

LINCOLN'S BODYGUARD

LINCOLN'S BODYGUARD

A NOVEL

TJ TURNER

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*To Nancy and the three little people (Cheyan, Jia, Sierra)
who share our lives. And to Uncle Fred.*

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LINCOLN'S BODYGUARD

I expect to maintain this contest until successful, or till I die, or am conquered, or my term expires, or Congress or the country forsakes me.

—Abraham Lincoln

PROLOGUE

Death creeps quietly behind a man. This lesson I learned early in life and, on that April night, the Old Man learned it too. The audience below strained in their seats, desperate to glimpse the President. A single actor held center stage—his monologue bringing laughter, rising till it filled the theatre. The gas lamps issued a constant hiss, luring me toward sleep. And the Old Man reached out to hold his wife's hand, then let go.

As I stood along the back wall, obscured in flickering shadows against dark wallpaper, a noise reached me—the Old Man's messenger talking to someone outside. The far door opened behind us, then closed. Footsteps followed down the short corridor of the vestibule. I readied myself. No need for a pistol at this range. I pulled my knife from its sheath.

I waited as he opened the inner door and closed it, making no sound. He moved past me, placing each foot with deliberate purpose to keep the flooring silent, confirming his motive. Even with his dark suit and felt hat I recognized him, his movement graceful and confident. He was a famous actor, the Hamlet of our day. I had seen him onstage before, other nights when I stood watch behind the Old Man in this theatre. He paused, watching the play over the Old Man's head, like a man standing at a cliff gathering courage to jump.

I should have leapt—cut him down before he had the chance to strike. But I hesitated. When more laughter erupted from below, he drew a pistol in one hand, a knife in the other.

As he lunged I jolted to action. From my position I had the advantage. Grabbing his shoulder, I spun him toward me. With my free hand I gripped his gun while my knife tore through soft tissue, deflecting off bone. I drew him near, locked in a dance. For a moment our eyes met. He had accounted for everything except this. Twisting my blade, I stripped the pistol from his hand.

His eyes lost their focus—dying men see another world.

The audience below knew nothing until he shifted his weight in a final act to reach the President. I guided him past the Old Man, throwing him over the balcony. A spur on his heel caught, snagging a flag decorating the State Box. He tumbled and crashed onto the stage, ripping the Stars and Stripes down on top of him. The play stopped, a collective gasp rose from the audience, and actors scrambled offstage. The Old Man leapt to his feet. I faced him, the pistol in one hand. My other hand still gripped my knife, blood dripping from the blade to the floor.

Death stalked the Old Man in the theatre that night. But sometimes, even Death has to wait.

CHAPTER ONE

MARCH 1872

I approached the White House slowly, my first time back in seven years. I left after saving the Old Man, after things changed. Washington looked as before, but the feel of the place had shifted. No one loitered or met the gaze of fellow citizens on the street. A cold city—scared. There were rumors of attacks in the heart of the Capital, of daring rebel assaults in broad daylight, meant to terrorize. The papers never reported them, but the rumors circulated, passed by word of mouth until truth and myth were intertwined but unreconciled.

As the sun reached higher the fog dissolved around the White House. The building took shape, a gray mass against the pure white of the mist. Something deep nagged that I should ask admittance and let the walls of the palace shield me.

I took the letter from my breast pocket. My fingers traced the outline of my name.

Feb. 22, 1872

Joseph,

I know much time has passed unspoken between us, but there is something important to discuss. Please, I need you.

—A. Lincoln

Please. The word pleaded through the letter. Maybe I assigned it gravity beyond its intent. *Please.* I tucked the paper back into my breast pocket.

Once inside, my fingers tingled, anticipation mixed with fear. Two soldiers led me down the corridors I knew so well. An air lingered about the place, a scent—musty with the taste of history and

power, like the building itself sweat it from the walls. My shoes found the well-worn path, the slight indentation down the middle of the carpet from decades of wear. We walked past closed doorways, behind which my mind could paint every turn in vivid detail. With my eyes shut I could walk to the Old Man's study, take my post along the back wall, and blend into the dark green wallpaper. I was home.

