

Not One Among Them Whole

By

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BOOK JACKET

It is the summer of 1863 and the greatest battle ever fought on American soil is in full tilt. Southern Pennsylvania has become one great grinding stone and thousands of men are dead or dying in its wake. In this tilted landscape, reputations are made, careers are ruined, and men are driven to the brink in the wake of two armies intent on killing one another. Opportunity is everywhere...

For the men and officers who fight the battle, it's a kill or be killed world, where salvation is ever just a bullet away...

For the surgeons laboring over the many wounded, opportunity knocks at the tables, where the price of a man's life is all too often an arm or a leg. The cost to the surgeons, however, will be much higher...

For one undertaker in particular, the dead are a canvas and his ability to make a body reflect the living individual is nothing short of amazing. For Jupiter Jones, the burgeoning dead themselves are the opportunity...

And finally, for one teenage boy and former slave, alive only because his father had the courage to bury him when the end came, opportunity comes in the form of the boy with a creel and only one shoe, who may or may not be a ghost...

It is the summer of 1863 and humanity is under siege. What happens next amid the carnage and human flotsam will be unholy, unnerving, and all but unbearable, with only one thing certain: nobody will escape unscathed.

Here, the dead are the lucky ones.

For the living, hell is in session.

And it's the devil's own day.

Book I

The In-Between Time

CHAPTER ONE

The end of the before time, and consequently the end of Cuuda's childhood and the beginning of the in-between time, came fast and without warning in the summer of 1857, on a day that dawned cloudless with the sun high in a vivid blue sky.

When the day ended, in a soaking rain this was, everything had changed.

Everything.

Forever.

"No! No, you caint put me in there. Please pa, don't put me in there!"

Cuuda's protests, those of a little negro boy who'd only just lost his milk teeth, sounded weak and mealy. He was seven or nine years old—keeping his age was no priority and to say he was about seven or nine was good enough—and in he went, forced into the ground at his father's own hand, kicking and bucking all the way, just up to the last moment. That last moment was, far as Cuuda could tell, the last moment in all the world and he suddenly stopped his carrying on and stared big into his pa's face. The huge man had hold of him then, his great hands wrapped Cuuda's tiny wrists and the boy thought *don't let go pa, don't ever let go*. Then, *don't do this! Why ya doin' this?*

His pa's face seemed to break open then. His head tilted—as if a great weight pushed it so—and his lips quivered and pulled back, baring his gapped and yellowed teeth in a pleading, regretful grin. One eye squinted, closed completely, then opened before squinting again. Cuuda thought, would think forevermore, that his father had wanted to say something in that instant. He didn't however, and what passed between them was unsaid. Both their faces welled with tears and neither could take his eyes off the other.

Bucking again.

"Ya keep shut up now boy!" The words came out hard, like saying them was akin to cutting your own arm off. Not something you'd ever want to do, except maybe the world had gone to shit and right here, in this time and place, cutting your own arm off was about the only thing that made any sense. Tears welled anew in the big man's eyes and that's what Cuuda would

always remember, how the last time he saw his pa alive he had been crying. The only time he ever saw him such.

Cuuda opened his mouth. "But pa—"

He never saw the hand coming and probably his father had meant it like that. His hand was big and strong from working years in the field, could palm a melon and squeeze it one-handed till it popped like a ripe berry. His pa jerked his head first one way and then the other, and if he took his eyes off the boy, Cuuda never saw it. Listening was what he was doing, crooking his head to gain a better ear. The big man paused still a moment longer and looking into his eyes was hypnotic. Those eyes were a witch's brew of warmth and love and everything that was safe and Cuuda thought he could go his whole life entire without ever looking elsewhere. His pa's breathing was loud and labored and heavy. Cuuda's own eyes watered and his nose ran with snot. He sniffled and what came to him was the rank odor of an animal caught in a trap, a coon or maybe a wolf. He and his pa had caught a wolf once...

His pa's hand struck him upside his head and Cuuda's childhood ended.

He awoke later to a cold squalor. The moldy earth smell of wet dirt clogged his nose. Breathing was a chore. He could barely move his legs and even in the dark, the close confines of the box hugged him in a claustrophobic shroud. His arms were across his chest and only a few inches space separated them from the board above. He raised his head and struck that board and fell back dazed and in his mind heard his pa shouting at him all over again: *Ya keep shut up now boy!*

He almost wet himself. Then his father's words over and over again, each more insistent than the last: *Ya keep shut up now boy! Ya keep shut up now boy! Ya keep shut up now boy!*

His breath hitched in the close dark and he struggled against the box. He finally took to chewing his lower lip and somehow that made it better, forced him to slow down.

He thought, *in the hole then.*

He heard voices, or thought he heard voices. Like in a dream, the kind that comes in the middle of the black night unbidden. The kind that make a little boy piss himself cause he's shaking so bad and there's nobody around to comfort him. He had known a few nights like that.

"Where's that nigger boy o' yours?" A phantom voice. Real?

And then his mother's sweet, golden song. That was real. She sang: "Will the circle be unbroken? / By and by, Lord, by and by / There's better home a-waiting / In the sky, Lord—"

The sharp—very real—smack of skin against skin and now Cuuda did piss himself. He began to squirm in his confines, to cry, to pummel the boards of the box. Then more of his father's words came at him.

