

**LAND OF
WOLVES**

Also By TJ Turner

Lincoln's Bodyguard

LAND OF WOLVES

THE RETURN OF
LINCOLN'S BODYGUARD

TJ TURNER

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To Nancy—my partner in all adventures.

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**LAND OF
WOLVES**

There is a struggle inside each of us—between two wolves. One thrives on justice and peace, the other on anger, fear, and hatred.

CHAPTER ONE

2 MARCH 1874

BREATHING DEEP, I forced the space before my next breath to fall longer. It gave my ears a chance against the stiffening silence. There was nothing. I willed my heart to slow, anything to better hear through the darkness. But no noise reached me—no fall of hooves, no creak from the axles of an old wagon. Each passing night made it harder to bear the delay. By any measure, they were late—too late for my liking.

I leaned against the doorframe. The shaved wood still smelled of pine, and the sap was sure to stick to my clothes. Molly would lecture me again, when next it came to do wash. I had ruined many shirts while building our cabin and a few pairs of pants playing with the children outside. We had been here the better part of a year, passing the winter in town while the Old Man and I worked at the cabin on the days where the wind didn't bite too hard. This country air filled our hearts—a place to heal. But it came with the price of an ever-growing mending pile I left to Molly.

Around me the sounds of night bloomed, and the moon fell in uneven fashion. In its light, the giant oak cast a shadow across a thin trail as it snaked its way through the meadow. The children had forged other paths as well. Their feet plodded the tall prairie grass, cutting deep to reveal the mud underneath, as if a giant

knife had scarred the earth. The lights were out at the Old Man's cabin, where Emeline slept sound in her room. She still knew the Old Man as *Uncle Abe*. Someday we would tell her the truth. She visited her mother often, buried a short distance from the oak. I pushed the recollection of that night from my mind. I would never wash the blood from my hands or the taste from my mouth. I drew consolation in keeping my promise to the dying woman. I had watched over her little girl and delivered her safe to her father.

In our cabin, Daniel slept in his small loft—the only room on the second floor. His bouncing amongst the rafters drove Molly crazy, though I regarded it a small price. He adjusted well in this place, accepting Molly and I as guardians after the loss of his family. I imagined Colonel Norris standing alongside the Great Spirit, enjoying the irony in our patchwork family. He had long fought for his Confederacy. Yet a half-bred Indian and the man he had despised most—Abraham Lincoln—were among those who raised his grandson.

Taking in the cool night air was like drinking water from a deep well. As I pulled it into my chest, a call echoed amongst the hills. The locals said there had never been a wolf in the area before, at least as far back as anyone could remember. But every night she tilted her head skyward, paying homage to some ancient wildness. Her song fell upon the land, long and intense. The howl rose and fell, only to start anew. This night she seemed closer, making her way from the rolling hills to the north. No call ever answered. It seemed odd she would be so far east, or alone. The Great Spirit created these social creatures to travel in packs. They taught the first men about loyalty and family. But this wolf had lost her pack, or been forced from it.

Behind me, the loose flooring creaked. I had not finished fastening it down, focusing instead on the roof. We needed shelter

from the rain and scorching sun that would come with late summer. We had been here just under a year, yet with the Old Man's help we made tremendous progress. As soon as we could move into the small cabin, Molly insisted we make it ours, even as I finished it from within. She tried to be quiet to surprise me, but her feet fell heavy on the rough-hewn pine planks. Without turning, I spoke before she made it to the porch.

"Thought you'd catch me with whiskey?"

Of late I had done well, though the shakes would not leave my hands. As long as I had no need of a gun or knife, I needed no whiskey.

At first Molly said nothing, wrapping her arms around me as her head buried into my back. She pulled me in, breathing deep in the crisp night.

"I worry that you don't sleep."

"I can't."

"I know."

The remnants of slumber held her voice, muted as she pressed her face against my back. Her forehead filled the space between my shoulders, her breath warm.

"It's been too long," I said. I stared toward the tall oak. "Something happened."