One of the soldiers showed me inside the great wood door. The room was empty. Two windows laid claim to the far wall, spanning from floor to ceiling. The first framed the Washington Monument. It remained partially complete, the sun blinding off the bleached white stone. During the War, maps plastered these walls, obscuring the wallpaper as they tracked battles and the movement of armies. At times they covered the windows. Without the maps the place felt empty, but the walls knew the truth.

I walked to the middle of the room, something I rarely did in my earlier days when I preferred a solid structure at my back. The fire hissed, a few pops betraying overly wet wood placed into the flame. A table stood in front of the fireplace, and I ran my fingertips over the edge. It hadn't budged in years, the carpet under it more plush and vividly green than elsewhere.

A map covered the wood tabletop, its corners curled from repeated rolling. It showed the South, the land from Richmond and below. Even though the generals had surrendered their swords, the fighting raged on. The War wouldn't give up. Though no longer the boil of '63, she simmered, nine years later. She still claimed lives, and would until the day she died. The Confederates had disbanded their armies to mold themselves into an efficient enemy—small networks of rebels who attacked and then dissolved into society. Fighting ghosts. Small *x*'s dotted the roads in all directions.

Ambush sites.

"How are you, Joseph?"

I never heard him coming, one of the things I hated about this carpet. Anything could creep quietly behind you.

"I'm fine, Mr. Lamon."

Ward Hill Lamon, the President's right hand. He had always despised me. His body language betrayed him. I had worked for Allan Pinkerton, the famed detective and forerunner of military intelligence, while Ward Hill Lamon was the President's best friend, advisor, and confidant. They competed for the Old Man's loyalties.

"I see the President's note found you. Mr. Pinkerton told us to expect you today."

I played over his intonation in my head, searching his choice of words. He stood more bent, though he still cut an imposing figure. His suit spoke of wealth and power. How a man composes himself and how he dresses tells an immense amount about his status, both real and self-imagined. In this, Lamon had grown more powerful than last we met.

"Will Mr. Pinkerton be joining us?" I asked.

"Not today. We need to discuss matters of great sensitivity, and discretion will be the priority. There are things he doesn't need to know. Do you understand?"

I lied and nodded. Another political chess match.

"Do you know why you're here, Joseph?"

"I received the President's letter. That's all I know."

"When the President arrives, we'll explain the situation. He insisted on having you. It's only proper we wait for him. I'll go check on things."

He turned to leave but then stopped. "Joseph, I don't want to leave you with the wrong impression about Mr. Pinkerton. Someone is reporting to the enemy—a fox in the henhouse, as the President would say. I have long suspected it to be among Pinkerton's people. These things happen, but what we will discuss cannot be compromised. The very life of our nation depends on that."

"My loyalty belongs to the President alone," I answered.

Lamon considered my reply. "Very well. I will not mention it again. If the President trusts you, that will suffice." This time he turned and left. When the door closed, I stood alone.

I turned to the little marks that littered the map in front of me, filling the roadways from Richmond all the way south. Parts of Louisiana and lower Mississippi had a line drawn across them. The country remained divided, the result of a failed surrender. When General Joe Johnston walked from the negotiation table years ago, the Old Man had called it the greatest treason. It surpassed even General Lee or Benedict Arnold. Other rebel leaders followed. Eighty thousand men burned their uniforms and returned to their farms. They melted back into the fabric of the South. But they kept their guns and the country knew no closure.

As I studied the map a younger man entered the room, resplendent in a three-piece suit fashioned from a shimmering cloth. Behind him the Old Man filled the doorframe, pausing to get a good look at me before he walked across the room with the aid of a cane.

“Joseph,” he held out a hand after switching the cane. “How we both have changed. I’m afraid that in beauty, neither of us has any more to claim, my friend.”

