

## I. The Tunnel

### 1.

“BOY, WHO THE HELL you think you are?”

“Pa, I don’t know.”

Pa lifted the jug, tipped it. The walnut in his neck popped up, popped down. He wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

“You ain’t worth the rope to hang you, you know that?”

“I know that, Pa.”

“You killed your ma, boy.”

“I didn’t mean to, Pa. I was just getting borned. I didn’t know no better.”

“What business you had, getting borned?”

“I don’t know, Pa.”

“Here’s something to know. Come daylight, I don’t want you around no more. You got that, boy?”

“Yes, Pa.”

“And don’t you go pestering your brothers’n sisters, neither. They don’t want you around no more’n me.”

Pa slapped him across the face and booted him past the falling-down tobacco barn into the road. His brothers and sisters had places of their own nearby, but Pa was right. They wouldn't want him around, never had.

He stayed the night in the woods with ghosts. Next day he went down the road to Cannady's store.

A man in uniform called him over to a table by the pickle barrel.

"Hey, you boy, how old you?"

"Seventeen."

"Sure it ain't 15, maybe 14?"

"I'm sure."

"You want to be a soldier?"

"I reckon."

"Why?"

"I don't like them Yankees stealing our slaves."

"You own any slaves, boy?"

"Sure do. Lots."

"You give your slaves shoes?"

"Damn right."

"How come you ain't got shoes?"

"Well –"

"Never you mind, son. General Lee won't. Sign here."

The boy made his mark.

SPLIT-RAIL FENCES SNAKED over low hills and chalky outcroppings on either side of the lane, enclosing fields overgrown with weeds and bushes. Spotting a rail that looked loose, the boy broke ranks and worked it free. He'd be able to get a fire going

when they stopped to make palatable the boiled mule meat issued as marching rations. Some of the fellows who'd been in the war since the beginning told how people back then thrust food on them as they marched – apples, bread, fried chicken, thick slices of ham or bacon, even pies and puddings. But those days were long gone, if they had ever existed. The boy had never been offered so much as a rotted spud. He hoisted the rail onto his shoulder alongside his musket.

An officer rode past.

"Sergeant McCandless!" the officer shouted.  
"What's that man doing with that rail?"

Sergeant McCandless came at the boy red-faced.

"You, there, what's your name?"

"Amos Gower, Sergeant."

"What company?"

"Yours, Sergeant."

The sergeant stared at him with a look that Amos had seen on his face before, a melding of sneer and snarl.

"Of course you'd be mine. You're just the kind of stupid butternut who's always in my company. Drop that rail."

"But –"

"I said drop that rail, Amos Gower. And you're on sentry tonight, all night."

Amos dropped the rail. Hoots rose all around as he scurried to catch up. Everyone was glad of this break in the monotony of marching – especially glad, he felt, because it was he who had been targeted. He looked back and saw Jess Fellows returning to the line carrying the rail that he had been forced to give up.

Jess was another of the young'uns like Amos, given cast-offs as uniform and an old smooth-bore musket instead of a rifled gun. But nobody stopped Jess from stealing the rail. The officer had ridden on. Sergeant McCandless still had his eye on Amos.

Amos shuffled on, breathing dust, his canteen dry, with no prospect of heating his boiled mule meat to make it go down easier. With every step he got dustier, thirstier, hungrier, and angrier. He was, he told himself, mad as a wet hen. First time he was in a battle, he'd just happen to be pointing his musket at Sergeant McCandless when he fired. He'd clip off the officer next, if by unlikely chance that personage should happen to be in the vicinity when bullets began to fly.

He put the canteen to his lips, hoping for a miracle, but got only a drop, not enough to clear his throat of the dust raised by the column shuffling along the country lane ahead of him. The sun burned down. Under his bare feet the ground felt too hot for the time of year, hot enough to fry eggs. His thirst sharpened at every step. He lifted the canteen again. It was as dry as his mouth. He hoped the column would soon ford a creek, so he could dip his canteen into cool water as he crossed. He wanted the stream to be shallow, though. He hated walking through water up to his chest, holding his musket and powder box over his head, while his haversack and blanket roll threatened to float away.

He had grown since he joined up and was taller than any man around him, but scrawnier. His scraps of uniform if ever new had been so long before they came to him.

The drooping brim of his slouch hat had pulled away from the crown in several places. It might have fallen to his nose had his ears not blocked its descent. His pants, blue when taken off a Yankee corpse by a Confederate forager, had faded to near gray by the time they came to him. Held up by frayed rope suspenders, the pants fell short of his shins but were so big in the waist that they could have held another Johnny Reb his size. Holes in the knees and seat exposed patches of unwashed skin. His butternut shirt was out at the elbows and nearly buttonless. It had gone unwashed for so long and bore so many stains of sweat and of soot from long-extinguished campfires that it was nearer black than the yellowish-brown color a walnut-hull dye had once given it. Intended like his pants for someone short and heavy, the shirt drooped tent-like off his shoulders, except where his rucksack's straps clutched folds of excess cloth to him. The shirrtails barely reached his waist. The sleeves stopped short of his wrist bones.

He was barefoot by preference. Square-toed brogans dangled from his neck on frazzled leather laces, but they had been shaped to another man's foot before they came to him and were not shoes to be worn with comfort. In months of marching here, there, and someplace else, but not yet into battle, he had slogged through mud and water so often that the leather had stiffened and cracked. He couldn't walk a mile in them without rubbing blisters on his feet. He had no socks to ease the rubbing—had never had money to buy any or anyone to knit him a pair.

