

Duncan stood in the open door, leaning against the jamb in calculated defiance. The office was empty. His effort to impress his uncle had failed. He now realized that all they wanted him for was to watch the front door—"holding the fort" as Steele would say—so they could run around feeling important.

A wagon rolled by. Up the street at Johnson's Drygoods, two men gestured in anger, their voices lost in the distance. Nearby, a farmer methodically loaded boxes into his wagon. A Union officer looked in a shop window at a display of fabric. Across the street, a beggar missing an arm and both legs sat in a chair, calling for alms from those who pretended not to see him. The air vibrated from the powerful piston thrusts driving a locomotive forward on nearby tracks. A black boy ran toward Duncan.

"I got a message fo' Cap'n Ramsey," he panted upon arrival.

"He's not here."

"Where he be?"

"He won't be back for a while."

The boy held up an envelope. "You know where he got to?"

"When he gets here, he'll be here! Go! Get along!"

If these words made matters clear to Duncan, they had little impact on the boy who held the envelope.

"You his friend?"

"Well . . . yes, I suppose. What do you have for him?" "A message."

Duncan held out his hand. "Leave it with me, and I'll be sure that Captain Ramsey gets it."

The boy hesitated.

"That's my job," Duncan sighed. "I take messages until people come back."

Flashing a smile, the boy handed Duncan the envelope and raced off the way he had come.

The stationery was of superior quality. *Captain Allan Ramsey* was written in a feminine hand on the ivory surface.

Duncan held it up to the light as he had seen Ramsey do, but the thick paper revealed no secrets. There was just the faintest scent of perfume. Did Ramsey have a woman in his life? Duncan didn't know, but there were lots of things he didn't know about Ramsey.



A train passed under the Broad Street Bridge and made its way out of the city. Like many structures in Atlanta, the bridge was newly rebuilt, crude, and serviceable. Ramsey watched the engine move slowly over groaning tracks. Cinders and ash floated down through the smoky air. Battered boxcars rumbled by. Ghostly figures lurked in the darkness of the empty cars, their few belongings clasped in their arms. He brushed the ash from his hat and shoulders and walked on.

A wagon, heavy with lumber from the planing mill, passed by. On Marietta Street, workers hauled a roof beam into place with ropes, pulleys, and profanity. A scant year ago, the business district was a burned-out shell. Now structures mushroomed on every street. Shacks and shanties became impromptu stores. Rents were enormous. People paid them. The religion of Atlanta was commerce.

Ramsey enjoyed the warm spring morning but was glad he hadn't much farther to go. Yesterday's walk to Georgiana's had been a trial for his leg. To spite his lameness, he tried to walk without his limp, tried to will it away, but the unnaturalness of his gait only aggravated the problem. He paused and looked at his pocket watch. Ten minutes until nine.

The evening before, Duncan had handed him a note from "a woman." The boy was obviously intrigued with what it might contain. He didn't hide his disappointment when Ramsey slipped it into his pocket and left without comment.

Despite the mystery that captivated Duncan, the note simply stated that a Mrs. Abigail Maynard wished to see Captain Ramsey on a matter of some importance. Would he be so kind as to call at nine o'clock tomorrow morning at her boarding establishment? If that was inconvenient, perhaps he could suggest a more suitable time. The note gave an address on Cone Street.

Chances were that Mrs. Maynard was looking for someone. Since the war had ended, a parade of people crisscrossed the South, searching for the missing and dead. Some were successful. Those with the means returned the deceased for reburial in family plots. The less fortunate mourned and carried their losses in their hearts. More often than not, the search was an empty trial; the dead were hard to locate, and the missing rarely found.

But for a bit of luck, he might have been among the dead. The bullet that passed through his back and grazed his lung might have killed him. One of the shots that hit his leg narrowly missed an artery. There was no way to disguise or justify it. He'd made a mistake, made a bad choice for wrong reasons; he'd been a fool. Would anyone have searched for him? He doubted it. He took a deep breath, relished the sun on his face, and was grateful for the day.

Thirty-three Cone Street possessed modest frontage, but the house ran back from the street to a considerable depth. Several shutters were missing, and the paint was peeling—yet all in all, an attractive house.