His hand felt frail, the bones barely covered by the tissue paper masquerading as skin. Tall and thin, he towered above me still. I felt like a child. The cane in his hand forced him to stoop—too short for his height. His suit hung loosely, indicating weight lost. His knee-length jacket appeared hollow, his neck gaunt inside the white collar and bow tie. But time had weathered his face the most. The lines were deep and furrowed, as if recently plowed. His beard had grayed, and his hairline retreated. It had only been seven years, but the office had drained him, pulling his very essence from the shell of his suit.

“It has been too long.” He motioned for me to sit at the table with him as the younger man circled the room and stood along the back wall, like I had done for years. Lamon entered the room and closed the door behind him. He joined us at the table.

“How is your mother?” The Old Man asked.

The question caught me by surprise, amazed at how far her influence spread. In retirement she had become famous, articles

published on her exploits, the newspapers using her story to blot out the little marks on the map.

"She is fine, sir, the last I checked. I haven't seen her in a while."

"She was here once, did you know?"

"No." In my mind some worlds were never meant to mix.

"Many of the conductors came, your mother, Harriet Tubman, a few others who risked so much. I hosted a ceremony and a banquet. Several years back now. She told me a few good stories about you. To think, the things you withheld in our time together."

The event would have been bald-faced propaganda arranged by Lamon to mask the sour reports from down South. My mother would cringe if she heard herself called a distraction.

"I hope we find time to catch up, Joseph. But my schedule is worse than ever, and I am sure you are wondering why you are here." The Old Man nodded toward Lamon.

"As you might suspect, Joseph," Lamon began, "the rebellion has grown." He flattened a curled edge of the map. "Some say we are losing. A fight like this is ugly, and even with our best efforts, we have been unable to rid ourselves of it.

"But we have a rare opportunity. A senior member of the resistance wants to end the fighting. The information he has would be devastating for the rebels. We could break them—push the fight out of this stalemate." Lamon swept his hand across the map.

I looked to the President. He held one hand across his chest while the other rubbed his beard.

"Who?" I asked.

Lamon looked to the Old Man before answering. "Norris."

"Colonel Norris?"

The weight of the name caught me off guard. It made me nauseated. I slouched, grateful for my chair, letting it hold my weight. Colonel William Norris had been the head of the Confederate Secret Service during the War, Pinkerton's nemesis. The end of the organized fighting accelerated his rise as leader

of a decentralized yet effective resistance. I tried to kill him once and damn near succeeded. His name appeared last on my list—a roster of the men who left my wife for dead and took my daughter to avenge their failed attempt to kill the Old Man.

“He grows tired of the fight,” Lamon answered. “I believe his letters and the promises of his envoy to be sincere. He sees the error of this conflict—that nothing will improve until we close this final chapter and move forward.”

I looked at the Old Man. He was lost in thought.

“So what do you want from me?”

“He requested you,” Lamon’s voice was flat.

“Norris did? Why? Last time you sent me to bring back his body,” I said.

Lamon provided the list that I had worked from.

“There’s symbolism for him. You killed Booth, and Norris planned the attempt on the President. He says he will trust only you.”

“Maybe he means to kill me?”

A smile flickered on Lamon’s face before he suppressed it. “He’s gone to a lot of trouble to convince us he wants to come in. Do you suppose you’re so important?”

“No,” I lied. But that was exactly what I thought. Years ago I had made a deal with Norris—a deal to spare my daughter. Unable to do what he asked, he would want me dead for my failings. “Even if I agree, how am I to find him?”

“He provided meeting instructions. You will take Baxter with you,” Lamon said.

“Baxter?”

Lamon motioned to the young man standing along the wall. “Mr. Winston Baxter, the President’s security advisor.”

The suggestion surprised me. I glanced at the man in the shiny suit standing against the bookcase. He was almost ten years my junior and far too confident for his age. Proximity to power can have that effect. The light material of his suit shimmered, the cloth likely from Europe. Polished leather boots extended under

the pleats in his trousers, and his slicked-back hair lent an oily appearance.