A rumor had spread through the ranks a day or two earlier that General Lee had issued an order

exempting shoeless men from going into battle. Amos had aimed to shed his brogans at the first chance of doing so without being seen. Before he could do it, however, the same rumor reached Sergeant McCandless. Another order came down, delivered forcefully and in person by the company commander: Any man caught shoeless would be shot as a deserter, battle or no battle. No one had to wear his shoes all the time—merely had to keep them by him, ready to be put on when the order came to do so. And there the shoes were, rapping his chest at every step.

Around a bend and over a rise, the column came to cultivated fields around a burned-out house with columns. Only the columns and one end of the house still stood. Its front wall was missing, exposing empty rooms with floors sagging into blackened ruins below. The roof had mostly caved in. Around the ruins of the house, a couple of barns or stables survived, as did a row of small outbuildings that might once have been slave cabins. Beyond the cabins, a neat white fence surrounded a small burying ground with granite gravestones. A spring flowed from the base of a steep chalk cliff that was overgrown with brush and vines and wild azaleas in bloom. The water looked clearer and wetter than any Amos had ever seen. He licked his cracked lips.

The officer who set Sergeant McCandless on Amos had stopped to talk with a one-armed man leaning on a gate in the split-rail fence. Behind the one-armed man a tree-lined lane led toward the burned-out house. The man wore overalls and a cavalry officer's broad-brimmed hat. He held a short-barreled saddle rifle in his one hand. Beside him stood the tallest black

man Amos had ever seen. He was dressed like his master, except for the hat. A holstered pistol dangled from his belt, its barrel seemingly as long as that of his master's rifle. Amos was shocked. Arming a slave! He had never heard of such a thing.

Ranged along the gate beside the two men and hanging on it were a dozen children, black and white. One girl looked near to Amos's age. Their eyes met. Amos thought he saw her smile. He couldn't tell if his raggedy state brought the smile or if she was just being friendly. She had blue eyes and brown hair that glistened red in the sun. She wasn't pretty in his eyes— she was too freckled, too skinny, too bony. But he liked the way she looked at him.

"You there, soldier," the one-armed farmer yelled, gesturing at Jess with his rifle, "where'd you get that rail?"

Jess hollered back, "Brung it from Georgia, I did. I grewed up with this here rail."

Everyone laughed and hooted, all but Amos. He shuffled along thinking, Ain't that just like Jess Fellows? He done just what I done, but he can laugh it off, get away with it. Ever we stop, Jess is going to get right down to breaking up that rail and getting his mule meat hotted up and decent to eat. I'll be lucky to get the smell off it.

The one-armed farmer was not laughing nor was the officer. "Sergeant, bring that man over here."

Sergeant McCandless stopped the column and marched Jess Fellows over to the officer. Jess still had the rail on his shoulder.

"Sergeant, get this man's name," the officer said.

"That there's Jess Fellows, sir."

“Well, tell Jess Fellows to hand over that rail.” The officer spoke loudly, meaning to be heard. “I will not stand for theft by any soldier under my command, especially not of a rail from a fence belonging to an officer who has fought bravely in our noble cause, a hero who will soon rejoin us despite grievous wounds.” Speaking directly to Jess Fellows for the first time, the officer added. “I’ll deal with you later, soldier, after we’re long past this gentleman’s property. In case you don’t know, you can be shot for stealing that rail.”

The column moved on, no one laughing. Amos looked back as he went, back at the skinny girl hanging on the gate beside the one-armed farmer in the cavalryman’s hat. She was staring at him. He was sure of it.

When the company fell out by a stream that had been dammed to form a small pond, Amos forced his way to the forefront. The water was already roiled and muddy but he filled his canteen anyway. The mud would settle out. Sergeant McCandless assigned two men as guards to march Jess Fellows off to see the officer. Jess swaggered away with a grin on his face. He still swaggered when the guards brought him back, but the grin was gone. He was red-eyed and pale. The guards said the officer had mouthed Jess hard. They said Jess broke down and cried, begging for mercy. In the end the officer decided to let him go with a warning instead of having him shot as an example, but he told Sergeant McCandless to keep Jess on extra duty for a month. The guards said Jess fell to his knees and tried to kiss the officer’s boots in gratitude.

Jess told a different story. He said he'd looked that damn officer in the damn eye and told him he didn't have no damn right to do a damn thing to him just because he'd picked up a damn fence rail that was lying loose on the damn ground, just asking to be picked up. Wasn't a damn thing the officer could do, Jess said, but let him go. Nobody believed his version of what had occurred, and Jess conceded that the officer had said some hard things.

"Sticks and stones," Jess said, "sticks and stones."

Sergeant McCandless put Jess on lookout with Amos.

THE CORPORAL LED Amos and Jess Fellows along a creek bed with bushy banks till they came to a road where two trails from the north converged into one westward-tending dirt road.

"Federals is coming at us whatever way you look, or so I hear," the corporal said, "foot and horse both, spoiling for a fight. Watch both trails and the west road, too. Don't take nothing for granted. These boys is tricky. Can't tell where they'll spring up next."

The corporal settled them in a thicket on a brush-covered hillside. "Keep out of sight. You're here to see them and not them to see you. They come along, one of you slip away and scoot back to camp. The other one wait to see how many more is coming along. Stay awake. And quiet. Them folks ain't bringing nothing you want."

Jess asked, "Where we at, you reckon?"

"Mississippi, by now, I should think, Tishomingo County maybe. Or maybe somewheres around God don't know where, the way we been skipping back

and forth, trying to keep away from them Yanks till we get there, wherever there is.”

