Mister Slaughter

By

Robert McCammon
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PART ONE: The Monster’s Tooth

One

Listen! Said the October wind, as it swirled and swooped through the streets of New York. I have a story to tell!

About change in the weather, and the whethers of men! Whether this one staggering past, the spindly gent, shall right himself against my onslaught before I take him to the wall, or whether that one there, with his prodigious belly, shall be fast enough to catch his tricorn as I throw it from his head! With a shove and a shriek I pass through the town, and what fast horse might ride me down?

None, thought Matthew Corbett in reply.

To be sure! Respect my comings and goings, and know that something unseen may prove a force no man may master.

Of that Matthew was undeniably certain, for he was having one devil of a time holding onto his own tricorn and balancing himself against the blasts.

It was near eight-thirty on a Thursday night, this second week of October. The young man was on a mission. He had been told to be at the corner of Stone and Broad streets at half past eight, and if he valued his hide he would report as ordered. Hudson Greathouse, his associate and senior member of the Herrald Agency, was in no mood these days to brook Matthew any easement concerning who was the boss and who was well; it was true enough, the slave.

But, as Matthew continued his brisk battle south along Queen Street with other citizens seemingly pushing against invisible walls in one direction or flying like bundles of empty clothes past him in the other, he thought that Greathouse's harsh attitude of late had more to do with celebrity than slavery.

After all, Matthew was famous.

Your hat's getting a bit high, don't you think? Greathouse had often asked since the successful conclusion of the mystery concerning the Queen of Bedlam.

Yes, Matthew had answered, as calmly as possible when faced with a human bull ready to charge any utterance that had the agitation of a red flag. But I do wear it well. Which was not enough to make the bull charge, but enough to make it snort with ominous anticipation of future violence.

The truth being, Matthew really was a celebrity. His exploits to determine the identity of the Masker and his near demise at the Chapel estate in the summer had given the town's printmaster, Marmaduke Grigsby, enough material for a barrage of Earwigs that made the broadsheet even more popular than the Saturday night dogfights up at Peck's Wharf. The initial story, written right after the end of the episode in July, had been restrained and factual enough, due to High Constable Gardner Lillehorne's threats to set fire to the printing press, but after Marmaduke's granddaughter Berry had detailed her own part in the picture the old newshound had nearly begun baying at the moon outside Matthew's residence, which was a refurbished dairyhouse just behind Grigsby's own home and printshop.

Out of decorum and common sense, Matthew had resisted telling the particulars of the tale, but in time his defenses had been weakened and finally crushed. By the third week of September the "Untold Story of our Own Matthew Corbett's Adventure with Venomous Villains and Threat of A Hideous Death, Part the First" was set in type, and the flames of industry-and the Grigsby imagination-had really started burning.

Whereas one day Matthew was simply a young man of twenty-three who had risen by fate and circumstance from New York orphan to magistrate's clerk to an associate "problem solver" at the London-based Herrald Agency, he was by the following afternoon being trailed by an ever-swelling mob of people who thrust upon him quills, inkbots and Earwigs so as to sign his name across the premier chapter of this adventure, which he hardly recognized anymore as being his own experience. It was apparent that whatever Marmaduke did not know for sure, he was
certain to invent.

By the third and final chapter, published last week, Matthew had been transformed from a simple citizen among the nearly five-thousand other New Yorkers of 1702 into a knight of justice who had not only prevented the collapse of the colony's economic underpinnings but also saved every maiden of the town from being ravished by Chapel's minions. Running with Berry for their lives across a dead vineyard with fifty killers and ten trained vultures at their backs? Fighting a trio of blood-crazed Prussian swordsmen? Well, there was a seed of truth at the center of this fiction, but the fruit around it was a fantasy.

Nevertheless, the series had been a boon for Grigsby and the Earwig, and was much discussed not only in the taverns but around the wells and horse troughs. It was said that even Governor Lord Cornbury had been seen strolling the Broad Way one afternoon, wearing a yellow wig, white gloves and his feminine finery in tribute to his cousin, Queen Anne, as he read the most recent broadsheet with rapt, purple-painted eyes.

A gritty gust at the intersection of Queen and Wall streets whirled around Matthew the commingled aromas of fish, tarbuckets, wharf pilings, stockyard animals and their fodder, the contents of chamberpots thrown from house windows onto the cobblestones, and the bittersweet winey smell of the East River at night. If Matthew was not in the heart of New York, he was surely in its nose.

The wind had whipped into many of the lanterns that hung from street-corner posts and put the quit to their flames. Every seventh house was required by law to hang out a lamp, but tonight no man—not the wandering constables nor even their chief Lillehorne, for all his own puffery—might command the wind to spare a wick. This unceasing tumult, which had begun around five o'clock and showed no signs of abatement, had brought Matthew to his philosophical mental discussion with the bellowing bully. He had to hurry now, for even without consulting the silver watch in his waistcoat pocket he knew he was a few minutes late.

Soon enough, with the wind now pushing at his back, Matthew crossed the cobbles of Broad Street and by the tortured candle of a remaining lamp spied his taskmaster waiting for him ahead. Their office was only a little further along Stone Street at Number Seven, up a flight of narrow stairs into a loft said to be haunted by the previous tenants who'd murdered each other over coffee beans. Matthew had heard a few creaks and thumps in the last few weeks, but he was sure those were just the complaints of Dutch building stones settling into English earth.

Before Matthew could fully reach Hudson Greathouse, who wore a woolen monmouth cap and a long dark cloak that flailed about him like raven's wings, the other man strode forward to meet him and, in passing, said loudly against the blast, "Follow me!"

Matthew did, almost losing his tricorn once more when he turned to retrace his path. Greathouse walked into the wind as if he owned it.

"Where are we going?" Matthew shouted, but either his voice was swept away or Greathouse chose not to answer.

Though bound together in service to the Herrald Agency, the two "problem-solvers" could never be taken for brothers. Matthew was tall and slim, yet with the toughness of a river reed about him. He had a lean long-jawed face and a thatch of fine black hair under his ebony tricorn. His pale candlelit countenance attested to his interest in books and nighttime games of chess at his favorite tavern, the Trot Then Gallop. Due to his recent celebrity, and the fact that he thought himself deserving of such status since he really had almost been killed in defense of justice, he'd taken an interest in dressing as a New York gentleman should. In his new black suit and waistcoat with fine gray stripes, one of two outfits tailored for him by Benjamin Owles, he was every bit the Jack O'Dandy. His new black boots, just delivered on Monday, were polished to a glossy shine. He had an order in for a blackthorn walking-stick, which he'd noted many young gentlemen of importance in the town carrying about, but as this item had to be shipped from London he wouldn't enjoy its company until springtime. He kept himself clean as a soapdish and shaved to the pink. His cool gray eyes with their hints of twilight blue were clear and on this night untroubled. They cast a direct and steady gaze that some might say—and as Grigsby had said, in the second chapter—"could cause the ruffian to lay down his burden of evil lest it prove as heavy as prison chains."

That old inkthrower sure knew how to turn a phrase, Matthew thought.
At age forty-seven, he was a broad-shouldered strapper who stood three inches over six feet, a height and dimension that upon meeting him caused most other men to look down at the ground to find their courage. When the craggy-faced Greathouse cast his deep-set black eyes around a room, the men in that room quite simply seemed to freeze for fear of catching his attention. The opposite effect was induced upon the women, for Matthew had seen the churchiest of ladies become a twittering flirt within scent of Greathouse’s lime shaving soap. Also in contrast to Matthew, the great one had no use for the whims of current fashion. An expensively-tailored suit was out of the question; the most he’d go was a pale blue ruffled shirt, clean but well-worn, to accompany plain gray knee breeches, simple white stockings, and sturdy, unpolished boots. Under his cap his thick hair was iron-gray, pulled back into a queue and tied with a black ribbon.

If the two had anything in common other than the Herrald Agency, it was the scars they each wore. Matthew’s badge of honor was a crescent that began just above the right eyebrow and curved into the hairline, a lifelong reminder of a battle in the wilderness with a bear three years ago, and lucky he was to still be walking the earth. Greathouse bore a jagged scar that sliced through the left eyebrow, and was—as he had explained in a petulant voice—presented to him by a broken teacup thrown by his third wife. Ex-wife, of course, and Matthew had never asked what had become of her. But, to be fair, Greathouse’s real collection of scars—from an assassin’s dagger, a musket ball, and a rapier swing—was worn beneath his shirt.

They were approaching the three-story edifice of City Hall, built of yellow stone, that stood where Broad Street met Wall. Lantern lights showed in some of the windows, as the business of the town demanded late hours. Scaffolding stood alongside the building; a cupola was being erected on the roof’s highest point, the better to display a Union flag nearer Heaven. Matthew wondered how the town’s coroner, the efficient but eccentric Ashton McCaggers, liked hearing the workmen hammering and sawing up there over his head, since he lived in his strange museum of skeletons and grisly artifacts in City Hall’s attic. Matthew mused also, as Greathouse turned to the right and began walking along Wall Street toward the harbor, that McCaggers’ slave Zed would soon be up in the cupola looking out over the thriving town and seaport, for Matthew knew the giant African enjoyed sitting silently on the roof while the world bargained, sweated, swore, and generally thrashed at itself below.

Not much further, past the Cat’s Paw tavern on the left, and Matthew realized where Greathouse was taking him.

Since the Masker’s reign of terror had ended at midsummer, there’d been no more murders in town. If Matthew were to volunteer to a visitor the most likely place to witness a killing, it would be behind the scabby red door that Greathouse now approached. Above that door was a weatherbeaten red sign proclaiming The Cock’a’tail. The tavern’s front window had been shattered so many times by fighting patrons that it was simply sealed over with rough planks, through which dirty light leaked onto Wall Street. Of the dozen-odd taverns in New York, this was the one Matthew most studiously avoided. The mix of rogues and high-pockets who thought themselves financial wizards were fueled here in their arguments over the value of such commodities as head souse and beaver pelts by the cheapest, nastiest and most potent apple brandy ever to inflame a brain.

Distressingly for Matthew, Greathouse opened the door and turned to motion him in. The yellow lamplight vomited out a fog of pipesmoke that was at once carried off by the wind. Matthew clenched his teeth, and as he approached the evil-looking doorway he saw a streak of lightning dance across the dark and heard the kettledrum of thunder up where God watched over damned fools. "Shut that door!" immediately bawled a voice that both blasted and croaked, like a cannon firing a load of bullfrogs. "You're lettin’ out the stink!"

"Well," Greathouse said with a gracious smile, as Matthew stepped into the rancid room. "We can't have that, can we?" He shut the door, and the skinny gray-bearded gent who was sitting in a chair at the back, having been interrupted in his massacre of a good fiddle, instantly returned to his display of screeching aural violence.

The cannon-voiced bullfrog behind the bar, whose name was Lionel Skelly and whose fiery red beard almost reached the bottom of his stained leather waistcoat, resumed his task of pouring a fresh—too use a word imperfectly—mug of apple destruction for a patron who turned a fishy eye upon the new arrivals.

"What, ho!" said Samuel Baiter, a man known to have bitten off a nose or two. To add to his charms, he was a heavy gambler, a vicious wife-beater, and spent much of his time with the ladies at Polly Blossom’s rose-colored house on Petticoat Lane. He had the flat, cruel face and stubby nose of a brawler, and Matthew realized the man was
either too drunk or too stupid to be cowed by Hudson Greathouse. "The young hero and his keeper! Come, have a
drink with us!" Baiter grinned and lifted his mug, which slopped oily brown liquid onto the floorboards.

The second man in that declaration of "us" was a new figure in town, having arrived in the middle of September
from England. He was almost as big as Greathouse, with huge square shoulders that strained his dark brown suit.
He'd removed his tricorn, which was the same shade of Broad Way mud, to display why he was called "Bonehead"
Boskins. His scalp was completely bald. His broad forehead protruded over a pair of heavy black eyebrows like,
indeed, a wall of bone. Matthew didn't know much about Boskins, other than he was in his early thirties and
unemployed, but had ambitions of getting into the fur trade. The man smoked a clay pipe and looked from Matthew
to Greathouse and back again with small, pale blue eyes that, if showing any emotion at all, displayed utter
indifference.

"We're expecting someone," Greathouse answered, his voice light and easy. "But another time, I'm sure." Without
waiting for a response, he grasped Matthew's elbow and guided the younger man to a table. "Sit," Greathouse said
under his breath, and Matthew scraped a chair back and eased himself down.

"As you please." Baiter quaffed from his drink and then lifted it high. He summoned a half-lipped smile. "To the
young hero, then. I hear Polly's quite taken with you these days."

Greathouse sat down with his back toward the corner, his expression relaxed. Matthew took the measure of the
room. Ten or twelve dirty lanterns hung overhead, from the end of chains on hooks in the smoke-greased rafters.
Under a floating cloud of pipesmoke there were seven other men and one blowsy lady in attendance, two of the men
passed out with their heads in a gray puddle of what might have been clam chowder on their table. No, there was an
eighth man too, also passed out and face-down at the table to Matthew's left, and as Matthew recognized the green-
glassed lantern of a town constable Dippen Nack lifted his swollen-eyed face and struggled to focus. Beside an
overturned mug was the brutish little constable's black billyclub.

"You," Nack rasped, and then his forehead thumped down upon the wood.

"Quite taken," Baiter went on, obviously more stupid than drunk. "With your adventures, I mean. I've heard she's
offered you a what did she call it? a 'season pass'?

The invitation, on elegant stationery, had indeed arrived at Matthew's office soon after the first chapter was
published. He had no intention of redeeming it, but he appreciated the gesture.

"You've read about Matthew Corbett, haven't you, Bonehead? If it wasn't for him, we couldn't walk the streets
safe at night, could we? Couldn't even go out for a drink and a poke. Well, Polly talks about him all the time," said
Baiter, with an edge of harshness creeping in. "About what a gentleman he is. How smart, and how noble. As if the
rest of us men were just little creatures to be tolerated. Little useless creatures, but oh how that whore can go on
about him!"

"I think the whole damned thing was made up, is what I think!" said the blowsy lady, whose sausage-skin was a
gown thirty pounds ago. "Ain't nobody could live, fightin' fifty men! Ain't that what I think, George?" When there
was no reply, she kicked the chair of one of the unconscious patrons and he answered with a muffled groan.

"Fifty men!" Dippen Nack lifted his head again. The sweat of effort sparkled on his ruddy, cherub-cheeked face.
The constable was, in Matthew's opinion, though, closer to a devil than a cherub. Anybody who stole the gaol keys
and went in at night to pee on the prisoners did not rate high in his book of life. "A damned lie! And me, boppin' that
Evans bastard on the bopper and savin' Corbett's life, and not even gettin' my name in that rag! Takin' a knife in the
arm for my trouble, too! It ain't fair!" Nack made a strangled sound, as if he were about to start crying.

"Sure he's a liar, Sam," said Bonehead, with a small sip from his own mug, "but that's a fine suit he's wearin'.
Fittin', for such a smart cock to strut around in. How much that suit cost you?" This was spoken as Bonehead stared
into the depths of his drink.

Now Matthew began to suspect why Greathouse had brought him here. Of all places, to the tavern where he knew
two men had died in brutal fights right on this floor, which looked to him to be more blood-stained than brandy-
splashed. Having clerked for Magistrate Nathaniel Powers, Matthew also knew that Lionel Skelly himself was no stranger to violence; the tavern keeper had cut off a man's hand with an axe he kept behind the bar. It didn't pay to try to swipe coins from the cashbox in here.

Greathouse spoke up, to parry the question: "Way too much, in my opinion."

There was a silence.

Bonehead Boskins slowly put his mug on the bar and aimed his eyes at Greathouse. Now he looked every inch a man who was neither too drunk nor too stupid but perhaps just enough of both to light his wick. In fact, he looked supremely confident in his ability to maim. Indeed, eager. "I was speakin' to the young hero," he said. "Not to you, old man."

Yep, Matthew thought as his heartbeat quickened and his guts went squirmy. Sure as rain. The crazed maniac had brought them here to get into a fight. It wasn't enough that Matthew had been doing very well in his arduous lessons on swordplay, map-making, preparing and firing a flintlock pistol, horsemanship and other such necessities of the trade. No, he wasn't progressing fast enough in that "fist combat" nonsense that Greathouse imposed upon him. Remember, Greathouse had said many times, you fight with your mind before you use your muscles.

It seemed that Matthew was about to get a demonstration of the great one's mind. And Heaven help us, he thought.

Greathouse stood up. He was still smiling, though the smile had thinned.

Matthew again counted the heads. The fiddler had stopped his fiddling. Was he a fighter, or a fixture? George and his unconscious companion were still face-down, but they might come to life at the first smack. Who could say what Dippen Nack would do? The blowsy lady was grinning; her front teeth had already been knocked out. Baiter would probably wait for Bonehead to bash a skull before he started nose-chewing. Skelly's axe was always near at hand. Of the five others, two looked like rough-edged wharfmen who craved a good bustarole. The remaining three, at a back table, were dressed in nice suits that they might not want to disfigure and were puffing on churchwarden pipes, though certainly they were no reverends. A throw of the dice, Matthew thought, but he really hoped Greathouse was not such a careless gamesman.

Instead of advancing on Bonehead, Greathouse casually removed his cap and cloak and hung them on wallpegs. "We just came in to spend a little time. As I said, we're expecting someone. Neither Mr. Corbett nor I want any trouble."

"Who're you expectin'?" Bonehead leaned against the bar and crossed his thick arms. A seam at the shoulder was threatening to burst. "Your lady friend, Lord Cornhole?" Beside him, Baiter sniggered.

"No," Greathouse replied, "we're expecting a man I might hire to join our agency. I thought this would be an interesting place to meet." At that moment, the door opened, Matthew saw a shadow on the threshold, heard the clump of boots, and Greathouse said, "Here he is now!"

Zed the slave walked in, wearing a black suit, white stockings and a white silk cravat.

As the place went quiet except for an inrush of breath and Matthew's eyes bulged in their sockets, Matthew looked at Greathouse with an effort that almost broke his neck and managed to say, "Have you gone mad?"
Mad or not, Greathouse had a gleam in his eye and a measure of pride in his voice when he next addressed the slave: "Well! Don't you look upright!"

How much of this praise Zed understood was unknown. The slave stood with his back against the door, his wide shoulders slightly bowed as if he feared disturbing the tavern's precarious peace. His black, fathomless eyes moved from Greathouse to take in the other patrons and then back again, in what was almost to Matthew's viewpoint a gaze of supplication. Zed didn't want to be here, no more than he was wanted.

"That's the coroner's crow!" came a shrill cry from the lady. "I seen him carryin' a dead man easy as a sack a' feathers!"

This was no exaggeration. Zed's tasks in service to Ashton McCaggers included the cartage of bodies from the streets. Matthew had also witnessed the slave's formidable feats of strength, down in the cold room in City Hall's cellar.

Zed was bald and massive, nearly the same height as Hudson Greathouse but broader across the back, shoulders and chest. To look upon him was to view in its full and mysterious force all the power of the dark continent, and so black was he that his flesh seemed to radiate a blue glow under the yellow lamps. Upon his face-cheeks, forehead
and chin—were tribal scars that lay upraised on the skin, and in these were the stylized Z, E, and D by which McCaggers had named him. McCaggers had evidently taught him some rudimentary English to perform his job but, alas, could not teach him to speak, for Zed's tongue had been severed from its root long before the slavership made fast to the Great Dock.

Speaking of tongues, Skelly found his. It threw forth a croaking blast from Hell: "Get that crow out of here!"

"It's against the law!" shouted Baiter, just as soon as Skelly's voice finished shaking sawdust from the rafters. His face, mottled with crimson, wore the rage of insult. "Get him out or we'll throw him out! Won't we, Bonehead?"

"Law? 'Gainst what law? I'm a constable, by God!" Nack had begun to stir himself once more, but in his condition stirring was a far stretch from standing.

Bonehead had not responded to the threat his companion had just unsheathed; it appeared to Matthew that Bonehead was taking in the size of the new arrival, and Bonehead was not so thick-skulled as to wish to batter himself against that particular ram. Still, being as men are men and men who drink potent liquor become more mettlesome as the mug is drained, Bonehead took a slug of valor and said, though nearly speaking into his drink, "Damn right."

"Oh, gentlemen, let's not go down that path!" Greathouse offered his palms to the bar, affording Matthew a view of the small scars and knots on the man's well-used knuckles. "And surely, sir," he said, addressing Baiter, "you don't really respect any decree Lord Cornbury might have pulled from under his gown, do you?"

"I said," came the tavern-keeper's voice, now not so much a croak as the metallic rasp of a pistol being cocked, "get that beast out of my sight!"

"And out of our noses, too," said one of the gentlemen at the rear, which told Matthew that they had no friends in this particular house.

"Very well, then." Greathouse shrugged, as if it was all done and sealed. "Just one drink for him, and we'll be gone."

"He'll drink my piss 'fore he gets a drop of my liquor!" hollered Skelly, and above Matthew the lanterns swayed on their chains. Skelly's eyes were wide and wild. His red beard, matted with the thousand-and-one grimes of New York, quivered like a viper's tail. Matthew heard the wind howl outside. Heard it shriek and whistle through chinks between the boards, as if trying to gnaw the place to splinters. The two wharfmen were on their feet, and one was cracking his knuckles. Why did men do that? Matthew wondered. To make their fists bigger?

Greathouse never lost his smile. "Tell you what. I'll buy a drink for myself. Then we'll leave everyone in peace. That suit you?" To Matthew's horror, the great man—the great fool!—was already walking to the bar, right up to where Bonehead and Baiter obviously longed to bash him down. Skelly stood where he was without moving, his mouth curled in a sneer, and when Matthew glanced at Zed he saw again that the slave had no interest in taking another step nearer destruction, much less getting a dirty mugful of it.

"He's gonna give it to the crow, is what he's thinkin'!" the lady protested, but it was already a thought in Matthew's mind.

"We're expecting a man I might hire to join our agency," Greathouse had said.

Matthew had heard nothing of this. Hiring Zed? A slave who understood limited English and could speak not a word of it? Greathouse obviously needed no drink here, for he had ample supply of brain-killing liquor in his quarters at Mary Belovaire's boarding house.

As Greathouse approached the bar, Bonehead and Baiter moved away from him like cautious wolves. Matthew stood up, fearing a sudden burst of violence. "Don't you think we ought to—"

"Sit down," Greathouse answered firmly, with a quick glance back that had some warning in it. "Mind your manners, now, we're among good company."
Good company my assbone, Matthew thought. And, hesitantly, he sat down upon it.

The two wharfmen were edging nearer. Greathouse took no notice of them. Nack was rubbing his eyes, blinking at the huge black figure against the door.

"One drink," Greathouse said to Skelly. "Your best, if you please."

Skelly didn't move.

"I'm paying," said Greathouse, in a cool, calm voice, "for one drink." He reached into a pocket, brought out a coin and dropped it into the cashbox that sat atop the bar.

"Go ahead," Baiter spoke up, scowling. "Let him drink and get that black beast out of here, and to Hell with all of 'em."

Greathouse's eyes never left those of the sullen tavern-keeper. "As the gentleman proposes," he said.

Suddenly Skelly smiled, but it was not a pretty sight. It revealed the broken black teeth in the front of his mouth, and showed that some faces wore a smile like the devil trying on a halo. It was just wrong. Because of that hideous smile, Matthew felt the danger in the room ratchet up, like a bowstring tightening to lose an evil arrow.

"For sure, sir, for sure!" said Skelly, who then turned away to fetch a mug from a shelf and uncork a bottle of the usual nasty brandy. With a flourish, he poured into the mug a coin's worth. He thumped the mug down in front of Greathouse. "There you are, sir. Drink up!"

Greathouse paused, measuring the distance of Bonehead, Baiter and the two slowly approaching wharfmen. Now the three well-dressed gentlemen were on their feet, puffing their pipes and watching intently. Matthew stood up again, no matter what Greathouse had told him; he glanced at Zed and saw that even the slave was crouched in a position of readiness, but for what Matthew did not know.

Greathouse reached out and put his hand on the mug.

"One minute, sir," said Skelly. "You did say you wanted the best, didn't you? Well, lemme sweeten it for you." And, so saying, he leaned his head forward and drooled vile brown spittle into the drink. "There you are, sir," he said, again with that devil's smile, when he'd finished. "Now either you drink it, or let's see you give it to the crow."

Greathouse stared at the mug. "Hm," he said. His left eyebrow, the one with the teacup scar across it, began twitching. He said nothing more for a space of time. Bonehead began chuckling, and the lady just plain cackled. Dippen Nack gripped his constable's lantern and his black billyclub and began to try to stand up, but without a third arm he was having no luck at the task.

"Hm," Greathouse said again, inspecting the froth that bubbled atop the liquid.

"Drink up, then," Skelly offered. "Goes down smooth as shit, don't it, boys?"

To the credit of their good sense, no one answered.

Greathouse took his hand from the mug. He stared into Skelly's eyes. "I fear, sir, that I've lost my thirst. I beg your pardon for this intrusion, and I ask only that I might retrieve my coin, since my lips have not tasted of your best."

"No, sir!" The smile disappeared as if slapped away. "You bought the drink! The coin stays!"

"But I have no doubt you can pour the liquor back into the bottle. As I'm sure you often do, when patrons are unable to finish their portions. Now I'll just take my coin and we'll be on our way." He began reaching toward the coinbox, and Matthew saw Skelly's right shoulder give a jerk. The bastard's hand had found that axe behind the bar.

"Hudson!" Matthew shouted, the blood pounding at his temples.
But the great man’s hand would not be stopped. Greathouse and Skelly still stared at each other, locked in a silent
test of wills, as one hand extended and another prepared to chop it off at the wrist.

In no particular hurry, Greathouse reached into the coinbox and let his fingers touch copper.

It was hard to tell exactly what happened next, for it happened with such ferocity and speed that Matthew thought
everything was blurred and dreamlike, as if the mere scent of the brandy was enough to give a man the staggers.

He saw the axe come up, clenched hard in Skelly's hand. Saw the glint of lamplight on its business edge, and had
the sure thought that Greathouse was going to miss tomorrow's rapier lesson. The axe rose up to its zenith and hung
there for a second, as Skelly gritted his teeth and tensed to bring it crashing down through flesh, sinew and bone.

But here was the blurred part, for the axeblow was never delivered.

There came from the direction of the door a sound of Satan's minions thrashing in their chains, and Matthew
turned his head fast enough to see Zed whipping out with the chain he'd just leaped up and wrenched off its hook
from an overhead rafter. The chain still had a firelit lamp attached on the end Zed had thrown, and when it snapped
across the room the chain not only wound itself around Skelly's upraised forearm, but the lamp hit Skelly midsection
in the beard hard enough to shatter its glass sides. It was apparent in an instant that a blue flicker on a lump of wax
might enjoy a feast of New York dirt and a week's drippings of apple brandy, for in a burst of eye-popping fire it
consumed Skelly's beard like a wild dog would eat a muttonchop. As a thousand sparks flew around Skelly's face,
Zed planted his boots and with one solid wrench of the chain pulled the old rapscallion over the bar as easily as
hauling a catfish over the side of a skiff, the only difference being that a catfish still had whiskers.

Skelly hit the floor on his teeth, which perhaps was an improvement to the beauty of his dentals. Even with a
mouthful of blood, he held firm to the axe. Zed began to haul him across the floor hand-over-hand, and with a
tremendous ripping noise the back of the slave's suit coat split wide open as his back swelled. When Skelly was at
his feet, Zed bent down, tore the axe loose and with an ease that looked like a child throwing jackstones he
imbedded the axeblade in the nearest wall.

Some people, it seemed to Matthew, are born stupid. Which could be the only reason that, despite this display of
fighting force, the two wharfmen jumped Greathouse from behind.

There was a flurry of fists and a barrage of cursing from the wharfmen, but then Greathouse had thrown them off
with a shrug of disdain. Instead of smacking them both flat, as Matthew expected, he backed away from them. They
made the supreme miscalculation of rushing after him, their teeth bared and their eyes drink-shiny.

They got perhaps two steps when a flying table hit them in their faces. The sound of noses breaking was not
unmusical. As they went down writhing upon the planks, Matthew shuddered because he'd felt the wind of motion
from Zed on the back of his neck, and he would not wish to be on the receiving end of that storm.

Skelly was spitting blood and croaking oaths on the floor, Baiter was backed up against a wall and looking for a
way to squeeze through a crack, Bonehead drank down another swig of his brandy and watched things unfold with
slitted eyes, and the blowsy lady was on her feet hollering names at Zed that made the very air blue with shame. At
the same time, Greathouse and Mathew saw one of the gentlemen at the rear of the place—the one who'd remarked
on the supposed offense done to his nose—slide a short sword from his cloak that hung on a wallpeg.

"If no one else will get that black bastard out," he announced with a thrust of his chin, "then allow me to run him
through!"

Greathouse retreated. Now Matthew thought that surely it was time to head for the relative safety of the street. Yet
Greathouse offered no suggestion for any of them to run for it, and instead that maddening half-smile was still stuck
to his mouth.

As the swordsman came on, Zed looked at Greathouse with what Matthew thought might be a question, but
whatever it might have asked it was disregarded. Dippen Nack had gotten himself standing, his billyclub lifted to
apply his own brand of constable's justice. When he took a wobbly step toward Zed he was caught at the scruff of
the neck by Greathouse, who looked at him, said a firm "No," and pushed him down into his chair as one would
manage a child. Nack didn't try to stand again, which was just as well.

Giving out a horrendous screech, the lady of the house threw a mug at Zed with the intent of braining him. Before it reached its target, Zed caught the thing one-handed. With only a second's hesitation to take aim, Zed in turn threw the mug to smack against the swordsman's forehead, which laid the man out as if ready to be rolled into a coffin.

"Murr! Murr!" hollered Skelly, obviously wanting to cry Murder but finding his mouth not equal to the job. Still, he skittered past Zed like a dirty crab and burst through the door onto Wall Street, shouting "Murr! Murr!" and going straight for the Cat's Paw across the way.

Bonehead Boskins took the opportunity to act. He stepped forward, moving faster than any man his size might be expected to, and dashed the rest of his brandy directly into Zed's eyes.

The slave made a guttural sound of pain and staggered back, both hands up to clear his vision, and so he did not see-as Matthew and Greathouse did-the brass implement of violence that Bonehead took from a pocket and deftly slipped upon the knuckles of his right fist.

Matthew had had enough of this. "Stop it!" he shouted, and moved to stand alongside Zed, but a hand grasped his coat and yanked him back out of harm's way.

"You just stand where you are," Greathouse said, in that tone he had that meant argument was a dead-end street.

Seeing Zed blinded by liquor, Baiter found his courage. He lunged forward and swung at Zed's skull, hitting him on the left cheekbone, and then gave him a kick on the right shin that made such a noise Matthew was sure the bone had cracked. Quite suddenly two black hands shot out, there was a ripping sound and Baiter had lost most of his shirt. An elbow was thrown, almost a casual movement. The stubby nose above Baiter's gaping mouth exploded so hard blood flew up among the lanterns. Baiter gave a cry like a baby for its mother and fell down upon the floor where he crawled up grasping against Bonehead's legs. The other man shouted, "Get away, damn it!" and kicked viciously to free himself even as Zed used Baiter's shirt to blot the last of the burning brandy out of his eyes.

Then, as Matthew knew it must, finally came the moment when the two bald-headed bulls must collide.

Bonehead waited for no other opportunity; with Baiter kicked aside and sobbing, Bonehead advanced a step and swung his brass widowmaker at Zed's face. The fist passed through empty air, for Zed had dodged the blow; was there one second, the next was not. A second blow had the same result. Bonehead crowded his opponent, the left arm up to deflect a strike and the right punching out with deadly purpose.

"Hit him! Hit him!" squalled the lady.

Bonehead had no lack of trying, and certainly no lack of brutal strength. What he lacked was success, for wherever the brass-knuckled fist struck, there Zed the slave was not. Faster and faster still went the blows, yet faster was Zed in dodging them. Sweat sparkled on Bonehead's brow and the breath heaved in his chest.

Hollering with drunken glee, a throng of men obviously from the Cat's Paw began to boil through the door, which hung half off its hinges due to Skelly's rough exit. Zed paid them no mind, his focus entirely on avoiding a brass kiss.

"Stand still and fight, you black coward!" Bonehead shouted, the spittle spraying from his mouth and his punches becoming wilder and weaker.

Desperate, Bonehead reached out with his left hand to grasp Zed's cravat, the better to hold him still, and no sooner had his fingers locked in silk did Zed's right arm cock back, the fist drove out squarely into Bonehead's jaw, and there came a solid and fearsome thunk of flesh on flesh that caused all the gleeful hollering to hush as if a religious vision had just been witnessed. Bonehead's eyes rolled back, his knees sagged, but he yet gripped hold of Zed and his own right fist was coming up in a blow that was more impulse than aimed, for it was obvious his brain had left the party.

Zed easily dodged it, with a small movement of his head. And then, in what men would later talk about from the
Great Dock to the Post Road, Zed picked Bonehead Boskins up like a sack of cornmeal, swung him around and threw him, bonehead first, through the boarded-over window where so many other, yet so much smaller, victims of altercations had passed. When Bonehead crashed through on his way to a bruising encounter with Wall Street, the entire front wall shook so hard the men gathered there feared it would collapse on them and so retreated in a shrieking mass for their lives. The rafters groaned, sawdust fell, the chains creaked as their lanterns swung back and forth, and High Constable Gardner Lillehorne stood in the shattered doorway to shout, "What in the name of seven devils is going on in here?"

"Sir! Sir!" Nack was up again, staggering on his way to the door. Matthew noted that either the constable had spilled a drink in his lap, or was past need of a chamberpot. "Tried to stop it, sir! Swear I did!" He passed close to Zed and recoiled as if fearing to share Bonehead's method of departure.

"Oh, you shut up," Lillehorne answered. A rather eye-startling picture of fashion in a pumpkin-colored suit and tricorn and yellow stockings above polished brown boots, he came into the room and wrinkled his nose with disgust as he took stock of the scene. "Is anyone dead here?"

"That crow was gonna kill us all!" the lady shouted. She'd taken the liberty of seizing the unfinished mugs of brandy from the table where the wharfmen had been sitting, and had one in each hand. "Look what he did to these poor souls!"

Lillehorne tapped the palm of his gloved left hand with the silver lion's-head that adorned his black-lacquered cane. His long, pallid face with its carefully-trimmed black goatee and mustache surveyed the room, the narrow black eyes the same color as his hair, which some said was dyed liberally with India ink, and which was pulled back into a queue with a ribbon that matched his stockings.

Baiter was still mewling, clasping the ruin of his nose with both hands. The wharfmen were starting to stir, and one of them heaved forth a torrent of foul liquid that made Lillehorne gasp and press a yellow handkerchief to his pinched nostrils. George and his companion had gained consciousness but were still sitting at the table and blinking as if wondering what all the fuss was about. Two of the gentlemen were trying to revive the swordsman, whose legs began to jerk in an effort to outrun the mug that had knocked him into dreamland. At the far back of the room, the fiddler stood in a corner protecting his instrument. Out in the street, the gawkers shouted merrily as they peered through the door and the gaping aperture where Bonehead had passed through.

"Appalling," said Lillehorne. His cold gaze dismissed Matthew, fell upon the giant slave, who stood motionlessly and with his head lowered, and then came to rest on Hudson Greathouse. "I might have known you'd be here, when I heard Skelly hollering two streets away. You're the only one in town who could put such a fright in the old wretch that his beard flew off. Or is the slave responsible for all this mess?"

"I appreciate the compliment," said Greathouse, still wearing his self-satisfied and thoroughly infuriating smile. "But as I'm sure you'll find when you speak to the witnesses-the sober witnesses, that is-Mr. McCaggers' slave was simply preventing any physical harm to come to me or himself. I think he did a very able job."

Lillehorne again turned his attention to Zed, who stared fixedly at the floor. Outside, some of the shouts were turning nasty. Matthew heard "grave-digger's crow", "black beast", and worse, coupled with "murder" and "tar-and-feather".

"It's 'gainst the law!" Nack had suddenly remembered his station. "Sir! It's 'gainst the law for a slave to be in a public tavern!"

"Put him in the gaol!" the lady hollered between drinks. "Hell, put 'em all under the gaol!"

"The gaol?" Greathouse's brows lifted. "Oh, Gardner! Do you think that's really such a good idea? I mean three or four days in there-every one day-and I might be too weak to carry out my duties. And as I and I alone certainly admit arranging Mr. McCaggers' slave to meet me here, I would thus by law be the person to suffer."

"I think it ought to be the pillory, sir! For all of 'em!" Nack's evil little eyes gleamed. He pressed the tip of his billyclub against Matthew's chest. "Or the brandin' iron!"
Lillehorne said nothing for a moment. The shouts outside were becoming uglier still. He cocked his head, looking up first at Greathouse, then at Zed and back again. The high constable was a small-boned and slender man, standing several inches shorter than Matthew, and thus was dwarfed by the larger men. Even so, his ambition in the town of New York was the size of Goliath. To be mayor, nay, even the colony's governor someday was the bellow that fanned his flames. "Which will it be, sir?" Nack urged. "Pillory or iron?"

"The pillory may well be in use," Lillehorne replied without looking at Nack, "by a spineless constable who has gotten himself stinking drunk while on duty and allowed this infraction of the law on his watch. And mind you cease talking about irons before you find one branding your buttocks."

"But sir I mean " Nack sputtered, his face flaming red.

"Silence." Lillehorne waved him aside with the lion's-head. Then he stepped toward Greathouse and almost peered up the man's nostrils. "You hear me, sir. I'm not to be pushed, do you understand that? No matter what. Now, I don't know what game you've been playing at tonight and possibly I don't wish to know, but I don't want it to happen again. Is that clear, sir?"

"Absolutely," said Greathouse without hesitation.

"I demand satisfaction!" shouted the fallen swordsman, who was sitting up with a huge lump and blue bruise on his forehead.

"I'm satisfied that you're a fool, Mr. Giddins." Lillehorne's voice was calm and clear and utterly frigid. "There's a penalty of ten lashes for drawing a sword in a public place with intent to do bodily harm. Do you wish to proceed?"

Giddins said nothing, but reached out and retrieved his weapon.

The shouting in the street, which was drawing more men—certainly more drunkards and ruffians—from the other taverns, was increasing in volume and desire for justice in the form of violence. Zed kept his head down, and sweat was gathering on the back of Matthew's neck. Even Greathouse began to glance a little uneasily at the only way out.

"What I must do galls me sometimes," Lillehorne said. Then he looked into Matthew's face and sneered, "Are you tired of playing the young hero yet?" Without waiting for a reply, he said, "Come on, then. I'll walk you out of here. Nack, you'll stand guard 'til I send someone better." He started for the door, his cane up against his shoulder.

Greathouse got his cap and cloak and followed, then behind came Zed and Matthew. At their backs spewed dirty curses from the patrons who could still speak, and Nack's gaze shot daggers at the younger associate of the Herrald Agency.

Outside, the crowd of thirty or more men and a half-dozen drink-dazed women surged forward. "Get back! Everyone get back!" Lillehorne commanded, but even the voice of a high constable was not enough to douse the fires of this growing conflagration. Matthew knew full well that there were three things sure to draw a crowd in New York, day or night: a street hawker, a speechmaker, and the promise of a rowdy knockabout.

He saw through the crowd that Bonehead had survived his journey with but a gash on his brow and some blood trickling down his face, but he was still obviously less than fighting fit for he was careening around like a top, both fists swinging at the air. Somebody grabbed his arms to pin them, somebody else caught him around the waist, and then with a roar five other men leapt in and there was a free-for-all right there with Bonehead getting bashed and not even able to punch. A skinny old beggar held up a tambourine and began to rattle it around as he pranced back and forth, but someone with musical taste knocked it from his hand and then he began fighting and cursing like a wildman.

Still the citizens pressed in around their true quarry, which was Zed. They plucked at him and danced away. Someone came in to pull at his torn suitcoat, but Zed kept his head lowered and paid no mind. Ugly laughter—the laughter of brutes and cowards—whirled up. As he followed the slow and dangerous procession along Wall Street, Matthew suddenly noted that the wind had ceased blowing. The air was absolutely still, and smelled of the sea.

"Listen." Greathouse had drifted back to walk alongside Matthew. His voice was tight, a rare occurrence. "In the
morning. Seven-thirty at Sally Almond's. I'll explain everything." He paused as he heard a bottle shatter against a wall. "If we get out of this," he added.

"Back! All of you!" Lillehorne was shouting. "I mean it, Spraggs! Let us pass, or I swear I'll brain you!" He lifted his cane, more for effect than anything else. The crowd was thickening, and now hands were balling into fists. "Nelson Routledge! Don't you have anything better to do than-"

He didn't finish what he was saying, for in the next instant no words were needed.

Zed lifted his head toward the ebony sky, and he made a noise from deep in his throat that began as the roar of a wounded bull and rose up and up, up to fearsome heights above the rooftops and chimneys, the docks and barns, the pens and stockyards and slaughterhouses. It began as the roar of a wounded bull, yes, but somewhere on its ascent it changed into the cry of a single child, alone and terrified in the dark.

The sound silenced all other noise. Afterwards, the cry could be heard rolling off across the town in one direction, across the water in the other.

All hands stilled. All fists came open, and all faces, even smirking, drink-swollen and mean-eyed, took on the tightness of shame about the mouth, for everyone in this throng knew a name for misery but had never heard it spoken with such horrible eloquence.

Zed once more lowered his head. Matthew stared at the ground. It was time for everyone to go home, to wives, husbands, lovers and children. To their own beds. Home, where they belonged.

The lightning flashed, the thunder spoke, and before the crowd began to move apart the rain fell upon them with ferocious force, as if the world had tilted on its axis and the cold sea was flooding down upon the land. Some ran for cover, others trudged slowly away with hunched shoulders and grim faces, and in a few minutes Wall Street lay empty in the deluge.
"Very well, then." Matthew folded his hands before him on the table. He'd just hung his tricorn on a hook and sat down a moment before, but Greathouse was too taken with consuming his breakfast of eight eggs, four oily and glistening sausages, and six corncakes on a huge dark red platter to have paid him much attention. "What's the story?"

Greathouse paused in his feasting to sip from his cup of tea, which was as hot and as black as could be coaxed from the kitchen of Sally Almond's tavern on Nassau Street.

There could be no starker contrast between this esteemed establishment and the vile hole they'd visited last night. Whereas City Hall used to be the center of town, one might say that Sally's place—a tidy white stone building with a gray slate roof overhung by a huge oak tree—now claimed that position, as the streets and dwellings continued to grow northward. The tavern was warm and friendly and always smelled of mulling spices, smoked meats and freshly-baked pies. The floorboards were kept meticulously swept, vases of fresh flowers stood about, and the large fieldstone fireplace was put to good use at the first autumn chill. For breakfast, the midday meal and supper, Sally Almond's tavern did a brisk business among locals and travelers alike, in so much that Madam Almond herself often strolled about strumming a gittern and singing in a light, airy and extremely pleasing voice.

Rain had fallen all night, but had ceased near dawn. Through a large window that overlooked the pedestrians, the passing wagons, carts and livestock on Nassau Street could be seen beams of silver sunlight piercing the clouds. Directly across the street was the yellow brick boarding house of Mary Belovaire, where Greathouse was presently living until he found, as he put it, "more suitable quarters for a bachelor". His meaning was that Madam Belovaire, though being of a kind spirit, was wont to monitor the comings-and-goings of her lodgers, and go so far as to suggest they regularly attend church services, refrain from cursing and drinking, and generally comport themselves with great decorum as regards the opposite sex. All of which put Greathouse's large white teeth on the grind. The latest was that Madam Belovaire had been trying to matchmake him with a number of ladies she deemed respectable and upstanding, which in Greathouse's opinion made them as interesting as a bowlful of calf's-foot jelly. So it was no wonder that Greathouse had taken to spending some nights working at Number Seven Stone Street, but Matthew knew the man was sleeping on a cot up there in the company of a brandy bottle.

But not to say either of them had been bored in the last few weeks. Far from it. Since the Herrald Agency had been getting such publicity in the _Earwig_, there'd been no lack of letters and visitors presenting problems to be solved. Matthew had come to the aid of a young man who'd fallen in love with an Indian girl and wished to prove himself worthy before her father, the chief; there'd been the bizarre and disturbing night ride, in which Matthew had determined that not all the creatures on God's earth had been created by the hand of God; and there'd been the incident of the game of jingo and the gambler who'd had his prized horse cheated away from him by a gang of cutthroats. For Greathouse's part, there'd been his ordeal at the House at the Edge of the World that had so nearly cost him his life, and the eerie matter of the last will and testament of Dr. Coffin.

As Mrs. Herrald had told Matthew at dinner one night, back in midsummer when she'd offered him a position as a "problem-solver" with the agency her husband Richard had founded in London, _You can be sure, Matthew, that the criminal element of not only England but also greater Europe is looking in this direction, and has already seen the potential. Whatever it might be: kidnapping, forgery, public and private theft, murder for hire. Domination of the mind and spirit, thereby to gain illicit profit. I could give you a list of the names of individual criminals who will most likely be lured here at some time or another, but it's not those petty thugs who concern me. It's the society that thrives underground, that pulls the marionette strings. The very powerful and very deadly group of men-and women-who even now are sitting at dinner just as we are, but they hold carving knives over a map of the new world and their appetites are ravenous._

So true, Matthew thought. He'd already come into contact with the man who held the largest knife, and sometimes in dark moments he imagined its blade pressing against his neck.

Greathouse put his cup down. He said, "Zed is a ga."

Matthew was sure he hadn't heard correctly. "A ga?"
"A ga," Greathouse answered. His gaze ticked to one side. "Here's Evelyn."

Evelyn Shelton, one of the tavern's two waitresses, was approaching their table. She had sparkling green eyes and blonde hair like a combed cloud, and as she was also a dancing instructress she was quite nimble on her feet at negotiating the morning crowd. Ivory and copper bracelets clicked and jingled on her wrists. "Matthew!" she said with a wide smile. "What might I get you?"

A new set of ears, he thought, as he still couldn't comprehend what a "ga" was. "Oh, I don't know. Do you have cracknel today?"

"Fresh baked."

"You might try the hot sausage," Greathouse urged as he chewed into another of the links. "Tell him how they'll make a man out of him, Evelyn."

Her laugh was like the ascending peal of glass bells. "Oh, they're spicy all right! But they go down the gullet so fast we can't keep 'em in stock! Only have 'em a few days a month as is, so if you want 'em you'd best get your order in!"

"I'll leave the fiery spice to Mr. Greathouse," Matthew decided. "I'll have the cracknel, a small bowl of rockahominy, some bacon and cider, thank you." He returned his attention across the table when the waitress had gone. "What exactly is a ga?"

"The Ga tribe. Whew, this is hot!" He had to blot his forehead with his napkin. "Damn tasty, though. Zed is a member of the Ga tribe. From the West African coast. I thought he might be, when you first described to me those scars on his face. They're given to some of the children at a very young age. Those determined to be suitable for training as warriors." He drank more tea, but obviously the sausage was compelling for he started immediately in on it again. "When I saw the scars for myself, the next step was finding out how well Zed could fight. I think he handled the situation very competently, don't you?"

"I think you could have been responsible for his death," Matthew said grimly. "And ours, as well."

"Shows how much you know. Ga warriors are among the finest hand-to-hand fighters in the world. Also, they have a reputation for being fearless. If anything, Zed held himself back last night. He could've broken the neck of every man in there and never raised a sweat."

"If that's so," Matthew said, "then why is he a slave? I'd think such a fearless warrior would have resisted the slaver's rope just a little bit."

"Ah." Greathouse nodded and chewed. "There you have a good point, which is exactly why I arranged with McCaggers to test him. It's very rare to find a Ga as a slave. See, McCaggers doesn't know what he's got. McCaggers wanted the biggest slave he could buy, to move corpses for him. He didn't know he was buying a fighting machine. But I needed to know just what Zed could do, and it seemed to me that the Cock'a'tail was the place to do it in."

"And your reasoning why this fighting machine became a slave, and why he just didn't fight his way out of his predicament?"

Greathouse ate a bite of corncake and tapped his fork quietly against the platter. It was of interest to Matthew, as he waited for Greathouse to speak, that Sally Almond had bought all her plates and cups in that popular color called "Indian Blood" from Hiram Stokely, who'd begun to experiment with different glazes after rebuilding his pottery shop. Due to the rampage of Brutus the bull, the Stokely pottery was now doing twice the business it ever had.

"What put him in his predicament, as you call it," Greathouse finally replied, "will probably always be unknown. But I'd say that even one of the finest warriors in the world might be hit from behind by a cudgel, or trapped in a net and smothered down by six or seven men, or even have to make the choice to sacrifice himself that someone else might escape the chains. His people are fishermen, with a long heritage of seafaring. He might have been caught on a boat, with nowhere to go. I'd say he might have lost his tongue because he wouldn't give up the fight, and it was
explained to him by some tender slaver that another body part would be the next sliced off. All possibilities, but as I say we'll likely never know."

"I'm surprised, then, that he just hasn't killed McCaggers and run for it."

"Now why would he want to do that?" Greathouse regarded Matthew as if he were looking at an imbecile. "Where would he go? And what would the point be? From my observation, McCaggers has been kind to him and Zed has responded by being as loyal. " He paused, hunting his compass. "As loyal as a slave needs to be, given the situation. Also, it shows that Zed is intelligent. If he weren't, I'd have no interest in him. I wouldn't have paid the money for Benjamin Owles to sew him a decent suit, either."

"What?" Now this was getting serious. Greathouse had actually paid money for a suit? To be worn by McCaggers' slave? When he'd righted his senses, Matthew said, "Would you care to explain—as reasonably and rationally as possible—exactly why you have enough interest in Zed to entertain hiring him for the agency? Or was I dreaming that part of it?"

"No, you weren't dreaming. Here's your breakfast."

Evelyn had arrived bearing a tray with Matthew's food. She also showed an empty burlap bag, marked in red paint Mrs. Sutch's Sausages and, below that, the legend 'Sutch A Pleasure', to the other patrons in the room. "All out, kind friends!" Her announcement brought a chorus of boos and jeers, though in good nature. "We ought to be getting another shipment next month, which we'll post on the board outside."

"A popular item," Matthew remarked as Evelyn put his platter down before him.

"They refuse to believe it's gone until they see with their own eyes. If this lady didn't live so far away in Pennsylvania, I think Sally would go into business with her. But, anyway," she shrugged, "it's all in the spices. Anything else I can get for you?"

"No, this looks fine, thank you." When Evelyn retreated again and the hubbub died down, Matthew stared across the table into Greathouse's eyes as the man continued eating. "You can't actually be serious about hiring Zed."

"I'm absolutely serious. And as I have the authority from Katherine to make decisions in her absence, I intend to put things into motion right away."

"Things into motion? What does that mean?"

Greathouse finished all but a last bite of the sausage, which he obviously intended to savor when he'd gone through his corncakes. "First, the agency has to arrange to buy him from McCaggers."

"To buy him?"

"Yes, that's what I said. I swear, Matthew! Aren't you getting enough sleep? Don't things get into your head the first time these days?" Greathouse gave a wicked little grin. "Oh, ho! You're up late tripping the moonlight with Grigsby's granddaughter, aren't you?"

"Absolutely not!"

"Well, you say one thing and your blush says another."

"Berry and I are friends," Matthew said, in what he realized was a very tight and careful voice. "That's all."

Greathouse grunted. "I'd say two people running for their lives together across a vineyard either never want to see each other again or become more than friends. But I'm glad you brought her up."

"Me? I didn't bring her up!" For emphasis, he crunched his teeth down on a piece of the cracknel.

"She figures in my plan," Greathouse said. "I want to buy Zed from McCaggers, and I want to petition Lord
Cornbury for a writ declaring Zed a freed man."

"A free-" Matthew stopped himself, for surely he did feel a bit thick-headed today. "And I suppose McCaggers
will gladly sell you the slave he depends upon to do such a vital work?"

"I haven't yet approached McCaggers with this idea. Now bear with me." He chewed down the last bite of
sausage, and again he reached for the tea. When that didn't do the trick, he plucked up Matthew's cider and drank
half of it. "That jingo business you went out on. Walking into that den of thieves, and casting yourself as a foppish
gambler. Well, the foppish part was true enough, but you really put yourself in danger there, Matthew, and don't
pretend you didn't. If I'd known you were accepting a task like that, I'd have gone with you."

"You were fully occupied elsewhere," Matthew said, referring to the problem of Dr. Coffin that had taken
Greathouse across the river to New Jersey. "And as I interpret the scope of my profession, I am free to accept or
reject clients without your approval."

"Exactly so. Which is why you need someone to watch your back. I paid McCaggers a fee to allow Zed to dress
up in the suit I bought for him and to come to the Cock'a'tail. I told him Zed would be in no danger, which is true
when you consider what he can do."

"But you didn't know it was true. He had yet to prove himself." Matthew returned to the statement that had caused
him to cease crunching his cracknell. "Someone to watch my back? You mean Zed would be my bodyguard?"

"Don't fly off the handle, now. Just listen. Do you know what instructions I asked McCaggers to give Zed last
night? To protect the both of us, and to protect himself. I was ready to reach in if anything went wrong."

"Yes," Matthew said, with a nod. "That reach of yours almost got your hand chopped off."

"Everybody knows about that axe Skelly keeps behind the bar! I'm not stupid, Matthew!"

"Neither am I," came the calm but heated response. "Nor do I need a bodyguard. Hasn't it occurred to you that
being in the company of a slave might cause more trouble than simply walking into a place-a den of thieves, as you
say-and relying on your wits to resolve the problem? And I appreciate the fact that Zed is fearless. An admirable
quality, I'm sure. But sometimes fearless and careless walk hand-in-hand."

"Yes, and sometimes smart and stubborn walk ass-in-hand, too!" said Greathouse. It was hard to tell whether it
was anger or sausages flaming his cheeks, but for a few seconds a red glint lingered deep in the man's eyes; it was
the same sort of warning Matthew occasionally saw when they were at rapier practice and Greathouse forgot where
he was, placing himself mentally for a dangerous passing moment on the fields of war and the alleyways of intrigue
that had both seasoned and scarred him. In those times, Matthew counted himself lucky not to be skewered, for
though he was becoming more accomplished at defending his skin he would never be more than an amateur
swordsmen. Matthew said nothing. He cast his gaze aside and drank some cider, waiting for the older warrior to
return from the bloodied corridors.

Greathouse worked his knuckles. His fists are already big enough, Matthew thought.

"Katherine has great hopes for you," Greathouse said, in a quieter tone of conciliation. "I absolutely agree that
there should be no boundaries on what clients you accept or reject. And certainly, as she told you, this can be a
dangerous-and potentially fatal-profession." He paused, still working his knuckles. It took him a moment to say what
he was really getting at. "I can't be with you all the time, and I'd hate for your gravestone to have the year 1702
marked on it."

"I don't need a-" Matthew abruptly stopped speaking. He felt a darkness coming up around him, like a black cloak
here amid these oblivious breakfast patrons of Sally Almond's. He knew this darkness very well. It was a fear that
came on him without warning, made his heart beat harder and raised pinpricks of sweat at his temples. It had to do
with a small white card marked with a bloody fingerprint. The card was in the writing desk in his home, what used
to be the dairyhouse behind Marmaduke Grigsby's abode. Of this card, which had been delivered to his door by an
unknown prowler after his adventure involving the Queen of Bedlam, Matthew had said nothing to any other person.
He didn't wish Berry to know, and certainly not her grandfather with his ready quill and ink-stained fingers. Though
Matthew had almost told Greathouse on several occasions he'd decided to close his mouth and shrug the darkness off as best he could. Which at times was a formidable task.

The card was a death-threat. No, not a threat. A promise. It was the same type of card that had been delivered to Richard Herrald, Greathouse's own half-brother, and after seven years the promise came true with his hideous murder. It was the same type of card that had been delivered to Magistrate Nathaniel Powers, whom Matthew had clerked for and who had brought Matthew and Katherine Herrald together. The death promise yet lingered over Powers, who had left New York with his family during the summer and gone to the Carolina colony to help his brother Durham manage Lord Kent's tobacco plantation.

It was a promise of death, this year or next, or the next year or the one after that. When this card was marked with a bloody fingerprint and sent to its victim, there could be no escape from the hand of Professor-

"Are you going to eat your rockahominy?" Greathouse asked. "It's lousy when it's cold."

Matthew shook his head, and Greathouse took the bowl.

After a moment during which the great man nearly cleaned all the rockahominy out of the bowl with four swipes of a spoon, Matthew's darkness subsided as it always did. His heartbeat returned to normal, the little pricklings of sweat evaporated and he sat calmly, with a blank expression on his face. No one was ever the wiser about how close they might be sitting to a young man who felt a horrific death chasing him down step after step, in a pursuit that might go on for years or might end with a blade to the back on the Broad Way, this very evening.

"Where are you?"

Matthew blinked. Greathouse pushed the bowl aside. "You went somewhere," he said. "Any address that I might know?"

"I was thinking about Zed," Matthew told him, and managed to make it sound convincing.

"Think all you like," came the quick reply, "but I've made the decision. It is absurd for a man of Zed's talent to be limited to hauling corpses around. I tell you, I've seen a lot of slaves but I've never seen a Ga in slavery before, and if there's a chance I can buy him from McCaggers, you can be sure I'm going to make the offer."

"And then go about setting him free?"

"Exactly. As was pointed out last night, it's against the law for slaves to enter taverns. What good would Zed be to us, if he couldn't enter where by necessity he might need to go?" Greathouse began to fish in a pocket for his money. "Besides, I don't like the idea of keeping a slave. It's against my religion. So, since there are several freedmen in New York, including the barber Micah Reynaud, there is a precedent to be followed. Put your money up, I'll call Evelyn over." He raised a hand for the waitress and the bill.

"A precedent, yes," Matthew agreed, "but every slave granted manumission was so approved before Lord Cornbury came. I'm wondering if he can be induced to sign a writ."

"First things first. Put your money up. You're done, aren't you?"

Matthew's hesitation spoke volumes, and Greathouse leaned back in his chair with a whuff of exhaled breath. "Don't tell me you have no money. Again."

"I won't, then." Matthew almost shrugged but he decided it would be risking Greathouse's wrath, which was not pretty.

"I shouldn't stand for you," Greathouse said as Evelyn came to the table. "This will be the third time in a week." He smiled tightly at the waitress as he took the bill, looked it over and paid her the money. "Thank you, dear," he told her. "Don't take any wooden duits."

She gave that little bell-like laugh and went about her business.
"You're spending too much on your damned clothes," Greathouse said, standing up from his chair. "What's got your money now? Those new boots?"

Matthew also stood up and retrieved his tricorn from its hook. "I've had expenses." The boots were to be paid off in four installments. He was half paid on his most recent suit, and still owed money on some shirts from Benjamin Owles. But they were such fine shirts, in chalk white and bird's-egg blue with frills on the front and cuffs. Again, the latest fashion as worn by young men of means. Why should I not have them, he thought, if I wish to make a good impression!

"Your business is your business," Greathouse said as they walked through the tavern toward the door. "Until it starts taking money out of my pocket. I'm keeping count of all this, you know."

They were nearly at the door when a middle-aged woman with thickly-curled gray hair under a purple hat and an exuberant, sharp-nosed face rose from the table she shared with two other ladies to catch Matthew's sleeve. "Oh, Mr. Corbett! A word, please!"

"Yes, madam?" He knew Mrs. Iris Garrow, wife of Stephen Garrow the Duke Street horn merchant.

"I wanted to ask if you might sign another copy of the _Earwig_ for me, at your convenience? Sorry to say, Stephen accidentally used the first copy I had to kill a cockroach, and I've boxed his ears for it!"

"I'll be glad to, madam."

"Any new adventures to report?" breathlessly asked one of the other ladies, Anna Whitakker by name and wife to the Dock Ward alderman.

"No," Greathouse answered, with enough force to shake the cups of tea on their table. He grasped Matthew's elbow and pushed him out the door. "Good morning to you!"

Outside on Nassau Street, in the cool breeze with the silver sunlight beaming down, Matthew reflected that one might be a celebrity one day and the next have cockroach entrails smeared across one's name. The better to wear nice clothes, hold your head up high and luxuriate in fame, while it lasted.

"There's one more thing," Greathouse told him, stopping before they'd moved very far from Sally Almond's door. "I wish to know the extent of Zed's intelligence. How much he can grasp of English, for instance. How quickly he might be taught. You can help me."

"Help you how?" Matthew instantly knew he was going to regret asking.

"You know a teacher," Greathouse answered. When Matthew didn't immediately respond, he prodded: "Who helps Headmaster Brown at the school."

Berry Grigsby, of course. Matthew stepped aside to get out of the way of a passing wagon that pulled a buff-colored bull to market.

"I want her opinion. Bring yourself and your lady friend to City Hall at four o'clock. Come up to McCaggers' attic."

"Oh, she'll love that!" Matthew could picture Berry up in that attic, where McCaggers kept his skeletons and grisly relics of the coroner's craft. She'd be out of there like a cannonball shot from a twelve-pounder.

"She doesn't have to love it, and neither do you. Just be there." Greathouse narrowed his eyes and looked north along Nassau. "I have an errand to run, and it may take me awhile. I presume you have something to do today that doesn't require the risk of your life?"

"I'll find something." There were always the detailed reports of past cases that Matthew was scribing. Once a clerk, always so.
"Four o'clock, then," said Greathouse, and began to stride north along the street, against the morning traffic.

Matthew watched him go. *I have an errand to run.* Something was up. Greathouse was on the hunt. Matthew could almost see him sniffing the air. He was in his element, a wolf among sheep. On a case, was he? Who was the client? If so, he was keeping it a secret from Matthew. Well, so was Matthew keeping a secret. Two secrets, really: the blood card and the amount of debt he was carrying.

A third secret, as well.

*Your lady friend,* Greathouse had said.

Would that it were more, Matthew thought. But in his situation, in his dangerous profession, with the blood card laid upon him

*Lady friend* would have to do.

When he'd watched Greathouse out of sight, Matthew turned south along Nassau. He walked toward Number Seven Stone Street, where he would spend the morning scribing in his journal and from time to time pausing to mark what might have been the faint laughter of distant ghosts.
Four

Clouds moved across the blue sky, and the sunlight shone down upon villages and hills daubed with red, gold and copper. As the day progressed, so did the affairs of New York. A ship with its white sails flying came in past Oyster Island to make fast at the Great Dock. Higglers selling from their pushcarts a variety of items including sweetmeats, crackling skins and roasted chestnuts did a lively business, drawing an audience for their wares with young girls who danced to the bang and rattle of tambourines. A mule decided to show its force of will as it hauled a brickwagon along the Broad Way, and its subsequent stubborn immobility caused a traffic jam that frayed tempers and set four men to fighting until buckets of water poured on their heads cooled their enthusiasm. A group of Iroquois who had come to town to sell deerskins watched this entertainment solemnly but laughed behind their hands.

Several women and the occasional man visited the cemetery that stood behind a black iron fence alongside Trinity Church. There in the shade of the yellow trees, a flower or a quiet word was delivered to a loved one who had journeyed on from this earthly vale. Not much time was taken to linger here, however, for all knew that God accepted the worthy pilgrims with open arms, and life indeed was for the living.

Fishing boats in the rivers pulled up nets shimmering with striped bass, shad, flounder and snapper. The ferry between Van Dam's shipyard on King Street and the landing over the Hudson in Weehawken was always active for travelers and traders, who often found that the winds or currents could make even such a simple trip a three-hour adventure.

Across the city the multitudinous fires of commerce—be they from blacksmith's furnaces or tallow chandler's pots—burned brightly all the day, sending their signatures of smoke up through a mason's delight of chimneys. Closer to earth, workmen labored at new buildings that showed the northward progress of civilization. The boom of mallets and scrape of sawblades seemed never ceasing, and caused several of the eldest Dutch residents to recall the quiet of the good old days.

Of particular interest was the fact that the new mayor, Phillip French, was a solid, foursquare individual whose aim was to put his shoulder to the wheel and get more of the city's streets paved with cobblestones; this enterprise, too, was directed northward past Wall Street, but as it cost money from the treasury, the task was being currently stalled in paperwork by Governor Lord Cornbury, who was seldom seen in public these days outside the walls of his mansion in Fort William Henry.

All these events were of the common clay of New York. In one form or fashion, they were repeated as surely as dawn and dusk. But one event happening this afternoon, at four o'clock by Matthew's silver watch, had never before taken place: the ascent of Berry Grigsby up a narrow set of stairs in City Hall, toward Ashton McCaggers' realm in the attic above.

"Careful," Matthew said lest she lose her footing, but with another step it was he who stumbled behind Berry and found himself grasping a handful of her skirt to prevent a fall.

"Excuse you," she told him crisply, and pulled her skirt free at the same time as his hand flew away like a bird that had landed on a griddlecake iron. Then she gathered her grace and continued up the rest of the steps, where she came to the door at the top. She glanced back at him, he nodded, and she knocked at the door just as he'd instructed.

These days their relationship was, as a problem-solver might say, complicated. It was known to both of them that her grandfather had invited Berry to come from England in order to find her not necessarily a position, but a proposition. Up at the zenith of the list of eligible marriage candidates, at least in Marmaduke's conniving mind, was a certain citizen of New York named Corbett, and thus had Matthew been invited to make the dairyhouse his own miniature mansion, and to enjoy meals and companionship with the Grigsby clan, they being only a few steps from his own front door. Just show her around the town a little, Marmaduke had urged. Escort her to a dance or two. Would that kill you?

Matthew wasn't sure. Her last escort, his friend and chess companion Effrem Owles, the tailor's son, had stepped into a muskrat hole while walking Berry home beside the East River one evening, and his dancing days were over until the swelling of his ankle subsided. But whenever Matthew saw his friend lately, either sitting at the Trot Then
Gallop or limping along the street on a crutch, Effrem's eyes widened behind his round spectacles and he wanted to know what Berry was wearing today, and where was she going, and did she ever say anything about him, and all such buffle-headed chatter as that.

*I certainly don't know!* Matthew had answered, a bit too stridently. *I'm not her keeper! And I don't have time for even talking about her, anyhow.*

*But Matthew, Matthew!* And it really was pitiful, the way Effrem hobbled on that crutch. *Don't you think she's the prettiest girl you ever saw?*

Matthew wasn't sure about that, either, but he did know that standing this close to her, here in the narrow little stairway awaiting an answer to the knock on McCaggers' door, she smelled very nice. It was perhaps the scent of the cinammon soap with which she washed the curly tresses of her coppery-red hair, or the faintly-sweet aroma of the blue wildflowers that adorned the rim of her straw hat. She was nineteen years old, her birthday being in the last week of June; it had been celebrated, if one was to put it so, aboard the ill-fated vessel that had brought her across the Atlantic and deposited her as a moldy mess staggering down the gangplank in midsummer, which was the first sight Matthew had had of her. But that was then and now was now, and so much the better. Berry's cheeks and her finely-chiseled nose were dusted with freckles, her jaw firm and resolute, her eyes dark blue and just as curious about the world as those of her esteemed grandfather. She wore a lavender-hued dress with a lace shawl about her shoulders, for last night's rain had brought a chill to the air. Before their initial meeting, Matthew had expected her to be a gnome to match Marmaduke's misshapen proportions, yet she stood almost at his own height and was anything but gnomely. In fact, Matthew did find her to be pretty. And more than that, actually. He found her to be interesting. Her descriptions of London, its citizens, and her travels-and misadventures-across the English countryside kept him enthralled during their mealtimes together at Marmaduke's table. He hoped to someday see that enormous city, which appealed to him not only for its variety but for its atmosphere of intrigue and danger gleaned from his readings of the *London Gazette*. Of course, he hoped to live long enough to get there, as he had intrigues and dangers enough in New York.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Berry asked.

"Like what?" He'd let his mind wander and his eyes linger, and so he immediately brought himself back to the business at hand. In answer to Berry's knock, a small square aperture in the door flipped up and an eye-glassed dark brown eye peered out. The first time Matthew had visited up here, he'd been witness to McCaggers' experiments with pistols on Elsie and Rosalind, the two dress-maker's forms that served for target practice. Not to mention the other items behind that door. In another minute or two, Berry was going to be beating a hasty retreat back down the stairs.

The door opened. Ashton McCaggers said, in a light and pleasant voice, "Good afternoon. Please come in."

Matthew motioned for Berry to enter, but she was paying no attention to him anyway and had already started across the threshold. Matthew followed her, McCaggers closed the door, and then Matthew had almost run smack into Berry because she was standing there, quite still, taking stock of the coroner's heaven.

The light through the attic's windows streamed upon what hung suspended from the rafters above their heads. McCaggers' "angels", as he'd once described them to Matthew, were four human skeletons, three adult-sized and one a child. Adorning the walls of this macabre chamber were twenty or more skulls of different sizes, some whole and some missing jawbones or other portions. Wired-together bones of legs, arms, ribcages and hands served as strange decorations that only a coroner could abide. In the room, which was quite large, stood a row of honey-colored file cabinets atop which were arranged more bone displays. There were animal skeletons as well, showing that McCaggers gathered bones for the sake of their shapes and variety. Next to a long table topped with beakers of fluid in which objects of uncertain-but certainly disturbing-origin floated was McCaggers' rack of swords, axes, knives, muskets, pistols and cruder weapons such as clubs studded with frightful-looking nails. It was before this assortment of things that turned human beings into boneyards that Hudson Greathouse stood, holding in one hand an ornately-decorated pistol he was in the process of admiring.

He looked now from the pistol at Berry, and said with a faint smile, "Ah. Miss Grigsby."
Berry didn't answer. She was yet motionless, still studying the grisly surroundings, and Matthew wondered if she could find her tongue.

"Mr. McCaggers' collections," Matthew heard himself say, as if it would do any good.

A silence stretched, and finally McCaggers said, "Can I get anyone some tea? It's cold, but-"

"What a magnificent" Berry paused, seeking the correct word. "Gallery," she decided. Her voice was calm and clear and she stretched out an arm toward the child-sized skeleton that hung nearest her. Matthew winced, thinking she was going to touch its hand, but of course it was too high for her to reach. Though not by much. She turned her gaze toward the coroner, and as Matthew walked quietly around to one side he could see her mind at work, examining the man who lived amid such a museum. "I presume these were unclaimed corpses, and the cemetery is not filling up so quickly in New York that there's no more room?"

"Indeed, not, and you presume correctly." McCaggers allowed himself a hint of a smile. He took off his spectacles and cleaned them on a handkerchief from the pocket of his black breeches. The better to see Berry more clearly, Matthew thought. McCaggers was only three years older than Matthew, was pale and of medium height and had light brown hair receding from a high forehead. He wore a plain white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and was perpetually a day or two away from a decent shave. In spite of that, he kept himself and his attic as neat as Sally Almond's kitchen. He put his spectacles back on, and seemed to view Berry in a new light. "I don't have many visitors here. The ones I do have usually cringe, and can't wait to get out. Most people are you know so afraid of death."

"Well," Berry answered, "I'm not fond of the idea," and she gave Matthew a quick glance that said she still hadn't quite gotten over their brush with mortality in the form of hawk talons and killers' knives at the Chapel estate. "But for the sake of form, your specimens are very interesting. One might say artful."

"Oh, absolutely!" McCaggers almost grinned, obviously pleased to have discovered a kindred spirit. "The bones are beautiful, aren't they? As I once told Matthew, to me they represent everything fascinating about life and death." He gazed up at the skeletons with an expression of pride that made Matthew's flesh crawl. "The young man and woman-those two there-came with me from Bristol. The little girl and older man were found here. My father was a coroner in Bristol, you know. As was my grandfather before-"

There came the loud _snap_ of the pistol's trigger being pulled, which served to stop McCaggers' recitation of his family history.

"Our business at hand," said Greathouse, who nodded toward a table across the attic where Zed sat in a spill of light cleaning and polishing some of the forceps, calipers and little blades that were tools of the coroner's trade. Zed's attire was a gray shirt and brown breeches, far removed from his suit of last night. When he looked up and saw everyone staring at him he returned the attention impassively, and then shifted his chair so his broad back was presented to his audience. He continued his work with admirable dignity.

"So," McCaggers went on, again concentrating on Berry. "You have an appreciation for art?"

Oh for Lord's sake! Matthew thought. If Effrem were present, the tailor's son might feel a twinge of jealousy at this obvious play for Berry's interest.

"I do, sir," Berry answered. "Most certainly."

Matthew could have told McCaggers how Berry's talent for drawing had helped solve the puzzle of the Queen of Bedlam, but he hadn't been asked. He shot a glance at Greathouse, who looked as if he were ready to shoot the coroner.

"Ah!" It was spoken by McCaggers as a sublime statement. Behind his spectacles his eyes took in Berry from shoetoe to hat brim. "And as a teacher, you have a curiosity for shall we say the _unusual_?"

Now Berry did appear a little flustered. "Pardon me?"
"The unusual," McCaggers repeated. "Not just in forms of art, but forms of creation?"

Berry looked to Matthew for help, but Matthew shrugged; he had no earthly idea what McCaggers was driving at.

"Listen," Greathouse spoke up. "In case you've forgotten, we're here about-"

"I don't forget anything," came the reply, which carried a touch of frost. "Ever. Miss Grigsby?" His voice warmed again with her name. "May I show you my greatest treasure?"

"Well I'm not sure I'm-"

"Of course you're worthy. Being interested in forms of art, and creation, and a teacher as well. Also, I think you might like to see a mystery that has no answer. Would you?"

"All mysteries have answers," Greathouse said. "It's just finding the one that fits."

"So you say." With that remark, McCaggers turned away and walked past a bookcase full of ancient-looking tomes bound in scabby leather. He went to a massive old black chest-of-drawers, which stood next to a cubbyhole arrangement that held rolled-up scrolls of paper. From the bottom drawer of the chest, McCaggers removed a small red velvet box. He came back to Berry bearing the red box as if it held the finest emerald from the mines of Brazil. "This is my greatest treasure," he said quietly. "A mystery that has no answer. It was given to my grandfather, as payment for work done. My father passed it along to me. And now " He paused, about to open the box. Matthew noted that even Zed had put aside his work and was watching intently. "I've never shown this to anyone else, Miss Grigsby. May I call you 'Berry'?"

She nodded, staring at the box.

"God creates all," McCaggers said, his spectacles reflecting red. "And all suits God's purpose. What then, is this?"

He raised the velvet lid, and both Berry and Matthew saw what was inside as McCaggers tilted the box toward them.

It was an ugly piece of dark brown wood, curved and scored and about five inches long, that came to a bladelike point.

"Hm," Matthew said, with a lift of his eyebrows that betrayed his amusement at McCaggers' folly. "Very interesting."

"And of course, by that tone of voice, you tell me you have no idea what you're looking at. Berry, would you care to guess what this is?"

Greathouse had put aside the pistol and come nearer. He offered his comment without being asked. "A tent stake, I'd say. Wouldn't care to stake my tent on it in a windstorm, though."

"I'll tell you where this was found," McCaggers said, as he drew a finger along the item's length. "Are you familiar with the bell pits of Somerset?"

"The coalfield? Yes, I know that area."

McCaggers nodded. He picked the item up and held it before them. "This was found sixty feet underground, in the wall of a bell pit near Nettlebridge. It's a tooth."

There was a span of silence, which after a few seconds was broken by Greathouse's rude guffaw. "A tooth! Sixty feet under? In a coalmine?"

"That's correct. I know a tooth when I see one, Mr. Greathouse. This is very old. A thousand years? Five thousand? Who can say? But you're missing the larger picture, so to speak."
"Which is?"

Berry answered, in a quiet voice: "The size of the tooth. If-from one tooth-you speculate the size of the jaw and then the head"

"Correct," the coroner said. "It must have belonged to what I can only say would have been" He hesitated, and fixed his gaze on the vicious point. "A monster," he finished.

"A monster!" Greathouse laughed again, but this time it didn't have the same force or conviction. "Where do you keep your rum barrel up here?"

"From what I understand," McCaggers continued, "the Somerset miners occasionally bring up bones that none of the locals can identify as being from any animal anyone's ever seen. They're considered to be ill omens, and so they're disposed of however one would dispose of such things. This tooth escaped destruction. Would you care to hold it?" He offered it toward Greathouse, who in spite of his courage in all things swords or fistic seemed to blanch a bit and recoiled from the gift.

Matthew found himself stepping forward. He opened his hand and McCaggers placed the tooth in his palm. It was as heavy as a stone of that size might be, yet it was surely no stone. Matthew could see serrations along one edge that might still do damage to flesh.

Berry pressed against his shoulder, peering at the object, and Matthew made no move to widen the distance between them.

"A dragon's tooth," Berry said at last, the sound of both excitement and awe in her voice. "That's what it must be. Yes?" She looked at McCaggers for confirmation.

"Some might say that. Those who believe in dragons, I mean."

"What else could it be, then?"

"A dragon-if such existed outside mythology-might be considered to conquer its enemies with fire. This creature was a killer made to tear away huge pieces of meat. A supreme carnivore. You see the edge on that tooth? A masterpiece of form and function. Do you have any idea what a jaw full of those could do to say a side of beef?"

"Dragons! Carnivores!" Greathouse had recovered his wits and his color. "This is nonsense, McCaggers! I mean no disrespect, but I think your grandfather has passed along something from a scoundrel's workshop!"

McCaggers regarded him somberly and then took the object from Matthew's palm. "That may well be," he said as he returned it to the velvet box, "but then again perhaps it's evidence of what God told Job."

Greathouse frowned. "What are you on about now?"

"God spoke to Job," McCaggers said, "from the whirlwind. He told Job about the behemoth and the leviathan. Unimaginable creatures of size and power. He told Job to gird up his loins like a man, and face what was to come. He said, I will demand of thee." McCaggers saw that none of this was getting through to Greathouse. "Don't you know your Bible?"

"I know the part that says if men respect me, I'll respect them. Is there anything else?"

McCaggers pointedly ignored him, focusing his attention to Matthew and Berry. "This may be a tooth from behemoth, or from leviathan. As I said before, it's a mystery without an answer."

"Maybe they know the answer by now." Greathouse motioned upward, where the coroner's angels watched with hollow sockets. "Too bad you have to die before you find out."

"Yes, that is unfortunate," McCaggers agreed, and closed the lid of his red velvet box. Then he spoke directly to Berry. "I thought you might enjoy seeing it, from the viewpoint of both a teacher and a person who obviously
appreciates the art of function. Just as the bones of a human skeleton are all formed for specific tasks, so was this
tooth. Whatever the creature was that possessed it, you can be sure the animal was formed for the function of both
destruction and survival. My further question is what was in God's will to create such a monster?" As he knew no
reply could be forthcoming, he turned away once more, took the box back to the chest-of-drawers and deposited it
where it had been.

"About Zed," Greathouse prompted. Beyond McCaggers, the slave had returned to his task of cleaning the
instruments and seemed not to care a fig about anything else.

"I appreciate your experiment with him," McCaggers said as he strolled back to them. "I understand and share
your opinion about his talents, that he shouldn't be-as you've stated-wasted in the duty of moving corpses about. I
had no idea of his obviously valuable heritage. I also find it quite interesting and very remarkable that you wish to
buy him from me and go about the process of gaining a writ of manumission for him from Lord Cornbury."

"First things first. I'd like Miss Grigsby to observe him for a few days and tell me if she thinks he can be trained." Greathouse caught himself, and his mouth twisted as if he'd tasted some bad liver. "I mean to say, taught."

McCaggers gave a thin smile. "Of course he can be taught. He's very intelligent, as a matter of fact. He quickly
understands instructions, as you yourself found out last night. I have to say, I don't know to what extent he can be
taught, but simple tasks are no problem for him."

"Does he know very much English?" Berry asked, watching Zed work.

"He knows enough to carry out his job. I think he had some knowledge of English before he arrived at the auction
block. It's somewhat difficult to know precisely, as of course he can't speak." McCaggers looked at Greathouse and
narrowed his eyes behind his spectacles. "Before we go any further, sir, I should tell you that there is a problem. As I
do appreciate and respect your offer, I'm afraid it's not possible."

"Not possible? Why? I'd be willing to pay-"

"Not enough," McCaggers interrupted. "Simply because I don't own Zed outright."

Greathouse was taken aback, and glanced at Matthew for support.

"You mean someone else owns him?" Matthew asked.

"When Zed came up for auction, you can be sure I wasn't the only bidder, and that I quickly came to the bottom of
my pocket. One of the predominant bidders was Gerritt van Kowenhoven."

A wealthy shipbuilder, Matthew knew, who owned one of the mansions atop Golden Hill. The man was in his
seventies, had been through three wives and had the reputation of being both a skinflint and a backbreaking
taskmaster. But, for all that, his ships were majesties of grace and speed. "He wanted Zed for his shipyard,"
McCaggers went on. "I happened to know that van Kowenhoven has not been able to buy something he devoutly
desires. Due to the fact that he's wrangled famously with every mayor we've had, and proclaimed his shipyard to still
be part of the States of Holland."

"That would tend to annoy," Matthew observed.

"Exactly. Well, as I knew what van Kowenhoven desired and I have sufficient influence to make it happen, I
concluded an agreement with him before the gavel's last fall. Thus I have possession of Zed for four years-and we
are currently in the fifth month of the third year-after which he becomes the sole property of van Kowenhoven and I
presume will do the work of a half-dozen men for the remainder of his life."

"And just what was it he wanted?" Matthew asked.

"It has taken awhile, but the next street laid down by our good Mayor French will be christened van Kowenhoven.
It's already on the new map."
Greathouse said with a sneer, "Son of a-"

"Sir!" Berry told him sharply. "None of that!"

He glowered at her, but his storm ebbed and he scratched the back of his neck so hard Matthew thought he was going to draw blood.

"I presume that tears it," Matthew said, with a quick glance at Zed. The slave was now arranging the instruments into his master's toolbox, which had served many of the best deceased of New York's society as well as the lowest ex-lifes. It was a shame, really, that a man of Zed's abilities should spend his life hauling timbers and tar barrels, but this particular path had come to its end.

"Wait a moment!" said Greathouse, as if reading Matthew's mind. "How much money are we talking about? To buy him from van Kowenhoven?"

"Zed went from the block for thirty-two pounds and six shillings. More than half my salary for one year. Plus, knowing van Kowenhoven, he'd want a profit on his investment, if he could be induced to sell."

Greathouse's mouth was still hanging open. "Thirty-two pounds?" It was a tremendous sum to be paid in one offering.

"As I said, I certainly wasn't the only bidder and neither was van Kowenhoven. When men like Cornelius Rambouts and John Addison entered the fray, it became more of a personal competition than a business purchase."

Matthew was thinking what he could do with thirty-two pounds. Pay off all his debts, buy some new suits, and have a small fireplace built in his dairyhouse, since it appeared that Marmaduke wasn't going to spring for it before the first cold blow. Plus there'd be enough left for a few months of meals and ale at the Trot. How some people could throw so much money away astounded him.

"I could probably raise seven or eight pounds," Greathouse said, his brow furrowed. "Maybe ten, at the most."

"Your spirit and intention are commendable, sir," said McCaggers, with a slight bow. "There would be a further cost. Just last month Daniel Padgett applied for a writ of manumission from Lord Cornbury for his slave Vulcan, that the man might open a blacksmith's shop. It's my understanding that Cornbury demanded and received ten pounds for his signature."

"Son of a-" Greathouse paused. When Berry didn't speak up, he finished it: "Bitch!"

"I'm sorry," McCaggers told him. "But things are as they are."

Greathouse started to speak again, but Matthew saw all the wind and bluster go out of him, for there was simply no more to be said. Matthew assumed that Katherine Herrald had left him some money to run the office, of course, but that sum was certainly out of the question. He knew it, Greathouse knew it, and so did McCaggers.

At last Greathouse said, to no one in particular, "I suppose we'll be going." Then he tried one last time, as was his nature to beat against stone walls: "Do you think if van Kowenhoven knew what kind of talent Zed had, he'd listen to reason?"