Molly nodded. She abandoned any attempt at excuse. Nothing fit. She knew it as well as I. My mother's last telegram came from deep inside Georgia, five weeks earlier. She sent it after she found Aurora, the little girl I had lost so many years ago. They headed north to us. Molly and I postponed our wedding until their arrival. But the days stretched, and then the weeks turned to a month.

"What will you do?" she asked.

"They could be anywhere. I can start with the telegraph operator, but I don't know if it will be much good."

“You can’t go south,” Molly insisted. “They know you to be dead—as does the North. The entire country thinks *Joseph Foster* is long buried.”

Faking my demise the year prior had been my only manner of escape. It bought our freedom from the Industrial Barons—a consortium of the rich and powerful. They had long run the country through corruption and manipulation. Years earlier, with the great Civil War about to falter and die, I had saved the Old Man from John Wilkes Booth. With that simple action I pushed the Old Man into the hands of the Barons. They used him as political power. Trapped in the White House, he enforced the Draft—a system to supply their factories with free child labor. All the while the last embers of our great Civil War held the South in a simmering conflict.

When the Old Man resigned, clearing the way for President Johnson, it invoked the wrath of the Barons. The new president worked to undo their influence while rebuilding the country. He supported the labor unions and sent the children home. The Barons would love to see me dead, but thus far the assumption of my death had shielded us. No one had come for me.

“What would you have me do?” I asked.

Molly’s hands clutched my suspenders. Her nightgown tossed in the light breeze. I knew she longed to pull me to her, to drag me back across the threshold until I stood inside. She would be happy then. And I might be, too. Essary Springs existed as a slice of perfection—deep in western Tennessee. The Old Man lived at the other end of the meadow, and the people here were a rough mountain folk. They paid little notice to the nation’s politics. Instead, they elected the Old Man as their mayor without care that he had once been our president. Pure heaven would fall short in describing this place, though the thought of enjoying it eluded me. I needed Aurora—to hold my daughter once more.

No matter how patch-worked our family was, it would never be complete without her.

“I will go to town tomorrow and telegraph Pinkerton,” Molly said. “He will have some advice.”

I drew her near. She always knew what to do. Allan Pinkerton, the famed detective to the presidents, had employed us both. Only his network of informants and spies reached deep enough into the South. They would be of use in finding my mother and daughter.

“Until then, I know you won’t sleep,” Molly continued. “I’ll put on some tea.”

“Lie down, Molly. I shouldn’t keep us both awake.”

She drew me close once more, resting one hand on the side of my face.

“My bed has been empty for far too long without you. If you insist on listening to the night and that damned wolf, then I will make us some tea. I will not go back to bed alone.”

By her footfalls my mind followed her into the kitchen. The cabin had only two bedrooms, a small dining room, and a kitchen. I would build upon it later, or let this one serve as a living space while we crafted a grand house next. But I had made the kitchen extra-large—enough to fit in the cast iron stove that arrived from over the rails. It had taken four of us to haul it inside. I closed my eyes and listened as Molly stoked the coals and then added a piece of wood. She placed the kettle on the top with a clank and set about with the china. I loved the sound of her. After all we had been through—all she had seen—she desired a simple life. This place would heal us, once all the pieces of our jumbled puzzle fell into place.

I moved onto the porch and sat upon one of the rocking chairs the Old Man made for us. He intended them as wedding presents. But night after night he watched us stand upon our front

porch and could bear it no longer. He gifted them early. The wood creaked, and the noise of the rockers on the rough planking killed my listening for the night. I would never hear a wagon on approach. Instead, I closed my eyes and waited for Molly. Many nights in the last month I had watched the sun rise and push away the darkness from this spot.

With my eyes closed, I drifted. I floated above the night, letting the howl of the wolf course through me as I rocked. Her voice pitched again, rising, then fading. She lured me toward sleep. A moment longer may have been all I needed, but in mid-song, she stopped. The immediacy of it stood in jarring contrast as the night became silent. Other sounds rushed to fill the void. I started from my chair.

Horses.

Their hoof falls were fast, echoing amongst the trees. At first I thought it a dream. Molly took the kettle from the stove. It steamed but hadn't boiled. She heard them, too. I stood, searching the night. They were coming up the trail and toward the clearing.

"Joseph . . ." Molly called from within.