Jess had another question. “What we going to do when we get to this place that you and God don’t know the where of?”

“Fight, boy, fight. There ain’t much to count on in this man’s army but you can count on that in the end. We’ll fight there if we can make it there, or here, or someplace else if we can’t. And about time, I say. We been dodging around too long.”

“Bring ‘em on,” Jess said. “We’ll give ‘em hell.”

“You boys keep your eyes open.”

Amos and Jess Fellows made themselves comfortable, more or less. Sergeant McCandless had given them a big hunk of bread, not more than two or three days old. He gave them each an onion, too, along with what might once have been an apple but was now so shriveled and rotted that Amos wasn’t sure if he meant it as a gift or an insult.

Amos thought they might risk a little fire around on the other side of the hill away from the road to warm what little was left of their boiled mule. Jess said no. If the smoke didn’t attract a Yankee scouting party, which they sure as hell didn’t want, it would be bound to call the corporal down on them—Sergeant McCandless too, perhaps. They didn’t want that either. Hidden in the bushes on the hillside, they swatted flies and skeeters as they ate their cold meat, bread, and onions. Both took a bite of apple and spat it out.

Jess said, “Wisht I had me a woman.”

“Me too.”

“You ever had you a woman?”

“Sure. Lots of times.” Amos never had, but that was not something a man could admit. “How about you?”

“Lots.”

Amos didn’t believe him but Jess went on, talking about things he had done to women or they to him. Amos didn’t believe much of that, either. But one of these days, he told himself, one of these days. He called to mind the girl on the gate.

Darkness came down on them. One minute Amos could see a good long way and the next minute he couldn’t pick out his hand in front of his face. An owl hooted off in the woods and in the distance dogs bayed.

“I don’t see no reason we both of us got to be awake at the same time,” Jess said. “I’ll stretch out here a while, then you poke me up and I’ll watch.” He spread out his canvas ground cover. Soon he snored, flat on his back, mouth open.

When Amos came awake he was stretched out full length on the bare ground, with his slouch hat rolled up as a pillow. The moon was full and well up. He sat up, yawning, and put on his hat. He saw a troop of Union cavalry coming down the nearest branch of the trail, almost up to them, coming slow with a jingle of bridles. Grabbing his gun and haversack he crashed through the brush to a cave-like thicket at the top of the hill. The noise he made woke Jess and caught the ear of the Yanks.

A Union officer spurred up the hill.

“What’s this?” Jess said, looking up at the officer. “What’s this?”

“What this is, is this,” the officer said.

Leaning from the saddle he drove his saber into Jess's neck and drew it across his throat, one ear to the other. Blood spurted over Jess's face, making him look like he had pulled a red mask over his head. His eyes rolled back until only the whites showed. Waving arms, kicking legs, he flopped over the ground like a headless chicken. The officer's horse danced backward at the smell of Jess's blood. The officer kept his seat, watching Jess, sword ready for another thrust.

Amos remembered the brim of a hat etched in sharp outline against the sky. A shadowed face with a moonlit beardless chin. Blue shoulders, similarly moonlit. A glint of steel. A strangled scream. A flood of blood. Jess's eyes and teeth gleaming white in a moonlit red mask. Nothing more.

The Union soldiers rode on. Amos crept out of his thicket and down the hill to see what Jess had in his rucksack and pockets. No use letting someone else get it.

2.

AMOS HEARD THE GIRL calling, "*Chickee, chickee.*" He lay on the dirt floor of the tumble-down shed and peered out a foot-high hole at the base of a rotted-off board.

"*Psst,*" he said. "*Psst.*"

He had been in the shed two nights. At dawn of the morning after he watched Jess Fellows die he had heard distant gunfire. As he listened he dreamed of the heroic things he would have done had he been there. Then the guns stopped. However the fight had come out, his company would be gone somewhere else, he didn't know where—Sergeant McCandless, the officer, and all the rest. Jess Fellows, too.

He had seen the girl at a distance but this was the first time she had come close to the shed. She held her apron out in front of her, making a basket of it, and scattered cracked corn.

"*Here, chickee. Chickee, chickee. Here, chickee.*"

"*Psst.*" He stuck his hand out the hole. "*Psst.*"

Now she heard. She looked around, just long enough to see his hand. She backed toward him, bent

over like she was looking for eggs in the weeds that grew along the side of the shed, chickens fussing after her. As she bent her skirt lifted. He saw the back of her leg almost to the knee. She wasn't more than a foot away. He could have reached out and grabbed her ankle. She backed past the rotted board and looked in at him.

"So it's you. I saw you the other day, marching along the road."

"I'm hungry."

"Come on out. I'll take you down and Mother'll feed you and Father will help you get back to your company. He's going back to the war soon himself."

"I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"I just can't."

She was bent over, peering at him through the hole. Her expression changed. It reminded him of Sergeant McCandless. She stood up.

"Don't let Father see you. He won't stand stragglers on the place."

"I ain't a straggler."

"Don't talk so loud. Father's milking in the stable. He'll hear. I'll be back later."

"I ain't ate in two days."

"Shush now. I'll be back."

He lay dozing on the hard-packed dirt floor of the shed, thinking about his stomach. The last thing he'd put in it was the final bit of rank mule meat and half an onion he'd found in Jess's rucksack when he searched it after the Federals rode on.

She was back. Through the opening in the rotted board, he saw the gray skirt that hid her legs to the

tops of her shoes. She dropped a chunk of bread, a fried chicken leg, and a raw carrot on the ground within his reach. She didn't stop or say anything. The next day, the girl brought him more food—pickled pigs' feet and fried mush wrapped in cornhusks, along with an apple and two thick cookies, chewy ones. Amos couldn't remember when he had eaten so well.