"You can try," came the reply, "but it would probably just make him raise the price."

"All right. Thank you." Greathouse watched Zed at work for a moment longer and then abruptly turned toward the door.

Matthew was about to follow when Berry posed a question to the coroner: "Pardon me, but I'd like to know can Zed read or write?"

"Not English, but perhaps his own language. He's never had cause to either read or write in the work he does for me. All he does is follow instructions, given verbally and by hand signs."
"Then, if I may ask, how are you so sure of his intelligence?"

"Two reasons," said McCaggers. "One, he follows instructions precisely. And two, there are his drawings."

"Drawings?" Berry asked, as Greathouse stopped at the door and looked back.

"Yes. Here are some." McCaggers crossed the room and retrieved a few sheets of paper from atop the bookcase. "I don't think he'd mind if I showed them," he said, though Zed had turned around in his chair and was watching with what might be called intense scrutiny, so much that Matthew felt the flesh crawl at the back of his neck for fear the man might decide his drawings were not for the eyes of strangers.

McCaggers brought the papers to Berry, and she took them. Now it was Matthew's turn to look over her shoulder, and Greathouse walked back to them to also take a gander.

"He's done a score of them," McCaggers explained. "Using my black crayons. And broken them like tindersticks too, I might add."

It wasn't difficult to see why. Some of the strokes had actually torn through the paper. But now Matthew knew why Zed spent so much time on the roof of City Hall.

The first drawing was a view of New York and the Great Dock, as seen from Zed's vantage point. Only it wasn't
exactly the town and the dock that Matthew saw everyday; those thick waxy black lines of buildings and canoe-like shapes of sailing vessels appeared to be from a more primitive world, with the circle of the sun a line gone round and round until obviously the crayon's point had snapped to leave an ugly smear across the scene. It looked forbidding and alien, with black lines spouting from the squares of chimneys and-down below-stick figures caught in midstride. There was a nightmarish quality to the drawing, all black and white and nothing in between.

The second drawing showed what must have been the Trinity Church cemetery, and in this the gravestones looked much like the buildings in the first scene, and the trees were spindly and leafless skeletons. Was there the figure of a man standing beside one of the graves, or was it only where the crayon had ground itself down to the nub?

The third drawing, however, was quite different. It showed, simply, a stylized fish bristling with what appeared to be thorns, surrounded by the wavy lines of water. The fourth drawing was also of a fish, complete with a sail upon its back and a long beak, and the fifth drawing—the last among them—a fish formed of circles and squares with a gasping mouth and a single gaping eye with a hole at the center where the crayon had ripped through.

"He draws a lot of fish," McCaggers said. "Why, I have no idea."

"Obviously, he was a fisherman." Greathouse leaned over Berry's other shoulder to look. "As I told Matthew, the Ga tribe—"

He didn't finish his sentence, for a large black hand suddenly thrust forward and took hold of the papers in Berry's grasp, causing her to give out a little startled cry and go pale. If truth be known, Matthew quivered down to his kneecaps and suppressed a start of alarm behind his teeth, for Zed was suddenly right there in front of them where seconds before he had not been. Greathouse did not move, though Matthew sensed him coiled and ready to strike if need be.

Zed's scarred face was impassive, his ebony eyes fixed not on Berry but upon the drawings. He gave them the slightest pull, and instantly Berry let them go. Then he turned around and walked back to his workplace with the drawings in hand, and it amazed Matthew that he made hardly any noise on the floorboards.

"Another of his talents," McCaggers said. "He can move around like a shadow when he chooses." He cleared his throat. "It seems I have betrayed a trust. I apologize for any discomfort."

Matthew wasn't worried about his own discomfort, but about Zed's and what might come of it. The slave had finished his task of returning the instruments to the box, and with his artwork protectively clutched in one hand he closed the box and latched it.

"He's done many drawings?" asked Berry as the color began to return to her cheeks.

"One or two every week, without fail. He has a boxful of them under his cot."

"I also draw. I wonder if he might care to see my work?"

"If he wouldn't," McCaggers said, "I certainly would."

"I mean to say it might be a way to communicate with him. To hear what he has to say." She looked at Greathouse. "Using an artist's language."

"A worthwhile endeavor, I'm sure." Some of the enthusiasm had left him; his eyes had lost the keen spark they'd shown before the subject of thirty-two pounds had been raised. "Well, as you please. Thank you for your time, McCaggers." He cast another glance at Zed, whose back announced he was through entertaining visitors, and then he went under the skeletons to the door and out.

"I look forward to seeing you again," McCaggers said to Berry, while Matthew felt like a third wheel on a higgler's cart. "Hopefully on your next visit I can get you that tea."

"Thank you," she answered, and it was with relief that Matthew followed her out of the coroner's domain and down the stairs.
On Wall Street, as they walked together toward the East River, Berry began to chatter about Zed's drawings. *A natural quality,* she said. *An elemental force. Don't you think?*

Matthew shrugged. To him they'd looked like something that might have been scrawled by an inmate at the New Jersey colony's Public Hospital for the Mentally Infirm near Westerwicke. He was debating saying so when a black cat squirted out from between two buildings and ran across his path, and so he kept his mouth shut and his eyes wide open for rampaging bulls, muskrat holes, clods of horse manure and whatever else the Devil might throw in his direction.
Five

Early Saturday morning, as the sun rose through the forest and lit the world in hues of fire, Matthew found his mind on the monster's tooth.

He was astride the muscular black horse Dante, which was his mount of choice from Tobias Winekoop's stable. He was riding north along the Post Road, and had been making good progress since seven o'clock. Long past him were the familiar streets and structures of the city; here, on this road that climbed hills and fell into valleys and wound between huge oaks and underbrush that made claim to choke off the path altogether, he was in a truly dangerous country.

In midsummer he'd been stopped by a devious, great ass of a highwayman near his present position. There were wild animals to beware of, and Indians who would never be seen except for the arrow that flew at your throat. It was true that tucked back along the river's cliffs were occasional farms and estates protected by stone walls and settlers' muskets, for what they were worth. Never let it be said that the New Yorker did not possess courage. Either that, or a passion for life on the edge of disaster.

Matthew wished not to provoke disaster today, but he was ready if it bit at him. Under his gray cloak he wore a black sash around his waist, and in that sash was a loaded flintlock with which he'd become quite proficient under Greathouse's demanding tutelage. Matthew knew he'd never be much of a swordsman nor was he particularly swift with his fists, but he could surely cock and fire a pistol fast enough to part a highwayman's hair, if need be.

He had been planning this trip for several weeks. Had gone to bed many times intending to take it, only to find at daylight that he wasn't yet as strong-minded as he'd thought. Today, though, he had awakened ready, and perhaps it was his introduction to the monster's tooth-and McCaggers' mystery with no answer-that had caused him to realize he had his own unanswerable mystery. It was something that must be discovered; something hidden from the light, as surely as a fang sixty feet down in a coal mine. How could he call himself a problem-solver, if he had a problem that could not be solved?

Or, to be more truthful, that he feared to face. This was the real reason he'd brought the pistol, not because of imaginary highwaymen or the improbable attack of a forest beast or an Indian who would surely be more curious than bloodthirsty, since at present there were no quarrels between the Iroquois and the colonists.

On this bright Saturday morning he was riding the fifteen miles north from New York to the Chapel estate, where he and Berry had almost lost their lives, and where a mystery had to be answered before he could let that vile incident go.

He was thinking about the tooth. How such a thing was utterly incredible. If he hadn't seen it for himself, he would have thought McCaggers a tipsy liar. Evidence of either behemoth or leviathan, most probably true, but what purpose would such a monster serve? Why would God in His wisdom ever create such a beast? Simply for the purpose of destruction? He could see in his mind's eye an ancient field under a gray sky shot through with lightning, and a huge dark shape moving across it with a mouthful of those blade-like teeth glinting blue and wet in the storm. The massive head turning left and right, seeking something weaker to tear to pieces.

It was enough to bring on a nightmare in broad daylight, Matthew thought. Even more so when something rustled in the brush before him, he almost jumped out of the saddle, and two small brown rabbits went on their merry way.

Where the road split around a dark little swamp, he took the path that veered left toward the river. The Chapel estate was getting closer now; he would be there in another hour. He had a sick feeling in his stomach that did not come from the strips of dried beef he'd been chewing for his breakfast. It was hard to return to a place where he'd thought death was going to take him, and indeed he found himself scanning the sky through the trees in search of circling hawks.

Dante plodded on, unmindful of his rider's memories. And then, quite before Matthew was fully ready, they came upon a wall of rough stones about eight feet high with vines and creepers dangling over it, and Matthew must have abruptly pressed in with his knees or jerked the reins like a greenhorn, for Dante's head came up with a reproachful snort and let him know that he was not above being tossed.
The road continued on, close-set against the ugly wall. As upon his first visit here, Matthew had the impression of approaching a fortress instead of an estate. In another moment he saw the great slab of the wooden gate ahead, wide open as when it was left by High Constable Lillehorne and the other men who'd come to his rescue. Matthew suddenly felt the sun was not bright enough, and that the cool air carried a wicked edge. He had to go through that gate and onto the grounds, because he had to find out how four people could have escaped Lillehorne's men and so completely disappeared that terrible day last summer.

He turned Dante through the gate, passed the white-washed gatehouse with its broken windowglass, and followed a driveway that curved to the right between thick woods.

Four people. A well-dressed man and woman Matthew had seen at a distance, back at the buildings by the corrupted vineyard. The woman had been watching from beneath a blue parasol. Both of them had disappeared, though Lillehorne and his men had gone over the grounds and through the woods not just that day but, after posting guards on the gate, had come back again to renew the search. Not a trace of them.

The young assassin-in-training, Ripley. Of indeterminate age. Small-boned, pale of skin and weirdly fragile. His silky hair the color of dust, a long thin scar running up through his right eyebrow into his hairline, and his eye on that side a cold milky-white orb. A blue knitting-needle in his hand, about to be pushed through Berry's eye into the brain.

Escaped.

The enigmatic swordsman, Count Anton Mannerheim Dahlgren, who'd so nearly slashed Matthew a belly-grin with the point of a dagger. Dahlgren had left the Chapel house rather violently, taking with him his broken left wrist and the garden door curtains out into the goldfish pond.

Gone, every last mean Prussian inch of him.

But how had those four gotten away? All the buildings on the estate had been searched through, from cellars to attics. The woods had been torn up like an old rug, and some of the searchers had climbed into trees the better to have a higher vantage point.

Had they flown away over the riverside cliffs, like demonic spirits? Matthew thought it was unlikely, particularly since Dahlgren had a broken wing. But even so, Dahlgren was a dangerous character, and Matthew also didn't like the idea of Ripley out there somewhere, sharpening his needles.

A large two-story manse of mottled red and gray brickwork came into view, its handsome front adorned with many windows and a gray-painted cupola at the top with a copper roof. Chimneys jutted skyward. The driveway made a circle around a lily pond that stood a few yards from the front steps, and it was at these steps that Matthew drew Dante to a halt.

The front door was open. Indeed, there was no front door; it had been removed from its hinges. Upon the steps lay a rain-ruined chair of yellow cloth, probably thrown out from the overloaded wagon that had carted away other valuables. Some of the windows were broken, and right in the doorway were ceramic shards that attested to a large white pot slipped from greasy fingers. Not far away, on the weeded lawn, a desk of dark oak with two broken legs leaned like a horse longing to be shot. The drawers had been pulled out and were missing. Matthew thought it might have been the desk from Chapel's office, which Lillehorne had already gone through in his collection of evidence.

So. As Matthew had surmised, many townsfolk had come here drawn by curiosity— and the lurid tales in the *Earwig*-and left as thieves with their saddlebags and wagons burdened by Chapel's loot. He couldn't blame them. He recalled the rich furnishings within; the tapestries, the paintings, the candelabras and chandeliers, the ornate desks and chairs and

Oh, yes. The books.

Matthew had never gotten around to visiting the library. Well, there might be some books left behind. After all, who would load books in their wagon when they could carry off Persian rugs and canopied beds?
He dismounted and walked Dante over to the lily pond to drink. At the pond's edge, the horse suddenly shied away, and at the same time Matthew caught a foul odor from the water. Drifting there, being eaten by buzzing green flies, was a large dead snake. Matthew retreated, tied Dante to a lower branch of a tree a little further along the drive, and then he opened one of his saddlebags and fed the horse an apple. He had a leather flask of water, which he drank from and then poured some water into his cupped hand to let Dante drink. As he stood in the shadow of the house, he could smell the snake's rot wafting around him, like the unseen presence of Professor Fell?

It was Chapel's estate, yes, but it was Professor Fell's enterprise. As Greathouse had told Matthew, _No one makes Professor Fell angry and lives very long._

Matthew had spoiled the enterprise. Had upturned the game table. But _won_ the game? No. The death card that had arrived at his door, with its single bloody fingerprint, said the game was just beginning, and Matthew must pay for making the professor angry.

He found himself with his hand resting on the pistol in his sash. Nothing moved beyond the open doorway; there was not a sound, but for the feasting flies. He saw in there shadows and chaos, ruin and dissolution, a little piece of Hell on Earth. Yet also knowledge for the hungry, in the books that Professor Fell's money must have bought.

Matthew walked up the steps and entered the house.

_There is an underworld you can't imagine_, Greathouse had said. _They're in the business of counterfeiting, forgery, theft of both state and private papers, blackmail, kidnapping, arson, murder for hire and whatever else offers them a profit._

Matthew's boots crunched on broken pottery. Teacups, they looked to have been. Someone had pulled down the foyer's iron chandelier, and chunks of ceiling masonry had fallen to the floor. Holes had been gouged into the glossy dark wood of the walls. Some of the staircase's risers had been ripped up. Scavengers hunting hidden treasure, Matthew thought. Did they find it? He walked along the main corridor, where the tapestries had been taken from the walls and, once again, there were gaping holes that appeared to have been made by axeblows. Matthew wondered how many houses in New York now held items removed from here; he didn't doubt that Dippen Nack probably squatted over a chamberpot decorated with gold, and that Lillehorne himself hadn't delivered silk sheets to the shrewish wife he called 'Princess'.

_Their gang wars_, Greathouse had said, _have been brutal and bloody and have gotten them nowhere. But in the last fifteen years, all that began to change. Professor Fell emerged-from where we don't know-and has through guile, intelligence and not a small amount of head-chopping-united the gangs into a criminal parliament._ Matthew came upon another room, on his right, that used to have a door before someone carted it away. Dusty yellow light streamed through two tall windows, both of them shattered, and illuminated under an arched pale blue ceiling what had once been a wall of books.

Next to a challenging question or a problem that needed solving, Matthew loved books. So it was with both great pleasure and gut-wrenching dismay that he took appraisal of the library's ruin. Pleasure because though most of the books had been swept from their shelves, they still lay in a pile on the floor; and dismay, because someone had thrown dozens of volumes into the fireplace and their black bindings were heaped up like so many bones.

_No one knows his first name. No one knows really if 'he' is a man or a woman, or if 'he' ever was a professor at any school or university. No one has ever given an age for him or a description_

The room held a gray sofa that had been gutted with a blade and its stuffings pulled out. A writing desk appeared to have been a target for a drunk with a blacksmith's hammer. On the walls were marks where paintings had hung; it looked as if someone had actually tried to peel away the wallpaper to get the marks, as well. Matthew surmised that whoever had burned the books had done so for the necessity of heat and light, as they'd probably made a night of it.

Who could blame people for wanting to get up here and take what was left? Matthew knew he hadn't been the only celebrity created by the _Earwig's_ lurid tales. This estate had also been made a celebrity, and so reaching the end of its celebrity it had been attacked and ransacked by those who wished to have a little handful of fame. Or, failing that, a nice vase for the kitchen window.
Matthew surveyed the damage. The wall held seven shelves. There was a small stepladder on which to reach the topmost books. Eight or nine books remained on either side of each shelf, but the middle portion of volumes had been tossed to the floor, the better for that greedy axe to go to work on the wall. Probably more than one axe, Matthew thought. A ship's crew, by the looks of the destruction. So it was not enough to carry off the furnishings, but the very walls of the house had to be broken into in search of hidden money. Let them have it if they found any, he thought. The books are what I want, as many as I can put in my saddlebags. After that, the plan was to go through the woods once more in search of any clue as to how those four got away so completely, and then onto Dante and out of here before the light began to fade.

He strode forward amid the debris, knelt down and began his examination of the treasures left behind. He considered himself well-read, for a colonist, but certainly not up to the standards of the London intellect. While London had a row of bookshops and one could browse the aisles at leisure for new volumes delivered that morning—at least, according to the Gazette—the only opportunity for Matthew to find books was from the moldy trunks of those who had died on the Atlantic passage and therefore had no further need of enlightenment. Every arriving ship put out the baggage of dead people, sold to the highest bidder. In most instances, any available books were bought up by the occupants of Golden Hill, not as reading matter but as a statement of social standing. Tea-table books, they were called.

It was thus, then, that Matthew found himself amid a bounty of books he had not read and, indeed, had never heard of before. There were leather-bound tomes such as The Blazing World, Sir Courly Nice, Polexandre, Thou Thirsteth, The Pilgrim's Progress, A New Theory of the Earth, The Holy State and the Profane State, The Corruption of the Times By Money, King Arthur, Don Quixote de la Mancha and Annus Mirabilis, The Year of Wonders 1666. There were books thin as gruel and thick as beefsteaks. There were volumes in Latin, French and Spanish as well as the mother tongue. There were religious sermons, novels, histories, philosophical statements and discourses on the elements, the planets, Eden and Purgatory and everything in between. Matthew looked through a book entitled The Revengeful Mistress and, his cheeks flaming red, decided he couldn't have such a scandalous book found in his house, but he put it aside anyway thinking it was more suited for Greathouse's ribald tastes.

He discovered historical novels so huge he thought a couple of them in each saddlebag would sprain Dante's back. Eight volumes of Letters Written By A Turkish Spy intrigued him, and these he also put aside. He had once enjoyed—if that was the word—a banquet here at the house, but this was the true feast that kept him digging for more and even sprang a little feverish sweat to his brow, for he was going to have to make a terrible choice of what to take and what to leave behind. London's Liberty In Chains Discovered? An Account of Religion By Reason? Oh, hang it all; he'd go with Love's A Lottery, And A Woman the Prize.

Matthew wished he'd brought a wagon. Already he'd chosen far too many books and would have to go through them again to make the final selections. And there were the books still on the shelves! He got up from the floor and approached the remaining valiant soldiers that stood at attention before him.

On the third shelf, left side, he immediately saw a book he wanted, titled The Compleat Gamester. Then almost directly above that was another volume that called to him, stamped across the spine The Life And Death of Mr. Badman. His gaze travelled upward, and there upon the topmost shelf on the far left side was a huge tome entitled The History of Locks As Regards The Craft of Ancient Egypt and Rome. He felt his mouth watering as surely as if he'd been presented a selection of pastries. Chapel might have been an evil bastard, but if he'd read one quarter of these books he had certainly been a well-educated evil bastard.

Matthew pulled the library stepladder over and climbed up, reaching first for the Gamester. He looked through it, made a quick decision and put it aside to join the other candidates. He next latched onto a thin volume entitled A Discourse on Moonbeams, but this one was rejected. Then he reached up for the History of Locks and had to grab it with both hands for the thing was as heavy as a frying-pan. No, Dante would never stand for this, and he was about to push the book back into place when something shifted inside of it.

The movement caught Matthew by such surprise that he nearly tumbled off the ladder. He held the book steady, started to open it, and realized with a jolt that it was not a book at all.

It was a box, fashioned to masquerade as a book. The History of Locks bore its own lock, right where the edges of the pages ought to be. The lid would not budge. Whatever was inside, it was no light reading matter. But where was
the key?

God only knew. In this wreckage, it was likely forever lost.

Matthew's eye found another book. The *Sublime Art of Logic*, read the gold-scrolled title.

*Think*, he thought.

If *I* had left this here, where would I have hidden the key? Not very far away. Somewhere in this room, most likely. Hidden where it would be close at hand. He wondered. If there was a locked box disguised as a book about locks, might there be somewhere in the library a book about keys that actually hid a key? But he'd seen no such book. He'd looked at every title that lay on the floor. No *History of Keys* to be found. Of course, such a book may have gone into the fireplace.

Or not.

Matthew searched the titles of the nearby books. Nothing about a key. He took the *History of Locks* down the ladder with him and put it on the battered desk. The desk's single drawer was hanging open, and someone had dumped the inkpot into it to make a congealed black mess of papers and quills. Matthew walked to the far end of the bookshelves where the rest of the survivors stood. He looked up to the topmost shelf, at the volume that was on the fartherest right and therefore was placed exactly opposite of the *History of Locks*. It was a medium-sized book and looked very old; he couldn't make out the small, faded title on the spine.

But that was his suspect. Within another few seconds he'd dragged the ladder over, had climbed up and taken the book in his hand. It was very light, for a book.

The title, on scarred brown leather, was *The Lesser Key of Solomon*.

Opening it, he discovered that this indeed had *once* been a book, but the pages had been hollowed out with a very sharp blade. Within the square lay presumably not Solomon's lesser key, but Chapel's greater one. Matthew felt an inner rush of both joy and excitement that might have been called victory. He removed the key, closed the book and pushed it back into place, and then he descended the ladder.

As he slid the key into the lock, he realized that his heart was beating like an Iroquois' drum. What might be inside? A document from Professor Fell? Something that might point to his whereabouts? If so, it was written on stone.

He turned the key. There was a small polite *click* as befitted a gentleman's lock, and Matthew lifted the lid.

*It may be that Fell is on the cusp of creating what we think he desires*, Greathouse had told him. *A criminal empire that spans the continents. All the smaller sharks-deadly enough in their own oceans-have gathered around the big shark, and so they have swum even here*

Matthew was looking at a black leather drawstring bag. It was the solitary occupant of the box. The drawstring's knot was secured with a paper seal, and upon it was something stamped in red.

*The big shark*, Matthew thought. Perhaps Greathouse's marine metaphor had been close, but was incorrect. Stamped upon the paper seal in red wax was the stylized shape of an octopus, its eight tentacles stretched out wide as if to seize the world.

Matthew thought that Greathouse might be very interested in seeing this. He lifted the heavy bag out to set it on the table, and heard the unmistakable clinking of coins.

He put it down and just stared at it for a moment. To open it, he must of course break the seal. Was he ready to do that? He didn't know. Something about it frightened him, down to the level where nightmares take shape. Better to let Greathouse break the seal, and be done with it.

But he didn't return it to the box, nor did he do anything but run the back of his hand across his mouth for his lips
suddenly felt parched.

He knew he had to decide, and the decision was important. He felt the time ticking away. The distance between this house and his own life in New York had never seemed greater.

He feared not only breaking the seal, but opening the bag. He listened, in the silence. Was there no one to tell him what to do? No good advice on what was the right and what was the wrong? Where were the voices of Magistrates Woodward and Powers when he needed them? Not there. Only silence. But then again, it was just paper, wasn't it? Just the shape of an octopus delivered from a wax impression? And look how long this had sat here in its box. No one was coming for it; it had been forgotten.

He didn't need Greathouse, he told himself. After all, he was a full partner in the Herrald Agency, and he had the letter of congratulations from Katherine Herrald and a magnifying glass to prove it.

Without giving himself further time to ponder, he tore the seal. The wax octopus cracked and opened for him. Then he untied the drawstring and peered into the bag, his eyes widening as sunlight from the library's windows touched all that gold and nearly blinded him.

He picked out one of the coins and examined it more closely. On the obverse it bore the double heads of William and Mary, and on the reverse a crowned shield of arms. The date was 1692. Matthew weighed the coin in the palm of his hand. He had seen two of these coins in his entire life, both of them recovered from the robbery of a fur merchant when he'd been clerking for Nathaniel Powers. It was a five-guinea piece, worth a few shillings over five pounds, and was the most valuable coin minted by the realm. The bag held how many? It was hard to count, with all that shine. He upended the bag over the table, spilled out sixteen coins, and realized that he was looking at the sum of more than eighty pounds.

"My God," he heard himself say, in a stunned whisper.

For stunned he was. It was a fortune. An amount of money even expert craftsmen might not see in the span of a year. A young lawyer would not make that much per annum, and certainly not a young problem-solver.

And here it was, lying right before him.

Matthew felt light-headed. He looked around at the library's debris, and then back at the shelf where the lockbox had been hidden in plain sight. Emergency money, he thought. That was what Lawrence Evans, Chapel's henchman, had been returning to the house to get when he was struck down by Dippen Nack's billyclub. Emergency money, in a black leather bag with what might be the seal of an underworld bank or possibly Professor Fell's own personal mark.

Chapel's estate, but Fell's enterprise.

Eighty pounds. Who should it be taken to? Lillehorne? Oh, certainly! The high constable and his wife would make short work of even such a large amount. He was already insufferable enough without being enriched from Matthew's risk, and indeed Matthew felt he'd taken a risk just to come back here. What about Greathouse, then? Oh, yes; Greathouse would take the lion's share for himself and the agency, and throw him a pittance. There was all that nonsense about Zed being bought from van Kowenhoven and made into a bodyguard, which Matthew definitely did not need.

Who, then, should take possession of this money?

He who needed it the most, Matthew thought. He who had found it. The process of discovery had been well-met, this day. And richly deserved, too. It would take him a long time to spend it all, if he was careful. But the question next to deal with was how to spend even one coin without attracting suspicion, for these were not seen beyond the lofty heights of Golden Hill.

His hands were actually trembling as he returned the coins to the bag. He pulled the drawstring tight and knotted it. Then he picked up the torn paper seal with its imprint of an octopus, crumpled it in a fist, and dropped it among the black ashes and broken bindings in the fireplace. For a moment he felt nearly delirious, and had to steady
himself with a hand to the wall.

A few books were chosen, almost at random, from his pile of candidates. Enough to give equal weight for Dante, one saddlebag to another.

But once outside and after the books were stowed away, Matthew balked at giving up the money just yet. He still had the question that had brought him here to begin with, and he realized that once he rode through that gate he might not be back, books or no. The time was getting on into afternoon, the sun shining fiercely through the trees. He didn't wish to leave the money with Dante, in case anyone else rode in. Carrying the moneybag with him, he started walking along the driveway in the direction of the vineyard, and specifically toward the place where he'd last seen Chapel stretched out, beaten and battered, in the dust.

He'd been pondering for awhile the assumption that Chapel had been trying to get to the stable. Why would that have necessarily been so? With all that was going on, how did Chapel think he would have time to put a saddle and bridle on a horse? But if Chapel was not going to the stable along this driveway, then where was he heading? The vineyard? The woods?

Matthew had decided to find the place where Chapel had been laid out on the ground, and enter the woods at that location. As he marked the spot where he recalled Chapel to have been and left the driveway there for the red glow of the forest, he realized he had to get his mind fixed on his purpose, for his thoughts were wandering into daydreams like beautiful paintings in golden frames.

He walked amid the trees and thicket. All this area had been gone over before, of course. But he wondered if somewhere in this woods there might be a place the searchers had not found. A shelter, somehow disguised as surely as a book could be a lockbox. An emergency hiding-place, if one was ever needed. Then, when the danger had gone, the occupants could emerge and either slip out by way of the gate or-more improbably due to Dahlgren's broken wrist-climb over the wall.

It was a shot in the dark, but Matthew was determined to at least take aim.

Walking through the woods was peaceful this time, as before it had been a race for life for both himself and Berry. He saw nothing but trees and low brush, the ground gently rising and falling. He started even kicking aside leaves and looking for trapdoors in the earth itself, to no avail.

There was a gully ahead. Matthew recalled he and Berry running along its edge. He stopped now and peered down into it. The thing was about ten feet deep at its bottom and walled with sharp-edged boulders. He thought what might have happened if either he or Berry had fallen in; a broken ankle would've been the least of it.

As Matthew stared into the abyss, he wondered if the searchers had also feared for their bones, and so had not made the descent.

But there was nothing down there except rocks. It was a perfectly ordinary gully, as might be found in any woods.

He continued walking along the edge, but now his daydreams and the moneybag were thrust out of his mind completely. He was focused on the gully, and specifically on how one might get down into it without falling on the rocks.

It was getting deeper as it progressed across the forest. Twelve or fifteen feet to the bottom, Matthew thought. In places shadow filled up the gully like a black pond. And, then, not too far ahead, he saw what might have served as steps in the rock. His imagination? Possibly, but he could definitely get down to the bottom here. Grasping the moneybag tightly, he demonstrated in another moment that one could negotiate the steps using only one hand to hold balance against the boulders.

He continued along the bottom, which was also covered with rocks. And perhaps twenty yards further on, as the gully took a turn to the right, he drew a sharp breath as he discovered in the wall beside him an opening about five feet tall and wide enough for a man to squeeze into sideways.

A cave, he realized, as he let the breath go.
He crouched down and looked in. How far back it went, he had no idea. There was nothing but dark in there. Yet he felt the movement of air on his face. What portion of the cave’s floor he could see was hard-packed clay, littered with leaves.

He held his free arm through the opening, feeling the air moving across his fingertips. Coming from within the cave.

Not a cave, he thought. A tunnel.

No light. Snakes were about, possibly. Could be a nest of them in there. He asked himself what Greathouse would do in this situation. Retire, and never know the truth? Or blunder ahead, like a great fool?

Well, snakes couldn’t bite through his boots. Unless he stepped in a hole and fell down, and then they could get at his face. He would walk as cautiously as if upon the roof of City Hall, blindfolded. He paused just a moment, herding his courage before it came to its senses and galloped away. Then he gritted his teeth, pushed himself through and was immediately able to stand, if at a crouch. He was glad he still gripped the moneybag; it could give something a good clout, if need be. It came to him, with enough force to almost buckle his knees: I am rich. He felt his mouth twist in a grin, though his heart was beating hard and the sweat of fear was upon his neck. He fervently hoped to live through the next few minutes to enjoy his wealth. Using one hand and an elbow to gauge the walls, Matthew started his progress into the unknown.
PART TWO: The Valley of

Destruction

Six

"A pity about Matthew Corbett. Dead at such a young age," said Hudson Greathouse. He shrugged. "I really didn't know him very well. Had only worked with him since July. So what more can I say, other than that he poked his curiosity into one dark hole too many."

The wagon, pulled by two sway-backed horses that seemed to move only with the slow but dignified agony of age, had just left the stable in Westerwicke. The town stood along the Philadelphia Pike, some thirty miles from New York; it was a small but well-groomed place, with two churches, houses of wood and brick and beyond them farmfields and orchards carved from the New Jersey forests. A farmer selling pumpkins from a cart waved, and Greathouse waved back.

"Yes," Greathouse said, looking up at the clouds that sailed like huge white ships across the morning sky, "too bad about Matthew, that his life was cut so short due to the fact he had neither sense nor bodyguard to protect him." He cut his gaze sideways, at the driver. "Would that have been a good enough speech at your funeral?"

"I have already admitted," Matthew spoke up, as he flicked the reins to urge a little more speed to horses that only hung their heads lower as if to beg for mercy, "that I should not have gone in that tunnel alone." He felt heat in his cheeks. "How long are you going to play this tune?"

"Until you realize you're not ready to go off risking your life foolishly. And for what? To prove a point? That you're so much smarter than everyone else?"

"It's awfully early for this." In fact, it was not much after six o'clock. Matthew was tired and cranky and wished he were anywhere on earth but sitting in this wagon beside Greathouse. By God, he'd even take the tunnel again. At least it had been quiet in there. He now knew the real meaning of torture; it was having to share a room with Greathouse at The Constant Friend tavern, as had been done last night in Westerwicke because the other two rooms were taken, and not being able to get to sleep before a snoring began that started like a cannon's boom and ended like a cat's squall. Long past midnight, when at last Matthew did slumber, Greathouse gave out a holler that almost made Matthew jump out of bed fearing for his life, but not even the subsequent angry knocking on the wall of the next room's occupant brought Greathouse up from his netherworld. More galling, the great one would not let this incident of the tunnel go. Danger this, and danger that, and what might have happened if it had not been a tunnel that led under the estate to the river, but instead to a cave where he could have gotten lost in the dark and been wandering until he had a beard down to his boots. What then, Mr. Corbett? Do speak a little louder, I can't hear you.

"You're right," said Greathouse after a brief reflection, which served only to make Matthew expect another volley was being loaded. "It is early. Have a drink." He passed over a leather flask of brandy, at which he'd already been nipping since the first threads of sunrise. Matthew took it and swallowed enough to make his eyes swim and his throat burn, and then he returned it to its owner. Greathouse corked it and slid it under the plank seat, next to the pistol. "Maybe I can't say I wouldn't have done the same. But I'm me, and I have experience at such things. Didn't you think to tie a rope to something to find your way back by?"

"It would have been a very long rope." Very long indeed. The tunnel, a natural feature of the Chapel estate, had been in Matthew's estimation almost a quarter-mile long. At one point it had descended at an alarming angle but by then Matthew could see light ahead. It had emerged from the riverside cliffs among boulders, and a path could be negotiated to the nearest woods. He surmised that not all the members of Chapel's little party had been privy to knowing about the escape route, but that was how those particular four had gotten out.

"I don't think I'm so much smarter than everyone else," Matthew answered, to one of Greathouse's more stinging barbs.

"Sure you do. It's part of your charm. Oh, my back aches! That bed should've been arrested for attempted
"You seemed to be sleeping well enough, for the most part."

"An illusion. I had a particularly bad dream."

"Really? Did you happen to be dreaming about a war between cannons and cats?"

"What?" Greathouse scowled. "No. It's this damned job. I don't like it."

"You were dreaming about the job?"

"No. I had a dream about now, this sounds ridiculous, I know." Greathouse hesitated, reached for the flask again and held it at the ready. "I had a dream about that damned tooth."

"The tooth," Matthew repeated.

"You know. McCaggers' tooth. What he showed us. All that jabber about God and Job and monsters and " The cork was pulled out and another swig of brandy went down Greathouse's throat. "All that," he said, when he'd finished.

Matthew waited, certain there would be more. He flicked the reins again, but it didn't speed the old horses a single hoof. Still, their destination was not very far ahead. The doctors, Ramsendell and Hulzen, would be expecting them at the Publick Hospital.

"I dreamed," Greathouse said, after taking a long breath as if to get his brain started again, "that I saw the monster the tooth came from. It was as big as a house, Matthew. No, bigger. As big as Trinity Church, or City Hall. Bigger yet. Its skin looked to be like black iron, still smoking from the bellows furnace. Its head was as big as a coach, and it looked at me, Matthew. Right at me. It was hungry, and it was coming for me, and I started to run." A crazed grin erupted across his face. "Ridiculous, isn't it?"

Matthew made a noise, but kept his eyes on the road as long as Greathouse looked at him.

"It came for me," Greathouse went on. "Like a terrible wind. Or a force of nature. I was running across a field where there were dead men lying. Or pieces of men. There was nowhere to hide, and I knew the monster was going to get me. I knew it, and there was nothing I could do. It was going to get me, with those teeth. A mouthful of them, Matthew. By the hundreds. It was so huge, and so fast. It was coming up behind me, and I felt its breath on my neck and then "

Greathouse said nothing else. At last, Matthew asked, "You died?"

"I must have woken up. I don't remember. Maybe I did die, in the dream. I don't know. But I'll tell you what I do know." He started to take another drink and then thought better of it, for there was the job to be done today. "I had almost forgotten what fear is. Not being frightened, that's one thing. I mean, fear. What you know you don't have a chance against. That's what I felt, in the dream. And all because of that damned tooth."

"Your eel pie last night might have something to do with it. I told you it didn't smell very fresh."

"Wasn't that. All right, maybe a little. My stomach did pitch and tumble a bit. But it's this job, too. If the money wasn't so good, I would've told Lillehorne to find someone else. Surely a couple of constables would have done just as well."


"The doctors." Greathouse gave a fierce tug at his brown woolen cap. "You know what I think of them, and their asylum. I suppose you're still visiting the lady?"
"I am. And she is getting better. At least she knows her own name now, and she's beginning to understand her circumstances."

"Good for her, but that doesn't change what I think of housing a bunch of lunatics out here in the woods." The wagon, as slow as it was, had left Westerwicke behind and was now moving along the forest road, which was still the Philadelphia Pike and would be called so all the forty-odd miles to that city. Up ahead, little more than a quarter mile on the right, would be the turnoff to the hospital. The sun was strengthening, casting yellow and red tendrils through the trees. Birds were singing and the air was crisp; it was a very lovely morning, save for some dark clouds to the west. "What a man must do for gold," Greathouse said, almost to himself.

Matthew didn't reply. What a man must do, indeed. He had already worked out a plan for his riches. Over the course of time he would take a few coins to Philadelphia by packet boat, and there buy some items so as to break the five-pound pieces into smaller change. He was even thinking of coming up with a new identity for himself, for his Philadelphia visits. It wouldn't do for anyone in New York to know of his sudden wealth; besides, it was no one's business but his own. He'd almost perished on that estate. Did he not deserve some reward for all he'd gone through? For now, the money was hidden in his house—not that anyone was going to get through the lock on his door, but he felt easier knowing all those gold pieces were tucked into the straw of his mattress.

Today was Wednesday. Yesterday morning, a young messenger had arrived at Number Seven Stone Street with a summons for Matthew and Greathouse to make haste to Gardner Lillehorne's office at City Hall, for the high constable had urgent business. Greathouse's reply was that neither one of them could be called like cattle from a pasture, and that if Lillehorne wished to conduct business it would be at Number Seven.

"I think you're pushing your luck with Lillehorne," Matthew had said after the messenger was gone. He picked up a broom and began to sweep the floor, as it was his usual task and newfound riches or not—he at least wished to keep clean the area around his own desk.

"Do you? And what is he going to do to me for standing up to him?"

"He has his methods. And his connections." Matthew swept the dust into a wooden tray, which he would later dump out the pair of windows that afforded a view of New York to the northwest, and beyond the wide river, brown cliffs and golden hills of New Jersey. "You were very cavalier to him that night at the Cock'a'tail. I'm still amazed we didn't end up in the gaol, because after all was said and done we were breaking the law."

"Course we were. But don't fret about it. Lillehorne's not going to do anything to either one of us. Certainly not put me where I can't be useful."

"Can't be useful?" Matthew stopped his sweeping and looked at Greathouse, who was leaning back in his chair with his big boots-dusty boots, too-propped up on his desk. "Meaning what?" He had a flash of insight when Greathouse just tapped his forefinger against his chin. I have an errand to run, Greathouse had said on Friday morning, there on Nassau Street. "You're working on something for him."

"I am."

"Something for him as high constable? Or something as an ordinary citizen?"

"A citizen, the same as any man off the street might have come up to me at Sally Almond's a week ago Monday, offered to buy me breakfast, and then asked me to consider doing him a favor. I told him favors cost money, and the larger the favor the larger the sum. We made an agreement for a favor of moderate size, and there you have it."

"And what exactly was the favor?"

"Is the favor," Greathouse corrected. "A work in progress, with no answer just yet." He frowned. "Why exactly should I be telling you, anyway? You didn't tell me you were riding up to the Chapel estate, did you? No, you didn't care to share with me what might have been your last trip on earth. Well, I'll tell you what! When Lillehorne gets here, you can tell him all about the tunnel. Or are you saving the story for Marmaduke and the next Earwig?"

"I didn't go for that reason."
Greathouse wore a steely glare. "Are you absolutely sure of that?"

Matthew was about to reply in the positive, but the bottom fell out of his resolve. Was he absolutely sure? Had he indeed been thinking of telling Marmaduke, so as to be the centerpiece of another story? No, of course not! But maybe just a little bit? He stood with motes of dust shimmering in the air around him. Was it true that maybe just a little bit he was no longer content to be only Matthew Corbett, magistrate's clerk become problem-solver, but wished the company of both wealth and attention? It seemed to him that attention could become as potent a drink as Skelly's apple brandy, and make one just as insensible. It seemed to him that one could be overcome by it, and without it would become as weak-willed and desperate as any half-penny drunkard. Was that part of why he'd ridden to the estate? No. Absolutely not.

But a few days ago he might have thought that if he'd ever found a bagful of gold coins, he would have first and foremost told who? Berry? She had also shared the ordeal; should she not share the reward? No, no; it was complicated. Very complicated, and he would have to consider this subject again when he had a clearer head, and anyway this dust in the air was about to make him sneeze.

"I regret telling you," he said to Greathouse, in a voice as steely as the other man's glare continued to be.

"Why did you, then?"

Matthew almost told him. That maybe he'd gone into the tunnel to prove his courage, once and for all; or that he'd simply thought Greathouse would approve of his decision to go forward, and trust in his instincts. But the moment came and went and Matthew did not say any of this; instead, he said, "Because I wanted you to know I don't need a bodyguard."

"Your opinion. All I know is, Zed could help us both, if he could be taught correctly. It's a damned waste for that man to be hauling ship timbers for the rest of his life." He waved a dismissive hand at Matthew. "Now don't get me started on that, I'll have to go out and get a drink."

Matthew returned to his sweeping, thinking that it was best to let some secrets lie undisturbed.

Less than a half-hour later, Gardner Lillehorne had arrived like a burst of sunlight in his yellow suit and stockings, his yellow tricorn adorned with a small blue feather. His disposition was rather more stormy, however, and as he marched up to Greathouse's desk his face bore the scowl of a particularly dark cloud. He placed a brown envelope sealed with gray wax before Greathouse. "You're required for an official task," he said, and cast a quick glance at Matthew. "The both of you."

"What official task?" Greathouse picked up the envelope, inspected the seal, and started to open it.

Lillehorne put his black-lacquered cane against Greathouse's hand. "The envelope is to remain sealed," he said, "until you pick up the prisoner. When you take possession of him, you are to read the contents to both him and the witnesses, as a formality of official " He cast about for a word. "Possession."

"You'd best rein in your runaways," Greathouse cautioned, and moved the cane aside. "What prisoner? And where is he?"

"The messenger from those two doctors said you would know. He came to my office yesterday afternoon. I have a wagon ready for you at Winekoop's stable. It's the best I can offer. The irons are ready, in the wagon. Here's the key." He reached into a pocket of that blazing and slightly-nauseating suit jacket and brought out the item, which he also placed on the desk in front of Greathouse.

"The two doctors?" Greathouse looked at Matthew. "Do you have any idea what he's going on about?"

Matthew did, but before he could say so Lillehorne went on, as if eager to be done with the responsibility. "Ramsendell and Hulzen, at the New Jersey Colony's Publick Hospital for the Mentally Infirm. Near Westerwicke. You know it, of course. The order for removal has come. A constable representing the Crown will be arriving on the Endurance at the end of this month to take him into custody. I want the prisoner's boots on the next ship leaving for England, and good riddance to him."
"Wait, wait, wait!" Greathouse stood up, the envelope in hand. "Are you talking about that lunatic we saw in the window down there? That what was his name, Matthew?"

"His name is Tyranthus Slaughter," Lillehorne answered. "Wanted for murder, robbery and other crimes, all laid out in the article of possession. The messenger said the doctors had already mentioned to the both of you the fact that Slaughter would be transferred from the hospital to the New York gaol, to await the Crown's constable. Well, the time's come."

Matthew recalled the first occasion he and Greathouse had gone to the Westerwicke hospital, during the investigation of the Queen of Bedlam. The two doctors who ran the place had introduced them to an inmate behind one of the barred windows. Sent to us almost a year ago from the Quaker institution in Philadelphia. The Quakers have found out he was a barber in London and he may have been involved with a dozen murders. We're expecting a letter in the autumn instructing us to take him to the New York gaol to wait for ship transfer to England. You know, if this business goes well with the Queen, you gentlemen might consider our hiring you to escort Mr. Slaughter to New York.

Greathouse brought forth a fierce grin that Matthew thought was one of his more disturbing expressions, because it meant the man was considering violence. "Are you out of your mind? You can't come in here and give orders!"

"You will see," said Lillehorne quietly, as he gazed about the office and his thin nostrils wrinkled with distaste, "that I'm not the person giving the orders. Don't you recognize Governor Lord Cornbury's seal?"

Greathouse took another look at it and dropped the envelope onto his desk. "That doesn't mean anything to me."

"Your doctor friends received two letters, both from the Crown's constable. One told them to prepare the prisoner for removal. The other was to be presented to Lord Cornbury, directing him to have the man brought here and held in irons. Lord Cornbury has been told to use the best possible men at his disposal. That's at least what he informed me when he dumped the mess in my lap. You two were specifically requested by Ramsendell and Hulzen. So here you are."

"We're a private concern," Greathouse said, with a thrust of his chin. "We don't work for the city, or the New Jersey colony. Certainly not for Lord Cornbury!"

"Ah, yes. The matter of who you do work for." Lillehorne reached into a pocket and brought out a small brown bag tied with a leather cord. He shook it, so that the coins might jingle. "Mister Three-Pounds. Have you made his acquaintance lately?"

Matthew kept his mouth closed.

"There are official transfer papers in that envelope," Lillehorne went on. "They require the signatures of both yourselves and the two doctors. Upon your acceptance of the prisoner, the doctors have agreed to pay you an additional two pounds. Can you do the mathematics, sir?"

Greathouse snorted. "They must want to get rid of him very badly." He paused, regarding the bag of coins with a hungry eye. "He must be dangerous. No, I'm not sure five pounds is enough." He shook his head. "Send some of your constables to get him. A half-dozen of them ought to do the job."

"My constables, as Mr. Corbett has pointed out before, are not fully suited to more demanding tasks. After all, are you not so proud to be the professionals?" He let that comment float in the air before he continued. "And you're laboring under the mistaken presumption that this is a request from Lord Cornbury. You might realize by now that he wishes to shall we say show himself able before his cousin, the Queen. I wish to show myself able before Lord Cornbury. And so it goes. You see?"

"Five pounds is not enough," Greathouse repeated, with some force behind it.

"For two days' work? My God, what are they paying you people these days?" Lillehorne took note of the broom that stood in the corner. "A poor little office like this could be swept away with the rubbish. Lord Cornbury can put a lock on any door he chooses, Greathouse. If I were you—which I know I am not—I would gladly take this very
generous amount and consider that Lord Cornbury can be useful to you, if you get on his good side."

"He has a good side?"

"He can be managed. And if you do a favor for him, I'm sure he might someday do a favor for you."

"A favor," Greathouse said, and Matthew saw his eyes narrow in thought.

"Two days' work. If you could leave within the hour, you might make Westerwicke by nightfall." Lillehorne inspected the silver lion's-head that topped his cane. "You won't be gone long enough to um miss any opportunities for further business." A reference, Matthew assumed, to the mysterious work that Greathouse was doing for his latest client.

It was another moment before Greathouse returned from his mental wanderings. He said, "I don't like the idea of going back there. To that hospital, with all those lunatics. What do you say, Matthew?" What could he say? Therefore he kept silent and shrugged. "You could use the money, I know. Maybe I could use a little goodwill from Cornbury. Tell me, Lillehorne: have you ever seen him wearing a man's clothes?"

"I have. Unfortunately, in them he is equally as unfortunate."

Greathouse nodded, and then he said, "The irons."

"Pardon?"

"The irons had better not have any rusted links."

They didn't. The sturdy cuffs and chains were now in a burlap bag in the back of the wagon. Matthew turned the horses onto the branch road leading off the Philadelphia Pike and through a grove of trees. The three buildings of the Publick Hospital stood just ahead.

It was a quiet place, with birds singing in the trees and a soft wind whispering. Still, Greathouse shifted uneasily on the seat and kept his eyes averted from the buildings, as if not wishing to think about what went on behind the walls. The second and largest building, made of rough stones and resembling a grainhouse or meeting-hall, held all the inmates except for a few who resided in the third structure, which was a white-painted house that faced a garden. Some of the second building's windows were shuttered and some were open but barred, and a few faces peered out at the wagon's approach. The pastoral quiet was broken when someone in there started hollering and a second, more shrill voice, joined the commotion.

"We must be here," Greathouse said dryly, working his hands together. Matthew knew from past experience that this place—even though it was run efficiently and in a humane manner by the two doctors—made Greathouse as jumpy as a cat on a carpet of razors.

Matthew pulled the team up in front of the first building, which was painted white and appeared to be simply a normal house. As Matthew climbed down to let the horses drink from a nearby trough, the first building's door opened and a stocky man in a dark brown suit and waistcoat emerged. He lifted his hand in greeting, at the same time removing the clay pipe that was clenched between his teeth.

"Greetings, gentlemen," said Dr. Curtis Hulzen. He had gray hair and spectacles perched on a hooked nose. "It seems the day has arrived."

Greathouse muttered something, but Matthew couldn't hear what he said and wasn't sure he wanted to.

"Jacob!" Hulzen called into the house, and a man in gray clothes and a brown leather waistcoat came out. "Will you go fetch Dr. Ramsendell, please? And tell him the escorts are here?"

"Sir," answered Jacob, with a quick nod, and he strode along a well-worn pathway toward Matthew, who had met this particular patient on his first visit here. Jacob suddenly stopped right in front of the horse trough and said to Matthew in a mangled voice, "Have you come to take me home?" The left side of Jacob's temple was crushed
inward, and an old jagged scar began at his right cheek and continued up across a concave patch on his scalp where the hair no longer grew. His eyes were bright and glassy, and fixed upon Matthew with pitiful hope. A sawmill accident had done this, Ramsendell had told Matthew, and Jacob could never again live "out there", as the doctor had put it, with his wife and two children.

When he realized Hulzen wasn't going to intercede for him, Matthew said as kindly as he could, "No, I'm afraid not."

Jacob shrugged, as if this news was expected, but perhaps there was a glint of pain in the eyes. "It's all right," he said, with a crooked grin. "I hear music in my head." Then he continued along the path toward the second building, brought a ring of keys from within his waistcoat, unlocked the big wooden slab of a door and disappeared inside.

"You're liberal with your keys around here," Greathouse remarked, as he stepped down from the wagon. "I wouldn't be surprised if all your lunatics got out into the woods someday, and then what would you do?"

"Bring them back." Hulzen had returned the pipe to his mouth and blew smoke in Greathouse's direction, as those two had had their verbal clashes before. "The ones that ran away, which would be few. You don't seem to realize that most of our patients are like children."

Greathouse produced the sealed envelope from within his tan-colored coat and held it aloft. "This tells me at least one of them isn't too child-like. We're supposed to have you sign some papers."

"Come in, then."
Matthew tied the horses to a hitching-post, put down the brake and followed Hulzen and Greathouse into the first building, which was the doctors' office and consultation area. Inside, there were two desks, a larger conference table with six chairs, a file cabinet, shelves full of books and on the floor a dark green woven rug. Hulzen closed the front door and motioned them to the table, where there was a quill pen and an inkpot. Another door at the back led to what Matthew had noted on his initial visit was an examination room and a place where drugs or medical instruments were stored.

"The papers," Hulzen said, and Greathouse broke Lord Cornbury's seal. Within the envelope was a trio of official parchment documents like the ones Matthew had seen every day during his duties as clerk for Magistrate Nathaniel Powers. Greathouse found the document and its copy that each needed four signatures, Hulzen briefly looked them over and then signed and Matthew added his signatures. Greathouse dipped the quill and was delivering his name on the copy as the front door suddenly opened, and when Greathouse's hand involuntarily jumped his signature became a scrawl.

The patient-soon to be prisoner, with the adding of one more name-sauntered into the room, followed by Dr. David Ramsendell and, at a distance, Jacob.

Matthew thought the room had suddenly turned cold.

"Hm!" said the new arrival, with chilly disdain. He was staring at the transfer papers, and specifically at the three names written thereon. "Signing me over like a common criminal, are you? The shame of it!"
Greathouse looked up into the man's face, his own expression as solid as a gravestone. "You are a common criminal, Slaughter."

"Oh, no, sir," came the reply, with the hint of a smile and a slight, mocking bow. His hands were clasped before him, his wrists bound together with leather cuffs secured by a padlock. "There is nothing common about me, sir. And I would appreciate that you show me due respect, and from now on refer to me as a refined gentleman ought to: Mister Slaughter."

No one laughed. No one except Slaughter himself, who looked from Greathouse to Matthew with his pale blue eyes and began a slow, deep laughter in his throat that beat like a funeral bell.
I'm glad you can amuse yourself so easily," said Greathouse, when Slaughter's hollow laughter had ceased.

"I've had a great deal of experience in amusing myself, and in both the Quaker institution and this virtuous haven a great deal of time to think amusing thoughts. I thank you for your regard, Mr." Slaughter took a step closer to the table, with the obvious intention of reading Greathouse's signatures, but Greathouse quickly picked up both sheets of the transfer papers.

"Sir will do," Greathouse told him. Slaughter smiled and again gave a brief little bow.

But then, before the tall, slim and bearded Dr. Ramsendell could come forward to take the quill that Greathouse offered, Slaughter swiveled toward Matthew and said in a light and amiable voice, "Now, you I remember very distinctly. Dr. Ramsendell spoke your name outside my window. Was that just July? It's " He only had to think a few seconds to bring it up. " Corbett. Yes?"

Matthew nodded, in spite of himself; there was a compelling note in Slaughter's voice that demanded a response.

"A young dandy then, I recall. Even more of a young dandy now."

It was true. As was his habit of presenting himself as a New York gentleman, even on a road trip, Matthew wore one of his new suits from Benjamin Owles; it was dark burgundy-red, the same color as its waistcoat. Black velvet trimmed the cuffs and lapels. His white shirt and cravat were crisp and spotless, and he wore his new black boots and a black tricorn.

"Come into some money, I see," said Slaughter, whose face hung before Matthew's. He winked, and said in what was nearly a whisper, "Good for you."

How to describe the indescribable? Matthew wondered. The physical features were easy enough: Slaughter's wide face was a mixture of gentleman and brute. His forehead slightly protruded above the straw-colored mass of eyebrows. His unruly mat of hair was the same color, maybe a hint more of red, with the sides going gray. His thick mustache was more gray than straw, and since Matthew had seen him in July the man had grown a beard that looked like the beards of many other men stitched together: here a portion of dark brown, there a red patch, here a dash of chestnut brown, beneath the fleshy lower lip a touch of silver, and upon the chin a streak of charcoal black.

He was not as large a man as Matthew remembered. He had a big barrel chest and shoulders that swelled his ashen-hued asylum clothing, yes, but his arms and legs appeared to be almost spindly. He was about the same height as Matthew, yet he stood in a crook-backed stance that testified to some malformation of the spine. His hands, however, were instruments worthy of special attention; they were abnormally large, the fingers long and knuckles knotty, the nails black with encrusted grime and grown out jagged and sharp as little blades. It was obvious that Slaughter either refused to bathe or hadn't been offered the grace of soap and water for a long period of time, as his scaly flesh was as gray as his clothes. The smell that wafted from him made Matthew think of something dead molding in the mud of a filthy swamp.

But for all that, Slaughter had a long, aristocratic nose with a narrow bridge and nostrils that flared ever so elegantly, as if he could not stand the stink of his own skin. His large eyes-pale blue, cold, yet not altogether humorless, with a merry sort of glint that came and went like a red signal lamp seen at a distance-were undeniably intelligent in the quick way they darted about to gather impressions just as Matthew was doing the same.

The part of Slaughter that could not be so easily described, Matthew thought, was a feeling from him of calmness, of utter disregard for whatever might be happening in this room. He didn't seem to care a fig, yet there was something else, too; it was a confidence, perhaps ill-advised under the circumstances, but as strong as his reek. It was a statement of both strength and contempt, and this alone put Matthew's nerves on edge. The first time Matthew had seen this man, he'd thought he was looking into the face of Satan. Now, though Slaughter was obviously more-as Ramsendell had put it on that day in July-cunning than insane, he was after all only a human being of flesh, bone, blood, hair and dirt. Possibly mostly hair and dirt, by the looks of him. The irons had no rusty links. It was going to be a long day, but not unbearable. Depending, of course, upon the direction of the breeze.
"Step aside, please," said Ramsendell, who waited for Slaughter to obey and then came forward to sign the
documents. Hulzen was puffing on his pipe, as if to fill up the room with the pungent fumes of Carolina tobacco,
and Jacob stood at the door's threshold watching as intently as anyone could who had a portion of their skull
missing.

Ramsendell signed the papers. "Gentlemen?" He was addressing Greathouse and Matthew. "I appreciate your
assistance in this matter. I'm sure you know that both Curtis and I have given to the Quakers our honorable decree as
Christians that our patient " He paused to correct himself, and set aside the quill. "Your prisoner," he went on, "will
be delivered to New York alive and in good health."

"He doesn't look too healthy as is," Greathouse answered.

"Just so you gentlemen understand-and I am sure you do, being upright citizens-that we are not in favor of violent
solutions, and so if Mr. Slaughter perturbs you on the trip I trust that-"

"Don't worry, we won't kill him."

"Very reassuring to hear it," said Slaughter.

Greathouse ignored him, and picked up the third sheet of parchment. "I'm supposed to read this article of
possession. I gather it's a formality."

"Oh, do read it!" Slaughter's teeth flashed.

"This day July third, the year of our Lord 1702," Greathouse read, "Her Majesty's subject Tyranthus Slaughter is
charged to be removed from his present arrangement and brought to stand before the Queen's Commission of the
Peace, held for the city of London and county of Middlesex at Justice Hall in the Old Bailey, before her Majesty's
Justices, in connection with murders possibly committed by one Tod Carter, barber at Hammer's Alley, on or about
April 1686 through December 1688, the bones of eleven men and one child being found under the cellar floor by a
recent tenant." Greathouse aimed a cool gaze at Slaughter. "A child?"

"I had to have a lather-boy, didn't I?"

"Said suspect," Greathouse continued reading, "also charged to stand in connection with the disappearances of
Anne Yancey, Mary Clark, and Sarah Goldsmith and the concurrent robberies of their family estates, on or about
August 1689 through March 1692, under the aliases of Count Edward Bowdewine, Lord John Finch and " He
hesitated. "Earl Anthony Lovejoy?"

"I was so much younger then," said Slaughter, with a slight shrug. "I had the imagination of youth."

"So you don't deny any of this?"

"I deny," came the smooth answer, "that I am a common criminal."

"Signed by the Right Honorable Sir William Gore, Knight Lord Mayor of the City of London, witnessed by Sir
Salathiel Lovel, Knight Recorder of Said City, and the Honorable John Drake, Crown's Constable." Greathouse
handed the parchment to Ramsendell, who took it as one might accept a dead snake, and then said to Slaughter, "I
think your past has caught up with you."

"Alas, I'm in your hands. I do presume you'll feed me a good breakfast before we get started?"

"One thing," Matthew said, and both doctors immediately gave him their attention. "You said the Quakers found
out Mr. Slaughter was wanted in London. How did that happen?"

"He was brought to us in August of last year, looking much as you see him now," Ramsendell explained. "A week
or so later, one of their doctors left for a business trip to London and arrived in November, where he discovered
people still talking about the bones that had been found at Hammer's Alley the month before." Ramsendell handed
the article of possession back to Greathouse and wiped his palms on his breeches. "Some witnesses had come forth
and given a description of Tod Carter that was published in a broadsheet and circulated through the streets. Someone else connected him to the alias of Lord John Finch, who wore—as it was called—a patchwork beard. This was evidently a continuing story in the *Gazette* at that time."

"I think I do recall reading about it," Matthew said. He would have gotten those copies of the *Gazette* from ship's passengers, which meant he'd been reading them at least three months after the fact.

"The doctor recognized Carter's description and approached the Crown's constable. But as I say, Slaughter was with us by then. He was um a little disruptive for the Quakers to handle."

"And you're any better?" Greathouse scoffed. "I would've taken a whip to him every damned day."

"Look how they talk about you here," said Slaughter, to no one in particular. "As if you're part of the wallpaper."

"Exactly why was he at the Quaker institution to begin with?" Matthew asked.

"He," Slaughter spoke up, "was there because he was arrested on the Philadelphia Pike for highway robbery. He determined that he was not suited for confinement in the Quakers' gloomy gaol, thus he-poor, misguided soul-should contrive to wear the costume of a lunatic and bark like a dog, which he began to do before that court of fools. Therefore, he was content to join the academy of the mad for how long was it? Two years, four months and twelve days, if his mathematic skills have not turned to pudding."

"That's not quite all of it," Hulzen said, through his pipesmoke. "He tried to escape the Quaker institution four times, assaulted two other patients and nearly bit off a doctor's thumb."

"He put his hand over my mouth. It was very rude."

"Slaughter didn't attempt anything like that here?" Greathouse asked.

"No," said Ramsendell. "In fact, before anyone had learned about Tod Carter, he was on such good behavior that we gave him work privileges, which he unfortunately repaid by trying to strangle poor Mariah, back at the red barn."

Greathouse's mouth curved into a sneer. "What did you do to him? Take away his scented soap?"

"No, we put him into solitary confinement until it was determined he could rejoin the others. He'd only been out a few days before you two saw his face at the window. By then we'd had a visit from the Quakers, who'd received a letter from their doctor in London addressed to me and explaining the situation. After that, he was kept apart."

"He should've been torn apart," was Greathouse's summary.

Matthew regarded Slaughter with a furrowed brow, as more questions were nettling him. "Do you have a wife? Any family?"

"No to both."

"Where were you living before you were arrested?"

"Here and there. Mostly there."

"And you worked where?"

"The road, Mr. Corbett. My partner and I did quite well, living on our wits and the treasure of travelers. God rest William Rattison's soul."

"His accomplice," Hulzen said, "was shot down during their last attempt at robbery. Evidently even the Quakers have their limit of patience, and they planted armed constables on one of the coaches between Philadelphia and New
"Tell me," Matthew said, again to Slaughter. "Did you and Rattison kill anyone while you were living on your wits?"

"We did not. Oh, Ratsy and I bumped a head occasionally, when someone grew mouthy. Murder was not the intent; it was the money."

Matthew rubbed his chin. Something still bothered him about all this. "So you elected to enter a madhouse for the rest of your life as opposed to standing before a judge and receiving a sentence of oh a brand on the hand and three years, say? I assume that was because you decided a madhouse would be easier to escape from? And why are you now so eager to leave this place that you don't even bother to deny the charges? I mean, the Quaker doctor could be mistaken."

Slaughter's smile emerged once more, and then slowly faded. The distant expression of his eyes never changed. "The truth," he said, "is that I never lie to men who are not fools."

"You mean you don't lie to men who can't be fooled," said Greathouse.

"I mean what I said. I am going to be taken from this place, no matter what. Put on a ship and sent to England. Walked before the court, identified by witnesses, badgered to point to the graves of three very lovely but very stupid young ladies, prodded into Newgate, and laughed by a slobbering mob up the gallows steps. No matter what. Why should I be less than truthful, and sully my honor before such professionals as yourselves?"

"Or is it," Matthew suggested, "that you fully believe yourself capable of escaping from us on the road? Even from such professionals as ourselves?"

"It is a thought. But, dear sir, never blame the wind for wishing to blow."

Greathouse returned the article of possession and their copy of the transfer document to the envelope. "We'll take him now," he said, rather grimly. "There's a matter of money."

"Oh, isn't there always," was Slaughter's quick comment.

Ramsendell went to one of the desks, opened a drawer and brought out a little cloth bag. "Two pounds, I believe. Count it, if you like."

Matthew could tell Greathouse was sorely tempted to do so when the bag was put into his palm, but the great one's desire to make haste from the asylum clearly won out. "Not necessary. Out," he commanded the prisoner, and motioned toward the door.

When they were outside and walking to the wagon, Slaughter first, followed by Greathouse, then Matthew and the doctors, a cacophony of hooting and hollering came from the windows of the central building, where pallid faces pressed against the bars. Greathouse kept his eyes fixed on Slaughter's back. Suddenly, Jacob was walking right up beside Greathouse and the poor man said hopefully, "Have you come to take me home?"

With a sudden intake of breath, Slaughter turned. His hands still clasped together and bound by the leather cuffs, he took a single step forward that brought him face-to-face with Jacob.

Greathouse froze, and behind him Matthew's knees also locked.

"Dear Jacob," said Slaughter in a soft, gentle voice, as the red glint flared in his eyes. "No one is coming to take you home. Not today, not tomorrow, not the next day. You will stay here for the rest of your life, and here you will die. Because, dear Jacob, you have been forgotten, and no one is ever coming to take you home."

Jacob wore a half-smile. He said, "I hear" And then something must have gotten through into his head that was not music, for the smile cracked as surely as his skull must have broken on the fateful day of his accident. His eyes were wide and shocked, as if they remembered the whipsaw coming at him, yet he knew that to see it coming was
already a lifetime too late. His mouth opened, the face went slack and as pallid as those that screamed behind the bars. Instantly Dr. Hulzen had come forward to put his hand first on the man's arm, and then his arm around the man's shoulder. Hulzen said close to his ear, "Come, Jacob. Come along, we'll have some tea. All right?" Jacob allowed himself to be pulled away, his expression blank.

Slaughter watched them go, and Matthew saw his chin lift with pride at a job well done.

"Take your shoes off," said Greathouse, his voice husky.

"Pardon, sir?"

"Your shoes. Off. Now."

With some difficulty because of the leather cuffs, Slaughter removed them. His dirty feet with their gnarled yellow nails did not make a pleasant sight, nor did the air remain unsullied.

"Drop them in the trough," Greathouse told him.

Slaughter shot a glance at Ramsendell, who made no effort to interfere. The papers had been signed and the money changed hands; he was quits with the fiend.

Slaughter walked to the horse trough. He dropped his shoes into the water one after the other.

"It's not I mind it so much," he said, "but I do pity the poor horses." And he gave Greathouse the smile of a wounded saint.

Greathouse pushed Slaughter to the wagon. Then he took the pistol from underneath the seat, cocked it and, standing behind the prisoner, put the barrel against Slaughter's left shoulder. "Dr. Ramsendell, I presume he's been thoroughly checked for hidden weapons?"

"You'll note he's been given clothes with no pockets, and his body has been gone over, yes."

"And that was quite the thrill," said Slaughter. "Of course, they left the joy of looking up my arsehole for you."

"Remove the cuffs," Greathouse said. The doctor slid a key into the padlock that held the leather cuffs closed. When they were off Greathouse said, "Back here," and pulled Slaughter to the rear of the wagon. "Get up there," was the next command. "Slowly." The prisoner obeyed without a word, his face downcast. Greathouse told Matthew, "Hold the gun on him."

"Please," Slaughter replied with an air of exasperation. "You don't think I want to be shot, do you? And I don't think the Quakers would like that, by the by."

"Aim at his knee," Greathouse advised as he gave Matthew the pistol and climbed up into the back of the wagon. "We said we wouldn't kill you. Sit down."

Slaughter sat, staring at Matthew with a bemused expression.

From the burlap bag Greathouse withdrew the irons. They consisted of wrist manacles connected by chains to a pair of leg shackles. The chains were short enough so that Slaughter, if he could stand at all, would stand only in a very uncomfortable back-bowed crouch. Another chain connected to the right leg shackle ended in a twenty-pound iron ball, sometimes called a "thunderball" due to the rumble it made across a gaol’s stone floor. When Greathouse finished locking the second leg iron, he put the key into the pocket of his shirt.

"Oh dear," said Slaughter. "I believe I have to shit."

"That's what breeches are for," Greathouse answered. He took the pistol from Matthew and eased the striker forward. "You drive, I'll guard."
Matthew untied the horses, got up in his seat, released the brake and took the reins. Greathouse climbed up beside him, turning around so as to face the prisoner. He placed the gun on his lap.

"Take care, gentlemen," Ramsendell said. In his voice there was a lighter note that could only be relief. "A speedy trip to you, and God's protection."

Matthew got the horses turned and started them toward the Philadelphia Pike again. He wished he could flick the reins against their backsides and get them trotting, but an earlier attempt at a "speedy trip" had met with nothing but the slow plod of old hooves. Now the horses were hauling about two hundred more pounds, as well.

Behind him, as they pulled away, Matthew heard the shrieks and jabbering of the mad beyond the barred windows.

"Farewell, friends!" Slaughter called to them. "Farewell, good souls! We shall meet again, on the road to Paradise! Ah, listen to my public," he said in a quieter voice. "They do so love me."
"I smell rain."

It was the first thing Slaughter had said since they'd left the Publick Hospital for the Mentally Infirm behind them about four miles. Matthew had already noted the large wall of dark-bellied clouds beginning to roll in from the west, and he too had detected the faint but telling metallic odor in the air that forecast a storm. He wondered, though, how Slaughter could-

"You might ask yourself," the prisoner went on, "how I am able to smell anything, due to my present physical aroma. Alas, I was not always so. In fact, I much enjoyed the bath and shave day. Not that I was allowed to hold the razor, of course. But those pleasures were taken away from me, when the doctors became so frightened of my mere shadow." He paused, waiting for a response from either Greathouse or Matthew, but none was forthcoming.

"A good shave," he went on, as if conversing with his companions in the House of Lords, "is a thing to treasure. The smooth leather of the chair, that leans you back just so. The steaming hot towel, to prepare your face. The warm lather, smelling of sandalwood, applied with a supple badger-hair brush. Not too much now, we mustn't waste such an expensive commodity! And then the razor. Ah, gentlemen, did the mind of man ever create a finer instrument? The handle made of walnut, or bone, or ivory, or that beautiful mother-of-pearl. The blade itself, slim and sleek and oh so very feminine. A beauty, a symphony, a shining piece of art." He rustled his chains a bit, but Matthew kept watching the road and Greathouse kept watching Slaughter.

"Red beards, brown beards, black beards," said Slaughter. "I've polished them all off. Oh, how I'd like to polish you off. You're in need of a shave, sir."

Matthew had brought along a small bag, which was under his seat next to his water flask, that included his own razor and shaving soap. He'd scraped his face clean of whiskers upon rising this morning, whereas Greathouse might typically go several days without, as Slaughter put it, a polish.

Slaughter said nothing more for a few moments. They passed a rider in buckskins, who nodded a greeting and then continued on his way south. Matthew glanced again at the slow advance of dark clouds. Though both he and Greathouse had brought light cloaks and were sitting on them as cushions against the splintery plank seat, he wished he'd packed his sturdy fearnaught coat, for he knew due to experience that a chilly rain could make a road trip a trial of misery. But the thing about October was, it was so unpredictable.

Slaughter cleared his throat. "I trust that you two gentlemen do not grudge me for telling poor Jacob the truth," he said. "You know, I like the young man. I feel pity for him, that those doctors won't tell him the truth. My fondest hope is that, due to the truth I told him, his mind will clear enough for him to walk back to the barn, take a rope and hang himself."

Matthew knew Greathouse wouldn't be able to restrain a comment on that one, and sure enough came the husky voice: "Oh, that's your fondest hope, is it?"

"Absolutely. Well, think of it! Once a strapping young man with-as I understand-a wife and two children. Then came a terrible accident at a sawmill on the river, which evidently was none of his doing. Now, he's all well and happy for the present time, perhaps, if you believe lying to a person makes them happy, but what of his future? He's never going to get any better. Not one iota improved. So what will become of him? What if Ramsendell and Hulzen leave, and a more shall we say stern master comes into possession of the hospital? What cruelties might be done to him, then? And all he is currently is a drain on their time and money, for I dare say there are patients who could be improved. So you might say that Jacob is an impediment to their work, his being far beyond improvement. And, sir, would you have his wife and children come to see him, and the children look upon such a horror as their father has become? Would you have him return to the family home, where he might be an impediment to the success and lives of those he once loved?" Slaughter made a clucking noise with his tongue. "Oh, sir, sooner or later, if Jacob does not kill himself, one or the other of those doctors may well realize it would be so much to the benefit of the hospital if a small accident might occur, say with a pickaxe or a shovel, so as to release that poor soul from his suffering. And surely, sir, you believe that Heaven is a much better place than this, don't you?"
"Keep talking and you might find out. Though I doubt Heaven would be your final harbor."

"I trust my last voyage will indeed sail into Heaven, sir, for I've seen so much of Hell on my earthly journey. Tell me: what is your name? You seem somewhat familiar to me."

"We've never met."

"Oh? And how can you be so sure?"

"Because," Greathouse said, "you're still alive."

Slaughter laughed again, that slow funeral bell sound, but also mixed with a frog's croak.

"I have a question to ask you," Matthew spoke up, if for no reason but to break the ghastly laughter. "Why didn't you try to escape the hospital instead of wasting your chance?"

"My chance? What chance?"

"Dr. Ramsendell said you tried to strangle a woman, back at the barn, when you were given work privileges. I suppose there was some kind of oversight, but you were out of the hospital. Why didn't you just run for it?"

Slaughter pondered the question for a few seconds, as the wagon creaked along, and then he answered, "My kind nature interfered with my desire for freedom. Just as I regret Jacob's suffering, so I was wounded by poor Mariah's. The young woman and her daughter were ravaged by two brutes, as I understood it. Her mind rendered dull, her spirit broken. The daughter murdered before her eyes. Some days all she could do was crawl into a corner and weep. Well, on that particular day I was going to—as you put it so gracefully—run for it, but I was compelled by my Christian charity to release Mariah from her world of pain, before I fled. But she was not yet freed from her suffering when one of the other fools in that barn hit me across the back of the head with an axe-handle."

"See, that's the problem with lunatics," Greathouse said as he examined more closely the striker of his pistol. "They don't know which end of a damned axe to use."

"I won't deny I have ended the lives of many persons," came Slaughter's next statement, delivered as one might say he had eaten many helpings of corncake. "But I have always been selective, sir. Some I released from their misery of being stupid, others I freed from their cages of arrogance." He shrugged, which made his chains rattle. "I might have cut the throat of a man who suffered from a touch too much greed, or bashed in the head of a woman who in her madness fancied the world revolved around her own ugly star. What of it? Is the ratcatcher hanged for killing rats? Is the horse leech hanged for blowing out the brains of a diseased nag?"

"And the child?" Greathouse cocked the pistol, eased the striker forward, and then cocked it again while he made pains to examine his finger on the trigger. "What reason for that one?"

"That poor boy, Christ bless him, was feeble-minded and wet his bed at night. Also he had a deformity in his neck that pained him badly. No parents or relatives, an urchin of the streets. I couldn't take him with me, could I? And to throw him out upon the mercy of London? No, I'm far too much the gentleman for that."

Greathouse didn't respond. Matthew glanced at him and saw him just staring fixedly at the pistol, his finger upon the trigger and the striker on full-cock. He sat exactly so for several seconds, and then he took a long deep breath, eased the striker home and said, "When you get back to London, maybe they'll give you a civic medal to wear with your rope."

"I shall wear it with pride, sir."

Greathouse looked at Matthew with dark-hollowed eyes. "I think we'd better switch places. Right now."

They handed off the reins and the gun between them and Matthew turned around on the seat. Slaughter sat with his back against the wagon's frame, his gray face with its patchwork beard offered to the beams of sunlight that here and there pierced the thickening clouds. His eyes were closed, as if in meditation.
Matthew watched him, saw a fly light on his left cheek and begin to walk across the flesh. There was no reaction from the prisoner. The fly crawled up upon the aristocratic nose, and still Slaughter's eyes remained shut. Then, as the fly made its way between the flared nostrils toward the forest of mustache, Slaughter said without opening his eyes, "Mr. Corbett, I am interested in you." The fly had taken flight with the first utterance, whirled buzzing around Matthew's tricorn and then flew away.

Matthew said nothing. The pistol was in his lap. The irons had no rusted links, and Slaughter wasn't going anywhere. From this vantage point, the man resembled little more than a chained-up bag of evil-smelling rags. With a beard and filthy feet, of course.

"Afraid to speak to me?" Slaughter asked, his eyes yet closed.

"Why don't you just shut up?" Greathouse fired back.

"Because," and here the pale blue eyes opened and fixed upon Matthew with a hint of mocking humor, "time is running out."

"Really? Meaning what?"

"Meaning time is running out," Slaughter repeated.

"Is that supposed to be a threat?"

"Not at all, Sir, my suggestion is to relax." He smiled thinly. "Enjoy the morning. Listen to the birds and count your blessings. Let me converse with this young man, as I rather think he's the more intelligent of your company. As a matter of fact, I'm sure he is the brain to your muscle. Is that correct, Mr. Corbett?"

Greathouse made a noise like a fart squeezed between a hundred-pounds of buttocks.

"Oh, absolutely," Matthew decided to say, if just to goad the great one. He felt a fist-sized knot of tension in his stomach, speaking to the prisoner like this, but he dared not show any discomfort. Besides, that would not be professional.

"I'm trying to determine what your career might be." Slaughter's eyes examined Matthew from boot toe to tricorn top. "Something to do with the law, of course. I know you came to the hospital several times to see that old woman. And he came with you, the first time. I think you must be a lawyer. And him, the roughneck who collects the money and does whatever a young lawyer deigns not to do. However, he does order you about a bit, so I'm confused on that point." He reversed the examination, descending this time from tricorn to boot. "Expensive, well-tailored clothes. Very nice boots. Ah, I have it!" He grinned. "You're a successful young lawyer, a little full of yourself but very ambitious, and he is a member of the militia. Possibly an ex-military man? Used to giving orders? Is that following the right track?"

"Possibly," said Matthew.

"I'll refine it, then. You are a young lawyer and he is a militia officer. A captain, perhaps. I know the look of captains, because I myself have been a soldier. So you were sent to make sure everything was done correctly, and he came because he's had experience with manacles, shackles and pistols. Have you been in prison or the madhouse yourself, sir?"

Greathouse, to the credit of his self-control, did not reply.

"Are you a dealer in firearms? Oh, here it must be! You have a hand in running the gaol, is that it? So the both of you were ordered to come fetch me, and for the price of two pounds bind me up like a broken bird and haul me to New York. Does that cover the item, Mr. Corbett?"

"We're being paid five pounds," Matthew said, just to stop his prattle.

"Ahhhhh, I see." Slaughter nodded, his eyes bright. "That much. So the officials in New York are paying the extra
three? Five pounds, split between you, yes?" He made a display of wriggling his fingers as if counting on them.
"Two and a half pounds in your pockets! What a bounty, for an old sack of guts like me!"

"Slaughter," Greathouse said tersely, without looking back, "if you don't keep your mouth shut I'm going to stop
this wagon long enough to knock out at least three of your teeth. Do you understand?"

"Pardon me, sir. I don't wish to antagonize. Neither do I wish to lose any more teeth than nature and a madhouse
diet have already taken." He cast a rather sweet smile at Matthew. "But before I lapse into a not-unfamiliar state of
solitary confinement, Mr. Corbett, may I ask if your opinion coincides with mine about how long it will be until we
reach the river? Say a little less than two hours?"

Matthew knew Slaughter was talking about the Raritan river. A ferry would take their wagon to the other side.
"That's right."

"Slow horses," said Slaughter, and he closed his eyes again.

Matthew didn't let down his guard, expecting that the man's silence would be short-lived. He wondered what he
would do if Slaughter suddenly lunged at him; but with those irons confining his arms and legs, and the thunderball
weighing him down, Slaughter wasn't going to be lunging at anyone today. In another moment the prisoner's face
went slack, the eyes fluttered behind the lids, and Matthew dared assume he was held fast in the arms of Somnus.

As Matthew watched, he saw another fly, or perhaps the same one as before, land at a corner of Slaughter's
mouth. The man did not move, nor did his eyes open. The fly began an unhurried crawl across Slaughter's lower lip,
its wings vibrating for any sign of danger. Further along went the fly, as upon a precipice above a forested valley.

When the fly reached the center of Slaughter's lip, the man's mouth suddenly moved in a blur. There was a quick
sucking sound, and the fly was gone.

Matthew heard just the faintest crunch.

Slaughter's eyes opened, and fixed upon Matthew; they glinted red deep in the pupils, and when he grinned there
was a bit of crushed fly on one of his front teeth. Then his eyes drifted shut again, he turned his face away from the
sun, and he lay still.

"Everything all right?" Greathouse asked, perhaps noting that Matthew had given a start that had nearly lifted him
off the seat.

"Yes." Matthew realized his voice was about a half-octave higher than it ought to be. He tried again, with better
results. "Yes. Fine."

"Your tricorn's crooked," Greathouse said, after a quick glance to ascertain Matthew's condition. "Do you want to
drive?"

"No." He corrected the wayward angle of his hat. "Thank you."

The Philadelphia Pike continued on through the Jersey woods, the horses walked and the wagon's wheels turned,
but never had it seemed to Matthew that movement seemed to be in such slow-motion. The road curved to the right,
straightened out again and then curved to the left, to repeat the process all over again. Did the woods on either side
alter a whit, or were they a painted backdrop? No, they were moving all right, for there in the distance was a solitary
farmhouse on a hilltop, with cultivated fields below. A deer ran gracefully across the road. Overhead, two hawks
circled on the currents of air. The world was still turning, and time had not stopped.

They passed a stone wall on the left, and beyond it a small gray house that had not weathered a storm as well as
the wall, for its roof had collapsed. Whoever its occupants had once been, they were long gone, for what had been a
farmfield was overgrown with weeds and brush. A large oak tree with huge gnarled branches to the right of the
house seemed to Matthew to make the statement that man might labor his sweat and tears on the land, might
overcome for the moment a thousand hardships, might even win the momentary favor of fate enough to feed a
family, but the harsh judgment of nature was in this land always the final decree of success or failure, or even of life
and death. No matter that man thought himself the master here, he was only a passing tenant.

He heard Slaughter's chains rattle, and involuntarily his stomach clenched.

"May I have some water?" the prisoner asked.

Matthew got the flask from under his seat, uncorked it and held it over Slaughter's cupped hands. Slaughter drank silently, like an animal. Then Matthew put the flask away and sat as before, with the pistol in his lap and his hand on the grip.

Slaughter looked around at the landscape, which was nothing but thick woods on either side. "How long did I sleep?"

Matthew shrugged, unwilling to be drawn into any further conversation.

"Soon be at the river, I'd guess. How much further, would you say?"

"What does it matter?" Greathouse asked, glancing back. "We'll be there when we're there."

"Oh, it does matter, sir. It matters quite a great deal, for all of us. You see, as I said before, time is running out."

"Don't start that shit again."

"Let me get my bearings." Slaughter struggled to sit up on his knees, as the chains clattered like the devil's claws on a slate roof.

"Stop that!" Matthew and Greathouse said, almost as one.

"No need for alarm, gentlemen. I'm bound quite securely, I promise you. All right, then. I believe we've passed a stone wall and a landmark on this road known as Gideon's Oak. How far back was that?" He received no answer.

"Not very distant, I'd say. You'll be seeing a road up here about another half-mile on the left that curves into the woods. Not much of a road, really. More of a track. I would suggest you consider taking that road, before time runs out."

"What the damned hell are you spewing?" Greathouse sounded near the end of his tether.

"Time will run out for you and Mr. Corbett, sir, when you put this wagon upon the ferryboat. Because when we cross the river," said Slaughter in a quiet, easy voice, "you will lose your chance at finding the fortune that I-and only I-can lead you to."
Nine

After a period of profound quiet, during which could be heard the squeaking of the wheels, the jingling of the team's traces, the battering of a woodpecker against a pine tree and the distant crowing of a delusional rooster, there followed a bray of laughter. Not of the funeral bell variety, but rather of a drunken loon.

Matthew had never before heard Greathouse laugh with such rib-splitting abandon. He feared the man would lose his grip not only of the reins but also of his senses, as his face was getting so blood-red, and topple off his seat into the weeds.

"Oh, that's a good one!" Greathouse gasped, when at last he'd found his power of speech. His eyes had actually sprung tears. "A grand try, Slaughter! Now I know why you were in that asylum! You really are insane!" He was overcome by chortling again, until Matthew thought he might choke on his mirth.

Slaughter's expression remained constant; that is to say, he wore a blank but for slightly-raised eyebrows. "Sir, I would appreciate your remembering to address me as a gentleman."

"All right then, Mister Slaughter!" Greathouse was barely containing his humor, but a little anger had started to gnaw at the edge of it. "Do you think we're a pair of damned fools? Turn off the pike onto a road to nowhere? Christ, save me!"