"I work by myself." I turned toward the Old Man.

"Absolutely not," Lamon answered. "You have a history with Colonel Norris, and we cannot run the risk of that past getting in the way of what needs to be done. You'll forgive me, but the stakes are too high to trust this matter to you alone. You'll take Baxter. He knows the particulars of finding Norris. There is no room for compromise on this."

"Why would I take someone of such little..." I paused, trying to find a word that would somehow diminish Baxter and Lamon alike, "...experience."

Lamon smiled. "You and Baxter are quite alike. He is young, but not green. You will find him a hard customer, with more starch than one his age should lay claim to."

Baxter stood motionless along the bookshelf—a complacent look on his face. A partner would make killing Norris that much harder.

"And if I say no?"

The Old Man reached out and placed his hand on my arm. "Please, Joseph. This is my chance to end this. I had so long planned to leave after my second term, like Washington himself, or Jefferson. But I promised I would not step down until the country was whole. I came in with this mess, and I will see it done right. I fear that with my stubborn disposition and with Congress refusing to impose limits on the office, I may never leave unless something helps us end this war."

I avoided his eyes. They would remind me of my dying wife as I held her, and of Aurora, the little girl stolen from me and, if still alive, old enough that I might not recognize her.

"Fine."

"Good," Lamon said. "You will leave tomorrow morning. Baxter will guide you to the meeting, and then you'll both escort Colonel Norris to Washington. If there are no issues, we'll have his sword this time next week."

“Thank you, Joseph,” the Old Man said.

Lamon stood and placed a hand on my shoulder. “We need Norris *alive*.” His voice lingered on that last word. “That’s why Baxter goes with you tomorrow.”

I nodded, though I would never let Norris speak of our arrangement to save my daughter. Lamon headed toward the door, leaving me with the Old Man, who struggled to rise. I helped him to his feet.

“It is so good to see you, Joseph. I’m afraid I have a cabinet meeting. But you will stay the night.” The Old Man looked to the door and Lamon. Baxter held it open, not looking in our direction. When they were out of earshot, the Old Man lowered his voice. “We will visit later. There is another purpose for my letter.”

CHAPTER TWO

Baxter escorted me to my old bedroom. It was redecorated as a guest room. Hot water filled a bathtub in the corner, and I stripped, anxious to wash days of travel from my body. The heat penetrated to my core. I fell asleep, only waking when the water cooled beyond comfort. A set of fresh clothes hung in the small closet, nothing extravagant like Baxter's suit, but better than what I had relied on to get me to Washington. I changed and fell back on the bed, slipping into a deep sleep. I didn't wake until late in the afternoon.

When I stirred, I found a tray perched on the bedside table with a half-filled bottle of whiskey and a glass—Pinkerton's whiskey. Lamon had excluded him from the meeting, but he knew how to look after me. He also meant the bottle as a message. Sooner or later I would have to face him. After Lamon had handed me the list with Norris' name, Pinkerton had counseled a more subtle path. But with my daughter gone and my wife dead, his influence proved of no avail. Revenge robbed my sanity. He would be upset with me still, so it would be best to visit when he least expected it, especially since they had taken my weapons when I entered the White House. I filled the glass and downed my first drink. It had been hours since my last, and my hands were beginning to shake.

To pass the time I unpacked my bag, filling my flask from Pinkerton's bottle to ensure a supply for the road. I refilled the glass and packed a second set of clean clothes. Putting the bag away I pulled out a small black velvet pouch, the only possession other than my knife that I cared about. Living light made life easier. In a hurry, I had little to leave behind. Even as the years passed, I hadn't collected many possessions—or friends. Habits were hard to break.