This time the girl paused in front of the opening. "You've got to leave. Father's going to rebuild this shed, turn it into a storehouse. He says it'll give the Yankees something to steal so they won't go looking for the rest of our stores, should any more come by after he goes back to the Army."

"I got no place to go."

She backed up against the shed, like she was resting and dropped ribs, two biscuits, and an apple. He could see a bit of leg above the shoe and below the skirt. He reached through the hole in the shed and stroked her leg. She jerked away.

"You've got to get out of this shed or you'll be sent back to the Army. Tonight you slip out and go up on the hill, this side of the stream. There are three trees there. You go behind the tree on the right—you know your left from your right?"

"I know."

"You go behind the tree and there's a shallow cave. From the outside it doesn't look like it goes anywhere. But you go in and look to the right and you'll see a tunnel. You crawl through that tunnel—it turns a lot—to a big cave and wait for me. I go there every afternoon. It's my special place. You can't stay, though. You've got to go."

That night he found the three trees and the shallow cave in the steep hillside behind the trees. He didn't see the tunnel at the back of the cave until he was right on it. The opening was small, under a ledge. He crawled blindly in on his belly and inched forward, head first, bit by bit, fearing to trust the girl but having to. A little way in, the tunnel turned once and then again, the second time sharply. It was black as a boot, but after a third turn he found himself in a dimly lighted cavern. Looking up he could see moonlight filtering through crevices far overhead. He could hear nothing but the muffled sound of water running.

He lay down and tried to sleep, but every time he dropped off he saw the Union officer slip his sword into Jess Fellows' throat. When he shut out that image, another showed up that he liked no better — of a one-armed man, the girl's father, wearing a cavalry officer's hat and carrying a short-barreled rifle. He stood at a gate with an armed slave, a giant, beside him, guarding a little farm that was all that remained of what before the war must have been a great plantation. Once asleep, he dreamed about the smooth skin of the girl's leg.

The next morning he awoke in a limestone cave with curving walls and a vaulted ceiling. From its roof dripped what Amos thought looked like icicles, which reflected streaks of sunlight angling in from overhead. At the back of the cave he saw the dark mouths of three small tunnels. Several books lay on a table at one side of the cave. Beside the table were a chair and a doll's bed with a doll in it, covered by a blanket except for its head. Against another wall he saw trunks and wooden boxes, many of them padlocked, a stack of

blankets, and piles of turnips, carrots, sweet potatoes, and cabbages.

It was afternoon when the girl came. She brought him a ham shank, two roasted potatoes, and a jar of milk, along with half a loaf of fresh-baked bread. She put the food on the table and sat in the chair, cradling the doll in her arms. Sunbeams fell on the table.

All else was shadowed, making it seem that the light created a separate room for the girl. He sat cross-legged on the sandy floor ripping strips of ham off the shank with his teeth.

“Make it last. I nearly got caught.”

“What is this here place?”

“This cave? It’s where we’re supposed to hide if Federal troops come again. They burned or stole most everything—my piano, my pretty clothes, everything except some cows and chickens—mules, too—that were in the woods. But they didn’t find this cave. Father stored these boxes up here for safekeeping before he left for the Army, along with things he wouldn’t need, like his ordinary clothes. So they didn’t get any of that, either. The Federal officer asked the slaves where the silver and such was. Father had left Scoot in charge of the place—you saw him when your company went by the other day. Scoot spoke up, pretending not to talk good, ‘Ya’all done got it a’ready, suh.’ So they went away. Most of the field hands followed along, thinking the Yankees had come to free them and provide for them. Scoot stayed and so did some others.”

“That big slave—Scoot, you said—he had him a gun. Was it real?”

“Of course it’s real—it’s a Remington—but Scoot’s not a slave. Used to be, but not anymore. After Father lost his arm and came home to get well, he said, ‘All that time in the hospital, I decided the preachers are right. No man’s got the right to keep another man his slave. It’s immoral and against God’s will.’ So Father freed the ones who stayed and pays them wages.”

“He freed slaves? He’s a traitor! Somebody hear talk like that, they’ll hang him.”

“He is not a traitor! He’s a cavalryman, a major, wounded in battle. General Lee himself went to the hospital and gave him a medal. Father’s a hero. Anyway, Father says the war shouldn’t be about slavery but states’ rights.”

Chewing noisily, he gnawed the shank in his right hand and stuffed bread in his mouth with his left until his cheeks puffed out.

“Don’t choke it down like that. Nobody’s rushing you.”

“What’s your name?” he asked, his mouth full.

“Minnie,” she said. “Minnie Wilkes. What’s yours?”

“Amos Gower. I’m seventeen.”

“I’m fourteen, almost fifteen. Were you in the battle?”

“You bet.”

“We could hear the guns all the way here. Your company came by again early today. The officer said your company was attacked from behind in the night by Federal cavalry they didn’t even know were around. He said one sentry who might have warned them was killed and there was no sign of the other. They think he deserted.”

“That ain’t true, Me and Jess Fellows, we was on lookout. We was the first that seen the Federal cavalry come along and we held them off best we could, picked them off one by one as they come over the hill, But then Jess got hit and I kept on till I didn’t have no more powder. I couldn’t make it back to my company through the Federals and come here.”

She listened big-eyed—believing every word, he was sure. He believed it, too, in a way.

Amos choked down the last of the ham and sat back, rubbing his belly.