"Get your laughter done," came the silken response. "When you can listen with any sense in your ears, let me know. But I'm telling you, the road has a destination, and at its end is a pretty pot of gold."

"That's enough." Greathouse's voice was firm, all foolishness over. He flicked the reins once, then again, harder this time, but the horses steadfastly refused to hurry. "You can tell us all about it when you're in the gaol."

"Now who is the insane one here, sir? Why in the name of sixteen fucking devils would I want to tell you about it when I'm in the gaol? The purpose is to tell you about it so that I will not be in the gaol."

"Oh, you'll be in the gaol, all right. Just shut up."

"Mr. Corbett?" Slaughter's imploring gaze went to Matthew. "As I said, I believe you to be the more intelligent of your company. Might I at least explain to you what I'm talking about?"

"No!" said Greathouse.

"Mr. Corbett?" Slaughter urged. "The road is coming up soon. Once we pass it and cross the river, neither one of you is going to want to come back, and you're going to be missing an opportunity that I have never offered anyone on earth and that I would not offer anyone on earth if I wasn't um just a little anxious about my future." He paused to let Matthew consider it. "May I?"

"This ought to be entertaining!" Greathouse said, with a disdainful puff of air. "Lies from a madman! Have at it, then!"

Matthew nodded warily, his hand still on the pistol. "Go ahead."

"I thank you. Do you wish to know why constables-armed mercenaries, is a better term for them-were hired by the Quakers to ride along with coaches and to guard travelers on this road? Because Ratsy and I were so damned successful. We worked the pike between the river and Philadelphia for almost two years, gentlemen. In every kind of weather you can imagine. We were giving the pike a bad name, I suppose. The Quakers were getting nervous about their sterling reputations as upholders of law and order. So they brought out the musketeers, and unfortunately Ratsy went down with a lead ball in his brain, dead before he hit the ground."

"Too bad a second shot didn't " Greathouse fished for the word. "Polish you off."

"Oh, I was shot at, all right. My horse was hit, and he bucked me. I was thrown headlong, knocked senseless, and woke up in chains in the back of a wagon much like this one. I took advantage of a bloody head to cry my case of
lunacy, which I knew the Quakers must take into consideration, their being so damned brotherly."

"And so the reign of the daring highwaymen had ended," said Greathouse with a quick backward glance. "Pardon me if I don't shed any tears."

"You miss the point, sir. The point being, our great success. The very reason we were considered such a threat to be captured and contained." Slaughter looked from the back of Greathouse's head into Matthew's eyes. "We stole a lot of money."

"Listen to him drool on!"

"A lot of money," Slaughter repeated. "At the end of the road you're going to be passing in about ten minutes is a safebox holding more than fifty pounds."

Matthew expected Greathouse to laugh again, or to make some rude comment, but he did not. The wheels kept turning.

"And more than the money," Slaughter went on, staring fiercely at Matthew. "Gold rings, jewels in elegant brooches, silver stickpins, and what have you. Two years' worth of treasure, taken from travelling merchants, dandies and damsels. I'd say in all, a fortune worth well over a hundred pounds. I'm no authority on fancy stones, so it might be much higher. What is a string of pearls selling for these days?"

"Drool on," Greathouse answered. "Do you think we're complete idiots?" He flicked the reins once more, hard, as if to gain distance between himself and the prisoner, alas to no avail.

"Mr. Corbett?" Again Slaughter's brows lifted. "Are you a complete idiot?"

Matthew returned the man's stare. He was trying to read Slaughter's eyes, his expression, or some giveaway in how he held his head or clenched his hands. He could not; the man was well-sealed.

"I think you're lying," Matthew said.

"Do you? Really? Or are you thinking, as your companion probably is, that when I am taken across the river and carried the rest of our journey, am put into the gaol at New York and then aboard a ship to be hanged in London, that the safebox at the end of that road may not be found for dare I say long after you gentlemen are moldering in your graves? If ever?" Slaughter showed his teeth. "I can see them now! Those men of the future, turning a shovel on a buried box! And when they open it, and see all that gleaming goodness, just what will they think, Mr. Corbett? What will they think? That someone in the long ago told a lie, to save their skin? Someone trussed in chains, with a pistol held on them? No, they'll think what complete idiot left this treasure box buried here, and never came back for it? And then their next thought will be: well, now it belongs to us, for the men of the past are dead and gone, and dead men have no need of money." He leaned forward slightly, as if to offer a secret. "But living men need money, don't they? Yes, living men need a lot of money, to live well. And that's no lie."

Matthew was silent, studying Slaughter's face. There was not a clue to determine the truth or fiction of his story. "Tell me this, then," he said in a flat, even tone. "Why were you burying your loot all this distance out here, so far from Philadelphia?"

"This was not our only refuge. I determined it would be safer to have two places to hide in, and to split the money between. In case one was found, we always had the second. The first is a house in the woods a few miles northwest of the city. There, also, a safebox is buried holding about thirty pounds and some items of jewelry. But I'm not offering that one to you; it's not part of our accord."

"Our accord?" Greathouse shouted, and for all their age and slowness the horses seemed to jump a foot off the ground.

"This is my offer." Slaughter's voice was quiet and controlled, almost otherworldly in its calm cadence. "I will lead you to the second house, which is at the end of the road coming up very soon. I will grant you a gift of the
safebox, and all its contents. For that, you will unlock my chains and set me free at that location. I'll take care of myself from there."

"Am I drunk?" Greathouse asked, speaking to the air. "Have I caught lunatic's disease?"

"From that point," Slaughter continued in the same manner as before, "I vow before you as a subject of the Queen and a citizen of England that I will take the money from the first safebox and use it to purchase a voyage to " He paused. "Where would you like me to go? Amsterdam? The South Seas? I don't necessarily like the sun, but."

"I am going absolutely mad," said Greathouse. "Hearing disembodied voices."

"I'm done with this country." Slaughter was speaking to them both, but staring directly at Matthew. "Done with England, as well. All I want to do is be gone."

"We're not going to let you go," Matthew said. "That's the end of it."

"Yes, but what end? Why not say I was shot while trying to escape, and that my body fell into the river? Who would ever know differently?"

"We would know."

"Oh, dear God!" Slaughter cast his eyes skyward. "Have I met a pair of noble imbeciles? Two men out of all creation who have no need for money, and who can live just as well on the sweet but worthless jelly of good deeds? Here! The road's coming up! See it?"

They did. Curving into the forest on the left was a narrow, rutted track hardly the width of their wagon. The underbrush was wild and the trees thick around as winekegs, their branches and leaves making an interlocked canopy of flaming colors far above.

"That's it!" Slaughter said. "Right there, gentlemen. The path to your Sir! You're not turning!"

Greathouse kept the team going, his shoulders hunched slightly forward.

"More than fifty pounds in money, sir! Add together the jewelry and other items and you'll both be rich men! Can't you understand what I'm offering you?" Still the wagon trundled onward. "I vow I'll leave the country! What more do you want? Me to rot behind bars before I swing on the gallows for killing vile creatures? Do you think the people who sent you here would turn my offer down? Do you think they care about anything but themselves?" He gave a harsh, hollow laugh. "Go on, then! Keep going, right on past, and damn your soul for it, too! Just know you could have been rich, but you were too stupid to claim your prize!"

Matthew looked away from Slaughter's strained face, which had begun to blotch red during this tirade.

The wagon's wheels made three more revolutions.

And then Matthew heard Greathouse say, "Whoa," to the team as if he had a stone in his throat.

Greathouse eased back on the reins. The horses stopped.

"What are you doing?" Matthew asked sharply.

Greathouse set the brake. "I have to piss." He put the reins aside, climbed down to the road and walked off into the woods.

Slaughter had closed his eyes and leaned his head back again. He said nothing, nor did he move a muscle. Gathering his strength for another try, Matthew suspected.

Time passed. A minute or more. Matthew looked toward the woods where Greathouse had gone but couldn't see him for the thicket. One of the horses rumbled and shifted its weight, as if uneasy at just standing there waiting, and
then it joined its brethren in chomping weeds.

Another minute may have passed before Greathouse reappeared, walking slowly through the brush. He was staring down at the ground, and kicking at stones and acorns. "Matthew," he said without looking up, "will you come here?"

"What about."

"He's not going anywhere."

Matthew returned his attention to Slaughter, who yet remained motionless.

"Matthew," said the prisoner, his eyes closed against the sunlight that lit up his beard like a coalfire. "A very respectable name, that. Go right ahead, I'll just rest."

Matthew got down off the wagon, the pistol in hand. He checked Slaughter's position once more before he walked the twelve paces or so to join Greathouse, but the prisoner had not moved.

"What is it?" Matthew asked, seeing the deep furrows of worry that cut across Greathouse's face. "Is something wrong?"

Greathouse rummaged in the leaves with the toe of his boot, bent down and picked up a white rock, which he examined closely. "I want your opinion," he said at last, in a restrained voice calculated not to travel the distance of twelve paces. "Is he lying about the money, or not?"

"I don't know." The meaning of what Greathouse had just asked him hit Matthew like a timber board across the back of the head. "Oh, my God! You're not listening to him, are you?"

"Keep your voice down." Greathouse turned the rock in his hand, examining its cracks and crevices. "What if he's not lying, Matthew? I mean why should he, at this stage of the game? It's all over for him, and he knows it. Why should he lie?"

"Because he wants to get us down that road and escape, that's why."

"Escape," Greathouse repeated. The word had been spoken gravely. "How? Chained up like he is, with the ball on his leg? And us with the pistol? How the hell is he going to escape? He may be half-crazy, but he's surely not full-crazy." Greathouse continued to turn the white rock in his palm as if studying every possible angle. "He knows that I won't kill him, but he also knows he wouldn't get far with one knee shot off. Hell, I might kill him anyway. I'm not a Quaker, and I didn't make any damned decree with 'em."

"He's lying," said Matthew. "That's my opinion, so there it is."

Greathouse gripped the rock in his fist. "You don't think I can handle him, do you?"

"I think we're both asking for--"

"Keep your voice down," Greathouse commanded. He stepped forward, until his face was only inches away from Matthew's. "I can handle him. I've handled plenty like him before--and worse, believe me--so he's not going to be any problem."

Matthew shook his head. The intensity of Greathouse's stare compelled him to fix his own gaze on the dead leaves around their feet.

"Fifty pounds," came the quiet voice. "And more. The gold rings and the jewelry. It would buy Zed's freedom, Matthew. Don't you see?"

Matthew did suddenly see, and as he looked into Greathouse's eyes he felt his face tighten into an incredulous mask. "That's what you want the money for?"
"Yes. What else?"

Matthew had to take off his tricorn and put the back of his hand against his forehead, for fear his brain had fired up a fever.

"Whatever van Kowenhoven named as a price, we could meet," Greathouse went on. "And pay off Cornbury for the writ of manumission as well. With that much money, we'd probably even have some to spare. You know, to split between us."

Matthew looked for someplace to sit down, for his legs felt weak. He needed a sturdy boulder to at least lean against, but there was nothing. In his mind was the image of a lockbox disguised as a book, and within it a black leather bag, and within that bag a handful of gleaming gold coins that made him a rich young man.

"Now don't think I have the slightest intention of letting him go," Greathouse said. "That would be a crime against humanity. But listen, Matthew: we can make him believe we're in accord, and then when we have the money, it's right back on this road again, across the river and on to put him behind bars. What do you say?"

Matthew had no words. He was thinking of the gold coins, and his debts, and new suits in the latest fashion, and how he needed a fireplace for his house, with the winter coming on.

"I know that lying to him might not be to your liking. I understand and appreciate your show of moral character, but back there he said Two men out of all creation who have no need for money. Well, I do have a need for it, and I know you do too." Greathouse frowned, taking Matthew's continued silence as stern disapproval. "Matthew, we can trick it out of him. We can lie to a liar. Or you don't have to speak a word, I'll do all the lying. I have much more experience at it than you."

"It's not that," Matthew heard himself say, though he had no memory of speaking the words. He had hornets in his head, they were buzzing so loudly he couldn't hear. This was the moment to tell Greathouse about the gold coins; he knew it was, for if Matthew didn't tell, Greathouse was going to take them down the forest track in pursuit of Slaughter's safebox. There was plenty of gold in that leather bag to share. Of course there was. Fifty or more pounds spent for Zed's freedom, for a bodyguard he didn't need, and then the rest for all the things Matthew planned on buying. Forget the fireplace until next winter. He had enough clothes, why should he ever need any more? Yes, plenty to share.

"What is it, then?" Greathouse prodded.

Matthew started to speak. To say what? He wasn't sure. Possibly I am a rich man or It's not fair, I found the money, me alone, and it's not fair

The world spun about him, and in the air he smelled the faint burned scent of autumn's decay.

Matthew said, with what seemed a genuine labor, "I am " And then the rest of it spilled out: " afraid of him."

Greathouse grunted, his face screwed up in a scowl. But slowly the scowl eased, Greathouse dropped his white rock and put his hand on Matthew's shoulder. "Listen, so am I. A little, maybe. But I'll take care of everything. Just follow along with me, all right?"

Tell him, he thought. And demanded of himself: Tell him!

But he did not, and he stood looking down at all the leaves at his feet as if the earth might open and swallow him up in an instant.

"Come on." Greathouse clapped his shoulder. "Let's get to it."

Matthew followed Greathouse to the wagon, where Slaughter still lay with his eyes closed like a beast dozing in the shifting sunbeams. Two more flies had found him and were whirling about his face. Matthew wondered how many he'd dined on since he'd been lying there.
Greathouse slammed his palm against the side of the wagon, which caused Slaughter only to lift his eyelids to half-mast and yawn. "Saying we might believe you," Greathouse told him roughly, "and that we might be interested. How far down that road do we go?"

Slaughter worked his head from side to side, stretching his neck. "To the end of it, as I've already said."

"How far?"

"Oh six miles west, along the river. Then the road takes a turn to the southwest. Another four miles, I'd say. Ten miles in all."

"Ten miles? That's a long way, with these horses."

"You make a journey," said Slaughter, "with the horses you have."

Greathouse suddenly reached over and grabbed hold of the prisoner's beard, which served to secure Slaughter's full attention. "If we drive ten miles to the end of that road and no safebox is buried there, I won't be pleased. Those doctors may have promised the Quakers you'd get to New York alive, but I'm a Baptist. If I decide not to kill you, I'll at least give you some marks to remember. I may even tear off that damned beard." He gave it a steady pull, but Slaughter gave no reaction. "Do you understand me? Just nod."

Slaughter did.

Greathouse released him. He wiped his hand down the leg of his breeches, leaving a dirty smear. He said to Matthew, "Get up there and work the horses back."

Matthew climbed up onto the seat and put the pistol beside him where he could reach it in a hurry if he heard the chains rattle. He lifted the brake, took the reins and started urging the team to backstep as Greathouse took hold of one of the wheels and pushed against it. Soon they had retreated the wagon to just beyond the turnoff. Then Greathouse climbed up again, took the pistol and turned around on the seat to watch Slaughter.

"All right, Matthew," said Greathouse. "Let's go."

Matthew hesitated on the verge of flicking the reins. Tell him, he thought. But it was a quieter, less urgent voice. There was still time. Maybe in the next mile or two. He would have to think about it a little more. And it might not be necessary to tell. Not necessary at all. If the safebox was really there, and it held the treasure as Slaughter said then why would it ever be necessary?

Still, he had a taste of ashes in his mouth, and his fine suit did not seem to hang so well on his frame as it had before.

He flicked the reins. The team started walking, one of the horses snorting at this indignity of the driver not knowing whether he was going backward or forward.

They entered the woods on the narrow road. The canopy of trees closed above their heads. It was only after another minute or so that Matthew pulled himself out of his thoughts to realize they were heading directly into the oncoming storm.
Ten

Beneath a sky the color of lead and just as heavy, they heard the wind approaching through the forest. On a hillside in the distance, through a break in the trees, they saw huge branches whipping back and forth and hundreds of scarlet leaves spinning into the air. Then the white veil of rain descended over the view, and though it was yet a half-mile away they braced for the blast.

Matthew had given the reins to Greathouse about an hour ago and taken over the task of watching the prisoner. Both Matthew and Greathouse wore their cloaks tight about them, and now as the sound of the wind came nearer Greathouse shouted, "Keep the gun dry!"

Matthew put it inside his cloak and kept his hand on the grip. The horses nickered and lifted their heads nervously to protest their course, but Greathouse's firm control of the reins kept them from going off the road and into the thicket. Matthew saw the prisoner watching him almost incuriously, as one might watch to see what a dog would do when doused with a bucketful of water.

"Here it comes!"

The first swirl of the wind, deceptively meek, came just a few seconds after Greathouse's voice. And then there was a keen high shrill of air that built to almost a feminine scream and the next blast of wind hit Matthew in the back and almost lifted him off the seat. He had the quick sensation of thinking that the wind was going to get into the flapping folds of his cloak and send him flying. Leaves of a hundred hues of red, purple and yellow struck him, as if the very forest had turned assailter. He felt the tricorn flip off his head, and that was when Slaughter made his move.

Through the tumult of whirling leaves Matthew saw Slaughter come up from his position of repose like a snake striking from beneath a rock. The noise of the wind masked the rattle of chains, and when Matthew opened his mouth to cry out he knew his voice would be tattered to pieces before it reached Greathouse, who was trying to keep the horses from turning against the onslaught. Slaughter reached out toward Matthew with a claw-like hand, the knives of his nails flashing at Matthew's eyes.

And even as Matthew struggled to get the pistol out of his cloak and failed to dislodge it, he brought up his other arm, fist clenched, to ward off the coming blow and he saw Slaughter grasp his tricorn, which had blown off his head and which the prisoner had caught before it could go flying off the wagon.

"There you are, Matthew," said Slaughter, bent with the weight of his irons and speaking close to the younger man's ear. "You wouldn't want to lose such a fine hat." He pushed it into Matthew's fist until the fist opened to accept it.

"What is it?" Greathouse had looked over his shoulder, his eyes widening as he took in the scene. The horses were still unnerved and tossing their heads against the bit. "Sit down, Slaughter! Now!"

The order could not be obeyed before the rain struck. It came rushing in on the heels of the wind, hit with a cold impact that made breath hitch in the lungs, and within seconds had drenched the three travelers to their skins. Slaughter sank down amid the leaves that littered the wagon, and curled himself up as best he could. Greathouse hollered out a great curse as rain streamed through his brown woolen cap and down his face. Matthew dumped the water out of his tricorn and put it back on, and when he sat there shivering he wasn't sure if it was due to the chill rain or the fact that Slaughter's fingernails could have torn out his eyes.

The wind ceased, but the rain kept pouring down. Waterfalls sprang from the treetops. The air itself turned grayish-green, visibility was cut to the edges of what might have been roiling seafoam, and it seemed they were no longer travelling through forest but across an undersea kingdom.

The horses, back to their old stolid selves, pulled the wagon onward with no further dissent. Presently their hooves began to sink in mud. Thoroughly wet and miserable, Matthew thought that now must surely be the time to admit his discovery of the money, and end this travail. They'd already come, by the reckoning of his tailbone, at least six miles due west from the pike and the road was yet to turn to the southwest as Slaughter had said. Before the
storm had hit, Matthew had expected Greathouse to point this fact out to the prisoner, but then again they might not
have quite made six miles yet; it was hard to tell, with just these unbroken woods all around. They’d had several
glimpses of the river, off to the right, but not a single view of any dwelling built by the hand of man.

Matthew wondered what his fate was going to be when he told. More than a scolding, for sure. A knock on the
head, if he was lucky. More than one, depending on Greathouse’s mood, and in this damned rain his mood was
certainly going to be deepest black.

"What the hell is this?" Greathouse suddenly said, and Matthew dared to look over his shoulder at what the other
man had already seen.

On their left the woods had been cleared away, and emerging from the rain-thrashed gloom were the simple
wooden markers of a small cemetery. Matthew counted thirty-eight graves. The surprising thing about it was that the
cemetery was so orderly and well-kept, free of weeds, vines and underbrush that normally would have quickly
overgrown such a sylvan setting.

"A cabin ahead," Greathouse said, and in another sticky quarter-revolution of the wheels Matthew also saw it, a
dark shape sitting on the right. Then, a second dark structure came out of the rain on the left, this one with a
collapsed roof. A third cabin stood just beyond that one, also seemingly abandoned, and as more of them emerged
on both sides of the mudtrack Matthew realized it was a village. Or, at least, what had once been a village.

"Slaughter!" Greathouse called, and the prisoner stirred. "Is this the place?"

"No," came the reply, as he sat up and gazed around with rain running from his beard. "This is New Unity. Rather
it used to be, before I went into the loon house. I wonder what happened to the people."

"You sure you didn't kill them?"

"It was an active village when I last passed this way."

In another moment Matthew caught a whiff of woodsmoke, and he spied a light glinting behind the shutters of a
cabin just ahead on the right. "There!" he said, but Greathouse only nodded because he’d already spotted the sign of
life. That and the smoke fighting its way up into the sodden air from a fieldstone chimney.

"I think it’s best we get out of this for awhile, if they’ll accept any visitors." Greathouse started to turn the team
toward what appeared to be New Unity’s single occupied dwelling.

"What're you doing?" Slaughter was up on his knees. "You can't stop here!"

"I say one miserable wreckage of a village is as good as another in a downpour, especially if there's a roof and a
fire."

"You can't!" Slaughter insisted, a note of desperation in his voice. "We're so close to the fort!"

"The fort? What're you talking about?"

"Where the safebox is buried. The Dutch settlement at Fort Laurens. We have to keep going, we can get there by-
"

"Nightfall?" Greathouse interrupted. "In this rain? Only if we're kept out of that cabin at gunpoint." He urged the
horses through the muck and off the road. Both he and Matthew had already seen what appeared to be a small barn
just beside the cabin, and none of Slaughter’s pleadings about keeping on to Fort Laurens made a whit of difference
to either of them; they were drenched, cold and uneasy about this journey, both for their own reasons, and the
lamplight behind a shutter was for the remainder of this day at least as good a shine as gold.

If they would be accepted by the occupant here, and that was the question. "Matthew!" Greathouse said. "Go
knock at the door."
"Me? Why me?"

"You're dressed as a gentleman. A soaking wet one, but a gent all the same. Go."

Matthew got down off the wagon and went up three stone steps to the cabin's door, which was set on a porch supported by large flat rocks. The place was made of timbers chinked together with mud, the same as the rest of New Unity's constructions. Everything was weather-beaten, dark-stained and dismal. The windows were shuttered tight, but through their cracks Matthew saw what appeared to be the light of several candles. He glanced back at the figure of Greathouse, sitting with as much dignity as could be maintained in a cold drenching downpour, and then he balled up his fist and knocked against the door.

He waited, not without trepidation, and heard footsteps approaching across the planks within.

"Who's there, please?" came a voice from the other side. A feeble, quiet voice, but carrying perhaps also an expectant note. The voice of an elderly man, Matthew thought.

"Travelers," Matthew replied. "The storm caught us. May we rest here for awhile? Or at least, in your barn?"

There was a pause. Then: "How many are you?"

"Three."

"Going to where?"

"Fort Laurens," Matthew said.

Again, a pause. Matthew thought the speaker must've gone away. Then, quite abruptly, the door was opened. The old man who peered out held a candle in a wooden holder. The flickering light painted him with orange and yellow. He was lean, rawboned, and of medium height, yet had been much taller in his youth for now his back was stooped with the ravages of age. His face was a mass of lines and wrinkles, like a map that itself had been left out in the rain and crumpled by a careless fist. His remaining tufts of hair were wintry white and as fine as the first frost, but his white eyebrows had grown as thick as summer's cornfields. He angled his head to the left and then to the right, and Matthew realized the man's sunken eyes might only be seeing him as a man-shaped shadow.

"All of you, please come in," said the old man. He opened the door wider, and Matthew motioned to Greathouse that their request had been granted. "Come in, come in. Warm yourself," the old man urged. Matthew waited to make sure Greathouse could handle the prisoner on his own, getting him out of the back of the wagon, and then he entered the cabin and went directly to the cheerful crackling fireplace, where he set the pistol atop the mantel, took off his tricorn and basked in the gratifying heat.

"I am John Burton." The old man had left the door open for his other two guests and had come up beside Matthew. With an age-spotted but steady hand, he lifted the candle nearer Matthew's face. "Your name, sir?"

"Matthew Corbett." He heard the rattle of chains coming. "Mr. Burton, I need to tell you that-"

He was interrupted by the noise of the thunderball, which Slaughter had been carrying in his manacled hands, slamming to the boards just outside the door. Matthew winced, thinking that visitors to a stranger's cabin ought not to destroy the porch floor within the first minute.

"Oh, forgive me," Slaughter said in the doorway, his back bent with the irons. "I carry a heavy burden, sir."

"Sit down," Greathouse told him. He shrugged off his wet cloak and threw it upon the prisoner. "Wipe the mud off your feet before you enter a man's home."

"If I had shoes, my feet wouldn't be so muddy, now would they?"

To the credit of his nerves, John Burton had jumped only a bit when the ball had fallen, and had not lost hold of the candle. Matthew saw in the stronger light that Burton's eyes were nearly opaque, and by the flame glowed with a
murky yellow that Matthew thought must be the color of London's fog. Possibly the man wasn't completely blind, but most of his sight was surely gone.

"You have a man in chains," Burton said, again tilting his head this way and that. "A prisoner. Taking him to Fort Laurens, then?"

"Yes, sir," Greathouse answered. "My name is Hudson Greathouse. Matthew and I are from New York. We appreciate your letting us warm ourselves."

"Your prisoner. He has a name?"

"Tyranthus Slaughter, at your service," he said from his seat on the porch, where he was fouling Greathouse's cloak with his filthy feet. "And you are?"

"John Burton. I should say, Reverend John Burton. I was the minister here." He hesitated, silent for a few seconds, and then seemed to make a decision. "I am the minister here," he said firmly. "Pick up your chains, and come in."

"You drop that ball again," Greathouse warned as Slaughter struggled to his feet, "and I'll take two balls for one with my boot. Understand?"

Slaughter looked up at him from his crooked posture and grinned wryly. "Put your threats back in your pocket, sir. I promise as a gentleman to be on my best behavior. All right?"

Greathouse motioned the prisoner in. Then he picked up his cloak, surveyed the damage and with a noise of disgust threw it off the porch onto a mound of wet leaves. He closed the door, walked past Slaughter and stood next to Matthew warming himself at the fire. "Ahhh!" he said, holding his palms out. "Much better!"

"Pardon our condition," Matthew told the minister, realizing they were dripping puddles on the floor. He'd taken stock of the room and seen that, however nearly-blind Burton might be, the place was nevertheless clean and neat. It was by no means up to the standards of the houses in New York, but it was also far from being the hovel that it had appeared from without. On the floor was a mat of woven river reeds. Two chairs, one with a footstool, were arranged before the fieldstone fireplace. A small round table was set between them. Wood had been brought in, and stacked next to the hearth in a leather carry-all. A larger table stood on the other side of the room, also with two chairs, and near it was an old trunk with its lid up displaying iron pots, pans and other cookware within. A ladder led up to what appeared to be a sleeping-loft. Matthew noted a bookcase with ten volumes in it, though how Reverend Burton could read was a mystery. A plain pine wood cupboard stood at the rear of the room. Next to one wall was a minister's lectern, simple but sturdy, and open atop it was a thick black-bound book that could only have been the Holy Bible. In the corner beside the lectern was something that made Matthew's brows go up: a little pile of straw that seemed to be the nesting place for an unknown entity.

"Your condition?" Burton put the candle down upon the small round table. Two other candles, both nearly stubs, were burning in holders, one atop the mantel amid a collection of smooth stones probably taken from the river, and the second on the larger table. "Oh, you mean that you're wet?" He managed a smile that took a few years off his face, and Matthew had the impression of a once-handsome man with a strong square chin and sparkling eyes. "I should thank God for the storm, then. We don't have much company."

"We?" Greathouse asked.

"My friend Tom has gone to check the snares."

"Oh," was Greathouse's response, but Matthew looked uneasily at the nest of straw and wondered if Tom slept there. Surely the reverend wasn't insane, for he seemed clean enough and was dressed well, in dark brown breeches, gray stockings, a white shirt and a pair of old but serviceable brown boots. No, there most certainly had to be a human Tom, for who had put an axe to the wood and lugged it in from the forest?

"Do you mind if I sit down, here on the floor?" Slaughter inquired. "Where I won't be in anyone's way." He was already sitting, and putting the ball gently down, by the time he'd asked the question.
"New York, you said?" Burton eased himself into the chair with the footstool, and winced a bit as his bones settled. "I haven't been to New York in oh eight years, I think it must be. Probably nearer ten, really. All that noise and the goings-on, it was never my cup of choice. But tell me, who do you gentlemen work for, that you're taking a prisoner to-" He stopped, and his head tilted. "Ah! Here's Tom now!"

There came the sound of boots on the porch. The door opened. A small wet dog, its short bristly hair black as midnight and its snout the brown hue of damp sand, scampered in. "Tom! We have company!" The wet dog was not Tom, for following right after the dog was a tall, slimly-built boy who Matthew guessed was thirteen or fourteen years old. Tom wore a black wool cap and a long black coat turned up at the collar. He was carrying two large gray rabbits hanging from a pole. And that was all the luxury of impression that Matthew could afford at the moment, for the dog stopped just short of Slaughter and, its legs splayed wide, began to rend the air with barks like pistol shots.

"James!" scolded Burton. "Don't be inconsiderate!"

The dog kept barking, but it ceased when the boy commanded sharply, "James! Hush!" After which, the dog made a couple of circles while keeping its eyes on Slaughter, and then it backed up against the boy's leg and made grumbling noises of disapproval.

"Strange," Slaughter said, with a shrug that rattled his chains. "Animals usually adore me."

Tom looked from Slaughter to Greathouse and then to Matthew, his expression impassive. By the candleglow, his keen eyes were a light gray, and as they stared at him for a few seconds Matthew had the distinct feeling of being taken apart from head to toe as a curious youth might cut to pieces a grasshopper for closer inspection. Then the boy's gaze left him, and Tom said, "Shhhh!" to quiet James' opinion of the new arrivals.

"These two gentlemen are from New York," Burton explained. "The individual on the floor who smells in dire need of soap scrubbing is their prisoner. They're on their way to Fort Laurens."

Tom frowned and started to speak, but the reverend continued. "I think we should take them at their word, and as Christians offer them shelter and food. Do we have enough?"

The boy was a moment in answering. Finally he said, "The rabbits are bonny enough. I'll make a stew," in what was definitely the cadence and rolling "r" of a thick Scottish accent. "First off, you'll be needin' to get that team in the barn 'less you want drowned horses."

Greathouse nodded. He told the boy, "I could use some help."

Tom glanced quickly at Matthew and then at the prisoner, as if marking whether the former was up to dealing with the latter. When he took notice of the pistol on the mantel, he put aside the freshly-killed rabbits and went out the door again without a word, the dog shadowing him right at his heels. Greathouse said, "Watch him," to Matthew, who needed no urging on that particular subject. Then the door was closed just as a distant sound of thunder boomed to indicate the storm was in no hurry to reach the sea.

"Well, here we are." Slaughter leaned back against the wall. "At least it's better than where I was, but not by much."

"Your friend," Matthew said to the reverend. "Just a boy. Is he not related to you?"

"No. Tom came to me " Burton hesitated, his eyes closed. "For-give me, time plays tricks on me now. He came to me in November, I think it was. Late November, just after my eyes began to go."

"He came to you? How?"

"Just as I say. One day he and James just walked into the village. From the direction of Belvedere, I think he said. The trading post there. It's a good thing he came. A God-sent gift, he is."

"Really?" Something about the reverend's tone of voice had pricked Matthew's curiosity, which always lay near his surface. "And how might that be?"
Burton's eyes opened and he stared into the fire as it popped and hissed. What he might be seeing was up to debate. "God sent him to me, to help keep my promise." He breathed softly, as again in the distance thunder rumbled. "I'm going to die soon," he continued. "I feel it coming. I was asleep in my chair when you knocked and others here, before they died, told me they had dreams of death knocking at their doors, and it was all right, it was not to be feared. So I thought I wasn't sure I was dreaming, or awake when I answered your knock. But God sent Tom to me to help do what I promised for the others, the ones who died. To take care of their graves, until I also pass from this life. And Tom has promised me also. He would stay with me until I die, and I will be the last grave in the cemetery. And that will be what happened to the village of New Unity, gentlemen. In the space of hardly more than six months, from April to October, one year ago."

"What happened?" Slaughter asked. "Eh? What're you talking about?"

"Fever," came the hushed reply. "It killed men, women and children. Whole families. My wife as well. And I am left, with the help of God and Tom, to watch over their place of final rest. They worked so hard at building a town. All of them. So very hard. They deserve now to be remembered. Don't you agree?"

"Your opinion," said Slaughter, in a hollow sort of voice that Matthew had not heard from him before. "God doesn't give a shit about us. Why should anyone else?"

Matthew saw the reverend flinch at this brutal statement. For a moment Burton did not respond, and then he said, not without pity, "Sir, you have a very cold and callous attitude."

"I've earned it," Slaughter answered.

The remark hung in the air, as the fire's red center spat sparks and another torrent of rain beat against the roof.

"But you were asking about Tom." The reverend put his feet up on the footstool before him with the slow regality of his age. "He's told me that the dog took up with him somewhere on the road, and he named it after his father. For companionship, you know. I believe he was very close to his father."

"What became of his family?"

"His mother died when he was a small boy. A younger brother and sister, also dead. I would think fever in that case, as well. His father was a farmer. Kicked in the chest by a horse and passed away soon after."

"Hm," Matthew said thoughtfully. Indeed, he was thinking of his own origins. His mother dead of poisoned blood when he was but three, his father a hardworking Massachusetts colony plowman who was struck down by a horse's kick to the head when Matthew was six, and then Matthew was thrown into the embrace of the world, which was not often kindly. But, looking upon Reverend Burton in this flickering firelight, Matthew was reminded of his mentor at the orphanage in New York. Headmaster Staunton, who had treated Matthew well, who had lifted him up into the higher realm of books and education with a strict but respectful hand, and who in essence was responsible for his evolution from a dirty street urchin to a young man whose mind never rested in the pursuit of a problem. Headmaster Staunton had left the orphanage in his sixty-sixth year to travel west into the frontier land, with intent to teach the Indian tribes the salvation of God, and then the detested Eben Ausley had arrived to take charge. But that was past history. What intrigued Matthew at the moment was the fact that he and Tom had both lost their fathers to the whim of capricious fate in the form of a horse's kick.

"From what I gather, Tom has no more family in the colonies," Burton went on. "I think he sold the horse and set off on his own, and that was a year or so before he came here, if I have it right."

"Parson, speaking of right," said Slaughter. "It looks to me as if we'd wear near the same size of boots. You wouldn't have another pair, would you?"

"No, I'm sorry, I don't."

"Oh." Matthew saw Slaughter give a faint half-smile, and the flameglow lay red in his eyes. "That's a pity, then."

Matthew didn't care for the way that was spoken. He measured how long it would take him to fetch the pistol up
and train it on Slaughter, if he had to. But how fast could Slaughter move with all that iron on him? He wished Greathouse would hurry up. He felt Greathouse could handle him, even without a gun, and he wondered as well if Slaughter could smell fear on a man, like a horse an instant before it kicked.

The fire popped, shooting sparks, and when Matthew jumped just the smallest bit he heard Slaughter give a soft laugh as if at the most secret joke.
Eleven

Outside Reverend Burton's cabin the darkness closed in, rain fell in sheets upon the wilderness, the thunder boomed and lightning streaked across the heavens. Just another night in New Jersey, some might have said.

Inside the cabin, though, the crackling fire issued forth a convivial warmth, the light of candles spread what in a tavern would have been a friendly glow, and the delicious smell of the rabbit stew bubbling in an iron kettle in the hearth would have made Sally Almond crave the recipe. Tom had shown himself to be a true gift from God, at least in terms of cooking; a few mushrooms, wild onions, potatoes and carrots into the kettle with the pieces of rabbit meat, a little added brandy from the flask that Greathouse had offered around to those who did not wear chains or have four legs, and for the moment a small cameo of comfort had returned to New Unity.

Wooden bowls were set at the table, and portions of the stew scooped into them with a wooden ladle. Tom set aside a smaller portion in a bowl for James, who Matthew noted was never far from the boy's touch. The two chairs by the fireplace were pulled over to join the two at the table, which left Slaughter to say, "I presume, then, that I'll be eating with the dog?"

"You'll eat on the floor and be happy about it." Greathouse put a bowl down for the prisoner. The great one's cap and coat hung on a wallpeg behind him, his shirtsleeves rolled up.

The reverend said with great dignity, "May I remind you, Mr. Greathouse, that this is my home? In all the time I've lived here no guest has ever been forced to eat his meal from the floor. I'd take it very kindly if that hospitality goes unblemished, in the good name of Christ."

"I think he ought to-"

"He can sit on the footstool," Burton interrupted crisply. "Would you help him up? Or shall you have an old man do it?"

Greathouse looked to Matthew for support, but all Matthew could do was shrug, for it was clear Reverend Burton was firm in his humanity, even to those who might be less human than others. Still, Matthew could tell Greathouse was restraining an oath behind his clenched teeth as he put the prisoner's bowl up on the table and then reached down to help Slaughter struggle up.

As Matthew brought the footstool over, Slaughter said to Burton, "Thank you for your kindness, sir, but I might ask for one more Christian favor. These irons will make sitting at your fine table an exercise in torment for my back, and if you might see fit that I be-

"No." Greathouse had him by the scruff of the neck. "You'll make do."

"One moment. Mister Slaughter? Might I ask that, if your irons are removed, you vow to comport yourself as a gentleman and cause no trouble?"

"Sir!" Greathouse was starting to get red in the face. "He's our prisoner, do you understand that? He's a killer. There's no sense in taking the irons off him!"

"I vow whatever you please," Slaughter said. "And it's true, pastor, that I've sinned much, but also true that I've been much sinned against."

Burton nodded. Tom helped him ease into a chair at the head of the table. "Remove his irons," said the reverend. "No man shall sit at my table in chains."

"Oh, for the love of-" Greathouse stopped himself only by biting his tongue.

"Precisely," said Burton. He tilted his head. "Listen to that rain come down!"

Greathouse took the key from his shirt. "Matthew, get the pistol and bring it over here, will you?" Matthew obeyed, and he held it ready as Greathouse unlocked first the leg irons and then the manacles. When the chains fell
away Slaughter stood up to his full height and the bones of his spine cracked.

"Ahhhh!" Slaughter stretched, holding his arms toward the ceiling. It seemed to Matthew, disconcertingly, that the prisoner was an inch or two taller than he'd appeared at the asylum. "Nothing makes a man hungrier than being out of his irons. I'm in your debt, parson." He sat down on the footstool, which was between the chairs meant for Matthew and Greathouse and across from Tom's seat.

Greathouse took the pistol, sat down and kept his eyes on Slaughter as Tom went about pouring apple cider from a jug into small brown cups for them. Then, when everyone was arranged, Burton led them in a short prayer during which neither Greathouse nor Matthew dared close their eyes—and Slaughter was the first to smack his lips and dig into his stew with a wooden spoon and his fingers.

They ate as hungry men do, without speaking. James finished his meal and came around to ask for more. Matthew noted that Tom resisted for awhile, but soon slipped a piece of rabbit from his own bowl down to his friend.

Matthew had been studying Tom while the stew was being cooked. The boy seemed silent by nature, closed up in a world of his own. Something about him resisted questions even before the questions had been asked. He had examined the visitors on first meeting, true, but after that he seemed not to care very much about them. He was a handsome boy, with a high forehead and a craggy nose that looked to have once been broken. His hair was more of a dark stain, being shaved to the scalp. Matthew had once worn his hair the same way, to combat the spread of lice. Tom had a strong square jaw and thick black brows above piercing light gray eyes. He was slimly-built, but nothing about him suggested weakness; in fact, he moved with a quickness and economy that said he was both physically strong and equally swift. Matthew thought the boy would've been a good candidate for Greathouse's sword-fighting lessons. Now, as Matthew continued to examine the boy, Tom looked up from his bowl and stared across the table at him, with a brief panther-like glare that asked the question *What are you looking at?* Immediately Matthew dropped his gaze and said, "Good stew."

There was no response from Tom, who went back to his eating as if nothing had been said.

"I saw evidence of a horse in the barn," Greathouse said in between sips of the cider. The pistol lay beside his bowl, aimed in Slaughter's direction. "My team will appreciate the oats, for sure. But what happened to your horse?"

"We had to sell her," Burton offered. "Tom rode her to Belvedere just last week, to trade for some things we needed. Candles, salt, sugar. Those things."

"And how far is Belvedere, then?"

"Oh twelve miles, I suppose."

"Fourteen," said the boy, without looking up.

Greathouse paused with the cup at his lips. "You're not going to tell me you rode a horse to this Belvedere place and walked back here fourteen miles carrying a sackful of supplies, are you?"

Tom shrugged. The silent answer was *All right, I won't.*

"A stout-hearted lad!" Slaughter raised his cup. "This world needs more of them!"

"Reverend Burton told me how you lost your parents," Matthew ventured. The boy seemingly paid him no attention. "I lost mine in much the same way. Don't you have any other family?"

Tom said nothing. He was finishing his stew, but kept a bit of rabbit to hand down to James. Then he spoke, as if the question were of no consequence: "A grandpa in Aberdeen. That's all."

"Hail to the Scots!" Slaughter said.

"I can take care of m'self." Tom lifted his gaze to spear Matthew with it, and then he drank down some more of his cider to put an end to this line of conversation.
Thunder spoke above the cabin. Rain slashed at the shutters. James, unperturbed by the roar of nature, sat down next to Tom’s foot and scratched at a flea.

"Greathouse." Slaughter had reached the bottom of his bowl. He licked juice from his fingers. "I don't know that name, but I swear you're familiar. Were you ever a circus performer?"

"No. Were you?"

"Oh, absolutely. In my youth I was an acrobat. Quite accomplished if I might say so. I had a female partner, and together we jumped through hoops of fire. Have you ever seen a circus?" The last question was presented to Tom, whose only answer was to reach down and rub his dog's back.

"I regret your situation here," said Greathouse to the reverend. "Can we do anything to help?"

"No. I just thank God the suffering is over," Burton rubbed his right temple, as if at the pain of memory. "They were such good people. So hopeful. And we were doing so well, for awhile. New Unity started as an apple orchard. There are fertile fields between here and the river, you see. More and more people came in, and then the fever struck. It was a terrible thing, sir. Terrible, to see all those people suffering, and begging over dying loved ones for the mercy of God, and yet all I could do was pray. A doctor was brought from Belvedere, and he did all he could but what could be done, against such an enemy? The doctor himself fell ill, and perished. Then my wife." He put his frail hand against his forehead. The thunder boomed again, off to the east. "My wife of fifty-two years, my lovely bride. Coughed herself to death, and squeezed my hand at the last, and I whispered, Wait for me, Abigail, please wait for me. But there were so many others in torment. I couldn't think only of myself, and my loss. I had to be strong, for the others. The young children who died, the mothers who watched their infants go pale and more and more unto deathly white. The strapping young men, with such great dreams, and the women who had come here with them to build a life. And there they lie, in the graves. Peaceful now, I hope. But oh, sirs, they endured so much."

A silence fell, but for the sounds of the fire and the rain.

Quite suddenly, Tyranthus Slaughter began to laugh.

"Shut your mouth!" Greathouse, his cheeks aflame, grabbed hold of the prisoner's beard and twisted it.

Slaughter kept laughing, as tears of either mirth or pain glittered in his eyes.

"Shut it, I said!" Greathouse shouted. James was up on four feet, starting a low gut-growl, but Tom put his hand down on the back of the dog's neck to hold him steady.

"Pardon me! Pardon me!" Slaughter tried to swallow his laughter and began to cough, so violently that Greathouse released him. Matthew didn't know what to think. The madman's wagon had lost its wheels. "Pardon me!" Slaughter repeated, as he wiped his eyes and his nose and drew in a long ragged breath of air. "It just it just strikes me as so funny so ridiculous that none of you have a goddamned idea of-" And on the final four words his eyes cleared, his voice tightened and he reached up to rub his raw chin beneath the patchwork beard. "What real suffering is."

"Apologize to the reverend!" Greathouse demanded, with such force the spittle foamed on his lips. "By God I'll smash your face in if you don't!" Already his fist was clenched and the blow about to be struck.

Slaughter stared at the upraised fist. He reached into his mouth with a forefinger and probed at an offending shred of rabbit stuck between upper teeth. "I shall apologize, sir," he said lightly, "if the company will hear my tale of suffering."

The fist was near being thrown. Matthew knew a bloody mess was about to erupt. "Don't do it," he cautioned, and Greathouse's enraged eyes ticked toward him. The cocked fist was slowly lowered.

"Let him speak," said Reverend Burton, his opaque gaze fixed on the space between Greathouse and the prisoner. "Go ahead, sir, but I ask you to refrain from taking our Lord's name in vain."
"Thank you. Might I have another cup of cider? Just to wet the old whistle?"

Burton nodded, and Tom did the pouring.

Slaughter took a long drink and swirled the liquid around in his mouth before he swallowed. Then he put the cup down before him and turned it between his fingers, with their jagged clawlike nails.

Thunder echoed in the distance. A second voice of the storm spoke, nearer still.

"There was a boy," said Slaughter. "A hardworking young English boy. Whose drunken mother had been murdered in a tavern brawl when he was not quite ten, and her blood spattered his legs, but that is neither here nor there. This upright young boy and his father went out upon the world, and as fate would have it both of them found positions in the mining fields of Swansea. Diggers, they were. Shovel-and-pick men. Handgrubbers, down in the earth. A father and son, blackened together inside and out, black grit in their teeth and in their eyes, and all the day the ringing music of the pit, hour upon hour, for that pretty little pence in their palms. Or rather, in the father's palm, for the boy did so wish that his father might become rich someday, and stride the world as an earl, or a duke. Someone who mattered, in the course of time. Someone he might be proud of. You see?"

No one answered. Slaughter lifted a finger. "Ah, that boy! Quite the worker, he was. He and his father, breaking rocks in that mine from sunup 'til sundown. Or was it from sundown 'til sunup? What is time, where there is only the light of the lanterns, and all seasons are damp and musty as the tomb? But then, gentlemen, came the hour of disaster!" He nodded, looking from one face to the other. "Disaster," he repeated, letting the word hiss. "A cracking noise, small as the sound of a rat biting a bone. Followed by a rumble that built to a roar, but by then the roof was falling. Thunder is no equal to such a noise, sirs. And afterward, the cries and moans of those trapped by the rock swell up in the dark, and echo in the chambers like a cathedral of the damned. Eleven diggers had gone down, to scoop out the last of a worn-out hole. Five were killed outright. Six left alive, in various states of life. One had a tinderbox and got it lit. Two unbroken lamps were found, and some candles in a dead man's sack. There the boy was, waiting for rescue, while his father lay a few feet away with both his legs crushed. And oh, how that man could caterwaul! It shamed the boy, really, to have to witness such indignity."

"When they stuffed a dead man's shirt into the father's mouth, they were at last able to hear help coming," Slaughter went on, as lightning streaked white beyond the shutters and thunder growled overhead. "They shouted to let the diggers know they were still alive. They had air, that was all right. And water, a flask or two. They could hold on, until the diggers got them up. And then-who can say when there came another little crack of a rat bite and boom fell more rock and dust. A storm of it. A whirlwind. But they relit their lanterns, and held on. As the candles burned down. As the last of the beef sausage was eaten. Once more they heard the diggers coming. Coming closer, hour after hour. Or was it day after day? And then again, boom fell the rocks, and this time the man who'd lit his tinderbox fell dead, his brains burst out upon the black wall. Which left five living, if one includes the boy's father, who by now had suffered the agony that renders a human being somewhat less than human."

Slaughter paused to drink again from his cup, and licked his lips when he'd finished. "They waited. The diggers were coming. They had one lantern left, and a few candles. Hope remained. Even when the father drew his last breath, and his eyes grew cold and white and the life left him like a bitter mist hope remained. And then someone-the old soldier with the gray beard, the one from Sheffield-said Listen. He said, Listen, I don't hear them anymore. Of course they all hollered and shouted until their lungs were raw, but the noise made more rubble fall and they were afraid to lose their lantern, and so they just sat and waited, in a little foul chamber that was filling up with the smell of the dead. They sat and waited, there in the earth, as the candles burned down one after the other and the waterflasks emptied and oh yes the hunger started gnawing their bellies. They became weaker, and weaker still. And finally someone said, I think they've left us. Left us, he said, to rot. And someone else went mad, and gibbered until he was hit over the head with a stone, and another wept in a corner and prayed to Jesus on his knees, but the boy vowed I will not die, here in this hole. I will not be left to rot, thrown away like garbage for the worms."

"So," Slaughter said quietly, as the low red firelight played across his face, "the boy listened when one of the others said he was once aboard a ship that was becalmed for weeks, and after the food ran out and people began to die you had to determine how much you wanted to live. You had to determine if you could take a blade and carve yourself a meal. And then that man looked at the corpse of the boy's father, and he held up a knife, and he said, There's enough meat on the thighs to keep us going. We can drink from him, too. Don't let it be, that he suffered so
"And when the knife went to work," Slaughter said, "the boy just sat and watched. He was hungry, you see, and perhaps by then half-mad himself, and the strangest, strangest thing was that, when he ate the first strip of meat when he put it between his teeth, and chewed out all the juice he thought it was better than any dish he'd ever tasted in his life."

"My God," the reverend breathed.

"It is like pork," Slaughter continued, staring at nothing. "But sweeter. I've been told. I have heard it said-just heard, mind you-that a blindfolded man given a choice of a beef tenderloin, flank of horse and buttock of human being will invariably choose the buttock, it being so richly marbled with fat. And that in the human meat can be tasted the essence of food and drink consumed by that body in happier times. There are some, I hear, who if left to their own devices would become enslaved to the taste of human, and want nothing else. And that's not mentioning the internal organs, which supposedly have miraculous powers to regenerate the near-dead. Particularly the heart and the brain."

"Oh!" he said brightly. "To finish my story, sirs. When he finally crawled up out of the dark through a space only a desperate boy could have negotiated, and unfortunately but out of necessity left two of his fellow companions behind, he made his way in the course of time to the house of Samuel Dodson, who owned that particular mining company. Thereupon he put a knife to the throats of Master Dodson, his lovely wife and the three little Dodsons and polished them all off, after which the house was burned down around their heads. The end yet just a beginning." He finished his cup of cider, held it aloft as a tribute to the hero of his tale, and when Greathouse knocked it from his hand to the floor and James started the pistol-shot barking again Slaughter looked at his oppressor with an expression of dismay.

"What, then?" Slaughter asked. "You don't like happy endings?"

Matthew had not eaten all of his stew; there remained a small fatty piece of brown meat at the bottom of the bowl. His stomach being rather queasy, he pushed the bowl away with a finger and sat very still, trying to decide if he was going to keep his food down or not.

"Not gonna eat that?" Tom asked, and when Matthew shook his head the boy reached across the table, took Matthew's bowl and placed it on the floor as an added treat for James.

"Thank you for your confession," said Reverend Burton in a raspy voice, his hands folded before him on the table. The knuckles had paled. "I regret your troubles."

"Oh, who said it happened to me? I'm just relating a story I heard, from someone I knew a long time ago." Slaughter frowned. "Pastor, what kind of monster would I be if I ate my own father? Hm?"

"You're as mad as a three-legged billygoat," Greathouse told him, as the red slowly drained from his face. He rubbed his forehead, as if to dispel as best as he could the gory scene that Slaughter had painted, and then he turned his attention to Burton. "We appreciate your hospitality. If we can sleep in the barn tonight, we'll be on our way first thing in the morning."

"To Fort Laurens."

"Yes, sir."

"There's something you ought to know, then," Burton said, and Matthew leaned slightly forward because he'd heard something in the old man's voice that did not bode well. "Fort Laurens has been deserted for oh many years before New Unity began. A dispute with the Indians, more than thirty years ago, is what they say in Belvedere. A series of raids killed most of the inhabitants and destroyed the fort. Therefore I don't quite understand why you two are taking a prisoner to Fort Laurens, when nothing's there but ruins."

Neither Matthew nor Greathouse knew what to say. But Slaughter spoke up: "They are taking me to Fort Laurens-I should say, to what remains of Fort Laurens-in order to seize money and trinkets that I've buried there. The
agreement was that, if I take them to this bounty and give it to them, they will let me go. But here's the thing, sir. I think they're lying. I think that when they get their hands on the money, they're either going to keep me in irons or, more likely, they're going to kill me." He paused to let that sink in, as both his escorts were too astonished to speak. "I see your Bible in the corner, sir. Would you do the godly thing and have these men vow on the Holy Book that they will do what they've promised?"
Twelve

Matthew writhed inwardly, knowing he could never put his hand on a Bible and tell a lie. To emphasize his danger, another bolt of lightning shot white beyond the shutters and thunder blasted overhead. He kept his face down, staring at a scuffed spot on the table.

Greathouse scratched the stubble on his chin, but made no other demonstration.

"Do it, pastor," Slaughter urged, his eyes ashine and his brows twitching. "Make them swear on the book."

Burton tapped his fingers. He cast his gaze in the direction of Slaughter's voice but said nothing for a space of time, during which Matthew thought he'd rather be in the long dark tunnel than this candlelit room. At last the reverend said, "Obviously you feel yourself to be at the mercy of these two men, yet I assume you initiated this um bargain? I do not approve of any of this. Gentlemen, before God I implore you to put aside your greed and do what is right for the common good. That is, deliver the prisoner to the proper authorities in New York. The reward for that is the knowledge that you have done a righteous thing for your fellow man."

"Make them swear!" Slaughter hissed. "Their hands on the book!"

"I will not," came the solemn answer. "In so much as, being of limited mind, I do not understand their motivations. Yet God, being of infinite mind, does understand. The only thing I can say is, do not let greed lead you into the valley of destruction. Take this man, with all proper respect, to New York as you are charged and be done with him. Remember also, that Christ showed mercy to the poorest wreckage of life. Should you not try to do the same?"

"That's right." Slaughter nodded vigorously. "Mercy. Listen to the reverend, gentlemen. He talks a peach, doesn't he?"

"I think," Greathouse said, "that it's time for your irons to go back on."

Burdened by the manacles, the leg irons and the heavy ball, Slaughter sank down to the floor with his back against the wall. He closed his eyes as James sniffed the air and growled in his direction. Outside, the rain continued to fall steadily. Matthew noted that water was dripping from several places in the roof, and Tom put pots around to catch what he could. More wood was added to the fire. Reverend Burton asked Greathouse to bring the Bible over to the table and read to him from the Book of First Timothy, which Greathouse did without noticeable complaint. Tom went to work scrubbing the bowls and utensils with ashes, and Matthew silently helped him in his task.

When the work was done, Tom brought a small box from the bookcase and opened it in front of Matthew. "You play?" he asked, showing two sets of crudely-carved but useful chess pieces, one in dark wood and the other a few shades lighter. Matthew nodded, both surprised and grateful to find one of his greatest pleasures out in these forsaken woods. Tom fetched a battered chessboard from the cupboard at the back of the room, and he and Matthew sat down in the chairs before the fire, set the board and pieces up on the small table between them, and began their war.

The first game Matthew won with ease. The second was not so easy, and it appeared to Matthew that Tom was a quick student, for before this contest was over Matthew had lost his queen, his defense of his king was in jeopardy and Tom's knights were threatening mayhem. But experience won out, and Tom nodded and turned his king over when it was certain there was no escape.

During the third game, Matthew noticed how Tom would lean down and rub or scratch the dog that lay nestled against his foot. Clearly, they had a strong connection between them, and at one point Tom picked James up and held him in his lap, and spent a moment rubbing the dog's back while Matthew puzzled over a potential move.

"Gonna let him go?" Tom asked, quietly enough not to be heard by Greathouse, who was still involved in reading First Timothy, or Slaughter, who snored on the floor.

Matthew knew Tom wasn't talking about the bishop that was being stalked by two rooks. "No," he answered, just
as quietly.

"Gonna kill him, then?"

"No."

Tom waited for Matthew to make his move. Then he said, "Maybe you ought to."

The third game ended in another win for Matthew, but not before the soldiers all across the rank and file had been decimated for their generals.

Greathouse finished his reading, Reverend Burton nodded his approval, James got down off his master's lap and curled himself up on the little bed of straw, and Matthew reached into his waistcoat pocket and brought out a small leather drawstring pouch he'd purchased to keep his silver watch, a gift from Katherine Herrald, safe from the elements. Tom regarded him with interest as he opened the pouch and checked the time, finding it was nearly eight o'clock.

"Wake up." Greathouse took his cap and coat from the wallpeg and gave Slaughter a none-too-gentle kick in that favorite fare of cannibals, the buttock. "It's time to get to sleep."

Burton lit another candle and put it into a punched-tin lantern for them. Matthew kept the pistol under his cloak and took charge of the lantern, and with Slaughter between them he and Greathouse said goodnight to their host and went out into the rainy dark, bound for a miserable night in the barn during which neither captor slept worth a Dutch penny but their prisoner slumbered as if on royal linens.

At first light, the rain had turned to a nasty drizzle and gray clouds seemed to be snagged in the treetops. Tom emerged from the cabin, with James at his feet, to help get the horses harnessed. Slaughter allowed himself to be pushed up into the wagon, where he lay down in the posture of a silent observer. Greathouse had retrieved his cloak and wrung it out, and now he put it around his shoulders, wet cloak against wet coat against wet shirt. He climbed up onto his seat and took the reins, while Matthew sat facing backwards again so as to keep guard over the prisoner. But, in truth, Slaughter appeared to be no menace today; his eyes were swollen from sleep and he yawned as if he might unhinge his jaws.

"Good luck to you!" Tom called. The last sight Matthew had of him was Tom walking up the steps to rejoin Reverend Burton in the cabin, and James following right behind. They set off into a murky fog that lay close upon the ground. Just past two more abandoned cabins, the muddy track took the curve to the southwest that Slaughter had foretold. The forest thickened again on either side. Rain dripped from the trees, and the birds were quiet. The wind was still, which was a blessing since all three travelers were soaked and already chilled. Further on, another track split off to the left at a more southerly course, which Matthew presumed must be the route to Belvedere.

Greathouse kept to the path they were on, which might be termed a "road" as much as belladonna might be termed a "spice". Soon the horses' hooves and the wagon's wheels were freighted with black mud, slowing their progress even more, and the road began to take a perceptible degree of ascent.

"This is a damnable track," Greathouse said sourly, as if Matthew were to blame.

"Sirs?" Slaughter spoke up. "Might I ask what you'll spend your money on?"

Neither Matthew nor Greathouse were in any mood for conversation. Slaughter adjusted his chains, sat up as well he could manage, and lifted his face to the stinging drizzle. "I'm going to buy myself a shave and a proper bath, first off. Then a new suit. Something very respectable," he said. "A new hat, too. Somewhat like yours, Matthew. I like that style. Then on to buy my ship's passage. Get myself out of here as soon as I'm able. Oh, you can have these colonies, gentlemen, and piss on them! Who in their right mind would want all this, this emptiness? Tell me, Mr. Greathouse, don't you miss London?"

No reply was offered.

"I do. Not saying I'm going to stay in London. I don't wish to trade one gaol for another. No, I shall make only a brief stop in London, to get my bearings. Then, I think I shall go to Europe. Any country where there's not a war, as
my soldiering days are behind me." He shook his head back and forth, flinging water. "I shall endeavor to find a
country," he went on, "where I might buy a title. Lord Slaughter, or Baron Slaughter, or Marquis de Slaughter. It can
be done, I have no doubt. In this day and age, with money as it is, it doesn't pay to be a commoner."

The horses pulled onward and upward, as the road continued to ascend. There was no abatement of the steady
rain, which dripped from Matthew's tricorn and ran down Greathouse's face from his soggy cap. Matthew felt sure at
least two miles had passed since they'd started their uphill climb; the horses were laboring, and the wagon's wheels
alternately seemed to stick and then slide.

"You're going to kill me, aren't you."

Matthew looked into Slaughter's face. The prisoner stared impassively at him, his head cocked slightly to one
side.

"I would," Slaughter said, before Matthew could form an answer. "I mean, if I were in your position. I'd get the
money in my hands, and then I'd kill you. You being me, of course." He gave a thin smile. "Really. What's five
pounds, when you're looking at fifty or more? And me, I'm just a what did you call me, Mr. Greathouse? Oh yes. A
common criminal."

"We're not going to kill you," Matthew replied.

"But you're not going to let me go, are you? You're not going to do as you promised. I can tell. Yes, I see it in
your eyes, Matthew. So, if you don't let me go and you don't kill me, how are you going to explain to your keepers
about the money? I mean, when we reach New York I must tell them that you've gotten hold of my treasure, for
what reason should I not? And then they're going to want a piece of it, aren't they? A sizeable piece, I would think.
Yes, I know about greed, all right."

"Shut up," Greathouse said over his shoulder. They were coming to what appeared to be, thankfully, the top of
this rather steep incline.

"I think it's a problem for both of you," Slaughter continued, undaunted. "And for me as well. Are you willing to
split the money with men who dared not even dirty their breeches to come fetch me? You two doing all the work, for
a measly five pounds? It's a crying shame, gentlemen."

"Matthew," Greathouse said grimly, "if he speaks again I want you to put the barrel of that pistol in his mouth."

"Now you know the young man is not going to do that. I do know pistols, sir, as well as I know razors. What if it
went off and blew the brains out the back of my head? Good-bye, money. One dead Slaughter, but not a penny for
Greathouse and Corbett. No, the reasonable thing to do, sir, is to assure me that you will let me go after I show you
to the safebox, and then if you're not a liar, young man I would much appreciate it if indeed you did allow me to go
on my way. I shall think of you kindly, when I'm sitting on silk pillows in Europe."

"Just do all us a favor, and keep your damned mouth-" And then Greathouse's own mouth stopped making noise,
for they'd crested the hill and there before them was a curving decline with thick woods on the right. On the left was
a dropoff that fell into a forested gorge with wisps of fog at its bottom fifty feet below.

"Oh dear," said Slaughter, peering over the wagon's side. "I did forget about this dangerous descent."

Greathouse held steady on the reins, which was unnecessary because the horses locked their legs up and one of
the beasts gave a tremulous whinny that sounded like it meant Don't make me go down there.

They sat in the rain, saying nothing. Greathouse's shoulders were hunched forward, water dripping from his chin.
Matthew wiped his eyes, his other hand on the gun he held protectively beneath his sopping-wet cloak. Slaughter
gave a long, low sigh and at last said, "Fort Laurens is a little more than a mile from here. What's your pleasure,
sirs?"

When Greathouse's voice came, it was as tight as an Iroquois' bowstring. "Giddup," he said, and flicked the reins.
The horses didn't move. Greathouse flicked the reins again, with some temper behind it this time, and one of the
horses started off, pulling along with it the animal that had put up a protest. The wagon rolled forward, as rivulets of mud coursed down before them.

"Keep an eye to that dropoff," Greathouse told Matthew, which was breath wasted because Matthew was already measuring the distance between wheel and disaster. The horses' hooves were plowing into the mud, for true, but there was always the danger of the wagon slipsliding to the side sinister. If Greathouse couldn't get them straightened out in time they could plunge over the embankment and down where the forest and fog might hide bones for a hundred years.

They'd descended about another sixty yards when it was apparent the road, tortured by time and weather, was getting narrower. "It's close over here," Matthew said. "Two feet at the most." With a start, he realized he'd not directed his attention to Slaughter for several minutes, and he had the mental image of Slaughter rising up with a burst of speed and strength and heaving him over to his death; when he looked at the prisoner, however, Slaughter had not moved an inch, and the man's eyes were closed against the drizzle.

They kept going down, through the slippery muck. Matthew uneasily watched the left edge of the road continue to constrict, where previous rainstorms had sheared large sections of the earth away. The horses nickered and jerked their heads, and Greathouse glanced to the left to see for himself how much space separated the wheels from going off the edge. It was less than ten inches, too tight for his comfort, and in another moment he pulled back on the reins and said, "Whoa!"

Slaughter's eyes opened.

Greathouse set the brake. He turned around, wiped the water from his eyes with his cloak, and stared gloomily at their prisoner.

"What are we going to do?" Matthew asked.

"I don't like this damned road. I don't want to take the team too far down it, in case it's washed out further along." He looked back the way they'd come. "No room to turn around. Going to be one devil of a job backing this wagon up."

"I repeat my question."

"I heard you the first time." Greathouse shot a glance at him that could curdle the blood. "The only thing we can do, if we're intending to get to that fort, is to walk."

"Good suggestion," said Slaughter.

He hardly had time to draw a breath after the last word, for suddenly Hudson Greathouse was off his seat and upon him, and when Greathouse meant to be upon somebody they were well and truly a fixed target. Greathouse grasped shirtfront with one hand and patchwork beard with the other and brought his face down into Slaughter's with eyes like hellfire lamps.

"Don't speak," Greathouse hissed. "Don't do any damned thing I don't like." His voice trembled, not from fear but from loss of control, which Matthew had realized was paramount to his nature.

Slaughter obeyed; his face was expressionless, betraying nothing.

It took a minute for Greathouse to compose himself, but still he kept hold of the prisoner's shirt and beard. "Yes, we're going to walk. Yes, I'm going to have to unlock your irons. But you want that, don't you? Is that what you'd hoped would happen, all along?"

Slaughter said not a word, honoring Greathouse's first command.

"I'd warrant it's still over a mile," Matthew said, looking down the long descent.

"You be quiet, too. Just let me think."
A bad sign, Matthew thought. The man of action, reduced to thinking.

"How heavy's the safebox?" was the next question directed at Slaughter. When the prisoner didn't reply, Greathouse twisted his beard. "Now you can speak."

No discomfort registered in Slaughter's eyes. Matthew thought he must have a supreme mental control over pain. "One man can carry it."

"All right, then. But you'd better know that I'll have the pistol on you all the way there, and by God if you do something-anything-I don't like I'll blow your kneecap off. Do you understand that?"

"I hear what you're saying, sir. But why should I do anything you don't like, as I wish to be quits with you two even more than you wish to see my backside."

Greathouse held him for a few seconds more, to emphasize who had power over whom, and then let him go. He reached for the key in his pocket and unlocked the manacles and leg irons, even as Matthew watched with the growing anxiety of a job ill-done.

Slaughter rubbed his wrists. "If you please, sir," he said in a silken voice, "would you throw that key over the drop?"

Greathouse shook his head, the key clenched in his fist.

"Ah, here's the problem, then, and I knew we must come to it." A faint, maddening half-smile surfaced on Slaughter's mouth. "It's a matter of trust, isn't it? I'm trusting you-the both of you-to do as you've promised, even though you were let off so lightly by that simpleton of a pastor. Why should I take you to the safebox, unless there's at least-a display from you that I shall not end up in irons again once you have the treasure?" He gave a passing scowl of irritation when Greathouse didn't respond, and diverted his attention to Matthew. "Tell him, young sir, that I'm not going anywhere if he doesn't throw the key over."

"We'll be sitting here for a long time then, won't we?" Greathouse said.

"Yes," replied Slaughter. "We will be."

The two men stared at each other, neither one moving. Suddenly, in a blur of motion, Greathouse reached out to grasp Slaughter's beard again; yet, before the hand could get there, Slaughter intercepted it with his own, the dirty fingers with their sharp ragged nails seizing Greathouse's wrist with remarkable and-for Matthew-unsettling strength.

Slaughter said, quite calmly, "You forget yourself, sir. We are no longer captors and prisoner. We are now partners."

"The hell you say!"

"The hell," came the answer, "I do say." He freed Greathouse's wrist, with an air of annoyance. "If I'm to walk you down to the fort, I want an assurance that I will not be walked back up and returned to those irons. You vowed you'd release me, and not kill me. I take you at your word. Now show me I can trust you by throwing the key over."

Greathouse looked to Matthew for guidance, and for the first time Matthew saw in the other man's eyes an expression of helplessness. It was a terrible thing to witness, this chink in a knight's armor. Yet Matthew knew his own tarnished tin had gotten them into this predicament.

"Damn it," Greathouse said, to the world. He took a long breath, let it out between gritted teeth, and then he reared his arm back to throw.

"On second thought!" Slaughter held his hand out, palm up, before Greathouse. "I should like to cast it myself." His eyes were heavy-lidded. "And, by the by, I do believe you moved the key to your other hand just before your last attempt at beard-twisting. I think it's in your coat pocket by now, there on the left side."
Greathouse lowered his head. When he looked up again, he was wearing a bemused-if petulant-smile. “As you said back at the hospital, never blame the wind for wishing to blow.”

"True enough. However, I've polished off several men who tried to blow their wind in my direction. The key, please?” He wriggled his repugnant fingers.

"I suppose you'll want the gun next?” Greathouse took the key from his coat pocket on the left side and dropped it into Slaughter's palm.

"Not necessary. I trust you not to shoot me, at least until you have the safebox. Besides, wet weather is no friend to gunpowder.” Slaughter threw the key over; there was a faint metallic tink as it hit a treetrunk far below. Then, rid of this obstacle to the life of a titled scoundrel, he grinned like a king. "Now! Shall we be off, gentlemen?"

Disregarding Matthew, who had brought the pistol's barrel out from beneath his cloak as a presentment of threat, Slaughter got down off the wagon. His feet pressed into the mud, and he began to walk jauntily along the treacherous road into the valley of Fort Laurens.

Greathouse started to get down as well.

Matthew felt a pressure in his throat, as if he were being throttled. It was his confession, he realized. His confession, all balled up word tangled with word. He reached out and grasped the other man's sleeve. "Hudson," he said, sounding near choked.

Greathouse looked at him, the thick gray eyebrows ascending.

"Listen," Matthew went on. "We don't have to go down there. There's something I need to-"

"Coming, sirs?” Slaughter called, waiting twenty yards further along.

"Easy, easy.” Greathouse's voice was muted. "I can handle him, Matthew. Don't worry. The key to the irons is still in my pocket. He threw the key to my room at the boarding house." Greathouse angled his face toward Slaughter. "We're coming!” he replied, and he clambered off the wagon to the mucky earth.

Matthew watched him follow Slaughter along the descending track. Wet weather is no friend to gunpowder. True enough. The pistol he was holding might be useless, if the time came to pull that trigger. He wished Greathouse had brought a sword; those worked well enough, shine or rain. He had to get out of the wagon and face what was ahead, had to push his guilt into his guts where his courage used to be. Had he actually begun believing those air-woven tales of his own stellar celebrity in the Earwig? Had he fallen so far, since summer?

Greathouse stopped to wait for him, and just beyond Greathouse also stopped Slaughter, who was if anything a well-mannered killer.

When Matthew's boots pushed into the mud, he half-expected the earth to open up for him, and for him to slide down and down into the thick dark where a new winter's fireplace had been lit for his comfort in Hell.

He walked on, carrying his invisible irons that made prisoners of even the richest men.
Thirteen

Walking only a few yards behind Greathouse, Matthew twice almost spoke out about Professor Fell's money, but both times an inner voice interrupted to say You heard him, didn't you? He said, Don't worry. The great one has spoken, and the great one will bash your head in if you tell him now, at this sorry moment, that there already exists enough money to buy Zed's freedom. So do yourself a favor, and keep your mouth shut.

The mean little drizzle was still coming down. They were walking through tendrils of fog, which didn't help Matthew's state of mind. The tendrils slowly shifted around them, as if drawing them deeper, and Matthew was made to think of the red wax octopus on the paper seal, and its eight tentacles stretched out to seize the world.

Through the fog at the bottom of the road there appeared a dark green wall about fifteen feet in height, splotched here and there with colors of wine red and pale yellow. At first Matthew thought it was just a particularly dense section of the forest, but a dozen yards closer and he could see individual black treetrunks, sharpened by axes at the top, and the spider's web of vines and creepers that had reached out from the wilderness to lay claim to the remains of Fort Laurens. It was a dead place, and utterly silent. The road curved slightly to the left, and entered the fort through the jagged, black-burnt opening where the main gate must have stood. Something suddenly crashed through the woods on their right, a heavy dark shape that caused even Slaughter to stop in his muddy tracks, but whatever it was—stag or wild boar, perhaps—it kept going into the thick underbrush and disappeared.

"Give me the gun," Greathouse said, and Matthew was relieved to hand it over. Just ahead of them, Slaughter had started on again, but Greathouse called to him, "Wait!" and the barefoot beast of barbershop butchery obeyed as meekly as a lamb.

It was apparent, as they neared the fort, that fire had done a nasty turn on the Dutchmen. Large sections of the treetrunk wall had burned away, the ravages of flame still to be seen beneath the mesh of nature even after three decades. What must have been a guardhouse, up on the right front corner, was a mass of tangled timbers held together by black vines, its witch's hat of a roof fallen down and overhanging the wall at an angle that defied gravity. Matthew noted gunports here and there, wide enough for the snouts of blunderbuss shotguns to deliver loads of gravel, nails, or glass as well as lead balls. It was clear, however, that the Indian hatchet and the bowstring had decided this particular battle, and he wondered how many hundreds of arrowheads would still be found in the logs. Or, indeed, how many skeletons might lie beyond the broken walls.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Slaughter had stopped before the hole where the gate had been. He put his hands on his hips and admired the place as if he were already an earl, and this his madman's castle. "We found it from an old map. Just the sort of refuge where a couple of hardworking highwaymen might rest for a few days and count their gold among the safety of the forgotten dead." He grinned broadly at his new partners. "Shall we enter?"

"After you." Greathouse motioned with the pistol.

"Must you still wave that thing around? I thought we were past that." Slaughter suddenly frowned and clutched at his gut. "Oh, dear," he said. "I've been holding my shit in respect for you gentlemen, but I really must let it go now. Pardon me." He started walking off to the left, down into a small gulley full of brush and leaves.

"Where do you think you're going?" Greathouse took a step toward him.

"I told you." Slaughter flashed a baleful look at them. "Do you want to hold my hand?" He descended into the gulley, mindless of the gun, and then he pulled his breeches down to expose a large white rump the sight of which instantly made Greathouse and Matthew avert their eyes.

"Stay where we can see you!" Greathouse commanded, even as he walked away a few paces. The sound of cursing, grunting and straining that issued up from Slaughter's place of excretion was truly horrific. Matthew could see the very top of Slaughter's head, but no further down did he wish to witness. At last the hobble-gobble ceased, there came the noise of a handful of leaves being gathered and, presumably, used, and then Slaughter walked back up with his gray breeches in place and the long tail of his gray shirt flagging.

"Thank you," Slaughter said. "I'm ready now."
"You first," Greathouse directed. "And slowly."

Slaughter entered the dead fort, with Greathouse a few feet behind and Matthew following.

Within the walls were the ruins of a small town. What had been horsepaths between log buildings were weeded up and littered with debris like broken barrels and shards of pottery. Fires had gnawed most of the interior structures down to the tindersticks. An overturned wagon attested to the violence that had visited this place, as well as the shutters that had been hacked away from the windowframes of the few remaining cabins. Doors had been torn from their hinges and thrown aside. Once inside the walls, the Indians had taken their task of destruction from house to house, and Matthew doubted that very many of the settlers had lived to see the next hour.

Matthew saw no skeletons in the wreckage of Fort Laurens, for which he was grateful. Either the Indians had carried off the corpses, or more Dutchmen had come later to claim their brethren. Still, this was a gloomy place, and the imagination could quickly stir up the embers of ghosts from the piles of cold ashes.

There was one good element in this picture: the drizzle had changed to a light spit, though the sky remained low and leaden. A whisper of chill wind blew from the west, with the promise that autumn's days were numbered.

Greathouse and Matthew followed Slaughter deeper into the center of the ruins. Matthew recoiled when he almost stepped on the head of a small ceramic doll, its blue-painted eyes staring up from the weeds and its body already crushed to powder. In another moment they came upon a few intact log cabins and two other structures—a barn and small warehouse, they appeared to be—arranged in a circle around a common area that held a stone well with a peaked roof above it. Both the barn and warehouse had suffered fire damage but were still standing, more or less; the cabins were in various stages of collapse. Slaughter took course for the one cabin that at least had a whole roof, and Matthew realized they had reached the highwayman's hideaway.

"Hold it!" Greathouse said before Slaughter could pass through the opening where a door used to stand. Slaughter stopped on the threshold and waited for them, his mouth twisted to one side with what might have been irritation. "Your pleasure, sir. Do you wish to go in first, to make sure I'm not leading you onto a floor that will collapse beneath you?" Greathouse peered in, as did Matthew. The place was dark, even with the shutters ripped from the windows. Not much could be seen inside. "Go ahead, then," Greathouse said, with a directional thrust of the pistol, and Slaughter's bare feet left muddy prints across the floorboards.

Inside, the one large room was grim and austere, and certainly had been so even on the day of its construction. But Slaughter and Rattison had evidently made it a home, of sorts. On the floor were two piles of straw, similar to James' bedding, but these big enough for men. A fireplace of rough stones held a mound of ash and some pieces of charred wood, and lying next to the hearth were pots and pans, indicating that at least one of the ruffians could play at cooking. There were two battered chairs, and a leather trunk between them that must have served as a table. A pair of woolen blankets were folded and stacked in a corner on the floor, showing that someone had a penchant for neatness even in the midst of decay. Both Greathouse and Matthew quickly noted that leaning over by the fireplace was a long wooden shovel with an edge of iron on its business point.

It was toward this implement that Slaughter intended to go, until Greathouse said sharply, "Wait!" When Slaughter paid no heed, Greathouse's thumb pulled the pistol's striker to full-cock.

Slaughter stopped, his hand outstretched to touch the shovel. "I do presume you want the safebox. Yes? If so, this will be needed."

Greathouse kept the pistol aimed. A little muscle had begun twitching in his jaw. "All right, then. Get to it."

Slaughter walked to one of the piles of bedding straw, which he shoved aside with his foot. Matthew surmised that Slaughter might not have trusted Rattison to the full extent of comradeship, and had been sleeping atop the treasure. Slaughter thrust the shovel downward and used it to pry up a short board, which he then put to one side. Three more boards were lifted and also removed. Then Slaughter stepped back and said with an exaggerated bow, "Sirs, your fortune awaits."

Cautiously, watchful of the shovel in Slaughter's grip, Greathouse and Matthew came forward to look down into
"It's underneath," Slaughter explained. "Do you wish to dig, or shall I?"

"You," Greathouse answered. "But if any of that goes in our faces"

"A man with a pistol, afraid of a little hay," Slaughter smiled sadly. "What is this world coming to?" Then he began to dig into the straw and very carefully placed it on the floor next to the hole.

"You surely went to great pains to keep this secured," Matthew said, as he watched Slaughter work. His heart was beating harder. When the safebox came up, there would remain the challenge of getting a very unwilling prisoner back up the hill to the wagon. "I suspect you didn't trust Rattison as much as you might have liked?"

"I don't trust anyone. Whether I like them or not." Bits of straw whirled up into the gray gloom. "But I was most concerned about the Indians. They're still around; I've seen them, poking about. It wouldn't do for them to find a safebox full of golden trinkets just standing-" The shovel's iron tip thunked into something solid. "Ah! Not buried too deeply, you see, but deeply enough. Take this." He held the shovel out toward Matthew, who paused long enough to glance quickly at Greathouse. A nod of assent was given, and Matthew took charge of the shovel.

Slaughter knelt down. With two hands he cleared away the last layer of straw, and then he brought up an object wrapped in what appeared to be a dirty burlap bag. Moving slowly, for it seemed the object had some weight to it, he removed the bag and let it drop to the floor. "Here," he said, with obvious pride. "The result of our accord."

"Not so fast." Greathouse's voice was strained. He still held the pistol, aimed now just to the right of Slaughter's body. "It has a keyhole. Where's the key?"

"Not necessary. It's unlocked, I assure you."

"Seems a natural thing, to have locked it before you buried it. I would have."

"Sir," Slaughter smiled again, as if at a poor fool. "It's a safebox, not a snake. It's not going to bite you."

"I've learned through experience, Mister Slaughter, that a box can bite. Especially if concealed within it is a throwing knife, or a pistol. And wet weather may be no friend to gunpowder, but I'd say that box has stayed dry enough nested in the bag and all that straw. Was that the intent? Is a gun in there?"

"No, and I never had the key. Does that suit you? May I open it now, and let's be about our business?" Again his finger went to the latch.

"I said, no. Just take it very easy." This time Greathouse directed the gun's barrel at Slaughter's head. "Let's get out into the light. Move."

Giving a sigh, Slaughter started out with the box in his arms and Greathouse went after him. Matthew put aside the shovel and started to follow when the burlap bag on the floor caught his attention. Rather, it was what was written on the bag, in bright red paint, that snagged his eye. He picked the bag up, held it to the dim illumination that spilled through the nearest window, and read upon it the words Mrs. Sutch's Sausages. Below that was the legend "Sutch A Pleasure".

"Matthew!" Greathouse called. "Come on!"

Odd, Matthew thought. Something was very odd about this. But he supposed highwaymen had the right to eat hot sausages, as much as did the patrons at Sally Almond's. Or maybe they'd waylaid a shipment bound for New York. Still it was odd.
He let the bag fall back into the hole, and then he went out.

Slaughter kept going, almost to the well, before he stopped and turned around. He waited for the others to reach him. His eyes darted from Greathouse to Matthew and back again. "If you don't trust me to open the box, you do it. Oh, better yet! Let Matthew open it, as he seems to be the one with the sense and the courage."

"I'll open it," Greathouse replied testily, but it was obvious he'd sensed something that he didn't like. "You just stand there and hold it, and keep your fingers away from those latches, Matthew?" He offered Matthew the pistol. "Steady this on him, and I want you to shoot if you have to. Can you do that?"

Matthew nodded as he took the gun, but even so he wasn't sure. There was a tension in Greathouse's voice that said it really might be necessary to put a lead ball in Slaughter, that some trickery might be in this plan, and that he was again feeling the loss of control. Matthew had done fine shooting targets in his pistol lessons, and threatening Slaughter by brandishing the gun around; now, though, the game had changed.

"Careful with that, Matthew," Slaughter urged lightly. "You wouldn't wish to waste your only shot, and heaven forbid if you were to hit Mr. Greathouse by mistake."

The statement made Matthew move the gun's aim a few inches to one side.

"Keep your mouth shut," Greathouse said. He was standing about ten feet from Slaughter, and Slaughter was holding the box out for him to open. Yet Greathouse still declined to approach. Matthew thought Greathouse's animal instinct was sniffing the wind for treachery.

"Come on, then! It's heavier than it looks, I assure you. All that money inside," said Slaughter. When Greathouse still didn't move, Slaughter added, "Very well, I'll put it on the ground and step away. You can lean down and-" He made the motion of lowering the box to the ground next to the well.

"Stay where you are!" came Greathouse's command. "Just right there. Where I can see your hands. That wouldn't be the first box I've seen with a hidden lever that shoots out a blade."

Slaughter laughed, but after the first few notes of it a rasp of anger crept in. "It's a fucking box! Do you see?" He turned it to show various angles. "And heavy! Dear Christ, am I to stand here until I grow roots?"

"Matthew?" Greathouse said, his gaze fixed on Slaughter. "Move to your right about five feet and forward three. I want you to have a clear shot." He waited until Matthew had situated himself, but a clearer line of fire did nothing to calm Matthew's nerves. Then Greathouse seemed to thrust his chest out, as if daring the fates, and walked the few paces between himself and his adversary.

"The box opens by pushing the latches to either side," Slaughter said. "A thumb to the left, and a thumb to the right. Simple, isn't it?"

Greathouse put his thumbs against the brass and pushed. Nothing happened. "It's locked."

"No, it's not. The mechanism may be a little stiff. Shall I do it for you?"

Greathouse tried again. The lefthand latch moved, with a faint metallic sliding sound, but the one on the right was still stubborn.

"I'd assumed you were a man," Slaughter said.

Greathouse put some force to the righthand latch. And then it moved, again with the sound of metal scraping metal.