The comings and goings of its tenants had worn the front steps. The owner of the establishment introduced herself as Mrs. Hoehling and directed him to a small front parlor. A table with a vase of daffodils stood by a window, the yellow of the flowers reflected in its polished surface. Two matching chairs faced the divan along the wall. Despite his aching leg, Ramsey remained standing. He held his hat at his side and idly examined the gilt-framed landscape over the fireplace.

A woman swept through the door a few minutes later. She was young and slim. Her movements possessed an animal vitality, and her black dress was cut from the finest silk. A rich widow's dress. Brown hair nearly as dark as the garment was pulled into a bun over her high forehead. Penetrating blue eyes and a prominent nose dominated her features.

Mrs. Abigail Maynard took a seat on the divan. Ramsey gratefully lowered himself into one of the chairs. Unimpressed, his leg continued to throb.

"Thank you for meeting me, Captain Ramsey. I apologize for any inconvenience."

He couldn't place her accent. Ramsey demurred with a slight wave of his hand.

"I have a letter of introduction from Colonel Horace Porter that I believe will explain my situation." She offered the letter and waited while Ramsey read.

The letter said, in the concise hand that mirrored Porter's concise thought, that Mrs. John H. Maynard was the widow of a fine soldier and a man known personally to Porter. She was presently seeking the whereabouts of her sister, Susan Knowles (née St. Clair). She and her husband, Alfred, had run a boarding school about ten miles southeast of Decatur, Georgia. The school failed during the war, and Alfred and Susan Knowles's whereabouts were unknown. At Porter's request, Major Wilhelm Havermeyer had made inquiries and found no trace of them. However, Porter would consider it a personal favor if his old friend would render assistance to Mrs. Maynard etc., etc.

Ramsey looked up from the letter.

"I would be eternally grateful for your help, Captain Ramsey."

"Mrs. Maynard, you have my profoundest sympathies."

"Thank you."

"However, at the present time I—"

"Colonel Porter has great confidence in your powers. He told me you handled unusual matters for General Grant and later

General Sherman. He assured me that if anyone in Atlanta could help me locate my sister, it was you.”

“I’m afraid Colonel Porter’s confidence in my ability outstrips the resources at my disposal.”

“Perhaps if I gave you some additional information, you would be in a better position to judge how we might proceed.”

“Mrs. Maynard, I—”

“During the war, I lived with my husband’s family in Boston. The last letter I received from my sister was dated July 19, 1864.”

“There was no mail between Boston and Georgia in 1864.”

“Obviously, the letter did not come through the regular channels. My sister and I lived for many years in Europe, and we have connections there. Family friends in France helped us. Susan sent her letters by steamer to Nantes, and they were forwarded to me in Boston. I, of course, reversed the process when sending letters to her. It was a slow but reliable route.”

“Steamer? I believe the term is ‘blockade runner.’”

“Like many Europeans, our friends did not take sides. The Miannay family, for that was their name, owned a substantial interest in several such ships. One or another of them called at Wilmington every few months. I would get packets of Susan’s letters periodically, and she would get mine. It was all we had. I would spend days reading and rereading them.”

“Is it not possible that later packets were lost in transit? As the war progressed, the Navy tightened the blockade, and port cities were captured.”

“I do not believe that was the case. M. Miannay told me that he received nothing from Susan after that July packet, and he and his associates did not lose a ship until September.”

“So after July 1864, you heard nothing.”

“That is the last time Susan wrote. However,”—she removed an envelope from her pocket—“shortly before I left Boston, I received this letter.”

Ramsey took it from her hand. The letter was an inquiry

from Mr. Munford Coldwater. He inquired about the ownership of the Knowles's property. It was his intent to buy it, either from Mrs. Maynard or from the rightful owner if that were not she.

"Do you know Mr. Coldwater?" Ramsey asked.

"Not personally. Susan wrote in one of her letters that Alfred leased some land to him. He owns a nearby plantation and uses the acreage to grow cotton. Susan and Alfred got a percentage of the profits. As you read in Colonel Porter's letter, my brother-in-law was using the house as a boarding school. He had no interest in working the land. However, as the school was new, he had a need for any money he could get." Frowning, she added, "It troubles me that a neighbor would make such an inquiry. Surely the question of selling the land should be put directly to Alfred, yet Mr. Coldwater applies to me as if I held ownership. Just as puzzling is how Mr. Coldwater would know about me or how to write to me in Boston."