“That was right good,” he said. “I never ate better ham.”

She stared at the back of his hand. “What’s that on your hand?”

“A louse.” He picked it off, crushed it with his thumbnail against his middle finger. He flicked it toward her.

She scrambled away. Again she looked at him as Sergeant McCandless had.

“Everybody’s got them. Can’t get rid of them. We call ‘em our Yankee visitors.”

“Father says it’s just a matter of keeping clean.”

She went to a box along the wall and pulled out a brick of brownish soap. She picked up a blanket too.

“You go back in that middle tunnel. It goes along a way and turns down. You’ll come out at a little pool. It’s not deep and it’s cold but you get in there and scrub top to bottom. Scrub your clothes and blanket, too. And then wrap up in this blanket till your clothes dry.”

She was bossy but he thought that was a good thing. When she was bossing him she didn’t talk

about him leaving. He took the soap and blanket and crawled in blackness along a twisting tunnel. After a couple of sharp turns the sound of running water grew stronger. He came out into another cavern, smaller than the other but like it, with light from crevices overhead. The stream had cut a narrow channel in the stone floor and gouged a saucer-like depression in the middle.

Amos stripped off his clothes and scrubbed them with the brick of soap in icy water elbow deep. The soap stung like fire where he had scratched bites on his arms. Black flecks floated up and slowly drifted away with the current. When he finished rinsing clothes he wrung them out and laid them to dry on the rocky shelf beside the stream.

The water was so cold he considered not washing himself. But Minnie wouldn't like that. Using his hands as a dipper he poured water over his legs and rubbed vigorously. When that began to feel bearable he put first one foot and then the other in the water. He soaped his hair and body from the top down and eased into the pool all the way. It was just deep enough to cover him. The cold took his breath away, but it felt good, too. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been clean and free of lice.

He wrapped himself in the blanket and crawled back through the tunnel to the outer cavern, thinking of Minnie, ready for her. He wished her hair was golden, not ordinary reddish-brown, and given a choice he'd want her to have a soft pretty face, not brown and freckled. He wanted a girl with meat on her bones, a girl he could dig his fingers into, bounce on, like Jess Fellows had talked about doing.

Minnie was all bone, skinny as a rail. But she was who was there. He'd have to take what he could get. Now, he thought, I'll do it now, she like it or not. It's time I had me a woman. She ain't all that pretty and not much to her, but she'll have to do until I find me one I like better.

She wasn't there. He crawled out to the end of the tunnel, blinking against the bright light. He opened his blanket and let the sun warm his bare body. He looked down the hillside, where wild flowers bloomed everywhere in the underbrush. He thought about Minnie, imagining her with flesh on her bones, somebody to rest against, bounce on.

The next day when she crawled into the tunnel he was waiting for her after the second turn, in the darkest part. He pressed against the side of the tunnel, not breathing, and let her crawl up to him on her hands and knees. He came up over her from the side, knocking her flat.

She shrieked and rolled over on her back, scratching and kicking, pounding on his chest. She kept slipping out from under him, but there was no room for her to get away. He pulled her skirt up, not sure what he would find under it. And then it was easy. It was like he knew just what to do. She shrieked as he plunged into her but he held her hands over her head and put the weight of his body down on her and let her buck and twist and holler all she wanted. He was in her good and solid, all the way in, and nothing she could do. It was just like Jess said it was.

He rolled off, pleased with himself. Nothing wrong with me, by God. I'm man enough for any woman.

As soon as he was off her she was gone, gasping and sobbing, scooting backward through the tunnel, dragging the clothes he'd torn off her. By the time he got turned around and went after her, she was far down the hillside scrambling through the azaleas, straightening her clothes.

3.

AMOS FEARED THAT Minnie's one-armed father might come after him with his short rifle, but he didn't know where he could go if he left the cave. He spent days creeping through the dark tunnels that honeycombed the cliff, looking for places to hide and ways to get away if need be. He found caves of all sizes. Many contained stores stashed away by Minnie's father—everything from cabbages and carrots to smoked hams, plenty to last through a winter. He also found more openings to the outside, some of them mere cracks that only someone as skinny as he would be able to squeeze through. He could not easily be cornered inside the cliff.

When no one came looking for him he decided that Minnie had kept secret what he had done. The more he thought on it the more likely it seemed that he was safe. She'd be ashamed of what she had let him do, he reasoned, and wouldn't want anybody to find out about it. She'd know that nobody would believe she hadn't asked for it some way or other. And as he thought about it he realized there was an added

reason why she couldn't afford to mention what he had done. No man worth having would marry her if she let it be known that she wasn't a virgin. He felt proud of himself. He'd got himself a cherry.

Not even Jess Fellows had claimed that.

As a farm-reared boy he was handy with snares and traps, and he was able to catch rabbits and squirrels in the thickets outside the caves. He roasted them over small fires he got going with flint and steel in a cavern far back in the network of tunnels. He didn't think there was much chance of anyone seeing smoke rising from the hillside at night but just in case he snuffed out his fires as quickly as he could. He missed the chicken wings and bread that Minnie had brought him. But he was eating better than he had on the march—or at home, for that matter.

He munched raw turnips, carrots, onions, potatoes, cabbages, and apples from the stores in the hillside. He was careful not to take too much from any one pile and stayed away from the hams and slabs of bacon, sensing that Minnie's father knew the exact number he had hidden and would be quick on the trail of a thief should so much as one disappear. In what he thought of as his home cave he hefted the padlocked boxes stacked along one wall. Several felt heavy enough to contain the silver the Union officer had inquired about. Restrained by fear of Major Wilkes, Amos resisted the temptation to break into them.