What happened next would be forever seared upon Matthew's brain, though it had the speed and violence of a whirlwind.

As the second latch came to rest, there followed within a split-second the soul-shaking, ear-cracking bang! of a
pistol firing at close-range.

From the keyhole a white gout of powdersmoke and sparks exploded into Greathouse's face, blinding him. Matthew jumped at the noise and took aim to fire, but with his finger on the trigger he had to dodge down as Slaughter, the man's bearded face a grinning rictus, hurled the still-smoking box at his head. His tricorn was hit, and spun off. Matthew slipped and fell, the striker dropped, the flint sparked, and the gun fired, its ball whining off one side of the well just behind Slaughter. Greathouse was staggering backward, his hands up to shield his face, but suddenly Slaughter was upon him, and Matthew was witness to a terrifying and awesome transformation.

With each step Slaughter took toward his prey, he seemed to grow. To expand, to thicken in his clothes as if he were letting go of muscles and tendons he'd contracted to make himself appear smaller. His spine lengthened, his chest pushed forward, his shoulders bulged. Matthew had the mad thought: *He's crawling out of his hole.* A hideous grin was fixed to Slaughter's mouth, the blue eyes wide and wild and nearly luminous with the joy of murder. Slaughter reached back, under his shirt. His hand held something in it when it reappeared. He uncapped a smooth silver cylinder, an object that looked like it might have been a doctor's instrument. Matthew saw the glint of a hooked blade. Slaughter caught Greathouse around the neck with the crook of his arm, squeezed so hard the blood jumped red in Greathouse's cheeks, and then with furious determination Slaughter began to drive the blade into Greathouse's upper back, between the shoulders.

Before Matthew could scramble up from the ground, Greathouse had already been stabbed three times, with a
fourth strike already falling. Matthew let out a hoarse cry and did the only thing he could think to do, which was to throw the pistol end over end at Slaughter's head. It hit the man on his shoulder and staggered him, interrupting a fifth strike of the blade. Still he gripped his victim, and then Slaughter swung Greathouse around like a grainsack toward the well.

Greathouse went headfirst over the side. The bucket's rope was hanging down from the overhead windlass, but there was no chance for him to grab hold of it. There was a splash as he hit water below.

Then, all the attention was turned upon Matthew.

Before Matthew, revealed in all his vile glory, stood the killer with the Satanic face whom he'd seen on his first visit to Westerwicke. No pretense was needed now. No disguise. The grinning carnivore lifted his thin, bloody blade, and said pleadingly, "Run, won't you? Go ahead! Run!"

Matthew heard the echoed sound of choking. Greathouse was about to drown either on well-water or his own blood.

Matthew dared to glance around at the safebox lying a few yards behind him. As soon as he did, he heard Slaughter start coming for him, moving with horrifying power. Matthew ran for the safebox, which had shown its strength by not bursting open on contact with the ground, and picked it up, finding the thing as heavy as guilt. In his current position it was mind over muscle, and he heaved it frantically at Slaughter as the hooked fingernails grasped for his face and the blade swung at his throat.

The box hit Slaughter in the upper body, and bounced off like a bird hitting a brick wall. But the impact drove the air out of him, and gave Matthew the chance to duck under flailing hand and swinging blade and run toward his true destination.

He leaped into the well.

Grasping the bucket-rope, he slid down into the wet dark so fast the skin nearly smoked off his hands. That pain he would deal with later. Suddenly he splashed into the cold water almost on top of Hudson Greathouse, and he clung hold of the bucket with one arm and with the other grasped Greathouse around the chest.

There came the grumble of a wooden mechanism in action. The bucket-rope tightened. Matthew looked up, and saw Slaughter peering down at him about twenty feet above. The bastard was using the windlass crank to pull the bucket up.

Matthew kept his grip on it, treading water and fighting the crank. Beside him, Greathouse coughed and sputtered, and then began to thrash as if coming to his senses to battle for his life.

"So!" Slaughter had released the crank, giving this little skirmish up as lost. His voice echoed down between the rough stones. "Do you think you're smart, Matthew? Do you think I'm going to let you climb out of there? Well, just stay where you are for a few moments, and I'll show you something!" He disappeared from view.

"Oh " Greathouse gasped. "Shit."

"Hang onto me, I won't let you go."

"You're the damnedest fool."

"Just hang on, do you hear?" There was no response. Greathouse's breathing was wet and ragged. "Do you hear?"

"I hear," Greathouse said, but the answer was so weak and weary that Matthew feared he would slip under at any second.

From above there came a banging, battering noise. Matthew caught a glimpse of the iron-tipped shovel, being used to knock the windlass out of its supports. Suddenly the bucket-rope went slack, and the rod of wood around which the rope was secured was falling into the well. Matthew angled his body to protect Greathouse, and took a
hard blow on his left shoulder. The rope settled into the water, coiling around them.

"I'm afraid that's the end of your rope!" Slaughter began to give his slow funeral-bell laugh, very pleased with his wit. "Here's something you can dig your graves with!" He reared his arm back, and flung the shovel down into the well as an added instrument of both murder and misery.

Matthew again used his body to shield Greathouse. But before the shovel could do grievous harm its iron edge hit rock, sparks flew, and it bounced back and forth between the walls, losing most of its force as it fell into the water beside Matthew. It sank tip-first, and was gone.

Gone, as well, was Tyranthus Slaughter.

"Damn," said Greathouse, lifting his face from the water. He had lost his woolen cap, his hair plastered down. Beneath him, his legs were moving only feebly. "I'm done for."

"No, you're not."

"Little you know. Bastard took us. Box blew up."

"Stop talking and save your strength."

"Thought I'd been shot." He winced, and again his face went into the water. Matthew was about to grasp his chin when he sputtered and coughed and drew air again. "Stabbed me. Old trick, that was."

"Old trick? What're you talking about?"

"Had it up his ass. When he went down there to shit. Took it out. He told me right there, he told me."

Greathouse wasn't making any sense. But then Matthew realized what he must mean. At the hospital, Slaughter had said it. *They left the joy of looking up my arsehole for you.* Matthew thought the silver cylinder, with a blade inside it, must have been a medical instrument. Maybe stolen from a doctor's bag at the Quaker institution, and the theft masked by an assault on another patient. With a man as cunning as Slaughter, anything was possible. There was no telling how long he'd had the blade, ready to use it when the time was right. And today, that time had come.

"I must say farewell now," Slaughter called down. "I have to also say, you've been interesting company."

Greathouse made an unintelligible noise. Matthew said nothing, concentrating on treading water. He was cold and in pain from his shoulder and raw hands, and the effort of keeping both himself and Greathouse above the surface was getting harder.

"It won't be so bad," Slaughter said. "Drowning, I mean. Only a little suffering to be endured. But it's easy for me to say, isn't it?"

"We're not dead yet," Matthew replied.

"Yes," came the answer, "you are. But you just don't accept it yet."

Matthew's legs were beginning to ache. Beside him, Greathouse's breathing sounded like cart wheels over cobblestones.

"Thank you for allowing me some practice." Slaughter was leaning over the edge, a dark shape without a face. "Get the rust out of my joints. I appreciate knowing that my judgment of human nature has not been impaired during my time away from the pleasures this world has to offer. So good day, sirs, and may you rot in the deepest pit of Hell set aside for men who think themselves so very smart." He offered a faceless bow, then drew away from the well and out of Matthew's sight.

"Slaughter! Slaughter!" Matthew shouted, but the man didn't return and Matthew ceased calling because there was no point in it and, anyway, it was another name for cold-blooded murder.
He kept treading water, and trying to think. To compose himself, and fight off the chill tentacles of panic. What had Slaughter said, about this place not being found again until he-Matthew-and Greathouse were moldering in their graves?

Or, moldering at the bottom of a well.

I can't give up! he thought. There has to be a way out of this!

You just don't accept it yet.

"No," Matthew said, and heard his voice speak back to him, something ghostly about it even now. "I don't."

Greathouse shuddered. He drew a long, terrible breath. "I'm used up," he said. "Not a damned thing. Left of me."

And with that understanding of himself and his limitations in a world so brutal it could hardly be borne, Greathouse the great one, the roughneck, the man of swords, the teacher and friend and Baptist, slipped silently down beneath the water.
PART THREE: Time Stops for the Englishman

Fourteen

Matthew had hold of Greathouse's cloak. He refused to let go. His feet searched for a place on the wall behind and below him where a half-inch of protruding rock might give him some support, but he found what felt only like slippery moss. In spite of that, he pulled Greathouse's face up out of the water.

"That may be so," Matthew said, answering the man's last comment, "but there's something left of me."

"Do tell," followed the response, and when Greathouse let out an explosive cough the blood flew into Matthew's face.

"Get your cloak off. It's dragging you down."

Greathouse's face again started to submerge. When the water reached the man's nostrils, Matthew grasped his hair and yanked his head back.

"Keep your chin up." Matthew realized it sounded absolutely stupid, but so be it. "Feel around behind you, try to find a place to put your feet."

"One thing at a time. Damn it. Bastard " He shook his head, unable to finish the thought. Matthew could feel the man's legs moving underwater, though, so even in Greathouse's anguish and shock he was making the effort to live. So much so that an elbow came up from the water and hit Matthew in the jaw, almost closing the book on his own efforts. When the stars had dissolved, he heard Greathouse say, "Something here. Got my. Right heel wedged in."

It was all Matthew could hope for. He went about getting the cloak off Greathouse, and then pushed it aside. They were in close quarters. The rope floated about them, like a serpent's coils. Matthew took off his own cloak, sinking into the cold embrace of the well before he was free of it. His burgundy-red coat came off next, for that too was a drag on him, and yanked his head back.

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Steady, he told himself. What he'd thought was anger had taken a turn toward panic. He looked up, at the peaked roof above. Twenty feet to the top of the well. At least twenty. He was getting truly cold now, and starting to shiver.

Greathouse coughed again. He put a hand to his mouth and then blinked heavily as he took account of the red smear. "Got me good," he croaked. "Matthew listen "

"No time. Save your breath." He was treading water with arms and legs, having to put forth a real effort, and he feared that if Greathouse fell off the slim ledge of rock that held his right heel, the man would go down for the last time.

"Said I " Greathouse stopped, swallowed blood, and tried again. In the dim light that fell from above, his face was ghastly gray. His eyes were tortured slits. "Said I could handle him. I was wrong. Sorry."

Matthew had no idea how to respond, for he was himself close to begging Greathouse's forgiveness. All that could wait, he decided in the next few seconds. He had to get his boots off before they drowned him. He curled himself underwater, struggled with one of the blasted impediments, freed his foot, and then had to come up for a breath. Then he repeated the ordeal, and thought that by the time he'd finished it would have been wiser to leave them on.

Greathouse's face was still above water, his arms splayed out to either side, fingers grasping rock wherever they could find a purchase. His eyes were closed, his breathing precarious.

Matthew peered upward again. God, it was a long way! If he was going to do something, it had to be soon, for his
strength, his very lifeforce and will to live, was staggering away from him like a sick horse.

With no warning, Greathouse suddenly fell from his precipice and the water closed over his head. At once Matthew had grasped his coat and was trying to pull him back up again, and this time was helped by the man himself, who kicked and splashed and reached and scratched for a fingerhold on the wall. At last Greathouse was still, having secured a hold on the edges of two rocks that barely jutted forward enough for the balance of a worm.

Matthew once more took stock of the well, and the distance up. The shovel, he thought. Sunk to the bottom. Depending on how deep the well, might he find it?

"I'm going under," Matthew said, and added, "On purpose. Don't let go."

Greathouse didn't answer, but he was shivering from either the effort, the cold, or both. Matthew took a breath and then exhaled it, the better to sink the faster. He pushed himself underwater, feet first, cupping his hands and stroking toward the bottom. There was no need to keep his eyes open, for everything was black. He felt about, searching left and right, also striking out with his legs. Deeper still he went. Suddenly his stockinged feet touched stones. His search became frantic, as his lungs were starting to convulse for air. He feared he couldn't surface and have enough energy left to repeat this descent.

His left elbow hit something. Twisting in that direction, his hands found the wall, and scabbling across it his fingers discovered the shovel, which had sunk iron-tip first and was leaning there as if ready to be used by the gravedigger. Except in this case, Matthew hoped, it might offer a reprieve from the boneyard.

He seized the shovel, pushed off from the bottom and rose quickly upward.

As he broke the surface, gasped for breath and shook the water from his face, he saw that Greathouse was now only hanging on with one hand. In this state of emergency, Matthew's senses had become keen—raw, it might be said—and he knew exactly what he needed to locate. He found a suitable crevice between rocks a few inches above the waterline, and, holding the shovel at a downward angle over his head, thrust the iron tip into it. Then he brought the handle sharply down, which effectively jammed the shovel between the walls, the shovel being longer than the well's diameter. He grasped the shovel at its midpoint with both hands, to test its strength, and it held firm. Now there was something for Greathouse to grip onto, if he could be compelled to fight for survival just a little longer.

Matthew grasped Greathouse's free hand and guided it to the shovel, where he was gratified to see the man's fingers clench hold. Now if Greathouse's weight just didn't break the shaft at its midpoint or dislodge it, but it was do or die. He said, "Come on, come on," as if speaking to a child, and Greathouse allowed Matthew to guide his other hand to the makeshift land-anchor. The shovel didn't budge, nor did it snap in two. Greathouse hung from it, his face upturned toward the light.

It was a tentative victory, at best. Matthew took hold of the rope floating about them. The bucket had filled and gone under, but the wooden rod, easily as thick as a small log and about three feet in length, was still afloat. He immediately gave up any idea of untying the rope from the rod, as a dollop of tar had been used to seal the knot. He had no choice; if he was to carry the rope to the top and tie it to the beams that supported the peaked roof above, which would be the only way to bring Greathouse up, he also would have to bear the rod. If he could get out, himself.

Treading water, he looped the rope twice around his chest and under his arms. "Hudson!" he said. "Can you hold on?"

There was no answer, but Greathouse gave a low, guttural grunt and that was enough for Matthew.

"I'm going to climb up." He had purposefully left out the words try to. Failure at this meant the end of them. "Hold on," he urged, as much for Greathouse as for his own resolve. Then he pressed his feet against both sides of the well, his toes seeking purchase among the rocks, and at the same time planted his palms rigidly outward to secure a grip by the force of friction. He pulled himself out of the water, slowly, inch by inch, and began crawling up the center like a spider dragging its own web.

He got about six feet up when his right foot slipped, his raw hands scraped across the stones, and he fell into the
water again, perilously close to coming down on Greathouse and the shovel. There was nothing to be done but start anew, as quickly as he could before some more rational part of his mind told him it was impossible.

This time he didn't make it quite six feet before he slipped and fell, and his palms left blood on the stones. He treded water for a moment, working his hands open and shut, and then he pushed upward yet again.

Slowly, slowly, the spider ascended. Palm pressing here, palm pressing there, right foot gripping a small outcrop of stone while the left foot sought a place to apply pressure, and all the time the tension of muscles could not be relaxed, for it was tension that gave the spider its balance. Upward and upward, carrying the rope that itself was pulled at by the water below, and then a few seconds to rest, but always keeping the muscles of splayed arms and legs taut. Upward once more, palms and feet pressing, moving, finding new purchase where the edge of a stone might be only a half-inch wide yet felt under his flesh like the edge of an axe.

Matthew lost his grip and fell again.

He scraped down three feet before he could right himself. This time he could not suppress a cry of anguish, and he squeezed his eyes shut until the wave of pain had crashed over him. In the echo of his own mortality he dared to look down. Greathouse was still hanging onto the shovel, about ten feet below him. He had half the distance yet to go.

As he continued upward, his arms and legs starting to tremble beyond his control, he thought very clearly of Berry Grigsby. Of when he'd fallen in Chapel's vineyard, with the hawks and the killers coming after them, how Berry—herself disheveled, terrified and bloodied—had shouted Get up! and paused in her own flight to help him to his feet, if only by nearly kicking him upright. He could use her kick, about now.

He intended to see her again. He desired it greatly. In fact, he intended to invite her to a dance at the first opportunity, if he lived through this. He'd never been much of a dancer, but damned if he wouldn't dance the floor to woodshavings. If he lived through this.

His right palm lost its grip and he scraped down another few feet before he checked the drop. What was pain, after all? A little thing to hold behind the teeth, and shed a tear or two over. Nothing more than that.

You just don't accept it yet.

He shut his mind to that voice, which threatened to weaken and destroy him. Slaughter might be physically gone, yet enough of him remained to finish the task of murder.

The spider stretched out arms and legs and continued up, not pretty, not graceful, but determined to survive.

Matthew lifted his head and saw, as if through a fog, the top of the well about two feet above. He had to be careful here, very careful, for this was where disaster lurked. He commanded himself not to reach for the top prematurely, or let his knees go slack. It was the hardest, most cruel distance he had ever travelled in his life. Then, with agonizing effort, his heart pounding and his strained muscles jumping and quivering, he was up. His fingers grasped the edge and he pulled himself over and let out a half-cry of pain, half-shout of victory as he fell to the ground.

But there was no time to rest. He staggered up, his stockings in tatters and his feet bloody, and peered into the well. "Hudson!" he shouted. "I've made it!" The man's face was downcast, though he was still clinging to the shovel. Were his mouth and nose underwater? "Hudson! Do you hear?" Matthew got the rope off himself and hauled up the wooden rod, which had been hanging several feet below him. He started feverishly coiling the rope around one of the beams that supported the peaked roof, and that was when he heard a chuckling noise at his back.

Whirling around, the breath freezing in his lungs for fear that Slaughter was about to swoop upon him and complete the day's work, Matthew saw three Indians sitting cross-legged on the ground less than ten yards away.

They were not chuckling, but talking. At least, Matthew surmised it was their language. One had leaned toward another and was speaking and nodding, and now that he saw Matthew looking at him he put his hand up over his mouth as if to guard his words. The one who'd been spoken to shrugged and shook items from a bead-decorated pouch onto the ground. They looked to be mollusk shells, from the river. The Indian with the chuckling tongue now
made a noise that was definitely a laugh, and scooped up the shells to put into his own similarly-adorned pouch. The third Indian, frowning fitfully, also poured some shells on the ground, which the happy deerstalker seemed delighted to claim as his own.

It appeared, Matthew thought, that a wager had just been won.

They were all barechested, but wearing deerskin loincloths, leggings and moccasins. The Indian sitting in the center, the winner of the shell game, looked to be much older than the two on either side, who might have been near Matthew's age. The elder man was tattooed with blue wave-like designs on his face, chest and arms and wore a metal ring in his nose, whereas the others—his sons, perhaps—were not so heavily nor intricately adorned. The two younger men were shaved bald but for a scalplock that hung down behind the head, and on the scalplocks were fixed with leather cords a burst of three or four turkey feathers dyed in different hues of red, blue and green. The elder warrior wore a feathered cap of sorts, which had a number of turkey feathers splayed out on either side with a central larger eagle feather standing up straight as if to signify order out of chaos. On the ground beside them lay their bows and arrow quivers. The Indians were lean and sinewy, not an ounce of English fat upon them. They regarded Matthew with their long-nosed, narrow faces like aristocrats of the forest wondering what the cat had just dragged in.

"Help me!" Matthew said, and motioned toward the well. "My friend's been hurt!" Of course that got no response. Matthew tried French, as he knew from experience that many Indians had learned the language—or a pidgin form of it, passed from generation to generation—from Jesuit and Sulpician missionaries. "Aidez-moi! Mon ami est blesse!"

Still there was no reaction.

"Mon ami est blesse!" Matthew repeated, with greater emphasis on the French word for injured. He added, as a measure of urgency, "S'il vous plait!" But it was clear the Indians did not know that language, as they continued to sit and regard him as if Matthew were speaking to stone statues. Matthew couldn't wait; whatever they intended to do, that was their own business. He set about finishing the job of tying the rope to the beam, and then he peered over and shouted, "Hudson! I'm coming back down!" He grasped hold of the rope with his bloody palms, and just as he was about to swing over the edge a pair of hands that felt like iron covered with flesh caught his shoulders and moved him aside as if he had the weight of a griddlecake.

The three Indians looked down upon Greathouse, who had neither moved nor responded to Matthew's shout. Before Matthew could speak again, the elder man said something to the others in a more serious tone of voice—a phrase that sounded to Matthew's uneducated ear like huh huhcha pak—and without hesitation one of the young men grasped the rope and descended into the well so fast he was nearly a blur. He got down into the water beside Greathouse and smacked him on the back of the head with an open hand, and when Greathouse stirred and gave out a muffled half-groan, half-curse, the young Indian called up with what was certainly a word but was heard by Matthew as an exuberant whoop.

Another command spoken by the elder, this one a staccato rat-a-tat not unlike the sound of a snare drum, and the young man in the well grasped Greathouse around the chest with one arm while holding onto the rope with the other and, amazingly, began to pull him up. If Matthew hadn't been witness to such physical strength, he never would have believed it. To act as safeguard, the second young man swung over on the rope, and as the overhead beam creaked and cracked he clambered down to meet the two men coming up. Greathouse was not entirely dead weight; he was feebly trying to use his hands and feet on the stones, but Matthew thought he was probably so dazed he imagined he was being flown to Heaven by an unlikely pair of angels.

They got Greathouse out of the well with an ease that made Matthew consider himself to be of a fiber so weak he could barely stand against the force of gravity, which in truth was how he felt. The elder Indian spoke again—heh ke shakka tey, it sounded to Matthew—accompanied by a gripping motion of his right hand and at once one of the sinewy braves heaved Greathouse up and put him across his right shoulder like a side of mutton. Hi, hi! the elder said, and pulled Greathouse's boots off. He emptied out the water and tossed them to the ground at Matthew's feet. Then, with a short sharp command from the elder that sounded like a spat-out tut! the young men began running in the opposite direction from which Matthew had entered the fort. The one carrying Greathouse seemed only a little burdened by the heavy weight, and in a few seconds the Indians had vanished amid the ruins.
The elder clapped his hands to get Matthew’s attention, and pointed at the boots. Matthew understood; if he was going to travel, he had to have something on his feet. As he pulled the boots on and found them on the large size but thankfully useable, he noted that his tricorn was gone, and so were the safebox and pistol.

The Indian had scooped up the three bows and quivers and put them around his shoulders. No sooner had Matthew gotten the second boot on did the Indian turn and began running in the direction the others had gone. Matthew realized he was expected to follow, or not, as he pleased, but that he would have to keep up regardless of his condition. He set off running after the elder, each stride a little explosion of pain all the way up to his knees.

The Indian ran without a backward glance, going between the burned remnants of cabins that perhaps had been torched by his own father. The other two and Greathouse were already out of sight. Matthew stumbled and staggered and kept upright by sheer willpower, which even so was not a bottomless commodity. He saw the elder leave the fort through another gaping vine-edged aperture in the wall, and then the man was gone into the dripping woods. Matthew continued after him, following what appeared to be a narrow trail into an otherwise impenetrable wilderness. Massive trees stood about, their branches interlocked seventy feet above the earth. Creepers as thick as anchor ropes hung down, it seemed, from the clouds. Dead leaves spun around Matthew in a chill breeze, and a judgment of crows flew past directing at him their silent appraisal. He felt an oppression upon him like the thumb of God. It was not just that Greathouse was gravely wounded, very likely near death. It was also that Slaughter had been loosed upon the world, and Matthew’s silence—yes, and greed, call it what it was—had aided the monster’s escape.

How could he live with that?

He was breathing hard after only three or four minutes, his legs leaden, the blood roaring in his head. It was impossible to see any of the Indians ahead of him for the thick foliage, and they were probably by now a half-mile in front. He was still running as fast as he was able, which was really not saying much, as he was hobbled by pain. But he kept going, marking the strides by how much they hurt. He must have lost his concentration, or his legs simply gave out, for suddenly he was off-balance and staggering and the stagger turned into a stumble that ended in a sprawl, his face skidding into wet leaves on the ground.

Matthew sat up, shaking his head to clear it of a gray haze. He saw a quick movement. There stood the elder Indian on the trail twenty or thirty feet away, seemingly appeared from among the trees. Up, the man motioned with his hands. Matthew nodded and got to his feet, a task that had a degree of suffering even Job might have appreciated. As soon as Matthew was up, the Indian turned away and began running again, and was out of sight before Matthew could get started.

Alternately running, limping and staggering, Matthew came out of the forest into a wide field of shoulder-high brown grass. Ahead of him, across the field a hundred yards or so, was a wall of cut logs similar to the wall of Fort Laurens, yet this one was in sturdy condition. A little pall of blue smoke hung in the air above it. As Matthew continued on, he heard from the field around him the cries of invisible sentinels, some mimicking the barking of dogs and others the cawing of crows. In another moment he knew that he was being accompanied, for he caught glimpses of the dark shapes of Indians loping along on either side of him amid the high grass. They barked and cawed and otherwise made high-pitched noises one to another, and Matthew thought there might have been five or six braves on either side. He might have been fearful at this presentation, but as he had no choice than to go forward, since certainly Greathouse had been brought this way, he dared not slow down nor show himself as anything less than able.

That was still fresh in his mind when the two braves coming up behind him at lightning speed grasped his arms, picked him up between them and carried him onward across the field with hardly a pause.

He was taken through an open gate. Surrounded on all sides by tattooed and feather-capped warriors, he was rushed across a bare dirt yard where small dogs, pigs and goats scattered out of the procession's path. Women with long glossy black hair, wearing leather skirts and waistcoat-like blouses decorated with brightly-colored beads and baubles, came forward chattering and calling out, most of them carrying or pulling young children, to see the new arrival. Some of the men had to holler and shove to keep the women away, as it appeared curiosity was as strong here as it might be toward a Japanese walking on Dock Street in New York. To their credit, the women shouted and hollered back, stating their rights in no uncertain terms. Children cried, dogs barked under Matthew’s boots, which
hung several inches off the ground, and goats ran wildly about butting anybody who got in the way. If Matthew had
not been so desperate for Greathouse's life, this would have been the first act of a comic play, yet he feared the final
act must surely be a tragedy. Through the feathered, tattooed and bangled throng Matthew caught sight of the
dwellings that he knew the Indians called their "longhouses", which were huge wooden barrel-roofed structures
covered in sheets of bark. Some of these were well over a hundred feet long and twenty feet or so tall, and from
openings in their roofs emanated the blue smoke of communal fires.

Matthew found himself directed toward one of the largest of the longhouses, and with a jumping and shouting
mass of Indians at his back he was carried through curtains made of animal skins that covered its doorway. When his
escorts abruptly halted and let him go he fell to his knees in the dirt.

The light was dim in here, the air smelling of pinewood smoke. The communal fire burned low, a pit of seething
red embers. Suddenly a renewed shouting and calling in the Indian language erupted around him, and through the
gloom Matthew saw first the glint of eyes. Converging on him from all sides, edging forward closer and closer, was
a mob of men, women and children numbering too many to count. He was truly in another world now, as much as a
being from another planet. Fear was driven deep into him at the sight of this multitude, but he had to stand up and
assert himself, for in his experience Indians respected courage above all. But where was Greathouse? Here or in
some other place? The mass of natives were ringing him, and some were daring to reach out as if to pluck at his
clothes.

Matthew hauled himself to his feet, and shouted forcefully, "Listen!"

His voice immediately silenced all others. The nearest Indians drew back, their eyes wide. Children scampered
away to hide behind the legs of their mothers, and even the fiercest-looking braves stood motionless at the sound of
a white man's tongue.

"Where's my friend?" Matthew called out. "Ecouter! Ou est'mon ami?" He got no answer. He looked around at the
staring faces. "Does anyone here speak English?" he demanded, as frustration got the better of him.

The silence stretched. And then from the back of the crowd came a single high-pitched voice chattering
something that sounded like ha aka nu eeeegish!

In the next instant the place erupted into a storm of hilarity, and the laughter that burst forth might have lifted the
roof up and whirled it away had it not been so securely fixed.

In this tumult of noise Matthew knew he was being mocked, that no one here spoke either English or French, and
while he was standing at the center of a joke Greathouse was likely dying. Courage or not, tears sprang to his eyes,
and as the Indians began to dance and caper around him and their laughter soared up with the smoke Matthew feared
all was lost.
"Stop it!" Matthew shouted, as the merry carnival of Indians continued to careen around him. His face reddened with anger. He knew a little of the Dutch language from his work as a magistrate's clerk, so in desperation he tried that as well: "Einde het!"

It made no difference, but only brought forth a fresh uproar of laughter. A brave of diminutive size suddenly leaped out of the throng and landed to Matthew's left, and as this buckskinned comedian began to swell up his cheeks and hop about while emulating the deep croaking of a bullfrog Matthew thought the audience was going to holler the place down on their heads. Such croaking, Matthew reasoned, must be what the white man's language sounded like to their ears. At any other time he might have found this of interest, but right now it was just maddening.

In the midst of all this, Matthew was aware of an approaching figure. He was aware of it for the reason that the mob was parting to let this figure through, and where the mob did not part quickly enough a pair of big hands found purchase and threw Indians left and right. Then a kick was given to the butt of the human bullfrog that launched him toward the nearest lilypad, and a massive buckskin-dressed woman with long gray-streaked hair and necklaces of animal teeth around her throat stood with her hands on her hips, glowering at Matthew. He had no idea what was about to happen, but in spite of what he really wanted to do—which was fall to his knees and beg for mercy—he stood his ground and even managed to thrust out his chin in an actor's show of defiance.

The big woman looked him over from head to feet, made a noise deep in her throat like a bear's grumble, and then turned upon the crowd. If anyone were still laughing and shouting, her voice in the next instant made certain all other mouths were shut. Matthew thought this woman could knock a door down by hollering at it. The other Indians simply shut up, and some of the young braves even plopped themselves on the ground in a display of obedience, their heads and shoulders bent forward as if the woman's words were whipstrikes. Matthew had no earthly idea what she was saying, but it was clear she was lighting the devil's own fire in their earholes. If anyone moved during this tirade, her black eyes found them and the offender shrank back like a trembling dog.

When she was done browbeating her own people, she turned her attention to Matthew again and just stared at him as if to crumble him to dust. After a length of time in which he failed to disintegrate, the woman shouted out what was obviously a command of some kind, for here came forward a fearsome-looking brave decorated with jagged red and blue tattoos on his cheeks, chin, arms and legs. The man got right up into Matthew's face, said, "E'glish folla," and turned around to walk out. Matthew did exactly as he was told, having to pass by the large Indian woman who made a noise like spit sizzling in a frypan, which he presumed summed up her opinion of himself and his countrymen.

Outside, another mass of Indians waited for him, along with their animals. Shouts and what might only be termed catcalls started up, but were quickly stopped by his escort, who began to give them as much a tirade as the woman had delivered, and this one punctuated by slaps to his own chest and the pounding of his fist against his palm. Whatever was said, it was delivered with authority, for no sooner had the brave finished speaking did everyone turn away and go about their regular business as if Matthew had suddenly ceased to exist. "Folla, folla!" the brave told him, and motioned him on. Matthew went like a ghost through the village. He caught the eyes of a few children and young women examining him, and a brown dog ran up barking furiously until the brave hollered out and a small boy scurried over to clamp his hand over the dog's muzzle, but otherwise Matthew's progress was undisturbed.

It was a huge place, containing one longhouse after another. Matthew counted thirty-four of them, of varying sizes. He figured the largest few might each house a hundred Indians. Women were busy caring for infants and young children, and there were shed-like structures where men were working at such tasks as building birch-bark canoes, chopping wood, and sharpening knives and spearheads. In fact, the industry he saw around him—the weaving of baskets and blankets, the molding of clay pots and the scraping of animal skins stretched taut in wooden frames—and the sheer number of villagers made Matthew think this must be the tribe's New York. Toward the rear of the village, the back wall was open to reveal a large lake that might have been part of the Raritan river system, and alongside it a cornfield, an orchard on the hillside and other rows of vegetable fields. Truly, it was a world unto itself. "My friend," Matthew said to his escort, who walked briskly ahead. "The man who was hurt. Where is he?"

No answer was offered, therefore Matthew had to be satisfied with silence. At length they came to a smaller bark-
covered dwelling set off by itself near what Matthew thought must be the village's eastern wall, and here the brave planted his palm in the air in a motion that Matthew took to mean \textit{stand still}. A little knot of children who'd been following at a distance crept forward a few more yards and then also stood still, watching intently. The brave shouted something in his language toward the dwelling's doorway, which was covered with a deerskin. Smoke was rising from the hole on the roof, indicating that someone was home, but no one emerged. The brave picked up a long stick from the ground, edged forward close enough to pull the deerskin aside with the stick, and then repeated his shout, which sounded not unlike a rough command.

Abruptly a brown hand shot out, grasped the stick and wrenched it away from the brave, causing the man and the group of children to turn around and flee as if they'd seen the hand of the Devil emerge from that dark interior. Matthew's first desire was also to run, but he stood by himself, waiting, as he'd already met Satan this day and a lesser devil was no match for Slaughter.

An Indian came out from behind the deerskin, and stared at Matthew with eyes like pieces of black flint. He was about as tall as Matthew, and maybe only three or four years older, though age was hard to determine among native people. He was bald but for a scalplock, in their fashion, yet he wore neither feathers nor that cap-like head covering Matthew had seen some of the others wearing. He bore no tattoos on his face, but his neck and bare chest under an open buckskin waistcoat were well-marked with blue scratches and scribblings that looked more like self-inflicted torture than any kind of symbolism. On his arms at wrists and just above the elbows were blue tattooed rings. He was slimly-built, even on the gaunt side, for every rib showed and there was a troubled darkness around his eyes. He wore the customary loincloth, leggings and moccasins, and around his neck hung a small carved wooden totem of some kind on a leather cord. It appeared to Matthew to be the representation of a man with two heads.

The Indian cast his gaze in the direction the others had gone. His profile was hawklike, his face high-cheekboned and his expression sullen. Then he regarded Matthew once more, and he said in a clear voice, "English."

"Yes!" Matthew was relieved to hear the word spoken almost as if by a native of New York.

"Are you what all the noise is about?"

"I am. My friend's been hurt. Can you help me find him?"

"Is he \textit{here}?"

"Yes, but where I don't know."

"Hm," the man said. His black eyebrows lifted. "Hurt \textit{how}?"

"Stabbed. In the back."

"Your hands." The Indian motioned with his stick. "They don't look too good."

"It's my friend I'm worried about," Matthew replied.

"Then, he must be a true friend, because I would imagine you are in some pain. What happened?"

"Never mind that. I just want to know where he is. His name's Hudson Greathouse."

"All right." The Indian nodded. "If he's here, he'll be with the medicine sisters."

"Take me there."

"No," came the reply, "I will not. The medicine sisters don't like to be bothered when they're working," he explained to his visitor's look of dismay. "It's best to leave them alone. Do you have a name?"

"Matthew Corbett."

"Do you wish to come into my house and have some tea, Matthew Corbett?"
"Tea?"

"A nasty habit I picked up in London," said the Indian. He tossed the stick back to the ground and pulled the deerskin aside. "Come in. It's poor manners to refuse a formal invitation." He waited as Matthew tried to decide what kind of bizarre dream he was having, and how soon he might awaken from it. Matthew was beginning to be aware of all the pain that was flooding upon him, from rope-burned hands and stone-slashed feet. His bruised left shoulder felt like a dead weight. Among these sensations was an overwhelming weariness, coupled with a forlorn grief. If not for him, Greathouse would not be dying, or already dead. If not for him, Slaughter would not have been set loose, and this might have been the worst of it. But he had to lay that aside now and put his attention on the moment, for that was how he had to survive what was ahead.

"Thank you," Matthew said, and he walked into the Indian's shelter.

Inside, the small bits of wood in the central firepit burned low. Arranged around the dwelling were items of everyday life: a sleeping pallet, a wooden rack holding blankets, animal skins and some items of clothing, a few wooden bowls and clay drinking cups, a bark water pail and other necessities. Matthew took note of several spears, two bows and a quiver of arrows leaning against a wall. The man would have to be a hunter, certainly, or he could not survive. But why was he living alone here, with no evidence of a wife and children?

Matthew's question was answered, in a way, when the Indian sat down cross-legged before the fire, poured some black liquid from a wooden pot into two small clay cups, and asked in a quiet voice, "You're not afraid of insanity, are you?"

"Pardon?"

"Insanity," said the Indian. "I am insane."

"No," Matthew answered, if a bit warily. "I'm not afraid."

"Ah, that's good, then." One of the cups was offered, and Matthew accepted it. "Everyone else here is afraid. That's why I'm an " He paused, his high forehead creasing as he searched for a word. "Outcast," he went on. "Or nearly so. It won't be very long before I am, because I'm getting worse. Go ahead, drink. As they say in your land, cheer up." He lifted the cup in semblance of a toast, then put it to his lips and downed the liquid.

Matthew also drank, but before he got more than a swallow down his throat he thought his knees might give way, for though it was certainly English tea it was the strongest, most bitter brew he'd ever dared to imbibe. He thought there must be some fishheads and bear balls in this drink. He coughed and sputtered, his eyes shot forth tears, and he held the offending cup almost at arm's-length.

"No sugar, I'm sorry," said the Indian. "Isn't it suitable?"

Matthew coughed again, explosively. Still, for all the bitter taste, he felt a little charge course through his veins, as if one ingredient of this particular tea might be gunpowder. He said hoarsely, "It's all right."

"I trade for it at the post in Belvedere." The Indian poured another cup and drank from it. "Is it what you recall from your land?"

"I was born here," Matthew said, when he could trust his tongue again.

"Ah. So I was. We might as well be brothers, shouldn't we?"

Matthew didn't know how to respond to that, so he took another small sip of the furniture polish. "What's your name?" he asked.

The Indian spoke something that sounded like a ghostly wind blowing through a winter forest. "In your language," he said, "that would be Walker In Two Worlds."

"You speak English very well."
"Thank you. It's not an easy tongue to learn. I still have difficulties. But I'm the best speaker here, and that is why I'm allowed to stay." He smiled tightly, which on his drawn and haunted face resembled a grimace. "I became insane in London. You see?"

Matthew didn't, but he chose not to press the point. He bent down and put the cup beside the fire. Not too close, though, for fear of explosion. "I need to find my friend."

"You need something on those hands. You won't be able to use them tomorrow."

"My friend," Matthew repeated. "If he dies" He let go of the sentence.

But the stern black eyes of Walker In Two Worlds were fixed upon him, and would not let him go free so easily. "If he dies, what?"

"If he dies," Matthew answered, "I'm to blame."

"Are you? How?"

"We were taking a prisoner from Westerwicke to New York. A very dangerous man, named Slaughter. Because of me something I did or didn't do Slaughter hurt my friend and got away." Matthew ran a hand through his hair, barely feeling the twinge of raw flesh. "He's a killer. There's no telling what he'll do out there."

Walker In Two Worlds nodded, his face now devoid of expression. "Tell me, then. Who do you grieve for most? Yourself, for your mistake; your friend, for his injury; or the others?"

"The others? What others?"

"The innocent others," Walker said, "you fear this man Slaughter is going to kill."

And there it was. The central truth, the essence of Matthew's anguish, perceived by a man who in New York might be called a savage. For Matthew had realized, on the way from Fort Laurens to the village, that Greathouse's death would be only the first of many at the hands of Slaughter. He cursed his stupidity and greed; he cursed his smallness, and his vanity. He cursed the black leather bag, with its red wax seal of an octopus, and he cursed the gold that had shone so brightly in his eyes that day at the Chapel estate. He felt as if he'd stepped into a trap that had been set out for him just as surely as if Professor Fell had planned it so. Such traps, he thought, were easy enough to step into, but hell was paid to get out.

He realized, also, that he was going to have to settle his own debt with Satan, if he was ever to get out of this.

He found himself staring at Walker's hunting tools: the sharp-tipped spears, the bows and the quiver of arrows.

"Are you a good hunter?" Matthew asked.

"I keep myself fed, and I what is the word contribute my part."

Matthew nodded. Then he swung his gaze back to meet Walker's. "Have you ever hunted a man?"


"Have you? Or, to the point could you?"

Walker looked into the small flickering fire. "It is not could that matters, but would. I could, but I would not. And you could not, for before the sun rises again your pain will make you forget that idea."

"My hands are all right."

"I was talking about your legs. I saw that you limped as you came in."

"My feet are cut a little bit, but that's no matter."
Again the tight smile that was a grimace distorted the Indian's face. "Oh, you Englishmen! Forever fighting everything around you, even your own spirits and vessels. You don't know when to cut the rope before it strangles you, or how to avoid the quicksand pool that lies in plain sight. You seek to bend everything to your way, even if it destroys you. To win, even if winning leads to your death. Haven't you had enough death for one day, Matthew Corbett?"

"I'm not dead. And I don't plan on dying anytime soon."

"Neither do I. But I suspect the man you wish to hunt would not wish to be captured, and has grown a killer's eye in the back of his head. Besides that, you don't even know what direction he's gone."

"That's why I need you," Matthew said. "Someone who can follow tracks."

Walker put a hand to his face and shook his head, as if this were such a ridiculous idea he didn't want to shame Matthew by revealing his expression of either mirth or derision.

Matthew felt his own resolve start to flag, yet he had to make another effort. "I have to get him back. Do you understand that? God knows what he'll do out there, and whatever blood he spills will be on my soul. Are you listening?"

"Listening," Walker said behind his hand, "but not hearing very well."

"Then hear this. I have money. Not with me, but I can get it for you. Gold coins. Eighty pounds worth. If you help me find Slaughter and bring him back, you can have it all."

Walker said nothing for awhile. Then he grunted and lowered his hand. He looked up at Matthew with narrowed eyes, as one might regard the most foolish of fools. "Eighty pounds," he said. "That would be quite a lot of money, would it not? It would make me the richest insane man in this village. What should I spend it on, then? Let me think. I'll buy the moon, and bring her down to earth so she might sing me to sleep at night. No, no; I should buy the sun, so that I should always have a warm-hearted brother to light my way. Or I might buy the wind, or the water, or the earth underfoot. I might buy a whole new self, and wear English clothes as I parade up and down the streets of your great town. No, I have it! I shall buy time itself, the river of days and nights, and I shall command it to carry me backwards in my canoe until I reach the moment I was taken from my people across the dark divide to your land and became insane. Ah! Now we have an agreement, Matthew Corbett, if you might promise me that eighty pounds of gold will return me to sanity, and how I used to think, and what I used to know was true. Because that is all I desire in this world, and without sanity there is one walk I can never make, and that is upon the Sky Road when I die. So did you bring the paper and quill to sign this agreement, or shall it be written on the smoke?" He held a palm toward the firepit, and the smoke there swirled between his fingers as it rose upward toward the roof hole.

Matthew had no reply, and at length Walker again turned his attention to the small tongues of flame, as if they might speak to him the reassurance for which he yearned to hear. But Matthew was not done yet. Walker's mention of "time" had reminded him that he had one more card to play.

He reached into the pocket of his waistcoat and brought out the leather holder that secured his silver watch. As he opened it, bits of glass fell out. He saw that the watch had been broken, probably in his fall to the ground, and if not damaged at that point then surely by immersion in the well water. The time had stopped at ten-oh-seven.

"This is broken," Matthew said, as Walker looked on, "but the silver should be worth something. I can give it to you now, and the gold later, if you'll help me."

Walker held his palm out. Matthew put the watch in it. Walker drew it to himself, and stared silently at the watch's immobile hands.

"This is broken," Matthew said, as Walker looked on, "but the silver should be worth something. I can give it to you now, and the gold later, if you'll help me."

Walker held his palm out. Matthew put the watch in it. Walker drew it to himself, and stared silently at the watch's immobile hands.

With an acid hint of irony in his voice, Walker said, "I would never have believed it, but time does stop for the Englishman."

A cryptic remark, Matthew thought, that seemed to hold some meaning for the Indian, but was otherwise impenetrable.
A few seconds after that, there came the tap-tapping noise of what Matthew reasoned must be the stick being struck against the side of Walker's dwelling. He heard a voice call out, and then Walker stood up and went to the entrance, where he pulled the skin aside and spoke for a moment with what Matthew saw was an elderly man whose deeply-seamed face was almost covered with time-faded tattoos. Walker listened intently, nodded and then said to Matthew, "Your friend has died."
"In fact," Walker continued, as Matthew's heart seemed to cease beating, "your friend has died twice. Both times the medicine sisters have been able to sing his soul into returning to his body, but they think it would understand better if you were to speak to it in your own language. They say he's a very strong man, though, which is a good thing. Go with Old Dry Ashes, he'll take you there."

Matthew passed by Walker, who withdrew with the watch clasped in his hand, and went out into the gray light. Old Dry Ashes turned and began walking at a brisk pace that challenged the ability of Matthew's aching legs. Again a group of children followed along, chattering and laughing at the pale, wobbling scarecrow, while their dogs ran around in circles and every so often aimed an indignant bark in Matthew's direction.

The journey this time was mercifully short. Old Dry Ashes led Matthew to a structure that was twice as large as Walker's dwelling. It also was emitting smoke from a hole at the center of its roof, and its walls were covered with deerskins marked with red, blue and yellow designs that appeared, to Matthew's limited comprehension, to be stick-figure depictions of human beings, animals and fantastic shapes with multiple arms, legs and eyes that might represent denizens of the spirit world. He thought this place, the domain of the medicine sisters, must be the village's hospital, if indeed any connection could be made to the English world. Strips of leather decorated with feathers, beads and carved totems marked the entry, and set above it-ominously so-was a human skull missing its lower jaw, perhaps to mark the fact that the medicine sisters lost patients just as did doctors in New York, and they wished not to be spoken badly of by the departed in their afterlife. Or, that bones were only bones, and all flesh no matter how proud, how beautiful, or how strong, was destined to fail.

Old Dry Ashes stopped before the entry and motioned Matthew in. With the most mixed emotions of dread and propensity he'd ever experienced, Matthew parted the leather curtains and went inside.

Once more the dimness of light within at first limited his vision. Then, gradually, he made out the figures of two women, both of sturdy size, with long silver hair and dressed in deerskins decorated with beads, brightly-hued feathers, and totems. Their faces were painted, one yellow with red around the eyes, the second half-blue and half-green. They both held round wooden rattles with, presumably, dried beans or corn inside. An essence of some kind had been applied to the central firepit, for the crackling flames showed colors of blue and purple. The sweet, musky smell of burning spices was all but overpowering. Clay pots and jars stood about, in a variety of sizes. And hanging in what appeared to be a hammock sewn from beaverskins was a figure tightly wrapped in white cloth, like a babe in swaddling.

Only Greathouse's head was visible. His eyes were closed, his sweat-damp face gray except for daubs of red and yellow that had been applied to chin and forehead. The two medicine sisters were keening and chanting in low voices as Matthew approached, and did not pause in their vocal utterings to the spirits when Matthew stepped between them.

Matthew thought Greathouse looked eighty years old. It seemed that the flesh was starting to tighten around the skull. Matthew felt a start of alarm because he couldn't tell if Greathouse was breathing or not. Then one of the medicine sisters took a drink from liquid in a red cup, sprayed it between her teeth onto Greathouse's face, and Matthew saw him flinch, if almost imperceptibly.

"Hudson," Matthew said, as the medicine sisters chanted and shook their rattles through the musky-scented smoke.

Greathouse's eyes fluttered and opened. Blood-shot and dark-hollowed, they searched for a face to go with the voice.

"I'm here," Matthew said, and touched the man's swaddled shoulder.

"Matthew?" It was a weary whisper; the voice of a man who was saving his strength to fight for his life.

"Yes."
"Where the hell are we?"

"An Indian village. Not far from Fort Laurens."

Greathouse made a noise of either pain or interest, it was hard to tell which. "How'd we get here?"

"They brought us."

"I can't move." He frowned, obviously disturbed by his lack of freedom. "Why can't I move?"

"You're all wrapped up. Don't try to move. I imagine they've put something on your wounds, and you don't want to-"n

"Shit, what a mess," Greathouse said, squeezing his eyes shut again. "That box. Damned box. What was in it?"

"I don't know."

There was a long moment in which Greathouse didn't speak. Matthew was aware that the medicine sisters had withdrawn to the other side of their shelter, probably to give him the opportunity to convince Greathouse's spirit not to fly away from the body.

"Well," Greathouse whispered, his eyes opening again, "I was a prince of fools wasn't I?"

"How could you have known?"

A small tide of anger rippled over the man's face. "I am paid to know. It's my job." He winced as fresh pain hit him, and let the anger go in order to lessen his torment. "In the well. I remember that. You wouldn't let me go under."

"That's right," Matthew said. "I'm not going to let you go under here, either. I forbid you to die."

"Oh do you?"

"Yes, I do. I forbid you to die because my education is not yet complete, and when you're up on your feet again and we're back in New York I intend to continue my lessons in sword-fighting and, as you put it, the art of combat. So you're not to die, do you hear me?"

Greathouse gave a grunt that might have been a muffled laugh. "Who died," he said, "and made you king?"

"I'm just telling you, as your associate." It was a difficult task for Matthew to keep his voice steady.

"I see." Again, Greathouse was silent for awhile. His eyes closed, the eyelids fluttered, and then he brought himself up to the world once more. "I suppose if the young master Matthew Corbett commands it, then I'll have to obey."

"You've been through worse than this," Matthew said. "I've seen the scars."

"My collection's growing. Like it or not."

Matthew tore his gaze away from Greathouse's face and stared at the ground. The fire popped and hissed behind him. He knew what he had to do now; he knew this was the moment. He opened his mouth to speak.

"Listen," Greathouse whispered. When Matthew looked at him again, he saw that Greathouse wore the crooked hint of a smile. "Something amusing. The work I was doing. For Lillehorne. Hired me to find out if his wife, the Princess is having " Once more he hesitated, and winced at a passing thrust of pain. "Sexual relations with the new doctor in town."

"Dr. Mallory?"
"Yes. Him."

Matthew knew that Jason Mallory and his wife Rebecca had come to New York from Boston about a month ago, and set up residence at the north end of Nassau Street. Mallory was in his late thirties and as handsome as his black-haired wife was beautiful. He doubted that the good doctor would wish to dally with the needle-nosed, frankly unattractive Maude Lillehorne when his own lady was so comely.

"Told me Princess sees him three times a week," Greathouse went on. "Says she comes home in a sweat. Red-faced, and trembly. Can you imagine it?"

"No, I can't."

"Won't tell Lillehorne why she goes. Just that that she needs him." A savage little grin moved across Greathouse's mouth, which Matthew took to be a good sign. "And listen the thing is " He couldn't speak for awhile, until he'd recovered some strength and breath. "There are four other wives. Seeing Mallory. For unknown reasons. He must be hell of a ram." Greathouse shook his head, as much as he was able. "Me I'd like to ram his wife."

Greathouse then lapsed into silence, and the grin slowly faded. His eyes closed and Matthew thought he'd drifted to sleep, but then he said in a barely audible voice, "God, I'm tired."

"You're going to be all right," Matthew told him. "It'll take time, but at least you'll have another interesting story to tell." And then he leaned closer to Greathouse's ear, and he said, "I'm to blame for this."

Greathouse said, "What?" His eyes were still shut, his mouth slack.

"I've caused all this. I wanted to tell you, but I was afraid."

"Afraid? Of what?" The voice was almost gone.

"Of what you'd think of me." Matthew's heart was beating harder; even with Greathouse in this condition, it was difficult to get the words out. "I've deceived you. When I went to the Chapel estate that day I found the tunnel I also found some money."

"Money," Greathouse whispered.

"Eighty pounds worth of gold coins, hidden in a lockbox made to pass as a book. The money is in my house, right now. It's enough more than enough to buy Zed's freedom. I didn't tell you, because " The moment of truth had at long last arrived, and its fruit tasted bitter indeed. "Because I wanted all of it," he went on, his face as agonized as Greathouse's now was peaceful. "I found it, and I thought it should be mine. Every last penny of it. When we turned off the pike, I should have told you. I wanted to, but I thought, maybe we could get Slaughter's money. I thought we could trick him as you said, and everything would be all right."

"I'm sorry," Matthew said, "that you have to pay for my mistake. I'm sorry that I didn't tell you. But listen to me, Hudson. I'm going after Slaughter, and I'm going to bring him back. Before God, I can't live knowing what I've let loose. Can you hear me, Hudson?" He clasped his friend's shoulder more tightly. "Can you hear?"

"I hear," said another voice.

Matthew turned around.

Behind him and just to one side stood Walker In Two Worlds.

They stared at each other for a moment, as the fire crackled and blue flames curled.

Walker held up his right hand, in which was gripped the silver watch.

"I like this." His eyes were full of shadow. "I'm sure it was very expensive, in your land." He stepped forward and put the fingers of his left hand under Greathouse's nostrils. "Still alive. I think he must be a very strong man."
"Do they think he'll live?" Matthew motioned with a lift of his chin toward the two women, who stood watching from the far wall.

Walker spoke to them, and one answered. "She says it's too early to tell, but it's a good sign that his soul has decided to stay in his body, at least for now." He looked down upon Greathouse's placid face. "Sleeping well, it seems to me. They gave him some strong medicine. He shouldn't wake again before tomorrow."

"Can they give me something?" Matthew asked. "For my hands and feet. Maybe also to keep me going."

"They do medicine, not " Walker probed his memory for the right word. "Miracles," he said. "You need food and sleep." He spoke once more to the women, and was answered again by the same one. "She says they can put a poultice on your hands and feet and bind them up, yes, but it won't take away all the pain."

"Just so I can walk."

"You won't be doing any walking today. Better to let them work on you, and rest until morning." He nodded toward Greathouse. "Is this man your brother?"

"In a manner of speaking," Matthew replied, "I'd say he is."

"But you betrayed him? And now you seek to make things right?"

Matthew didn't know how much of his confession Walker had heard, but obviously the Indian had caught some of it. "Yes."

"And the man called Slaughter? If I refuse to track him for you, will you still go?"

"I will. He's going to have a long headstart, but he has no shoes. The first thing he's going to do is try to get a pair of boots." Matthew had already given this some thought. Would Slaughter try to get the wagon backed up on the road above Fort Laurens? It would be a hard job for one man. He might try to unharness the horses, but those old nags weren't going to hold a rider. Matthew recalled, with chilling clarity, Slaughter's comment to Reverend Burton: *Looks to me as if we'd wear near the same size of boots. You wouldn't have another pair, would you?*

Matthew thought that was going to be Slaughter's first destination, but where he would go after that was anyone's guess. Matthew could only hope that Slaughter took just the boots, and left Burton and Tom in one piece.

"You may never find him," Walker said. "You know that, don't you?"

"I know I'll never find him if I don't try."

Walker stared into Matthew's eyes for a time, until Matthew uncomfortably felt as if the Indian was gauging the territory of his very soul. "True enough," said Walker. He spoke to the medicine sisters, who acknowledged him by going about their business that involved pouring some of the contents-different sorts of tree bark and berries, it appeared to Matthew-from a few of the jars out into a bowl and then grinding the mixture with a pestle made from an animal's bone. "Do you like fish?" Walker asked, and when Matthew nodded he said, "Come on then, there's always some on the coals at " He paused as he put together the correct translation. "Happy River Turtle's house."

As they progressed through the village, Matthew noted that most gave Walker a wide berth, and some averted their faces or clasped their hands over nose or mouth as if to avoid a bad smell. Women picked up children at their approach, and hurried away. A few braves motioned angrily at them, their attention directed specifically to Walker, but Walker paid no heed to his critics and actually laughed harshly in the face of one who came up close enough to spray them with spittle.

"Don't mind them," Walker explained. "This is a show they put on."

Matthew had to ask the question, though he didn't know how to phrase it. So he simply asked it as best he could: "How are you insane?"
Walker looked at the watch as they continued on, and rubbed its silver back with his palm. "I know too much," he answered.

Happy River Turtle indeed must have a fine reputation as a cook, Matthew thought, for there was a crowd around the longhouse he and Walker were approaching. There was an outside fire burning at the center of a communal eating area. It was almost a festive atmosphere, of people drinking from clay cups and hollowed-out gourds and taking from the fire roasted meat and fish on sharpened sticks. It shouldn't have surprised him, he mused, because it was time for the midday meal here just as in New York. He didn't see that any payment was being made for the culinary items, but maybe it was simply on the basis of share-and-share-alike, or that some system of bartering was happening beyond Matthew's understanding. In any case, Walker waded into the throng—which parted for him, and became more sullen until he had passed through—and then returned bearing a stick on which sizzled large chunks of charred white-fleshed fish along with pieces of tomato and peppers. Matthew reasoned they were to share the item, so there was enough to go around.

Matthew sat on the ground to eat the portion that Walker gave him, for his legs were giving out. He felt exhaustion coming upon him, slowly and steadily; it was a process he could not halt, no matter how steadfast his will. As he ate, he couldn't help but go over in his mind again and again the events of the morning. When he could tear his thoughts away from Greathouse's precarious situation and his concerns about Reverend Burton and Tom, he found himself pondering the trick safebox. How had Slaughter managed to rig such a thing? Some kind of explosive device had been concealed in it, yes, but how had the thing worked? And all the time Slaughter had been pretending to fear for his life he'd known that box was in its hole, protected from the damp by all the straw, ready to go off in Greathouse's face. Had Slaughter primed the thing over two years ago, and left it waiting like a bomb? But for what reason? His fear that Indians might dig it up? Slaughter couldn't have known he wouldn't be back to his cabin that day he was captured, so perhaps the box was primed to go off when and if an Indian tried to open it. But what had been inside to make it explode? Matthew wished he could get a look at it, just to satisfy his curiosity.

His hands were stiffening up. He finished his food, grateful to get something in his stomach, and then struggled to his feet again. Walker remained a few yards away, crouched on his haunches as he ate. No one had dared to come anywhere near either of them. Matthew watched Walker as the Indian stared out impassively toward the other villagers. Insane? Because he knew too much? Matthew noted that Walker kept firm hold of the watch, and gazed at it every so often. In admiration, or for some other reason? It was hard to tell. Equally hard to tell was whether Walker had decided to help him or not. If not, then Matthew was on his own, but he had to keep going. Tomorrow morning he would set out, no matter what. First to the reverend's house, and then?

He wasn't sure. Would Slaughter head back for the Philadelphia Pike, or toward the nearest settlement, which would be the trading post at Belvedere? It seemed to Matthew that once Slaughter got boots on his feet his next item he'd try to get was a horse that could carry him at a reasonable speed. If that happened, the chance of catching up with him became even less likely.

Matthew felt that if he closed his eyes for just a second and reopened them, all this might fade away and reveal itself to be nought but a bad dream brought on by the experience-long ago, it seemed now—at the Cock'a'tail tavern. Here stands the celebrity of New York! he thought bitterly. Look how well he's dressed, and how fine a figure he makes! He lowered his head. All that could go to Hell, he thought. The only thing that was important now—the only thing that both taunted and compelled him—was seeing Tyranthus Slaughter back in chains.

He was aware of a movement to his left.

When he looked up, the young Indian girl who was holding a wooden cup full of water instinctively stepped back, like a frightened doe. But she only retreated one pace, and then held her ground because, after all, it was her ground.

Her dark eyes shone as if pools of some exotic amalgam of ebony and silver. Her long black hair was a midnight stream, flowing over the warm brown stones of her shoulders. In her lovely, full-lipped face and steady gaze Matthew saw something ancient and indescribable, as if the hundreds of ancestors who had hunted and farmed this land, had raised children here, had died and returned to the earth, were there behind her eyes, studying him. She was maybe fifteen or sixteen years old, but timeless. She wore the deerskins, beads and ornaments her mother had worn, and her mother's mother, and on back into the mists before London's first citizen had built a fire on the edge of the Thames. He felt flowing out from her like a spirit force the dignity of great age, but also the curiosity of a child who
never aged.

She said something softly, like a church bell heard at a great distance. Then she came forward and offered him the cup, and he took it and soothed his thirst.

Step by step she backed away, calmly watching him, until at last she turned around and was gone among her people.

"Matthew Corbett," said Walker In Two Worlds, standing at his side. "Come with me now."

In his state of increasing weariness, his mind beginning to fill up with fog, Matthew followed Walker back to the house of the medicine sisters. Within, the two women were prepared for him. They washed his hands with warm water from a pot over the fire, dried them and applied a red powder to his raw palms that made him grit his teeth and almost shout from the pain, but he was determined not to make a fool of himself. Next they coated his palms with a brown, sticky liquid that smelled of pine sap, and was as cooling as the pain had been hot. Pieces of white cloth were bound around his hands, followed by strips of leather that were knotted and secured so that he in essence found himself wearing fingerless gloves.

The sisters were chattering at him, wanting him to do something he couldn't understand, and Walker had not entered the dwelling with him so he was all at sea. Then one of the women overturned a large wooden pot in a corner and plopped herself down on it, motioning Matthew to follow her example. As he sat on the makeshift chair, the medicine sisters removed his--Greathouse's--boots and treated his damaged feet in the same fashion, with powder and pine sap liquid. Then they repeated the process of the pieces of cloth and also the binding of his feet with the leather strips, knotted and secured across the top of the foot. He started to stand up but they grasped his shoulders and wouldn't allow it. A nasty-looking black elixir was poured from a long-necked clay jar into a fist-sized cup and put to his mouth. He had no choice but to drink it, and though it smelled like wet dirt it tasted surprisingly sweet, like musky fermented grapes or berries. They wouldn't let him stop until he'd finished it all, after which he was light-headed and his tongue felt coated with fur. At the bottom of the cup was a residue of what appeared to be pure black river mud.

"Here," said Walker, as he came into the house. "These should fit you." He held out for Matthew a pair of moccasins. They were by no means new, but looked to be sturdy enough.

Matthew took them and tried them on. They did fit, quite comfortably.

"Sleep in those tonight," Walker told him. "Get used to them. Those English boots aren't any good for travelling."

"Thank you. Where will I sleep?"

"Outside my house, on the ground. I'll give you a blanket. You ought to get used to sleeping on the ground, too. Besides," he said, "my demons come in the night."

Matthew nodded, deciding it was far better to sleep on the ground than witness a visitation of Walker's demons, whatever they were.

"We'll eat well tonight," Walker continued. "But you'll be wanting to sleep early, with all that." He hesitated. "There's no English word for what you just drank, but the sisters know what they're doing. We'll leave at dawn, and we'll be travelling light and fast. That is, as fast as you can move."

"We?"

"You'll never find that man by yourself," Walker said. "I told you I liked the watch." He was still holding it, Matthew saw.

"All right." Either the drink was about to overpower him, or it was the sense of relief. "I thank you again."

"Thank me after he's caught. Which, as you English would say, is tomorrow's business."
Matthew stood up in his new footwear. He approached the beaverskin hammock where Greathouse lay silent, eyes closed, in his wrapping.

He remembered something Greathouse had spoken to him, that morning at Sally Almond's.

*I can't be with you all the time, and I’d hate for your gravestone to have the year 1702 marked on it.*

"I as well," Matthew said quietly. But it was equally important-vitally important-to stop Slaughter from filling up any more graves. He prayed he would be in time, and that when the time came he would be strong enough-and smart enough, having crawled back from that deepest pit in Hell set aside for men who think themselves so very smart-to be more than a match for a monster.

But, as the Indian and the English said, that was tomorrow's business.
 Seventeen

Up on the road ahead of them was the wagon. One of the horses was missing, while the other stood with head hanging and shoulders slumped, forlorn in its solitude and unable to reach any leaf or stem of edible vegetation.

Matthew followed Walker up the hillside. It was still the dim light of early morning, the clouds thick overhead, and the air smelling again of approaching rain. Walker had already pointed out the clear prints of Slaughter's bare feet. "He's carrying something heavy," Walker had said, and Matthew had nodded, knowing it was the explosive safebox.

The missing horse made Matthew's guts twist. He'd thought that surely neither of those old swaybacked naggs would have carried a rider. And, anyway, how fast could the horse go, even if whipped by a stick? Still, for Slaughter to have a horse meant he could give his legs and lungs a rest, which was a definite advantage over his trackers—or at least one of them.

At the first rooster's crow this morning, the wet nose of a dog sniffing his face had brought Matthew up from his sleep beside Walker's dwelling. His hands and feet were sore, his left shoulder badly bruised; if he'd awakened in such condition in New York, he might have lain in bed until midday and then staggered out to see a doctor, but in this country he thought that such injuries amounted to a splinter in the finger. Not a half-minute after Matthew had pushed aside his blanket and tested the strength of his legs, Walker In Two Worlds had emerged from the shelter. Today the Indian was wearing, along with his usual garb of deerskin loincloth, leggings, and moccasins, a dark green cloak tied at the throat. Fixed to Walker's scalplock with leather cords was an arrangement of feathers dyed dark green and indigo. Around his right shoulder was a leather sheath, decorated with the beaded images of various animals, securing his bow, and around the left his quiver of a dozen or so arrows. A knife hung in a holder from a fringed belt around his narrow waist, along with a small rawhide bag that Matthew thought probably contained a supply of dried meat. What Matthew took as spirit symbols-swirls and lightning bolts—had been painted in black on Walker's cheeks, his forehead, and across his chin. His eyes had been blackened, and made to resemble the glittering danger of tarpit pools. As Greathouse might have said, Walker was ready for bear.

Matthew, in contrast, realized he was as dangerous-looking as a sugar cookie, in his dirty white shirt and cravat, his dark burgundy-red breeches and waistcoat missing half its buttons, and the tatters of his stockings, which bared his calves and ankles down to the moccasins. He was in need of a shave and his dirty hair and gritty scalp might have scared the bristles off a brush. That, he thought, was as fearsome as he would be this day, for though he pushed himself onward following the silent Walker out of the village he felt his courage was made up of tinfoil and could be crumpled by any child's fist.

They were trailed from the village by several young braves who seemed to be jeering at Walker, making fun of his perceived insanity perhaps, but Walker paid them no heed. After a while the young men tired of their game and turned back, and the two travelers were left alone. Walker moved fast, without speaking or looking left or right, but with his eyes fixed ahead and his shoulders slightly lowered. He had a strange rolling gait that Matthew had seen other Indians use: the "fox walk" was what the leatherstockings in New York, the fur traders and rough-edged men who had experience with the tribes, called it. Very soon it was a chore for Matthew to keep up, and when Walker seemed to realize he was so far ahead they were about to lose sight of each other the Indian slowed his pace to what was probably for him a crawl.

Last night Matthew had slept soundly on the earth, beneath a tan-colored blanket, until he'd been awakened in the stillness. Why he'd been awakened he didn't know. A few Indians were sitting around the embers of a nearby fire, talking quietly as the members of any community might converse, but their voices did not carry. No, it was something else that had disturbed Matthew, and he lay with his eyes open, listening.

In a moment he heard it: a keening cry, barely audible at first, then becoming louder and stronger, ending with either a strangled rush of breath or a sob. Again the cry rose up, and this time Matthew saw the men around the fire glance back at Walker's house, for the tortured wailing was surely coming from within. The cry went on for a few seconds longer, then quietened once more. Twice again it rose and fell, now more of a hoarse moan than a cry. Matthew felt the flesh crawl on the back of his neck; Walker's demons had come, and they were sparing him no mercy. Whatever insanity Walker believed he possessed—or that possessed him—on this night he was its prisoner.
The men around the fire went to their own houses. The embers darkened and cooled. Matthew at last fell asleep again, with the blanket up to his chin. In the morning, when Walker had emerged, nothing was spoken about the visitation of demons, and for once in his life Matthew had known to ask no questions.

The wagon was ahead, where it had been left. The single horse, seeing the men coming, lifted its head and gave an exhausted whinny.

Walker reached the animal. He put a reassuring hand on its flank. "Is this what Slaughter was carrying?" he asked Matthew, and nodded toward the back of the wagon.

And there it was. The safebox, its lid open, sitting right there next to the chains. Matthew went to it and saw that it was empty of valuables: no coins, no jewels, nothing. But within it was a rectangular compartment that immediately drew his interest, for he recognized the flintlock mechanism of a pistol that had been tripped by a rachet-like device and caused to ignite a powder charge. The walls of the compartment were black with the powder's ignition, which had blown smoke and sparks through the keyhole. Of additional interest was a small square of iron and a piece of metal that resembled a miniature hammer. Matthew saw, with admiration at the skill and trickery of this ruse, that the little hammer had been under some kind of tension and, upon being released by the rachet, had made the sound approximating a gunshot when it struck the iron plate. It was an elaborate way to foil a robbery, but certainly would have worked to scare off an overly-curious Indian or two. Still, the thing was a puzzle. How would its owner get into it without setting off the charge? And who had made it?

He tilted it up to look at the bottom, searching for a maker's mark. His reward for that supposition was not just a mark, but a name and place of origin, burned into the wood by a piece of redhot iron used as a quill.

It read O. Quisenhunt, Phila. And was followed by a number: 6.

"I think he left something else," Walker said, and knelt down beside the wagon. He held up a muddy ring, fashioned of gold and inset with a small red gemstone. "And another." This find was an elegant silver brooch, studded with four black stones. Walker continued to search the ground, while Matthew came to the realization that in transferring his stolen items and coins from the safebox, Slaughter had dropped at least two things. And what had he transferred them to? Matthew recalled that Slaughter's clothing had had no pockets. He looked beneath the wagon's seat, and saw that his small bag of personal belongings was gone, along with his water flask. His razor and shaving soap had been in the bag. And now, horribly, the razor belonged to a man who could devise more use for it than grooming.

"Take these." Walker had found two more items: a silver ring with intricate engraving and a necklace of grayish-blue pearls that would be very beautiful when they were cleaned up. As Matthew took the four pieces of jewelry from Walker's outstretched hand, he remembered Slaughter posing the question What is a string of pearls selling for these days? He put the pieces into his waistcoat pocket, as it was clear Walker had no interest in them and it was foolish to leave them lying about. Walker made another survey of the ground around the wagon, then he stood up and began unharnessing the horse. Matthew helped him, finding it difficult to look the Indian full in the face because, in truth, all that paint made Walker himself appear to be demonic, some sort of forest specter whose purpose was to stab fear into an English heart. Matthew figured that was the reason for it: if he was the one being tracked, one glimpse at that fierce visage and Matthew would have given up his flight as hopeless.

Whether that would work when-and if-they found Slaughter was another question.

When the horse was freed, it made a direct line to the nearest vegetation and began to eat. Walker was already climbing the road, and Matthew hurried after him.

They found the second horse chewing weeds at the top of the hill. Walker had only one comment to make as they passed the animal and continued on: "Slaughter has discovered he's not up to riding a horse without a saddle."

Matthew got up alongside Walker and forced himself to keep pace. How long he could maintain this, he had no idea. Even so, it was evident Walker was not moving as fast as he was able. "Why are you helping me?" Matthew managed to ask, his lungs starting to burn.
"I told you. I like the watch."

"I don't think that's all of it."

"I would save your breath, if I were you." Walker glanced quickly sideways at Matthew. "Did you know that my father, in his youth, could run one hundred of your English miles in a day? And that after a night's sleep, he could get up at dawn and run one hundred more? Those were the old days of the strong men, before you people came. Before you brought what it is you have brought."

"What exactly " Matthew was having trouble talking and keeping his breath. "Have we brought?"

"The future," said Walker, and then he broke into a loping trot that Matthew tried to match but could not. In a few seconds Walker had pulled away, heading downhill. Matthew doggedly followed, as fast as he could manage on sore feet and aching legs but no faster.

Soon Matthew came to the split in the road that led to Belvedere. Walker was down on his haunches, examining the ground. The Indian gave Matthew time to catch his breath, and then he said, "Bare feet going this way." He pointed in the direction of New Unity. "Boots coming back, and going this way." His finger aimed toward Belvedere. He stood up, narrowing his eyes as he stared at Matthew. "He's going to the trading post. There was money in that box?"

"Yes."

"He wants to buy a horse. The boot tracks were made yesterday, about midday. He's walking quickly, with a long stride. He might have reached Belvedere by late afternoon or early evening. If he bought a horse, he's gone."

"Unless he stayed in Belvedere to rest."

"He may have," Walker said. "We won't know until we get there."

Matthew was looking along the road that led to Reverend Burton's cabin. "I have to go that way first," he said, his voice hollow.

"For what reason?"

"I know," Matthew answered, "where Slaughter got the boots." And he set off, again moving as quickly as he was able. Walker caught up within a few strides, and stayed a distance off to his right.

Rain began to fall quietly through the trees. Red and yellow leaves drifted down. As Matthew reached Reverend Burton's house, he saw that the door was open, sagging inward on its hinges. He went up the steps to the porch, where he couldn't help but note splotches of dark red on the planks. Then he walked through the door, and into the world of Tyranthus Slaughter.

It was a place of blood and brutality. Matthew abruptly stopped, for he'd heard first the greedy buzzing of flies. The reverend's body lay on its back amid splintered furniture, both boots gone, the hands outstretched, palms upward. A pool of blood surrounded the head, and there the flies were feasting. The face was covered by the heavy Good Book, which had been opened about to the middle. Matthew stepped forward, slowly, and saw upon the Bible's back a smear of mud from the bare foot that had pressed it down.

And there was Tom.

The boy was on his knees, near the fireplace. Half his face was a black bruise. His nostrils were crusted with blood, his lower lip ripped open, a razor slash across his left cheekbone. His dark brown shirt was torn open to the waist, his pale chest scored with razor cuts. He looked up at Matthew with eyes sunken into swollen slits.

He was holding James in both arms, at about chest-height. The dog lay on its right side. Matthew saw that it was breathing shallowly. It was bleeding from the mouth and nose and its visible eye had rolled back into its head.
When Walker came into the house, Tom gave a start and dropped the dog a few inches. What could only be called a scream of agony came from James' mouth, and instantly Tom lifted the dog up again to chest-height. Gradually, its piercing cries subsided.

"He's with me," Matthew said to Tom, as the boy gave an involuntary shiver; his voice sounded unrecognizable to him, the voice of someone speaking beyond the door through which he'd just walked.

Tom just stared blankly at him.

Walker eased forward. He leaned down and lifted the Bible.

"He's dead," Tom said. A spool of bloody saliva unraveled from his mouth over his injured lip and down his chin. His voice was listless, matter-of-fact. "I touched him. He's dead."

Matthew could not bring himself to look at the reverend's face, but he saw how bad it was by looking at Walker's. If an Indian could ever go pale, this one did. Matthew saw an incomprehension in Walker's eyes, a statement of horror that was made more terrible because it was silent. A muscle jumped in Walker's jaw, and then the Indian put aside the Bible and gazed upward—not to Heaven, but at the sleeping loft. He climbed up the ladder.

"That man came back," Tom said. "That man. This mornin'." He shook his head. "Yesterday. Knocked the door down. He was on us 'fore we could move."

Walker returned with a thin blue blanket, which he used to wrap around the misshapen mass that had been John Burton's face and head.

James gave another sharp cry, and Tom adjusted his arms because they'd begun to drift down. "I think " Tom swallowed, either thick saliva or blood. "I think James' back is broke. That man brought a chair down on him. Right 'cross his back. There wasn't anythin' could be done."

"How long have you been sitting there?" Matthew asked.

"All night," he said. "I can't I can't put James down. Y'see? I think his back is broke. He cries so much."

Walker stood over the corpse. Flies were spinning in the air, and the place smelled of blood and a darker sour odor of death. "No human," he said, "could do this."

"What?" Matthew hadn't understood him; his own mind felt mired in the mud of corruption. He stared at a hayfork that leaned against the wall near the door.

"No human could do this," Walker repeated. "Not any human I've ever met."

James shrieked again. Tom lifted his arms. Matthew wondered how many times he'd done that over the course of the long night to keep the dog's body evenly supported; the boy's arms must feel like they were about to tear loose from the sockets.

"His back is broke," Tom said. "But I've got him. I've got him, all right." He looked up at Matthew, and gave a dazed, battered half-smile that made fresh blood drool from his mouth. "He's my friend."

Matthew felt the Indian staring at him. He avoided it, and ran the back of a hand across his mouth. Tom's eyes were closed, perhaps also avoiding what he must certainly know should be done.

"Belvedere," Walker said quietly. "It won't come to us."

"Shhhhh," Tom told the dog, as it whimpered. The sound became a low groaning noise. "I've got you," he said, his eyes still closed, and possibly more tightly shut than a few seconds before. "I've got you."

Walker said to Matthew, "Give me your neckcloth." The cravat, he meant. Matthew's brain was fogged. He heard a blood-gorged fly buzz past his ear and felt another graze his right eyebrow. He unknotted the cravat, removed it
from around his throat and gave it to the Indian, who tore from it a long strip and handed the rest of it back. Walker twisted the cloth for strength and began to wrap the ends of the strip around each hand. When Walker took a forward step, the boy's eyes opened.

"No," Tom said. Walker stopped.

"He's my dog. My friend." The boy lifted his arms again, and now winced at the supreme effort of holding them steady. "I'll do it if you'll hold him so he don't hurt."

"All right," said the Indian.

Walker unwound the strangler's cloth from his hands and lay it across Tom's left shoulder, and then he knelt down before Tom and held out his arms like a cradle to accept the suffering animal.

James cried out terribly as the exchange was made, but Tom said, "Shhhhh, shhhhh," and perhaps the dog even in its pain understood the sound of deeper agony in its companion's voice. Then James whimpered a little bit, and Walker said, "I have him."

"Thank you, sir," answered Tom in a distant, dreamlike tone, as he began to wrap the cloth between his own hands, which Matthew saw bore razor cuts.

Matthew stepped back. Tom eased the taut cloth around James' neck, trying to be tender. James began to whimper again. Its pink tongue came out to lick at the air. Tom leaned forward and kissed his dog on the head, and then very quickly he crisscrossed one hand over the other and fresh blood and mucous blew from his nostrils as he did what he had to do, his eyes squeezed shut and his teeth grinding down into the wound of his lower lip.

Matthew looked at his feet. His moccasins stood in the pool of the reverend's blood. The indignant flies swarmed and spun. Matthew backstepped, hit the remnants of a broken chair, and almost fell. He righted himself, swayed unsteadily, felt sickness roil in a hot wave in his stomach. He had seen murder before, yes, and brutal murder at that; but Slaughter's work had been done with so much pleasure.

"Don't shame yourself," he heard Walker tell him, and he knew that not only were his eyes swimming, but that his face must have been as white as his cravat had been only yesterday morning.

Slowly, his eyes still downcast, Matthew busied himself with winding the cravat around his throat again. After all, it had been very expensive. It was the mark of a gentleman, and what every young man of merit wore in New York. He carefully knotted it and pushed its ends down under the neck of his dirty shirt. Then he stood very still, listening to the patter of rain on the roof. Tom turned away from Walker. He went to a bucket of water on the floor that had survived the violence, got down on his knees with the slow pained grace of an old man and began to wash the blood from his nostrils.

"His tracks head to Belvedere," Walker said, speaking to the boy. A small black-haired carcass with a brown snout lay on the floor in front of the fireplace, as if sleeping there after a day fully done. "We intend to catch him, if he hasn't already gotten himself a horse."

"He'll want a horse," Tom agreed. He splashed water into his face and rubbed life back into his shoulders. "Maybe one or two to be bought there, not many."

"One would be enough."

"He can be tracked, even on a horse," said the boy. "All we have to do is get us some horses, we can find him."

We, Tom had said. Matthew made no response, and neither did Walker.

Tom took their silence for another reason. "I can steal us some horses, if I have to. Done it before. Well one horse, I mean." He started to stand up, but suddenly his strength left him and he staggered and fell onto his side.

"You're not in any shape to be stealing horses," Walker observed. "Can you walk?"
"I don't know."

"Decide in a hurry. Matthew and I are leaving."

"I can walk," Tom said, and with a show of sheer willpower over physical distress he stood up, staggered again, and then held his balance. He looked from Walker to Matthew and back again, the bruised and bloodied face defiant.

"How fast can you walk?" was the next question.

For that, Tom seemed to have no answer. He blinked heavily, obviously in need of sleep as well as medical attention. He held his hands up before his face and looked at the razor cuts there as if he had no memory of having been wounded. Then he turned his attention to Matthew. "You're a Christian, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Will you help me, then? You bein' a Christian, and the reverend bein' a Christian. Help me bury him?"

"There's no time for that," said Walker.

"I promised. Said I'd stay with him 'til he died, and then I'd bury him. I won't go back on a promise."

"We can't lose time. Do you understand that?"

"I understand it. But I won't go back on a promise."

"Do you want to play at catching Slaughter?" Walker asked Matthew, with a flash of anger behind it. "Or do you want to really try?"

"We're talkin'," Tom said, "when we could be buryin'. I want to put the reverend under, and James, too. There in that cemetery, with the other ones. After that, I'll show you how to get to Belvedere through the woods. Cuts about four miles off goin' by the road."

"I already know that way," said the Indian.

"I reckon you do," Tom replied, and he winced at some pain and blew a little bloody snot out of his nose.

How the boy was even standing up, Matthew had no idea. He might have a broken nose or even a broken jaw, by the looks of him. Probably missing some teeth, too. But he was alive, and that was more than most of Slaughter's victims could claim. Matthew thought that this boy probably had the hardest bark of anybody he'd ever met, including Greathouse himself. Of course they had to get to Belvedere, and they had to get there before sundown.

But still a promise was worth something, in his book.

"What's your say?" Walker prodded.

Matthew realized he was in charge. He was the only member of the New York office of the Herrald Agency who could stand on his feet, and make the decisions. He was Greathouse now, for better or worse. What would Greathouse do, was the question?

But no, it was not, he decided. The question was, what was right?

Matthew looked squarely at Tom. "Do you have more than one shovel?" he asked.
Matthew had lost all calculations of time and distance. He knew they'd been travelling through the woods for what seemed like several hours, but exactly how long and how many miles they'd come, he had no idea. A light rain was falling from a sky more twilight than afternoon, which further distorted his senses. His legs, usually a reliable informant as to distance, had passed through ache and pain into numbness. No longer either could he feel any sensation in his feet. The woods were thick, and the path through them-winkey-twistey, as Greathouse might have said-led up over rocky hillsides and down through swampy hollows. It was sometime during the descent into one of these hollows that Tom's knees gave way and he went down into the thicket. It was a quiet falling, like the rain, and if Matthew had not glanced back at the boy and seen him already on the ground he would not have known it.

"Wait!" he called to Walker, who was about thirty yards ahead and already going up the next hill. Instantly the Indian checked his progress and stood among the golden-leafed birch trees with his dark green cloak wrapped around himself, resembling nothing more than a black-eyed, fearsome and feathered head floating amid the questionable beauty of nature.

Matthew went back the fifteen yards or so to where Tom was trying to get his feet under him. It was obvious the boy, as hard barked as he might be, was running low on wood to feed his fire. His bruised face was ghastly purple, one of his eyes swollen shut and the other nearly so. The razor cuts across his chest were as scarlet as whistrikes. It had astounded Matthew, back in the sad cemetery of New Unity, how Tom with his slashed hands had gripped hold of one of the two shovels and started feverishly digging in the wet earth. Matthew had joined in the work, as Walker had watched from a distance. They must have made a sight, Matthew thought. Both of them with wounded hands, staggering around in the cold rain trying to do the Christian thing. After the boy had fallen down twice and twice picked himself up with mud on his knees, Walker had taken the shovel from him and told him to go sit down under a tree. In time, they had two graves, as Tom had asked; one large, one small. Neither was very deep, and this had been at Walker's insistence for, as he'd said before the work had begun, Belvedere was not going to come to them. They left the cemetery, which now held forty markers. The last two were boards taken from a crumbling cabin and pounded into the ground. When Tom turned his back to the graves he had so carefully maintained, Matthew noted that it was without emotion. But Matthew thought he understood why: a show of emotion would be a use of resources that Tom needed to get through today. Either that, or the boy had iron control over what he revealed or did not reveal.

In any case, the three travelers departed from New Unity, and left its occupants and their stories for some future generation to ponder.

Now, in the deeper forest some number of miles distant from Belvedere, Matthew reached Tom and offered his hand to help the boy up.