Stopping at the threshold, I reached above the doorway. I had nailed a crude rack to the wall above the door. It held my Henry rifle. Molly joined me, grabbing the shotgun next to the door.

"Do you think it's—"

"Bad news," I interrupted.

"How do you know?"

"When is good news ever in a hurry?"

"The Barons?" Molly asked.

I shook my head.

"Why not?" she pressed.

I didn't want to frighten her, though it didn't matter. She read the fear on my face, as I did on hers.

“When *they* come, we won’t hear them.”

I stepped out onto the edge of the porch and strained my vision, waiting for the riders to emerge from the dark.

“All the same,” I said. “Go blow out the lamps.”

I racked the rifle, cocking the hand-lever under the stock. The metallic sound split the night as the bolt forced a cartridge into the rifle’s chamber. When Molly blew out the last of the oil lights, I stepped off the porch into the night.

My advantage would lie in the darkness.

CHAPTER TWO

WITH THE BARREL of my rifle propped against the woodpile, I took deep breaths to steady my hands. They still shook. My mouth dried, as if my lips anticipated the flask. Liquor had always held the fear at bay and, without it, the pounding of my heart made my hands worse. I shifted until certain the moonlight did not cross my body. It concealed me amongst the shadows. My eyes narrowed—anything to gain the advantage if I had need to fire first.

The horses pulled closer. Whoever rode them forced the animals into a pitched run. From the sound, I thought there might be two. But as they emerged from the trail and into the clearing, the hoof falls echoed off the great oak making it hard to tell. They slowed to a trot, and then the noise faded, save the din of their breath as a rider pushed them forward. In the moonlight a man sat atop the first horse. He held one arm outstretched behind holding the reins to a second riderless horse.

“Sheriff Foster! Sheriff Foster!”

The voice came out winded and strained. At once I lowered my rifle and stepped from behind the cord of wood.

“Charley, I’m over here.”

The horses started forward again, this time toward the sound of my voice. The form of the rider emerged from the dark. An eagle’s feather stuck out from the band around the Stetson hat.

“I can’t see you.”

“What is it, Charley?”

He guided the horses until they stood nearby. I grabbed the reins of the one he pulled. Charley had worked both into a lather—their hides glistening under the moon.

“What’s the fuss, Charley?”

“An Indian woman, she came to town an hour back. I thought of you right away.”

The breath sucked out of me as his words struck hard about the gut. I tried to answer, but nothing came. Charley knew I waited for my mother—and daughter. We had talked on it plenty.

“Did you hear me, Sheriff? She’s down at Doc Herman’s right now. She’s in a bad way.”

I turned toward the cabin. Molly stood on the porch. Her hand covered her mouth as she stared. The shotgun hung limp from her other hand.

Without saying anything, I stepped forward and handed her my rifle.

“Joseph, I’ll . . .”

I didn’t hear what she said. Turning to the empty horse, I pulled myself up and barely settled before I dug both heels into the beast.

“Stay here, Charley. I want someone with Molly and the children.”

Below me the horse twisted, unused to the weight. As I took up the slack in the reins, I pulled her head until she faced the end of the meadow. With a swat to her backside she reared before falling hard on her front hooves. When she gained her footing, we flew past the moonlit meadow and into the darkness.

I let her find the way. She knew it as well as I, and my vision held nothing on hers in the dark. I spoke in her ear—like my mother used to do when riding bareback to escape the slave catchers. As the darkness of the trail closed around us, I leaned closer to avoid

the low branches. Loosening my grip on the reins, I remembered my mother's words in her old tongue. The horse seemed to know, running at her limit through the night. Branches tore at me. My shirt ripped as they tried to pull me to the ground, but she steered me clear. I closed my eyes and spoke, feeling her gait and moving my weight as she needed.

She played her role to perfection, making the fastest descent from Big Pond Hill I had ever seen. We found our way out of the woods and into Essary Springs, then down Main Street. I only grabbed the reins to slow her as we reached the doctor's office. I didn't bother tying her as I leapt from the saddle. The town lay dark and still, and only my footfalls on the wooden boardwalk disturbed the peace. I pushed into the door of the doctor's small office.