Don't ya cry boy. Ya cry, dey finds you.

He became still again, bit his lip and sucked in a breath and tasted dirt. A cruddy, earthy flavor that lingered after he spat. He took in another and felt his chest heaving, felt his parents going away, going to the *sure dead*, the place old Prosper had told him folks went when they died. A nice place he hoped.

Don't ya cry boy. Ya cry, dey finds you.

"Who they, pa?" Soft words, but they sounded loud in the box.

Toubob. Monsters.

In his mind, he walked the *sure dead* with Prosper. Neither one of them could read, but that didn't seem to matter. They found the stones of his parents. *Erasmus and Sara Monk*. They had no dates because slaves didn't get dates on their stones. Their deaths were as anonymous as their lives.

Toubob. Monsters. Or White folks. Same word for both.

They beat Cuuda's father senseless.

He heard his father wailing, heard the scrapings as they dragged him to the tree, then hung him first when his mother refused to give away her son's hiding place. Then her sweet singing again, strong and bold as ever. She could have been projecting to the heavens, but he knew she was sending her love to him. She sang and they waited for her. *They waited for her.*

"Amazing grace! how sweet the sound / That saved a wretch like me! / I once was lost, but now am found / Was blind, but now I see. "

"That's just about the best nigger singing I ever did hear. Real sweet lady. Damn shame you won't tell us where that boy be."

"You leave my boy 'lone. He ain't hurt no one."

"Say goodbye lady."

Under the earth, Cuuda said goodbye.

A long time later—no idea how long in the silent dark—he kicked his way out of the box and rose out of the grave his father had fashioned for him. He was back a piece in the woods at the side of the road. The sun had gone away and the earth had cooled. When he came out on the road it was pouring rain and at first he didn't see them. He heard the heavy ropes complaining as they swung in the weather though, and then the lightning came and he saw them suspended in the tree like flying shades.

He wasn't big enough to cut them down and sat under the tree for the better part of two days trying not to look up except to scare the crows away. On the third day hunger and the natural tainting of their bodies encouraged him to move on.

"Boy!" someone shouted, "Boy! Y'all hold up there. Come here now boy!"

Cuuda stopped rummaging in the garbage, pulling a half eaten orange out from its depths. He turned toward the hollering voice, recognizing the toubob's low speech. He had long ago learned toubobs came in two classes: those who treated negroes like property or wayward children, and those who regarded negroes on a par with coons. The former were a nuisance, but tolerable; the latter were like mad dogs—unpredictable, with a tendency for a nasty bite.

Which is you?

He took a few reluctant steps toward the man, saw he was young, not twenty or twenty-five. He looked him over warily, the way one might do a snake. He avoided his eyes. Shoeless,

Cuuda felt the cold mud squish between his toes. The same cold climbed his spine. "Yassuh?"

"What your name boy?"

"Jim, suh."

"Don't sass me boy."

"No suh. Never suh." *Don't move no closer.*

"So what your name BOY?"

Hesitation. In toubob's world, according to Prosper this was and verified by his own experience, one name was good as another. That the toubob was asking again was uncomfortable. *Ain't nuttin good.* "Most folks, they jus' calls me Jim, on account of m' pappy, big Jim." He smiled, a stupid grin that made him look simple.

"I could beat it outta ya boy."

Cuuda stood bulging his leg muscles, preparing to run. But where? He'd been running two months, every place as awful as the last. Back in the before time, he'd heard Prosper say how the world was a place with thorns, how a man could get himself dead without trying. The seer had been wise to the ways of the toubob world.

"Jim, eh?" The toubob stared at him with his head cocked at a crazy angle.

The toubob's forearms were done up with crazy wrappings of some sort. No, Cuuda thought, not wrappings. Bandages. Cuuda palmed his half orange—his orange, he had found it, wasn't about to share it with nobody—and rubbed it against his shirt like he was polishing it. He held it out. "Yassuh. Jim suh. Orange suh?"

"Do I looks like I wants a orange nigger?"

That ain't no question you wanna answer. The voice in his head was Prosper's—old and creaky like the man himself, but strong too. Cuuda listened out for that voice and kept his mouth shut and made little squishes in the mud with his toes. He was hungry in the worst way a boy can be, deep down where the taste for food is a poison that'll get you killed. He wanted—needed—to sink his teeth into the orange. The weight of it in his hand was a tease and his mouth watered. He saw now that the wrappings, the bandages if that's what they were, had come partially undone on one arm. Cuuda was close enough—too close he felt—to see something ugly under those bandages. A burn maybe, below the elbow.

"You simple boy? That your problem?"

Yeah, simple. "Yassuh. Orange suh?"

Toubob smiled. "You just a dumbshit baby nigger darkie, that's all."

Okay, if'n that suits ya. Cuuda redoubled his simple looking smile and stuck his tongue out like he was trying to catch flies with it. "Yassah," he said. He bit the orange and its juices ran down his chin, over the dark skin of his neck. It would have tasted good in any other place, but here he barely tasted it at all. He just wanted to get it down, to have something filling the hollow under his ribs for whatever was coming.