Tom angled his head so his better eye looked at the hand. "If I'd wanted your help," he said, his voice distorted by his injured lip, "I would've asked." So saying, he hauled himself to his feet and staggered past Matthew, who turned to find the Indian standing there right beside him.

"How do you do that?" Matthew asked.

"Do what?"

"Never mind." He watched Tom fall again, get up once more and keep staggering onward, up the hill where Walker had just been standing. "Should we rest awhile?"

"No." Walker turned and began striding rapidly after the boy, while Matthew quickened his pace to catch up. "Boy!" Walker called.

"I've got a name."

"Tom," Walker amended. He'd heard Matthew call him that, in the cemetery. "How is it you know this way to Belvedere? It's a Seneca trail."
"How is it you speak such good English?"

"I've lived with the English. Have you lived with my people?"

"No. I was lookin' for a shorter way to Belvedere one day, and I found it."

"How is it you didn't get yourself lost in the woods?" Walker asked, slowing his stride to remain alongside Tom. "Or did you?"

"I can tell my directions, if that's what you're askin'." Tom shot him a quick dark glance from his better eye.

"Who taught you?"

Tom suddenly stopped, so abruptly that Walker also stopped and Matthew narrowly avoided a collision with the both of them. "Who taught me?" There was acid in the boy's brogue. His mouth twisted. "I'll tell you who, then. My father, partly. Taught me how to read the ground and the sky. Taught me my directions. How to build a fire. How to hunt, and lay a snare. But after he died, and I was on my own then there were lots more things I had to best learn in a hurry, and I knew if I didn't learn 'em right the first time, I wouldn't get no second chance. So I stole when I had to, and I hid out when I had to." He glanced at Matthew, as if marking him as an intruder in this brutal paradise. "See," Tom continued, "I learned real quick that the way to stay alive is to keep movin'. I forgot about that, and I got soft and liked an inside bed, and a house with a table you ate off of, and readin' the Bible to an old man, and pretendin' I had some kind of family again. That's why they're dead, 'cause I forgot that at any minute this world can kick your door down and come in swingin' a razor." He nodded. "Look what I let happen, back there." His eye found Walker again. "Who taught me, you're askin'? My father, some. But in this world, it's the Devil teaches you the lessons you never forget."

"You couldn't have stopped Slaughter," Matthew said. "No one could've."

Tom thrust his face toward Matthew's. "Maybe you could've," he answered. "I told you, maybe you should've killed him when you could. But don't fret about it, don't you fret." He held up a finger of his razor-slashed right hand. "I'm gonna kill him, so don't you fret."

Matthew almost recoiled from the cold ferocity in the boy's voice. It was hard to remember that he indeed was a boy, of thirteen or fourteen years, because his sentiments and expressions were those of a older man mauled by life. Scarred by life, would be the more correct phrase. To see what lay behind those eyes, Matthew thought, would be a frightful view. A desolation, perhaps; a loneliness, for certain. Anger was holding him together, a rage against the world. And who could blame him, with all the death and misery he'd witnessed? So he might be young in years, Matthew thought, but it was an illusion, for his trials had left him withered within.

Tom was through talking. He turned and started up the hillside again, but halfway up his remaining strength failed him, for he staggered against a boulder and slid down to the ground. He put his hands to his face and sat there, hunched over and otherwise motionless.

"He's almost done," Walker said quietly. "He's fighting it, but he knows it too."

"What are we going to do with him?"

After a silence in which Walker was obviously deliberating the question, the Indian approached Tom, with Matthew following behind. "I suppose, if you can read the ground so well, that you've seen the tracks?"

Tom lowered his hands. Matthew had expected to see the tears of either loss or frustration on Tom's cheeks, but there were none. The boy was again sealed up tight. "I have," Tom replied. "Good-sized bear about two hours ahead of us, movin' slow."

Matthew felt a start of alarm; his own scars had been left by a meeting with a bear, three years ago, and he didn't wish for another encounter.

"That's why I'm not running us faster," Walker said. "I'm going on ahead, to scout. You two meet me at the
stream, and don't dawdle."

Tom nodded, familiar with the landmark Walker specified, and then the Indian took off running at a steady pace up the hillside, among the trees, and out of sight.

"Give me a minute," Tom said, as Matthew waited. He reached into his mouth and worked a loose tooth, after which he spat red on the ground. Then, with a soft groan that spoke volumes, the boy pulled himself up and stood unsteadily, balancing with a hand against the rock. "Maybe find myself a walkin'-stick," he said, his voice slurred. "I'll be all right."

At the top of the hill, a slim branch from a fallen tree was found to suit Tom's purpose, and he hobbled on it while trying to walk as fast as he could go. Matthew thought that Tom's revelation of his sense of the world's evil had sapped some of the strength the boy had been hoarding, and even Tom's depth of willpower had its bottom.

Tom's description of the murder of John Burton had been horrific, even if the boy was unable to remember all the details. It had been like a bad dream, he'd told Walker and Matthew. James started barking, the door had crashed in and the man was suddenly there. Tom recalled that he'd worn a black tricorn-Matthew's hat-and how he'd grinned in the guttering candlelight. Dogs were born brave, and so James had attacked the intruder and been crushed down by the chair across his back. Boys were also born brave, and sometimes foolish, and when Tom had gone at Slaughter he hadn't seen the glint of the drawn razor until it came at him, slashing his outstretched hands, followed by a fist that had slammed into the side of his face and sent him sprawling. He'd remembered, in a blur, seeing what Slaughter was doing to the reverend, and when he'd grabbed at Slaughter from behind an elbow hit him in the mouth and another fist struck and the razor streaked across his cheekbone and tore ribbons from his shirt. Then he was stumbling out across the porch, dripping blood and only half-conscious, but the conscious part was screaming at him to run, to get to the woods, because he knew James was finished from how the dog had shrieked, and no man could stand up to a razor the way it was cutting pieces from the reverend's face.

He had gone instead to the barn to get the hayfork, but there the darkness had crashed upon him and he remembered falling. And there he'd stayed, until James' cries had called him back to the world, and he'd gotten up and walked in a haze of blood and pain to the cabin with the hayfork ready, the Devil's weapon to kill the Devil. But Slaughter had gone, probably in a hurry to get to Belvedere before nightfall, and had taken with him two items: the boots and Tom's long black coat, which certainly was too small for him to shrug into but would serve well enough as a cloak over his asylum clothing.

"I don't intend to kill Slaughter," Matthew said to Tom as they continued on along the trail. "Though he might deserve it. I'm going to catch him and take him to New York. Let the law punish him."

Tom grunted. "Tall words. He'll have somethin' to... It was getting harder for him to talk, and he had to get his breath and make another effort at it. "To say about that. Best I kill him. When the time comes."

The afternoon moved on, and so did the two travelers along the Seneca trail. When Matthew thought Tom couldn't make it another step, the boy seemed to draw from amazing reserves and keep going. By Matthew's imprecise calculation of time, about two hours after Walker had left them they came upon a shallow stream that ran clear and quick across rocks. Both Tom and Matthew drank from it and rested against the trunk of a massive oak tree that Matthew saw was carved with Indian symbols.

They didn't have long to wait. Walker came at his steady run along the trail from the opposite direction, knelt down and drank from the stream and then said, "Belvedere is only a mile distant." He turned his attention to Tom, who was already trying to stand up but whose legs would not obey; he was worn to a nub. "Help him," he told Matthew.

"I don't need no help," was the boy's angry, if hoarsely whispered, response. But whether he admitted it or not, he did, for he couldn't stand up even with the walking-stick until his pride allowed Matthew to lend a shoulder.

At last they emerged from the forest onto the road again, or at least what served as a road, and there stood the town of Belvedere before them. The smell of a settlement was very different from the smell of the woods. In the air lingered the scents of cooked food, burned firewood, moldy timbers, wet cloth and that oh-so-ripe fragrance of well-
filled fig-pits. Belvedere itself was no different from any of dozens of small communities that had grown up around a trading post originally built to barter skins from Indians and trappers. Most of the houses that Matthew saw were in need of whitewash and some were green with mold, though here and there an enterprising soul had put a brush to work. But all their roofs and walls were still standing and they all looked to be occupied, for their chimneys smoked. A long structure with a front porch had brightly-colored Indian blankets nailed up on the walls, and above its door was a red-painted sign that proclaimed, simply, Belvedere Trade. Two men were perched in chairs on the porch, smoking long clay pipes, with a little boy sitting on the floor beside them, and all three stared at the new arrivals as Walker led the way and Matthew supported Tom.

Walker did not go to the trading post, as Matthew would have thought. Instead, the Indian went through the gate of a picket fence to one of the white-washed houses, which Matthew saw had mounted above its entrance a wooden cross. Then Walker knocked at the door, the sound of which brought the door open and a tall man about fifty years old with thick gray hair, a trimmed beard and eyeglasses emerged.

"Ah!" the man said, with a frown of concern. "Bring him in, please! Sarah!" he called into the house. "They're here!"

It was a normal house with the usual spare furnishings, but Matthew noted the woman's touch in the frilled window curtains and on the fireplace mantel a blue clay pot of wildflowers. And then the woman herself appeared from another room; she was slim and had copious curls of gray hair, looked to be a few years younger than the man, and wore the expression of a worried saint as she came forward to meet the visitors.

"Go get Dr. Griffin," the man directed, and the woman was out the door. "You can bring him in here," he said to Walker, and led them along a short hallway to a small but clean bedroom.

"I'm all right!" Tom had grasped some of the picture, and didn't like what he was seeing. Still, he could hardly stand up and was in no position-of either strength or willpower-to resist. "I'm all right!" he protested to Matthew, but Matthew helped him to the bed and didn't have to use much force. As soon as Tom lay down upon the russet-colored spread he thought better of it and tried to get up again.

"Listen to me," Walker put a hand against the boy's chest. "You're to stay here, do you understand? The doctor's coming. You need to be tended to."

"No, I'm all right. I don't need a doctor!"

"Son?" The man leaned forward. "It's best you stay here, and try to rest awhile."

"I know you." Tom's eyesight was fading, along with his resolve. "Don't I?"

"I'm the Reverend Edward Jennings. Walker In Two Worlds has told me what happened to you, and to Reverend Burton."

"Told you?"

"Yes. Lie still now, just rest."

Matthew realized that Walker had run to Belvedere and back in the time it had taken him and Tom to reach the stream. It was an answer to Matthew’s question about what they were to do with the boy.

"I don't want to lie still. I've gotta get up gotta keep movin'." As much as he desired it, the movement part was all but impossible. He looked up, almost pleadingly, at Walker or where his darkening vision had last made out Walker to be. "I'm goin' with you. To find that man. I ain't gonna I ain't gonna stay here."

"You are going to stay here," Walker replied. "You can't go any further. Now you can fight it all you please, but you're only going to wear yourself out more. The doctor's coming, just lie still."

Tom had been shaking his head-no, no, no-all the time Walker was speaking. He rasped, "You don't order me what to do," and reached up to grab hold of Matthew's waistcoat as a means of pulling himself out of bed. The grasp
was weak and the show of will a last flicker of the flame, however, for Tom then gave a quiet moan. "I'm gonna kill him," he managed to whisper. But even the powerful desire for revenge had its limits, and as Tom's fingers opened and the hand fell away from Matthew's waistcoat his head lay back against the straw-stuffed pillow and sleep overcame him in a second. His razor-slashed chest moved as he breathed steadily, but his candle was out.

The doctor arrived, escorted by Sarah Jennings and with his own wife in tow. Griffin was an earnest young physician only ten years or so older than Matthew, with sandy-brown hair and sharp hazel eyes that took in Tom's injuries and instantly called for Sarah to bring a kettle of hot water. Griffin's wife was laying out bandages and the doctor was readying his sewing kit when Walker and Matthew took their leave of the room.

"I thank you for accepting the boy," Walker said to Reverend Jennings at the front door. A few people were milling about at the fence, craning their necks to get a view of what was happening in the parsonage. "I trust the doctor will fix him?"

"As much as he can be fixed," Jennings replied. "He's been through a rough time."

"He has. And you'll treat him well?"

"Of course. You have my word on that."

"What'll happen to him?" Matthew asked.

"When he's able to get up and about, I suppose he'll have a choice to make. There are people here who could use help on their farms, but then again there are the homes for orphans in Philadelphia and New York."

Matthew said nothing. That was going to be a hard choice for Tom. He thought the boy would probably get up one night and disappear, and that would be that.

"Thank you for bringing him in," said the reverend to Walker. "It was very Christian of you."

"For an Indian?" Walker asked, cocking an eyebrow.

"For anyone," came the reply. "God be with the both of you."

They left the parsonage, and Matthew followed Walker through the little knot of people toward the trading post. It wasn't such a terribly bad town, Matthew thought, though it was out on the raw edge of the western frontier. He saw vegetable gardens and fruit trees, and in the dim light of late afternoon lanterns were glowing in windows. He judged from the number of houses that maybe seventy to a hundred people lived here, and there were surely some outlying farms and orchards as well. There looked to be, at a passing glance, a small business area with a blacksmith's, a tavern and two or three other merchants. The locals who glanced at him and Walker did so without surprise or untoward curiosity, for surely Indians were a common sight at a trading post. He reasoned also that Walker had been here many times, and had previously met Reverend Jennings. Well, it was a relief to have Tom taken care of, and now Matthew could turn his attention to the task at hand.

They went up the stone steps to the porch. The pipe-smokers were still there, though the boy had gone. One of them called, "Walker! What's the commotion?"

"You'll have to ask the reverend," the Indian replied, with the polite decorum of an Englishman. Inside, in the lamplight, a squat, wide-bodied man behind the counter wore a tattered and yellowed wig and a faded red coat bearing what appeared to be military medals. He said in a booming voice, "Afternoon, Walker!"

"Good afternoon, Jaco."

The man's bulbous blue eyes in a face like dried mud took in Matthew and then returned to the Indian. He had six rings hanging from one ear and four from another. "Who's your companion?"

"Matthew Corbett," said Matthew, who reached to shake the man's hand and was met by a piece of wood sculpted and painted to resemble one, complete with carved fingernails and grooved knuckles. Matthew hesitated only a
second before he took the timber and shook it, as any gentleman should.

"Jaco Dovehart. Pleased to meet you." Again the bulbous eyes went to Walker. "What are you all dressed up for? Never seen you in black paint. Hey! There's no trouble, is there?"

"I'm working."

"Just wanted to make sure you fellas weren't on the warpath. What'd you bring me?"

Matthew had had a chance to take a look around during this exchange. His first impression was of a merchant's bedlam. This likely being the first building put up in Belvedere and obviously as old as Moses' beard, the crooked mud-chinked walls encouraged vertigo and the warped floorboards presented a series of frightening rises and dips. Shelves held blankets, linens, clay plates and cups, wooden bowls and eating utensils, mallets, saws, axes, shears, bottles, jars and boxes of a staggering variety, wigs, slippers, boots, breeches, petticoats, gowns, shifts, and a myriad of other items. Everything, however, appeared to be either well-worn or moldy. Pieces of a plow lay on the floor, and two wagon wheels were propped in a corner. On dozens of wallpegs hung a crowding of shirts, cravats, waistcoats, leather belts, tricorn hats, caps, coats, blanket robes and bed gowns; again, everything had a musty green tinge. Matthew thought all the items here had probably belonged to dead people.

"We're looking for a man who may have passed this way," Walker said, his face especially fearsome caught as it was between the yellow lamplight and the blue haze through dirty windows. "Describe him, Matthew."

"He would have a beard. It's been described as a 'patchwork'."

"Oh, him!" Dovehart nodded. "Came in yesterday, about this time. Askin' to buy a horse. I told him I had a good horse last week, but I sold it to a Mohawk. Hey, Lizzie! Walker's here!"

A gaunt, sharp-chinned woman wearing what once had been a royal-blue gown with a frill of lace at the neck—now sickly green-stained and more ill than frill—had entered from a door at the back, holding what appeared to be a pair of candlesticks made from deer's legs, hooves and all. Her hair was coal black, her eyes were coal black, and so were her front teeth when she grinned. "Walker!" She put the bizarre candlesticks down and glided forward to offer her hand, the fingernails of which were also grimed with coal black.

"Lady Dovehart," said Walker, and as he kissed the hand Matthew saw spots of color rise on the cheeks of her sallow face.

"Watch out, now!" Dovehart cautioned, but it was spoken in good humor. "I don't go for none of them damned manners!"

"You ought to," the lady replied, with a coquettish and rather hideous smile at Walker. "What is this world comin' to, when an Indian's got better manners than an English-born?"

"I'm sure the world will survive," Walker answered graciously, turning his attention again to the trading post master. "But you were speaking about the bearded man?"

"Yeah, he came in and asked about a horse. I told him the only fella I knew might sell him a horse was Constable Abernathy. Now!" Dovehart motioned with his wooden hand. "Here's where it gets interestin'. Round about three, four in the mornin', somebody broke into Abernathy's barn and tried to steal a horse. Only he didn't know that mare's a right terror, and the sound she put up brought Abernathy runnin' out in his nightshirt with a pistol. Abernathy took a shot at the man, that mare bucked the bastard off, and he took out through the woods. All mornin' long Abernathy, his brother Lewis and Frog Dawson— you know Frog, that crazy bastard—have been ridin' up and down the road huntin' that fella."

"But they didn't find him," Walker said.

"No, didn't find him. But Abernathy said when they found him, they was gonna take his skin and trade it to me for a nice bag of hickory nuts."
"Any blood on the road?"

"No, not that either. Shot must've missed, but it scared him plenty."

Matthew thought that what might have scared Slaughter—if indeed he could be frightened—was being thrown for a second time from a horse. The first time had ended in his capture. He wondered if after this incident Slaughter might swear off horses and keep his boots on the ground.

"Odd, though." Matthew watched, his face expressionless, as Dovehart actually used his wooden hand to scratch the back of his neck. "That fella could've just walked up to the constable's door and bought the mare. He had plenty of money in his bag."

"He bought something here?" Matthew asked.

"Oh yeah, sure did. He bought you kept the tally, Lizzie. What was it all?"

"A haversack, for one. Some salted meat, for two."

Salted meat from this place? Matthew wondered if Slaughter might be lying dead in the woods from food poisoning, which would make his job all the easier.

"And the ammunition for his pistol," Lizzie said. "For three."

"The ammunition," Matthew repeated.

"That's right. A dozen balls." Dovehart rubbed his nose so furiously with the wooden hand that Matthew expected to see splinters sticking out of it. "And everythin' else a shooter needs, of course. Two flints, powderhorn and powder, cloth patches. He got himself a deal."

Matthew glanced quickly at Walker, but the Indian was examining a gaudy brown-and-red striped waistcoat that hung from a wallpeg.

"What'd the man do?" Lizzie asked, drawing closer to Matthew. "I mean, besides tryin' to steal the constable's horse?"

"He's a killer. Escaped from me and my associate yesterday. I suspect he didn't want to meet the constable face-to-face. Probably couldn't bring himself to pay a penny to the law, either. But I think he's gotten a little overconfident."

"He seemed all right," Lizzie said. "He had a nice smile, and his voice was refined. Said he was on his way to Philadelphia, that he had to get there for some business and Indians stole his horse last night when he was camped. I thought that was kind of peculiar, but then again all kinds of people pass through here goin' north and south."

"Did you inquire as to what kind of business he was in?" Matthew asked.

"I did. Just to converse, you see." She used that lofty word as if she'd been waiting years to drag it out from its shuttered attic. "He said he was between jobs, but that he was goin' back into the business of settlin' accounts."

Matthew thought that over. It meant something, certainly. But what?

"Oh!" Lizzie snapped her black-nailed fingers. "Almost forgot. He bought a spyglass, too."

Walker In Two Worlds lifted his gaze from his inspection of the English waistcoat, which he'd found had a stitched-up tear in its back that had likely been made by a knife. The brown bloodstain very nearly blended into the color of the stripes.

"Special on that one," Dovehart announced.

Matthew put a hand against the pocket of his own waistcoat and felt the jewelry there. He said, "You have guns?"
"Surely! Got a nice musket no, wait the barrel fell off that one a few days ago, needs a bit of work. Are you handy with gunsmithin' tools, sir?"

"How about a pistol?" Matthew asked.

"Three for your approval, sir! Lizzie, show the man!"

Lady Dovehart leaned down, opened a box on the floor and brought up, one after the other, three flintlock pistols in various stages of decay. Two looked to be more dangerous for the firer than for the target, but the third—a little brown bullpup of a gun, hardly a handful—appeared to be in fairly decent shape but for the green patina on all exposed metal parts.

"Twelve shillings, an excellent choice!" said the master. "But for you, seeing as how you're a friend of a friend, ten!"

"I have no money, but I have this." Matthew brought out the first trinket that came to his fingers; it was the silver brooch with the four black stones.

"Hmmmm." Dovehart picked the brooch up with his good left hand to examine it more closely. Before he got it up to his face, his wife snatched it away.

She held it near a lantern. "Ohhhhh," she crooned. "It's pretty! You know, my favorite color's black. Kinda royal-like lookin', ain't it?" She elbowed her husband in the ribs. "Sell the young sir his pistol, Jaco."

"Including the same items you sold the man we're after?" Matthew prodded. "Flints, powderhorn, powder, patches and a dozen balls?"

"All right. Very well. Sold."

"Including also a pair of stockings?" Matthew had seen a few on one of the shelves. How clean they would be he had no idea, but he needed a pair anyway. "And," he continued, "I'd like that, if it fits." He pointed to another item that had caught his eye; it was a fringed buckskin jacket, hanging from a peg next to the waistcoat Walker had been ogling.

"Well, sir." Dovehart frowned. "Now, I'm not so sure that we can—"

"Try it," the lady said. "Go on, it looks about right."

"God A'mighty!" Dovehart fumed as Matthew shrugged into the jacket, which was on the large size across the shoulders and had a burn mark along the left arm as if a torch had been passed over it. Otherwise, it was fine. "I'm tryin' to run a business here!"

The lady was already pinning her brooch on, and she picked up a little oval handmirror that was cracked down the middle to admire her new acquisition.

"Jaco?" Walker had come up to the counter again. "Do you have another spyglass?"

"Huh? No, that was our one and only. Lizzie, stop grinnin' at yourself! God save us from prideful wives!" That comment was directed at Walker, but Matthew saw Dovehart quickly shift his gaze as if it had been originally meant for him. Obviously, the matter of Walker not having a wife was a thorny subject, best left alone.

"One more thing," Walker continued calmly, as if the comment had never existed. "He'll need a carry-bag for all that."

"Got anythin' else to trade?"

Matthew started to reach for another item from his pocket, but before he could get there Walker said with a hint of steel in his voice, "Good will is a valuable commodity. I'd expect you could find something." He stared across the
counter into Dovehart's eyes and became utterly immobile, as if nothing on earth could shift him from the position.

"Well " Dovehart glanced nervously at Matthew and then back to the Indian. "I suppose there's an old shooter's bag up on the top shelf over there. Ought to do."

Walker found it and gave it to Matthew. It was made of deerskin with the hair still on it and had a drawstring closure, as well as a braided leather strap that fit around the shoulder.

"Alrighty! You through robbin' me?" asked the master, with a measure of heat in his face.

"I'll remember your good will," Walker answered, "the next time the pelts come in."

"And I hope it's soon! Been waitin' for a good load of 'em nearly a month now!"

In his buckskin jacket and new stockings, with his bullpup pistol and the necessaries in the shooter's bag around his shoulder, Matthew bid good-bye to the Doveharts—the master still fussing about lost business, the mistress fixed on her mirror—and followed Walker out into the darkening afternoon. A drizzle was falling again, proclaiming a nasty night. Matthew's stomach rumbled; he looked toward the single little tavern, identified by the sign Tavern, and said, "I'll buy us a meal." Surely the tavern-keepers would accept the engraved silver ring for two bowls of corn soup and a few slices of whatever meat was available.

"I am not allowed in there," said Walker, who did not slow his pace past the tavern. "It's for Englishmen and Dutchmen only."

"Oh. I see."

"They think we smell. It upsets their appetite." He went on a few more strides before he spoke again. "Constable Abernathy's house is around the bend there. I can find where Slaughter was thrown, and where he entered the woods. I can find his track, and his direction. But it has to be done before dark. We can make another mile, maybe two. Are you able?"

Am I? he asked himself. The lights in the tavern windows were fading behind them. It seemed to him that it was the last call of civilization, before whatever lay out there, ahead.

Slaughter. In the dark. With a razor and a pistol. Settling his accounts.

"I am," Matthew said.

Walker began to move at a slow run, and Matthew grit his teeth and kept up.
They had penetrated possibly a mile and three quarters into the thick forest that lay alongside the road directly across from Constable Abernathy's house before Walker said, "We'll stop here."

The decision had a strategic importance, because the place he'd chosen was among a group of large boulders in a slight hollow overhung by pines. Working quickly, Walker found a series of fallen treelimbs that, with Matthew's help, he placed overhead in a criss-cross pattern between a pair of the largest rocks. Smaller branches and handfuls of pine needles were then spread across this makeshift roof to provide further shelter from the drizzling rain. Matthew had no qualms about getting wet tonight, but he was appreciative of any measure of comfort.

Walker wasn't finished with their camp, though, for as soon as the shelter was done he went to work preparing a fire using broken-up pine needles and small bits of pine bark and papery white birch bark that were as dry as he could find. The tinder was sparked by not the rubbing of two sticks together, which Matthew had expected, but by the method any English trapper or leatherstocking might have used, the striking of a flint and a small piece of steel. Walker worked intently but patiently, adding more bark and then broken branches to the little tongues of flame. Soon, they had a not unrespectable fire and a decent amount of warmth.

The Indian had previously shed his bow and quiver, as well as his fringed knife belt and his rawhide bag. He sat with his back against a boulder, warming his hands, and then he opened the bag and removed from it a fist-sized, black and oily-looking hunk of dried meat. He sliced some off with his blade and gave it to Matthew, who didn't particularly care if it was beef, venison, bear meat or beaver tail. And it might have been beaver tail, for its pungence, but it was chewy in the mouth and went down just as well as brisket at Sally Almond's. Walker ate some, cut Matthew another piece and himself a second, and then returned the rest of it to the bag.

"Is that all?" Matthew asked.

"It's enough."

Now Matthew knew why the man was so thin. But even though Matthew was still famished, there was no asking for anymore, and that was that. Now that he'd had some time to sit and stretch his legs out, he wondered if he could ever stand up again. Truly, the morning was going to bring a battle of mind over matter. Sitting in the warmth and the orange light, he felt how very tired he was, how very near the edge of absolute collapse. Yet he knew also that when he closed his eyes he would see the carnage in John Burton's cabin again, and hear the buzzing of the flies.

True to his claim, Walker had found the crushed place in the thicket where Abernathy's mare had thrown Slaughter. The Indian had knelt down and found Slaughter's tracks among the dead leaves, and had announced to Matthew that their quarry was heading into the deeper woods on a southwesterly course. Probably wanted to avoid the road for awhile, Matthew reasoned; at least until a few miles had been put between himself, the constable and the men who were after his skin. Matthew assumed Slaughter would either veer his course to meet the road further ahead or might find some other backwoods route to Philadelphia.

"We go at first light," Walker said as he added a few more small broken sticks to the fire. "By that, I mean we're moving at first light."

"I understand."

Walker stared at him, his face impassive. "You did well today."

"For an Englishman?"

"Yes."

"Thank you," Matthew answered. Whether he would do so well tomorrow was another question entirely.

"We might catch up with him in the afternoon, if we're fast and he's slow. I had hoped he might have been injured in his fall, but he's not limping."
"Too bad," Matthew mumbled. It was all he could do to keep his eyes from sliding shut.

"Yes, unfortunate for us. But he didn't get the horse." Walker arranged the cloak around himself. "Listen to me, Matthew."

An urgent note in the man's voice made Matthew push back the dark.

"I'm going to sleep now. My demons will find me. You are not to awaken me, no matter what you hear. Don't touch me. Do you understand that?"

"Yes."

Walker said no more, but curled up beneath his cloak and for all intents and purposes disappeared within its folds.

Matthew sat up for a minute or two longer, until his chin dropped upon his chest. The fire still burned, its warmth soothing. Matthew stretched out alongside the flames, listening to the soft crackling of the wood and the softer sound of rain upon the shelter's roof. Behind his closed eyes he did again see the bloody horror of Reverend Burton's cabin, the broken dog and Tom's battered face, but the worst was that he saw in his mind's eye Slaughter out there in the night somewhere, going on and on, mile after mile, a monster moving across fields of carnage.

Then, mercifully, he dropped into sleep as off a precipice.

He woke up just as suddenly.

And lay there, very still, drowsy and fogged, listening to the night.

Far off, an owl hooted. Once, again, and a third time.

The rain had stopped, he thought. He couldn't hear it falling any longer.

The owl hooted once more. The same one or another? It seemed to be from a different direction, and nearer to their camp.

Matthew opened his sleep-swollen eyes. The fire had burned down to the red-glowing embers. And then from beneath Walker's cloak came that keening cry again, rising up to end in what might have been a gasp of breath or a plea for mercy. There followed a period of silence, and then the cry rose up, grew ragged and hoarse and became in its last tortured notes a strangled moan.

The owl spoke. Walker was silent, but Matthew could hear the quickness of his breathing, as if he were running from something he knew he could not possibly escape.

Matthew gave an involuntary shiver. The night was colder, with the fire's dying. He carefully and quietly reached out to grasp a few of the broken sticks Walker had gathered to feed the flames, and as he dropped them upon the embers one of them gave a crack, a polite sound, nothing harsh, just a sound that might have been the trod of a stealthy boot amid the pines.

The dark green cloak whipped up. Startled speechless, Matthew looked into the face of the damned.

The skin seemed to have further tightened around Walker's skull, its pressure so intense that it had caused him to bare his teeth in anguish. Sweat sparkled on his forehead and cheeks. The thin slits of his eyes were fixed directly on Matthew, but then again they had an unfocused quality, a nightmare glaze about them, and so perhaps they could be just as much looking through Matthew at some distant vision as at him. He was up on one knee, his body quivering.

Matthew saw the gleam of the knife in the newborn firelight, and suddenly in a blur of motion the blade was right there at Matthew's neck.

"Walker," Matthew said firmly. He dared not move. The Indian's face came toward him, as if to make out whose visage was floating like an orange lamp in the dark. "Walker," Matthew said again, and this time his voice cracked
and betrayed him. "I'm not one of your demons."

Walker's eyes searched his face. The seconds passed. And then Matthew saw the madness leave him, like a blanket of crows rising from a bleak field. It was there one second, and the next it had broken apart and whirled away and nothing was left but the memory of black wings beating the air.

Walker sat back on his haunches and looked at the knife in his hand. Matthew, as weary as he was, doubted he'd be getting back to sleep anytime soon. He sat up, rubbed his throat where the blade had threatened to cut him a dead man's grin, and stared into the fire as if to find in it some picture of comfort.

"Ah," said Walker, his voice tired and raspy. He slid the knife back into its holder on the fringed belt. "Now you know."

"Know what?"

"Why I have no wife, and why I am unlikely to ever have a wife."

"That's happened before?"

"Several times, in your land. Of course, they never let me have a knife. But I did try to attack some of the ladies who accepted me. It happened only once, here, but once was enough." Walker kept his head down, shamed by his lack of control. "You can imagine my. " He thought for a word again, and Matthew decided that in these times of hesitation Walker was trying to recall words he had learned but that he didn't have much need to use and so had nearly forgotten. "Popularity," he finished.

Matthew nodded. "What do you dream about?" he asked. Walker was silent. "Is it so terrible to speak of?"

For a time Walker did not answer. He picked up a few sticks, broke them between his fingers and put them into the fire one after the other. "My demons show me things," he said at last. "Things only demons would be cruel enough to show a human being."

"That's saying a lot while not saying very much," Matthew observed. "What do they show you, exactly?"

"The end of the world," Walker answered, and he let that linger before he continued. "That is to say, the end of my world. Yours will go on, but you might wish someday-someday-that it would not."

"I don't understand."

Walker opened his rawhide bag that held the dried meat as well as the flint and steel, and from it he brought a familiar object: the broken silver watch. He placed it in the palm of his left hand, and occasionally gazed at it as if to ascertain whether it was still lifeless or not.

"When I was eleven years old," Walker began, "a group of Englishmen came to our village, with a guide who spoke our tongue. Rich-looking men, they were. Wearing great cloaks and feathered hats. They brought bags of gifts with them. Bundles of bright cloth, glass bottles, bead necklaces and bracelets, woolen caps and the like. They were certainly rich men, and they wanted us to know it. They brought the chief's daughter a clay doll with blonde hair; I remember that very clearly, because all the children crowded around it wanting to see. And then these men said that they wished something for their gifts, and it would benefit both them and the tribe. They said they wanted three children, to take back with them across the dark divide, to show them what the world called England was like, and the great King's city of London."

"The agreement was made," said Walker, as he watched the fire burn. "To pick three children, and see them off on one of the flying canoe clouds that rested on the waters of Philadelphia. Nimble Climber was chosen, Pretty Girl Who Sits Alone was another, and I was the third. " He glanced at Matthew. "Back then, I was called He Runs Fast Too. My father is He Runs Fast. You met him. He and my younger brothers took your friend out of the well. He doesn't run quite so fast now, but he still gets around."

"For that I'm grateful," Matthew replied.
"It would please him to hear it, but not from me, since he and I no longer speak. I am a source of great shame to him, being insane."

"Insane how? Because you have bad dreams?"

"Let me go on. We three children, and the tribe, were told we would see the world of England and the city of London for ourselves and when we were returned-within two years-we would be able to explain to our people what we had witnessed. In hopes, the men said, of forming closer ties as brothers. But you'll note in my story that the men wanted only children, and there was a reason for that. Walker nodded, his eyes still directed to the fire. "Children are so much easier to handle. They're so trusting, so unaware."

"You mean the men didn't do as they said?"

"We were taken to England, yes." A muscle worked in his jaw as if he were chewing bitter hardtack. "What a journey that was. And all that time, through heavy seas and sickness, knowing your home is falling further and further away behind you, and to get back home you have to come the same way again. My soul withers at the memory of that trip. How you English do it again and again, I'll never know."

Matthew managed a faint smile. "Maybe we're a bit insane, too."

"You would have to be. But I suppose that's the nature of all men. To be a bit insane, for a purpose or a cause." Walker turned the watch over in his hand, and ran his fingers across the silver. "Nimble Climber did not survive the trip. The sailors began a wagering game, betting how fast he could get up the rigging to fetch a gull feather fixed to the mast with a leather strap. And they kept putting it higher and higher. The captain warned them to stop, and the gentlemen who were travelling with us forbade it but an Indian boy of nine years can't be stoppered in a bottle, or locked below a deck. They were paying him with peppermint candies. He had one in his mouth when he fell. And when I stood beside Pretty Girl and looked at him lying on the deck, I thought of the clay doll with the blonde hair, and I hoped it didn't break as easily as Nimble Climber."

One of the owls hooted a few times, far off in the woods. Walker listened to it, his head tilted to the side as if hearing the sweetest music. "When we reached England," he said, "I stood on the deck in the dawn light looking at a forest of flying canoe clouds around us. Ships, of course. Hundreds of them, it seemed. All shapes and sizes. I thought how many men must there be in this world, to have made all those canoes? It was an incredible view, one I shall never forget. And then directly when we left our ship Pretty Girl Who Sits Alone was taken away by two men. I held onto her hand as long as I could, but they pulled us apart. They put her in a horse box. A coach. She was carried off, somewhere. I never found out. Some men put me into another coach, and I was not to see my people again for almost ten years. When they finally were done with me, and let me go home, I was insane."

"When they were done with you?" Matthew asked. "What happened?"

"I became a star," the Indian replied, with his own wistful smile. "A celebrity, I think is the word. I was dressed up in feathers and animal skins, with a golden crown on my head, and put upon the London stage. The signs out front advertised me as the 'Noble Young Savage', or 'Jonathan Redskin'. The plays-I was in several, over a number of years-were all the same: romantic dramas pitting the gallant Englishmen against the wicked or misguided savages, building to the moment when I stepped upon the stage and with sign language alerted the hero to the oncoming attack. Some such thing. As time went on I grew older, the novelty of my stoic silence wore off, and I was required to speak a few lines. I remember one: Beware the wrath of the Iroquois, as they shall strip your scalps. " He frowned, searching for the rest of it. "As surely as the locust strips the cornplants, yonder in the field."

Matthew thought that the low firelight might indeed pass for the footlamps. On the boulder behind Walker his shadow was thrown as upon a canvas backdrop. "And that was enough to drive you insane? Playing a part on the stage?"

"No, not that. In fact, it was a very interesting experience. I was tended to, fed and watered very well, and I was taught your language by some very capable teachers. People came to see me by the hundreds. The thousands, I suppose. I was shown off at garden parties and in grand ballrooms. I was may I say the object of affection from a
few daring ladies. But that was then. Later when first a new Indian was brought to the stage, and then another, and another yet Jonathan Redskin's days of valor were numbered. I was cast as the villain in a new play, which served to prolong my career, but the truth was I could not act. My finest scene was a death sprawl, in which I lay motionless at center stage for three minutes with my eyes open. But I was no longer a boy, and I was no longer a sensation. I was simply one of many."

Walker paused to add a few more sticks to the fire. "One of many," he repeated. "In a foreign land." He took a long breath and let it slowly out. "I was sold," he said flatly. "To another acting company. They toured the countryside. I was required to do the same as I had done, in town halls, pastures, barns and warehouses. Wherever we might set up. Of course the people flocked in, to see I, I was called 'The Savage Adam' that time around. Things were good for awhile, but soon there was always another Savage Adam, it seemed, who had just passed that way and played a week's engagement. In one village I was accused of being an Englishman in makeup, because I'd spoken to a man there who thought my speech was too civilized. So I was sold again. And sold again, about a year after that. Then, sold once more within six months. Until at last " He looked directly at Matthew. "Have you ever seen a mishap of nature?"

"A mishap?"

"A person," Walker corrected, "who is a mishap of nature. A malformed human being. A dwarf, or a man with claw hands, or a woman with three arms. A boy who sweats blood. Have you ever seen any of those?"

"No," Matthew replied, though he could certainly relate to any boy who sweated blood.

"I was the Demon Indian," said Walker, in a quiet, faraway voice. "The Lucifer of the New World. The sign on my cage said so. The red paint on my face, the horns on my head those said so, too. And Mr. Oxley, the show's owner-poor old drunken Mr. Oxley-told me to make sure I rattled the bars of my cage, to throw myself against them, and holler and growl like a fiend from Hell. Some nights I had part of a chicken to gnaw upon. Then when the people had gone, I came out of my cage and took off my horns and all of us-all of us mishaps of nature-packed up to go to the next town. And there stood Mr. Oxley with his silver watch-very much like this one-telling everyone to hurry, telling everyone that tomorrow night in Guildford there was a fortune to be made, or the next night in Winchester, or the night after that in Salisbury. He said, hurry there! Hurry up! He said we had to hurry, through the night along the little roads, because time was wasting, because time was money, and because time never stops for an Englishman."

Walker turned the watch in his hands. "Mr. Oxley," he said, "hurried himself to his death. He was already worn out. It was the gin that finished him off. The rest of us divided what money we had and that was the end of the show. I dressed in my English suit, went to Portsmouth and bought passage on a ship. I came home. I went back to my people. But I brought my insanity and my demons with me, and they will never let me be."

"I still don't understand what you mean."

Walker closed his eyes for a few seconds and then opened them again. "From the first moment I saw the city of London," he said, "the demons came to me. They began their whispering in my ear, day and night. In my dreams I see them as high-collared Englishmen with gold coins and jewels in their fists. They have eyes like fire-pits, and they say, Look upon what will be. All those buildings, roads, coaches, and people. A hundred thousand chimneys, spouting black smoke. All that noise, like the beating of great drums that you can never find nor understand. All that confusion, and constant rushing like mad human rivers. The demons whispered: this is the future. Of everywhere. Not only of the English New York, and Philadelphia, and of every town the English build upon the earth. But for the Seneca, or the Mohawk, or any of my nation there will be no place left, among all those buildings and roads and noise. Oh, we'll fight for a place, yes, but we won't win. That's what my demons tell me; that's what they've shown me, and to make me insane they have ensured that no other of my tribe will believe it, because it is beyond belief. The world will be strange. My nation will no longer be part of it. All we have created all that is important to us gone, under the buildings and the roads, and all we hear will be lost to the noise."

He looked at Matthew and nodded. "Don't think you shall escape it. Someday you'll see your world and not know it, and think it strange monstrous, even. And you and your Englishmen will yearn for what was lost, and never be able to find it again, for that is the demon's trick. To point the way forward, but to close the way back."
Matthew ventured, "I suppose that's called progress."

"There is progress," Walker agreed, "and there is rushing toward an illusion. The first takes wisdom and a plan, the second can be done by any drunken fool. I know how that story ends." He regarded the watch again. "I will think of Mr. Oxley whenever I look at this. I will think of him hurrying through the night, toward a fortune that never existed, with a wagon full of mishaps of nature. And I will think that the greatest thing for a man-and maybe the hardest thing-is to make peace with the passage of time. Or the stopping of his own time." He returned the watch to the bag, and gathered up his cloak, his bow and quiver, and the belt with his knife. "It's not raining anymore. I'll find another place."

"You can stay here."

"No, I can't. I won't be far away, though. I believe we have four or five hours before light, so there's still plenty of time to sleep. Take it while you can."

"All right. Thank you." It was all Matthew could think to say. He watched as Walker strode off into the dark beyond the fire, which seemed a familiar place for the Indian to be. At last Matthew lay down and tried his best to relax, if that would ever be possible again. But weariness is weariness, after all, and slowly he began to drift off. His last sense of anything was hearing the voice of a nightbird far away in the woods, which stirred some memory that did not linger, but departed on silent wings.
"So," said the Reverend, "you've had a good year, then?"

"Yes, sir. Very good," Peter Lindsay answered. "A bumper crop of corn, apples a'plenty, and pumpkins still on the vine. You must have seen them, out in the field."

"I did. Peter, you're a blessed man. To have such a farm as this, and such a lovely family. I was speaking with a fellow not long ago about greed. You know, how greed can lead a man into the valley of destruction. It's good that you're not greedy, Peter, and that you're satisfied with your position in life."

"I am, sir, and thank you."

"Well, we certainly need the glories of the farm, don't we? Just as we need " He paused, tapping his chin with one forefinger, which had a long and ragged nail.

"The glories of Heaven?" asked Peter's wife, Faith, who was preparing the midday meal at the hearth across the room. Her kitchen was a glory of its own: clean and tidy, with walls of pale yellow pinewood, an orderly arrangement of cups and platters on shelves and in the arched fireplace itself the frying pans, trivets, spider skillets, iron pots, bake kettle, pot hooks and other vessels and tools that kept a home in operation and the family fed.

"Exactly that," the reverend agreed.

The youngest child, Robin, had been helping her mother. Now she came toward the reverend, who sat at the head of the table nursing a cup of cider, and showed him something she'd brought from the other room. She was eight years old, blonde-haired, and very proud of her small embroidered pillow, which indeed had upon it the representation of a robin perched on a tree branch.

"I made this myself," said the child.

"You did? How wonderful! Now, you're saying your mother didn't help you one bit, is that right?"

"Well " The child grinned. Her eyes were a bright, warm blue, like her mother's. "She helped got me started, and she helped got me finished."

"Oh ho! But I'm sure there was a lot of work between starting and finishing." He handed the pillow back. "Ah, what's this, then?" The middle child, the thirteen-year-old tow-headed boy named Aaron, had come forward as well to show off his favorite possession. "A fine collection," said the man as he took a small white clay jar and admired the bright variety of different colored marbles within. "How many do you have?"

"Twenty-two, sir."

"And you use them for what purpose? Games?"

"Yes, sir. But just to look at, too."

"I'd think any boy would like to have these."

"Yes sir, any boy sure would."

"Aaron?" said Faith Lindsay. "Don't bother Reverend Burton, now."

"He's no bother. Not at all. Here you are, Aaron." He returned the jar of marbles and then lifted his bearded chin slightly to gaze at the eldest child, who stood next to the fireplace in the process of helping her mother cook the cornbread, the beans, the baked apples and the piece of ham for this special occasion.

She was sixteen years old, with the pale blonde hair of her mother and sister, the same lovely oval-shaped face and high cheekbones, and the lustrous dark brown eyes of her father. She stared fixedly at Reverend John Burton, as
she paused before spooning the beans into a bowl.

"Would you like to show me something, Lark?" the man prodded.

"No, sir," came the firm reply. "But I would like to ask you something." Sitting opposite the reverend, her father—a wiry man in his late thirties, wearing a blue shirt and tan-colored breeches, his face lined and freckled by the sun and his scalp bald but for cropped reddish-brown hair on the sides and a solitary thatch at the front—glanced quickly at her, his thick eyebrows uplifted.

"Go right ahead, please," said the reverend, in a gracious voice.

"Why are your fingernails like that?"

"Lark!" Peter frowned, the lines of his face deepening into ravines. At the same time, Faith shot a stern look at her daughter and shook her head.

"It's all right. Really it is." Reverend Burton held his hands up and stretched the fingers out. "Not very attractive, are they? It's a pity I couldn't keep my nails like a gentleman ought to, among the Indians. My travels among the tribes unfortunately did not include weekly use of scissors. I presume you have a pair here? That I might use later?"

"Yes, we do," Peter said. "Lark, what's gotten into you?"

She almost said it, but she did not. I don't trust this man. Even thinking such a thing of a reverend, a servant of God, was enough to make the red creep across her cheeks and her gaze go to the floorplanks. She began spooning the beans into the bowl, her shoulders slightly bowed forward with the weight of what she was thinking.

He looks at me too long.

"I am hungry," the reverend said, to no one in particular. "Ravenous would be the word."

"Done in just a minute," Faith assured him. "Robin, would you put the cornbread on its platter?"

"Yes, Momma."

"Get out the good napkins, Aaron."

"Yes, ma'am." He put the jar of prized marbles down on the table and went to a cupboard.

Lark Lindsay glanced quickly at Reverend Burton, and then away again; he was still watching her, with eyes the pale blue color of water. The water of Christ, she thought her mother and father might say. But she was thinking more of frozen water, like the pond in midwinter when nothing can drink from it. She finished spooning out the beans, set the bowl on the table in front of her father, and then her mother asked her to refill the reverend's cup of cider from the jug so she turned her attention to that task.

He had arrived about an hour ago. Lark, her father and brother had been out in the orchard behind the barn, filling up more baskets from God's bounty, when Aaron had said, Papa? Somebody's on the road. Comin' this way.

It was rare to have a visitor. The nearest minister lived on the other side of Caulder's Crossing, which itself was almost eight miles south along the road. They had been overjoyed to have a guest, and Lark knew her father would take it as a sign of the beneficent grace of the Lord, which he talked about often. The land might be hard and the living a trial, Peter Lindsay said, but all you had to do to touch God in this country was to reach up. Which Lark had always thought was a roundabout way of saying that if you worked hard enough, God would reward you. But sometimes that wasn't exactly true, because she remembered several years when everybody worked themselves to the sweat and the bones, but the crops were paltry and all reaching up did was give you a withered apple from a higher branch.

She refreshed the reverend's cup of cider. He shifted his leg slightly; beside him, on the floor, was his haversack. My Bible is in there, he'd said. I like to have my Bible right next to me, where I can get to it fast when I see a sinner
And Peter and Faith Lindsay had laughed—a polite laugh, seeing as how some preachers did not appreciate laughter—and Aaron and Robin had smiled to hear their parents laugh, but Lark had looked at Reverend Burton's face and wondered why it was so scratched up, as if he'd been running through brambles.

"Momma? Momma?" Robin was pulling at her mother's apron, the nice blue one with the yellow trim instead of the older scorched one she usually wore. "Is this all right?" She showed that the cornbread had crumbled and fallen apart a bit when lifted from pan to platter, but Faith said it was just fine, dear.

Upon his arrival, the reverend had made himself comfortable in the kitchen and had told them the story of his life: how he'd grown up as a vicar's son in Manchester, and how he in his middle age had crossed the Atlantic on a vow to his father to bring salvation to the Indians. He had been among the savages for many months now, had carried the Lord's light into many heathen hearts, but oh how he missed Manchester. England was calling him home, he'd said. There to find a new place of service, and new flocks to tend. "We're pleased to have you here after you've travelled so long and far," Peter said as Aaron brought the good napkins to the table.

"Long and far, indeed. And I'm so glad to find a place to rest. I fear my feet are blistered, as these boots are just a shade small. You have some very nice boots, I see. They look comfortable."

"Yes sir, they are. Been broken in well enough by now, I'd guess."

"Hm," said the reverend, and he took a drink from his cup. The smoky-burnt smell of the ham was filling up the kitchen, as Faith always let the skin char just before she took it off the fire. Burton put his cup down and held it between both hands, and Lark could not help but take another furtive glance at the long, jagged nails. He had washed his hands and face in the kitchen bucket, and scrubbed the nails with a brush too, true enough, but the reverend smelled to Lark as if he had also gone long and far without a bath. Of course, if a man of God was out in the wilderness for months carrying Christ to the Indians then what opportunity might he have had for an encounter with soap? It was ugly for her to be thinking this way, she thought. Ugly as sin, to be throwing shadows on such a bright, sunny day as this one had dawned.

But she couldn't help it, and she thought that later—when Reverend Burton had gone—she ought to confess her sin of haughtiness or pride or suspicion or whatever it was. And it wasn't just the ragged nails that made her think of claws, either; it was the strange beard of many colors—dark brown, red, chestnut brown, silver—with a streak of charcoal black across the chin. God help her cleanse her soul of this sinful thinking, Lark thought, but it was the kind of beard that Satan might grow, the Devil wanting to be such a cock of the walk.

"Tell me, Peter," said the reverend, as Faith and Robin began to bring the plates to the table. "I passed several houses back there that looked to be deserted. There are no people nearby?"

"My brother had a farm back that way. When his wife—rest her soul—died in '99, he took the children and went to Philadelphia. Some of those houses are older; they were empty when we came here. You know, towns rise up and fall, and fall and rise up. But it is good land here, that's for sure. And I'm hoping, with the beneficent grace of the Lord, that we won't be alone in this valley too much longer. But the nearest people from here would be at Caulder's Crossing, sir. About eight miles. A little hilly to get there, not bad."

"And I'd presume the road connects somewhere to the Pike?"

"Yes, sir. On a few miles past the Crossing."

"I'd presume also that Philadelphia is probably twenty or so miles?"

"Near twenty-five. Aaron, go get another chair. Faith, you and Robin sit on this side here, and Aaron can sit beside Lark."

"Philadelphia is my destination. From there, I sail to England," said the reverend. Faith set the ham platter at the center of the table, and alongside it the horn-handled knife sharp enough to slice through the burnt crust. "Another thing, if you please. Your barn. Might you have a horse I could ride to Caulder's Crossing? As I said, these boots—"
"Oh, reverend! We have a wagon!" Faith said, as she put down the bowl of baked apples and sat beside Robin. "We'd be honored if you'd let us harness the team and carry you to the Crossing ourselves."

"How delightful," Burton answered. "This is truly an answer to a tired man's prayer." All the food was on the table. Aaron brought in another chair and sat to the left of Lark, who had taken a seat down by her father and was looking at Reverend Burton's black tricorn hanging on one wall hook behind him, and at the long black coat hanging on another. He'd come in with that coat, which appeared to be far too small for him, wrapped around his shoulders like a cloak. His dirty, dun-colored clothing looked to have been worn day and night for God only knew how long. Still months in the wilderness, with the heathen tribes.

"Reverend?" Faith looked at him, her blue eyes sparkling, the sunlight through the windowpanes shining in her hair. "Would you lead us in a blessing?"

"I certainly shall. Let us close our eyes and bow our heads. And let me get what I need, it will just take a moment."

Lark heard the reverend open his haversack. Getting his Bible, she thought. Had he seen a sinner coming?

She heard a click, opened her eyes and lifted her head, and she saw Reverend Burton pull the trigger of the flintlock pistol he was aiming at her father's skull.

Sparks flew, white smoke burst forth, and with a crack! that rattled the panes in the sun-splashed window a small black hole opened in Peter Lindsay's forehead, almost directly between his eyes as he too looked up in response, perhaps, to some internal warning of disaster that was far more urgent than waiting for a minister's blessing.

Lark heard herself scream; but it was not so much a scream as it was a bleat.

Her father went over backwards in the chair, slinging dark matter from the back of his head onto the pinewood wall. A hand reached up, the fingers clawing.

Reverend Burton laid the smoking pistol down upon the table, and picked up the horn-handled knife.

He rose to his feet, his chair falling over behind him with a crash. He grasped the nape of Aaron's neck, as the boy looked up at him with a mixture of shock and wonder. Aaron's mouth was open and his eyes were already dull and unfocused, like the eyes of a small creature that knows the predator is upon it. Reverend Burton drove the blade down into the hollow of the boy's throat until the handle could drive no deeper. Then he let the handle go, and Aaron slithered off the chair like a boneless, gurgling thing.

The reverend's gaze moved across the table. The hard, frozen-water eyes fixed upon Faith Lindsay, who made a noise as if she'd been struck in the stomach. Her own eyes were red-rimmed and dark-hollowed. She had aged twenty years in a matter of seconds. She tried to stand up, collided with the table and knocked over her son's jar of marbles, which rolled crazily among the platters, cups and bowls. Then her legs collapsed like those of a broken doll, she staggered back against the wall and slid down making a beaten whimpering noise.

"Momma!" Robin cried out. Her face had gone pasty-white. She also tried to stand, and so was on her feet when Reverend Burton's hand took hold of her head.

Whether he was trying to break the child's neck with the severe movement that followed, or whether he was just aiming her where he wanted her to fall, Lark did not know. Lark's head was throbbing with a terrible inner pressure; her eyes felt about to burst from her skull. The room, the air, the world had turned a blurred and misty crimson. She made a guttural hitching noise-nuhnuh nuh, it sounded-and watched, paralyzed with fear, as Reverend Burton flung Robin against the hearth, followed her, and picked up an iron frying pan from one of the fireplace trivets.

Robin was up on her knees, sobbing quietly, when he hit her on the head. Her sobbing ceased as she fell, her chin striking the floor. Her hair was in her face. Miraculously, she began to sit up again. The reverend stared at her with true amazement, his brows slightly lifted and his teeth parted, as if witnessing a resurrection. He hit her again with the pan, the sound like the strange commingling of a low-throated church bell and a clay pitcher breaking in two. She fell forward into the fireplace, her face disappearing into the white ashes. Then Reverend Burton let the frying
pan drop, and in her state of near-madness, her mind slipping back and forth between horrors, Lark saw hot embers touch fire to her little sister's hair and crisp the locks to powder and smoke.

There was a silence. Which went on, hideously, until the breath rushed again into Faith Lindsay's lungs and she began to scream, her mouth wide open. The tears that shot from her eyes were ruddy with the blood of ruptured tissues.

Reverend Burton stood looking at the dead girl. He pulled in a long draught of air and shook his head back and forth, as if to clear his own mind and vision. Or perhaps, Lark thought, he had sprained his neck killing her sister. She tried to speak, to shout or scream or curse, but found her voice had left her and all that emerged was a hoarse rattling of enraged air.

"Hush," he said to Faith. And louder, when she did not: "Hush!"

When she still did not or could not—Reverend Burton returned to the table, took up a handful of cornbread and pressed it into her mouth until she gagged and choked. Her bright blue eyes, wide to the point of explosion, stared at him without blinking as her chest slowly rose and fell.

"There. Better," he said. His head swiveled. His gaze found Lark, whose voice was reborn in a shuddering moan. With both hands she gripped hold of the chair beside her, as if its oak legs made up the walls of a mighty fortress.

He rubbed his forehead with the heel of his right hand. "Don't think ill of me," he said, and then he went to Aaron's body and, pressing down with a boot against the chest, pulled the knife out. He wiped it on one of the good napkins. Then he righted his chair, sat down at his place at the head of the table, sliced himself a piece of ham, spooned out a baked apple and a helping of beans, and began to eat.

Faith was silent, still staring but now simply at the far wall. Lark still gripped hold of the chair, her knuckles white. She did not move; she was thinking, crazily, that if she didn't move he wouldn't see her, and soon he would forget that she was even there.

He chewed down the ham and licked his fingers. "Have you ever been irritated by a fly?" he asked, as he carved the baked apple. His voice made Lark jump; she thought she had spoiled her invisibility, and she thought she was stupid and weak and she couldn't help but begin to cry, though silently. "One of those big green flies, that buzz around and around your head until you can't stand for it to live another minute. Another second," he amended, between bites. "So you think, I am going to kill this fly. Yes, I am. And if it doesn't go easily, I shall pull off its wings before I crush it, because I don't like to be flouted. Then you watch the fly, and it may be slow or fast or very fast indeed, but soon you make out its pattern. Everything alive has a pattern. You see its pattern, you think one step—" he emphasized his point by rapping his spoon against the table. "A dead fly. Not so different with people."

He reached for the cornbread, paused to take note of Lark's crying, and then continued his solitary feast. "I hate flies. They'll be in here in a while. Nothing you can do to keep them out."

"You're not " Lark didn't know if she'd meant to speak, but there it was. Still, the words were sluggish, and her throat strangled. "You're not you're not "

"Not really a reverend, no," he admitted, with a small shrug. "But if I'd come to your door and said, Good morning, I'm a killer, where would it have gotten me?"

"You didn't have " Could she ever make a whole sentence again? Something in her mind was screaming, but she could barely whisper. "You didn't have to do that."

"I wanted to. Lark. That's a pretty name. There used to be a nest of larks in a tree outside my house, when I was a boy."

"Did you did you kill them?"

"Absolutely not. They woke me up in the mornings, so I could get to work."
And now came the question that she had to ask, but that she dreaded. "Are you going to kill us now?"

He finished the apple before he spoke again. "Lark, let me tell you about power. Most men will say that power is the ability to do as you please. But I say power is the ability to do as you please, and no one is able to stop you. Oh!"

He watched as Faith threw up her breakfast and in so doing blew the cornbread out of her mouth. "I think she's coming around."

Faith was trying to stand. Her face was pallid and somehow misshapen, her mouth twisted to one side and her eyes sunken inward as if a pair of vicious thumbs had forced them back into the skull. The tracks of tears glistened on her cheeks. Her mouth moved, but she made no sound.

Then Lark thought her mother's tortured eyes must have seen the bodies again, and the whole event must have whirled once more through her mind like the gunsmoke that still roiled at the ceiling. Faith slid back to the floor and began to cry like a broken-hearted child.

The Not-Reverend continued to eat. He cut another piece of ham and whittled it down between his teeth.

"We didn't we didn't do " Lark feared she too was going to vomit, for the smell of blood and burnt hair had touched her nostrils. "We didn't do anything to you."

"And that matters exactly how?" he asked, with a spoonful of beans at his mouth. When no reply was made, he ate them and dug in for another bite.

Lark wiped her eyes. She was trembling, the tears still running down her face. She was afraid to try to stand up, for she was sure that would bring him upon her with either the knife or some other implement. She listened to her mother crying, and thought that something in the sound reminded her of how Robin had wept when the spotted puppy-Dottie, they'd named it-had died of worms last summer.

Lark felt her lips curl. She felt the rage seize her heart and embolden her soul, and even though she knew that what she was about to say would mean her death she spoke it anyway: "God will fix you."

He finished the piece of ham he was working on, took a last drink of the cider, and then he put his elbows on the table and laced his murderous hands together. "Really? Well, I'd like to see that. I want you to listen. Listen beyond your mother's crying. What do you hear? Listen now, listen very carefully. Go on what do you hear?"

Lark didn't answer.

"Nothing but my voice," he said. "No one but me." He lifted his arms toward the smoky ceiling. "Where is the bolt of lightning? Where is the angel with the flaming sword? Bring them on, I'm waiting." He paused a moment, smiling thinly, and then he lowered his arms. "No, Lark. It won't be today." He regarded the nails of his right hand and with them scratched his chin. "You'll stand up now, and take off your clothes."

Lark didn't move. Deep inside her head, the words repeated over and over again.

He picked up the knife. It reflected a streak of light across his face and across the walls. "Let me ask you this, then: which ear could your mother do without?" When no sound came from between the girl's tightly-compressed lips, he continued, "Actually, she could do without either one. All you need is a hole. But fingers now that's another kettle of cod."

He waited. She waited also, her face downcast.

"I'll demonstrate," he said, and with the knife gripped in his hand he stood up.

Lark said, "Wait. Please." But she knew he would not wait; no man who had just slaughtered three people was going to wait, and so she got unsteadily to her feet and when she began to remove her clothing she tried to find a place in her mind to hide. A small place, just enough to squeeze into.

"Show me where you sleep." He was standing right beside her, the knife glinting. One ragged fingernail played
across her freckled shoulders, down her throat and between her breasts.

In the room she had shared with her sister, Lark stared at the ceiling as the man moved atop her. He made no noise, and did not try to kiss her. Everything about him-his hands, his flesh, that part of him battering itself within her-was rough. The knife was on a round table beside her bed. She knew that if she reached for it he would kill her, and perhaps he was so adept at murder that if she even thought about reaching for it he would kill her, so she stayed in that safe place in her mind, that far and distant place, which was a memory of her mother holding her hand and by candlelight reciting the nightly ritual before going to bed.

*Do you believe in God?*

Yes, Momma.

*Do you believe that we need fear no darkness, for He lights our way?*

Yes, Momma.

*Do you believe in the promise of Heaven?*

Yes, Momma.

*So do I. Now go to sleep.*

The man was still. He had finished in silence, with a hard deep thrust that had almost conquered her refusal to break before the pain. The tears had coursed over her cheeks and she had bitten her lower lip, but she had not sung for him.

"Momma?"

It was the voice of a child. But not Robin's voice.

The man's hand went to the knife. He slid off her. Lark lifted her head, the muscles taut in her neck, and looked at her mother standing in the doorway.

Faith was holding both hands to her private area, her face half-masked by shadow and the other half sweat-shiny. "Momma?" she said in the childlike, horrifying voice. "I have to water the daisies."

It was what Robin always said. And what Lark knew her mother had said to Grand Ma Ma when she was a little girl.

"Hurry, Momma," the child in the doorway pleaded.

Lark heard the man begin to laugh. It was the slow sound of a hammer nailing a coffin shut, or the hollow cough of a puppy choking on worms. She almost turned upon him and struck at him then. Almost. But she let the rage go, and instead decided she would try to keep herself and her mother alive as long as she could.

"Never seen that before," said the man. "By all means, get her to a chamberpot."

Faith allowed herself to be guided. To be directed and squatted and wiped. Lark realized that her mother's dull blue, sunken eyes no longer saw anything but what she wished to see, and if those were scenes from nearly thirty years ago on an English farm, then so be it. Faith gave no reaction to the man's presence, not even after Lark had put on her clothes again and the man instructed Lark to heat a pot of water and fetch a pair of scissors because he wished to shave. Not even, when the man had drawn the last stroke of his razor and the devil's beard was gone, he put on a pair of her father's stockings, a pair of his brown breeches, a gray shirt and a beige coat with patched elbows. When the boots came off the corpse and went onto the man's feet, Faith asked Lark if they were going to town today to see someone named Mrs. Jane Penny.

"You remember, Momma!" Faith said, as she walked across the kitchen avoiding the blood and the bodies like a
child making her way through a blighted garden. "About the lace!"

The man had his tricorn hat on and his haversack with the pistol in it around his shoulder. He waved away the flies, which had arrived as he'd predicted. "We're going to the barn, and you are going to help me harness the team."

The afternoon sun was bright and warm, the air cool. There were only threads of clouds in the sky. In the barn, as Lark got the harness down from its hooks beside the wagon, Faith sat on the ground outside and played with some sticks. The man brought one of the horses from its stall and was getting the harness on when Faith said excitedly, "Momma! Somebody's coming!"

Instantly the man said, "Bring her in. Quickly."

"Mother!" Lark said, but the woman just stared blankly at her. "Faith," she corrected, her mouth tasting of ashes. "Come in here! Hurry!" Her mother, an obedient child, got up and entered the barn.

The man rushed to a knothole facing the road and peered out; within seconds he turned to his haversack and took from it a spyglass, which he opened to its fullest extent and put to the knothole. Lark reasoned that the approaching visitor was still distant. There followed a silence, as Faith stood beside Lark, grasped her hand and kicked idly at the straw.

The man grunted. "I am impressed," he said. "Found himself an Indian guide, as well." He lowered the spyglass, closed it and returned it to the haversack. He stood rubbing his bare chin, his cold eyes moving back and forth between the woman, the girl and the wagon. Then he walked to an axe leaning against the wall, and when he picked it up Lark caught her breath.

He chopped out two of the spokes from one of the wagon's wheels. Then, with quick and powerful blows, he began to destroy the wheel, until the wood splintered and broke and the wagon sagged. He threw the axe aside, reached again into the haversack and brought out two items that he offered to Lark.

"Here," he said. "Go on, take them!" There was impatience in his voice. Lark accepted the gold coins, and once they were in her hand they were visible to Faith, who made a cooing noise and wanted to hold them.

"The young man's name is Matthew Corbett," said the man, and Lark noted that small beads of sweat had bloomed on his clean upper lip. "I want you to give those to him. Tell him we're square, as far as I'm concerned. Tell him to go home." He strode to the rear of the barn, where he kicked enough boards loose to crouch down and get through into the orchard beyond. "But tell him," he said when his way of escape had been made, "that if he wishes to find death, I will be glad to give that to him, also." He took his tricorn in his hand and knelt down.

"You aren't going to kill us?" Lark asked, as her mother rolled the gold coins between her palms.

The man paused. He gave her a slight smile that contained in equal measures both disdain and mockery, but not a whisker's weight of pity.

"Dear Lark," he said, "I have already killed you."

And with that, the man pushed his shoulders through, and was gone.
PART FOUR: Rattlesnake Country

Twenty-One

After Lark had told her story, Matthew walked for the second time into the blood-stained kitchen, not to further test his stomach but to reaffirm that this hideous, unbelievable sight was inconvertibly true.

The scene of carnage had not changed. He put his hand to his mouth once again, but it was only a reflex action; he had not yet lost his breakfast of cattail roots nor the midday meal of dried meat and a handful of berries, which meant that he was either toughening up or that the food was too precious to expel. He thought the latter was more likely, for he never wished to be tough enough to take a sight like this without feeling sick.

He walked around the kitchen, avoiding the blood and in the case of Peter Lindsay, the brains that had been blown out the back of the head. He was looking for details, as the sunlight through the window shimmered in the gore and the flies buzzed back and forth on their industrious journeys.

No boots on the man's corpse. Slaughter's old boots, taken of course from Reverend Burton, were lying on the floor. Couldn't Slaughter just ask for a damned pair of boots? Matthew wondered. Or at the very least take them without stealing someone's life? God damn the man! Steady, steady, he told himself. There was no use in losing control. He was shaking a little bit, and he had to get a grip. Slaughter would not be Slaughter, if he asked for things he desired. No, Slaughter's way was to take, and to kill, and however senseless it seemed to Matthew it must make some kind of sense to the killer. Or not. Matthew thought that Slaughter was a breed apart; a human being who detested the very air that other humans breathed, who hated people right down to their shadows. But to kill children...

Matthew picked up a green marble from the table. No, it was not altogether green. It had within it a swirl of blue. It was a beautiful thing, polished and smooth. He had it in mind that he should put two or three of these marbles in his pocket, to rub between his fingers, to remind himself that beyond the ugliness and evil of what had happened here there still remained beauty in the world. But he had no wish to rob the dead and, besides, marbles were for boys. He was far from boyhood now. Getting older, he thought, by the minute.

He put the marble back where it was, looked at all the food on the table and knew that Greathouse might be able to cast the corpses out of his mind and feast on the leftovers, but Matthew would rather have eaten cattail roots and dried meat for a week rather than touch any of this tainted groaning board. Or perhaps, he suspected, he wasn't hungry enough.

The pot of soapy water on the table drew his attention. In it he saw floating hair of many colors. Slaughter had gotten his shave; one more step toward his presentation as an earl, a duke, or a marquis, the better to cut the throat of some wealthy widow and throw her in a pauper's grave.

God damn the man.

Walker In Two Worlds came into the room. This was also his second visit here; his face was impassive, his eyes fixed only on Matthew. But he looked tired and drawn, and even his feathers seemed to have wilted like the petals of a dying flower.

"Slaughter went up the hillside," he reported. "I caught sight of him, moving among some boulders. He got into the woods before I could draw my bow."

Matthew nodded, knowing Walker had chosen the better part of valor-and shown good sense-not to continue the pursuit without having the little bullpup pistol covering his back.

"It's very thick up in there," Walker said. "Many places to set a trap."

"He'll keep going." Matthew opened his left hand and looked at the two gold coins Lark had given him. They were both five-guinea pieces, the same type as he'd taken from the lockbox in Chapel's house. Some well-to-do traveler or merchant had come to grief on the Philadelphia Pike, and coughed these up for Slaughter and Rattison. "I wonder if he really thinks I'll give up."
Now Walker did turn his gaze away from Matthew and with hooded eyes regarded the dead man and the two children. "Will you?"

Matthew saw a small blood-splattered pillow on the floor, next to one of the chairs. It displayed an embroidered picture of a robin sitting on a tree branch.

"I don't understand your god," said Walker, in a toneless voice. "Our spirits created the world and the heavens and all that we are, but they never promised to keep their eye upon every little bird. I thought your god showed more" He searched his memory for the word. "Compassion."

Matthew couldn't reply. Rain fell equally on the just and unjust, he thought. The Bible surely contained more verses and lessons about misery and untimely death. But how could God turn a blind eye to something like this? The question begged for an answer. More than that; it screamed for an answer. But there was no answer, and Matthew put the two gold coins into his waistcoat pocket along with the other items of jewelry and got out of the kitchen before his sense of dark despair crushed him to his knees.

Walker followed him. Outside, the girl and her mother sat in the shade of a brilliant yellow elm tree. The girl's back was pressed hard against the trunk, her glazed eyes staring straight ahead, while the mother was chattering with a strange childlike abandon and playing with the hem of her daughter's light blue dress.

Faith looked up at Matthew as he approached. "Are you Mr. Shayne?"

Her voice was high-pitched and childlike. Matthew thought it was nearer to the voice of a girl seven years old. The sound of it was unsettling, coming from the throat of a woman in her early thirties. But Matthew had already seen the emptiness of the woman's eyes, the scorched shock where a mind used to be, and he thought that here was a patient for the doctors in Westerwicke.

"No," Matthew said. Lark had previously given him their names and the names of the dead. The girl had come out of the barn like a sleepwalker, her face devoid of expression but for the tear tracks on her cheeks and the grim set of her mouth, and she'd opened her hand to show him the gold coins.

_He says you're square as far as he's concerned_, she'd said. Her eyes had rolled back into her head, her knees had buckled and Matthew had caught her just before she fell, as the bedraggled woman in the blue apron with yellow trim emerged from the barn crying for her momma.

Matthew had known it was going to be bad, in the house. He had eased Lark to the ground against the tree, and he and Walker had gone inside to find the aftermath of Mister Slaughter's visit. Neither one of them had stayed but a moment, in that sunny kitchen with all the food upon the table. It appeared that only one person had left the table well-fed.

_Gone_, Lark had said when she could speak again. _Not more than ten minutes. Back of the barn._

Walker had told Matthew to stay where he was, that he was not going to do anything stupid but that he was going to find Slaughter's trail across the apple orchard, and he had set off at a cautious trot. Matthew had sat down beside Lark to hear the story when she was able to give it. Several times Faith Lindsay had asked him if he was Mr. Shayne, and once had inquired when Ruth could come to play.

Matthew had returned to the house when, after Lark had finished her tale, the girl had begun crying with her hands to her face. Just a little at first, as if she feared releasing what she was holding back within; but then, suddenly and terribly, she had broken. It had begun as a wail that Slaughter must have heard as he climbed the hillside toward the deeper woods. And as Lark had sobbed and trembled her mother had rubbed her shoulder and whispered in the little-girl voice, "Don't cry, Momma, don't cry. We'll get the lace tomorrow."

Lark had lifted her agonized face and stared at her mother, who said brightly, "For the dolls, Momma. You know. To make their dresses." Which was when Matthew had gone into the house for the second time, preferring for the moment the silent company of the dead to the tortures of the living.

"Why are you wearing that?" Faith asked of the Indian, as Walker came up beside Matthew and Lark blinked,
looking around herself as if trying to determine who was speaking.

"I am a Seneca," Walker replied. The woman was obviously puzzled, for she frowned and shook her head. She returned to her task of smoothing and smoothing and smoothing the hem of Lark's dress.

Matthew knelt down beside Lark. "The man's name is Tyranthus Slaughter. He's a " She already knew that part about him being a killer, so it was not necessary. "Escaped prisoner," he said. "Walker In Two Worlds is helping me track him. I'm going to take him to the gaol in New York."

The girl's mouth gave a bitter twist. "You are? How?"

"I have a pistol in my bag. Walker has his arrows. We'll run him to ground, eventually."

"Eventually," she repeated. "How long is that?"

"As long as it takes."

"He said he's going to Philadelphia. We told him about Caulder's Crossing, that it was just a few miles from the Pike." She caught her breath, as if she'd suddenly been struck. Her eyes again filled with tears. "Why did he have to kill them? Why did he have to kill them?"

"Shh, Momma, don't cry," Faith fretted.

"Matthew." Walker stood over him. "We shouldn't waste time or daylight. We can catch him before dark, if we start now."

"Start now?" Lark's bloodshot eyes widened. "You can't leave us here! Not with in there."

"There's no time to bury them." It was a statement of fact, and spoken with the hard truth of the Indian.

"Caulder's Crossing is eight miles. I can't walk with my mother, like she is. Not alone. And what if he comes out of the woods while we're on the road? If he caught us out there " She left the rest of it unspoken.

That was why Slaughter had destroyed the wagon's wheel, Matthew thought. He'd seen it in the barn. Lark and her mother could have taken the wagon to town, but Slaughter had wanted to slow his pursuers down in case the bribe didn't work. Thus Matthew and Walker were now encumbered by a desperate sixteen-year-old girl and a woman with the mind of a seven-year-old.

"You look funny," said Faith to the Indian.

He ignored the comment. "You'll have to either stay here or walk the road. We don't have time to throw away."

"Spoken," Matthew said quietly, "like Mr. Oxley."

Walker turned upon him with something like cold fury on his face, though it would have been barely perceptible to anyone but Matthew. "Did you see what I saw in that kitchen? The hand of a monster? If you want him to escape, just keep standing here enjoying the shade. Do we go, or not?" Exasperated when Matthew didn't immediately respond, Walker asked Lark, "Are there saddles for the horses?"

"No. They either pull the plow or the wagon."

Walker spoke in his own language, and from the sound of it even an Englishman couldn't have expressed a more vehement oath.

Matthew had decided. "There's a third choice. They come with us."

"You are mad," Walker shot back, in his own calm but devastating fashion. "Those woods at the top of the hill are thicker than what we went through this morning. We'd be slowed to a crawl."
"At least we'd be moving."

"Yes, at the pace of a girl and a girl," he said. "Matthew, we can't take them up in there! One broken ankle, and we're done."

"Slaughter won't have an easy time of it, either. He'll be moving faster than us, yes, but he's still leaving a trail, isn't he?" Matthew held up his leather-wrapped hand when Walker started to protest again. "If he's not heading for Caulder's Crossing, he's heading for the Pike. Maybe he hopes he can get a ride from there. But if his trail leads to the Crossing, that's where we can leave them." He motioned toward Lark and her mother, the former paying close attention and the latter totally oblivious.

Walker stared at the ground. After a moment he said tersely, "They'll need food. A piece of the ham and some cornbread should do. Something to carry it in. And cloaks or a blanket. Warm, but light. A flask for water. The sturdiest shoes they have, too."

Lark got up and, with a quick glance and a nod of thanks at Matthew, set her jaw and started into the house. At once Faith was after her. "Momma! Momma! Where're you going?"

"I'm going inside," Lark answered, pausing at the door.

"Inside," the woman said.

"Inside our house. I have to get us some things before we go. Do you understand that, Mother?"

"Our house?" There was something ominous in the reply. She kept her gaze fixed on her daughter's face, and Matthew saw the woman's lips try to make words. Nothing came out at first. Then she said, in a dazed voice that was midway between a woman's and a child's, "I'm not I'm not your mother."

"Yes, you are. I'm Lark. Don't you know me?"

"Lark," she repeated, as if she'd never heard it before.

"Mother, we have to leave here. I'm going inside now. I want you to stay-"

"I don't want you to go inside, Momma," said the little girl, clutching at Lark's hand. It must have been a painful grip, for Matthew saw Lark flinch. "Please." She leaned her head forward, her eyes wide, and whispered, "I'm afraid of that place."

"I'm afraid of it, too. But I have to go." Lark slowly eased her hand free. "Faith," she said, "I want you to stay out here, with them."

"Mr. Shayne and the funny man."

"That's right. Will you do that for me?" Something dark, like the shadow of a passing cloud, moved across her face. "Will you do that for your momma?"

"Yes'm," came the reply. All seemed to be well again, in the land of faraway and long ago. But not entirely well; again she leaned forward, and this time whispered, "The funny man doesn't have on enough clothes."

Lark went into the house. Faith came over toward Matthew and Walker—but not too close—and sat down once more on the ground.

When Matthew looked into Walker's face, he saw the Indian's eyes burning holes through him. Walker abruptly turned away, and strode in the direction of the orchard.

In less than three minutes Lark re-emerged, ashen-faced and silent, with a dark brown cloak, a second cloak the gray of morning mist, and around her shoulder a canvas bag stitched with red and yellow flowers. She had not changed her shoes, as they appeared sturdy enough, but she'd brought for her mother a leather pair to trade for the
fabric slippers Faith wore. As Lark put the shoes on her mother's feet, Faith did not seem to note all the blood on the slippers that were removed. Then Lark put the dark brown cloak around Faith's shoulders, fastened it at the throat, and they stood up.

"Where are we going?" Faith asked, as Lark took her hand.

"To Mrs. Janepenny's house," was the response. "I think I'd like to get that lace."

"Isn't Daddy coming?"

"No. We'll meet Daddy later on."

The answer seemed to make Faith happy. But as Matthew, Lark and Faith met Walker behind the house and began to make their way through the orchard toward the rocky hillside ahead, the woman abruptly stopped and looked back, and Matthew stopped also. Lark pulled at her mother's hand and said firmly, "Come on, we have to keep going."

"This isn't the way. To Mrs. Janepenny's. I don't know where. Again, the voice was wavering between age and youth, anguish and innocence. "I don't know where I am," she said, and Matthew saw the bright tears begin to roll down her cheeks.

"You're with me, dear," Lark answered. Matthew thought it took a brave soul to keep a steady voice, to betray not a quaver nor a tremble, for surely she knew that this was not the worst part; surely she knew that the worst would come when-if-her mother's mind fully awakened from this protective dream. "You're with me. That's all that matters."

"I am I am Faith Burgess," the woman said, as if speaking to the house. "Faith Burgess," she repeated, and now lifted her chin as any child might, in defiance of some imagined horror that might lie beyond the walls.

"We're going to Mrs. Janepenny's by a different way," Lark told her. "Look at me." The woman tore her gaze away from the house, the cords standing up in her neck, and obeyed. "We're going up the hill and through the woods. I want you to be careful where you step. If you need help, ask me. But try to keep up, because we're in well, Mr. Shayne and his friend are in a hurry, and they've offered to take us with them. All right?"

"The hill?" Faith's manner of speech had fully become the child's again. "What hill, Momma?"

"The one I'm going to help you climb," said Lark.

Faith nodded, but her eyes were blank. "Yes'm."

Matthew saw that Walker had gone ahead. He was waiting on one knee at the base of the hill about forty yards away. The hill was stubbled with large boulders and spindly pines, and at the top the woods boiled up in a thick chaos of green, yellow, purple and red. As Walker had said, many places to set a trap.

Faith turned her back to the house. She began walking, her hand held firm in Lark's, and together they left the dead behind.
Twenty-Two

Something of formidable size crashed away through the thicket as the travelers came upon a swiftly-moving stream. Whatever it had been, Walker gave only an incurious glance in its direction, and Matthew knew it had not been Slaughter taking to his heels.

"Drink," said Walker, as if they needed encouragement. The last two miles had been a rugged, hard go, through tangles of brush, hanging vines, and thorns; but Matthew was pleased to note, as Walker indicated all the broken vegetation and the bootmarks in the dirt and fallen leaves, that Slaughter had already blazed this trail.

Walker knelt down, cupped his hands for a drink, and left them to their own devices. Matthew stretched out, put his face in the cold water and drank directly from it; Lark took the waterflask from her bag, filled it, and let Faith ease her thirst before she drank. Matthew sat up, rubbed his mouth with his buckskin sleeve and watched as the Indian set foot in the stream, which was about a foot deep, and waded to the other side. The current swirled around Walker's legs. He examined the bank, bent down for a closer look, and then regarded the foliage ahead.

"Interesting," Walker said. He stood up. "It seems Slaughter doesn't trust you, Matthew. He didn't think you'd go home, after all."

"What do you mean?"

"He didn't come out here. He followed the stream for a distance. That means he suspects you wouldn't give up gold coins or not-and he's making an effort to elude us."

"Momma," Faith said quietly. "My feet hurt."

"Mine too," Lark answered, and patted her mother's shoulder. "We'll just have to bear it."

Matthew got to his own feet, which were certainly no strangers to pain. "You're not saying he's gotten away, have you?" he asked urgently.

"I'm saying he's making an effort. We'll have to follow him. In the water."

"But which way?"

Walker pointed to the left, upstream. "Humans and animals alike usually have a desire to reach higher ground. Unless Slaughter knows I'd think that, in which case " He shrugged. "I say we go upstream first. If I can't find where he came out-and it won't be beyond a hundred yards, most likely-we'll go downstream. Everyone ready?" He waited for Lark to nod assent, and then he turned and began wading against the current.

Lark and Faith followed, with Matthew at the rear. That had been the order of progression since they'd started off, nearly three hours ago. Matthew was in fact situated there by Walker's command, to make sure the girl and her mother did not falter and to lend a hand if one of them fell. So far, they were both doing an admirable job of coping with this torturous course, though Walker had been right about their being slowed to a crawl. But if the Indian was frustrated about their lack of speed, he didn't show it; he simply plodded on ahead, waited for them to catch up, and did the same over and over again.

They weren't in the stream a matter of minutes before Faith slipped. She went down on her knees, crying out with pain, and at once Matthew was at her side helping Lark stand her up. Walker stopped a distance ahead to mark their struggle, for the current was indeed strong, and then he continued forward, his eyes searching the right bank.

"I hurt my knee," Faith said. "Momma, I hurt my knee." Her lower lip quivered, but she was a big girl and did not weep.

"You'll be all right. Can you lean on me?"

"Yes'm, thank you."
Matthew saw Lark lower her head and quickly squeeze her eyes shut. He said, "Faith, let me help you," and took her weight against his shoulder so Lark could keep her own balance.

"Thank you, sir," said the child, whose parents should be ever so proud of her manners. "It just hurts a little bit now." She gave him a sideways glance. "Water's cold."

"Yes, it is."

"Mr. Shayne?"

Matthew replied, "Yes?"

"How come you to visit us today? I thought you went to London."

"Well, you thought correctly. But I'm here now."

"Did you like London?"

"It's a very large city," Matthew said.

"I'd like to go someday. Momma and Daddy say we will. Just yesterday. We were sitting at the table and-"

Matthew felt the shock go through her. Felt her seize up and tremble, as if her heart was about to burst. She stopped moving and stood very still, while the current pulled at her dress and decorated it with dead leaves. Matthew did not wish to look at her face; he was tensed and ready for the scream.

"Faith?" Lark's voice was miraculously steady and as calm as the underwater stones. "Dear?" She put her arm around the woman. "We have to keep going. Come on." She glanced at Matthew, because still Faith would not be moved. "Tell her we have to keep going, Mr. Shayne."