"I'm sure Mr. Coldwater's letter has an innocent explanation. After all, he apparently knew your sister. Did Major Havermeyer contact the Dekalb County authorities?"

"I've been told that was done. I went to Captain Havermeyer upon arriving in Atlanta. He is very busy, and our interview was not at all satisfactory. That is why I have found it necessary to impose upon you."

Ramsey liked the woman's directness and energy. She had not tried to enlist his pity or pretend she was helpless. That made what he was about to say even harder.

"Mrs. Maynard, I hope you will understand. I am not *Captain* Ramsey. These days, I am only Mr. Ramsey. My soldiering days are over, and I do not have the Army's resources at my disposal. I assure you that Major Havermeyer's reach is far greater than my own. If he was unable to locate your sister, there is nothing more I can do."

"Surely you are too modest. General Grant, I believe, wished you to continue in his service after the war. I doubt that offer was made to many others."

How much had Porter told this woman?

"It's difficult for me to disappoint you, Mrs. Maynard, but there is really nothing I can do. I'm very sorry. Perhaps if you returned to Boston, I'm sure—"

"I only ask for a bit of your time." Abigail Maynard's penetrating eyes caught his. Pain raged inside them. He looked down and turned his hat in his hands.

"I appreciate your concern, Mrs. Maynard—I truly do. If I should find myself in a position to help you, I will." He looked up at her. "At the moment, I have neither the time nor the means to be of any service. It would be best if you returned to Boston. All may yet be well."

"I have come South to find my sister, Captain Ramsey!" Abigail Maynard's blue eyes flashed with anger. "I sincerely desire your help. My sister must be in trouble. If all were well, she would have written by now. I tell you, sir, I have no intention of returning to Boston! I have asked for your help, and you have refused it. Fine. You insist that you are powerless. Fine. You have declared my efforts a failure before they have been undertaken." She gave a disgusted flick of her hand. "So be it. I'm sorry to have wasted your time."

She fired her words like bullets. Her eyes never released his.

Ramsey desperately wanted to explain himself. He wanted to tell her that her search wasn't foolish—it was hopeless. It was a search not of the mind and eyes but of the heart. Her duty was to heal her life. Her sorrows were her own, and she must learn to bear them. If her sister was gone after two years, she was gone forever. Everyone in this life has lost something or someone; no one is whole.

"Good day, Mrs. Maynard," he said quietly. "I wish you well."

He stood to leave. Pain shot like an electric arc through his leg. He steadied himself clumsily against the back of the chair.

"Oh!" Abigail Maynard's hand flew to her lips.

"An old wound," Ramsey said with a weak smile, "terribly sorry." He slowly stood erect. "Sometimes my leg doesn't behave as it should. I'm quite all right."

He limped toward the door.

"Captain Ramsey . . . I've . . . I've had dreams," she said to his retreating back. Her voice was soft and distant.

He turned.

"Dreams," she repeated. "Your limp. It's just . . ." Her face was pale, her anger gone. "It's just that, for a long time, I've had dreams about my sister. Terrible dreams. There's screaming and blood. Blood running down over stones. And horses. So much blood. It's terrible. I wake up screaming." Tears filled her eyes. She looked away.

Ramsey was at a loss for what to say or do.

She cleared her throat and summoned her strength. "Just before I left Boston, the dream changed. In many ways it remains the same, but now, after the screaming and the blood, there is a mist . . . and there is a man . . . and the mist swirls around me, and the man comes toward me. There is danger, but I don't fear him. I never see his face, but he is tall like you, and"—she paused—"he limps."

They stared at each other in the long moment that followed. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

"I'm sorry, Captain Ramsey," she said, rubbing her eyes and trying to recover her composure. "You must think me mad. My life has not been easy of late. Goodbye."

She turned to the window.

Ramsey's thoughts lay heavy on him as he made his way back up Cone Street.