Inside, he sat next to his exam table. A sheet laid over her, though not covering her head. Doctor Herman rose to meet me.

"Joseph. I figured you'd be by soon."

"Is she—" I didn't finish the sentence.

He shook his head. "She's resting now, though she lost a lot of blood. I gave her some opium a while back. She'll need more soon."

I started into the room, but he caught my arm.

"I couldn't stem all the bleeding, Joseph."

"I thought you said . . ."

He shook his head again. "This was deliberate—to make it painful and slow. I did what I could, but we would need a real surgeon."

"Then we'll get her on the train in the morning."

"She won't make it through the night. I'm sorry. And likely she won't wake again. There's not much more I can do. I'm a country doctor. I do simple things here."

He stared into his hands before looking back to me.

“This . . . this was evil. They carved on her something awful. Those who did this, they knew how to use a knife. Maybe a good surgeon could have done more, but I don’t know.”

Fear held me. I had killed so many with my blade. What I sowed came back to haunt me. My stomach turned as I stood over her, watching her face turn cold. I had seen it too many times. The sheet was pulled high under her chin, but left enough folded over to cover her face—in anticipation. Her arms extended to her sides, wrapped in bandages that had bled through. I stepped into the room, just a half-step forward.

“Thanks, Doc,” I said.

“Sit with her. If she stirs and needs more medicine, I’ll do what I can.”

I nodded, and he left me alone.

I took a moment—embarrassingly long. I hadn’t seen her in years, not since I went to Washington to enlist. She had kept at her work, ferrying escaped slaves to freedom despite the fighting. It had earned her an audience with the Old Man, well after I had saved him in the theater that night. She seemed smaller now, somehow shorter as she lay stretched on top of the table. Maybe the stories, the ones from the Underground Railroad, made her larger in my mind. Perhaps I stood that much smaller when I saw her last. I forced myself forward until I leaned over her.

Peace held her face. So much so that I stooped near to hear her breathe. Her chest rose and fell, in shallow breaths that arrived in unsteady intervals. More wrinkles set about her face. No one would deny that native blood flowed through her veins, despite the store-bought dress. Even my stepfather, enlightened as he was about the worth of men, referred to us as civilized savages. To him we were a force to tame.

I sat next to her. She stirred as I held her hand. It wasn't enough to wake her.

"*Djòdjò*," I whispered. *Mother*. "I'm here."

The sounds felt awkward, some long cherished memory that I finally spoke aloud. I remembered such little of her native *Algonquin*. She did not stir, even as I caressed her hand. Doctor Herman carried a lamp into the room. He placed it on the table by the head of the bed.

"Did she wake?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Is there any way to rouse her?"

"Not while she's under the opium."

"I need to know what happened," I said.

He stood quiet for a time, a small brown vial in his hand with a metal syringe—more medicine.

"We should try to make her passing comfortable."

"I need to know," I insisted, raising my voice.

"Why would it matter, Joseph? So you could hunt them down? What good comes of it?"

"She had my daughter."

Doctor Herman looked to the vial in his hands. He nodded.

"We won't give her any more then. Wait and see if she wakes."

"Thank you."

He placed the vial and needle on the table near the lamp, and then walked out.

"*Djòdjò*," I said again, this time louder. "I need you to wake. Tell me where to find Aurora."

She did not stir.

I sat by her as the hours passed, the large clock chiming in the front hallway. It marked the progression of night. Every hour playing its music until the first gray light passed through the windows. Her breathing felt shallower. I prayed to *Wakan Tanka*—the Great

Spirit—though I had forgotten the words. I asked for mercy—to bring her back to us. I needed to know. She held the only way to find Aurora.

When next I woke, Molly stood next to me. The morning fell brighter in the room, though a gray pallor still gripped the horizon. She placed her hand on my shoulder. As I stirred, she leaned in and kissed the top of my head.

“I see I have more mending.” Her fingers played with a split in my shirt. Below it a red welt had raised at a place where one of the branches had lashed me.

“Anything?” she asked.

I shook my head.

Molly walked out of the room and returned with a cloth. She placed it on my mother’s head, wiping gently before letting it lie.

“How did you get here?” I asked.