Matthew said, in as gentle a voice as he could manage, "Mind your mother, now. Like a good girl."

And Faith Burgess, if anything, was a good girl. In another few seconds she came back to them, and she breathed deeply of the crisp air and rubbed the back of her neck and picked up the hem of her dress to view her scraped right knee. She did not speak, for perhaps somewhere in her mind the shadow of Faith Lindsay knew that things were best left unsaid, untouched and unremembered. She went on, silently, between Lark and Matthew.

Matthew saw that Walker had drawn his bow and nocked an arrow, and was aiming it into the woods as he waded forward. The Indian had obviously seen something he didn't like, or else he expected that Slaughter might choose this place as a shooting gallery. *I do know pistols, sir, as well as I know razors,* Slaughter had said to Greathouse. And another statement Matthew recalled Slaughter making: *I know the look of captains, because I myself have been a soldier.*

Which meant Slaughter must have had experience quick-loading pistols. Matthew had heard from Greathouse, during his own firearms training, that a real expert could eye-measure the powder, pour it down, ram the ball and cloth patch, prime the pan and fire a shot within fifteen seconds. Of course the faster the process was done, the more chance there was for a mistake, which meant a misfire or even an explosion, rendering both the pistol and the hand useless pieces of junk.

Walker continued along the stream, moving the arrow's point to follow his line of sight. But in another moment he lowered the bow, climbed up upon the right bank, and motioned for the others to come ahead.

"He came out here. The mark is very fresh, maybe an hour old." Walker showed Matthew an area of crushed weeds and among them the impression of a bootheel. When he located two more, he said, "Going this way," and pointed to the southeast. "Moving slowly. His legs are tired and he ate too much." He stood up and returned the arrow to its quiver and the bow to its sheath. "Is the woman all right?"

Faith didn't speak, though her mouth was moving as if reciting a childhood conversation. Her eyes were glazed.
over, her face slack. Though her body was here, her mind was far distant.

Lark said, "She can keep going."

Walker looked up through the trees toward the sun. "About two hours of light left. Can we pick up our pace?" He had directed this question to Matthew.

"I don't think so."

"All right, then." There was no reason for argument; things were as they were. "If possible, we should be silent from here on. We don't want him to hear us as we get closer. I'm going to go ahead a distance, but not so far that I can't see you. If you're getting too much off the track, I'll correct you." With that pronouncement, Walker trotted quietly away into the woods, nimbly leaping gnarled roots and ducking under low-hanging branches.

Matthew had never bargained to be a pioneer, but he'd learned that many things in this life were thrust upon you whether you wanted them or not. He had not a clue about how to follow Walker's trail. A disturbance of leaves and a crushed weed spoke volumes to the Indian, but withheld from him even a short story. Walker was out of sight now, and the forest seemed vast and darker. Still, Matthew could only do as he was instructed; he started off in what he hoped was Walker's path, and behind him followed his army of two.

"Careful here," Matthew said, as softly as was practical, to warn them of a place where the ground abruptly sloped into a hollow full of tangled vines and roots before it rose up again. Lark nodded; Faith was still absent, but she clung to Lark's hand and let herself be guided.

"Who are you?" Lark asked, coming up beside him. "A constable?"

"In a way. I'm a problem-solver. In New York."

"What kind of problems?"

"This kind," he replied. He motioned toward a patch of thorns that blocked their way, so they had to change course a few degrees. They walked for a while in silence, as Walker had directed, but Matthew found himself compelled to speak again. "I'm sorry," he said.

"You had nothing to do with it." She paused, and Matthew thought she might be able to sense the bitter anger that suddenly seemed to be, like one of Slaughter's claw-nailed hands, closing around his throat. "Did you?"

Matthew didn't reply. But he knew he would have to, eventually; if not here, then somewhere else, for he could not let himself wander a path that had no end.

"I am responsible for his escape," Matthew said.

He felt Lark staring at him. He kept his head down, in pretense of examining the way ahead for pitfalls. Lark said nothing else. Soon he'd either picked up his pace or she had drifted back, he wasn't sure which, but he might as well have been a solitary traveler.

They came out of the forest into a small clearing. Matthew was pleased with his sense of direction, because Walker was kneeling down under a group of oaks at the clearing's edge only a few yards away. Before them rose another hill, easily twice the height of the one they'd climbed when leaving the Lindsay house.

Matthew, Lark and Faith approached the Indian. They were almost beside him when Matthew caught from the corner of his eye a sharp glint of glass or metal catching the sun. He looked up the hillside, toward the top where the trees grew thick.

"He's up there," Walker whispered, motioning them to remain under the trees. "Taking a look around with his spyglass."

Matthew crouched against an oak's trunk and scanned the hilltop. The reflection did not repeat itself. "Do you
"I don't know."

They waited. Slaughter might have moved to a different spot, and be watching them even now, or he might have made a single quick pass across the clearing. In any case, they couldn't stay here forever.

After about three minutes during which both he and Matthew intently watched for any sign of movement and saw none, Walker got to his feet. "I want to get up there as fast as we can. You help the girl. And if you see anything, call out."

"All right."

Walker found the trail that Slaughter had already broken through the underbrush, but it was an arduous climb. At one point Faith nearly collapsed and had to sit down, still without a word, and Lark sat beside her and rubbed her legs until she could stand once more. Walker stayed with them, crouched on the ground and alert for movement, his bow drawn and an arrow ready to fly. Matthew's own legs were killing him; the muscles in his calves felt as if they were about to rip through the skin.

It took more than half-an-hour to reach the top. There was no sign of Slaughter, except for the bootmarks that Walker easily found. It appeared to Walker that Slaughter had clambered up onto the rocks, laid flat and from there aimed the spyglass down.

And not far from where Walker deduced that Slaughter had done so, Matthew's black tricorn lay on a smooth gray boulder amid the pines. Likely left behind, Matthew thought, in Slaughter's haste to put distance between them.

Matthew approached his hat. He reached out to pick it up.

Walker's bow stopped the arm from its intent.


"What're you-"

"Back," Walker repeated, and this time Matthew obeyed.

The Indian stretched his own arm out and used the bow's narrow end to tilt the tricorn up. As Walker lifted it, the snake that was coiled underneath began to give its warning rattle. Fangs struck at the bow. Walker swept the rattler off the boulder onto the ground where it slithered away.

"Bite you," said Faith, in her dazed and dreamlike voice. "Ol' Scratch."

Lark stood beside Matthew, and Matthew suddenly realized she had grasped his hand because his fingers were about to be broken.

"I would say," Walker remarked, "that Slaughter has seen us. Do you agree with that, Matthew?"

"Yes."

"That's probably not a good thing."

"No," Matthew said.

"He's left clear tracks. Still moving slowly. The hill wore him out."

"I think we're all worn out."

Walker nodded. "I think you may be right." He regarded the sun again, which was turning red in a cloudless sky as it dropped toward the west. "We need to make camp before dark. Find someplace as safe as possible."
"Not here!" Lark objected. "Not in rattlesnake country!"

"Miss," said Walker, with weary authority, "it's all rattlesnake country." He looked at Matthew, who had been kneading the blood back into his fingers since Lark had released him. "You can get your hat now."

They went on about two hundred more yards before Walker said the place would do for the night. It was a grassy clearing atop a small hillock, surrounded by huge oaks. They found as much comfort as was possible on the ground. Walker gave Matthew a portion of the dried meat and some for himself. Faith sat staring at nothing when Lark offered her a piece of ham and some cornbread; she reacted by clamping her hand over her mouth when Lark tried to push a bit of the ham between her lips. Then Faith curled herself up into a ball at the base of an oak and refused to respond to Lark's entreaties to eat. His meal done, Walker promptly climbed up into a tree and sat amid the branches while the sun went down, painting the western sky vivid red edged with purple. "No need to waste this." Lark offered Matthew what her mother had rejected. "Do you want it?"

"I'll take the cornbread, thank you." He was delighted to get something that reminded him of happier suppers at home. "You ought to eat the ham yourself."

"I'm not very hungry."

"That may be so, but hungry or not you ought to eat it anyway." He chewed on the cornbread, which was absolutely delicious, and watched as she looked at the ham in her palm as if it had been cut from the haunch of a gigantic rat. Then, overcoming her revulsion for what the last family meal had been, she followed his suggestion, after which she promptly got up, rushed away into the thicket and vomited.

Matthew stood up, retrieved the water flask from her canvas bag and took it to her. She was sitting on her knees, having crawled a distance away from her stomach's refusal. Without looking at him she accepted the flask, uncorked it, took a drink, swished the water around in her mouth and spat it out. She took a longer drink, corked the flask again and handed it back.

"Pardon me," Lark said, pushing the hair out of her eyes.

Matthew said nothing, but sat down a few feet away. He took off his tricorn, which he doubted he would be wearing much anyway, since his scalp prickled underneath it. Lark was a pretty girl, he thought. Very young, and fresh-faced. Or had been. He wished he had seen her yesterday. He wished so many things. But wishing seemed a waste of time, out here. He looked up and saw in the darkening sky the first few stars in the east. He wondered who might be looking at them in New York. Berry? Effrem Owles? Zed? Even Lord Cornbury, on his evening walk?

He wondered if he would ever get back there. He wondered if Greathouse was still alive, and at that point he had to stop wondering for that, too, was folly.

"How are you responsible?" Lark asked.

Matthew knew what she meant. He knew his statement had been working at her, ever since he'd spoken it. "If it weren't for me-my actions-Slaughter would now be in the gaol at New York."

"You let him go?"

"No, not so directly. But I remained silent about something when I should have spoken. I forgot my job, and I in essence betrayed a friend. That silence when you know you should speak up, but you don't that's the killer."

"You're saying you made a mistake?"

A mistake. It sounded so small when she said it. So inconsequential. "I did," he answered. "A mistake that I shall be turning over and over in my head for the rest of my life."

She shifted her position, sitting down and pulling her knees up toward her chin, her hands hooked together. "That could be a very long time."
"I hope," Matthew replied, and found that he could still smile, if only briefly.

Lark was quiet for awhile. A flock of birds flew across Matthew's line of sight, winging home before full darkness fell. "My mother," Lark said. She couldn't continue, and had to wait. "My mother," she tried again, "was a very good woman. A well-educated woman, and very kind, to everyone." She drew in a long breath and slowly, almost painfully, released it. "I don't think she's coming back."

"You don't know that. She may be better in the morning."

"You mean when her head clears? If it clears? I mean, she can never go back to what she used to be. Neither one of us can. Ever. And I guess you can't, either."

"That's right," Matthew said.

"My father always said there were only two directions in life. Up or down. He was always talking about how good the land was, and how good God was to us. He said no matter how hard things got, all you had to do to touch God in this country was to reach up. Just try to meet God as much as you can, I guess is what he meant. Just try. I suppose that's the best anyone can do, is try." Now Lark managed a tight smile, but it quickly slipped away. "I used to sit on his knee and listen to him, and I believed everything he said. Reach up, reach up, he said. Just try, is what he was telling me. And don't give up, because then you never meet God. But I suppose I stopped listening to all that, when I was too old to sit on his knee anymore. I thought it was just something you told a child, when the harvest went bad and the going got rough. But it was for him, and my mother, as much as it was for me. He never quit trying. Neither did she. Trying to reach up."

In the last of the light Matthew saw the glint of her tears, and then how they slowly coursed down her cheeks one after the other. But her face remained tragically serene.

"I'm going to get him," Matthew promised. "Tomorrow."

"How? I've seen what he can do. What he will do. How are you going to get him?"

"One arrow," said Walker In Two Worlds, who was standing only a few feet away; he had come upon them in total silence. "That's all I need to put him down. If I can get close enough, and get a clear shot, it's done."

Matthew said, "I don't want him dead. I want him taken back, to stand trial in England."

"In England?" Walker frowned. "Trial or not, I'd say he's earned the hangman's noose here first. Then they can take him over and hang him again, as they please. But don't worry, I'll be sure to spare him for the rope, if you think he's worth the knot."

Matthew was about to reply that he himself thought Slaughter wasn't worth a cupful of drool, but that higher powers across the ocean wanted him before the docket; he was interrupted in the formation of this reply when there came a shrill cry from Faith Lindsay. At once Lark was up and tearing through the thicket toward her mother, with Walker and Matthew close behind.

Faith was sitting up, clinging to the trunk of the tree beside her; she cried out again, a sound of utter, mindless terror, before Lark could kneel down and comfort her. Matthew turned his back, wishing to give them at least a little privacy, and walked a distance away. Now that the sun was just a purple blush to the west, the air was chill but not uncomfortably cold; the cloaks would do for the mother and daughter. He looked up at a sky filled with stars. On any other night he would have thought this an absolutely beautiful view, and he might have wandered out along the harbor-possibly with Berry at his side, if she'd liked to go-and taken it all in, but tonight the darkness was not his friend.

"You need to sleep." Walker was standing behind him. Matthew immediately heard the edge of tension in the Indian's voice. "While you can."

Matthew gave words to his suspicion:
"Do you think he's coming tonight?"

"If I told you I did, would it help you sleep any better?"

"No."

"The fact is, he's not far away. He knows we'll catch up with him tomorrow. It's likely his spyglass has already shown him that his gift did not make the proper impression. So if I were of a mind to murder someone, I would strike before dawn."

"We'd best both stand guard then."

"You need sleep," Walker repeated. "He's sleeping too, you can count on it. If he's coming, it will be when he's rested and ready. But make sure, before you sleep, that your pistol is loaded, and that it's near at hand."

"All right."

"May I ask you something?" Lark had left her mother, and was approaching. Her question had been directed to Walker. "Can you make us a fire? She's afraid of the dark."

"I'm afraid of the light."

"A small fire," Lark persisted. "Please. It doesn't have to last very long, just so I can get her to sleep."

Walker pondered the request. He looked at the woman sitting against the tree with the dark brown cloak wrapped around her, her eyes swollen and vacant, her mouth slack. He drew his knife from its sheath. "A small fire," he agreed.

Walker was true to his word. With the knife he dug a shallow hole next to Faith, filled it with a fistful of tinder, and struck a spark. A few broken-up sticks were added. The fire that resulted was little more than a warming glow, but it served its purpose. Lark sat beside her mother and smoothed her hair as Faith stared into the flames.

Matthew found his own place to sleep, under the stars. Walker had disappeared; whether into the tree branches again or out into the woods, Matthew didn't know. He prepared his pistol, first by pouring gunpowder down the muzzle. Next he took a lead ball from his shooter's bag, placed it against one of the cloth patches Dovehart had sold him and, using the small ramrod that was actually secured in the pistol just underneath the barrel, rammed the patch and ball home. He returned the ramrod to its place. The final step would be to prime the flashpan, but that would be done in advance of actually using the weapon. He stretched out, hearing his backbone crack, and put the gun at his right side, just under his fingertips.

He heard Lark speaking to her mother.

"Do you believe in God?"

There was only silence.

"Say it for me, Faith. Come on, as we say every night."

The silence stretched. Then, in a hoarse and ragged voice, Faith the little girl asked, "Will we get to Mrs. Janeppenny's tomorrow?"

"We will."

"I don't like this way."

"It's the way we have to go. Now, try to relax. Close your eyes. That's right, very good. We need to speak it, the same here as we do at home. All right? Do you believe in God?"

Only silence. And then, faintly: "Yes, Momma."
"Do you believe that we need fear no darkness, for He lights our way?"

"Yes, Momma."

"Do you believe in the promise of Heaven?"

"Yes, Momma."

"So do I. Now go to sleep."

Matthew was having his own problems. How to bid sleep come on, knowing that when Slaughter crept to their camp it would be with intent to murder, and his victim of choice would be a certain problem-solver from New York who, having escaped one rattler, was the prime target for another. Matthew remembered asking Slaughter at their first meeting why he’d decided to try to kill Mariah at the red barn behind the hospital instead of running for freedom, and Slaughter had answered _I was compelled by my Christian charity to release Mariah from her world of pain, before I fled_. It seemed to Matthew that perhaps the hatred of people and desire for murder in Slaughter even overwhelmed his common sense. Just as some men were willing slaves to any number of vices, against all possible reason, so Slaughter was devoted to the extinction of human life. Or, more likely, he simply saw the opportunity to kill and took it, no matter what. Matthew closed his eyes. And opened them again. He was tired enough, but his nerves were jangling. He put his fingers against the pistol’s handle. Suddenly being a magistrate’s clerk seemed not such a bad occupation. He recalled Nathaniel Powers saying to him, at City Hall in midsummer after the magistrate had released Matthew from his duties in order to enter the employ of the Herrald Agency, _I think your education is just beginning._

God help me survive the next test, Matthew thought.

"Can I sit here with you? Just for a minute?"

He was aware that Lark had joined him. He sat up, glad to have some company. "Yes," he said. "Please do." He reached over to brush some sticks and rocks away from where she was going to sit. "I apologize for the furnishings," he told her, "but at least the place has a nice view."

He doubted if his attempt at humor had made her smile, as he couldn’t see her face in the dark. Behind her, the small fire was dying. Under her cloak, Faith appeared to have at last drifted to sleep, which in itself was a blessed event. Lark sat down and offered him the flask of water. He took it, drank some and returned it.

Neither of them spoke. Overhead the night had revealed an awesome river of stars, and within that gigantic river were swirls of light like celestial currents. Some stars appeared to burn red, or blue. Some seemed to pulse with unknown energy. Far off above the horizon, a spark of fire leapt, gold against black, turned orange and winked out just as suddenly. It was the way of all things, Matthew thought. Beginnings and endings, even for stars.

"Matthew," Lark said. "I wanted to tell you I don’t blame you for anything."

He didn’t respond, but he was listening very carefully.

"You shouldn't blame yourself," she went on, and whether she was looking at him as she spoke or not, he couldn't tell. "You had your own reasons for what you did, and I’m sure you thought they were important. They must have been important. But if you weren't if you weren't a good man, Matthew, you wouldn't be out here right now. You wouldn't care what happened to us. And you wouldn't be trying to make things right."

"I don't think I can ever-"

He stopped speaking, because Lark had placed a finger against his lips.

"You can," she said. "By taking him where he needs to be. By not giving up. Everything that's happened is in the past now. It's done. Do you hear?"

He nodded. Her finger moved away.
"Let yesterday go," Lark said, "so it will not betray tomorrow."

Did he feel something leave him? A heaviness? A sadness that had leached deep? A sense of guilt, like a self-built gallows? He wasn’t sure. If he did, it was not dramatic; it did not have the power and majesty of a river of stars, or a celestial current. But he thought that by the grace of this young girl—older and wiser than her years would suggest—there was the lighting of a small spark of hope within him, there in his darkness, and by it he might find his way home from this wilderness his soul wandered.

"Would you hold me?" she asked, in barely a whisper.

He did. She put her head against his shoulder, and pressing her face in tightly she began to cry with muffled sobs, so her mother—her child—might not hear and awaken. He stroked her hair, and rubbed warmth into her neck, and still she clung to him and wept like any heartbroken girl of sixteen years might, on a night when the stars burned with fierce beauty high above the ugly realm of rattlesnake country.

Matthew didn’t know how long he held her, or how long she cried. Time had indeed stopped for the Englishman. But at last her sobbing quietened, her crying ceased, and she lifted her face from his damp shoulder.

"Thank you," she told him, and she got up and returned to her mother’s side.

Matthew lay back down, the pistol under his fingers. His legs were hurting and his back ached, but for the first time in a long while—maybe since he’d decided to break open the red octopus—his mind knew a calming touch of peace.

His eyes closed.

He slept soundly, and at least for a short while he feared not.
Twenty-Three

When Matthew awakened, it was as any animal of the forest might: instantly alert, his senses questing, and with the memory of what Walker had just quietly spoken to him.

"He's coming."

There was no light but starshine and the poor candle of a quarter-moon. Everything was made up of shades of dark blue deepening to black, and Matthew could just see Walker kneeling at his side.

"One minute," Matthew answered, in an equally quiet, composed voice. He opened his shooter's bag and brought out his powderhorn. In his firearms training, Matthew had been required by Greathouse to several times load a pistol blindfolded. Matthew then thought it had been ridiculous, but now he grasped the wisdom of the exercise. He wished, indeed, that he'd practiced it more, instead of getting out the door and to the coffeehouse as soon as possible. But he would have to do the best he could, and if he made a mistake the gunpowder goblin—he who sometimes flashed bright and hot and sometimes fizzled and sputtered in the hands of greenhorns—would soon correct him most harshly.

He shook powder into the pistol's flashpan, after which he closed the pan's lid and thumbed the striker to half-cock. Now, he thought as he shouldered his shooter's bag and stood up to follow Walker, they were in it for blood.

Walker unsheathed his bow, took an arrow from his quiver and nocked it. "Slowly and silently," he whispered. "Stay on my right side, shoulder-to-shoulder. He's coming in from the left, about sixty yards out."

"How do you know?"

"I got near enough to hear him. And to smell him. Are you ready?"

"Yes." He had told bigger lies, but not many.

They left the sleeping girl and her mother, crossed the clearing and entered the forest on the far side. Matthew strained to see anything, and thought himself lucky not to immediately trip over a root or stumble into a thicket and fall face-first, alerting everything with ears between here and the City of Brotherly Love. But the moccasins helped his feet read the earth and he moved slowly, at Walker's pace. One step, and stop. One step, and stop. His heart was beating hard; in this silence, surely Slaughter could hear the drumming.

When Matthew took a pace forward and dead leaves crackled, the noise seemed as loud as the raucous laughter of ruffians in the Cock'n'tail tavern. Walker stood motionless, and so did Matthew. They stayed that way for what Matthew thought must have been at least a minute. Walker knelt down, making no noise, and leaned his head further toward the ground. Then, at last, he stood up again and eased onward, correcting their course a few more degrees to the left.

Blue upon black and gray upon black were the colors of the night woods. Matthew's eyes were becoming more accustomed to the dark; here the black stripes of tree branches were faintly seen across dark blue underbrush, and there a gray boulder rose up like an island in a sea of ink. The two stalkers, seeking to intercept the third, continued stealthily into the forest. When thorns clutched at Matthew's buckskin jacket and scratched his face, he barely paused in his advance. His eyes sought movement among the massive trunks of trees and among the black patterns of vegetation. He kept the pistol low at his side, his thumb ready to pull the striker to full-cock. Though the air was chill, sweat rose at his temples and dampened his armpits. He was no hero born with iron nerves; every step he took, he thought he might pee in his breeches.

"Crouch down," Walker whispered, close to his ear.

He obeyed. Walker got on his knees, tilted his head and leaned forward, almost placing his ear upon the ground. The Indian stayed in that posture as if frozen, while Matthew scanned back and forth across the dark.

It was very quiet at first. Just a hint of sound, before it became a sound.
Dead leaves being crunched underfoot, almost directly ahead.

The sound ceased, so quickly Matthew wasn't sure he'd heard it or not.

Walker remained still.

The back of Matthew's neck crawled. If that was indeed Slaughter out there, and not just any nocturnal animal, he was moving as cautiously as they were. It called to Matthew's mind the unsettling supposition that Slaughter might have known they would be here, and he was listening for them as well.

The noise did not repeat itself. Walker waited a moment more, and then he silently and smoothly rose to his feet.

He took one step forward and stopped. Then one step, again, and stopped. His head went from side to side, the arrow ready for a target. Matthew eased up next to him, wincing as a small stick broke under his right heel.

Walker once more remained motionless, and Matthew with him. They listened, in the silence.

Matthew could only hear his heartbeat and the roaring of blood in his veins. If any of that got any louder, he would be deafened.

And now ahead again, but nearer was that the noise of a boot scraping across a stone? Or had it been a pistol's striker being drawn to full-cock?

Walker's elbow was planted firmly in the center of Matthew's chest. The message was clear: Wait.

Moving his head in small increments, Matthew looked back and forth across the woods. Nothing moved. Nothing made a sound.

Then, frighteningly and horribly, there came from the direction of camp a woman's cry. It was sharp and sudden, and became the noise of Faith calling for her mother. Matthew realized she had awakened in the dark, with all the terror it unlocked in her fragmented mind. In a few seconds the sound of her voice faded, as Faith had either drifted off again or Lark had been able to comfort her.

Walker's elbow moved from Matthew's chest. Slowly, carefully, Walker took a single step.

Something abruptly burst from the brush beneath the Indian's foot. Matthew, who thought his hair had just turned white, had the sense of a small dark shape scurrying off. Its clatter through the leaves sounded like a herd of deer, though the creature had probably been a rabbit or a woodchuck. Walker stood as solid as a rock, but Matthew was left trembling and instinctively felt at his crotch for any leakage there. Fortunately, he was still wearing dry breeches.

But was there a shape ahead of them, through the slanting blue and black bones of the night, that Matthew saw moving? Just a glimpse, and then gone if it had ever been there?

"Something moved," Matthew whispered, his voice raw. He started to point and thought better of it. "Ahead to the left."

Walker aimed his arrow toward that point, and when the Indian took his next step Matthew felt his guts twinge until it was evident there would be no more bursts from the brush. Matthew stayed alongside him, as they advanced among huge trees. In another moment Matthew was aware of a faint and hazy lumination on all sides: the green glow from dozens of mushrooms on the forest floor, or of fungus attached to rotting wood.

Matthew kept alert for any further movement. Walker stopped again and seemed to be sniffing the air. There was a long pause, during which Matthew thought his teeth might break, he was clenching them so hard. Walker whispered, with a hint of urgency, "He's close." A shape suddenly rose from a crouch through the thicket in front of them, but even as Walker let his arrow fly the shape flattened out once more and merged with the dark. There came the thunk of the arrowhead hitting a tree. Walker reached back, took a second arrow from his quiver and nocked it.
Matthew saw, to the left again, another fleeting motion. Whether it was part of a shoulder, or a back, or a head, he couldn't tell. It was just there one instant and the next not. The bowstring sang and the second arrow sped away. No cry of pain followed. There was only the silence and the stillness. Walker readied a third arrow. The Indian moved forward, the bow drawn and the arrow seeking a target. Matthew lifted his pistol and cocked the striker; it made a jarringly loud **click**. He followed Walker, staying just off his right shoulder.

With two more paces, the world blew up.

Sparks flew from low down on the ground, about ten feet in front of Walker. In the blinding flash of the powder igniting, Matthew saw Walker fire his third arrow into the light, and then the sound of the gunshot cracked his ears. As Walker staggered back, Matthew pulled his pistol's trigger and fired into the billowing smoke, his eyes dazzled by first Slaughter's shot and then his own. Another voluminous gout of smoke whirled up, rank with the potent smell of gunpowder, and he felt Walker collide with his shoulder and nearly knock him sprawling.

Matthew went down on his knees. Walker had fallen to the ground somewhere behind him. And now, as Matthew's head reeled and his eyes seemed to pulse with white-hot cores of flame, he realized he had to get his gun loaded again, for there was no way to know if Slaughter had been hit or not. Over the high-pitched ringing in his ears he heard Lark shouting from the camp: "Matthew! Matthew!"

He got the shooter's bag off his shoulder and shut his eyes, for they were useless. His fingers would have to see for him. They found the powderhorn, a lead ball and a cloth patch.

"Matthew!" Lark screamed.

He poured the powder, pulled the ramrod from its socket and rammed down the patch and ball. Opened the flashpan. Shook powder into the pan. Closed it. What was he forgetting? Something vital. The ramrod. Still in the barrel. If he lost it, the pistol would be reduced to a club. He removed the ramrod from the barrel and-

A shot fired from his right. The ball hissed past his ear. Slaughter might be wounded, but he was still able enough to quick-load a pistol in the dark.

Matthew opened his blind eyes, which saw nothing but flowing curtains of light, and fired at the sound of Slaughter's shot. He heard the ball smack into a treetrunk; he thought, crazily, that Greathouse would have kicked his tail for firing too hastily and too high. Then Matthew's next thought was that even though Slaughter was also shooting blind he had to move, lest Slaughter pinpoint his own position from the sound. Grabbing the shooter's bag and holding the pistol like God's own gift, he got on his belly and crawled to the right over dead leaves, roots and luminous mushrooms.

He got his back against a tree and, eyes closed, started the loading process again. Halfway done, he was shaken by the **crack** of another shot from somewhere in front of him, but where the ball went he didn't know. All he cared was that he wasn't hit. Flashpan primed? Ramrod out? Yes. He aimed into the night, pulled the trigger, and the little bastard bullpup gun failed to fire.

He thumbed the striker back, his hand trembling. Could be any damned thing gone wrong. Flint misaligned. Touch-hole blocked. Maybe not enough powder in the pan. He opened the pan, feeling his way, and shook more powder into it from the horn.

"Matthew! Matthew, answer me!" Lark was pleading, near panic. Beyond her voice, he could hear the sound of Faith wailing like a child about to be whipped.

He opened his eyes. Through the mist and dazzle he saw a shower of red sparks fly up from the underbrush maybe twenty feet away. He heard the report an instant before the ball knocked splinters from the treetrunk a foot above his head; then it was his turn, and when he pulled the trigger this time the Dovehart Special fired into Slaughter's hiding-place with a spectacular display of flaming comets and smoke that might have choked London.

In the aftermath of the shot, Matthew set to work reloading. His industry was sped by sheer terror, for Slaughter's last try had been much too close. Was Slaughter wounded? Dead? There was no telling. He got the pistol ready, cocked the striker, and waited for Slaughter's next move, if the man could move at all.
He heard a crashing through the woods. In what direction, it was hard to tell. The smoke was still thick and his eyesight still feeble. Was Slaughter repositioning himself for another attack? Getting around behind him? He almost called out to the man, but for what purpose? To tell him to give himself up? He thought that Slaughter might be arrow-pierced and pistol-shot, but as long as the monster had breath, teeth and claws he was not going to surrender. He waited, his heart pounding, the gun aimed into the night, and he would not let himself think about what had happened to Walker. "Matthew!" Lark called again, but he was too afraid to answer.

A period of time went by-two minutes? three? during which Matthew thought he might either vomit or pass out. He did neither, but he was hard-pressed to want to move a muscle from where he sat, with the protection of the treetrunk at his back. "Stand up," someone said at last, from the dark. It was Walker's voice, calm and steady. Matthew didn't move; he thought he must have been made delirious by the gunpowder fumes, or his ears weren't quite back to normal. "Up," Walker's voice repeated. "He's gone." Matthew was too dazed to respond to the specter; he could see nothing, though thankfully the bright whorls of gunfire had faded away. A hand grasped his left arm. It was solid enough. "Stand up. He's gone. Toward the camp." The last three words knocked sense into him. He shouldered his shooter's bag and tried to stand, but everything seemed to be gone from the knees down. "I thought you were shot," Matthew said.

"Listen," Walker insisted. "Do you hear the women anymore?"

Matthew did not. This time his effort at getting to his feet was successful. "Lark!" he shouted. There was no answer. Then, again, and louder: "Lark!"

Slaughter, he thought. Slaughter had crept up to them in the dark, while he was sitting against the tree protecting his back, and cut their throats with razor or knife. "Lark!" he cried out, and his voice broke.

"Follow me," said Walker.

Matthew took hold of Walker's cloak and stumbled after him. His nostrils felt nearly singed by the scent of the powder, but he caught another odor drifting in the smoky air. He knew what it was: the coppery smell of blood. "Are you hurt?"

"Yes," Walker said, and now his voice had tightened. "Be silent." But just a distance further on, Walker suddenly stopped. "I'm going to have to rest here."

"Where are you hurt?"

"I've been shot in the left side. I can feel the edge of a broken rib in the hole. Ay-yuh!" It was an Indian's exclamation of disgust.

"Sit down. Can you?"

"I can. But can I get back up again?"

Matthew felt crazed; he feared he was going to crack like an overheated pot, and mad laughter would bubble out. Walker badly injured. Maybe both Lark and her mother lying dead. Was Slaughter waiting for them, hiding among the trees with his pistol? Where was the clearing from here? He thought it was ahead about fifteen yards and maybe another ten or so to the left, but it was through rough thicket.

"I'm going in first," he decided.

"Go slowly. If the women are dead, there's nothing you can do. Take a step then stop and listen. And I mean listen, Matthew. He may be hurt, too. If he is, you might hear him breathing. All right?"

"Yes."

"If you hear see or smell anything that makes the flesh on the back of your neck crawl you crouch down and wait. Until you know what it is. However long that takes."
"Are you trying to teach me how to be an Indian?"

"I'm not a very good teacher. I was impatient tonight. Too much English in me after all." Walker leaned back against a tree, and Matthew saw his shape slide to the ground. "If you live through the next half hour will you come back for me?"

"I will," Matthew said.

"I won't go anywhere, then." He sounded weak and tired, which frightened Matthew almost more than the idea of braving Mister Slaughter's murderous skills again tonight.

But pistol in hand, Matthew turned away from Walker. His mouth set in a grim line, he advanced quietly through the woods, his mind steeled against what he feared to discover.
The sun came up, on a morning clear and cool. Birds sang in the trees. A passing breeze stirred the limbs and brought down a shower of autumn-burnt leaves, and Matthew picked up an arrow and saw on its bloody point a piece of skin matted with hair.

Slaughter at least had been given a new part across his scalp last night. Good, Matthew thought. On his inspection of the scene of battle this morning, he'd found the two other arrows Walker had launched, but only this one showed damage. There was some blood spattered on the leaves, but not enough to indicate that Slaughter had been hit by a lead ball. His legs were still working, that was for certain. Whatever Slaughter was up to by taking Lark and Faith from the camp, he might not be hobbled but he was surely hurting.

Matthew picked up Walker's bow where the Indian had dropped it in the dark after the ball had hit him. He could see where the mushrooms and weeds had been crushed by crawling bodies. And, more interestingly, he could see the edge of a ravine about forty feet away, falling down onto jagged rocks and a small stream; they could have all tumbled into it last night, and their bones lay together moldering into dust. Lying dead next to Tyranthus Slaughter for all eternity was not in Matthew's plans.

He followed the blood trail, as Walker had instructed. They'd known Slaughter was hurt from the blood they'd found in the clearing at first light. Either ball or arrow grazed him, Walker had said. But only a flesh wound.

Matthew saw where Slaughter had torn through the thicket like a mad bull. Drops and splatters of blood on the forest floor led Matthew onward into an area of slender pines. He stopped, looking closely at what appeared to be the bloody impressions of two fingers and the thumb of a left hand against one of the pine trunks. Slaughter had briefly paused here either to get his bearings or make a decision about what he intended to do. Obviously, he'd made a quick decision and carried it out with military efficiency. After all, hadn't he said he'd been a soldier?

But why, Matthew wondered as he'd already wondered several times this morning, hadn't Lark cried out? Or tried to fight him? Well, of course she knew what he was capable of, and what was she going to fight him with? In hindsight, they should have left her the knife, or at least wakened her and told her to take Faith and move out of the clearing, or hidden them somewhere, or

But they'd never expected Slaughter to get past them. To slip into the camp in the dark, and-wounded or not-makew quick work of forcing Lark and her mother into the woods. Going to the southwest, Walker had said after he'd found the trail. Don't need an Indian to follow this one, he'd told Matthew. The stuck pig is still bleeding.

Matthew left the blood-smeared pine and continued walking along the path Slaughter had taken to the clearing. There were some thorns and thicket, but his boots had stomped through them. Matthew imagined what might have happened last night, when Lark had heard someone coming, had called his name-when he'd been too afraid to reply, for fear of Slaughter getting off a shot at the sound of his voice-and been answered by a quiet whisper up close to her ear, and maybe the hot barrel of the pistol up under her throat. Now tell your dear mother we are going to a safe place, or tell her we're going to play hide-a-seek, or any damned fucking thing, but know I will kill her first if you scream. I don't want to hear any noise from either of you. Just take her hand, and walk ahead of me. That way. Go.

Matthew wondered if Slaughter had told Lark that there was no hope for the two women if she resisted, but that he might let them go once they got a distance away. Would Lark have believed that, after what had happened at her house? Or might she have seized upon it, as a way to survive? Maybe she thought she could talk him out of killing them. Maybe perhaps possibly who could know?

I myself have been a soldier, Slaughter had said. It seemed to Matthew that he'd certainly been well-trained in combat, in addition to his natural aptitude for killing. Slaughter elevated murder to the realm of art. He could plan an escape days-weeks?-in advance, plot his moves like a chess master, travel overland like an Indian, confidently stalk the dark like a cat, and shake off the pain of a nasty wound to fix his mind upon his purpose. He was skilled with pistols, knives and razors. He was utterly ruthless and ice-cold, and he possessed, as Walker had said, "a killer's eye in the back of his head".

A soldier? Maybe so. But it sounded more to Matthew as if Slaughter had been trained to be an assassin. For that
job he seemed to be exceptionally capable.

His job? Oh, that: Between jobs, but going back into the business of settling accounts.

What did that mean?

Whatever it was, Matthew knew it wasn't good, and likely meant someone was going to pay with his or her life.

Matthew had his own account to settle. When he emerged from the woods, he saw that Walker was still sitting against a tree on the far side of the clearing, next to the ashes of last night's fire that had soothed Faith to sleep. Matthew felt the same hammerblow to the gut he'd taken at first light, upon seeing the bloody hole in the Indian's side.

Walker's eyes were closed, his face uplifted toward the warmth of the early sun. But even in the short time that Matthew had left him, to visit the battleground and find Walker's bow, the Indian seemed more frail, the facial bones more defined. His flesh was as gray as a gravestone. The bandage that Matthew had made from his cravat—the same cravat that had been utilized for the mercy killing of Tom's dog—was tied around the lower part of Walker's chest. It was dark with blood on the left side.

Walker opened his eyes and watched as Matthew approached. "Do I look that terrible?" he asked, reading Matthew's expression. And he answered his own question: "Death has been called many things, but never handsome."

"I'm going to get you out of here."

Walker smiled thinly. His eyes held the glint of inescapable pain. "No, you are not. If you wish to become an Indian, the first thing you have to do is accept reality."

Matthew could find no reply. He'd already seen, in his inspection of the wound, that the ball had splintered at least one rib and driven deep into the organs. Where it had come to rest in all that carnage could not be determined. It was miraculous, he thought, that Walker was even able to talk, much less move. Walker had taken a handful of moss, pine bark, and broken-up green pine needles and pushed it into the hole, and then he'd said, Bind it up.

"Is there nothing you can do?" Matthew asked.

"No." It was firm and final, spoken without regret: the Indian way. "You'd better eat something, then we'll go."

Matthew ate a piece of the dried meat and drank some water from the flask that Lark had left behind. Everything tasted like the smell of gunsmoke, which permeated his hair, skin and clothes.

"The women are going to slow him down," Walker said as he again lifted his face into the sunlight. "So is his wound. They're leaving a trail any Englishman could follow." He winced, and waited for the pain to pass. "You know why he took them."

Matthew did. "He needed something to trade."

"For you," Walker said.

Matthew agreed: "For me."

"You know him well. I think he must know you well, too." Walker shifted his position a few inches and pressed his hand against the bandage. "He's not sure if he hit you last night. He knows if you're not too wounded to move you'll be coming after him. So: your life for the women. He's just seeking the right place."

"Where might it be?"

"Somewhere that limits your choices," said Walker. "He'll know it when he finds it. Until then, we follow."
Matthew offered him water, but Walker shook his head; he had also previously refused the food. "Listen," Matthew said, as he corked the flask. "I want you to know I thank you for doing this for me. For coming all this way, and " He let the rest of it go. "You didn't have to."

"I've already told you. I wanted the watch."

"Is that all of it?"

Walker paused; maybe he'd been about to say yes, Matthew thought. But now, with the hole in his side and his life leaking away, Walker decided to speak honestly. "Not all," he said. "When I first agreed yes, it was just the watch. The what would be the word? The novelty of it. And the idea that life is a circle. Things come back to you, when you least expect it." He was quiet, gathering his strength again. "Then," he continued, "when I saw what Slaughter did at the reverend's house I knew what you were. What you are."

"What is that?"

"My chance," said Walker, looking into Matthew's eyes, "to walk the Sky Road."

Matthew said nothing.

"Though I am insane and taunted by demons confused in my mind," he went on, "I may be accepted home by the Great Spirits if I can help you catch this mad wolf. This creature who cannot be endured, among civilized men. The Great Spirits don't see red skin, or white. They see only the war between good and evil, which makes the world what it is. And they charge us to be their weapons. Their strength. They charge us to be their arrows, and fly true." He nodded, with the sun on his face. "You have given me my chance to fly true," he said. "But first we have to catch the monster. We have to pull his teeth." He coughed, spat dark blood onto the ground beside him and studied it. "Not good," he said, with a slight frown. "We have much to do before I become the spirits willing a walker in three worlds. Will you help me up?"

Matthew did. When Walker was steady, he asked for his bow to be returned to its sheath and the sheath slung across his shoulder, along with the quiver of arrows. He had his knife in its fringed belt and his rawhide bag of dried meat, which was nearly gone. On his face the black paint was smeared, the spirit symbols blurred by rain, sweat, and circumstance. He had lost a few feathers, but he was ready.

Matthew put the loaded pistol and the waterflask into his shooter's bag and the bag's strap over his shoulder. He looked at his black tricorn, which lay on the ground where he'd left it last night. He decided he didn't want it anymore, since two snakes had worn it. Then he was ready too. He offered his shoulder for Walker to lean against, but the Indian didn't even grace that gesture with a glance; Walker went on, slowly at first, as if over hot coals, but then with his hand positioned firmly against the bloody bandage he set off at a decent speed following the red spots and splatters that marked Slaughter's trail.

The sun continued its ascent. Within an hour, Matthew noted that Walker's pace had slowed dramatically and the Indian was limping on his left leg. When Matthew again offered to give support, Walker shook his head. His face was ashen, and glistened with sweat.

Walker was right about the trail being easy to follow. Though the blood spots had stopped, there was clear evidence of the passage of three people. The ground cover showed a plentitude of broken twigs and crushed weeds, and at one point Matthew stopped to examine an area under some pines that indicated dead needles had been brushed aside for someone to sit down. He could envision Lark's hand, trying to make her mother comfortable even on this march of terror. They might have rested here until daybreak. In the thicket nearby he found a few ragged pieces of blue cloth, trimmed with yellow, and glistened with sweat.

"The mother's apron," Walker said; his eyes were sunken and bloodshot. "Made himself a bandage."

They kept going. With the passage of another hour, Walker did not resist when Matthew put an arm around him to keep him upright. Every so often Walker spat blood upon the ground, and now his knees were weak and Matthew knew he couldn't go on much longer.
They were moving through an area of large white boulders shaded by yellow elms when Matthew noted Walker kept looking over his shoulder. By now the Indian was all but stumbling, and he had begun to half-mutter, half-sing a strange rhythm in his own language.


Matthew instantly obeyed, and helped him sit against one of the boulders. Walker's hand came up and grasped the front of Matthew's jacket.

"Someone behind us," he said.

"Behind us?" Matthew looked back along the trail they'd come, but saw only trees, brush and rocks. A spear of panic pierced him; was it possible Slaughter had circled around?


"Saw who?"

"Death," came the answer. "He is near, but he stays back."

Matthew again fixed his gaze along the trail, and focused on detecting the slightest movement-human or otherwise-among the trees. There was nothing. He crouched beside Walker, who was breathing raggedly and holding his side as if to keep his organs from spilling out. "I'm going to go ahead," he said quietly. "You stay here and-"

"Die?" Through his delirium, Walker gave him a savage, fearsome grin. "Not yet. I'm not ready. Help me."

"You can't go any further."

"I'll say when I'm done. Not yet."

Again Matthew helped him to his feet. They passed through the jumble of boulders and found, just on the other side, a narrow but obviously well-used track that came up an incline from the right and led off into the forest on the left. Whether it was another Indian trail or a pathway used by fur trappers, Matthew didn't know. Fresh boot and shoe marks in the dirt showed that Slaughter was continuing his relentless advance to reach Philadelphia, with captives or not, and had gone left in the southerly direction.

In another few minutes, during which Matthew feared Walker was surely at the end of his strength, they came out of the forest and faced a new obstacle.

Before them was a ravine, about thirty feet in width. When Matthew stood at the edge and looked down, he saw gray rocks fifty feet below, and that same stream meandering on its way to the nearest river. A rope bridge had been strung across the ravine, but it was history; though it was still tied to its supports on this side, it had been cut away on the other, and now hung useless.

Matthew cursed under his breath. It was certainly Slaughter's work. How far would they have to go to find another way? The answer was quick in coming, for when Matthew looked to the right he saw, at a distance of forty or so yards, a massive dead oak that had been felled in some turbulent windstorm, its roots wrenched up from the earth on this side and its branches entangled in the foliage on the other.

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Though Walker's vision was fading, it was still strong enough for him to judge the situation. "Careful," he whispered. "This is the place."

Matthew knew it was. Slaughter had made sure of that by destroying the bridge. He opened his shooter's bag and withdrew his still-loaded pistol.

"I can't get across that," Walker said, "unless I grow wings."
"Come on," Matthew told him. "Hold onto me." They pushed through the underbrush and vines alongside the ravine, as rays of the sun streamed down through the trees. Birds chirped and sang overhead. Matthew was thinking furiously while watching the thicket on the far side. Crossing by way of that tree would be precarious for him; would it be impossible for Walker? Maybe another rope bridge could be found across, but how far might that be? A mile or more? If at all?

Matthew thought maybe they both could sit on the trunk and pull themselves over. They could go slowly. As slowly as it took. But if this was the place, then Slaughter had to be somewhere nearby with the women, maybe watching them right now. The longer it took to cross, the longer either one of them would be a target for Slaughter's pistol, and he knew which one of them would be the first man shot.

Walker knew also. "Here," he said wearily. "Let me sit down. Here."

Matthew eased him to a sitting position on the ground, leaning against the oak near its base where the gnarled roots had burst forth.

"My bow. My quiver," Walker said. "Put them next to me."

Matthew did as he asked, and then he knelt beside the Indian. "Can I " He had to stop, and begin again. "Can I do anything for you?"

"You can go on. Quickly. With great care, Matthew. With eyes always open in all directions."

"All right," Matthew said.

"Hear me." Some strength had returned to the ragged husk of Walker's voice; he was a valiant brave, right to the end. "I will die but I shall not perish. I charge you to be my arrow. And if you if you ever get back to my village tell my father I might have been insane but I was a true son." His bloody hand came up and pressed Matthew's arm. "Will you?"

Matthew nodded. "I will," he answered.

Walker gave a half-smile. His eyes slid shut. Then he abruptly opened them again, as if he'd remembered something vitally important. "Do you want the watch back?"

"Oh, what a sad and stirring sight!" came the mocking voice, from the other side of the ravine.

Matthew felt Walker's hand fall away from him as he stood up and turned to face Tyranthus Slaughter, who had emerged from the woods. In his right hand Slaughter was holding his pistol; in the hand sinister was gripped the cord he had made from Faith's apron, which served to bind the women's wrists one to another. The bandage he had also cut from the cloth was tied around his head, and Matthew noted with satisfaction the dark splotch of blood on the left side just above the ear, which was itself crusted with gore. Slaughter kept the women in front of him as a shield. Even so, Matthew noted that Slaughter's clothing had improved: brown breeches, white stockings, a gray shirt and a beige coat. The strap of a brown canvas haversack slung diagonally across his chest. He knew whose boots were on the killer's feet.

"That red bastard got me," Slaughter said. "Just a nick, though. Be right as rain in a few days." He grinned, showing a mouthful of teeth which appeared larger now that he was clean-shaven. "Matthew, Matthew, Matthew!

He made a clucking noise with his tongue and rested the pistol's barrel on Lark's shoulder. "Keep that gun down by your side, now. Don't touch the striker. Tell me: what am I going to do with you?"

Matthew made a quick examination of Lark and Faith, who stood tethered by the killer's cord. Faith had left this world; she stood with her face downcast, her hair in her eyes. Her mouth was moving, perhaps repeating in her mind over and over some moment of childhood that sustained her even on this black morning. Like a child, also, she looked to have tripped and fallen on their journey here, for her nose and chin were both skinned and bloodied and dead leaves clung to the front of her dress.

Lark's eyes, though swollen red and surrounded by dark hollows, still held the shine of intelligence. She had been
recently slapped, for a handprint showed on her left cheek. Matthew saw the vivid scratches where Slaughter's fingernails had caught her. She stared silently across the divide at him, and lifted her chin as a way to tell him she was yet all there in the mind.

"Well," Matthew said, as easily as he could with Slaughter's pistol aimed in his general direction, "you can drop your gun, untie the ladies, crawl across this oak like the slug you are and give yourself up, for I am arresting you in the name of New York, both town and colony, the Queen's Constable, the Queen herself, and the country of England. How does that sound?"

His intention had been for Slaughter to lose his temper, blow himself up like a bullfrog, and take a shot; the distance between them—near forty feet, from where Matthew was standing at the oak's roots—would severely test the flintlock's accuracy, and Matthew thought that if push came to shove he could get off his own prayerful shot and scramble across that damned tree before Slaughter could reload. He hoped.

But alas, it was not to be. Slaughter just laughed; the slow tolling of funeral bells freighted the air. "You are worthy," he said, when his laughter was done. He didn't say worthy of what, but Matthew suspected he meant worthy of a slow, excruciating execution.

"Lark?" Matthew spoke to the girl, but kept his eyes on Slaughter's trigger finger. "Are you all right?"

"Never been better," Slaughter said. "A little piece of custard pie, this one is." His arm moved, and now the pistol's barrel played with her locks of blonde hair. "Want the leftovers?"

Matthew felt the slow boil of rage in his guts. Taunting me to lose my temper and take the first shot, he thought. As Walker had said, You know him well. I think he must know you well.

"Matthew?" Lark's voice was steady; she had not given up, she had not broken. She was, he thought, an incredibly strong girl. If they got out of this, he would take both of them to New York, find care for her mother and what? Somehow erase all this horror from Lark's mind? "I want you to know," she went on, "that I my mother and I we're-

"Blah de blah blah," Slaughter interrupted. "Is he dead?"

Matthew looked down at Walker. The Indian lay motionless, gray-faced, his eyes open but seeing nothing. A trickle of blood had leaked from his mouth. "Yes," Matthew answered.

"Throw the body over," Slaughter said.

Matthew stared across at the other man. "You come do it."

"I gave you an order, young sir."

"I'm not in your army." He offered a purposefully-mocking smile. "I'm surprised at you! A stalwart soldier, afraid of a dead Indian? He was my friend, Slaughter; I'm not throwing him over like a grainsack."

Slaughter paused; he worked his tongue in and out of his cheeks, and then he said brightly, "Leave him for the buzzards then, I don't give a shit. The business at hand, Matthew, concerns your coming across that tree. When you set foot on this side, and I blow your brains out, the two little squats go free. My word of honor. And as I told you, I never lie to men who are not fools. You, sir, have proven yourself to be no fool. Stupid, yes, but a fool no. Therefore, I do not lie."

"I appreciate the compliment. But being no fool, I should have to ask after my departure from this earthly realm, how long will they remain free?"

"Ahhhhh," said Slaughter, and grinned again. "Ouch! You're making my head hurt."

"Your truths are lies, Slaughter," Matthew told him. "You know I'm going to follow you, wherever you go. You know I'm not going to stop." His heart was beating hard at this presumption that he would still be alive in the next few minutes. "If you give yourself up, here and now, I promise-"
"That the fucking noose doesn't cause me to shit in my pants?" Slaughter had nearly roared it, making Faith jump and give a muffled little child's cry. "That I get a garland of red roses upon my fucking grave?" His face had also bloomed rose-red, so much so that small creepers of blood began to appear at his nostrils. In his rage he had swollen up again, all huge shoulders and massive monster's chest, spittle upon his lips and the red lamp of murder in the pond-ice eyes. "You idiot! You charlatan of a constable! What can you promise me?"

Matthew was silent until the tirade had passed. Then he said, "I promise that I will endeavor to buy you a title before you are hanged, and that it will be so marked on your stone." Katherine Herrald would have special connections; maybe she could be talked into arranging it.

Slaughter's face froze, his mouth half-open. Slowly, very slowly, his expression began to thaw. "Well said," he allowed. "The one thing I so devoutly wish, given to me what? an hour before I swing? And possibly marked on a black brick at the ass-end of Hammer's Alley? Oh but it's impossible, Matthew, bless your heart; you see, even if I was fool enough to give myself up, as you put it, I wouldn't live to cross the Atlantic."

"And why might that be?"

"I have," he said, "a very strict employer."

Matthew frowned, puzzled by that statement. Employer? He was about to ask who that was when Slaughter thumbed his pistol to full-cock and held it against the side of Lark's head.

"You will throw your gun over," Slaughter directed, staring cold-eyed and remorseless at his enemy. "Now, young sir, or I shall have to scorch some blonde hair."

Matthew had no doubt it would be done. Though Slaughter couldn't reload again before Matthew got across the log, that would be no help for Lark. His bullpup was useless at this range. He could refuse and then what? No, he had to get closer to Slaughter. Try to make the man take a shot. He threw the gun into the ravine.

"The shooter's bag, too. Let's not be hiding anything I don't know about." When it was gone, Slaughter lowered the gun but kept it aimed between Matthew and the girl. "Sensible. Now we shall see what sort of a true-blue knight you really are. Come across the tree, like a good lad."

"Matthew!" Lark called, but he didn't look at her.


Matthew slowly climbed up on the oak and, sitting on it, began to slide himself forward. It was a very long way down, upon the treacherous rocks. His throat was dry; his mouth had no spit in it. He heard himself breathing like a bellows while his mind raced to figure how to save their lives. If he could make Slaughter fire a shot before he got too much closer but the distance was narrowing, and he might just have to leap at Slaughter and take his chances that the ball would not kill him outright. For this Englishman, time did not stop nor stand still. "A little faster, if you please," Slaughter said. "Don't mind your breeches, where you're going they'll give you a fresh pair with your name sewn across the bum, I'm sure."

Onward Matthew pushed himself, and now he was nearly halfway across. His legs were dangling over. He thought how much he'd hate it if he lost one of his moccasins. The sweat had beaded on his face; it ran in rivulets under his shirt.

"I will make it quick. That I would do for any worthy opponent. Right in the back of the head. Candle snuffed, the end. I'll do the same for them as well."

"Matthew!" Lark called, and when he looked at her he saw she had grasped her mother's hand. A strange kind of light gleamed in her eyes. Madness? Determination? "Just try, is all I ask."

"Oh, he's trying all right," Slaughter replied. "He's trying to think how to get out of this. Can't you see his eyes going 'round and 'round?" He moved out from behind the women and motioned with the pistol's barrel. "Come, come!"
"My mother and I are already dead, Matthew," said Lark. And of Faith she asked the question, "Do you believe in God?"

Yes, Momma. Had it been spoken, or had Matthew only imagined it?

"Do you believe that we need fear no darkness, for He lights our way?"

Yes, Momma.

"Stop that nonsense!" Slaughter said.

"Do you believe in the promise of Heaven?" Lark asked.

Did Faith answer, or not? Yes, Momma.

"So do I," said the girl.

With one quick, strong, sure movement she tore the cord out of Slaughter's hand.

Making a leap forward, Lark threw herself and her mother over the edge.

They fell silently.

Matthew saw them hit the rocks like two dolls all dressed up in lace.

He had a shout in his throat, but it lodged there like a stone. His eyes filled with tears.

Slaughter peered over the edge. He scratched his chin with the pistol's barrel.

"Women!" he said with an air of disgust, and then he took the gun in a two-handed grip, held it at arm's length toward Matthew, and pulled the trigger.
In the brief delay between the flare of the flashpan and the ball leaving the gun, Matthew gripped hold of a broken stub where a branch had been and flattened himself against the trunk. At almost the same time, he was aware of something going past his shoulder on the left side; he heard a high-pitched zip, and his ear tingled in the disturbance of air.

The gun cracked. Matthew heard the ball tear through foliage on the other side of the ravine. He looked up to see the shaft of an arrow still vibrating in the meat of Slaughter's upper right shoulder. Slaughter too was regarding it with an expression of curiosity, the pistol's smoking barrel uptilted where the arrow's force had altered his aim.

Then Matthew looked over his shoulder to see that Walker had slowly and painfully, inch by inch, angled his body to get a shot. The bow fell from the Indian's hand. He remained sitting upright, supported by the mass of roots behind him. His eyes were open, unblinking, and now truly focused on something beyond Matthew's world.

Slaughter crashed away through the woods. Matthew was torn for an instant about what to do; he scrambled back across the tree to Walker's side, and there he found that the last breath had been drawn, the last bit of strength spent, the last measure of will used up.

*My finest scene was a death sprawl, Walker had said, in which I lay motionless at center stage for three minutes with my eyes open.*

But the damned part of it was that Matthew *had* thought Walker was already dead. Jonathan Redskin the Savage Adam the Lucifer of the New World

They had all left the stage.

Matthew took Walker's knife. Something came over him that was a resolve greater than courage; he knew he was likely to die today, and possibly in the next few minutes, but it didn't matter. He was ready for that. His mind shut off to anything and everything but chasing Slaughter down, and he stood up, half-ran and half-jumped along the tree without looking at the bodies below, and then he was in the woods sprinting at full speed along the path Slaughter had just trampled.

Beyond the ravine, the land sloped sharply downward. Matthew tore through low-hanging pine branches and flinched as vines whipped his face. His eyes darted back and forth. He jumped a mass of tangled roots, landed off-balance and felt a twinge of pain along his right ankle, but it didn't slow him a stride. He kept going, and then through the next group of trees he saw Slaughter running on the decline below him, bursting his way through the foliage like any wounded wild beast might.

Slaughter ran without a backwards glance. Matthew saw him fumbling with the haversack as he fled. Trying to load the pistol while moving? He didn't think even a killer of Slaughter's experience could do that; more likely he was getting everything he needed to hand, and looking for a secure place to stop, pour the powder and ram the ball.

Matthew had to get to him first.

Pine needles slid under his feet. One slip here and he would be on his face. Ahead of him, Slaughter's foot caught on something and he staggered, nearly falling before he crashed off a birch tree and righted himself. Still they ran downhill, Matthew steadily closing the distance, and then Matthew heard above his own harsh breathing the noise of water rushing over stones.

Ahead, down at the bottom of this hill where the trees stood thick and colored vivid scarlet, Matthew saw a fast-moving stream. It ran to the left, between rocky banks, and turned the wheel of a watermill, a vine-covered wooden structure with a brown peaked roof. Through the trees Matthew caught the quick glimpse of a village maybe a quarter-mile distant and further below: small houses, white church, smoking chimneys. One of the villages on the outskirts of Philadelphia.

Slaughter made for the watermill. This time he dared a glance to judge Matthew's progress, and with a bound he
was up the mill's three stone steps. He whirled around, facing his pursuer. Matthew saw the powderhorn come out of
the bag. Saw Slaughter's arm moving in a blur to seat the patch and ball. Saw the gleam of the ramrod as it slid from
the socket.

Matthew felt vines grab at his ankles. He tore free, and was racing toward the steps when he saw the ramrod go
down into the barrel.


_I'm not going to get there_, he thought.

Gun swiveling toward him. Thumb on striker.

Striker going back.

Firing position.

The gun was in Matthew's face, and he saw the striker fall as he was jumping forward up the steps, pushing with
every ounce of strength in his legs, the knife in his hand already streaking out.

He heard the click of the flint and the hiss of the sparks. Smoke enveloped him, but before the gun fired and the
ball came out the pistol was deflected, because Matthew had chopped an arm into Slaughter's wrist and stabbed at
his ribs. But just that fast Slaughter had already sideslipped; he caught Matthew's arm to prevent the knife from
biting, and their backward momentum took them crashing through the door.

They tumbled together amid the mill's inner workings. The rotation of the pit wheel, the wallower and the great
spur wheel made a noise like muffled thunder. Matthew and Slaughter fell across a planked floor thick with yellow
dust and the decay of thousands of dead leaves blown in through the glassless windows. Matthew had not let go of
the knife, and as he rolled away from Slaughter he took it with him. Slaughter got up fast, his face pallid with dust
and his eyes full of murder. Matthew saw him swell up and become monstrous, huge of shoulders and chest. The
arrow's shaft had snapped off at the midpoint in their collision, but the way the man moved he seemed to be
suffering no sensation of pain.

Slaughter flung the pistol end-over-end at Matthew, who dodged aside in time to save his teeth. Slaughter then
reached into his haversack. He brought out a wicked-looking knife with a horn handle. Matthew thought it was
likely the blade he'd used to sever the rope bridge. A dark brown stain below its handle testified to other work as
well.

Without hesitation Slaughter rushed Matthew, whipping the knife back and forth. Matthew retreated, striking here
and there with the blade but finding only empty air where a body had been. Even wounded, the man possessed a
fearsome speed and agility.

"Just lie down, lie down," Slaughter breathed, as he circled. "Lie down, let me kill you, just lie down."

Matthew had no intention of lying down. But he was still backing away, his own knife ready to stab into
Slaughter's guts if he had to. Slaughter followed, like a man who smells a particularly juicy cut of steak.

Slaughter feinted and drew back. He moved to the right, the knife carving slow circles in the air. Slaughter's eyes
never left Matthew's. There came another feint followed by a fast strike toward Matthew's chest, which he
recognized and dodged almost a second too late. He struck out with his own knife, intending to get under Slaughter's
guard arm as the man righted himself, but then realized with sickening certainty that he was far too slow, for
Slaughter's free hand clamped hard on his wrist. The horn-handled knife rose up. Matthew grasped the arm before it
fell. They struggled, slamming back against the wall. A set of shelves collapsed, and with them a box of wooden
tools and three or four oak buckets that rolled about the room.

As they fought, straining against each other, Slaughter's dust-streaked face came in toward Matthew's. Closer, and
closer still, until Matthew feared the man would try to bite his nose off. Then Slaughter began to laugh, deeply and
slowly, as the increasing pressure from his grip numbed Matthew's fingers. The ragged fingernails dug into his wrist.
Matthew felt the knife began to slip.

"Just a little more, now," Slaughter whispered, right up in his face. "Starting to break, isn't it? Listen for the bones to snap!"

And then Slaughter twisted Matthew's wrist so fiercely searing pain coursed along the tortured arm through his neck and paralyzed him. He cried out, equally in panic as well as pain, as the knife fell from his frozen hand to the floor. Slaughter released Matthew's wrist to jab at his eyes with the fingernails, an effort Matthew was able to deflect even as he clung desperately to Slaughter's knife arm. Slaughter then grasped the front of Matthew's buckskin jacket, and with a display of awesome one-handed strength whirled around and flung him across the chamber to crash heavily into the base of the opposite wall.

Matthew got up on his knees. He tasted blood. The room swam about him.

Slaughter came toward him almost leisurely, the knife at his side. He was hardly breathing heavily. "Dear Matthew! Don't you know by now? It would take two of you to polish me off. Alas, there is only-

One of the wooden buckets was within Matthew's reach. He picked it up and hurled it at the man's head.

Slaughter dodged, snake-quick, but not quick enough that the bucket didn't glance off his wounded scalp. Its passage tore the bandage away, brought a hiss from between Slaughter's teeth and caused blood to stream anew from the hideous, raw red furrow above his ear. "Damn it!" he shouted, staggering back and clasping a hand to the injury. How dare you, was his tone of voice. He blinked rapidly; blood was in his eye. "Damn-

He never finished the second oath, because Matthew had gotten to his feet and now he hit the man in the mouth as hard as he could. Even falling, Slaughter swung out with the knife; it slashed across Matthew's chest, carving through buckskin, waistcoat cloth and shirt linen as cleanly as it had cut through the burnt crust of a ham.

Slaughter went down on his back, making the planks squeal and tremble. Matthew had no time to worry about a slashed chest. He stomped on the knife hand; once, twice, again did the man have a grip of iron? Slaughter was trying to grab Matthew's leg, and then he reached up and caught the jacket, but the fingers of his other hand had sprung their knuckles and the knife was loose. Matthew bent down to get it but again Slaughter's nails came at his face. He kicked at the knife, if only to remove it from the killer's immediate choices, and the weapon of murderous destruction slid up under one of the revolving wheels.

Slaughter was on his knees. The arrow wound was running crimson through his hair. Matthew hit him in the mouth again, but Slaughter just grinned with bloody teeth. A fist struck Matthew in the chest and made his lungs hitch for air, another blow smashed him on the right cheekbone and a third hit his jaw and rocked his head back, and then the killer was up and driving him across the floor toward the mechanisms, where a set of pyramid-shaped teeth in one of the groaning gearwheels could very well scrape a face from a skull.

That was Slaughter's intent. He bent Matthew's face toward the teeth, put a hand on the back of his head and pushed. Matthew resisted, the cords and muscles of his neck straining. He thrashed to escape, frantically throwing both elbows, but the man's grip was just too strong. Matthew knew that in another few seconds his fast-dwindling strength would be history, and so too would he be when Slaughter polished him off. Still he fought, and still he knew he was losing. He heard Slaughter grunt when an elbow crashed against his chest, but it was only a matter of time.

Matthew felt himself going. Felt himself giving up, whether he wanted to or not. Try? He had tried. Tried all he could. It was not to be. And all those deaths all for nothing

Slaughter released one hand to pound him across the back of the head, which made red comets shoot through his brain. And from the gloom that was closing in on him Matthew imagined that Slaughter leaned forward, as Matthew's face hung inches over the revolving teeth, and whispered something in his ear that was strangely familiar:

"With a shove and a shriek I pass through the town, and what fast horse might ride me down?"

Very soon, now. Very soon.
Try. I'm sorry, he thought. I am all tried out.

Something hit the wheel.

Not his face. Something that sounded like pebbles. Someone had just thrown a handful of pebbles into the room, is what it sounded like. Matthew heard them-four or five, it might have been-hit the wheel and bounce off; one struck the side of his neck and gave him a sting.

All at once Slaughter cast him aside like dirty laundry. Matthew fell to his knees. He stared down at the floor where his own blood was dripping. He was used up, nothing left. He thought he was going to pass out in another few seconds, and lie here like a lamb for the well, yes.

"Who's there?" he heard Slaughter roar. The man stalked to the nearest window, which looked toward the woods. "Who's there, please?" The diplomat at work. "This is a private matter!"

Matthew saw something roll past his face. His eyes followed it.

It was a marble.

Green, it appeared to be. No, not altogether green. It had within it a swirl of blue.

Matthew was dazed. He had seen that before. Hadn't he? Somewhere.

"Show yourself!" Slaughter shouted. He reached into his haversack again-his bottomless bag of horrors, it seemed-and this time brought out the razor, which had an evil glint about it that Matthew had never noted in his own shaving-glass.

"Somebody's spying on us," he heard the man mutter. "I'll fix 'em, just you wait there. I'll fix 'em." And then, louder, "Come on in! Where are you?"

Matthew didn't wish to stay for the cutting party. He looked over his shoulder. At one of the windows on the opposite side of the mill.

If he was going, it was time to get.

Matthew hauled himself up.

With the desperate urgency of someone fleeing Satan Incarnate he ran or hobbled or somehow got to the window. As he heard Slaughter bellow and start after him, he flung himself through the frame.

For a few seconds he was actually riding on top of the watermill's wheel, for he had come out amid the blades. Then he was on the downward slope, he banged the right side of his head on a slat, and suddenly he was in cold water that rushed him away from the mill. How deep the stream was he didn't know, but if his feet dragged the bottom he wasn't aware of it. The chill of the water had given him a start, but now everything was darkening once more, getting hazy around the edges. He went past several half-submerged rocks that he tried to grasp, but the stream was fast and his reflexes seemed to be several seconds behind his intentions. The stream curved to the right, spun him around in white water eddies and picked up more speed.

If Greathouse could see him now, he thought. It was to laugh at, really. To laugh at until one wept. He had the strength of a wet feather. His vision was fading; everything was giving out on him, he had blood in his mouth and a knot on his head and maybe, he thought, this was the end of it. Because his face kept going down into the water, and he couldn't seem to keep his head up.

His chance to get Slaughter was gone. That was to laugh at, as well. Had he ever possessed a chance to "get" Slaughter? He doubted it. The man was unstoppable.

He was very, very tired. His feet found no bottom. The stream was speeding him along, and now Matthew heard a roaring noise that at any other time might have secured his full attention but that now only made him think his life
was numbered in minutes and there was not much to be done about that.

There was a waterfall ahead.

He let his neck relax, and his face slipped into the water. He felt like a floating bruise. He felt like an utter failure. There was not much to be done about that, either.

Oh, but he could try, couldn't he?

No, there would be no more trying. Not today. He just wanted to drift, to some land where there was neither pain of mind nor body.

He lifted his face up. The water hissed, rushing past boulders with mossy beards. On either side of the stream was thick forest. He could see a fog ahead; a mist, it was. The waterfall’s spume. He felt a rocky bottom under his feet, which then fell away again. The sound of falling water was louder, and he wondered how steep the drop would be. He might tumble into a deep, swirling pool, or he might come down on more boulders and drown with shattered bones. He hoped it would be quick.

*I charge you to be my arrow*, Walker had said.

And Lark speaking: *Reach up reach up*

Matthew saw he was going to pass one of the big rocks, just a few feet to his right. Once beyond that, it was over the falls and done.

If he died, he thought, Slaughter would go on and on, truly unstoppable. If he died, then Walker and Lark had offered up their lives for nothing.

It was a hard thing to think about. It caused him, in a way, to want to die. To punish himself, maybe, for being so weak.

The big rock was coming up, very fast.

He began to weep, for Walker and Lark, for her family, for himself too.

Because he realized very clearly that his lot in life was not some place beyond pain of mind and body. His lot in life was, in fact, directly in harm’s way. He had asked for that, when he'd signed on with the Herrald Agency. And maybe that was the lot in life of all people, and realizing that either broke you or built you. Just as Lark said her father told her: there were only two directions in life, up or down. He was looking at that big rock coming nearer, and as he wept he was thinking that the good thing about tears is sometimes they wash your eyes clear.

Slaughter would be along soon, for sure. Looking for him, to finish the job. Matthew thought he maybe had seven or eight minutes. Maybe. But if he only had two minutes, or one minute, he ought to get out of this stream and not let a waterfall break Walker's arrow.

The big rock was right there.

Painfully, Matthew kicked toward it, and he reached up.

It took him a long time to get out. Seven minutes? Ten? He had no idea. He was hurt and hurting, no doubt about it. Spitting blood from a cut inside his mouth where his own teeth had bitten flesh, his head throbbing, his vision fading in and out, the muscles of his legs stiff and cramping, his neck nearly wrenched. But he got out by swimming from one big rock to the next, grabbing hold of the mossy beards and pulling himself onward, until at last he could stand up and hobble into the woods.

He staggered like a drunk through the dense thicket, lost his footing almost at once and slid into a hollow full of vines and fallen leaves. There he lay on his back, the world slowly spinning around him. He hoped that if Slaughter followed the stream he might think the waterfall had done his work for him; still, Matthew knew he was not safe,
that he ought to get up and keep moving, but he could not. He forced himself to turn over, get up on his knees and start digging into the leaves, winnowing himself in like a wounded mole.

It was while he was occupied at this camouflage that he heard the voice through the woods.

"All right, come out! Do you hear?"

Matthew's heart nearly burst. He flattened his body and pressed into the leaves. The smell of dirt and decay was up his nostrils. He stopped breathing.

"What kind of game are you playing at?" Slaughter shouted. "Can't you see I'm hurt, I don't have time for this!"

Matthew didn't move.

"You have the wrong impression!" Slaughter went on. His voice was moving. "I was attacked! That thief tried to kill me!"

Matthew heard him crunching through leaves alongside the stream. He's not speaking to me, Matthew realized. He's speaking to whoever threw the pebbles. Not pebbles marbles. But who?

"Come out, let's talk about this!"

Matthew knew that the razor would do most of the talking. Slaughter was silent; he'd continued on, away from Matthew's hiding-place. Had he looked over the falls? Seen anything that might lead him to believe a certain constable from New York was deader than yesterday's codfish pie?

Matthew could breathe again, but he still didn't move. He didn't think he could move, even if he wished. He was safe here, buried in all these leaves. At least he had the illusion of safety, and that was all he could ask for.

"All right, then!" he heard Slaughter shout, some distance away. The voice was ragged and tired; the beast was also in pain. "As you please!"

Then, nothing more.

Matthew thought of calling for help to whoever had thrown the pebbles-marbles—but the thought was short-lived. Slaughter might still be near enough to hear. What would Slaughter do next? Matthew wondered. His mind was sluggish, filling up with dark mud. What would any man with an arrow in his shoulder and a bloody gash across his scalp do? Find a doctor while he could still stand up. He would go down to that village-Caulder's Crossing or whatever it was—and find a doctor to mend him.

Matthew decided he should rest here for awhile. A short while. Slaughter wasn't going anywhere fast. Matthew needed some rest. He needed some strength. He would let himself rest here until he was sure he could walk again without falling, he thought. Then he would get up, and he would go down in search of the doctor. No better to find the town's constable first. Tell him to bring a gun or two, or three. Also bring about five more men.

I'm not done, Matthew thought. Not finished.

His eyes were closed, though he hadn't remembered closing them.

He did not drift off; he plunged into an abyss.

When his eyes opened again, the light had faded to purple. He had no idea at first where he was, or why. Night is coming on, he thought. Why am I buried, and in what? Everything suddenly came back in a jumble and rush, a madman's picture book. He had to get up now, he told himself. Slaughter was down in the village, wherever that was from here. Get up, get up!

Matthew moved, but the pain that throbbed through him—from arms, legs, scalp, cheekbone, chest, everywhere it seemed—put quit to that intention. He felt as if his bones had been yanked from their sockets and thrust back in at
crooked angles. He might have groaned, he didn't know. Some small frightened animal darted away. Slowly, against every bruise that shouted his name, he started digging out of the leaves. His head ached fiercely, and it seemed to take tremendous effort and concentration to do anything. He was the one who needed the doctor, he thought. Maybe later, after Slaughter was behind bars.

Get up, get up! Now!

He tried. His feet slipped out from under him. He rolled down into underbrush and stickers.

The purple light darkened. Matthew felt the chill of the night around him, but the earth was warm.

He would try again in a little while, he thought. Not yet. He wasn't strong enough yet. But he wasn't done, he told himself. He wasn't finished. Neither would he give up, no matter what. He would just keep on trying.

And that was something, wasn't it?
PART FIVE: The Road to Paradise

Twenty-Six

"Ollie? There' a man asking for you."

He looked up from his work at Priscilla, who had knocked first before opening the door to his workshop at the rear of the house; it was her way never to intrude upon him unless it was important, and he appreciated her value of his privacy. Which meant concentration; which meant productivity; which meant progress.

Oliver set aside his tweezers and lifted the magnification lenses clipped to his spectacles so he could see her clearly. The lenses, ground to his exacting specifications by the optician Dr. Seter Van Kampen here in Philadelphia, could make a gnat appear elephantine and a tiny gearwheel gargantuan. Not that he worked with gnats or elephants; he did not, though gearwheels of all sizes were commonplace on his desktop and now, indeed, were scattered there. But what might have been a disorderly scatter to any other man was to Oliver a comforting variety of challenges, or puzzle parts waiting to be put into their places.

He was a man of many loves. First of all, he loved his wife. He loved the fact that she was five months pregnant, loved her plumpness and her curly brown hair, the sparkle of her eyes, the way she called him Ollie—all prim and proper in daylight, but truth be told at night she made the name sound a little wicked, indecent even, and thus the blessed event approaching—and he loved the fact that she granted him such privacy to do his work, here in the sun-splashed room with its high windows. He loved also the shine of sunlight on tweezers and calipers, metal-shears, pincers, the delicate miniature pliers, wire snippers, files, the little hammers and all the rest of his toolbox. He loved the weight and feel of brass, the grain of wood, the pungent smells of whale oil and bear grease, the beautiful God-like geometry of gear-teeth, the confidence of screws and the jollity of springs. If Priscilla would not think him too odd—and this was also why he valued his privacy—he would have professed that he had names for all his instruments, his hammers and pliers and such, and sometimes he would say quietly as he put two pieces together, ”Very well, now, Alfred! Fit there into Sophie and give her a good turning!” Or some such encouragement to succeed. Which, now that he thought of it, sounded indecent too, but who ever said an inventor had to be decent?

Or, for that matter, boring?

He also loved gunpowder. Its rich, almost earthy smell. Its promise and power. Its danger. Yes, that was part of the love, too.

"Who is it?" Oliver asked.

"He just inquired if this was the house of Oliver Quisenhunt. He said it was vital that he speak to you."

"Vital? He used that word?"

"He did. He um he's a little frightening in appearance. I'll go back and ask his name, if you want."

Oliver frowned. He was twenty-eight years old, had been a bachelor—a life-long bachelor, he'd assured his friends over ale at the Seven Stars Inn—until he'd met a pretty little plump curly-haired sparkling-eyed girl two years ago whose wealthy father wanted a Dutch clock in their parlor repaired. It had taken him the longest time to fix that clock. It had been strange, repairing a clock and wishing time would stop. At the same time.

"No, that's all right." He pushed his chair back and stood up. "Something so vital, I suppose we ought to find out what, eh?"

She caught his arm. "Ollie," she said, and she looked up at him imploringly. Way up, because he was rail-thin and six-feet-three-inches tall and towered above her plump little self. "He he might be dangerous."

"Really? Well," he said with a smile, "danger is my business. Part of it, at least. Let's go see what he wants."

In the rooms there was a place for everything and everything in its place. One thing that Priscilla had taught him,
an artist did not need to live in confusion. Did not need to fill up the house with books and scribbled-upon papers and little gearwheels and sacks of gunpowder and lead balls everywhere and underfoot clay jars full of different varieties of grease that made a terrible mess if they were broken. Indeed, not with the new Quisenhunt coming. So he had his workshop where what she termed confusion was his paradise, and she had the rest of the house, excepting of course the cellar.

He also loved the fact that she called him an artist. The first time she'd said that to him, in her father's garden, he had looked into her face and asked himself what the term life-long bachelor really meant, anyway.

Priscilla had closed the door when she went to fetch him. She stood at Oliver's side, clutching the sleeve of his cream-colored shirt. He opened the door, and the man outside turned around from observing the parade of wagons, carts and passersby on Fourth Street.

"Oliver Quisenhunt," the man said.

Oliver nodded, when his flinch had passed. He thought he might have heard a note of what? relief in the man's voice. And Priscilla had been right about him: this was a raw-boned and rough-edged leatherstocking straight from the woods, it appeared. Straight from the frontier where Indians hacked your limbs off and boiled them in pots for their suppers. This man looked as if he'd seen a few of those boiling pots. Maybe had barely escaped from one, as well. How old? About twenty-six, twenty-seven? It was hard to tell, with those blue bruises splotching his right cheekbone and forehead. Both his eyes were bloodshot. The left eye had a white medical plaster laid just below it. The dark hollows under his eyes, and the general grim menace of his countenance was he twenty-seven, going on fifty? A few days' beard, a mess of black hair, the palms of his hands wrapped up in dirty leather, torn burgundy-colored breeches and a waistcoat the same color, stained stockings, filthy white shirt and a fringed buckskin jacket scabby with grime. On his feet were honest-to-God Indian moccasins.

He was a scout, Oliver guessed. Someone who goes ahead to clear the way, who takes the risks only the bravest- or most foolhardy-men can face.

He thought they called that kind of man a providence rider.

"My name is Matthew Corbett," said the visitor. "May I come in?"

"Ah well I am very busy at present, sir. I mean to say, it would be best if you came back some other-"

"I want to talk to you about one of your inventions," Matthew plowed on. "An exploding safebox."

"An exploding oh. Yes. Those. You mean the keyless safe? The thief trap?"

"Whatever you call it. I just want to know how it got into the hands of a killer named Tyranthus Slaughter."

"Slaughter?" Quisenhunt searched his memory. "I'm sorry, I have no recollection of that name. I sold no thief trap to him."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. I keep strict records of who buys my " He almost said art. But instead he said, "Creations."

Matthew hadn't known quite what to expect from this man. Quisenhunt was thin and gangly, had hands that seemed too big for his skinny wrists and feet like longboats. He had large brown eyes and a topping of blond hair with a cowlick that shot up at the crown like an exotic plant. Thick blond eyebrows arched up over the rims of his spectacles, as if he were perpetually asking a question. Matthew already knew he was twenty-eight years old, from his inquiries, but Quisenhunt seemed younger than that. There was something almost childlike about him, in his slightly-slumped posture, or in the inflections of his voice that seemed to rise on the last word of every sentence. This impression was aided by the multitude of freckles scattered across his cherry-cheeked face. He looked to Matthew to be a strangely overgrown twelve-year-old boy wearing his father's buckled shoes, white stockings, dark brown breeches, cream-colored shirt and yellow-striped cravat. The phrase mishap of nature came to mind.
It was time to roll out the cannon. Matthew said, "I am a representative of the law from New York. In this case, you may consider me an arm of the royal court. I'm looking for Slaughter. You may have information I need."

"Oh," came the hushed response. Quisenhunt rubbed his lower lip. "Well, then why aren't you in company with the Philadelphia officials? I personally know High Constable Abram Farraday."

"Yes," Matthew said. "He sent me here."

"I thought you were an Indian scout," Quisenhunt said, and almost sounded disappointed.

"May I?" Matthew made a motion of entrance.

There was an uncomfortable moment where the master of the house looked to his wife to see if she approved letting such a ragamuffin into their domain, whether he was a law man, an Indian scout, or chief of the street beggars. But then she nodded graciously at Matthew, retreated a step, and asked if he might like a nice cup of lemon water.

Quisenhunt took Matthew along a hallway and through the door to his workshop, and there Matthew saw how much a man could love his calling.

Three days ago, in the weak light of early morning, Matthew had stumbled down out of the forest into the village below the watermill. He didn't get very far before a man wearing a brown woolen cap, a gray coat and carrying a torch came out between two houses and hollered, "Who goes there?" Matthew thought it was wise he answer, because the man was also aiming a blunderbuss at him.

_Indian trouble_, the watchman had told him as they went to see the town's constable, by name Josaphat Newkirk. The town's name was not Caulder's Crossing but Hoornbeck, and according to the watchman was situated on the Philadelphia Pike about four miles away from the city. The _Indians have got their warpaint on_, the watchman told him as they walked. Matthew still had a pounding headache and his vision blurred in and out, but he could function, more or less. _Hey! Did they jump you too?_

_Who?_ Matthew had asked.

_The Indians, man! They're crawlin' all around here!_

Hoornbeck, a small town that overlooked a picturesque lake, was in a state of high alert. Men with guns were everywhere, leading skittish horses. Women stood in groups holding babies or comforting frightened children. By the time Matthew was escorted to the constable's office in the white-washed town hall, a clerk reported that Constable Newkirk had gone out on his rounds to check with the other watchmen. Matthew had no time to waste; he asked to be taken to the town's doctor, so in a few minutes he was at the door of a white house with dark green shutters on the edge of the lake.

Dr. Martin Lowe, a big bearish man with close-cropped brown hair, a brown beard streaked with gray and brown eyes behind his spectacles, took a look at him, rushed him in and put him on a table with three candles on either side of Matthew's head. He began to examine the injuries while his wife boiled water for tea and hot towels.

"Lucky here," said the doctor, in a bass rumble that Matthew could feel in his chest. He touched the sore, blood-crusted area below Matthew's left eye. Matthew hadn't realized before now that Slaughter's fingernails had worked their magic. "You might have lost that eye if those claws had caught you any higher. And that was a bad blow to your head, from the size of the bruise. Very dangerous. How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Three," Matthew said, when he concentrated and half of the man's six fingers disappeared like wisps of smoke.

"Mouth open. Did you swallow any teeth?"

"Sir please listen I'm not here about myself. I'm looking for a man who probably came in " What day was this? "Yesterday." Slaughter was simple enough to describe. "He would have had an arrow in his upper right arm."
"You mean Lord Shelby's land speculator, Sir Edmond Grudge. Constable Newkirk brought him in."

"Sir Edmund Grudge?"