What he missed most was Minnie. He wanted her under him again. His hand wasn't enough to please him anymore, now that he knew what it was like to have a woman, even a skinny little thing like Minnie. He could still feel her sharp hipbones poking as she

struggled to keep him out of her. He had supposed that after she got over the first shock of it she'd start feeling the way he did, that she would want more of what he could do for her, like Jess had said women did. But she did not come back.

He grew comfortable but not content in his caves and tunnels. He knew no more about what was going on than he had in the Army—if anything, knew less. In the Army there had always been *somebody* around who claimed to know something, which was comforting even if he didn't believe a word the *somebody* said. Hungry for information, he spent hours every day outside the cave looking down on comings and goings and other doings at the farm below. He saw Minnie feeding chickens, saw her father with his forehead pressed against a cow's flank, milking one-handed. He watched black men, slaves no longer, working in the fields, and Minnie's mother working right alongside former slave women churning butter or scrubbing clothes. For all his watching he couldn't tell much of what was going on. People would come and go and he had no way to find out where they came from or went, and why.

On a sunny morning after days of rain, Minnie's father came out of a cabin dressed in his uniform, braid on his shoulders and sleeves, one sleeve folded back over the stump of his arm. The brass handle guard on his curved saber shone like gold. He stepped on a mounting block and swung himself one-handedly onto a black mare that skittered about before allowing him to guide her back into place. He leaned down from the saddle and kissed his wife and Minnie as they stood on the mounting block. The

smaller children were held up to him and he bent to touch his lips to their foreheads. He shook hands with Scoot, the big black man who had carried a long-barreled pistol the day Jess Fellows had been made to give up his fence rail.

When Major Wilkes rode out of the yard on the high-stepping mare, an ex-slave Amos had seen working around the place followed, mounted on one mule and leading another. The second mule was loaded with leather-covered boxes and camp equipment. Far down the muddy lane the major and his servant, no longer slave, paused to wave before riding on. All this went on and Amos, cast away on the hillside, knew only what he could see. He hungered to know more.

Minnie came up the hillside. The azaleas had quit blooming. He considered slipping back into the tunnel to catch her again by surprise as she crawled in. Jess was right. She was coming back for more. But she had made him wait too long. He would punish her, pretend not to want her, make her beg for it. She climbed slowly with her head down, but even if she had looked up she would not have seen him.

She lifted her head. He was shocked. If she had been thin before, she was now a skeleton. She looked like an old woman, with dark circles under her eyes, which were red and puffy from crying. The tip of her nose was also red and looked even redder because the rest of her face was so pale under the freckles. He hadn't thought her pretty before. Now he thought she was downright ugly.

When her eyes fell on him, her expression again reminded him of the scornful way Sergeant

McCandless had looked at him the day he tried to steal her father's fence rail—an unanswerable look combining disdain with distaste and hatred.

"You got to marry me," she said.

He stared at her. He had not spoken to anyone in weeks and he croaked, "What?"

"I got your baby in me." She sounded country, not city like she usually did.

"I never. Why you talking that way? I don't like it."

Sergeant McCandless snapped onto her face. "You got to marry me, hear?"

"I can't marry you."

"Why not?"

"I'm married a-ready."

The sergeant knew better.

"I shouldn't never have trusted you," she said. "I seen you marching by with all them others and you looked like you was playing soldier. And when you come back like you done I felt sorry for you even if you were a deserter. That was dumb of me."

"I weren't no deserter—I told you what me and Jess done."

She shook her head. "And the first chance you got, you done that to me. And now you got to marry me."

"I ain't going to marry you."

"Yes, you are. If you don't, soon as I tell Mother, Scoot'll take you back to the Army and you'll be shot. If you try to get away Scoot will track you down and shoot you himself. Father says he's the best shot he ever seen, in or out of the army."

He believed her.

“All right. But if I’m going to marry you, you got to do what I tell you, starting right now.”

*Sergeant McCandless!*

“Come on,” she said. She crawled through the tunnel into the cave that had once been hers and was now his. She lay down on his blanket.

“Take off your clothes.”

She stood up and stripped, not looking at him. She stretched out on the blanket again and folded her arms over her face. She opened her legs and he lay down on her. She was stiff as a ramrod, every muscle rigid. But he was, too, and he didn’t mind. He didn’t mean to marry her, though. He could feel her bones sticking into him. He wanted a woman with meat on her bones.

Every afternoon she came to him, bringing a chicken leg or pork chop and stale bread, sometimes milk and, when he demanded it, an occasional piece of pie or cake.

He accused her of feeding him table scraps. She looked at him, *Sergeant McCandless* on her face, saying nothing. He ate and then she stripped and folded her arms over her face while he got on her. He told her to take her arms down. She refused. When he exposed her face by force, he was surprised at the strength it took to move those pipe stem arms. She kept her eyes closed even then. If she did look at him, he knew it would be with her *Sergeant McCandless* look, but he needed to know for sure. It seemed like something was missing if she wouldn’t look at him when he was inside her.

“Open your eyes,” he said.

She clamped her teeth. She wouldn't open her eyes, any more than she would willingly take her arms down. It wasn't until he was done that she looked at him, a quick, contemptuous glance. *Sergeant McCandless!*

She picked up her clothes, silently dressed, and silently left, leaving him with the uneasy feeling that it was he who had been bested. Her silence bothered him as much as her *Sergeant McCandless* look or her talking country. He wanted her to tell him things, what was going on at the bottom of the hill, what she felt and thought. If she spoke at all, it was in monosyllables, communicating little, volunteering nothing, and most of the time not even answering questions. Her not speaking made him feel he was not connected with her, even when he was.