“I took Charley’s horse.”

“And the children?” I didn’t need to ask. Molly would have it well in hand.

“I left Daniel with Mayor Lincoln. Charley is with them.”

I nodded. “You didn’t have to come.”

Molly leaned over, placing her head on mine.

“Of course I did.”

“How will I find her?”

“Aurora?”

I nodded.

“We’ll think of something. I’ll leave you and send that telegram.”

Before Molly left the room, my mother stirred. It wasn’t much. I stared, not wanting to move. Molly pulled the cloth from my mother’s head after wiping her forehead. Her eyes opened. She appeared confused, her stare falling to Molly, and then me. I stood and leaned over.

“Djòdjò.”

She tried to smile, but couldn't make it fill her face as I always remembered.

“Joseph.” The sound of her voice held barely above a whisper.

“It's me,” I said. “You made it.”

Her other hand began to lift from the bed. I grabbed it and raised her palm to the side of my face. She spoke, so soft that I leaned close. The words that came out were not English. For a moment I panicked, not understanding. Then I let the sounds in, repeating them again and again as she spoke, hoping to remember.

She looked at me for understanding, but I feared the words would fall from my memory as I tried to untangle their meaning. I wanted to ask her to speak them again, to say it in English, but even the thought of speaking caused me to lose the sounds. I stumbled over them, saying each out loud this time.

She listened, and then repeated. As she finished, her eyes became glassy. I had seen it before, too many times. I gripped the hand at my face tighter, fighting the mask of death that descended.

“Djòdjò!”

It brought her back for a moment. She locked eyes with me and smiled. Then she said something different, hurried and rushed. She looked through me, seeing the world beyond. She tried to smile once more. Her hand at my face clenched—then let go. Her breath fell short and faded.

I leaned in, my forehead against hers. I tried to fight the sobs, not wanting Molly to see me this way. Molly placed a hand on my shoulder, pulling me away to hold me. We stayed like that for minutes, maybe the better part of an hour. I don't know. The clock in the hall sounded, and Doc Herman came in to pull the sheet over my mother's face.

Molly pulled back from our embrace.

“Joseph, what did she say?”

I thought of the words, played them over in my mind, repeating each one.

“Do you know?” she asked.

I nodded. I remembered enough.

“What?”

“Find Aurora and go to the *Paha Sapas*.”

“What does it mean?” Molly asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve never heard those words before—*Paha Sapas*.”

“She said nothing else?” Molly pressed.

She had said something more. I tried to translate those words, but they filled me with fear. She had grown serious, her voice deeper. In my youth that tone of voice meant words I needed to heed well.

“What was it?” Molly asked. She read my face.

I didn’t want to tell her. It would shatter our peace—the perfection of Essary Springs. I looked away, but Molly turned me until I saw into her eyes.

“*They’re coming.*”

CHAPTER THREE

THE OLD MAN stopped the wagon in front of the station. The afternoon sun hung low. Heaviness still gripped me. The image of my mother lying under that sheet would not shake from my memory. The morning sun had been so bright off the white fabric that it still blazed in my eyes. For so long I imagined what I might say when I saw her again. But I never pictured it in this manner, struggling to understand and with no time to say my peace.

I dismounted from the wagon and the Old Man handed me my bag. It held the few things I would need—a change of clothes and food for the trip. I would head east and then make my way to Georgia where my mother had sent her last telegram. She left nothing else to go on, and Doc Herman estimated that she traveled injured for days. If she had stopped, she might have lived, but then Aurora's trail would be that much colder. She pressed on knowing she sacrificed herself.

The Old Man got down from the wagon while the children stayed in the back. Charley sat with them, holding a shotgun across his lap. Emeline watched. She had grown tall, matching her father's gait. Their contrast never bothered folks here—the darkness of her skin against his. Daniel sat next to her and seemed not to mind that I would be gone for a time. He tried to grab the feather from Charley's hat. They had made it a game, where Charley swatted him away at the last moment.

"I wish you would wait for Pinkerton to respond," the Old Man said.

"Would you?"

He shook his head. "No. I would send you."