"Well I could use me a dumbshit baby nigger darkie. Maybe I buy you, boy. Maybe you come with me then you eat." Toubob stepped toward him, put a bandaged arm out. Both his forearms had been wrapped, but the wraps were dirty and old now. The one side, the one that had come undone, unraveled further. The skin under it was either dirty or charred going on black. Cuuda stepped back a pace. He barely breathed, as if chewing was the important thing and breathing came second.

"Leave him be."

A tall, thin man in a green bowler hat stepped from the shadows.

"What's it to you mister? I'm maybe looking for a nigger boy. Got me some work what needs doin'." Toubob turned to Cuuda and sucked air through the gaps in his tobacco stained teeth. He was missing at least one in front, maybe more but Cuuda's glimpse was quick. "How's about it, boy? Where your master?"

Cuuda swallowed, hesitated. His eyes went to the man in the green hat.

"He ain't for sale," the man in the green hat said.

Toubob eyed them both. "What?" The word came out of the corner of his mouth, as if escaping.

"You heard me. The boy ain't for sale. He's mine and I ain't interested in selling." Green hat turned to Cuuda and gestured behind him. "Get on back to that wagon, boy. Be quick about it. Ain't got all night."

Eat.

Cuuda wolfed what was left of the orange and looked past green hat. In the flickering light of a street lamp, he saw a painted wagon, a mural on its side. Letters too, though he couldn't read them. The paint was worn, the wagon old and tired looking. A miscellany of pots and pans and ropes hung from the wagon. Cuuda looked at toubob, then back at green hat.

"Yassuh. I's sorry suh," Cuuda said, and stepped toward the wagon.

"Goddammit, that ain't your boy."

"Prove it."

"Ah shit, what the hell. I'll find me another darkie." He said it loud enough for Cuuda to hear. "Ain't like they don't breed like sewer rats you know." Toubob snickered and it echoed down the alley.

Cuuda approached the wagon, biting his lip and looking back at the pair all the while. He leaned against the side of it, trying to decide if he should run or not. The green hat man was coming toward him and he had just about decided yes when a little door opened above his head and a small creature with a face reminiscent of a man—only not—appeared. It had bright eyes and slender arms and tiny, perfect fingers. It climbed out and up and hung by its tail from a crossbar that seemed made for the purpose. A moment later it jumped onto Cuuda's shoulder and the boy gasped.

"Archimedes, mind your manners."

And that was how Cuuda met the man in the green bowler hat and how the in-between time ended and the now time began.

Book II

The Dust of a Thousand Men

CHAPTER TWO

Liza Coffin faced into the breeze and closed her eyes, feeling the gentle wind blow over and around her. There was still a hint of cool in the air, the day new and promising and not yet the furnace it would become, and the sky was high and clear and beautiful, and without a hint of trouble anywhere. She filled her lungs with the good air, which smelled of spring honeysuckle and pear blossoms.

It was dawn of a Wednesday, the first day of July 1863. In the days and weeks to come Liza would not infrequently close her eyes, breathe deep, and try with all her might to remember this last morning before the soldiers came and the world went to hell.

She turned her head to the ground, where lay her baby boy Sam in his basket. She waved a hand at him, said, "Howdy doody Sammie," in her baby voice, the one she used for him alone. A high pitched, sugary sweet speak. He smiled up at her, sort of. He was a generally plain faced baby, just three months old, and she hadn't yet decided whether or not he had learned to smile. He pulled up one side of his mouth anyway, and it might just as well have been a smile she decided. The novelty of having another soul around—let alone her own baby—had not yet worn thin. She had spent so much of her life alone, her parents were gone and she had no other family, that to have this little bundle seemed to her a daily miracle.

"You're lovely, like your pa. And you have his nose."

She knelt down and rubbed his hair, laughing at how it stood up with static cling, then reached into the pile of laundry beside him and grabbed a few items. She began to hang these things over the clothes line—cloth diapers, a few blouses, a flower patterned dress she was particularly fond of, pieces of her underthings, and more. She talked incessantly all the while, with Sam in his basket a captive audience.

"Your pa, he'll be home soon." She said this everyday, or something very much like it. She had no particular knowledge of his return, rather a deep longing to see him again. "I don't mean today of course, but soon. I ain't exactly sure on account of him being in the army. Soldiers ain't got a whole lot of time these days on account of the war. But he'll be home. You'll see."

Sam made a quizzical little face, like he wanted to ask a question but couldn't think of the right words, and Liza went on, both with her laundry and her talking. "You're such a quiet thing," she said in her baby voice, then back to her own. "I do love your pa, you know. When he comes

home, I guess when this killing war is over, we gonna be a family. You'll see Sammie. You, me, and your pa. I'll introduce you."

She smiled at that last, thought, I hardly know him myself. She was just seventeen, he was twenty or so, couldn't remember for sure. Older than she was, but not much. She didn't even know his birthday. They had known each other six months, but that was a year ago. Hadn't seen each other since. But it had been an intense six months and sometimes in the night, when her longing for him crossed into a physical need, she would lie with her pillow and believe she could feel the shape of him against her. They were in love—young love—the kind meant to last a lifetime and then some.