He did not understand what had gone wrong. Why wasn't she as soft-seeming and friendly as she'd been? Why did she look at him as she might at a cow pie in her path, something to be stepped over and otherwise ignored? She had asked for it, hadn't she?

He began to suspect there were things Jess Fellows had not told him about women, things that she could tell him, if only she would. But she wouldn't say a thing, or at least nothing that mattered. She had the answers, he was positive, and could have told him, but she would not. Now and then he grew angry and drew back his hand to hit her. That made her look him square in the face, but *Sergeant McCandless* made him bring his hand down. He did not dare do otherwise.

The only thing she would talk freely about was marriage.

"When?"

“Not yet. And next time, bring me some pickled pigs’ feet.”

Instead of pigs’ feet, she brought her mother.

Amos lay on his belly and peered through the weeds as they climbed the hill to the tunnel. Her mother was no taller than Minnie, but broader and heavier—a sturdy figure, wearing a white bonnet that kept him from seeing her face, a high-necked gray dress that reached to her shoe tops, and a starched white apron. She came up the steep hillside easily, without hesitation or pausing for breath. There was something imperious in her bearing. Here she was, a woman and not a large one at that, striding through the underbrush like a colonel. He scuttled through the tunnel back to his cave and then into other tunnels, hiding. When he came out Minnie and her mother were gone.

The next morning when he rolled out of his blanket the black giant called Scoot was squatting by Minnie’s table. He was too big for her chair. The long-barreled Remington rested on his knees.

“Who you?” Amos asked, though he knew.

“Scoot. I’m Scoot, and I’m taking you to see Miz Wilkes.”

Amos decided to pretend not to be scared, though he was. The man with the gun had been a slave—in Amos’s eyes was still a slave—and therefore would be accustomed to obeying orders.

“Get outa here. I ain’t going to have no slaves in here.”

Scoot threw back his head and laughed, a deep laugh resonating far down in his chest. He stood up and gestured with the pistol.

“Up, boy.” His voice was as deep as his laugh. “Miz Nellie, she wants to see you and I’m taking you to her.”

It wasn’t right, a slave ordering a white man around, but Amos couldn’t think what to do about it.

“Move them feet, boy.”

Scout crawled through the tunnel after him. Once outside Amos had a moment or two in which he might have run away. But he remembered Minnie’s saying that Scout was the best shot her father had ever known. He slouched down the hillside ahead of Scout, trying to look nonchalant. Children peeked around doorways. Some of the children were black and some white, the white ones being Minnie’s little brothers and sisters.

Amos felt shamed by having a slave, even a freed slave, herd him along like a criminal, and nothing he could do without getting shot.

Scout rapped on the door of the last cabin.

“Come in,” a woman called.

Scout threw open the door and pushed Amos inside with his gun. “Take off your hat, boy.”

Amos snatched off the remnants of his floppy-brimmed slouch hat. The only light came from the open door and small windows high on either side of a fireplace. Minnie’s mother sat, rocking and knitting. Scout prodded Amos to stand where the light from the doorway fell on his face. He could not see Minnie’s mother very well at first, but when his eyes adjusted to the dimness he saw where Minnie got her *Sergeant McCandless* look.

But she was polite.

“I am Nellie Wilkes, Minnie’s mother.”

“Yes’m.”

He darted his eyes around the cabin, not wanting to look at her. The cabin was much like the one Amos had grown up in, but this one was whitewashed and clean. There were pictures on the wall and rugs on the floor, which was of hewn boards and not of packed dirt like the one at home. The bed was made and the table was neatly set.

“What is your name, young man?”

“Amos, ma’am. Amos Gower.”

He didn’t mean to call her ma’am, but she drew it from him like a claw hammer draws a nail.

“How old are you, Amos?”

“Eighteen, ma’am.”

“Minnie said 17, but I don’t believe that, either. How old are you, Amos?”

“Sixteen, ma’am?”

*Sergeant McCandless.*

“Close on, ma’am.” Every time he opened his mouth, a *ma’am* he didn’t know he had in him leapt out.

Knitting needles clicked.

“Who are your people?”

“My people, ma’am?”

“Your parents. Who is your father?”

“Pa’s a farmer, ma’am, but he’s got him a bad back.”

“What is wrong with his back?”

“It hurts, ma’am.”

“So he doesn’t do much?”

“No, ma’am. Not much. His back hurts right smart.”

“He sits around and drinks?”

How did she know that? He wiped his palms with the hat he clutched. His throat was dry as a dusty road. He said nothing.

"Where is this farm? Where do you come from?"

"Georgia, ma'am."

"Where in Georgia?"

He stared at her. She repeated her question.

"I don't know, ma'am."

"You don't know?"

"No'm. Nobody never told me. There weren't no place to give a name to, ma'am, just old man Cannady's store down the road a piece."

"How much schooling have you had, Amos?"

"I went to school, ma'am. I can write my name, ma'am."

"Can you read?"

"Yes, ma'am!"

She picked up a Bible from the table beside her and opened it, taking a moment to find the passage she wanted. She handed it to Scoot, who tucked his pistol under one arm and held the Bible open in front of Amos.

"Read the Sermon on the Mount," she said. "Matthew, Chapter 5."

"I don't know no Matthew."

She laughed. So did Scoot.

He stood silent, hating her, hating them both.

"Read him a bit of it, Scoot. Perhaps that'll help him get started."