I dragged a chair to the one small window and pulled at the strings of the velvet bag. I rarely opened it, only in those

sparing moments I wished to remember Aurora. Releasing the drawstring, I upended the bag into my hand. A silver necklace fell out—the evening sunlight caught the polished edges. A small pendant dangled on the chain, a tiny and amazingly detailed eagle’s feather. My stepfather had been a silversmith, an incredible artisan. He tried teaching me his craft, but my hands were better for coarser tools, like a Bowie knife. He was a progressive man who took in a pregnant Indian woman, and after I was born, he molded me with his fiery dinner table orations. He preached extreme abolitionist views that he kept none too hidden. They would eventually account for his death. But he drilled me on my lessons every day and ensured my education was second to none across the Kansas plains. He intended me to return as a great chief to my mother’s people. How wrong he had predicted my destiny.

The feather nearly floated in my palm, as if it might catch the draft from the fireplace and take flight. I never had that kind of skill, to make something of such fine beauty. If I could, the world would be a different place. I struggled to hold it still as the whiskey had yet to drown the shakes. At one time the feather had a twin, a pair of earrings made for my mother—a reminder of her Miami Indian ancestors. With the birth of my daughter, my mother split them up, one for my wife and one for the baby. I only recovered the one around my wife’s neck.

Muffled voices filled the hallway outside and then a soft knock rapped against the door. I put the necklace back in its bag, and the bag in my pocket. Even after so long, I tried never to think about it. *Please*—the last word my wife had said to me as I held her, the memory of her face lost to me. Little wonder I didn’t resist the Old Man’s letter.

I started across the room when the door opened and the Old Man stepped in. He glanced down the hallway before closing the door behind him. Things had changed. The king had to slink about his castle.

“I’m sorry to barge in, Joseph.”

I stood and motioned him to the chair by the window. "It's not a problem, sir." I offered my poured drink. "I have only one glass."

"Oh, no. It does not sit well with me."

He sat and rested his cane between his legs—both hands clutched the curved handle. The War rode heavy on him.

The Old Man broke the silence after looking around the room. "Sometimes I feel a visitor in my own house, like I came for a dinner party, and they never asked me to leave." He laughed while staring at the floor.

"It's time for that quiet cabin you always talked about—woods nearby, a stream to fish in, birds in the spring."

"I'm afraid even those good dreams leave me to my solitude." He paused, his stare piercing and unbroken. "Sometimes I believe I would accept the bad ones, if only for the company."

During the War, the Old Man had strange and disturbing dreams of his death. He saw them as a message—from the Great Spirit perhaps—showing his eventual demise and the reason for it. His was to be the last death in our War—a noble sacrifice to end the nation's suffering. By saving him, I had stolen his place in history.

"Joseph, I know there are plenty of things we should talk about, but I asked you here because you are the only person I can trust." He sounded unsure of himself.

"I came to help."

The Old Man nodded. "That's why it has to be you. This business with Norris is not why I wrote to you. I used it merely as a decoy to bring you here."

"Lamon knows nothing of this?"

"No, and he must not. Do you understand?"

"No, I don't. But I have no love for Lamon."

The Old Man stood and turned to the window. "This job is not what it once was. The lines were clear when the armies faced one another. But now there is no righteous path. I have been south on many occasions, trying to broker a lasting peace. It always shatters. Stronger forces than I benefit from the fight. I'm afraid this will never end."

“But Lamon thinks Norris’ surrender will finish the rebels.”

He turned toward me. “There is so little I am certain of anymore. But I am convinced that Colonel Norris does not intend to surrender. But that is not why I wrote you. My request is personal.”

“Sir, I would do anything.”

“I know that, Joseph.” He leaned on his cane as he once again labored to sit in the chair. “I never thought I would still be here. I had hoped the War would die with me, that I could at least see the country through it. Now this job is so lonely, almost a sentence to endure. After you left and Mary passed from the fever, I had no company. There is Lamon, but he has charted a course that will tear this nation apart, and I am mostly powerless but to watch it unfold. This War has been so evil, Joseph. It takes good men and turns them wicked—all the fighting, the death. Lamon was a good man, but I fear what he has become.”

“The Draft,” I whispered.

The Old Man’s eyes narrowed, then relaxed. I had touched upon something deep.