Liza, Mrs. Ezra Coffin she liked to say because it reminded her she was part of a family now, finished with the laundry. She picked up Sam, kissed him, and he glomped on to her tit. "You hungry Sam? Go on, take yer fill. After breakfast we got to get that old cow over to the barn. Might be we can get some milk outta her yet. Something to trade."

Twenty yards behind her cabin, buried in the scrub and thorn berry bushes with an entrance all but invisible, was an old root cellar. After milking the old cow, it was a good day and she gave up the better part of two gallons, Liza carried the milk bottles under one arm and Sam under the other. She was on her third trip between the cellar and the barn when the first soldiers came. She dropped the milk.

There were two of them, dressed in a dirty, slipshod sort of way, wearing what she took to be Confederate uniforms. One of them was shoeless, and she could see the other's toes through the holes in his footwear. They were friendly, and too familiar she thought. They asked did she have anything to eat.

"Nothing," she said, hugging Sam close.

The one with the wholly footwear spat. "That thar baby don't look too hungry," he said, in a lazy Southern drawl.

"We got a little milk's all." She didn't like their eyes, how they roamed over her. "In the barn."

"Where there's milk, there's a cow."

"She's old, don't produce much," Liza said.

"She ain't too old for eating," the shoeless one said.

Liza smirked. "That ain't right."

"Well, that's war. Just about the least right thing I ever seen in this life," the shoed man said.

The pair left trailing the old cow behind them. Liza stood watching them go, Sam in her arms, stripped to his diaper as the day was starting to heat up. From across the wheat fields, the irregular sound of repeated gunfire startled her.

"They'll be back," she whispered, "them or others."

They marched in the dust of a thousand men—a hot, dry dust spewing the kind of heat that paws at a man and drains the vigor out of him. These men were the common part of a larger machine, indeed the guts that made that machine work. Privates, corporals, sergeants, junior

lieutenants, seasoned captains, majors, and colonels. Soldiers all to a man, they had an undeniable familiarity with the march. The army to which they were both an insignificant part and the most consequential element had been ever on the move for two years now. This road, and hundreds more like it bridging the miles between ten thousand different places scattered wide across the nation, was their home. Marching was their stock and trade as much as, if not more than, fighting. For every hour in combat, they endured many more hours on the road. They wore shoes down faster than the cobbler could make them. They slept on the side of the road, ate on the side of road, relieved themselves at the side of the road. They rarely went where the roads did not, and when circumstances forced them to do just that, they built a road. And so even with raw throats and feet made leathery by too many miles, they pressed on. As if their bones knew the way of their own accord; as if they'd been born to a world of miserable stepping. Such was a soldier's life.

As a certain private in this army watched, a hawk flew high overhead. It soared on some unseen air current, looking graceful and free. The bird grew small in the distant sky until this certain private could no longer pick it out from the other specks of dust. After it was gone, he remarked, "If I was a bird I'd get on outta here too." This man was a member of 'E' Company, a part of the 115th Pennsylvania. An infantry regiment in the Grand Army of the Potomac, what had once been called the showpiece of the Union Army. But on this, the last day of June in the year of our Lord eighteen and sixty-three, such a time as that seemed far removed. The rebels had nearly bled the Army of the Potomac to death at Chancellorsville, just seven weeks past. Six months before that, this certain private and other members of the 115th Pennsylvania, held in reserve, had watched with a sort of gut-boiling awe as their fellows assaulted the heights above the Rappahannock River no less than fourteen times. They had seen that no blood looked quite so red as that silhouetted against new fallen snow. A massacre in the cold December wind. Such was Fredericksburg.

This certain private twisted with the day's heat. A sheen of grubby sweat coated his skin and he crooked his neck this way and that with the feel of it. All the while, he followed the man in front of him, who in turn followed the man in front of him, who followed the man in front... The land seemed to blight in their wake, to quake under their feet. He choked on the russet dust and spat dirt. Unwashed, he smelled of last week's march, of the burnt ashes of last night's campfire. As he walked he chewed a half cooked piece of fatback, ignoring the nothing taste of grease. The straps of his pack dug into his shoulders but he no longer tried adjusting them. It was a slight discomfort, like a small pebble underfoot. A trifling thing. The better part of a year at war had taught him to ignore trifling things.

This certain private's name was Ezra Coffin and he had no idea where they were going, only from where they had come—a place best forgotten. At Chancellorsville, he'd come across a man he knew slightly from before the fight, a Corporal Dalhausie. Dalhausie was from Poughkeepsie and had a wife and two daughters. On his arm was a big heart-shaped tattoo with the name 'Liza' in the middle. The private's wife was also named Liza and so he had admired the tattoo as the two bivouacked. The next day, they'd been standing together when a bullet tore through Dalhausie's elbow, completely separating it at the joint; the glistening, polished bone stuck out like the white hot glow of embers in the ashes of a dying fire. Two hours later, the private had recognized that tattoo—half of it anyway—on a heap of flesh beside a big oak. The

ground was soaked with blood for ten feet around the tree and when he walked across it his boots slid on the burdened grass. He stared at the arm, at the broken heart and the inked letters on the skin, *za*. He thought of his own Liza, of the baby boy he'd never seen, and he conjured that Dalhausie himself and not the arm had been amputated.