Scoot turned the Bible around and read, booming out the words like a preacher. "And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him: and he opened

his mouth, and taught them, saying, Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Again Scoot held the Bible in front of Amos.

“I can’t make it out, ma’am. It’s too dark in here.”

“The truth is, you can’t read. Isn’t that so?”

“I can write my name, ma’am.”

“An educated man,” Mrs. Wilkes said. She laughed, Scoot too. Amos shuffled his feet and turned his cap in his hands.

“Tell me more about your family. Tell me about your mother.”

Her commanding manner would have kept him in the room even if Scoot hadn’t been standing there, six-shooter in hand.

“My ma’s dead, ma’am. Pa, he said get out.”

“Brothers and sisters?”

“Yes’m.”

“Older or younger?”

“I’m the baby, ma’am. Ma, she died a-borning me.”

“Your father sent you away. Didn’t your brothers and sisters take you in?”

“No, ma’am. Pa said he didn’t want me pestering my brothers and sisters. He said they got troubles enough without me, ma’am.”

“And now you’ve got my poor little Minnie with child, sweet, dreamy Minnie.”

“I never, ma’am. No, I never.”

*Sergeant McCandless.* Scoot lifted his pistol. Lifted it slowly, as though he were about to aim it.

“Young man, were my husband here, he would horsewhip you and send you back to the company you so shamefully deserted during battle. You would

almost surely be shot or hanged at once as a coward and deserter, as well as a rapist. But he is gone and I don't know when or if he will return. So I must handle this."

He swallowed hard at every word. *Horsewhip. Coward. Deserter. Shot. Hanged.*

His Adam's apple jumped like his pa swallowing rotgut.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, though she had said nothing to say yes to.

"Minnie has persuaded herself that there is nothing for her to do but marry you, and she insists on doing it. She is a stubborn child despite her dreaminess—the most strong-willed little person I have ever known.

"She will not change her mind. She does not love you, you must understand, but Minnie has always been a romantic. She has supposed all her life that someday a prince would come to her. She would marry her prince and live happily ever after. You have destroyed that dream, childish and foolish though it was, and she cannot believe that any man worth his salt will ever look at her again without scorn. Thanks to you, she feels dirtied. Perhaps she is."

Amos wanted to protest but did not know what to say. He turned his hat in his hands, shuffled his feet, and stayed quiet.

"I have told her she does not have to marry you or anyone else. Gossiping tongues cannot hurt her for the simple reason that we will pay no attention to them. I have told her I would prefer she did not marry you, because a brutal, ignorant boy can only grow into a brutal, ignorant man who will do nothing but make

her unhappy. The only difference between what you are today and what you will be in three or four years and all your life is in height and weight and strength.”

Again Amos felt the need to protest her description of him, but he couldn't manage more than a strangling sound in his throat.

“I have warned her that by marrying you she will only suffer and that her child would be better off with no father than with such a father as you. But Minnie feels that she was at fault for putting herself in a position that allowed you to do what you did. She also feels that if you were to be shot she would be responsible for your death. She cannot bear the thought. She is a soft-hearted child—always has been. She once stepped on a frog and held a funeral for it. She buried it next to her grandmother and put a little white cross on the grave. Rather than see you killed, as you deserve, she is determined to sacrifice herself for the mistake she made when she took in a deserter about whom she knew nothing and of whom she should have expected nothing but what happened.

“She learned too late that when you touch dirt you come away dirty.”

Amos did not feel he should have to bear insults like that. This rich lady with *Sergeant McCandless* on her face and highfalutin' language in her mouth had no right to call him dirt, no right that he knew of. But he did not have the words to say what he had in mind to say. And Scoot was there with his pistol. There was no way for him to grab her and slap her the way he felt he should.

She stared at him—would have stared him in the eye if he'd let her—and said all those ugly things

calmly, without raising her voice. She might have been discussing a pig wallowing in the mud, or a slave. That was it, he decided. She was talking to him like he was a slave, a nothing. When she paused, waiting for him to speak, it took time for him to find his voice.

“I ain’t going to marry her. I don’t have to and ain’t nobody going to make me — ma’am.”

“I see there is one thing we agree on. You understand as well as I that it would be better for both you and Minnie if you didn’t marry.

“But the rest of it we may think differently about. You can marry Minnie or you can go with Scoot to the nearest Confederate regiment to be turned in as a deserter and a rapist. You would be dead within a day. That would please me. I would not be pleased to have you marry my daughter.”

“I ain’t going to do neither one,” he said. He turned toward the door.

Before he had gone a step he was on the floor with Scoot’s foot on his chest, holding him down.

“Put him in the root cellar, please, Scoot. We’ll keep him there until he decides what he wants to do.”

Scoot lifted three boards on the floor and rolled Amos into a dark hole.

He fell on a mound of what he took to be sweet potatoes. He fell hard, the breath knocked out of him. Scoot threw his hat in after him and put the boards in place. Amos heard a scraping noise and a thump overhead as Scoot moved a box or chest over the boards. Cracks between the boards admitted strips of light except where Scoot’s feet and the box blocked it.

Amos could see nothing. He could hear voices, however.

“Not a prepossessing young man, do you think, Scoot?”

“No ma’am, he’s not a boy I’d want my girl to wed.”

“Nor do I, but she’s in a family way and he’s the father, for better or worse, and Minnie insists on it.”

Amos heard feet moving overhead, heard the voices, but could not tell what was being said. He knew only that as usual somebody was deciding his fate and he had nothing to say about it.

*A Hero of Brag*

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