"He had a terrible time of it. Indians ambushed his party. Wiped 'em out, not five miles from town. I sewed up that gash in his head, took the arrowhead out of his arm and did what I could. Gave him a bottle of brandy to ease his pain."

"And where is he now?"

"I said he ought to stay here and let me watch him overnight, but he wanted to get a room at the tavern. The Peartree Inn, alongside the Pike. Damned if he's not a strong-willed man."

"I've got to go."

Within five minutes, Lowe was out the door like a shot to track down Constable Newkirk.

It was awhile before they returned, because to add to the confusion of the day Matthew later learned that Newkirk had been out talking to a watchman whose eyes were evidently not so watchful, for his horse had been untied and stolen from a hitching-post on Main Street hardly an hour before. Then Newkirk, a lean gray-haired man with the sad face of a dog that just wants to sleep in peace, listened intently to Matthew's tale, which made him look even sadder. He lit his pipe, blew smoke, and said, "All right, then," with a sigh as if that explained everything. "Let me get some men together, and we'll go pay a visit to Sir Grudge. Whatever his damned name is."

When Matthew heard about the stolen horse, he'd figured of course Slaughter had taken the beast and pounded away the last few miles to Philadelphia. But the constable had a different story for Matthew when he returned from The Peartree Inn.

"Seems your Mr. Slaughter had himself a good meal last night," Newkirk said as he puffed his pipe and Lowe applied the plaster to Matthew's wound. "Everybody wanted to hear about the Indians and pay his bill. He told some big ones. Fooled me, he did. Except the last trouble we had with the red men was more than six, seven years ago. You recall, Martin. They burned down Keltey's barn, set fire to his haystacks."

"I recall."

"Ran around hollerin' a little while, shot some arrows into the roof and then they went."

"The horse? Oh, Ben Witt's horse? No, I don't think so. Unless he was in two places at once. Your Mr. Slaughter. Matthew wished he would stop saying that--took up with a tradesman last night at the inn. Peddler told Daisy—that would be Daisy Fisk, my daughter-in-law—that he was headin' to Philadelphia. Had all his wares in a wagon. Well, your Mr. Slaughter left with the tradesman before somebody stole Ben's horse."

Having delivered that unwelcome news, Newkirk just stood there puffing.

"Constable?" Matthew waved smoke away from his face. "Why don't you send out some fast riders? Maybe they can catch him before--"

"Already in the big town by now," Newkirk replied. "Their problem, now." He scratched his pate and gazed out the window at the lake as if he would give up everything he owned for a morning of fishing. "At last," he said. "You say there're some bodies out in the woods?"
"This young man can't go anywhere for a while," the doctor said. "I'm surprised he can walk."

"The bodies can wait, then," Newkirk decided. "Funny thing, though."

"What's funny?"

"Your Mr. Slaughter. Such a killer and all, you say. Left with a tradesman." Newkirk gave a dry little chuckle.

"Fella was sellin' knives."

Matthew stood on the threshold of Oliver Quisenhunt's workshop, three days since his visit to Hoornbeck. He looked into an untidy mess: stacks of books and papers upon the floor, shelves full of strangely-shaped metal pieces and tools, a filing cabinet with more papers spilling out, a desk covered with small brass and wooden gearwheels and more tools, and at the center of the hurrah-rah a chalkboard on wheels. The chalkboard was covered side to side and top to bottom with diagrams of what appeared to be different-shaped hinges and pegs, gearwheels, drillbits and mechanisms he had never seen before. Some of them might very well have come from a distant planet, like the thing that looked like half of a spoked wagon wheel and had two batlike wings extended on either side.

"Of course I know Oliver Quisenhunt, High Constable Farraday had told Matthew this morning. He's the crazy clockmaker. Well I say that with all respect. He's actually a very talented inventor. Designed the safebox especially for us. Now, Mr. Corbett tell me again how you let Tyranthus Slaughter get away?"

Matthew took stock of another shelf that held a variety of clockfaces in both metal and wood. "How many of them have you made?"

"My clocks? Twelve. Working on my thirteenth. I make three or four a year, depending on the complexity of what the client wants."

"What is that?" Matthew pointed to the half wagon wheel with the bat wings.

"Part of the inner workings of my thirteenth. I don't believe in bad luck-unlucky thirteen and all that-but with my client's permission I'm making a clock that will um flap its wings like a bat upon every hour. What you see diagrammed there are the rods that the hammers will hit to cause the wings to flap. I'm thinking of creating the entire thing out of black cloth draped around a wooden frame. With a black clockface and possibly red enamel numerals. My client, fortunately, is very open to my designs and already owns two of my creations."

Matthew just stared at him. "Why don't you make it meow? Like a black cat?"

"Well," Quisenhunt said, and studied his knuckles, "the nearest sound approximating that would be from a fiddle. When I get my self-playing fiddle perfected, then maybe so."

"Your self-playing " Matthew decided to let it alone. "I'm not so interested in your clocks," he said, "as in "

"The thief trap, yes you said that. Then you know about my other interest?"

Matthew nodded. "Farraday told me."

"Ah." Quisenhunt's wife had entered bringing a cup of pale yellow lemon water, which she offered to Matthew. "Take your drink, then," said the inventor, "and I'll show you my cellar workshop."

"It's awfully dirty down there," the woman cautioned.

"I think Mr. Corbett can handle a little dirt." Quisenhunt paused to light a candle, and then motioned for Matthew to follow.

Along the stairs that led down, Quisenhunt lit a succession of wall candles until they reached the bottom. Matthew had caught the odor of gunpowder as soon as the door was opened. As Quisenhunt continued to walk around and touch fire to a few more wicks, Matthew saw that they stood in a stone-floored shooter's gallery. A half-dozen pistols hung on wall hooks near the stairs. On the other side of the chamber were two canvas-covered circular
targets, one large and one smaller, with enough holes in them to show the straw stuffing. Matthew thought Ashton McCaggers would have felt right at home in here with his own pistols and dress-maker's forms Elsie and Rosalind to shoot at.

"I have always been fascinated by firearms," Quisenhunt said when the last candle was burning and yellow light gleamed off the pistols. "These I've designed myself. Here, this is something I've been testing lately." He picked up from a circular table not a pistol but a short sword with an ornately-scrolled grip.

"It's a sword," Matthew remarked.

"Is it?" Quisenhunt made a couple of swipes through the air with his weapon. Then he turned toward the targets. Matthew heard a click as a cleverly-disguised striker was drawn. With a flash of sparks and billow of smoke the pistol barrel constructed along the swordblade fired. A hole appeared near the center of the larger target.

"Interesting," Matthew said. "Bringing a gun to a swordfight."

"That would be the idea, yes. The trigger is hidden in the grip." Quisenhunt showed it to Matthew, as smoke curled from the barrel. "I have high hopes for this, but unfortunately at present it does need work. The problem is keeping both sword and pistol equally-balanced."

Matthew thought a novice swordsman such as himself could benefit from the long reach of that particular blade. He saw a pistol hanging amid the guns on the wall that caught his attention. "May I?" he asked, and when Quisenhunt nodded he took it down. "What is this?"

"My pride and joy," said the inventor.

It was a pistol, Matthew saw, with three barrels-one atop two-but only a single striker. The wooden body of the gun was black and sleek, the barrels a steely blue. Heavy in the hand, but very well-balanced. It was, he thought, awesome.

"You prepare all three barrels at once," Quisenhunt explained, holding his candle closer so the light jumped off the bizarre and beautiful gun. "When the first barrel is fired, you cock the striker again and a gearwheel revolves the second barrel into position. Then, when that is fired, the striker revolves the third barrel into place."

"What do you call it?"

"A rotator."

"Ah." Matthew was definitely impressed. "And all three of these barrels really fire, then?"

"Well " Quisenhunt looked down at the floor and rubbed at a stone with his shoe. "Sometimes yes, sometimes no. I've had considerable trouble with the third barrel, which fires-by my calculations-with only thirty-six percent certainty." He shrugged. "But there's always room for improvement. You'll note that the barrels all share a single flashpan, so unfortunately the shooter does have to prime the pan between shots. If you'll open the compartment in the butt of the handle-it's the little brass lever there-you'll find three small paper cartridges, which hold the necessary powder for three applications to the pan. My intention with this was to speed the firing process as much as humanly possible."

"I'll say," Matthew heard himself sound like a dumbfounded schoolboy. "If you don't mind my asking, what would something like this sell for?"

"It's the better-working model of two in that configuration, but I wouldn't sell it. There's still a lot of work to be done."

Reluctantly, Matthew returned the rotator to its hook. What he would have paid to have a gun like that in the woods against Slaughter! His eye was snagged by another pistol, this one with a long barrel and atop the barrel a brass cylinder that looked to be a spyglass.
"Tyranthus Slaughter," said the inventor suddenly. "Yes! I do recall that name. He was one of the highwaymen they caught was it two years ago?"

"Two years and a little over four months. You made the exploding box for that particular purpose, correct?"

"Correct. High Constable Farraday and some of the town officials came to me to ask that I help them catch the highwaymen who were terrorizing the Pike. They knew of my interest in firearms, but being Quakers they wanted something non-lethal. Something that would startle the highwaymen, possibly daze them long enough to be overcome."

"I see. And do you always sign your work?"

"All my finished work, yes." Quisenhunt answered. "I'm proud of my creations."

Matthew took a drink of the lemon water and found it more sweet than sour. But even so, it did make the healing cut inside his mouth pucker. After his realization that Slaughter had successfully escaped Hoornbeck, Matthew hadn't known what else to do. He could search Philadelphia, of course, and he'd already been to the stables to ask for anyone of Slaughter's description, but essentially the trail had gone cold.

Except for one thing.

The exploding safebox that had held Slaughter's ill-gotten treasure. The safebox that bore, burned across its underside, O. Quisenhunt, Phila., followed by a number: 6.

Matthew said, "I know there's a striker device inside the box that ignites the gunpowder. And the hammer that falls makes the gunshot sound. But tell me how someone opens the box without the striker being tripped."

"Simple enough. The latches operate on springs. There are two versions of the triggering mechanism. In one, if the latches are turned any way but horizontally before they're opened, the mainspring is released and trips the striker. In the second, the latches have to be turned vertically, or the striker trips. The latches are designed to give some resistance; sort of an early warning to a potential thief, so to speak."

Matthew saw the intent, which was to blow smoke and sparks into the faces of the highwaymen, leading to-hopefully-a quick arrest. He recalled that the box Greathouse had opened-with some difficulty, as he remembered-had its latches turned vertically, which meant its 'safe position' would have been if the latches had been horizontal. Obviously, Slaughter had known which version he possessed. "How many boxes did you make?"

"Six. The first had an unforeseen flaw and suffered a premature combustion. The second fell off a coach and was broken. The third and fourth actually were in use for several months, but never um served their purpose before the highwaymen were caught."

"And what about the fifth and sixth?"

"I recall I sold those, for quite a nice price. To one of my clients for whom I have also created a clock."

"Then you're saying the fifth and sixth boxes were never used by anyone but this client?"

"As far as I know. She said she had need of a thief trap herself, because she didn't have complete trust in some of her workers. Actually, she decided to buy the pair."

"She?" Matthew prodded. "What's the name?"

"Mrs. Gemini Lovejoy," said Quisenhunt. "She owns Paradise."

"Paradise," Matthew repeated.

"Mrs. Lovejoy owns the Paradise farm," Quisenhunt explained. "It's on the south side of town, a few miles out between Red Oak and Chester."
"A farm." Matthew thought he must be sounding like an idiot.

"It's titled a farm," said the inventor, "but Mrs. Lovejoy-a very generous, charming woman, by the way-takes care of elderly people there."

"Elderly people." Stop that! Matthew told himself.

"That's right. It's a place where how shall I put this elderly people in need of care are brought by their families, who can no longer keep them."

"You mean they're ill?"

"Possibly that. Possibly they are hard to handle. To control. Like children can be. Hard to feed, or to um well, many things. She's told me all about it."

"Is this a Quaker institution?"

"I think she receives some money from the town, if that's what you mean. But she originated the concept. She believes it will become more popular an idea as time goes on."

"Quite a concept," Matthew said quietly. He regarded the pistols again. His mild expression masked the jolting memory he'd had of Greathouse reading off Slaughter's aliases from the article of possession that first day at the Westerwicke hospital: **Count Edward Bowdewine, Lord John Finch and Earl Anthony Lovejoy.**

Lovejoy.

Quite a coincidence, as well.

"Listen," Quisenhunt said, scratching the back of his neck. "You're telling me that one of the thief traps I sold to Mrs. Lovejoy wound up in the possession of this Slaughter criminal?"

"I am. It was number six."

"That's very odd. I sold them to her well, it's written in my ledger upstairs but I'm sure it was long before the highwaymen were caught. And I've seen her many times since then, but she's never mentioned being robbed, or the box being stolen."

"Yes," Matthew agreed. "Odd."

"How can that be explained, then?"

Matthew thought the question over. Turned it this way and that. And at last he posed his own question: "Do you know where I might buy a suit?"
"My dear Mr. Shayne!" said the woman who rose from her chair at his entrance into the room. "So very good to meet you." She came forward slowly and gracefully, offering her hand, and as Matthew took it and gave it the obligatory kiss he wondered if she was thinking of how she ought to kill him.

But she was smiling warmly enough. "Sit down, won't you?" She motioned toward the chair on the other side of the black-lacquered desk. "Opal?" This was directed to the young girl who'd shown him in. "Take Mr. Shayne's hat and cloak, please. And bring him what would you like, sir? Tea? Coffee? A glass of brandy?"

"Tea would be fine. Very strong, if you please." He turned to glance at the serving-girl, who he imagined shot a look at his crotch. Matthew removed his newly-bought charcoal-gray cloak and dark green tricorn and gave them to the girl, who-and this was no imagining-rubbed her hip along his own as she turned to leave. Matthew thought she'd had much practice at this sort of thing, because she'd covered the maneuver with his cloak and it was over and done so quickly nothing was left but the tingle.

"Sit down, sit down!" said Mrs. Lovejoy, motioning toward his chair. She was still smiling, still warm, and perhaps she didn't want to kill him after all. Perhaps she knew nothing of any monster named Tyranthus Slaughter; perhaps there was a perfectly reasonable explanation for Slaughter's possession of the sixth thief trap that Oliver Quisenhunt had made and sold to her.

Perhaps, perhaps; but Matthew still intended to pass today as a young lawyer named Micah Shayne, and he intended to make it stick. Shayne after the name Faith Lindsay had given him, Micah after the first name of a very kind and energetic tailor on Spruce Street. The tailor had taken a look at the gold coin Matthew had offered and set to work altering a dark green suit left over in the shop when the young merchant it was going to had lost a substantial sum betting on dog-versus-rat fights out in the woods north of town. A little bringing in here and letting out there, and this dog was ready to fight.

Two more days had passed since Matthew's visit to the inventor's house. A shave and a hot bath had done wonders. Also, his bruises had faded to mere murmurs of themselves, though they would still enter themselves into any conversation, and of course the plaster would remain below his left eye for awhile longer. Last night, in his room at Mrs. Angwire's boarding house on Fifth Street, he had unwound the leather from his palms and feet and found everything sufficiently healed. His thoughts went to Greathouse's condition; he hoped the great one had been so fortunate. But now he had to think only about tomorrow, and his meeting with Gemini Lovejoy.

Thus this cool, sunny morning he had secured a horse from the Fourth Street stable, ridden along a pleasant pastoral route with its gentle wooded hills, its rich farmfields, its wide pastures and meticulous stone walls, and just past the Speed The Plow tavern turned his mount onto a well-kept road toward the northwest. Soon enough he saw straddling the road a huge wrought-iron arch, painted white, with the word Paradise in blue letters above his head as he passed beneath. He had obviously arrived at someone's idea of Heaven.

"I presume we shall be feeling the first touch of winter soon," said Mrs. Lovejoy, having seated herself across from him.

"I'm sure," said Matthew.

"I do enjoy the autumn. The crispness of the air makes one feel so fresh, so alive, after the doldrums of summer."

"Absolutely alive." He had seen her gaze drift over the bruises and the plaster.

"You have a letter for me, then?"

"Yes, madam, I do." Matthew retrieved the envelope from an inner pocket of his coat. On the envelope, Quisenhunt had written To My Dear Gemini Lovejoy, Concerning Mr. Micah Shayne. It never hurt to have a proper introduction. Matthew gave her the envelope. Mrs. Lovejoy opened it with one quick snap from a brass blade on her tabletop and, as the lady read the letter, Matthew attempted to also read the lady.
She was probably in her mid-forties, and very handsome in the way of a lioness. Matthew of course had never seen a lioness but he had read descriptions of them. Mrs. Lovejoy fit the bill. The proud crown of tawny hair that was pulled back from her face and arranged in a display of curls about her shoulders was probably more appropriate for the male lion, but there it was nonetheless. The gray was not so outspoken yet, though it had begun to announce itself at the temples. She was not a small woman, nor was she oversize; she had big bones, and she made no attempt to hide them by wearing a gown with voluminous folds and frills. She was dressed simply, in a very beautiful indigo-dyed gown with a puff of tasteful cream-colored ruffle at the throat and cuffs, and on her feet were sensible black shoes decorated with black ribbons.

Matthew watched her read. She was devouring every word, and had one hand up to rest her chin upon. He could envision her, like a lioness, reclining on her throne of rocks on some African hillside, and peering into the ruddy distance for the dust trail of a weaker beast. He'd already noted that her eyes were clear green, wide-set and slightly almond-shaped, and that her jaw was square and firm and her forehead high as would befit a regal cat. Her nose was long and sharp-tipped, her mouth large enough to gnaw a bone or two. Dear God, he thought, he was thinking with Hudson Greathouse's brain. As yet Matthew hadn't gotten a close look at her teeth, and wasn't sure he wanted to. She blinked slowly, taking her time. He saw she wore no rings, but on both wrists were filigreed gold bracelets.

With the help of one of the coins Slaughter had left him after the Lindsay massacre, Matthew had made sure he would himself stand up to scrutiny. The new suit, the new cloak, the new tricorn all were necessary for the deception. The investigation, as it were, On his feet were a pair of black boots that his tailor friend had found for him from a shoemaker friend, at a reasonable price. The moccasins had had their day; when Matthew had taken them off they'd been nearly ready to fall apart.

"Mr. Shayne," the woman suddenly said, as if just to repeat the name. She didn't divert her attention from the letter. "How is my friend Oliver?"

"He's fine. Did you know that Priscilla will be having her baby in four months?"

"Yes, I did. I saw her at the market oh that was late August." She put the letter aside with a brief and unrevealing smile. "Here's our refreshment."

Opal the hip-grazing crotch-glancer had returned, bringing a silver tray that bore his cup of tea. He accepted it and the linen napkin that was also offered. In the exchange of tea and napkin he caught Opal staring right at him, her pink lips slightly parted, and he wondered who really was the lioness in the room. She was wearing a gray muslinet gown and a shapeless gray mob cap that did nothing for a woman's charm and perhaps was meant so. Under the cap Opal's hair was jet-black and the eyes that stared so piercingly into Matthew's were a bright blue almost crackling with their heated appraisal. She was the proverbial mere slip of a girl, slim and wiry and standing maybe two inches more than sixty even in clunky black heels. Matthew saw small metal rings stuck through her lower lip and her right nostril. She scared the hell out of him.

"Thank you, Opal," said Mrs. Lovejoy, who was returning the letter to its envelope. "I won't need you here any longer. Go to the laundry house and help there."

"Yes, mum." Opal gave a quick curtsey to both of them and took the tray back through the doorway again.

"Always something to be done," the woman explained. "The washing, the cooking, the general maintenance. But it's my life now, Mr. Shayne. My calling."

"And an admirable calling it is, according to Oliver." He winced inwardly, and cautioned himself that it was better not to be so very damned eager.

"Sometimes admirable, sometimes just difficult." She tilted her head slightly, as if to examine him from a different angle. "I want you to understand that Paradise is very expensive. My guests-I always refer to them as my guests, for that's how much I respect them-require the best in food, care and consideration. But before I quote you a one year's fee, which would be our least expensive arrangement, let me ask you to tell me the particulars of your situation."
Matthew paused for a drink of tea, and then he forged ahead. "I am opening a law office after the first of the year. My wife and I will be-

"In Philadelphia?" she asked. "Your office?"

"Yes. My wife and I will be moving down from New York. We have one son and another child on the way."

"Congratulations."

"Thank you." He brought up a frown. "The problem is my grandfather. He's quite aged. Seventy-two years. Come December," he chose to add, just for the sake of texture. He felt he was drawing a picture, as much as Berry ever did. "My grandmother has been dead these last few years, my father passed away on the voyage over, and my mother well, my mother met a new gentleman in New York, they married and returned to England."

"This world," she said, with no expression.

"Yes, a trying place. But the situation is that my grand-father-"

"What's his name?"

"Walker," Matthew replied.

"An active name for an active man?"

"Exactly." Matthew offered a fleeting smile. He decided then was the time to touch the plaster under his eye. "Unfortunately of late he has been too active."

"I was wondering. My pardon if you caught me looking." Now there was a quick show of teeth, then gone. The clear green eyes did not smile, Matthew noted. Ever.

He was getting nothing from her. Feeling nothing. But what had he expected? He swept his gaze around the room, as if trying to gather his next confession of the trials of this world, especially those of a young lawyer who needs to get rid of an uncomfortable cyst that pains his progress. The house, on the outside painted white with a light blue trim the exact color of the Paradise lettering, was simply a nice two-story dwelling that any lady of means might have owned. The furnishings were tasteful, the colors restrained, the windowpanes spotless and the throw rugs unsullied by a dirty boot. He wondered if Tyranthus Slaughter was lying upstairs in a bedroom right this moment, nursing his injuries. For Matthew had come to the conclusion that Lovejoys of a feather might well lie down together.

"Not long ago he struck me," Matthew continued. "Several times, in fact, as you can see. He's angry about his situation, I know, but things are as they are. He's not companionable with people, he's surly, he can't work, and I have to say, I don't like my wife and son being with him, much less the idea of a new baby coming."

"And who's with him now? Your wife and son alone?"

"No. He's in the custody excuse me, the possession of friends in New York."

Mrs. Lovejoy looked him directly in the eyes, again revealing nothing with her own. "He sounds like a difficult case."

Matthew didn't know whether her cool, polished demeanor made him go faster than he'd intended, or if he wanted to shake her up. He said, "Honestly, I'm afraid he might take a knife some night and slaughter us in our beds."

There was no reaction whatsoever. The lacquered surface between them held more expression than the woman's leonine face.

"In a manner of speaking," Matthew went on, a little flustered.
She lifted a hand. "Oh, I understand. Absolutely. I see many situations like this. An elderly person who is not used
to being dependent, now finds the choices limited due to illness, waning strength or changing circumstances, and
very often anger results. You and your wife have the demands of family and profession, and therein lies the
problem. You say Walker will be seventy-two in December?" She waited for Matthew to nod. "Is he a strong man?
In good physical health?"

"I'd say, for the most part, yes." He was still looking for some reaction, for something. Now, though, he wasn't
sure he would know what it was if he saw it.

Mrs. Lovejoy picked up her letterblade and toyed with it. "I have found, Mr. Shayne, in my five years at this
occupation-this calling-that the more physically aggressive guests are the ones who unfortunately tend to " She cast
about for the proper word. "Dissolve, when placed in a situation of being controlled. In time, they all dissolve, yes,
but those like your grandfather do tend to go to pieces first. Am I making sense to you?"

"Perfect sense." He was beginning to wonder what the further point of this was.

Maybe it showed in his own eyes and came across as boredom, for Mrs. Lovejoy leaned toward him and said,
"Men like your grandfather rarely last more than two years here, if that. Now: we would wish to make him
comfortable, and as happy as possible. We would wish to feed him well, to keep up his strength, and give him some
kind of challenge. We do have gardening activities, a greenhouse, a library and a barn they can putter around. We have
women who come from town to read to them, and to tell stories. Your wife will wish to inquire about the
Bluebirds once you're settled, I'm sure. They do all sorts of charitable deeds."

She reached out and patted his hand, very professionally. "Everything is taken care of here. Once you sign the
agreement, it's all done. Your life is your own again, so that you may give it to your family and your future. And as
for worrying about your grandfather's future let me say that we hope, as I'm sure you do, that he lives many more
happy years, but but when the day of God's blessing occurs, with your approval your grandfather will be laid to rest
in Paradise's own private cemetery. He can be out of your mind and cares, Mr. Shayne, and you will know that for
the remainder of his days he has received the very best treatment any guest of Paradise can be given. For that is my
solemn promise."

"Ah," said Matthew, nodding. "That sounds hopeful, then."

"Come!" She stood up with a rustle of fabric. "Before we venture into the area of money, let me show you exactly
what your coin would buy."

Matthew got his cloak and hat, and in a few minutes was walking beside Mrs. Lovejoy along the gravel drive that
went past her house into the property. It was an aptly-named place, because it was certainly beautiful. There were
stands of elm and oak trees brilliant in the sunshine, a meadow where sheep grazed, and a green pond where ducks
drifted back and forth.

Mrs. Lovejoy continued to talk as they walked. Presently there were twelve male and sixteen female guests, she
said. The men and women were housed in separate facilities, because-she said-snow on the roof did not necessarily
mean the fireplace had gone cold. Their ages were from the late-sixties to the eighties, the eldest being eighty-four.
The guests had been brought from Boston, New York, of course Philadelphia, Charles Town and many smaller
towns between. Word-of-mouth was building her business, she said. As life moved faster and responsibilities
increased, many people were-as she said-stuck between a rock and a hard place regarding aged parents. Sometimes
the guests resented being here, but gradually they accepted their situation and understood it was for the greater good
of their loved ones. Oh, there were the rowdy guests and the guests who cursed and fought, but usually they calmed
down or they didn't last very long.

A doctor was within a thirty-minute ride, she assured him. Also, the doctor made several visits each week to
check ailments and general health. A minister came on Sunday afternoons to lead worship in Paradise's church.
Seven workers, all female, did the cooking, the washing, kept everything scrubbed and fresh and all the rest of it.
Very upright girls, every one. "Here's our laundry house," Mrs. Lovejoy announced, as they came around a bend.

There stood a tidy-looking white brick building with two chimneys spouting smoke and a pile of wood stacked up
alongside it ready to be burned under the wash kettles. The door was wide open, and three young women wearing the gray gowns and mob caps stood beside it chattering and laughing; they also, Matthew quickly saw, were taking snuff up their noses from a snuffbox. When they saw Mrs. Lovejoy they went stiff-backed and the laughter died. Two of the girls turned away and rushed inside, where the heat was probably stifling, to continue stirring the laundry with kettle poles. The third seemed to realize too late that her friends had abandoned her. She had been left holding the snuffbox.

Before the girl could retreat into the laundry house, Mrs. Lovejoy said sharply, "Opal! Bring that to me." And then, under her breath to Matthew: "I have told them such nasty habits will not be tolerated. Pardon me while I apply the whip."

Opal held the snuffbox behind her as she approached, as if that would do any good. In her eyes there was a mixture of trepidation and what? Matthew wondered. Barely-repressed hilarity? Opal's mouth was twisted tight; was she about to laugh in mum's face?

It was never to be known. At that moment came the crunch of hooves on gravel. Two horses pulling a wagon came trotting along the drive from the direction of Mrs. Lovejoy's house. Matthew and the woman stepped aside as the wagon approached. Guiding the reins was a heavy-set, bulky-shouldered young man maybe Matthew's age or just a little older. He was wearing a gray monmouth cap, a russet-colored shirt, brown breeches and stockings and wore a brown cloak over his shoulders. His hair looked to be skinned to the scalp, from what Matthew could see. He had a broad, pallid face with fleshy lips and his scraggly black eyebrows met in the middle.

"May I help you?" Mrs. Lovejoy asked.

"Need talk," the young bulk said; something was wrong with his mouth or tongue, for even that simple sentence was garbled.

"I am with someone," she said crisply.

He balled up a formidable fist and rapped three times on the wagon's side.

Mrs. Lovejoy cleared her throat. "Opal? Would you continue Mr. Shayne's tour of our Paradise? And please do something with that snuffbox. Mr. Shayne, I'm needed for the moment. I'll meet you back at my house in oh fifteen or twenty minutes?" She was already going around to climb up on the seat. Matthew followed her to do the gentlemanly thing.

"Not necessary," she said, but she let him help her.

As Mrs. Lovejoy took his hand and stepped up, Matthew glanced into the rear of the wagon. Back there, among dead leaves and general untidiness, was a scatter of workman's odds-and-ends: some lumberboards of various lengths, a pickaxe and shovel, a couple of lanterns, a pair of leather gloves, a wooden mallet, and underneath the mallet a dirty burlap bag that-

"Mr. Shayne?" came the woman's voice.

He brought himself back. "Yes!"

"You can let go of my hand now."

"Surely." He released it and stepped back, but before doing so he glanced one more time at what he'd thought he'd seen, in case the problem with his vision fading in and out had become a problem of seeing what was not there.

But it was there.

"Later then," said Mrs. Lovejoy. "Take care of Mr. Shayne, Opal."

"Yes, mum, I shall."
The wagon moved off, heading deeper into the property. An interesting wagon, Matthew thought as he watched it follow the drive and disappear beyond a stand of trees. Interesting because of the dirty burlap bag that was lying underneath the mallet.

The bag that had ‘Sutch A’ across it in red paint. If he could have picked the bag up and shaken out the folds, wrinkles and dead leaves he would have read its full declaration: Mrs. Sutch’s Sausages and, below that, the legend ‘Sutch A Pleasure’.
**Twenty-Eight**

"Want a sniff?"

The snuffbox, open to its mound of yellow powder, was suddenly up below Matthew's nose. He stepped back a pace, still with Mrs. Sutch's pleasure on his mind. "No, thank you."

"Don't laugh, you bitches!" Opal called to her friends as the girls emerged grinning from the steaming innards of the laundry house. She took two sniffs up the snoot and sneezed with hurricanious violence. Then she hooked an arm around Matthew's, her eyes watering, and crowed, "I've got me a man!" She pulled him along as if he were made out of spit and straw.

Matthew let himself be pulled.

"Well!" she said, striding with a jaunty step. "What do you want to see?"

"What's worth seeing?"

She gave him a deep-dimpled smile. "Now that's an answer!" She glanced back to gauge if her companions in crime were still watching, and when she saw they'd returned to their labors she released his arm. "Not much worth seein', 'round here at least," she confided. She looked him over from boots to tricorn. "Here, now! You ain't old enough to be puttin' a mater or pater in this velvet prison!"

"I'm bringing my grandfather. And I don't think Mrs. Lovejoy would care to hear your description of Paradise."

"This ain't my idea of Paradise!" she scoffed, her nose wrinkled up so hard Matthew thought the metal ring might go flying out. "Hell, no!" She suddenly seemed to catch her own imprudence. Her cheeks reddened and she widened the distance between them by several feet. "Listen, you ain't gonna go blab about my tongue, are you? I mean, my tongue gets me in awful trouble. I'm already hangin' on to my job by the curl of an ass-hair."

"I won't blab," said Matthew, who was finding the girl to be a sparkling conversationalist. Just what he needed, in fact.

"Might have to go pack my bag anyways, cause of this here whuffie-dust." Opal held up the snuffbox, which was fashioned of cheap birch bark and looked like an item from the shelves of Jaco Dovehart's trading post. "Mizz Lovejoy's already been on me twice this week about it. If Noggin hadn't come along, she was sure to toss me out right then and there."

"Noggin?"

"That's who was drivin' the wagon. What she calls him, I mean. Let's go this way." She pointed out a path leading off the main drive into the woods. Matthew had had his fill of forest travel, but he went in the direction she indicated. He waited a moment until he asked his next question, which was disguised as a statement. "I thought Mrs. Lovejoy told me all the workers here were female."

"They are. Well, all the ones who live on the premises. Noggin lives somewhere else. He comes in to do fix-up work. You know, patchin' roofs and paintin' walls and such. And diggin' the graves, he does that too."

"Oh," Matthew said.

"Matter of fact," Opal said, "here's the graveyard."

They came out of the woods to face a cemetery surrounded by a white-painted wrought-iron fence. Everything was neat and orderly, the weeds kept at bay and the small wooden crosses lined up in rows. Matthew counted forty-nine of them. He didn't know if that was high or not for five years of business, considering the ages and conditions of her guests. He doubted if any of them were too very robust when they arrived, and they went down from there.

"Be another one in here after dark," Opal said. "The widow Ford passed late last night. She was a pretty good old
lady, never caused much trouble. Had a merry kind of laugh."

"After dark?" Matthew paused to lean against the fence. His sense of curiosity, still tingling from his sighting of the burlap bag, received a further pinch. "Why do you put it that way?"

She shrugged. "Ain't no other way to put it. You come here tomorrow, you'll see a fresh grave dug in the night. That's how it's done here."

"Isn't there a funeral?"

"There's a service, if that's what you mean. After the doctor looks 'em over and pronounces 'em dead, the preacher says some words. It's done in the church, right over yonder." She motioned toward a small white building that Matthew could see through the trees. "Everybody who's able and wants to come can pay their finals. The coffin lies in the church all day. Then, after dark, Noggin takes the listen, why are you wantin' to know about this so much?"

"I'd like to know what to expect," Matthew said evenly, "when my grandfather's time comes."

"Oh. 'Course. As I was sayin', then " She stopped and shook her head. "Maybe Mizz Lovejoy ought to be the one tellin' you. I'm already up to my buttbone in trouble."

"All right." Matthew decided to pull back, so as not to scare all the conversation out of her. "Where to next?"

They walked along the path past the cemetery and the church itself. A road went by the church that Matthew thought must connect to the main drive. Further on there was a bench positioned among some trees, and beyond that vantage point the land sloped slightly downward toward a meadow. A number of other white-washed buildings were in view.

"Those are where they live. The guests, I mean," Opal explained. "The one on the right is for the men, the one on the left for the women. Between 'em is the vegetable garden. Then way over there the smaller one is where we live. It's not much, but we've all got our own rooms. Barn's back behind there. She's got some cows and pigs over that way. I'll milk a cow, all right, but I ain't prancin' in pigshit, and I told her just the same."

"Good for you," Matthew said. "What's that?" He pointed toward a low-slung structure beyond the workers' house that looked to be all panes of glass, shining in the sun. "A greenhouse?" He recalled Mrs. Lovejoy mentioning it.

"That's right," Opal said. "Grows her hot plants in there."

"Her hot plants?"

"Her peppers. Mizz Lovejoy's got a craze for 'em. You can't go in there without your eyes start leakin' and your skin get all itchy. At least I can't."

"She has a second business?" Matthew asked.

"What second business?"

"Well she must sell her peppers at market, is what I'm thinking. A little of that goes a long way."

"You'd be wrong," Opal told him. "Mizz Lovejoy feeds 'em to her guests. Grinds 'em up in every damn thing, excuse my French. Even gives 'em pepper juice to drink, mornin', noon and night."

Matthew frowned. "For what earthly reason?"

"Makes the blood flow, is what she says. Keeps everything workin'. I don't know, ask her. All I know is, you ought to see some of them oldies-guests-eatin' their suppers and moanin' with the tears runnin' down their faces. It's just awful." And then she put her hand up to her mouth but she couldn't catch the laugh before it came spilling out.

"I think you're a very cruel girl, Opal," Matthew said, but he was fighting to keep a straight face too because he
could envision the scene she had described. That must make him cruel too, he thought. He was just about to laugh, and he also brought his hand up to cover his mouth.

Before the hand could get there, Opal turned and kissed him.

Actually, she flung herself upon him. She pressed her lips upon his with desperate need, and Matthew thought peppers were cool compared to Opal's fire. He staggered back, but she had hold of him and wouldn't let him go. Her mouth worked at his, her tongue explored, one of her hands gripped his buttocks and Matthew thought he was going to be thrown down and ravished under the trees. But after all, this was Paradise.

"Come on, come on," she breathed in his ear, cleaving to him like a second skin. "We can go in the woods, don't matter. I know a good place. Come on, you ever done it behind a church?" He feared she was going to peel his breeches right off. "You don't know," she said as she pulled at him, her voice near sobbing. "Old people everywhere, and sick, and dyin' right there in front of you, come on, darlin', come on just let me-"

"Opal," he said.

"-have a little bit, a little bit of warm, that's all I'm-"

"Stop," he told her, and he caught her chin and looked into her dazed blue eyes and saw it was not about him at all, no it was not; it was about the place, with its white paint and blue trim and lovely buildings that hid the dark side of Paradise. It was about the wrinkled flesh and the spottings of age and the old women who talked about old dead loves and the old men whose adventures had dwindled down to the size of a chamberpot. It was about the silence of midnight and the frost on the windowpane, and the way a day could be so slow and yet so quick, and how the merry laughter of that good old widow Ford had ended in a strengthless gasp. Matthew knew the truth of this place, and Opal knew it as well; it was where you were put to be forgotten.

"-askin'," she finished, and suddenly the tears bloomed up and blurred the blue and she looked at him as if she'd been struck.

She backed away. Matthew thought she was going to turn and run, but she stopped at a distance and stood staring at the ground as if searching for something she'd lost.

"I " she started, and then went silent again. She rubbed her mouth with the back of her sleeve. He thought she was going to rub her mouth until it bled. "I'm " Once more she was quiet, and Matthew saw her considering her position. When she lifted her gaze to his again, she was full of flame and spite. "I'm going to have to say you advanced on me, if it comes to that." Her eyes were blazing. "If it comes to that," she repeated.

"It won't," he answered, gently.

"I ain't a bad person," she went on. "I mean, I've had my share of scrapes, but I ain't bad. Exactly."

"I need your help," he told her.

She was silent. An expression of incomprehension flickered across her face. Now she did look as if she might turn and run.

"Don't go," Matthew said. "Just listen."

So close to running so close

"Mrs. Lovejoy may be in some trouble." Matthew kept his voice low, but he was also very aware of their surroundings, that no one—especially the mistress of Paradise or her Noggin—would come along the path unheard.

Opal regarded him as he had regarded the rattlesnake beneath his tricorn. "Who are you?"

"I'm going to ask the questions. Has there been a male visitor here lately for Mrs. Lovejoy? Say in the past five days?"
"A visitor? Who?"

"Listen to me, Opal. In the past five days. Has a man come to visit her? A big man, with broad shoulders." Only true when he swelled himself up, Matthew thought. "Reddish-blond hair, parted down the middle. Going gray on the sides. He would have a bandage probably on the left side of his head, just above the ear. Very pale blue eyes. Like ice. Have you seen anyone like that?"

"Here?" she asked.

"Yes, here. Please, Opal, it's important."

"Why is it important?"

Oh Christ! he thought.

"If this is about Kitt, I don't know anything," Opal said.

"Kitt? Who's Kitt?" Matthew felt as if he were back in the night wilderness and unable to see his hand in front of his face.

"I don't know anything."

"All right, then." Matthew held out a hand to steady her, even though she was more than ten feet away. "Tell me about Noggin. He lives somewhere else?" When she nodded, he asked, "Where?"

She shook her head.

He tried for a flintlock shot in the dark, thinking that there might possibly be some connection between the fact that Slaughter's safebox—bought by Mrs. Lovejoy—had been wrapped up in a Mrs. Sutch sausage bag, and now a Mrs. Sutch sausage bag appears in the back of her handyman's wagon. "Do you know the name Sutch?"

"Who?"

The sausages were likely too expensive for her purse, he thought. And too expensive for Noggin's, as well? "Back to Noggin. And use yours, please." He waved away whatever she was going to say before she could open her mouth. "Has Noggin brought a man here to see Mrs. Lovejoy? In the past five days? Or after dark?" But how would she know? he wondered. Where the girls lived was a good distance away from Mrs. Lovejoy's house.

Opal just stared at him, her eyes wide. Matthew thought she was trying to make a decision. Whatever it was, it wasn't easy.

"I am investigating Mrs. Lovejoy," Matthew said. "It's better that you don't know my name. But I believe that a man I'm looking for may have—"

"Kitt found out Noggin didn't bury Mr. White," she blurted out. "She told me. Everythin' she saw that night."

Matthew had stopped speaking at this bizarre assertion; he had no idea what she was talking about, but it seemed very important-urgent-to her. He said, "Go on."

"Mr. White was laid out in his coffin, in the church," Opal said. "For the service. Kitt said for me to look, that Ginger had dressed him up in that fine lace cravat he always wore, and it was a shame such a nice piece of lace was gonna get buried. She had a mind to come back before Noggin put him under and get it, but I said if Mizz Lovejoy caught her she was out on her ear." She paused, making sure Matthew was following.

"Ginger being another servant?" Matthew asked.

"Yeah, she's gone now. But Kitt said she wanted that lace, and she wanted me to go get it with her after we'd fed 'em their supper. I wasn't havin' no part of it. So Kitt said she was gonna hurry to the church, sneak in and get the
lace before Noggin wheeled the coffin out."

"Wheeled it out?"

"He's got a cart with wheels on it, that's how he moves the coffin about. See, he makes the coffins, too. So Kitt went back just as dark was fallin', but she told me she was too late because she saw Noggin's lanterns burnin'. And the thing is the thing is she saw Noggin right there pushin' the coffin into the back of the wagon, and she didn't know what to make of this so she slipped into the woods to watch."

"He'd already dug the grave?"

"That's not what I'm gettin' at," Opal said. "Kitt told me she saw him open the coffin and look in it for a time. Then he reached in, lifted up Mr. White's head-she said she could see his hair in the lamplight-and all of a sudden, whisk! He pulled that lace cravat off Mr. White and wrapped it around his own neck. Then he closed the lid, and he walked back to the graveyard as nervy as you please."

"Then he hadn't dug the grave?"

"No, just listen!" She came closer, until she was right in front of him a hand's reach away. "Kitt couldn't make tits nor teeth out of this, so she followed him. And there was Noggin in the graveyard, tampin' the last of the dirt down on Mr. White's pile. He'd finished it. But Mr. White was still in his coffin, sittin' in the wagon!"

"Noggin didn't bury him," Matthew said.

"That's right! He didn't bury him! But he'd made it look so! Well, Kitt figures she ought not to be where she is, and she starts off along the path away from there. Then all of a sudden somebody comes out of the woods right in front of her, right smack dab, a lantern's pushed in her face, and she said she hollered so loud she was surprised I didn't hear it way down where I was. She said she just turned tail and ran. And she said, 'Opal, don't you breathe a word of this, and I'm forgettin' I saw anything either.' And I said, 'Well, what is it you saw?' And she said, 'I don't know what I saw, but I didn't see it.'"

"Saving money on their coffins, I suppose," Matthew ventured. "Using the same one over and over in the funeral service."

"Yeah, I thought that." She leaned in to him, her eyes wide again. "But what became of Mr. White?"

Her question begged another. Matthew wondered if any of those forty-nine graves were really occupied. Were the bodies actually buried somewhere else? Or just dumped into the woods beyond Paradise? If so, what the hell was this about?

"The next day," Opal said, "I went and looked for myself. Sure enough, the grave was dug and filled and there was a new marker planted. And I started wonderin' right then is anybody to home in there?"

"Interesting," Matthew agreed, but this was totally off the subject of Tyranthus Slaughter. Except for the fact that if Mrs. Lovejoy knew about this fraud, it indicated a larcenous frame of mind. Still, what did she stand to gain from something like that? A few shillings saved on the wood for a coffin? "Have you or Kitt told anyone else?"

"Not me, for sure. I can't say for Kitt. Specially since she up and ran away about three days after it happened. So says Mizz Lovejoy to the staff. Says Kitt must've gotten sick of the work and bolted in the middle of the night. She wouldn't have been the first, just took out for the road. Well, I looked and all her clothes were gone out of her room, and her travelin' bag gone too." Opal held up a finger. "But," she said, "Kitt never would've left without sayin' good-bye to me. Never. I just know it in my bones. So right after that Mizz Lovejoy says she wants to see the staff one-by-one, to find out what might have made Kitt bolt like she did, without even drawin' her week's coin. Find out what might have been so heavy a weight on Kitt, she says. Me, I sat in there across from Mizz Lovejoy and all I thought about was who it might have been come up on Kitt and shone a lamp in her face. And I kept my mouth sealed tight. There you have it." Opal looked in all directions to make sure no one had crept close enough to overhear.

It was an odd story, Matthew thought. He really didn't know what to make of it. A grave dug and filled, but no
coffin or body in it? The coffin and body then put onto a wagon, and taken where? Obviously Noggin knew. Matthew was surmising that Mrs. Lovejoy also knew. And Kitt's fate? Had she actually run away, or had she

There was a very large mallet in the back of Noggin's wagon, Matthew remembered.

But what had Kitt seen damning enough to kill her for?

Matthew figured that had to do with the importance of the secret.

If, for instance, a servant-girl decided to ask for a little extra shine in her pay in order to keep the secret, a mallet might have to fall. Or the decision might be to go ahead and use the mallet early, because if that same servant-girl got in contact with one of the families of a deceased person and talked them into coming back and having a grave dug up

"Tonight," Opal said. "He'll be doin' it again, with the widow Ford."

Whatever Noggin was doing, Matthew knew it had to be nasty.

And Nasty seemed to be Tyranthus Slaughter's middle name.

Was there a connection? He had no idea. But he thought one slime trail might lead to another.

"I'd best get you back," Opal offered, suddenly sounding wan and older than her years. "Oh the man you're talkin' about? I ain't seen nobody like that."

Matthew didn't follow when she started back toward the cemetery, and she paused to wait for him. He asked, "What's your full name?"

"Opal Delilah Blackerby."

"All right, Opal Delilah Blackerby. I want you to have this." He reached into the pocket of his dark green waistcoat, felt for what he knew to be there, and brought it out. "Here. Come take it."

She came forward, slowly, and when she took what he was holding she blinked first at it, then at him, then at it again. "Is this real?"

"It is." The ring was real gold, of course. Was the red stone a ruby? He would leave it for her to find out. Never let it be said that Slaughter's treasure hadn't offered a chance for escape to someone. "I wouldn't show that to anyone else. And I wouldn't care to stay around here very much longer either."

"Why are you givin' me this?"

"Because I like you," he answered, in all truth. "I think you'd make a good detective."

"A what?"

"Never mind. If you ever get to New York, come to Number Seven Stone Street. Can you remember that?"

"Remember it? Hell's bleedin' bells, I'll never forget it!"

"I can find my way back," he said. "Just be careful, do you hear me?"

"I will," she promised. He started to go back along the path, leaving her staring at the gold ring with its small red-ruby-stone, and then suddenly she caught at his sleeve and she asked, "Can I kiss you?"

Matthew said yes, it would be fine, and Opal gave him a sedate but heartfelt kiss on the cheek. A far cry from doing it behind the church, he thought, but maybe at its essence a little bit of warm.

He returned to Mrs. Lovejoy's house. Another servant-girl answered his knock at the door. No, sir, Mrs. Lovejoy
has gone out, she said. Mrs. Lovejoy has asked me to tell you that urgent personal business has called her away, but she will be glad to finish the arrangements if you would come back tomorrow or the following day.

"Thank you," Matthew replied. "Tell her"

Tell her I’ll be back tonight, he thought.

"Tell Mrs. Lovejoy I shall look forward to her charming company," he said, and then he walked to his horse at the hitching-post.
Crouched in the woods that faced Paradise's cemetery, Matthew didn't have long to wait before Noggin came calling.

It was a hazy blue twilight. Matthew had left his horse hitched among the trees at the edge of a meadow about two hundred yards away, back toward the Paradise sign. He had been waiting little more than ten minutes, and here came Noggin's wagon along the road to the church.

Noggin pulled his team up in front of the church, set the brake and climbed down. He lit the two lanterns and set them in back of the wagon. He put on his gloves, took his pickaxe and shovel to the cemetery, came back for the lanterns, stripped off his cloak and then set to work digging a grave with what appeared to be formidable strength.

Matthew settled back. From where he was positioned, he could see Noggin working if not speedily, at least steadily. The digging was not what particularly interested him; it was what happened to the coffin and the corpse afterward.

He'd spent some time this afternoon visiting the village of Red Oak, which was about two miles away from Paradise and the nearest community. It was ringed by farms and lush pastures where cattle grazed in the golden light. Red Oak itself had a busy farmers' market, a main street of craft shops, three taverns, two stables, and between thirty and forty houses separated by gardens, picket fences and fieldstone walls. Matthew had received a few curious looks as he walked from place to place, being a stranger, but for the most part he was taken as having business there and left alone. His business was to stroll into some of the shops and inquire about a handyman from the area called Noggin. The closest he got to an affirmative answer was from the blacksmith, who said he thought he knew a young man named Noggin who lived in Chester, but then again now that he remembered it the man's name was Knocker. Matthew had thanked him kindly and moved on.

The patrons of the taverns had been equally unhelpful. Matthew had gotten back on his horse and ridden another few miles to Chester, where a further unprofitable hour was spent. Then, as the afternoon was growing late, he'd returned along the road toward Paradise, and had decided to stop for a meal and drink at the Speed The Plow.

"Noggin?" The beak-nosed tavernkeeper had shaken his own bald nog. "Never heard the name, sorry."

Matthew had eaten a humble pie and nursed a mug of ale, waiting for the twilight to gather. Several people came and went, a rather raucous drunk had to be swept out with a broom to the backside, and Matthew must have looked a little forlorn at his table because the tavernkeeper called out, "Hey, Jackson! You know a fella by the name of Noggin?"

Jackson, a black-garbed stout who wore a powdered wig and resembled for all the world either a hellfire preacher or a hanging judge, looked up from his second mug of ale and said in a gravel-scrape voice, "Not recallin'," which put paid to that particular bill.

"I know the name," said a younger but equally stout gent sitting at a table just beyond Jackson. "Fella named Noggin did some work for me last summer. Who's askin'?"

Matthew watched Noggin dig, as the darkness began to come on. According to the farmer who lived just outside a village called Nicholsburg, the handyman called Noggin could patch a barn roof like nobody's business. Could chop wood like there was no tomorrow. Could slap on paint as sure as the day was long. And had told the farmer in his garbled voice that he was just trying to make some extra money because his regular employer was a tightfisted

"Bitch, was the word he used," the farmer had related, over the mug of ale that Matthew had bought him.

"I'm sorry to hear him speak of the lady in that way," Matthew had said.

"Oh?" The farmer's thick brown eyebrows had gone up. "Do you know Mrs. Sutch?"

It had taken Matthew a moment to digest that. "Mrs. Sutch?"


"That's who he said he worked for. Owns a hog farm up north of Nicholsburg. She makes sausages."

"Ah," Matthew had said, brushing some invisible dust from the front of his waistcoat. "Sausages."

"Big taste for 'em in Philadelphia, I hear. Too damn expensive for the home folk, though."

Matthew listened to the wind moving through the trees. He heard Noggin's shovel stop scraping dirt.

In another moment he heard the dirt start going back into the grave.

The farmer couldn't describe Mrs. Sutch. He'd never seen her. A private type of lady, he thought. Had heard tell of Mrs. Lovejoy, but had never seen her either. She was probably private, too.

Nicholsburg was about seven miles up the road, the farmer said. He didn't get down this way often, but this morning he'd gone nearly to Philadelphia to a cattle sale. "What was it you were wantin' Noggin about?"

"Oh," Matthew had said, "I'd heard he was a good worker. Just trying to find him."

"I don't think he's the kind of fella you find," came the reply. "He finds you."

It was almost full dark. Matthew watched as Noggin used his shovel to tamp down the dirt. Noggin did a good job of it, not rushing at all. Then Noggin came back to his wagon, took a wooden cross from it, and planted the marker with two firm whacks of the mallet. After his tools were squared away, Noggin carried one of his lanterns into the church, and Matthew sat wondering if the lowest point of human evil could ever be reached.

Noggin returned wheeling his cart with the coffin on it, and the lantern on the coffin. He pushed the coffin into the back of the wagon with ease. He took the cart back into the church for the next occasion, and when he came back out again he opened the lid and looked into the widow Ford's face as if determining whether she had anything worth stealing. Matthew saw by the lamplight that Noggin's flat, bovine features were totally devoid of expression. Not even a shred of curiosity. Noggin was obviously an old hand at this; he even had the ill manners to yawn in the widow's face before he eased the lid shut. For the sake of decorum he'd brought along a ratty old gray blanket, which he spread over the coffin. Then he took off his gloves and threw them in the back. He put on his cloak and hung the two lanterns up on hooks on either side of the driver's seat. The horses rumbled and shifted, ready for a trip.

Matthew watched Noggin get the wagon turned around. When the wagon pulled away, heading back in the direction of the main road, Matthew emerged from his hiding-place and made his way as quickly and safely as possible across the meadow to his horse. As he mounted up, he looked toward Mrs. Lovejoy's house through the trees on the other side of the meadow. Not a light showed in the windows.

He turned his horse, caught sight of Noggin's wagon by the glint of the lanterns, and set forth in a leisurely pursuit, for Noggin was going somewhere but in no hurry.

Matthew also had plenty of time. He kept watch of the lanterns, and followed Noggin under the same sky of stars that had looked down upon Lark, Faith and Walker that night in the forest. He still felt he was Walker's arrow, shot through the dark. It might take him a while to reach his destination, but reach it he would. He still felt he was trying, for Lark.

The horror of both the Burton house and the Lindsay house had come to him in nightmares every night since he'd arrived in Philadelphia. He thought they would be waking him in a cold sweat for many nights to come. That was how it should be; he should not easily forget those scenes. They were part of his penance. But one thing kept coming back to him, over and over again, in broad daylight as well as deepest dark.

The marbles that had belonged to Lark's brother. On the table and the floor in that murder room. Then rolling across the floor in the watermill. Thrown through the window by whom?

Matthew didn't believe in ghosts. Well, yes, he did, actually; he believed Number Seven Stone Street was haunted by the unquiet spirits of the two coffee merchants who had killed each other there. He might tell himself those bumps and thumps were Dutch stones settling into English earth, but often he felt he was being watched, or heard a
faint chuckle or saw a shadow pass across the corner of his eye where there should be no shadow. He did believe in those ghosts, but what unquiet spirit had tossed a handful of marbles through the watermill’s window?

It was something he’d thought about, but which he didn’t wish to think about for there was no answer. He’d told himself quite sternly that it had not really been the dead boy’s marbles thrown through the window, but instead pebbles that his heated and pain-wracked brain had incorrectly seen. Some passing farmboy had heard the fight, peered through the window and thrown pebbles in to distract one man from killing another. Then the boy had hidden while Slaughter raged and raved.

But why hadn’t this boy come forward? Why hadn’t he gone to fetch the constable? Why had no boy appeared in Hoornbeck to tell his tale, during the duration of Matthew’s stay there?

A ghost? The marbles hadn’t been ghostly. They’d clattered loud enough when they’d hit, and one had given him a substantial sting to the neck. Or had they been only pebbles, after all?

When this was over and the local constable informed that Mrs. Lovejoy’s dead guests did not stay in their graves, Matthew had decided he would go back to that watermill and find out if either marbles or pebbles lay on the floor. But first there was this and Mrs. Lovejoy was going to have to explain how her thief trap had ended up holding Slaughter’s buried treasure. Mrs. Lovejoy? Mrs. Sutch?

What did the mistress of Paradise have to do with the queen of spicy sausages?

He thought of something Opal had said, about the pepper plants: Mizz Lovejoy feeds ’em to her guests. Grinds ’em up in every damn thing, excuse my French. Even gives ’em pepper juice to drink, mornin’, noon and night.

Matthew watched the lanterns far ahead. He saw them sway with the wagon.

Is anybody to home in there? had been Opal’s question about the cemetery.

He had the mental image of Hudson Greathouse sitting in Sally Almond’s, eating some of Mrs. Sutch’s sausages for breakfast. Whew, this is hot! he’d said, as he’d blotted sweat from his forehead with his napkin.

And Evelyn Shelton, saying, Only have ’em a few days a month as is, so if you want ’em you’d best get your order in!

Matthew whispered, “Easy, easy,” to his horse, though it was he who had given a start, as if a cold hand had suddenly been laid across the back of his neck.

He refused to consider what had just gone through his mind. Refused it. Shut the book on it. Closed the coffin. Mrs. Sutch owned a hog farm up north of Nicholsburg. A hog farm. Pork. Hear me?

Opal’s voice came to him, asking, But what became of Mr. White?

And, the real question: What may have become of all forty-nine people supposedly buried over a period of five years in Paradise?

Mrs. Lovejoy? Mrs. Sutch?

Sisters in crime? Or one and the same?

Matthew had no idea. He banished these wild, unsettling, and downright sickening suppositions from his mind, as best he could, and concentrated on the glint of Noggin’s lamps. The wagon moved on, the horse and rider following at a distance behind and cloaked by the night.

Two hours passed, during which Matthew drew no closer nor fell back no further. In a shift of the chill breeze he caught the rank scent of hog filth, and by that he knew Noggin was near his destination.

The wagon turned to the left. Its lanterns suddenly disappeared. Matthew picked up his horse’s pace, and in a few
minutes came to the forest track that Noggin had followed. Through the trees Matthew could see no lights, but the
smell of the hogs was overpowering. He urged his mount forward, though even the steadfast horse grumbled and
didn't seem to want to proceed. About fifty or sixty yards along the track, with dense woods on either side, Matthew
cought sight of lanterns. He instantly dismounted, led his horse among the trees and tied the animal up. When he had
sufficiently bolstered his courage, he left his tricorn and cloak with the horse and crept through the forest into what
appeared to be yellow layers of smoke hanging in the sullied air, the stomach-turning miasma of hog stench.

It was developing into a delightful evening.

Through the trees and low underbrush, Matthew saw that Noggin's wagon had pulled up alongside a one-story
house painted dull gray. The house had a front porch with a rope handhold up the woodblock steps, and window
shutters painted the same gray as the walls. Light showed in the windows and a lantern hung on a hook next to the
door, which was shut. Matthew wondered if Noggin had crafted the house, for though it seemed at first glance to be
of good construction it began to dawn on him that the structure was somewhat malformed, that the walls were
crooked, and none of the windows were the same size. A stone chimney spat smoke from the yellow roof, which sat
like a crumpled hat on the head of a blowsy drunk. Matthew thought Noggin might be an able handyman, but house
building was not his talent.

A black horse with a white star on its forehead stood tied to a hitching-post on the far side of the house. Matthew
saw the dark shapes of other structures beyond the house, back where a few fitful lanterns burned and the haze was
thick enough to choke a mule. From what he could tell there looked to be a barn, another utility building of some kind-the slaughterhouse?-and finally a scabby-looking rectangular building that might be a smokehouse. The noise of hogs gobbling and grunting came from the
pens.

The domain of Mrs. Sutch. Matthew thought it was very far indeed from Paradise.

Noggin was nowhere in sight. The coffin's lid was open. Matthew shifted his position a few feet and saw an open
cellar door. A faint glow of dirty light washed out upon the boards.

He knelt down, mulling his situation. It would be a simple matter now to ride back to the village of Nicholsburg
and knock on doors until he roused someone who had something to do with the law. He could get there in about
twenty minutes. Go from door to door and raise hell, if he had to. Sorry to wake you up, sir, but Mrs. Sutch's
handyman Noggin is stealing dead guests from Mrs. Lovejoy's Paradise and carting them up here to the hog farm,
where he's taking them into the cellar, and would you please lower that musket from my face, sir?

Noggin suddenly came up through the cellar door, which caused Matthew to duck even though he was already on
the ground. Matthew had a glimpse of Noggin's dark-stained leather apron before the handyman trudged on toward
the buildings out back. The haze swallowed him up.

Something moved behind Matthew. He sensed it first before he heard it. The back of his neck rippled, and then
came the quiet sound of brush being stirred by a body. Matthew whirled around, his eyes wide, for he thought surely
someone he hadn't counted on being there was going to jump him, and he would have to fight for his life.

But no there was no one there.

Matthew's heart was racing. He had to struggle to regain his breath. An animal of some kind had just skittered
past, he thought. Damn if it hadn't turned his temples gray.

He saw Noggin returning to the house, carrying a bucket in each hand. Noggin went back unhurriedly into the
cellar, like any workman doing a job he's done many times before.

This would be number fifty, Matthew thought.

He no longer felt safe out here. His skin was still crawling. In another moment Noggin was going to come back
and shut the cellar door. Matthew stood up. In back of the wagon would be the shovel, the pickaxe and the mallet, if
Noggin hadn't already taken them inside. Matthew figured those items stayed in the wagon. He had to make a quick
decision that might end his life right here and now. The longer he delayed, the worse. He pushed out through the
brush, crept up to the wagon, debated for about three seconds which of the items he could use, decided against his first choice, the pickaxe, because he didn't want to burst Noggin's skull, and picked up the mallet. He stood at the cellar door, the mallet upraised, waiting for Noggin to appear.

He waited.

No Noggin.

From within, at a distance, he heard what sounded like an axe at work. On what, he dreaded to think, but it didn't sound like wood.

Matthew took a deep breath and peered inside. A few lanterns hung from beams overhead. The cellar had dirt walls, and looked to be a warren of small rooms and passages. Like the diggings of a rat's nest, Matthew thought. Or the tunnels of a coal mine. In the larger chamber before him stood a number of barrels, coils of rope and chains, a cupboard in the corner and on the floor a stack of burlap bags with Mrs. Sutch's legend already painted on them in red.

The chopping noise was coming from the right. He eased down the cellar's steps and saw along the passageway a shadow thrown by lamplight from one of the rooms. It had a shadow axe, and was cleaving a shadow something that appeared to be hanging from the ceiling. Matthew heard liquid running into a bucket. He decided this was not where he wished to be.

"can't go back and pick up like it was only yesterday"

The muffled voice was coming from above Matthew's head. A woman's voice.

Thunk thunk thunk went the axe.

"if you would help me, that particular door might not be"

A man's voice, responding.

That voice was very familiar. Sickeningly familiar, in fact.

"Ty, listen to me!" said the woman sharply. "He won't take you back. Not now, not ever."

Ty's voice pitched lower, became silken in its cajoling. Whatever Ty wanted help with, he meant to get it. Matthew had lifted the mallet, as if to strike at the speaker though separated by a floor of uneven boards. His heart was pounding, and a sheen of cold sweat glistened on his forehead. He knew the voice of Tyranthus Slaughter, all right. And the woman calling him "Ty" sounded like Gemini Lovejoy, but less genteel now and more hard-edged.

In the room along the passage, Noggin kept chopping. Further in the cellar, Matthew saw a set of steps going up to a door. When he took the second one, it let out a squeal that made his blood curdle; he froze in place, expecting either the door to open or Noggin to come rushing along the passage, but the voices kept muttering and wrangling. The two Lovejoys were having a dispute, it seemed. He intended to find out what issue stood between the loving harmony of a killer and a whatever she was. He eased up the steps and peered through a crack where door and wall should have met. He could see nothing but yellow lamplight in a room with dark brown wallpaper, so he put his ear to the crack instead and listened to the Lovejoys fuss.

"shouldn't have come here," she said. "Of all places."

"I told you, I'd worn out my welcome in that boarding house. Chester is not my idea of a fascinating destination."

"Be damned with that!" she snapped. Matthew heard a chair scrape. Were they both sitting down? At a table? "I told you, long ago, that I was done with you! I couldn't help you anymore!"

"Ah, Lyra!" Slaughter's voice was like warm honey. "Couldn't, or wouldn't?"
"Both. Now we've been going over this all afternoon. How much longer are you going to stir the pot?"

"Oh," he said, and Matthew could imagine him shrugging and giving a cold smile, "until the stew is ready."

She was silent. Then: "Your head's leaking again."

"Yes, that happens when I become disturbed. The stitches were put in by a country idiot, what do you expect? Would you get me a fresh cloth?"

Matthew's nerves jangled. The chopping noise had stopped. But now it began again, and Matthew could relax a little because at least he knew where Noggin was. He heard Mrs. Gemini Lovejoy-also her own twin, Mrs. Sutch-walk across the floor and return. The chair scraped once more, and Matthew presumed she had seated herself. He thought they might be sitting at a kitchen table, because there was also the clink of a plate or a glass.

"Thank you," said Slaughter. "You should have seen me, Lyra! All the old fire and ability came back. Makes a man delight in living, to know he hasn't lost a step."

"I still don't believe you. About the three constables and the Indian."

"Three of the hardest constables you ever set eyes on," he insisted. "Militia soldiers, every one. Took me out of that madhouse and treated me like a common criminal. The Indian came later, as I said. But I killed them all, I did. Outsmarted them, and put them down. The Indian got me, yes, but I polished him off, too, when push came to shove. That's when I'm at my best, Lyra. When my back's against the wall. As it is now, dear one. As it is now."

"I'm not your 'dear one'. And stop crowing. I know your abilities. That's not the problem."

"The problem," Slaughter said, "is that you're telling me he has no need for my abilities. When we both know I was his favored one. We both know he relied on me to settle his accounts, more than any other." Mrs. Sutch was quiet, and Slaughter added, "Look how neatly I polished off Richard Herrald. That still counts for something, doesn't it?"

Matthew's knees almost buckled. Polished off Richard Herrald? What madness was this?

"Professor Fell will take me back," Slaughter said, in the room beyond. "He's not going to let a talent like mine go to waste."

Truly, Matthew nearly had to sit down. He put his eye to the crack, but still saw nothing of the two villains. He thought they were sitting just to the right of his position. He was aware that Noggin had ceased chopping; now there came a scraping noise, blade against bone.

Matthew's brain crackled as he took it all in: Tyranthus Slaughter had been an assassin working for Professor Fell in England. Settling the professor's accounts, which included murdering Fell's enemies who received the blood cards. Richard Herrald, Katherine's husband and founder of the Herrald Agency, had been on Fell's murder list, and had met a hideous fate in London about ten years ago.

Greathouse, Slaughter had said at Reverend Burton's cabin. I don't know that name, but I swear you're familiar.

Probably because Greathouse looked enough like his elder half-brother for Slaughter to have his memory jogged, though he couldn't connect one man to the other.

Slaughter had murdered Richard Herrald, on behalf of his employer Professor Fell. His very strict employer, who had the habit of having associates killed once they landed in gaol, to ensure the secrecy of his operations. Thus Slaughter had preferred a stay at the Westerwicke public hospital, and a pretense of being mad, rather than spending any time whatsoever in a gaol.

As Greathouse himself had said, No one makes Professor Fell angry and lives very long.

Not even, evidently, the professor's own assassins.
"You did that job a long time ago," Mrs. Sutch countered. Matthew heard the clink of glass against glass; was she pouring from a bottle of wine? "And that was before he found out you were working for yourself. Masquerading as a nobleman and killing those girls! Really, Ty! Without his permission, and without paying him a percentage! You knew you were dead if you stayed there, and you know you can't ever go back again."

Slaughter didn't speak for a time. When his voice came, it was raspy and hesitant, as if some measure of strength had left him. "Tell me, then," he said, sounding small and even a little frightened, "where is my place?"

"Not here. I want you gone. Tonight. If he knew I was still in touch with you, it'd be my throat cut." Spoken like a true woman of business who looks at the balance sheet and sees liability. Matthew wondered if this was the female partner with whom Slaughter had jumped through hoops of fire as a circus acrobat in his youth. He could imagine it printed in festive letters on the broadsheet: Presenting the Daring Ty and Ly!

"You owe me." Slaughter had regained his dignity; his voice was stone-cold. "I gave you the idea for this. Told you how you might do it, and look how Mrs. Sutch's sausages are so well-loved, with that little bit of extra spice in 'em! People crave 'em, don't they? Damn right they do, just like I said they would!" There was a loud slap: the noise of his palm hitting the table. "Don't you scowl at me, woman! I know where your bodies aren't buried!"

Matthew felt feverish. He wiped his forehead with his sleeve.

It is like pork, Slaughter had said. But sweeter. In the human meat can be tasted the essence of food and drink consumed by that body in happier times. There are some, I hear, who if left to their own devices would become enslaved to the taste of human, and want nothing else.

A popular dish at Sally Almond's, indeed. Sausages likely made most with pork, but with the extra spice of human meat saturated with hot peppers. Matthew recalled seeing them oily and glistening on Greathouse's breakfast platter. This would really slay him.

My God! Matthew thought. How he could use Quisenhunt's rotator pistol right now!

"Lyra," Slaughter said softly. "I don't mean to fight with you. After all we've been through together? All the times I've come to your aid?"

"We're paid up," she answered. "I bought that damned box for you, so you'd know one when you saw it. You were too stupid to quit while you were ahead."

"I shall bare my back to your lash. You may whip me for my stupidity—for my ambition—a thousand times, if it pleases you. But this thing I'm asking this one thing would mean my salvation. I'm begging you, as I have never begged another human being and shall never again beg please give me someone to kill."

"I can't."

"You can. You have the power to bring me back into his grace, Lyra. Just one name, is all I'm asking. Someone he wants dead. It doesn't have to be a hard one. Or make it the most difficult on the list, I don't care. Please. Now look closely you'll never see Ty Slaughter grovel like this again, so mark the momentous occasion."

Matthew heard her sigh.

"You're an insane fool," she told him, but her hard edge had softened.

"True," the killer replied, "but I am forever and dependably your insane fool."

Lyra Sutch muttered an oath that Matthew had never heard come from a woman's mouth, and indeed had thought it was beyond a woman to imagine such a mindboggling crudity.

There came the sound of a chair scraping back.

"Come downstairs," she said.
Thirty

The door opened. The two killers descended the stairs, lady first.

In the darkness beneath them, Matthew was already on his knees on the dirt floor. He dared to peer out from his hiding-place, but not far enough that the lantern's light might catch him. Mrs. Sutch, wearing an austere gray gown and with a black netting over her leonine hair, went to the cupboard, drew a latch and opened the doors. Slaughter's boots clomped down the steps, the gentleman dressed in a black suit. Obviously he'd either found a tailor to do a quick job, as Matthew had, or more likely some victim had died for his clothes. It pleased Matthew no end that Slaughter's face was less ruddy and more the shade of Mrs. Sutch's gown, and that he held a mottled blue rag pressed to his scalp stitches.

"Now that's what I'm talking about!" Slaughter said, in admiration for what was contained within the cupboard.

Light glinted and gleamed off a variety of weapons held on hooks. Matthew saw three pistols, four knives of various lengths and shapes, two pairs of brass knuckles, one of which was studded with small blades, and two black cords used for the strangler's art. An empty space above the cords indicated that some implement of murder had recently been removed.

Tools of the trade, Matthew thought.

Mrs. Sutch reached deeper into the cupboard and slid out a shelf. On it was the fifth thief trap Quisenhunt had made. She opened it so quickly Matthew couldn't see if she'd turned the latches horizontally or vertically. She lifted the lid, as Slaughter plucked one of the knives from its hook and examined the blade with the air of an artist considering a new brush.

Papers crackled within the box. Mrs. Sutch brought out a small brown ledger book and opened it, positioning herself beneath the nearest lantern in order to better read what was written there. "As of the last posting, there are two in Boston," she said. "One in Albany. That would be an easy job for you. A retired judge, fifty-eight years of age. Crippled in a riding accident last year. Received his card in London, March of 1697. Oh here. This one would please the professor." She tapped the page. "Are you up to a trip?"

"I can travel."

"This would be to the Carolina colony. Twelve days or so, depending on how hard you want to ride. But he's not going anywhere. In the summer he left New York, where he was a magistrate. Settled now as manager on Lord Peter Kent's tobacco plantation, just west of the town of Kingswood. His name is-"

Matthew almost spoke it, if speaking wouldn't have gotten him killed.

"-Nathaniel Powers," she continued. "A friend of Herrald's, by the way. Received his card in London, July of 1694. Sailed from Portsmouth to New York with his family in September of 1694. Obviously he has a healthy respect for the professor's determination. It's time his card was called to count."

"Absolutely time," Slaughter agreed, and seemed to be admiring his reflection in the knife's shine.

"Take what you please."

"I've come upon a bounty of blades just recently. I have a sufficient pistol, as well." He put the knife back upon its hook. "But tell me, what's missing right there?" He touched the empty space above the cords.

"A new item, brought from South America. A blowpipe. It uses a dart tipped with frog venom that causes "

"Instant death?" The way Slaughter said that, it was religious.

"The muscles to stiffen and the throat to constrict," she corrected. "Within seconds, the victim cannot move. It's being experimented with."
"Who has that job?"

"We have new blood among the brethren, since you've been gone."

"It's gratifying to know our profession shall not die for want of youth," Slaughter said, and then he, the lady and Matthew all looked across the cellar as Noggin came out of the passageway lugging a damp and dripping Mrs. Sutch burlap bag that appeared to be heavy with contents. Noggin carried it out the cellar door, bound for some destination Matthew didn't wish to think about.

"Can you trust him?" Slaughter asked, as Mrs. Sutch closed the box and slid the shelf back.

"He does what I tell him, when I tell him. He's dull, but smart enough to ask no questions." She shut the cupboard and pushed the latch home. "From time to time, I let him have one of the girls at Paradise."

The fate of Kitt, Matthew thought. And of how many others?

"You amaze me." Slaughter had turned toward Mrs. Sutch. He lowered the cloth from his head, and Matthew could see that the hair had been shaved away from the vivid red gash and its ugly stitches. "Always the spirit of industry. You can work any ten people into the ground."

"You know where I came from. What I went through, and what I saw. Poverty and misery have always been the greatest of incentives. Besides," she said with a faint smile, "I'm making a fortune for both myself and the professor."

"As if he needs more."

"He always needs more. And so do I."

They stared at each other for a moment. Then Slaughter reached out to touch Mrs. Sutch's cheek. She pulled away, her face grim. Slaughter let his arm drop.

"When you do the job," she told him, "come back here. Send Noggin for me. At that point, we'll consider what the next step ought to be. I'm not promising anything."

"I understand." Slaughter was all business now as well; the sparkle had gone out of his eyes.

"Do you have money?"

"Enough, yes."

"Then I want you out of here now," she said, and she went up the stairs. Slaughter followed her without a word, his face lowered and shrouded with shadows.

The door closed.

Matthew heard footsteps creak the boards. They were moving toward the front of the house. He was lightheaded, because he'd been breathing so shallowly. He drew a long breath and kept watching the cellar doorway, expecting Noggin to return at any minute. He didn't think any of the pistols in the cupboard would be loaded or he would have been up and at them already, if he could coax his legs into moving. Slaughter was on his way to kill Nathaniel Powers in the Carolina colony. Mrs. Sutch was in charge of the blood cards, and of arranging the murders on behalf of Professor Fell. His own name was on that list, of course, and he wondered what Slaughter's reaction would have been to hear it. How did Mrs. Sutch manage the job? Did she get some kind of message from Professor Fell, or from one of his associates, directing whose name should be added to the list? Did she then make the blood card here? Using blood from either the hogs or-more of a macabre touch-the gutted guests of Paradise? He wondered if his own card had been daubed from the blood of Mr. White. A bizarre riddle occurred to him: what color was White on white?

Did Noggin deliver the cards? Maybe by packet boat from Philadelphia? Or did someone else carry the cards out?
So many unanswered questions, and so little time.

But Matthew kept staring at the cupboard. In there was Quisenhunt's fifth thief trap, and within it was a book with the names of Fell's murder list. What else might be in that book, and what other papers in the box?

"Noggin! Noggin!" Mrs. Sutch was outside, calling for her handyman. Slaughter must have already ridden away. It sounded as if Mrs. Sutch was moving toward the rear of the place, back toward the pens or the utility building.

There indeed wasn't much time. Matthew stood up, went to the cupboard and found the latch. He put aside his mallet, opened the cupboard, slid out the shelf and looked at the thief trap.

"Noggin!" Mrs. Sutch shouted, still at the back of the house.

Matthew now faced a question regarding the box. Was it an armed thief trap, or simply a locked keyless safe? He ran his fingers over the latches. One was nearly horizontal, the other just to the right of vertical. If he turned the latches the wrong way, would smoke and sparks explode from the keyhole? What if the powder charge was not set, but the hammer mechanism was armed? Either way, the noise would bring Mrs. Sutch running. He could take the whole box, he decided. That would be the safest thing. Just take the whole box and get out of here. But he needed the lamplight to see what he was doing. In the dark, it would be impossible to line the latches up either perfectly vertically or horizontally. And which version of the two might this be?

He could take the box and a lantern. He reached up, lifted a lamp from its hook and then set the lamp atop the box. He picked the box up with both arms. It was heavy, but not unmanageable.

He turned toward the cellar door, took a single step and stopped as if he'd been slapped in the face.

He was no longer alone.

Standing in his way was Mrs. Sutch.

She smiled tightly; in the lamplight her eyes seemed to possess glowing centers of red.

"Good evening, Mr. Shayne," she said in a quiet, strained voice.

With an effort, Matthew answered, "Hello, Mrs. Sutch."

They stared at each other, the lioness and her prey.

The moment hung, both Matthew and Mrs. Sutch standing motionless as paintings.

Mrs. Sutch suddenly lifted her arm, not without a certain feminine grace. The axe she'd picked up at the back of the house emerged from behind her gray gown. She had come prepared to do her share of the night's work. Her smile crumpled. She showed her teeth.

"Noggin!" she screamed, her face contorting into a picture from Hell, and Matthew thought she might well be announcing her target because she gripped the axe's handle in both hands and, rushing forward, brought it down for his head.

He lifted the box. The axeblade crashed into it and knocked it and the lantern from his hands to the floor. He spun around to get at the weapons in the cupboard, but he heard the whisper of the axe coming at him again. As he threw himself to the left the blade whacked into the cupboard. The guns, knives, and all the rest of the deadly collection jumped off their hooks.

The woman was on him before he had time to right himself. The axe was flying at his face, and as Matthew tumbled backward the blade hissed past, nearly rendering him noseless. Before she could bring the axe back for another blow, Matthew reached for the stack of burlap bags, picked one up and whipped it into her eyes. A second whip of the bag sent her reeling, and then Matthew leaped forward and hit her, female or not, smack in the forehead with his fist.
Mrs. Sutch fell across a coil of rope, but she did not relinquish her hold on the axe. All Matthew wanted to do was get out, devil take the box and everything in it; he found this intent denied, however, as Mrs. Sutch heaved herself up from the ground and stood between him and the cellar door, her teeth gritted and the axe upraised.

"Noggin!" she shouted, loud enough to wake the widow Ford. "Come here!

Matthew knew he was finished when Noggin came. He bent to pick up a length of chain, but the woman charged him once more. The axe flashed with lamplight. Matthew jerked his head back, and the blade thunked into the wall. Then Matthew grabbed hold of the axe and they fought for it, spinning each other around and around, banging into barrels and staggering back and forth across the cellar. Everything was blurred and chaotic, a mad nightmare, Mrs. Sutch kicking at his legs, spitting in his eyes and biting at his hands, he trying to pull the axe out of her iron grip.

Suddenly she shoved him hard against a wall. A knee came up and caught him square in the groin. Pain stole his breath and nearly crippled him. His legs sagged and he slid down. She stepped back to give herself room to bash his brains out, but before she could steady her legs to deliver the blow Matthew had scrambled away from her, almost on hands and knees. He found himself in the passageway that Noggin had come out of, and desperate to buy some time and find a weapon he half-ran, half-stumbled toward the lamplit room that had thrown such hideous shadows.

"Noggin!" she screamed, her throat shredding.

Matthew knew she'd be after him, Noggin or not. He flung himself into the chamber, fell onto his knees, and there through his pain-hazed vision saw the depth of Mrs. Sutch's pleasure.

Hanging from the ceiling beams in this dirt-walled room, along with a few blood-spattered lanterns, were a half-dozen chains each ending in a sharp iron hook about five feet off the floor. Items impaled on some of these hooks looked at first to be nothing more than marine creatures from the deep brought up in a fisherman's net: here twisted blue coils like an aquatic worm, there a gleaming mass like a crimson skate, here a grayish-purple fist-sized lump with cords dangling down like the tendrils of a jellyfish. Two buckets full of blood stood beneath a wooden trough, within which lay a ferrago of gore and matter that was best not too closely examined. The chamber's smell was also nautical, of sea brine and low tide. On the floor very near Matthew were, oddly enough, a pair of bare feet chopped off at the ankles, a pair of wrinkled hands and beside them the white-haired decapitated head of an elderly mermaid, her eyes half-open as if groggily awakening from sleep and her gray lips pressed tight to keep a secret.

The widow Ford had come to pieces in here. An extra bit of spice, to be added to the next batch of sausage.

Matthew stared at the hanging internals, which were swinging ever so slightly. He thought it was very economical that Mrs. Sutch used all the body as she did. All the organs, as well as the meat. Bone marrow too, most likely. Didn't want to get the nails into the mix, though. Or the teeth. The head was probably due to be cracked last, for the brains. Then everything into the pot along with the pork, and after the sausages were shaped and cased they went into the smokehouse. Very economical of her, very efficient.

He thought he could lose his mind, kneeling here before this altar of evil.

With a shriek of rage Mrs. Sutch hurtled into the room. She lifted her axe, and when it fell it cleaved deep into Matthew's head.

Or, rather, the head he'd picked up from the floor, which had belonged to the widow Ford and which Matthew had thrust up in front of his own to take the blow.

Mrs. Sutch saw she'd chopped the wrong head and began to try to fling it off the axeblade, but it was stuck tight. She beat the head against the floor, to no avail. Then she gave a scream of frustration, put her foot upon it and pushed, adding indignity to the sorry fate of the widow Ford. As Mrs. Sutch was so occupied, Matthew crawled to one of the buckets of blood and took hold of it. He struggled to his feet against the ache of his bruised stones and threw the gore full into her face.

Spitting blood that was not her own, her face, hair and the front of her gown streaming crimson, Mrs. Sutch dropped the axe and the head it was buried in. She staggered back into the passageway, her hands up to clear her eyes. For good measure Matthew flung the bucket at her, but she was already moving and the bucket only crashed
Matthew knew she wasn't done. He knew also that she'd gone to find something else to kill him with. He looked around and saw a second axe leaning against the trough, this one with a bloody blade. The handyman's tool. But where the hell was Noggin? Matthew heard Mrs. Sutch shout for him again, her ragged voice carrying the high note of desperation. She knew, as well as Matthew did, that if Noggin wasn't here by now he wasn't coming.

Matthew picked up the axe. He turned to face the doorway, the pain at his groin forcing him into a crouch.

When Mrs. Sutch returned, her face a dripping bloodmask, she was gripping in each hand a knife from her collection.

"I don't want to kill you," Matthew said. He held the axe up.

If she feared the blade, she gave no sign of it. She feinted once, trying to get him to commit, but he stood his ground. "You're in your grave," she whispered, as her knives carved the air between them. "In your grave. Oh yes, in your grave." Her eyes were fixed upon his, both daring and taunting him. She shifted two steps to the left and then came back to the right. "In your grave," she repeated. "Yes, you are. In your-"

She leaped at him, the knives flashing.

Matthew had no time to think, only to react. Neither did he have time to aim. He just struck out with the axe, as Mrs. Sutch slashed at his face with one knife and at his throat with the other.

Before she could get to him, there was a crunching sound. Mrs. Sutch gave an animalish grunt and was flung away. She fell down in the wet red dirt. She blinked, her eyes wide with shock and perhaps more than a touch of madness. Then she began to try to get up once more, but her left arm was no longer a working part of her body.

"Stay down," he told her.

She was on her knees. She stared at the knife in her right hand, as if drawing strength from it. Then, shaking with either rage or pain, she got up on her feet.

"Don't," Matthew said, the axe ready again.

But he knew she was coming. She had passed beyond the human state, into a creature that must kill to survive. At that moment Matthew thought of the monster's tooth in McCaggers' attic. A supreme carnivore, McCaggers had said. Formed for the function of both destruction and survival.

Both she and Slaughter were of the same breed, Matthew thought. Formed for the same function. Kill or be killed.

He watched as she came toward him, but slowly now, with a terrible silence. The blade was thrust forward; the monster's tooth was seeking flesh. He retreated, brushing past the chains with their hanging pieces of meat.

She was now the full creation not of God, but of Professor Fell. Whatever the professor was, he had the power to take the raw clay of humanity and mold it into something monstrous.