Private Ezra Coffin fixed his eyes on the back of the man in front of him. His legs ached and he had a need to piss. He spat and took another chew of the fatback and wished for a breeze. Even the tiniest breeze. The trees, still heavy with their leaves in late June, did not sway. It occurred to him there was no such thing as perfect weather for marching. Always too hot, or too cold, or too wet, or too dry. Too much of this, or too much of that. And so, over a sun-parched, dusty road on the last day of June, in the year of our Lord eighteen and sixty-three, Private Ezra Coffin marched along as he had a hundred times before.

He couldn't know his marching days were just about over.

Another army was on the move on a road remarkably similar to the thoroughfare used by the 115th Pennsylvania. Though not quite in the immediate vicinity of each other, the roads were close enough that the vanishing speck of dust seen by one army was an enlarging bird in flight from the vantage point of the second. More precisely, as seen through the field glasses of Major Tom Jersey, the bird was a red-tailed hawk. The major whistled as he saw the soaring wings come into distant focus. He hadn't seen a bird of prey in Northern Virginia in almost a year. Such a bird of prey could mean only one thing: food.

Jersey hailed from Kitty Hawk Village, a fishing town on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. A banker before the war, he was a balding man of slight build who wore wire-frame spectacles and spoke with a thick, Carolina drawl. A quiet, family man in his mid-thirties, the worst day of his life had come not as a soldier, but as a father. Little Tom, his ten year-old son, had gone fishing one afternoon in the summer of 1860. He had never been seen again. A few months later, a nigger boy walking the back roads of Albemarle Sound, not two miles from the major's house, spied a wicker basket in the roadside mud. Inside he found a bit of tackle, the remains of several fish long since rotted, and a smear of muck which might have been fish guts. It was black and crusty though, and just the exact color of old blood. On the underside of the creel's lid, scrawled in faded, barely legible letters, was the single word 'tom.' A search of the creel's hiding place turned up only one other object: a boy's left shoe.

It had been a year since Major Jersey had seen the Outer Banks. As second in command of the 18th North Carolina, an infantry regiment in the Army of Northern Virginia, he'd had little time for such visits. Now that regiment, three hundred strong, was strung out along the road and raising a billowing cloud of dust in their wake. They had crossed the Potomac a week before, were in the North. Enemy territory. They had orders to quickstep it; the battle was joined and men were dying. Or soon would be.

Replacements were needed.

The hawk came closer now. This North was a bountiful place, with lush, green fields and crops aplenty. Jersey stepped aside the column of men and stopped. He took a swig from his canteen, swearing at the drops that trickled down his beard. On a day so hot, water was too

precious to waste. The major knew much about waste. The land they'd left across the river, a place most of the soldiers called home and became melancholy about, was a wasted land indeed. Picked over by the two armies, whole valleys had been scorched to ash—first by fleeing Rebels, then invading Federals, then retreating Federals going back the way they'd come in the first place. In the ruins of Northern Virginia, even the chickens were starving.

He urged the men forward, holding the canteen high in the air with his arm extended as he did so. "Git on now," he said in his lanky Southern drawl, "and mind you drink. It's a hot one and we ain't gotta man to lose. Drink up you sonsabitches." He ran his eyes up and down the column. "You, Collins ain't it? Step up there, son. No stragglers today."

"I got shurt legs, sir. Caint hardly keep up," the young soldier said. He showed a wide, crooked-teeth smile as he spoke and those around him burst into laughter. The rebuked fellow moved up smartly just the same.

"Well," the major hollered after him, "I guess you just gonna have to two-step-it then." He turned to another, a corporal whose right sleeve hung empty. "Good to see you back, Miller. I thought you was a goner sure."

"Ain't no Yankee lead whatever could kill me, sir. This," the stout corporal pointed to his vacant sleeve, "this here's no more 'an a flesh wound."

And so it went. They were in Southern Pennsylvania now, taking the war to the enemy, giving them a taste of what they'd felt for far too long. The major looked out across the countryside and saw rolling green hills as far as he could see, the land broken only by the occasional copse of oak. He thought of his son, as he often did on long marches, and tried to imagine him running through the tall grass. He wondered what the boy, gone these three long years, would have looked like today. As was always the case, however, the boy he saw in his mind's eye was the same ten years old he'd been the morning of his disappearance. And as the hawk soared above him, Jersey had a vision of that boy chasing butterflies in the hills before him, his step uneven.

He was missing a shoe.

Surgeon Josiah Boyd leaned toward the corner, pressed his tongue against his lips, and spat. Reflex mostly, something he did without thinking whenever the need presented, which was often. The gob splattered against the wall, joining the smear of juice already there. Assistant Surgeon Tobias Ellis gave little thought to the smear of tobacco, keeping his mind on the task at hand. Like Boyd, his hands and forearms were streaked with the blood of scores of men. They looked raw, almost skinned.

"Artery clamp." Boyd stretched a palm out in waiting.