“I lay no claim to that idea. I detest it.” His words were flat. He understood the extent of Lamon’s twisted logic. The Draft started during the War to swell the Union ranks with fresh soldiers. As the fighting subsided, the Draft Board adapted. The states below the Mason-Dixon Line were desperate for reconstruction, but needed skilled labor. Congress passed a modernization act, part charity, part reconstruction, and ultimately part retribution. Children of Confederates were shipped north to work the factories. The more important the Confederate family, the more children the Draft took. At first, it was just the older children, but the factories were ever hungry, and children as young as five had small fingers to work the textile looms. They were supposed to learn a new trade and bring those skills home when they returned. But they never returned.

"I can't stop it, Joseph. Congress overrides anything I veto. I can't save everyone. And if I step aside, I fear what will happen. Lamson has powerful backers. It takes all I have left to keep them in check. I am a prisoner of circumstance."

An uncomfortable silence filled the space between us. Finally, he spoke again.

"There is a young woman, Joseph. I need you to bring her to me, deliver her safely."

"Who is she, sir?"

The Old Man looked to his shoes as if they held the answer. "She is no one, and yet, she is everything. I did not intend it to happen. I see her but a week a year..." He turned away, twisting in the chair. "I do fear what you'll think of me."

I pictured Aurora in her blue dress. "I am no one to judge."

"She is much younger than I, younger even than you." A seriousness descended over him. The War had extracted his dry wit, his last line of defense against the ever-increasing demands of a nation.

"It's not entirely what you think. This woman, she is..." he stopped to think. "I have only one son left. Robert is bright and ambitious, but we are very distant. The boy so loved his mother. They were infinitely closer. But this girl, she feels like..." he paused, "she is family."

"Where do I find her?"

"At a resort, the same place we have the Peace Summit each year. The island south of Savannah."

I had left long before the summits began—yearly meetings designed to heal the wounds of the nation. The President met with Southerners who had no power to influence the rebels. They were propaganda, set in a beautiful playground for rich Northern industrialists, many of whom built winter retreats among the old-growth oaks covered in Spanish moss.

The Old Man handed me a piece of paper. I unfolded it. He had neatly printed each letter of her name—*Annicie*.

"This is her?"

He nodded.

"Her last name?"

"She's part of the staff, Joseph. She doesn't use her last name. It came from the plantation where she was born."

I let it sink in—the reason for secrecy, why the Old Man had revealed this to no one else. The man who freed a nation could not bridge the social canyon separating colored from white. A colored mistress would be a scandal beyond all proportions, and if the truth were discovered while she still lived in the Deep South, her life would be forfeit.

"And Lamon doesn't know?"

The Old Man shook his head. "I am not ashamed, Joseph. But you realize what this would mean."

"Yes, sir. Washington won't be much safer. What will you do with her?"

He exhaled deeply. It hadn't entered his consideration, at least not fully. "I don't know, Joseph. I could send her north, where she will be safe. And free. Maybe Canada. I can't imagine what the rebels would do to her if she was discovered."

"And Colonel Norris?" I asked. I had no intentions of doing anything to Norris other than running him through.

He ran a hand over his forehead. "Even if he intended to surrender, I am certain Lamon would not accept it. Other politics are at work, and I am not privy to it all. Despite the office and all the trappings, I do not hold influence as I once did. I can't continue this struggle with Lamon and the masters he serves knowing that Annice is trapped. And if they find out about her, they will use her against me. I can trust no one else. What I ask of you is selfish, but I need this, Joseph. *Please.*"

My task had become more difficult. It would be hard enough to escape Baxter and the South after killing Norris, but it would be impossible if laden with this girl. I had to choose—my revenge, or the Old Man's forgiveness.

“If no one knows about her, I might put her in greater danger,” I said. “You’ve thought of this, sir? Getting her out might be what kills her.”

The Old Man shook his head. “If I could leave her to my dreams and, by so doing, she could live her days safely, then I would never have asked you here. It is more complicated than this, Joseph.” He paused. “She is expecting, and her child is mine.”