young soldier boys will make us old by the time we’re thirty.”

“I’m not goin’ to let that happen.”

“Mary Beth! Where on earth would you go?”

“I’d follow the money.” Mary Beth put her arm around Susan as they turned to go indoors. “The Confederate capital’s gone to Richmond. The money’s gone to Richmond,” she said, nodding her head as if suddenly coming to a life-changing decision, “so, I’m going to Richmond.”

“How you gonna get all the way up north to Virginia?”

“I’ll take the train.”

“That train’s for soldiers only—you know that. No civilians can set foot on that train.”

“I haven’t met a man yet that I couldn’t convince to see things my way.”