Tiny, the surgeon's helper, was a heavysset kid in his early twenties, though he looked younger. His experience put the lie to his appearance. He'd spent the better part of two years—the worst part of a lifetime—with the field hospital. He rummaged in the dirty water of the basin even as he held a chloroformed mask over the patient's face. His fingers made quick work in the cool, blood pink water, finding the instrument by feel. He slammed the clamp into Boyd's hand with a sharp smack and Boyd squeezed the clamp around the femoral artery as Ellis lifted the

great vessel out of its bed, the thrum of the pulse fighting back from within. The clamp clicked as it locked, and the artery beyond the obstruction went limp. "Ligature," Boyd said with a practiced calm.

Major Josiah Boyd was old for his thirty-eight years. His hair had thinned up top and he hadn't shaved in days. He was of lanky build and sallow complexion, possessed of a long drawn-out face almost ghoulish in its particulars, with prominent cheekbones high under his eyes. His lower jaw had been twice broken (once by a horse, once by a man) and poorly set. It jutted obtrusively and his teeth came together at an angle somewhat off the expected, so that the whole of his face looked skewed. His hands were large and his fingers long and spindly like the legs of a great spider. They were economical in their wanderings across the surgical field however, with no waste of motion.

The soldier on the table lay on his back. He was insensible to the workings both around and upon him, heavy under the influence of a chloroform-soaked towel. Boyd and Ellis worked quickly at their labors, their movements looking somewhat frantic at times. They had about them a look of resigned experience, showing both intolerable exhaustion and inordinate energy at the same time. They'd been working feverishly at one task or another since first light a dozen hours before. Their efforts had made not a dent in the line of men awaiting their services. At times, they worked so fast and the wounded spent so little time before them, it seemed they were cutting the same man over and over again.

Tiny passed the silk ligature and Ellis encircled the artery twice with it, just above the clamp. His fingers blurred with movement as he tied the thread and occluded the artery. He repeated the exercise on the thinner-walled vein beside it. Tiny retrieved a pair of scissors from the basin and slapped them into Ellis's hand even before the man could ask for them. The assistant surgeon divided the vessels—artery and vein—below the ligatures and removed the clamp.

They had cut away the soldier's trousers and filleted his thigh to the bone midway between hip and knee ten minutes before. Now, with the last of the muscle and flesh parted and only the bare thigh bone joining the lower leg to the upper, the amputation was complete in all but fact. Only the saw cut remained.

"Capital saw," Ellis said, and out of his side vision he caught Boyd turning to spit again. This time he had time to consider the action, something he'd seen Boyd do a thousand times in a dozen hovels just like this one. In the instant before the handle of the bone saw struck his palm, Ellis wondered at the incongruities of the man who was his direct senior. He had 'good hands'. *Goddammit that ain't true*, Ellis thought, *he's more than that, a genuine honest-to-God born surgeon*. Ellis had seen a lot of men work the tables in his almost two years as an assistant surgeon and Boyd was, hands down, the best cutter out there. But it was also true the man had odd ways. Like his want to chew during surgery, which perhaps wasn't all that bad, except it meant he was always spitting. And there was his habit of spacing out in the middle of an operation. He'd suddenly walk away from the table, turn his back to the room or go behind a wall, then reappear before too long as if nothing had happened. Except something had happened, Ellis would always think. At such times Boyd looked different. Certainly not better, and not worse (or probably not worse, he'd had occasion to think a few times—and how curious was that?). Just different. It showed most in his hands, which looked somehow, he tried to think of the

correct word, *revitalized*? *Was that it?* Upon returning to the table, those hands, which had seemed worn and tired, would now be spirited and quick to perform. But it was Boyd's eyes that bothered. Once the surgeon reappeared, Ellis always found those eyes...*unsettling*. As if Boyd's eyes had developed an unpleasant 'lag,' a sort of disparity with his hands. *As if the one had given to the other*, Ellis suddenly thought. He swallowed hard then, tried to put that absurd notion out of his head. A fevered product of his own exhausted mind, he decided. After all, once a battle was joined and the bloodletting began, there was never enough rest.

Tiny put the saw in Ellis's palm and he came back to the moment. He curled his fingers around it—they seemed to have conformed to it over the endless months of the war—and went to task on the soldier's femur. Boyd held the meat of the leg out of the way as Ellis laid the business side of the saw against the lower end of the bare thighbone and began to run it back and forth. The blade's teeth bit at the glistening bone with a gritty feel and flecks of ivory dust and crimson blood peppered the air as he worked. The sawing took more force than Ellis supposed it should and he made a mental note to have Tiny replace the blade before the next patient. When he'd about sawn through the whole of the femur, the remnant snapped with the pop of a dry twig and the leg fell away. Tiny stuffed a wad of lint against the bleeding stump as Boyd removed the now useless limb.

"Bone file."

Tiny anticipated the request and passed it without hesitation. Ellis grasped the narrow, five-inch flat metal file and worked the roughened side against the sharp edges of the bony stump. When he was satisfied with its appearance and feel, no sharp edges to work through the skin later, he nodded at Boyd, who took a quick feel as well. "That'll do," the senior man said. Ellis handed the file back to Tiny and Boyd took up an amputation knife—its long, sharp edge might easily slice a ham—and carved away a bit of remaining muscle and flesh on the back of the thigh, until he was satisfied with the look and feel of the flap to lay over the stub of bone.