"I won't sit here and wait—that's a means to die when they find us. And who knows how far away Aurora will be by then. With my mother . . ." I paused. I couldn't bear to think of the glassy look that came upon her eyes. She saw something in those final moments. It left me sick in the pit of my stomach. "They want me scared. And I will be if I sit and wait. I'm going to find them. I'm going to find her."

"You know that's what they want."

"I do."

The Old Man held out his hand and I grasped it.

"Do be careful, Joseph. The South is not yet healed. There is no telling what you will find there."

I nodded, shouldering my bag.

"I almost forgot," the Old Man said.

He reached inside his jacket and produced a package wrapped in linen, tied by burlap twine.

"I had this made for you. After I gave away the rocking chairs, I thought I might need something else for your wedding. I figured you would use it as we set the fields and such. Now it will have more important work."

Tugging at the burlap, I let the string fall away. When it came undone I held a long knife, sheathed in leather. The smith had forged it in haste, attaching rough Osage handles.

"The only good steel he had came from an old file," the Old Man said.

I pulled on the handle, and the knife came free. The blade still held hammer marks. Little triangular indentations pocked the

sides of the blade—from the cutting edges of the old file. The blacksmith heated and reheated the steel, hammering the file into a useful blade. At least the edge looked sharp, and it felt well balanced.

“Thank you.”

“It will serve you better than a gun,” the Old Man said. “You were always good with a knife.”

Though not as refined as the Bowie knife that had sent John Wilkes Booth to his demise—this blade would do the job. I tucked it away, behind my hip where the leather stayed in place inside my belt. Reaching out, I grasped the Old Man’s hand.

“You come home to us, like your mother said, and bring Aurora.”

“Will you talk to Molly for me? She seemed a might sore this morning as I packed.”

“I’ll see what I can do. I’ve never been good with those kinds of things.” Then he glanced over my shoulder. “Although, Joseph, you might give it a try yourself.”

I turned. Molly stood on the boardwalk. She wore a simple homespun dress, holding her finest bag.

“Molly, we’ve talked about this.”

“We have,” she said. “And I decided I’m coming. Mr. Lincoln can no doubt handle two children after steering a nation. And he’ll have Charley to help.”

Charley tipped his hat at the mention of his name.

“But Charley has the duties of Sheriff while I’m gone. He has enough to do.”

“Round up drunks? Find lost cattle?” Molly asked. “It’s hardly a job that will tax Charley’s time or skill.”

“And I would feel better if you had help,” the Old Man added. “We will manage here.”

Winning such an argument stood beyond my grasp. I had been outmaneuvered. It became clear she had already talked about this with the Old Man. I held out my hand for her bag. At first she refused.

“Are you so stubborn that you will not permit me to carry it?” I asked.

“Are you placing it on the wagon or the train?”

I turned to the Old Man. He had already mounted the wagon. He tipped his hat, and with a crack of the reins, the wagon started forward.

“The train,” I answered.

Molly handed me the bag. We walked down the walkway of the station, toward the ticket counter.

“I had not imagined we would leave this place ever, especially so soon,” Molly said.

“I know.”

I shifted the bag into my other hand and tried to look over my shoulder. Essary Springs had filled, crowded with people. The frontier beckoned. As President Johnson sought to quell the fight in the South, the West cast an undeniable allure. People headed into the wilderness to make their fortune. The newspapers even whispered rumors of gold. And then the mountain men chased those rumors into the Lakota Indian country.

“What is it?” Molly asked.

I turned to the ticket counter.

“It’s getting harder to find the outsiders. Even in the last few weeks.”

“It will calm again. Things always do.”

Molly purchased her ticket and then handed me mine.

“I trust you can find us comfortable seats?” she asked.

“Where are you going?”

“The train leaves in twenty minutes. I will find you,” she said, without answering my question.

She left me on the platform and headed toward town. There were only a few stores along Main Street, though I had no idea what she might need. I didn’t want to think about it. The night had left me drained—the passing of my mother numbed everything. Aurora seemed so far from reach now, as far as she had ever been. I couldn’t bring myself to imagine who had her, or what they might do to her. They wanted me, and I would give them everything they wanted—and more.