The monster's tooth. Evidence of what God had told Job, about the behemoth and the leviathan.

*God spoke to Job from the whirlwind,* McCaggers had said. *He told Job to gird up his loins like a man, and face what was to come.*

*I will demand of thee, He said.*

Mrs. Sutch attacked with a sudden burst of speed and ferocity, her teeth gritted, her eyes wild in the bloody face, the knife seeking Matthew's heart.

Matthew swung the axe. Even as the blade tore into flesh and broke bone, Matthew was aware that the knife had
pierced his waistcoat and shirt because he felt the point of the monster's tooth pressed against his skin, felt it poised to bite into his guts but quite suddenly its power was gone.

Mrs. Sutch had lost the knife, and she was falling backward. All of her head was no longer there. She fell into the chains and staggered against the trough and then slid down to the floor, where her body quivered and her legs shook in a hideous palsied dance.

Incredibly, she put her remaining good hand to the floor and looked to be trying to get up again, and she lifted her misshapen head toward him and gripped her fingers into the dirt in an attempt to crawl. The expression of pure, cold hatred on her face riveted Matthew.

It said, *Don't think you've won, little man. Oh no for I am the least of what is ahead for you*

She drew a terrible, shuddering breath, and then he saw her eyes cloud over and her face freeze. Her head pitched forward but her fingers dug deeper into the dirt-once, twice, and a third time-before they stilled. Her hand stayed twisted into a claw.

For a long time, Matthew could not move. Then, at last, the full impact that he had killed another person hit him, and he hobbled out of the cellar next to Noggin's wagon and threw up until he was just heaving and gasping, but never in all this distress did he let go of the axe.

Matthew unbuttoned his waistcoat and opened his shirt. The blade had given him a shallow bite across his ribs about two inches long, but it wasn't so bad. Not as bad as Mrs. Sutch had intended. His groin, though, was a more painful subject. He would think himself lucky if he could walk tomorrow.

But Slaughter was on his way to kill Nathaniel Powers. To settle an account for Professor Fell. Matthew thought he might have trouble walking tomorrow or the next day, but somehow he was going to have to gird up his loins enough to climb on his horse and ride to Nicholsburg, to find some help. It would be an unlucky farmer who answered his door tonight. First, though, there was a box in the cellar that needed to be opened.

After this mess was sorted out, he was going to have to ride south, to the Carolina colony, and get to Nathaniel Powers before Slaughter did.

Matthew leaned against the wagon, waiting for his head to clear and his nerves to settle. That might take a while. He looked at the empty coffin, and at the shovel lying there in the back.

Something was missing, he realized.

It was the damnedest thing.

Where was the pickaxe?
Thirty-One

A solitary rider came along the road, under the gray November sky. The road went straight between young trees. At its end stood a red brick two-story plantation house with white trim, white shutters and four chimneys. On either side of the road, beyond the trees, were the tobacco fields, brown and barren now until April. The solitary rider reined his black horse in for just a moment, while his gaze swept across the landscape, and then he continued on his chosen path.

He was a well-dressed gent, on this cold and somber morning. He wore tan-colored breeches, white stockings, polished black boots, a dark blue waistcoat and a dark blue jacket overlaid with a design of paisley in lighter blue. On his head was a tasteful white wig, not too ostentatiously curly, and atop that a black tricorn. Black gloves, a black cloak and a white cravat completed his carefully-crafted attire.

He had just come from the Gentleman's Rest Tavern and Inn in Kingswood, where he'd spent the past two nights. They knew him there as Sir Fonteroy Makepeace, aide to Lord Henry Wickerby of the Wickerby estate near Charles Town. This title had also appeared in the very formal letter sent from Sir Makepeace by way of a young courier from Kingswood to the door of the plantation house now drawing nearer. Such was the communications of one gentleman to another, and the privileges of breeding.

As Sir Makepeace rode his horse along the drive, a groom who'd been notified to expect the visitor saw him coming and emerged from his small brick watchhouse that stood alongside the main entrance. He went up the front steps to alert the other servants by using the brass door knocker cast in the shape of a tobacco leaf, and then he hurried to bring over a footstool and hold it steady as Sir Makepeace dismounted. The groom offered to take the gentleman's horse around to the barn, but Sir Makepeace said it wouldn't be necessary, that his business would only take a short while and it was fine to just keep the animal here.

The groom gave a respectful bow and said As you wish, Sir Makepeace.

"Good morning, Sir Makepeace," said the rather stocky, balding servant who came down the steps to meet him. Climbing the steps to the front door appeared to be a bit hard on Sir Makepeace, if anyone was watching. He brought a cloth from his waistcoat pocket and blotted some beads of sweat that had risen on his face. Then he put the cloth away, looked back to make sure the groom was standing firm with his horse, and allowed the servant to usher him inside.

A servant-girl came forward to take Sir Makepeace's cloak, hat and gloves, but he said, "I'll keep these for the while, miss. I'm rather cold-natured." She gave him a polite smile and a quick curtsy.

"Mr. Powers' office is this way, please," said the male servant, motioning up the staircase.

Sir Makepeace looked up the stairs. His face showed just the slightest ripple of unease.

"Men usually keep their offices on the lower floor," said Sir Makepeace.

"Yes sir, that may be true," the servant answered, "but Lord Kent has given Mr. Powers an office on the upper level, so that he might always have a view of the fields."

"Ah." Sir Makepeace nodded, though his smile did not completely take hold. "My business is with Mr. Powers, but is Lord Kent in residence?"

"No sir, Lord Kent is currently in England and shall not be back before summer. This way, if you please."

Sir Makepeace followed the servant up the stairs and to a closed door on the right side of the house. The servant knocked, there was a muffled, "Come in," and the servant opened the door for Sir Makepeace's entry. He closed it as soon as the visitor had crossed the threshold.

Sir Makepeace gave the office a quick once-over. It was richly appointed, with cowhide chairs, a brown leather sofa, and in the corner to his right a gold-and-black lacquered Chinese screen. A chandelier holding six lanterns
hung from the ceiling. The desk was on the far side of the room, where a man in his mid-fifties, with dark brown hair gone gray at the temples, had removed his reading spectacles and risen from his chair. "Mr. Powers?" said Sir Makepeace, as he walked across a red carpet toward the desk.

"Yes," Nathaniel Powers replied. Since leaving his position as magistrate in New York he'd grown a gray goatee that his wife, Judith, actually thought was quite handsome. Behind him a pair of windows looked out upon the fields, and to his right a second set of windows offered another view of the fields that included several of the plantation's workbuildings.

"A pleasure to meet you," Sir Makepeace said. He removed his gloves as he approached. "I much appreciate your taking the time to see me, as I have business to conduct."

"I assumed so. I must say, though, I'm not familiar with Lord Wickerby or the Wickerby estate."

"No matter. I have here an item concerning an old account of yours that needs to be settled. To be polished off, you might say." With a frozen smile, Sir Makepeace reached into his waistcoat.

"Mister Slaughter," came a voice from behind him that caused the rest of him to freeze. "Please keep your hands at your sides."

The nobleman turned slowly toward the source of his irritation. Matthew had emerged from his concealment behind the Chinese screen, and he stood halfway between it and Tyranthus Slaughter.

"Pardon me," said the nobleman, with an air of bewilderment. "Do I know you?"

Matthew kept his own hands behind him. He was relaxed, but not lax in his assessment of his foe. Slaughter was carrying a knife or pistol—possibly both—within his waistcoat. Either one of his boots could be hiding a blade. He might even have a knife under that damned wig. But it was clear that Slaughter was somewhat diminished from their last meeting. Slaughter's face was gray and puffy, with dark hollows beneath his eyes. Sweat sparkled at his temples. Matthew wondered if Walker's arrows had not done the job on him, after all, and Slaughter's blood was poisoned. Still the most dangerous beast was one that was both wounded and trapped.

"Lyra Sutch is dead," Matthew told him. "I have the ledger book of Professor Fell's accounts to be settled." He saw Slaughter flinch on that one. "Your career has ended, sir. The man who is standing outside that door has a pistol, and so does the groom who took your horse. Of course we weren't sure who Sir Fonteroy Makepeace actually was, so we had to let you come up." He did not say that Powers' office was usually downstairs, and that this was Lord Kent's bedroom, redecorated. The point had been to get Slaughter further away from an exit, if only to underscore the difficulty of escape.

"Mr. Powers?" Slaughter lifted his hands, as if to beg a question. "Is this young gentleman mad?"

Powers looked from Slaughter to Matthew and back again. "I have complete faith in his judgment. He intends to take you to New York, but from what he's told me about you over the last few days, I would have shot you as soon as you walked through the door."

"Really?" The gentlemanly veneer of Sir Fonteroy Makepeace cracked, and peering out with narrow, red-rimmed eyes and a half-snarl was a monster who had perhaps been born long before the small sound of a rat biting a bone in a Swansea coal mine. "But I don't see that he has a gun, sir, or anything else with which to take me anywhere I don't wish to go."

"Well, actually," Matthew said, and brought from behind his back the three-barreled black rotator pistol that Oliver Quisenhunt had been kind enough to loan him when he'd returned to Philadelphia to ask for it, "I do."

Slaughter moved.

He lowered his shoulder and like a charging bull smashed through the wood frame and glass squares of the window to his left. Matthew pulled the trigger, aiming at Slaughter's legs. A ragged-edged hole exploded in the wall, but through the billowing smoke Matthew saw the killer leap into space.
"My God! My God!" Powers was shouting. The door burst open and the servant, Doyle by name, came rushing in with his pistol drawn. Matthew got to the aperture where the window had been in time to see Slaughter below him, sliding down the sloped roof of the outbuilding on which he'd landed. His tricorn and white-curled wig were tumbling down behind him. Then Slaughter dropped to the ground, staggered and nearly fell, but gained his footing and started running with a pronounced limp toward the cluster of worksheds and barns. Beyond them was three hundred acres of open tobacco field, and beyond that the Carolina woods.

Matthew saw Slaughter run past a few startled workmen in a blacksmith's shed and then disappear into the darkness of another workbuilding. Damn, what a jump! He'd never imagined Slaughter would've risked a broken neck to make an exit, but that was the nature of the beast: death before surrender.

"Sir!" Doyle said to him. "What shall we do?"

Matthew had no idea what other weapons Slaughter might have. He couldn't ask anyone else to fight his battle for him. He opened the compartment in the rotator's handle and brought out the second paper gunpowder cartridge.

"I've got a musket!" Powers' face was ruddy with excitement. "I'll blow the shit out of him!"

"No sir, you'll stay right here." Matthew tore the cartridge and primed the second barrel. "Doyle, I want you to stay with the magistrate. I mean " He waved off his confusion as to his ex-employer's current position. "Just be his bodyguard," he said.
"I don't need a bodyguard!" Powers shouted, further incensed.

Matthew asked himself where he'd heard those words before. He said, "Your family would think otherwise."

Thank God their own home was at another location. He heard people coming up the stairs. It was Corinna, the servant-girl, and Mrs. Allen, the cook. Matthew got past them as they came forward to press themselves on Powers' nerves, and he ran down the steps, through the house and out the back door that led into the work area.

Though the labors of the tobacco plantation were never-ceasing, there was not so much activity here this time of year, and the workmen fewer in number. Matthew set his course for the shed that Slaughter had entered.

Matthew couldn't help wondering where he was. Not Slaughter, but the other one. The one who had taken the pickaxe from the back of Noggin's wagon and hit Noggin in the head with it while the handyman was crouched down in the woods relieving himself. A man with a broken skull could not answer a shout, no matter how desperate.

When the constable from Nicholsburg had found Noggin dead the next morning in the woods, with that pickaxe planted in his head, Matthew had known who it must be. Incredibly, who it must be. The same person who had thrown a handful of marbles against the gearwheel in the watermill. The same person Matthew had seen on a horse, following him at a distance day after day on the road south. Matthew had no doubt who it must be. A resourceful person who could take care of himself. Who could take a fierce beating and keep going, mile after mile. Who could read the ground and the sky. Who could build a fire, who knew how to hunt, and how to lay a snare. Who could push himself nearly beyond the limits of human endurance, and who had an iron will to survive. Who also knew how to steal a horse, which he'd done in the village of Hoornbeck the morning Slaughter had left with the knife peddler.

In these last few days Matthew had started leaving a jug of water and some food out for him, just before dark at the edge of the woods. The food was always gone the next morning and the jug emptied, but then again it was hardly needed because there was a stream nearby and he'd seen plenty of rabbits. One could say an animal might have taken the food, but one would be wrong. But also right, in a way. Matthew had looked for the glow of a fire, but on those many nights of travel when he couldn't find an inn and had to sleep outside, he'd never seen any fire but his own, so why should he see one now? But he was out there, all right. Waiting. The question was, where was he now?

Matthew reached the building that Slaughter had entered and eased into it with his pistol ready and all his senses alert. He passed slowly and carefully through a storehouse of wagon parts, extra harnesses, yokes and the like. On the opposite wall was an open door. He passed through it, and outside again.

Before him, about forty yards distant, was a large red barn. It was where the tobacco leaves were stored to age, pressed into bundles or put into hogshead barrels pending shipment. Matthew could see across the field from his position; there was no sign of Slaughter. The barn's door was partly open.

He approached the barn, briefly hesitated to solidify his resolve, and then with his finger on the pistol's trigger he went inside.

The light that streamed in was dim and dusty. Matthew saw around him stacks of barrels as tall as a man and thick bundles of tobacco leaves wrapped up with rope. Handcarts stood waiting for use, and ahead was a wagon half-loaded with barrels. He moved cautiously, taking one step and then stopping, listening for any movement.

The back of his neck was tingling.

He had nearly reached the wagon when he heard a quick sliding sound. Like the dragging of an injured leg. There and then gone. It had come from his right. He changed course for that direction, his heart slamming in his chest.

Three more steps forward, and he heard the click of a striker being cocked almost directly ahead of him.

Slaughter had a pistol.

Matthew thrust his own gun out at arm's length, and so was ready when suddenly Slaughter rose up from behind a wall of tobacco bundles less than six feet away and thrust his own pistol forward. Matthew's finger tightened on the trigger, but he didn't squeeze it. He saw Slaughter's gun barrel drift to the right. Slaughter blinked heavily, as if
trying to focus on his target. Matthew thought he might have taken such a jolt in the fall that he was seeing double.

Or maybe he was nearly used up. Slaughter's face was pinched with pain and damp with sweat. The flesh around the ugly wound on his scalp was so swollen the stitches had torn open, the gash wet and glistening. Tendrils of gray liquid were trickling down the side of his face, and Matthew caught the odor of corruption.

"Shall we die together?" Slaughter asked, bringing the barrel to bear on Matthew. "I don't fear it."

"Lower your gun."

"No, I think I will not. I think I will pull my trigger, you will pull yours, and that will be the end of it." He managed a lopsided grin. "Does that suit you?"

"I'd rather live a little longer," Matthew answered, watching Slaughter's trigger finger. "You can choose life too, if you wish. It's not the end of the world."

"Oh, but it is. The end of my world. What else-" There came the sound of something moving, very fast.

A body hurtled through the air from Matthew's right. A knife's blade flashed in a blur and went into the side of Slaughter's neck, and as Slaughter's face contorted and he turned to shoot his attacker Matthew had no choice but to pull the trigger. He shot Slaughter in the side, about halfway down the ribcage.

Slaughter's pistol fired downward, in a burst of sparks and smoke. Pieces of tobacco leaves flew into the air. He staggered back, clutching the wound in his neck that now poured blood over his cloak, his cravat and his paisleys, and the pistol fell from his fingers.

He looked with both amazement and incomprehension into a face he didn't seem to recognize. "Who are you?"

The boy was gaunt. His hair had grown out some. His clothes were dirty, his eyes were steely gray and the point of the knife he held was blood-red.

Matthew remembered what Walker had said, when he'd seen a figure behind them on the trail and Matthew had dismissed it as delirium:

_Following. I saw him twice. Very fast._

_Saw who? Matthew had asked._

_And Walker's answer had been: Death._

_Tom answered the question with a statement, his voice cold and matter-of-fact: "You hurt my dog." _

Slaughter reached into his waistcoat. He brought out a knife of his own. He lunged at Tom, but the boy had already retreated. Then Slaughter began to flail with the knife, left and right, his teeth gritted and eyes hideous with dying rage. Matthew figured it was likely the knife with which he'd planned to cut Nathaniel Powers' throat, and then make a quick escape.

Tom had lifted his blade to stab Slaughter again, but now he stopped as the bleeding wretch before him slashed wildly at the air. Slowly, Tom lowered the knife to his side. He backed away.

Slaughter was still fighting. He fell against the bundles and stabbed them in a frenzy as if striking flesh, sending brown ribbons of tobacco flying. Matthew wondered what he was trying to kill. He wondered what he had _always_ been trying to kill, in one way or another.

Tom walked a distance and bent to the ground.

Slaughter was running down; his watch was about to stop. He dropped the knife, his head lolling.

"Matthew?" It was the voice of Nathaniel Powers, the stubborn man who didn't need a bodyguard. "Matthew?"
The barn door was pulled open wider. There looked to be six or seven men at the entrance, drawn there by the sound of the shots.

Slaughter straightened himself up. He ran a hand down the front of his paisley-patterned coat, as a lord might do to smooth it before meeting his public. Even as the life's blood streamed from his neck and bloomed around the hole in his side, he looked at Matthew with eyes that yet in their gathering dark held a red glint of ferocity.

"My compliments," he allowed. "I said you were worthy. But Matthew you never could have bested me. Not alone."

Matthew nodded. As Slaughter had told him in the watermill, *It would take two of you to polish me off.*

But he'd been wrong. It had taken three.

Now, though, it appeared he was well and truly polished.

"You have aided my ambition," Slaughter said. "My title. Where I'm going they'll make me royalty."

Lifting his chin, he took an unsteady step toward the door. Then another, dragging his injured leg. Matthew followed behind him, as he staggered onward. At the threshold, Slaughter fell to the ground on his knees. The knot of men backed up to give him room to die. Powers had a musket, Doyle had his pistol, the groom also brandished a gun, and the others all carried either wooden clubs or other implements of violence. At the back of the group, Mrs. Allen held a large rolling-pin.

Tyranthus Slaughter gasped and forced himself up. He lurched forward again, his fists clenched. Suddenly he lifted his right fist and cocked it back, as if about to hurl a thunderbolt of evil into their midst. Before him the crowd shrank away, their faces taut with fear that even their guns and clubs and rolling-pin could not overcome.

Slaughter took two more steps toward them, his fist upraised and trembling, and the crowd retreated two.

And then Slaughter began to laugh, that deep slow sound of a funeral bell.

Matthew watched as Slaughter opened his fist, and the handful of dust he was holding streamed away between his fingers.

When his hand was empty, the funeral bell ceased its tolling.

Slaughter pitched forward, and lay stretched out upon the earth.
PART SIX: A Meeting of Night

Owls

Thirty-Two

On a bright, breezy afternoon in the middle of November, a flat-bottomed ferry barge from Weehawken tied ropes at Van Dam's shipyard, and discharged its passengers onto the wharf after an hour's trip across the Hudson.

A wagon pulled by a team of horses rumbled off the boat and onto the boards. Its driver then steered the horses into the town's traffic along King Street and turned to the right on the busy Broad Way, while the boy sitting next to him took in the sights, smells and sounds of New York.

The wagon was passing the intersection of Beaver Street and the Broad Way, heading south toward the Great Dock. Three men engaged in conversation in front of a tallow chandler's shop fronting the Way paused in their snide remarks concerning the bilious green of Lord Cornbury's new hat and took view of the wagon. One of them, a little barrel-chested gent standing at the center, caught his breath. He said, with a smudge of disgust, "Choke a duck! Corbett's back!"

With that, Dippen Nack took to his heels in the direction of City Hall.

Matthew heard several people shout to him from the sidewalks, but he paid them no mind. As much as he was glad to be back—as much as he'd thought he would never be back—the place seemed foreign, in a way. Different. As alien as Walker's village had seemed, at first. Had there been this many houses and buildings when he and Greathouse had left, more than a month ago? This many people, carts and wagons? This much clatter and bustle? He wondered if part of Walker had not returned with him, and he was seeing New York through an altered vision; he wondered if he would ever see it the same way again, or feel he truly belonged here among citizens who had not witnessed such vicious murder, violence and evil, or who had not killed a woman with an axe and fired a bullet into a man's body.

He had returned home, but not as he'd left. For better or for worse, he had blood on his hands. As did the boy beside him, but if Tom suffered any qualms about his part in the death of Tyranthus Slaughter, he kept them locked up in the ironclad vault of his soul. The most he'd professed about it to Matthew was that he viewed it as an execution, and lawful or not it was done so it wasn't worth speaking of any more.

But Matthew was sure Lillehorne was going to have a lot to say about it.

"Matthew! Hey, there!" Running up alongside the wagon was his friend, the blacksmith's apprentice John Five, newlywed in September to Constance Wade, now the happy Mrs. Five.

"Hello, John," Matthew answered, but he kept the team moving.

"Where've you been?"

"Working."

"You all right?"

"I'll be all right," Matthew said.

"Folks were wonderin'. When your partner came back last week, and you didn't. I've heard what he's been tellin', about the redskins. Some were sayin' you'd had it."

"Almost did," Matthew said. "But I gave it back."

"You up to comin' to supper one night?"
"I am. Give me a few days."

"Okay." John reached up and slapped Matthew's leg. "Welcome home."

Not much further along, a well-dressed middle-aged woman with an exuberant, sharp-nosed face waved at him with her handkerchief and stepped forward. "Oh, Mr. Corbett!" she called. "So good to see you! Will we be reading any more of your adventures in the next *Earwig*?"

"No madam," he told Mrs. Iris Garrow, wife of Stephen Garrow the Duke Street horn merchant. "Definitely not."

"But surely you won't *deprive* us!"

"Some things are best left to the imagination," he said, for he'd decided that the spicy element of sausages once sold at Sally Almond's to patrons just such as Mrs. Garrow need not be revealed. He knew that High Constable Farraday in Philadelphia felt the same about keeping the lid on the grisly box, for there was not enough water, wine, ale or hard cider in the colonies to wash that taste out of people's mouths.

"Are you somebody *special* 'round here?" Tom asked.

"Just a citizen," Matthew said, as they left Mrs. Garrow behind. "The same as anyone."

It was no surprise to Matthew that Hudson Greathouse had returned to New York, because he'd already known it to be true. After Nathaniel Powers had given him and Tom this wagon and some money to get back on, Matthew had turned off the Philadelphia Pike on the very same road by which Slaughter had directed his captors to Fort Laurens. Tom had remained silent as they'd passed the New Unity cemetery and Reverend Burton's cabin. On reaching the treacherous slope that led down to the ruins of the fort and beyond it the Seneca village, Matthew had seen that the wagon afforded him and Greathouse by High Constable Lillehorne was gone.

Matthew and Tom had left their wagon at the top of the hill and walked the rest of the way. Passing through Fort Laurens onto the path to the village, their progress was soon accompanied by the noise of cawing crows and barking dogs from the depths of the woods. When the first feathered brave finally showed himself, Matthew called out, "English!"

Again, there was a merry circus among the tribe as Matthew and Tom were escorted in, but after Matthew stuck out his chest and hollered, "English!" a few more times he was taken to a forbidding-looking, solemn man who at least could understand a little of the language and speak it enough to be understood in turn.

From what Matthew could gather, Greathouse had regained enough health to walk out on his own two legs, with the help of a hickory stick. In the time he'd been there, he had earned respect from the medicine sisters because, if Matthew comprehended this correctly, he had wrestled with Death in the wilderness beyond and returned grinning like a wolf. It seemed, from what the solemn Indian was able to make clear, that Gray Wolf had sat before the fire with the elders and drank a cup of rattlesnake blood with them, which much impressed everyone. Also, he was quite the good singer, which Matthew would never have guessed.

The Indians had previously brought in the two old nags that had pulled the wagon, intending—from what Matthew could gather—to kill them and use them as food for the dogs, but prevailing wisdom had dictated that the dogs should not suffer such an indignity. So they were allowed to graze and serve as playthings for the children until the day came that Gray Wolf was ready to leave. Then the horses were taken back up the hill, the wagon was pushed to the top and turned in the direction of the English world, and Gray Wolf set off for his home.

Matthew would have been interested to see how Gray Wolf had talked himself across the Raritan river ferry, having no money, but maybe he'd offered a song for his passage.

Before he'd left, Matthew had turned around and found that He Runs Fast had come out of the crowd. He Runs Fast spoke to the interpreter, and the question directed back to Matthew was: "Where son?"

"The Sky Road," Matthew said.
The interpreter didn't understand this. Matthew tried again: "Tell him his son did a great deed, his son was a true son, and now his son has gone to walk with the spirits."

The message was relayed and an answer given. "You say dead?" asked the brave, speaking for He Runs Fast.

"Dead, yes."

He Runs Fast had been silent for a moment, staring at the ground. Then he spoke quietly, and the interpreter said, "He wish spirits make sense." But after saying that to the interpreter, He Runs Fast had turned away, and had broken into a trot in the direction of the lake.

Matthew's wagon had reached the Great Dock, where it appeared another merry circus was in progress, with a number of ships being loaded and unloaded. Crates and barrels were being carted up and down gangplanks, dock workers rushed around to the orders of their supervisors hollering through the sawed-off horns of bulls to amplify their voices, ropes were being coiled up, chains rattled, horses stamped nervously at their wagons and as usual the higglers were shouting to sell their roasted chestnuts, hot cider and corncakes.

"Always like this?" Tom asked.

"Pretty much," Matthew halted the team, "I'll be right back. I have to find the next ship leaving for England." He set the brake and got down, then went around to the rear of the wagon. In the back were two duffel bags that Powers had afforded them, holding a supply of clean clothes for their return trip to New York, and a smaller brown canvas bag.

Carrying the canvas bag, he walked along the dock until he saw a hook-nosed, bewigged man in a light gray suit who was marking in an account book with a pencil. He didn't know the individual, but reasoned he was one of the dock managers. He approached, got the man's attention from the confusion of commerce, and inquired about the ship he sought.

The man turned a page. "The Golden Eye. Care to sign up?"

"No, thank you. Where is it?"

"Two down, wharf nine. Leaving on the next tide. It'd be a grand adventure."

"Thank you all the same."

Matthew set off for wharf number nine, the numerals painted in white on the pilings. He was almost there when he heard the quick clack-clack-clacking of shoes on the timbers behind him, nearly running, and before he felt the black cane with its silver lion's-head tap his shoulder none too gently he heard the sharp voice say, "Corbett! What the devil is this?"

Matthew stopped and turned to face Gardner Lillehorne, who wore a sea-blue suit, a tricorn the same aquatic hue, and a waistcoat striped blue-and-ebony. Behind him smirked Dippin Nack, who was always eager to watch Matthew receive a verbal thrashing.

"Where is the prisoner?" Lillehorne demanded. On the narrow, pallid face his carefully-trimmed mustache and goatee seemed to bristle.

"Thank you, sir," Matthew answered calmly, "for your appreciation of my return. I can tell you that it was an iffy proposition."

"All right, all right! I'm gratified you've returned! Now where's Slaughter?"

"And speak up!" Nack added, to which Lillehorne shot him a warning glance.

"I'm actually very glad you're here, to witness the transfer." Matthew motioned toward the ship on its moorings at wharf number nine. "I understand," he said, "that the Golden Eye is the next vessel sailing for England. Come with
me, won't you?" He started for it, and heard the clack of Lillehorne's boots following.

"What game are you playing at, Corbett? Don't you realize that John Drake, the Crown's constable, has been staying at the Dock House Inn for nearly three weeks? And who do you think is shouldering that cost? New York, that's who!"

Matthew waited for a couple of men to pass lugging a huge trunk, and then he went up the gangplank. Lillehorne was right behind him. Matthew stopped at the end of the plank. He opened the canvas bag, uptilted it, and upon the deck fell two polished black boots, somewhat scuffed in their tumble down a roof.

Lillehorne looked at the boots and then, incredulously, at Matthew. "Are you absolutely mad?"

"I seem to remember, sir, that you said in our office, 'I want the prisoner's boots on the next ship leaving for England, and good riddance to him'. Isn't that what you said?"

"I don't know! I don't remember! But if I said that, I meant for him to be in the boots! And these could be any boots you found between here and wherever you went. Now I know what happened to Greathouse, and I regret that but it was his own greedy fault."

"Greedy!" Nack crowed, standing behind Lillehorne.

"Drake's come to take the prisoner into custody!" Lillehorne plowed on. "Where is the prisoner?"

"Tyranthus Slaughter is buried on the grounds of Lord Kent's tobacco plantation in the Carolina colony," Matthew said. "If you wish to know the details, I suggest you visit Nathaniel Powers, or ride to Philadelphia for a meeting with High Constable Abram Farraday. Or Drake can go, I don't care. All I care is that Slaughter's boots are on the next ship leaving for England, which was your stated requirement." Matthew glared holes through the high constable. "And good riddance."

"Sirs!" came a bellow from the deck. "Either move your asses out of the way or start loadin' freight!"

The suggestion of physical labor put naked fear on the faces of Lillehorne and Nack, but Matthew was already descending the gangplank. He strode back along the dock toward his wagon.

Lillehorne hurried to catch up with him, while Nack brought up the rear. "Corbett! Corbett!" Lillehorne said, as he got up beside Matthew. "I'll hear the details from you! This minute!"

Where to begin? Matthew wondered as he walked. If Greathouse had already related the incidents leading up to the exploding safebox, that was to the good. He could pick up the story with Walker, he thought. Of course, sooner or later he was going to run into the part about Mrs. Sutch, and he wasn't sure Lillehorne was ready for that. Certainly it was not something Nack needed to hear, and then go flapping his red rag about town.

He wondered what they would think of Tom's story. That, to him, was the most amazing part.

Tom had spent about eight hours at the house of the Reverend Edward Jennings and his wife in Belvedere. When he had slept enough to get some strength back, he had simply gotten up in the dark just past midnight and gone out the door. He had reasoned that Slaughter was following the road south to Caulder's Crossing, which he himself had passed along on his journey north. Nothing in the world mattered so much as finding that man and killing him, and in the cold resolve of Tom's voice Matthew felt as if Slaughter had come to stand for many tragedies in the boy's life, or maybe Evil itself. In any case, Tom was bound to follow Slaughter no matter how far the killer travelled or how long it took, and so he'd left Belvedere on the same route that Matthew and Walker had followed.

Not knowing about Slaughter's attempt to steal a horse and his subsequent jaunt through the woods, Tom had kept to the road. Just before dawn he'd slept about two more hours, but he'd never needed much sleep anyway. Then, further on and as the day progressed, he'd sighted tracks coming out of the forest. One traveler wearing boots, two wearing moccasins.

They led him to a house he'd stopped at before, on his journey north. Where the family had been kind to him, and
fed both him and James. Where the girl named Lark was so very pretty, and so kind as well, and where the boy, Aaron, had shown him a bright variety of colored marbles in a small white clay jar. He and Aaron had spent more than an hour shooting marbles, and it had amazed Tom that there was still a boy to be found somewhere inside him, because by this time he’d already killed a man in self defense down in the Virginia colony.

He had gone into the house, he’d told Matthew. He had not shed a tear, he’d said, since his father had died; he was done crying, he’d said. But these murders, of these innocent and kind people, had shaken him to his soul. Of course he knew who’d done it. And he’d found himself looking at Aaron's marbles scattered across the table, and picking up four or five in his hand, and thinking that if he ever needed anything to keep him going, to push him on when he was tired or hurting or hungry, all he had to do was touch these in his pocket and think of that day a good family had let him be young again.

But he was not young anymore.

He had taken some food from the kitchen table and a knife from a drawer. He didn't think they would mind. He had found the broken boards in the back of the barn. Had found the tracks going up the hill. Had followed four travelers who were following one, deeper into the forest. But he was still weak, he’d told Matthew. Still in pain from his injuries. He was going to kill Slaughter, yes, and he didn't want Matthew or Walker to stop him, or stand in his way. That would be a problem. He figured he was going to have one chance to kill Slaughter. Just one. He would know it when it came.

Gunshots and shouts in the night had given him direction. The next morning he’d sighted Matthew and Walker on the trail, had seen that the Indian was badly hurt, and had ducked down when he knew Walker had gotten a glimpse of him.

There was nothing he could have done at the ravine, where Matthew went over the fallen tree. Tom had watched Lark and her mother jump, but he had also seen the arrow go into Slaughter. Then, at the watermill, Tom had seen Slaughter getting the better of Matthew, had seen Matthew’s face about to go into the gears, and the only thing he could do to help was to throw a handful of marbles. He'd hidden when Slaughter had gone rampaging through the woods, and had thought Matthew was swept over the waterfall.

Tom had followed Slaughter into Hoornbeck, had watched him come out of the doctor's house freshly-stitched and go to the Peartree Inn. Tom had hidden all night where he could see the place, and waited for Slaughter to emerge. Early in the morning, Slaughter had come out with another man carrying some boxes, set them in the back of a wagon and headed off. Tom had had to find a horse to steal, in a hurry.

Not far from Philadelphia, Tom had pulled his horse off the road as he’d watched the wagon pull off ahead. Slaughter and the other man sat talking, and then they had gotten down and Slaughter had clapped him on the back as they’d walked into the woods on the side of the road. In a few minutes, Slaughter had returned, climbed up on the wagon and continued on his way alone. Tom had found the corpse in the brush, the throat cut, and had also discovered a few coins in the dead man's pocket, enough to buy him food and drink for the next few days if he couldn't beg or steal anything.

In time, Tom had shadowed Slaughter to a hog farm north of a town called Nicholsburg. He was amazed there to see Matthew appear, and creep into the cellar. The hulking man who had brought a coffin in the back of his wagon and hauled a dead body out of it was clearly up to no good. Matthew hadn't come back out, but it appeared no one had found him yet because the coffin-robber emerged lugging a damp and nasty-looking bag just as easy as you please. So Tom figured the pickaxe in the back of the wagon could be put to some use, and Matthew would have a chance to do whatever he was doing and get out with his skin on.

Slaughter had ridden away. Tom had followed, still waiting for his one chance to strike.

A black suit. A black horse. A black night. Tom had lost Slaughter at a crossroads. Had gone a distance in all directions, but the man was gone. Not lost, but gone.

"You came back and decided to follow me? All that way?" Matthew had asked. "Why?"
"'Cause," Tom had answered, with a shrug. "I knew that if you were alive, you'd keep tryin'."

Now, as Lillehorne and Nack followed Matthew to the wagon, Matthew said, "I'll tell you the whole story later. I want to talk to Hudson first."

"Well then, who's this?" They had reached the wagon, and Lillehorne was motioning at Tom. "I send you after a killer and you bring back a boy?"

"Tom helped me. I couldn't have done it without him."

"Oh, I'm sure," Lillehorne sneered. "Tom who?"

"Bond," said the boy.

"Where are your parents?"

"Got a grandpa in Aberdeen."

"No one else?" He waited, but Tom just gave him a blank stare. "What are we supposed to do with him?"

Lillehorne asked Matthew. "Add him to the orphanage roll?"

"No, sir," Tom said. "Not an orphanage." He climbed down and took his duffel bag from the back. "Say you found the next ship leavin' for England?"

"Put your bag down," Matthew told him. "We've come a long way. There's no hurry for that."

"Got a long way yet to go," Tom answered. "You know I'm one to keep movin'."

"I should say so." Matthew thought he ought to try again, since he wanted to at least buy Tom a good meal at the Trot and introduce him to the regulars there, but he knew it would be a waste of breath. When this boy made up his mind to do something, it was done. "Wharf nine. The Golden Eye, leaving on the next tide. I hope you don't mind that Slaughter's boots are lying on the deck." He reached into the pocket of his waistcoat for some of the money Powers had given him. "Here. I want you to-

"No charity," Tom interrupted. "I'll work my way over, if they're hirin'." He aimed his intense gray eyes along the row of masted vessels, and he gave the faintest hint of a smile as if he sensed the opportunity for a grand adventure. "Figure I ought to learn somethin' about ships, anyway." He held out his hand. "So long."

Matthew shook it. The boy's grip was as hard as his grit. "Good luck."

Tom swung the duffel bag over his shoulder and moved on. True to his nature, he never looked back.
"The truth," said Greathouse, as he ruminated over his third cup of wine, "is that we failed." He frowned, rethinking his statement. "No," he amended. "I failed. As the one with the most experience-I won't say the most sense-I should have known he was going to try something. I just didn't know it was going to be so effective." He took another drink, and then he grinned across the table at Matthew. "Did I tell you they named me Gray Wolf?"

"Several times." At this point in the evening, Matthew could not bring himself to tell his supper companion that he'd already known it.

"Well then, there you are," Greathouse said, though Matthew wasn't exactly sure where they were in this conversation. One minute they were talking about Slaughter, the next about the great one's experiences in the Seneca village. It seemed to Matthew as if Greathouse had actually enjoyed his time there, once it was sure he'd returned from the wilderness beyond.

They were sitting in the Trot Then Gallop, on Crown Street. This being Matthew's first night back, his meal and drinks were on the house courtesy of the tavernmaster, Felix Sudbury. Many people had come forward to wish him welcome home, including Effrem Owles and his father Benjamin, Solomon Tully, Robert Deverick and Israel Brandier. Matthew had been polite, but firm in his refusal to say anything more than that the criminal he and Greathouse had been sent after was dead. Case closed.

"Savin' it for the Earwig, huh?" Israel had asked, but Matthew said there would be no more of those outlandish tales in Marmaduke's broadsheet and he offered to vow on a Bible if they didn't believe him.

As the night progressed, the interest in knowing Matthew's business waned, since he remained steadfastly not talking, and the other patrons drifted away from him to their own concerns. Matthew had noted, however, that he'd gotten some sidelong glances from people who thought they had known him very well up to this evening, and perhaps were wondering what had changed about him in his month's journey.

One thing different, among many, was that he now believed in ghosts more than ever, since he'd seen both Walker In Two Worlds and Lark Lindsay on the street this afternoon. Several times, in fact.

Even now, as he sat with Greathouse and drank his own third cup of wine, he was sure someone was sitting at the table behind him and to his right. If he turned his head just a fraction he could make out from the corner of his eye an Indian with black facepaint and an arrangement of feathers dyed dark green and indigo tied to his scalplock with leather cords. Of course when he looked fully in that direction Walker was not there, but now in the corner of his other eye a lovely, serene blonde girl was standing over by the table where Effrem Owles and Robert Deverick were playing chess.

He had brought them back with him, he thought. How long they wished to stay-how long they would stay-he didn't know. But they were friends of his, just as much as any of the others, and they were welcome.

"What do you keep looking at?" Greathouse asked.

"Shadows," Matthew said, and let it go at that.

When he had gone to the Grigsby house today, after Tom had boarded the Golden Eye, Matthew had knocked at the door and Berry had answered it. They had just stared at each other for a few seconds, he taking her in like sunlight after thinking he would likely die in the dark, and she seemingly frozen with his name on her lips. And then just as she'd cried out, "Matthew!" and reached for him her grandfather had let forth a bellow from behind her and shouldered her aside to throw his arms around Matthew in a crushing embrace.

"My boy! My boy!" Marmaduke had shouted, his large blue eyes ashine in the frames of his spectacles and his heavy white eyebrows twitching on the moon-round face. "We feared you were dead! Good God, boy! Come in here and tell us the whole story!"

The whole story was what Matthew was determined not to tell, even as Marmaduke pushed a platter of honey-drizzled biscuits and a mug of mimbo upon him at the kitchen table. Berry sat beside him, very close, and Matthew
could not help but notice and be gratified by the fact that she kept placing her hand upon his arm or shoulder and rubbing there as if to make certain he was real and would not fade away like a dream upon awakening.

"Tell! Tell!" Marmy insisted, as his right hand seemed to grip an invisible quill and prepared to scribe upon the table.

"No," Matthew had said, after he'd eaten two of the biscuits and put down half the sugared rum. "I'm sorry, but I can't."

"But you must! Your readers are clamoring!"

"My business depends on privacy. There'll be no more of those stories."

"Nonsense! I've made you into a celebrity!"

"The price for that is too high," Matthew had answered. "From now on, I'm just an ordinary fellow who works for a living."

Marmaduke had snatched away the platter of biscuits, but then he'd seemed to take note of Berry's hand upon Matthew's arm. He'd pushed the biscuits forward again, and sighed. "Ah, well. I'm running low on ink, anyway. But"—and here he'd lifted a finger of triumph—"there's yet the tale of Gray Wolf to be told, isn't there?"

Matthew had shrugged. If Greathouse wanted to go down that particularly twisty road, it was his own horse-and-wagon. More like ass-and-cart, to be truthful.

Berry had put on a yellow cloak and walked with Matthew for a while, north along the waterfront. He didn't speak and she didn't speak for the longest time, as the breeze blew about them and the sunlight shimmered off the river. He stopped for a few minutes to watch a ship, its sails unfurled, gliding toward the blue expanse of the sea past Oyster Island, and then he turned away.

"Can you talk about it?" she'd asked, her voice quiet and careful.

"Not yet. Later. Maybe."

"I'll be there when you want to. If you want to."

"Thank you." A few more steps in silence, and then he'd decided to speak what he'd been thinking ever since he'd walked into the Lindsays' kitchen: "I need help with something."

"Yes?"

"I need help with a question," he'd said. "A mystery. Even more than the monster's tooth, in McCaggers' attic. It's about God. Why does God allow such evil in this world? If God is supposed to watch over every little bird. Why?"

Berry didn't reply for awhile. Then she said, "I suppose you'd have to ask a reverend."

"No. That's not good enough. What would a reverend know that I don't? The right words and verses? The names of the saints and the sinners? Yes, all those, but not the answer." He'd stopped abruptly, and looked deeply into her expressive dark blue eyes. "Why doesn't God strike down evil? Why doesn't He destroy it, before it takes root?"

Again, she was reluctant to answer. She lowered her head, looking at the ground, and then lifted her eyes to his again. "Maybe He expects us to take care of the garden."

Matthew considered something that had winnowed itself into his brain. It was He Runs Fast, saying through the interpreter He wish spirits make sense. Matthew hadn't understood that at first, but then it seemed to become a quiet cry at the passing of his son. A cry for understanding, and the peace of acceptance. Matthew too wished that God's ways made sense, or that he could understand what sense they did make. He knew he could batter his brain against that unknown and unknowable door between the trials of Earth and the truth of Heaven every day for the rest of his
life, and it would not bring him any closer to an answer.

It was the ultimate mystery, more ancient than a monster's tooth.

*He wish spirits make sense.*

"So do I," Matthew had said. And then he was aware that Berry's hand was in his, and he was holding onto it like a gift given him to protect.

Now, in the Trot, Matthew drank his wine and contemplated the fact that Greathouse, for all his show of bravado, had entered the tavern about an hour before on the support of a cane. The hollows under his eyes were still dark, his face drawn and more deeply lined. Gray Wolf had wrestled with Death in the wilderness beyond and returned grinning, yes, but not without leaving something behind. Matthew thought that if anyone could make a full recovery to health after being stabbed in the back four times, it would be the great one, but only time would tell.

Which was one reason Matthew was not ready to share with Greathouse the letter he'd found in Mrs. Sutch's safebox, and was now in his coat pocket. To venture into that area at all would be detrimental to Greathouse's recovery, for who would wish to know he'd eaten sausages spiced with human flesh? And with such *relish*, as well?

"I spoke to Berry this afternoon," Matthew said. "About Zed. She tells me they've devised a common language, based on drawings."

"Yes, I know."

"And that he really is a highly intelligent man, she says. He knows he's a long way from home, but not how far. She says he sits up on the roof of City Hall at night looking at the stars."

"The stars? Why is that?"

"They're the same stars he's always seen," Matthew related. "I suppose there's a comfort in that."

"Yes," Greathouse agreed, and turned his cup between his hands. "Listen," he said after a moment of silence. "We failed this job. I failed it. I'm not proud of being stupid. The doctors and the Quakers and Lord Cornbury and that Constable Drake expected us to bring Slaughter in alive. Obviously, my plan to buy Zed and set him free got the better of my judgment. Things are as they are. But I'm a professional and in this situation I did not act as one, and for that I'm profoundly sorry."

"No need for that."

"There is," said Greathouse, with a little of the old fire. "I want you to know that if I'd been on my feet and in my right mind I would never have let you go after him. Never. I would have called it quits right then and there, and been done with it. You took a tremendous risk, Matthew. God knows you're lucky to be alive."

"True," Matthew said.

"I won't ask you about it, and you don't have to tell me. But I want you to know that going after Slaughter was a braver thing than I have ever done in my life. And hell, just look at you! You're still a moonbeam!" He drank down the last of his wine. "Maybe a little tougher around the edges," he admitted, "but a moonbeam all the same."

"And still in need of a bodyguard?"

"In need of a *keeper*. If Mrs. Herrald knew about this, she'd-" He stopped and shook his head.

"She'd what?" Matthew prodded.

"She'd say that I was a damned fool," Greathouse replied, "but she'd know she made a good choice in you. Just so you stay alive to secure her investment for a few more months."
Matthew distinctly remembered Mrs. Herrald telling him that the job of a problem solver meant thinking quickly in dangerous situations, sometimes taking your life in your hands or trusting your life to the hands of someone else. But he chose not to remind Greathouse of that.

"Speaking of investments," Greathouse said, "there's a job you can do for me. Or rather, try to do. You know I told you about the situation involving Princess Lillehorne, the other women, and Dr. Mallory? When I was half out of my head? Well, due to my current complication I'm not going to be able to get around so much for a while, so I'd appreciate it if you would take the case over. It's just a question of why Princess sees him three times a week and comes home in a red-faced sweat, according to Lillehorne. Four other wives, the same, and do you know what they tell their husbands? That it's a health treatment. Then they refuse to say another word, and in the case of Princess Lillehorne, she's threatened to withhold her wifely duties if Gardner doesn't pay Mallory's bill."

"All right, then. I'll just ask Dr. Mallory."

"Wrong. If he's ramming them in the back room, what's he going to say?"

"Maybe he's ramming them in the front room."

"You just take it slow. Talk to that wife of his and see if you can get a handle on him. If he's strumming the love harps of five women three times a week, she ought to have a clue." He stood up with the help of his cane. "My notes are in my desk. Have a look at them tomorrow."

"I will."

"Want to meet me for breakfast at Sally Almond's? I think they're supposed to be getting in some of those hot sausages."

"I wouldn't count on that," Matthew said. "Anyway, they're not to my taste. But yes, I'd be glad to meet you. My treat."

"Wonders never cease. Seven-thirty?" He frowned. "No, better make that eight-thirty. These days it takes me a little longer in the morning."

"Eight-thirty it is."

"Good." Greathouse started out, but he turned back to the table and stood over Matthew. "I did hear what you told me about finding the money," he said quietly. "The eighty pounds worth of gold coins, in the lockbox at the Chapel estate. You found that on your own time. It belongs to you, no question. And I would have done exactly the same thing," he said. "But you're still paying back what you owe me, and buying me breakfast. Hear?"

"I hear," Matthew said.

"Tomorrow, then." Greathouse stopped at the door to get his woolen cap from a wallpeg and wrap his cloak around his shoulders, and then he walked out of the Trot for home.

It was awhile before Matthew finished his wine and decided he ought to go. He bid goodnight to his friends, got his tricorn and his warm ash-gray cloak and bundled himself up, for it was a chilly night. He left the Trot, but instead of going north to his dwelling behind the Grigsby house he turned south. There was some business to attend to.

He had memorized the letter in his coat pocket.

Beginning with a place name and date-Boston, the fifteenth of August-it read in a flowing script: Dear Mrs. Sutch, Please carry out the usual preparations regarding one Matthew Corbett, of New York town in the New York colony. Be advised that Mr. Corbett resides on Queen Street, in-and I fear this is no jest-a dairy house behind the residence of one Mr. Grigsby, the local printmaster. Also be advised that the professor has been here lately in the aftermath of the unfortunate Chapel project, and will be returning to the island toward mid-September.
The professor requires resolution of this matter by the final week of November, as Mr. Corbett has been deemed a potentially-dangerous distraction. As always, we bow before your experience in these matters of honor.

At the bottom it was signed, Sirki.

The letter had been in Mrs. Sutch’s safebox, among papers detailing mundane business things such as money paid for delivery agents to carry orders of sausages to Sally Almond’s in New York and both the Squire’s Inn and the Old Bucket tavern in Philadelphia, as well as-interestingly enough-the Peartree Inn on the Philadelphia Pike at Hoornbeck. The deliverymen, contacted by the decent and hard-nosed constable from Nicholsburg, were simply locals who had been recruited by Mrs. Sutch to do the work, and they were amazed that anyone would have murdered Mrs. Sutch and Noggin and burned the place to the ground. But then again, these were evil times, and God save Nicholsburg.

Also in the box had been a half-dozen small white cards, identical to the one Matthew had received in the second week of September excepting the fact that his had borne the bloody fingerprint.

Matters of honor, indeed.

He had tried to reason this out. The best he could figure was that Mrs. Sutch was given the command by Professor Fell—or whoever this Sirki was—to carry out these preparations. It was likely she gave Noggin—or an unknown someone else—the card and put him on a packet boat from Philadelphia. Then, depending on the professor’s pleasure, time passed while the intended victim was left to squirm. Only in Matthew’s case, the professor had decided to resolve the matter of honor by the end of November, this very month, in order to remove a potentially-dangerous distraction.

Matthew didn’t know whether to be pleased or insulted by that. It also irriated his craw that they were laughing about his house.

He walked south along Broad Street, passing City Hall. Lights showed in the attic windows. The sky was full of sparkling stars, and Matthew wondered if on this crisp and quiet night Zed was not sitting up there, maybe with a blanket draped around him, thinking of nights spent with loved ones under those same celestial banners.

Lanterns gleamed from wooden posts on the street corners. The constables were out, carrying their green lamps. Matthew saw one coming north further along Broad, the lantern swinging back and forth to check nooks and crannies. Matthew turned to the right onto Stone Street, took from his pocket the key he’d gotten from home, and unlocked the door to Number Seven.

He fired the tinderbox that sat on a table beside the door, and with its flame touched the wicks of three tapers in a triple-armed candleholder also on the table. He locked the door, picked up the candles and climbed the steep stairs.

As he reached the top he heard a soft little thump. The ghosts were greeting him, in their own way.

Passing through the oak-paneled outer room with its cubbyhole-chest and its windows that looked toward the Great Dock, Matthew entered another door that held his and Greathouse’s desks. He left the door open and lit four candles in an eight-armed wrought-iron chandelier overhead. The unshuttered windows in this office gave a view of New York to the northwest. The room held three wooden file cabinets and a small fireplace of rough gray and tan stones sure to see much use when the really cold weather began. It was good to be home.

Matthew sat the triple-candleholder on his desk. Relishing his return, he peered for a while through the windows at the comforting view of the little lamps scattered across the expanse of town. Then he removed his hat and cloak and hung them up, satuted himself at his desk, took the letter from Sirki to Sutch out of his pocket, and smoothed it down before him. Opening the top drawer of his desk, he brought out the magnifying glass that was a gift from Katherine Herrald, and studied the handwriting with closer scrutiny.

A man’s hand, he decided. Flowing, yes, but with very little elaboration except for a flourish beneath the name. What kind of name was Sirki? And what was that about returning to the island toward mid-September? Matthew could see where the quill had paused from time to time for another dip of ink. The paper had been twice folded to fit an envelope. It was light brown, not as thick as parchment. He held it up before the candleglow, and there he saw...
something that made him turn it over and look again.

He brought from his drawer a pencil and scratched lead over what seemed to be a faint impression on the back of the paper.

Before him appeared the stylized shape of an octopus, its eight tentacles stretched out wide as if to seize the world.

It was the impression of the wax stamp that had been used to seal the envelope.

He heard a quiet noise, almost a sigh.

Something bit him on the side of his neck.

A little sting, no more.

He put his hand there and felt a small object in his flesh. When he pulled it out, he was looking at a wooden dart about three inches long with a smear of yellowish paste on its stinger tip and on the other end a piece of hollowed-out cork.

A ghost stirred in the corner beside the file cabinets, where the shadows lay thickest.

This ghost, as it emerged, wore a long black cloak and tricorn and had silky hair the color of dust. He was of indeterminate age, small-boned, pale of skin and weirdly fragile. A long thin scar ran up through his right eyebrow into his hairline, and his eye on that side was a cold milky-white orb. He held a wooden tube, which he now set atop one of the filing cabinets. His black-gloved hand went into his cloak—his movements slow and horribly deliberate—and reappeared with a long, sharp knitting needle that glinted blue in the candlelight.

Matthew stood up, dropping the dart to the floor. His throat was cold, his neck prickling where the tip had entered.

"Stay where you are," he said. He was aware that his tongue was starting to freeze.

Ripley, the young assassin-in-training, advanced as in a nightmare. Obviously he had graduated to using a blowpipe and a dart smeared with frog venom. Matthew recalled with terror what Mrs. Sutch had told Slaughter: "causes the muscles to stiffen and the throat to constrict. Within seconds, the victim cannot move"

If he had only seconds, he was going to make them count.

He picked up the candleholder with numbed fingers and hurled it. Not at Ripley, but through the glass of the windows. The crash echoed along Stone Street and made a dog start barking. His only chance, he'd realized, was to bring the nearest constable to his aid. If no one heard the noise, he was dead. And he might well be dead, anyway.

He retreated. His legs were cold and trembling; everything seemed to be in slow-motion, and he was aware that his heart—when it should be pounding in his chest—was also slowing. When he drew in a breath, his lungs creaked. They felt as if they were filling up with icy water. Even the workings of his mind were running down: Ripley may have shadowed him from the Trot come ahead and picked the lock relocked the door waiting for him in the dark his method of a needle through his eye into the brain for resolution of this matter of

Matthew picked up Greathouse's chair and held it before him, as he backed toward the wall.

In the flickering light cast by the candles on Greathouse's desk, Ripley glided forward step after step.

"Hello?" someone called from the street. "Hello, up there!"

Matthew opened his mouth to shout for help, but his voice was gone. It came to him to throw the chair at Ripley and take his chances on getting down the steps. As soon as this thought registered in his brain, his hands spasmed. He lost hold of the chair. His legs gave way and he fell to his knees.
A fist hit the door at the bottom of the stairs. Matthew fell onto his face. He was shivering, his muscles jumping as if the venom had birthed frogs beneath his skin. Still, he tried to push himself across the floor. Within another five seconds both his strength and power of will had abandoned him.

Ripley stood over Matthew, who lay frozen on his stomach, his eyes open and his mouth gasping.

"Corbett?" shouted another voice. There came the sound of the doorhandle being worked back and forth.

Ripley reached down and began to turn Matthew over.

Something slammed against the door.

Ripley succeeded in his task. In his prison of ice, Matthew thought he should get his hands up before his eyes. He tried this also, but nothing happened. I'm drowning, he thought. My God I can't breathe.

Again, something smashed into the door. There came the noise of wood ripping asunder. Matthew felt the floor shake underneath him.

Ripley grasped a handful of Matthew's hair. Candlelight jumped off the needle's tip as it hovered over the center of Matthew's right eye. Ripley had become a blur, a white shape, truly ghostly. The needle's tip descended, and looked to be burning with blue fire.

Matthew saw Ripley's head turn.

A dark shape enveloped the assassin.

Ripley's mouth opened, and suddenly a huge black fist hit him in the face and his jaw crumpled and teeth and blood flew out. For a second the blurred Ripley gave a hideous rictus of a grin with his ruined mouth, the single good eye wide and staring, the other fish-belly white, and then his face disappeared again beneath the fist. This time Ripley fell out of Matthew's line-of-sight, leaving what Matthew saw to be a streak of spirit image across the air.

Matthew's lungs hitched. He was gulping breath down, swallowing it from where he lay at the center of an ice-pond.

"Corbett!" Someone was above him. He couldn't make out the face. "Corbett!"

"Is he dyin'?" another voice asked. A green lamp floated over Matthew.

The face went away. There was a silence, during which Matthew continued to gulp small mouthfuls of breath, for it was all he could manage. His heartbeat was slowing slowly.

"Christ!" came a shout. "Zed, pick him up! Peterson, do you know where Dr. Mallory lives? On Nassau Street?"

"Yes sir, I know."

"Run there as fast as you can! Tell him we're bringing in a poison victim! Go!"
Thirty-Four

"Drink this."

Matthew recoiled; he couldn't recoil very far, however, for he was swaddled in damp beddings with his arms down by his sides. A cup of steaming liquid was tilted to his lips, which Matthew even in his humid haze kept tightly pressed together.

"It's just tea. English tea, that is. With honey and a dash of rum. Go ahead, drink it."

Matthew accepted it, and Jason Mallory held the cup to his mouth until the tea was gone.

"There," said Dr. Mallory. "Wasn't so bad, was it?"

Matthew's swollen eyes took in the doctor sitting in a chair beside his bed. On an octagonal table next to the chair was a single candle with a polished tin reflector behind it, and by that light Matthew made out Mallory's face. The rest of the room was shrouded by darkness.

Matthew felt as if his mind had been shattered like a mirror and pieced together again by a stranger who was not quite sure how the memories fit. Had Rachel Howarth ever stood beautiful and defiant before a mocking throng of Indians in a Seneca longhouse? Had Magistrate Woodward ever nocked an arrow and fired it into the night-black forest? Or Berry ever leaned her head against his shoulder under the stars and wept heartbroken tears? He was all messed up.

More than that, his bones ached, his very teeth ached, he couldn't have gotten up from this bed or in reality lifted his arms from his sides for eight times eighty pounds, and he had the awful impression of a woman sliding a chamberpot under him and saying, "There you are, now do your business like a good boy."

He remembered sweating. But he remembered freezing, as well. Then burning up. At some point, had cold water been poured repeatedly over his back? He remembered someone pushing down on his chest, again and again, hard enough to had he wept, like Berry had? And someone saying close to his ear, "Breathe, Matthew! Breathe!"

Ah, yes. He remembered drinking the tea. Not English tea, certainly. This had been thick, sharp-tasting, and

Again, Matthew. Drink it, now. You can do it. All down.

His heart. He remembered how his heart was pounding, as if about to tear itself from his chest and tumble across the floor spewing blood. He was sweating, he was lying in a sodden mass of linens, and

One more cup, Matthew. Come on, Greathouse, get his mouth open.

"How are you feeling?" Mallory asked.

Matthew made a noise between a fart and a whistle.

"Do you know where you are?"

Matthew could see nothing but the doctor's face, illuminated by the reflected candle. Mallory was a lean, handsome man who appeared to possess features part angel, in his long, graceful Roman nose and luminous seagreen eyes, and part devil, in his arched, thick dark brown eyebrows and a wide mouth that seemed to be on the constant verge of a cruel burst of laughter. He had a weathered face that spoke of the harsh fire of tropic suns. His hair was dark brown, pulled back and tied into a queue. His chin was square and noble, his demeanor calm, his teeth all in their places. His voice was low and smoky, like the rumble of distant guns.

"The treatment room in my house," he said, when Matthew didn't respond. "Do you know how long you've been here?"

"No." Matthew was shocked at the weakness of his own voice. How time flew: one day a young man, the next
ready for Paradise.

"This is your third morning."

"It's day, then?" But where was the sunlight? Surely there were windows in here.

"When I last checked the clock, it was just after two. In the morning."

"A night owl," Matthew rasped.

"You might give praise for night owls. Owing to a particular night owl named Ashton McCaggers, you were brought promptly to me."

"I remember " What? A one-eyed ghost, sliding out of the wall? A sting in the side of his neck? Oh, yes. That. His heart was beating hard again, and suddenly he was wet with perspiration. The bed already felt like a sinking boat. "Ripley," Matthew said. "What happened to him?"

"He is in need of a new face, and currently resides in the prisoners' ward of the King Street hospital. It's unlikely he shall be speaking anytime soon. You might thank McCaggers' slave for that."

"How did Zed get there?"

"Well, he knocked the door down, is the short answer. As I understand, the slave was up on the roof of City Hall and saw your light. He relayed this-as he does in some way, I suppose-to his master, who wished to take you a bottle of brandy to toast your return. There was something about hearing glass break. So again, you might give thanks for night owls, both the white and black variety."

"Why?" Matthew asked.

"Why what?"

"A moment." Matthew had to compose the question again, for it had slipped away between thought and lip. "Why was I brought to you? There are other doctors nearer Stone Street."

"There are," Mallory agreed, "but none of them have travelled as extensively as I have around the world. And none of them know anything about the frog venom on the dart that struck you, or of course how to alleviate its unfortunate effects."

"How?" Matthew asked.

"Is this a guessing game?"

"How did you alleviate?"

"First of all, I knew what it was-what it must be-due to the blowpipe that Ashton found in your office, and of course from your condition. I spent half a year on an expedition into the jungles of South America, where I witnessed natives regularly hunt with the pipe and dart, and more than once I saw them put even jaguars on the ground. Of course there are many different species of what they call 'poison-dart frogs', some more potent than others. The venom is actually sweat from the skin. A sort of sticky yellowish-white paste. As in the small clay vial that young wretch was carrying in his pocket."

Matthew thought of the empty space where the blowpipe had been, in Mrs. Sutch's cupboard. His own name had been in the ledger book of victims, but it would not have been crossed out until Ripley had done the deed and reported back.

"The venom doesn't travel well," Mallory went on, his face daubed yellow by the light. "After a year or so, it loses its full lethal potency. Though it can still seize a man up, so to speak, or at least give him a good scare. The trick is to keep the victim breathing and give him a shock to the heart. Which I did with my tea."
"Your tea?"

"Not the English variety. My own recipe, which I hoped would work if indeed the venom was not at its full potency. A tea boiled from feverwort, yarrow, cayenne pepper, coca leaves, hawthorn and skullcap. You received a very, very strong dosage. Several, in fact. Boiled down to a thickening, I suppose you might call it. The result is that your heart pounds, your lungs pump, and you sweat rivers, but you do banish the impurities, if you live."

"Ah," Matthew said. "I expect my face got very red, as well?"

"Beet-red."

"May I ask you a question?" Matthew slowly eased himself up to a sitting position. His head swam and the room spun, but he made it. "Have you ever given that tea to Princess Lillehorne?"

"In a much more moderate portion, yes. A very expensive health treatment. Firms the fibers, aligns the humors and is quite beneficial to women's parts. She told me she was having some trouble in that regard. I asked her to keep the treatment to herself, because my supply of coca leaves was limited, but she deemed it wise to tell a friend, who told a "

"Friend, who told a friend, until there were five women paying for health treatments three times a week?"

"Yes. And I allowed it because every time I raised my fee, they paid. Only now you've used up the last of my supply."

"I don't think I want anymore," Matthew said. "But tell me how did Ashton McCaggers know you knew anything about the frog venom?"

"Ashton and I," said the doctor, "have been meeting regularly on Crown Street for coffee. He's a very interesting and knowledgable young man. Very curious about the world. I've told him about my travels: Italy, Prussia, Hungary, China, Japan and many other places, I'm proud to say. One day I mentioned my exploits in South America, and I told him about the natives and the blowpipes. He'd already read Sir Walter Raleigh's account of his travels on the Orinoco River, and of how the pipes were used, so Ashton recognized what it was when he saw it."

Matthew nodded, but he was watching the doctor very carefully. Some little thing, just a pittance of a thing, had begun to bother him. "I wonder," Matthew said, "how that young wretch, as you put it, got hold of a blowpipe, a dart and that vial of frog venom. Don't you?"

"I have wondered about that, yes."

"You know, that seems a bit strange to me."

"Yes," the doctor agreed. "To me, as well."

"I mean, it's not every day that a killer tries to murder someone with frog venom from South America, and there in the same town is a doctor who is well almost an expert on frog venom from South America."

"Not an expert." Mallory gave a passing smile. "There are so many more varieties of poisonous frogs yet to be discovered, I'm sure."

Matthew sat up a little straighter. He had a bitter taste in his mouth. "I would think McCaggers might wonder about that coincidence too, when he stops to consider it."

"He already has. As I said to him, it's one of those strange improbabilities that make up the chaos of life. I also told him, Greathouse and Lillehorne that the blowpipe could have been fashioned right here in New York, but that the venom would have been obtained only after much time and expense. Someone had to bring it back from the jungle. A very exotic way to kill a victim, really. But perhaps it was an experiment?"

Matthew felt a new chill pass through him. It's being experimented with, Mrs. Sutch had told Slaughter. "How do
you mean?" Matthew asked.

"I mean perhaps the young wretch was testing the method. For someone else. To see how well the venom travelled, or" He stopped abruptly. "Your point being, did I supply it?" His arched brows lifted. "Don't you think that's being ingracious? After all, I gave you a very expensive amount of my tea."

"But I wasn't going to die, was I? Because the venom wasn't potent enough?"

"It was a close call," Mallory said. "But I can tell you that without my treatment you'd have been lying on your back in a hell of delirium for at least a week, and after that your ability to walk would be impaired for who knows how long? With my treatment, you'll be able to stagger out of here tomorrow or the next day."

Matthew couldn't help it. Even as weak as he was, he had to probe. "Did you say you and your wife came from Boston? Toward mid-September?"

"Boston, yes. And the middle of September, the same."

"I wonder, Dr. Mallory I know this seems a very odd question, but" Matthew forced himself to lock eyes with the other man. "Would you call Manhattan an island?"

"It is an island." Mallory paused for a few seconds. His mouth squirmed, looking very near to giving out the burst of laughter. "Oh! You're referring to this!"

From within his white shirt he produced a piece of light brown paper, twice folded. It was not as thick as parchment. As Mallory unfolded it before the candle, Matthew could see the pencil's impression of the octopus symbol on the back.

"That's private," Matthew said. Did his voice quaver?

"And so it should remain. I sent Rebecca to your office after they brought you here. I wanted to know if there were any more of those nasty little darts on the floor, like this one Ashton found." Mallory reached over to the table, beside the candle, and picked up the dart that lay there to show his patient. "It appeared you'd only been struck with the one, but I wasn't sure and you couldn't tell me nor could that young toothless wretch, though it was later discovered he had three more in a leather pouch in his pocket. I thought it was also a good idea for Rebecca to take a quick look around before Lillehorne got there. So on the floor behind your desk was this letter."

Matthew was silent. He cursed himself for stupidity, for he had wandered again into rattlesnake country where it was least expected.

Mallory looked long and hard at the octopus symbol. "I understand," he said, his guns rumbling, "that you killed the man you were sent to bring back. Tyranthus Slaughter. Yes?"

Matthew didn't answer.

"Relax. We're only talking, Matthew. Two people in a room, at half-past two in the morning. Just us night owls." He gave a quick, cold-eyed smile. "All right, I presume you killed Slaughter. That's what Lillehorne says. Now, about Mrs. Sutch: is she in custody, or is she dead?"

"Who are you?" Matthew managed to ask. His throat was cold again.

"I," said the doctor, "am your friend. And I am going to assume as well that Mrs. Sutch is deceased, because she would have killed herself before she let anyone cage her." He folded the letter again and slid it into his shirt. "A pity," he said. "I liked her sausages."

Matthew decided he had to make a move. He had to get up and get out of here, no matter what. But when he tried-and he really, really did try—he had no strength, and now his arms and legs were losing sensation and the candlelight was spinning out long yellow spikes.
"Tell me, Matthew." Mallory leaned closer to him, his eyes shining. "When you killed Slaughter and Mrs. Sutch, what did you feel?"

"What?"

"Feel," Mallory repeated. "What did you feel?"

"I felt sick."

Mallory smiled again. "There's a medicine for that, too."

Again Matthew tried to get out of bed; again he failed, and this time his head fell back upon his pillow because the muscles of his neck had given out. He thought of shouting for help; the thought shattered like glass, and blew away like smoke.

"You'll be peacefully asleep in a minute," said Mallory. "I want you to know the blade scrape across your chest is healing well, but the smaller cut on your side is infected. I have a poultice on it that should help, but we'll watch it carefully."

Matthew was fighting the oncoming dark. The light was fading, and so was the doctor's face. "Are you " He couldn't speak. Mallory was fragmenting into pieces, like Matthew's mind. "Are you going to kill me?" And he added: "Professor?"

The good doctor drummed his fingers on his armrest. "To your question, I answer: absolutely not. To your supposition, I say even night owls must rest." He reached out and with two fingers shut Matthew's eyelids. Matthew heard the chair creak as the man stood up, heard a breath extinguish the candle, and then all was silent.
An envelope arrived by courier at Number Seven Stone Street on a Friday afternoon in late November. Matthew's name was upon the front, and Lord Cornbury's seal upon the back.

"What the hell is it?" Greathouse wanted to know, and when Matthew informed him what it must be, the great one had said, "I think you ought to tell him, don't you?" Matthew agreed. He took his cloak and tricorn and was halfway down the stairs when he heard Greathouse shout, "You wouldn't have made a very good slavemaster, anyway!"

Matthew set off into the traffic on Broad Street. It was a bright day, warm for the season though light cloaks and coats were in order. Matthew went directly to City Hall, climbed the attic steps to McCaggers' domain and knocked at the door. He waited, but there was no answer. He thought he knew where McCaggers and Zed might be, since Berry had told him that the light this time of year-and especially on sunny afternoons such as this-was to be taken advantage of before the gray gloom of winter set in. Matthew had not missed the fact that where Berry was to be found, McCaggers also was.

He left City Hall and walked east on Wall Street toward the harbor. Another fact he didn't miss was that at the end of this street was the slave market.

He had been a slave owner for nearly a week. It had been an expensive proposition. McCaggers had been agreeable, with the understanding that Zed would continue his present living arrangements and also help the coroner as needed. But the villain of the play had been Gerritt van Kowenhoven, who brought in a silver-tongued lawyer before he would consider any discussion of selling his valuable slave. When the discussion began, it seemed to revolve around not Zed's future but the street van Kowenhoven had been promised as an honor to his name. Then, after being assured the street was indeed on the new map-and actually getting a view of the new map, courtesy of McCaggers-the talk had turned to van Kowenhoven's profit on his investment.

When the quills finished their job, Matthew's remaining money after the payment of debts had been whittled down to twenty-three pounds. The next step had been arranging a meeting with Lord Cornbury.

In Cornbury's office with its overstuffed chairs, a desk of English oak that seemed as wide as a continent and a portrait of Queen Anne glowering from the wall, the Lord himself had regarded Matthew through bored, blue-shaded eyes and idly twisted a curl of his high blond wig while Matthew stated his case. It wasn't easy, stating a case to a man in a purple gown with puffy frills of blue lace down the front. But after the case was stated, Cornbury then coldly informed Matthew that the Herrald Agency had embarrassed him in front of his cousin the Queen over that Slaughter business and Matthew might believe himself to be a celebrity, and think he had some influence due to this mistaken belief, but that Matthew should not let the door hit him in the cheeks on the way out.

"Ten pounds for your signature within the week," Matthew had said. And remembering his station in life, which was just a citizen the same as everyone, added: "Your Lordship."

"Are you not hearing me, sir? Anyway, these things take time. Even though we're speaking of personal property, we have the town's safety to consider. There has to be a discussion of the council. A meeting of the aldermen. Some of them are vehemently opposed to this kind of thing. No, no. Impossible."

That was when Matthew had reached into his pocket and put the intricately-engraved silver ring from Slaughter's safebox on the desk. He'd pushed it across the continent toward Lord Cornbury.

It had been picked up by a purple-gloved hand, inspected in the spill of light from the window next to the face of Queen Anne, and tossed aside. "Nice enough," came the voice through the painted lips, "but I have a dozen of those."

Matthew then took from his pocket the necklace of grayish-blue pearls that indeed were very beautiful, now that they were cleaned up. "Your Lordship, pardon me for asking," Matthew had said, "but do you know what a string of pearls is selling for these days?"

Obviously, Lord Cornbury had known.
Matthew found McCaggers, Zed and Berry at the waterfront near the fish market at the end of Smith Street. Small boats were coming in and throwing lines to the wharf. Baskets full of the sea's bounty were being unloaded onto the dripping timbers. Salters stood by with their carts, and both customers and cats were prowling around looking for supper.

In all this haste and hurry of commerce, Berry and Zed stood drawing with black crayons on pads of paper as the fishermen delivered their catch. McCaggers stood a distance away, putting on a brave face though it was apparent the fish market was not his favorite place in town; he held a handkerchief with which he dabbed at his nose, and Matthew figured it had some kind of aromatic tonic applied to it.

Matthew approached them where they stood alongside the wharf. Zed saw him coming first. The huge man touched Berry's shoulder, who looked up, followed Zed's gaze and smiled when she saw their visitor.

"Good afternoon!" she called to him. Her smile became more of a sideways grin. Today she was an eyeburst of colors, as befitting her artistic nature. She wore a wide-brimmed red hat and a floral-print gown of red and yellow. A light green wrap covered her shoulders and arms, and she wore gloves of yellow wool that exposed her fingers, the better to control the crayon.

"Afternoon," he answered, and walked to her side to look at what she and Zed were drawing. On each pad were partially-completed scenes of boats arriving at the wharf. Zed's were created with much more force and intensity, each line as thick as a finger. Again, as in the drawings of Zed's that Matthew had seen in the attic, they had an alien quality. The boats looked more like long canoes, with scrawled, menacing figures aboard that seemed to be carrying spears and shields.

To be sure, the sight of a slave drawing a picture at the waterfront was not common, and several people paused to glance and mutter, but the printmaster's granddaughter had been seen around town on many occasions with McCaggers' man, both of them drawing as easily as if they'd been talking. Of course everyone knew the printmaster's granddaughter was a bit strange—an artist as well as a teacher, you understand—but as long as McCaggers tagged along to keep his man under watch there was no need for fear. Still the size of that man; he could go mad with rage and tear down a building, as it was said he'd done to the Cock'a'tail tavern just last month.

"Lo Matthew," said McCaggers, offering one hand while keeping the handkerchief near his nose. "How are you feeling?"

Matthew shook the hand. "Almost myself again, thank you." He took in a deep draw of air. There were the smells of the briny sea, the wet timbers and the fresh fish. Very invigorating, he thought.

"We were just about to move along," McCaggers said, with a hopeful note.

"Before you do, I have this." Matthew held up the envelope. Berry and McCaggers stared at it, but Zed had returned to his art. Matthew broke Cornbury's seal, removed the parchment from within and unfolded it. "Ah," he said when he saw the crimped and altogether ugly signature. No matter, it was the intent that counted. "The writ of manumission," Matthew said, and showed it first to McCaggers, then to Berry.

"My God." McCaggers sounded stunned. "I can't believe you actually secured it." He turned to look at Zed, who was concentrating on further thickening a line and paid the others no attention whatsoever.

"Matthew? May I tell him?" Berry asked.

"Tell him? How?"

"Let me," she said.

He gave her the document.

"Zed?" When Berry spoke his name, he immediately turned his head and looked down at her. She held up the writ. "You are free," she said. "Do you understand that? You are free." She touched Lord Cornbury's signature.
He frowned, his fathomless ebony eyes moving back and forth from the parchment to Berry. There seemed to be no comprehension of what he was looking at.

Berry turned the document over, put it down on her pad, and began to draw something. As Matthew watched, a fish took shape. It was leaping out of the water, like one of the many drawings of fish Zed had done and kept in a box under his cot. When she had finished, Berry showed him the picture.

He stared at it, his tribal-scarred face immobile.

Slowly, his mouth opened. He gave a quiet gasp, from deep in his throat.

"Yes," Berry said, nodding. She offered him a kind smile. "You are as free as that."

Zed turned his head toward the market itself, where the catch was being laid out on tables beneath a roof of brown canvas. He moved his gaze across the many dozens of shimmering silver, brown-patterned and green-streaked bodies brought up on the lines and in the nets, across the seabass, the snapper, the fluke, the cod, the flounder, the bluefish, the mackerel, the cunner and the hake. He was a fisherman too. He knew the difference between a dead fish losing its magnificent colors and shine on a wet table as opposed to the fish that had slipped a hook or sensed the fall of a net and gone deep into the blue, deep where no man might catch it, deep where it might swim for yet another day as a bird might fly through the air.

Matthew realized what Berry had already figured out.

The fish that Zed drew were the ones that had gotten away.

And in his mind, that was freedom.

Zed understood. Matthew saw it dawn in his eyes: a spark, like a distant candle on the darkest night.

He looked at them all in turn-Berry, Matthew and McCaggers-and then brought his gaze back to the girl. She smiled and nodded once more—the universal language of yes—and he nodded also but it was hard for a man in an alien world to smile.

He dropped the pad and crayon. He turned away from them, and he began to walk along the nearest pier out toward the water. As he went, he removed his shirt. Fishermen stepped aside, for he was a mighty force in motion. He kicked off one shoe, then the other, and now he was running, and anyone who had stood between him and his destination would have gone down as if hit by a moving wall.

"Zed!" Berry cried out.

He dove off the end of the pier, into the cold river water where the sun sparkled in bright ribbons. But even as big as he was, he hardly made a splash.

They shifted their positions to see past a boat and caught sight of his head surfacing, followed by the broad shining shoulders and back. Zed began to swim with powerful, deliberate strokes, following the river's current as it flowed to the Atlantic. He kept going, past the point where Matthew thought he must surely stop and turn back. He kept going.

"He'll come back," McCaggers said, the reflection of sun and water in his spectacles.

But Zed did not pause in his forward motion. Through the chill water, he swam on.

"He won't go too very far," McCaggers said.

What was too very far? Matthew wondered if on all those nights Zed had studied the stars he'd calculated the way home, and now he was bound to get there if only in his last dream as he swam downward into the blue, away from the hooks and the nets.
"Zed!" McCaggers shouted. In his voice was a hint of panic. Matthew realized that McCaggers had likely considered Zed not a slave but a companion. One of a very few he could claim, for who wished to be friends with a man who spent so much time with the dead?

Zed kept swimming, further and further out, toward the wide expanse of the sea.

McCaggers said firmly, "He'll come back. I know he will."

A little waterbug of a boat moved majestically between them and Zed, its patched sails flying. When the boat passed, there was no more sign of the man.

They stood there for several more minutes, keeping watch.

At last McCaggers bent down and picked up the pad and crayon, and he gave them to Berry.

"He's a good swimmer," Berry said. "We just may not be able to see him from here."

"Yes," McCaggers agreed. "The sun's bright on the water. We may not be able to see."

Matthew felt he ought to add something, but he could only think that one attribute of being truly free was choosing how one wished to depart from life. Still was it a triumph or a tragedy?

McCaggers walked out onto the pier. He took his spectacles off, wiped the lenses with his handkerchief and put them back on. He stood there for awhile staring in the direction Zed had gone. When he came back, he said to Berry with a note of relief, "I think I saw him. I believe he's all right."

Matthew said nothing; he'd already seen what looked to him like a treetrunk with twisted branches being carried out toward Oyster Island.

The work of gutting fish had begun. McCaggers turned his face away from the sea, caught sight of a bucket full of fish heads and entrails, and focused on Berry. "Will you accompany me," he said, "for a cup of coffee?" He had a yellowish pallor. "On Crown Street?"

"I will," she answered. "Matthew, would you go with us?"

Matthew was about to say yes when he saw two people standing a distance away. One was a tall, lean man with features part angel and part devil. He wore an elegant gray suit, waistcoat and cloak, and on his head was a gray tricorn. The other was a slimly-built woman, nearly as tall as her husband, with long thick tresses of black hair curling about her shoulders. She wore a gown of deep blue velvet, with a short jacket the same material and color. She was standing beneath a blue parasol, its hue a few shades lighter than the velvet.

Matthew felt sure he'd seen that parasol before. At the Chapel estate, possibly. In midsummer.

The Mallorys seemed to be talking quietly, admiring the work of the blades as the glistening fish were carved. Did the woman cast a sidelong glance at him? He wouldn't be surprised. They'd been shadowing him ever since he'd left the doctor's care. A day hadn't gone by when he wasn't aware of them, hovering somewhere nearby.

They turned their backs to him, and arm-in-arm they walked away in the shadow of her parasol.

McCaggers hadn't noticed them. He was still anxiously searching the distance for a swimmer.

"Some other time," Matthew said to Berry's invitation. He didn't think he'd be very good company, with the Mallorys on his mind. "I'd best get back to the office."

McCaggers spoke up before the girl could respond. "Of course! Some other time, then."

"Ashton, I want to thank you again for saving my life," Matthew said. "And for letting me call you friend."

"I think Zed is the one who saved your life. When he comes back, we'll toast freedom and friendship. All right?"
"All right," Matthew agreed.

"You're sure you won't join us?" Berry asked imploringly.

"Let the man go about his business," said McCaggers, and he put his hand on Berry's elbow. "I mean are you sure you won't join us, Matthew?"

"I'm sure."

"Zed will be back." McCaggers looked into Matthew's eyes, and no longer out to sea. "You saw what a good swimmer he is."

"Yes, I did."

"Good afternoon, then." The coroner attempted a smile. His somber face was ill-suited to the expression and it slipped away. "I trust no one will try to kill you anytime soon."

"I trust," Matthew said, but he'd realized that he was a killer himself, whether he'd wanted the title or not, and to survive in a land of carnivores he would have to grow the killer's eye in the back of his head.

"Later?" Berry asked.

"Later," Matthew replied.

McCaggers and Berry walked on together, with his hand at her elbow. She glanced back at him, just briefly, and he wondered if she hoped he'd changed his mind. McCaggers had taken three steps when the heel of his right boot broke off. Berry helped him steady himself. He picked up the heel, and with a shake of his head at the improbabilities that make up the chaos of life he limped along at her side.

Matthew started off, heading back to Stone Street.

Before he got a block away from the waterfront, he heard a woman's voice behind him say, "Mr. Corbett?"

He could keep going, he thought. Just keep going, and pretend not to hear.

"Mr. Corbett? One moment, please?"

He stopped, because he knew that whatever their game was, they were determined to play it out.

Rebecca Mallory was a fiercely beautiful woman. She had high cheekbones and full, red-rouged lips and intense eyes of deep sapphire that Matthew thought must have claimed the souls of many men. She held the blue parasol between them, as if offering to share its shadow. Matthew saw her husband standing behind her a few yards away, lounging against a wall.

Dr. Mallory's care of Matthew had been professional and successful, and when Matthew had gotten his clothes back he'd found the letter from Sirki to Sutch returned to him in a pocket. It was as if that discussion between night owls had never happened, but for the fact that they were watching him. What was he going to do? Show the letter to Greathouse and open up all that bloody mess? And what could he prove about the Mallorys, anyway? In fact, what did he know about them? Nothing. So best to wait, and to let the game play out. For what choice was there?

"We have a mutual acquaintance." The woman's voice was calm, her gaze steady. She might have just said they liked the same kind of sausages.

"Do we?" Matthew asked, just as calmly.

"We believe he'd like to meet you," she said.

Matthew didn't answer. It suddenly seemed very lonely, on this street.
"When you're ready, in a week or two, we'd like you to come visit us. Will you do that?"

His lip felt the graze of a hook. He sensed the silent falling of a net. "What if I don't?"

"Oh," she said, with a tight smile, "let's not be unfriendly, Matthew. In a week or two. We'll set a table, and we'll be expecting you."

With that, she turned away and walked back to where her husband waited, and together the elegant, handsome Mallorys strolled along the street in the direction of the waterfront.

Matthew determined that before this day was over he was going to have to take a long drink or two at the Trot, surrounded by laughter and lively fiddle music and people he counted as friends. That was the true treasure of a man, it seemed to him. Greathouse, too, if he wanted to come. Matthew would even buy him a meal; after all, he had thirteen pounds and a few shillings left to his name. Enough for a fireplace, and then some. But without all those gold pieces stuffed in the straw of his bed, he slept so much better.

He also determined that his mouth was going to remain shut about this—to Greathouse, Berry, and everyone else he knew—until he found out more.

Right now, though, he had nothing but a friendly invitation from a beautiful woman.

And God only knew where that might lead.

Matthew watched the blue parasol out of sight. Then he went back to Stone Street on a path as straight as an arrow.

The End
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