They continued to work largely in silence, with no idle chit-chat. Ellis removed the lint from the end of the sawn bone. Satisfied the wound was not oozing too much blood, the surgeons flapped the skin up and approximated the edges with several silk stitches placed an inch apart. Ellis dressed the incision with a plaster cap and Tiny fanned the man to purge the chloroform from his system. A quick whiff of liquor of ammonia served finally to bring him back to consciousness, where upon he began to groan. Judging the man was safely over the effects of the chloroform, Boyd dribbled a few drops of laudanum, a sweet concoction of opium and alcohol, on the soldier's tongue to dull him to the agony of the hours to come. Ellis had seen its effect on men time and again. Some the laudanum slept, others it simply relaxed. Ellis himself had taken it once or twice to kill a headache. Its effect had felt something akin to salvation—removing him from the horrors of the field hospital and the tussle of war, albeit transiently. *Good stuff*, he thought, *and dangerous. Too much of that could turn a man out.*

A pair of stretcher bearers stepped forward and lifted the patient with only a bare afterthought of gentleness, grabbing him under his butt and armpits. The man's grunts as they carried him outside to be deposited alongside the other unfortunates were lost in the chaos of the battlefield hospital. Boyd stood off to one side of the room, several men interposed between he and Ellis. Ellis watched as the surgeon put his hands out, looking at the trembling, blood soaked palms as if they might suddenly fall off. Another of Boyd's odd behaviors. There followed a

curious moment in which Boyd looked about, spotted Ellis, and slipped awkwardly out the back of the building.

Another soldier was placed on the table. As Tiny pressed a cloth over the man's nose and mouth and chloroformed him, Ellis probed the wound in his calf with a stiff finger, feeling for splinters of bone and the ball that had done the damage. The soldier winced, not quite under yet. As Ellis pulled his finger from the man's innards, Boyd appeared at the side of the assistant surgeon and chuckled in an odd, not at all funny way. "The truth of the flesh," he said, or something very much like it. Ellis couldn't be sure. It was a small thing, but as Boyd called for a scalpel, it disturbed Ellis nonetheless and he had no idea why.

CHAPTER THREE

Major Tom Jersey watched the dog through his field glasses, his attention temporarily distracted from the heat. It wasn't clear which side the animal belonged to, a mutt of no particular distinction, an ordinary thing caught in an extraordinary time. It moved in the borderland between the two armies, racing among the dark forms of the day-old dead, stopping now and again to sniff at some remains or lift its hind leg. Somewhere along the way, the animal had lost part of an ear and every time its head came up, the gap was silhouetted and stood out peculiarly. He watched the dog move to within fifty yards of his line, then bound off across the field as the men taunted it.

He removed his cap and wiped his sleeve across his brow. "Damn heat," Jersey said, thinking of his wool uniform, of the heat wringing him dry. His jacket, a dirty yellow-gray, stuck to the small of his back. No wind meant the smell of twelve thousand men on the edge of battle was penetrating and musk-like, as of a barnyard at branding time.

Jersey stood with his regiment in a screen of trees, line abreast, arrayed for battle with the enemy a mile distant beyond a treeless grassy divide. Before them flowed a shimmering field of wheat, broken only by a rail fence three-quarters of the way across—and by the ugly bodies of those who had fallen the day before. *Yesterday*. What kind of hell had that been? His company had numbered one hundred and eighty-two then, had assaulted the Federals a half dozen times, had nearly broken them. But nearly didn't count, except maybe to the thirty soldiers that'd been lost. Half of those had been killed—their bodies still lay out there, on the scorched earth between the two armies—and the other half were missing or with the surgeons. Among the dead had been his colonel and Oppley's last words still rang in Jersey's head. He had raised his saber toward the enemy, shouted something like "That way men, the enemy is that—" and then had fallen dead, a dribble of blood staining his blouse over his heart. He had known Colonel Charles Oppley since their days together at the bank before the war. Oppley had been a good man, full of integrity and bound to duty. An honorable man. Neither he nor Jersey had been true gentlemen, not in the Southern sense of it anyhow, but if that had once mattered, it seemed foolish now. They had done their duty to North Carolina and Oppley had paid the ultimate price. His was a merciful soldier's death, Jersey understood, to be killed quick in the heat of battle at the front of his men. He supposed that's what he would tell Cora Oppley.

An officer came bounding up on horseback, saber drawn before him. The major thought he looked the archetype of a mounted warrior, too good for actual battle. "Major, you must take that hill there," he thrust his saber out to indicate the ground to which he referred. "It's the enemy's extreme left flank and the commanding general believes they are vulnerable there." The horse moved skittishly as the rumble of a distant shell shook the ground underfoot. "Can you do that, Major? Can your men take that ground?"

"I, eh, yes sir," he said. "We can, yes, we can take that hill, General. Yes sir, my men will take that hill, sir. This will be a proud day for the 18th North Carolina. Sir."

"Very well, Major. The 18th will lead the charge on this end of the field." The general nodded, said, "Godspeed sir."

"Sir, my regards to the commanding general."