As I stepped into the train, old habits took over. They drew me some small manner of comfort—something to focus on. I looked for a seat where nothing would escape my notice. I moved a few cars forward, opening the doors and walking through. Most were near empty after dropping their load of passengers. No one wanted to head east—adventure and fortune lay to the west.

When I settled into a seat, I searched out the window, looking for signs. I didn’t know for what I searched, only that I had to be careful. My mother’s warning lingered. *Who were they and how would we tell?* I had no idea.

Molly found me a short time later. She had a small package, wrapped in brown paper and tied in twine. She took her bag down from the shelf overhead and placed the package inside.

“What did you need?” I asked.

She sat across from me and smiled, though she said nothing. The stress of the night, of venturing into the unknown, it pushed me to the edge.

“What was it, Molly?” I snapped. Anger felt good. In truth, I didn’t care what she had purchased.

Molly looked to me for a moment, ever calm, and then back out the window. Her brow furled as she noticed something. I strained in my seat to see behind me, to discover what she watched.

“What is it?” The anger eased, replaced by worry.

“What did you used to say,” she asked, “about seeing people multiple times?”

“To see if you’re followed?”

She nodded.

“Once is happenstance, twice coincidence.”

“And three times?” she asked.

“Deliberate.” I looked out the window, turning in my seat to look over my shoulder. “What is it?”

“That man in the Bowler hat and the gray suit.”

“I don’t see him,” I said.

“He watched us at the platform earlier, and then I saw him in town just now.”

“That’s only twice. Maybe he’s traveling.”

“His hat,” Molly said.

“What about it?”

“The Sears catalog says it is popular back east, especially in New York.”

“I don’t think that matters.”

“Why would there be four of them from New York, here in Essary Springs?”

“Four of them?”

Molly nodded. I strained once more to see. At the end of the platform, three men stood talking. They were not from here—not from Tennessee, not from the West. I had never been to New York, but I could well imagine these men in a large city.

“I only see the three,” I said.

“The other one, the man who followed me, he just stepped onto one of the passenger cars.” The train jolted as Molly finished talking. Up front, the engine tugged as the steam built, and the whistle let out a long lone howl. I thought of the wolf.

I strained to see out the window once more, trying to find the three men left behind. They walked together, not bothering to tip their hats to a group of women who passed. They did not belong. I turned over my other shoulder to see down the aisle. If the other man had climbed on the train, he couldn’t see us. Several cars lay in between. Standing, I held my hand out for Molly.

“What is it?” she asked, as if she had forgotten the entire conversation.

“We’re getting off.”

“Joseph, I didn’t mean it for real. There are many newcomers in town.”

“Not like this.”

She stared, the defiant look beginning to form across her face.

“The children,” I said.

Those were the only words Molly needed to hear. She stood, only taking my hand at the end. Then she reached for her luggage, though I pressed my hand into the small of her back to hurry her down the aisle. The train began to roll, and in a few moments would be moving too fast to step off.

“Joseph, you will not hurry me, and I will not leave my luggage. That is my finest bag.”

I removed my hand from her back. When she reached this manner there would be no arguing without conceding some point. Like the time we escaped Jekyll Island. She had insisted on removing her dress to carry through the marsh. Now she pulled the bag down and handed it to me. It nearly pulled me off-balance.

“What could you possibly have packed?”

Molly said nothing. She turned and walked up the aisle, away from where the man in the Bowler hat had entered the train. At the end of the car, she pushed open the door and descended the stairs. A man on the platform extended his hand as she stepped off. I followed her, and once on the platform, I turned to look as the train picked up speed. The man in the Bowler hat walked down the aisle inside the train, searching the faces of the few passengers. It would not be long before he realized we were gone.

I placed my hand on Molly's back and led her toward the nearest alleyway. I didn't want the others to find us—to see that we had stepped off the train. The knife along my hip felt reassuring.

“Did they see?”

I shook my head, still concentrating on the backs of the men walking at the far end of the boardwalk. The giant steam engine strained to gain speed, and we waited until it cleared the end of the station.

“Is it gone?” Molly asked. “What now?”

As the last car pulled out of sight, I took Molly's hand.

“Come. We need to find a horse.”