"Of course." The brigadier reigned his horse and galloped off down the line.

Jersey surveyed the ground before his troops. To the south he saw the edge of the wheat field, numerous boulders the size of houses, and the woods beyond. Off in the distance in front, the field narrowed to half a mile and a rail fence bordered a dirt road running parallel to the trees. The ground beyond the road angled steeply upward as a thickly wooded hillside. The Federals were dug in on that hillside, among the trees and rocks. They'd argued over the ground between for a day and a half now. They had taken it, lost it, taken it again, and lost it again. The hill was good ground for a defense, deadly ground for an assault. The remnants of his company were proof of that. As he surveyed the ground through his field glasses, Jersey imagined he could pick out Colonel Oppley's body just in front of the fence.

He put the glasses down and wondered why he'd been so positive his men could take the hill. Hadn't Oppley been just as positive yesterday? What was it about war that made a man stupid, made him less—and more—than he was? The sulfur stink of gunpowder? The close feel of sweat parading your back? Of fear twisting your gut? Was it the anticipation of glory? Or just the simple sense of duty?

Jersey looked up and down the line, squinted as his eyes fought to adjust first to bright sun, then to shade, then to sun again. He was on the extreme right flank of the army. Thousands of men crowded the trees in a long line to his left. Jersey thought how it seemed to be alive, looked to have a pulse and a breath all its own. A slight corporal some distance away pulled an item from a breast pocket. Whatever the object, it must be close to the man's affections as he first kissed it, then flipped it open and stared awhile at it. A picture case of gutta percha, perhaps it held an ambrotype of the soldier's girl back home. Jersey suddenly had a notion he was intruding. He himself had had such a case, within it had been the likenesses of his beloved Elspeth and their three daughters. The damn case was now at the bottom of the Potomac River, where he'd lost it the week before. The gray images it held were still fresh in his mind.

A large tree burst not far up the line, close enough that he felt its report on his face and was stippled with the blood of those closer. The blast jerked him into the present and he saw a dozen men splintered in its wake. Others stepped forward immediately to replace them, as though the shell had wounded not men but the line, and the line had healed itself. But they had existed, he thought, wiping the proof from his face with a kerchief. He turned away from the scene, turned to face forward, toward the enemy. That was where his attention properly belonged.

A pasty complexioned private sniveled beside the major, mumbling something very fast, his face wet with tears. A veteran stood on the other side of the sniveler, tall and with a full beard and a dusty blouse. Jersey heard him say, "You'll be okay, Benny," and saw the veteran's hand come up to rub the other's shoulder. "We'll all be okay if'n we jus' please to do our duty today." The major pondered the words, took their measure, and decided the advice was sound. Someone else was praying, and the Lord's Prayer became loud for a moment as others joined in. Jersey felt he should say some words, something inspirational. He was at a loss for what, though, could think of nothing beyond that which they were already saying to each other.

The moment passed and the command came. At three o'clock, he and the other soldiers stepped out of the trees and began to move toward the Federals. The rumble of five hundred score pair of feet pounded the earth; the hard, deep clamor of good men exerting themselves to the utmost. No silence, no stillness—only the lethal din of Federal artillery, only the sound of men ready to give their full measure. He was pushed along as the army became a sea of gray flooding the ripe wheat, the tide moving slowly, inexorably forward. His men marched bravely. The sun caught the glint of polished poles and company colors flapping in the smoke. They moved with muskets shouldered, at the route step, side by side, five and six and eight deep in places. A grand spectacle. Jersey felt the surge of blood swelling his veins. He was hot again, and his blouse seemed too small. He stank of sweat but didn't care.

"Onward now! Over thar! Men, show 'em what we think o' Yankees in North Carolina!"

As he labored forward, Jersey saw terrible gaps blasted in the line and learned what men are made of. Great chunks of flesh and bone mixed with bits of earth as the Union batteries turned the wheat field into a place for dying. Canisters of grape thickened the air with metal shot, like a swarming mass of black bugs. Arms, legs and fingers flung skyward yielded a peculiar mortal rain.

Jersey was painted red by the mist of diffused blood.

He was halfway across the field—running hard but he might as well be running into a stiff wind—when a trooper next to him went down. The major stopped beside him, along with a second trooper. They made themselves low in the grass. He saw the wounded man was bleeding heavily. A minié ball had shattered his knee. The major tied a tourniquet above the wound, the two troopers talking incessantly as he did so.

"Do it hurt?"

"Not much, burns a little."

"I got to get you back."

"Can't walk, no way."

"Lookahere, just lean on me."

"I just wait here."

"This ain't no place for waitin'. And what I gonna tell ma?"

"Help me up then, I kin hobble along."

Jersey glanced at both troopers for the first time, did a double take. The two had the same face; identical in every way except the blood streaming down one's leg. The major said nothing, helped them to their feet. The one slung his musket over his shoulder, then hooked an arm around his wounded brother's torso. He looked Jersey in the eyes. "I promised..." and the rest was lost in the blizzard of battle. They stumbled in the direction they'd come and Jersey knelt to

regroup, breathing deeply in the closeness of the burnt air. He watched the two go a few paces, then began to move forward again. He looked back a moment later, saw they'd gone fifteen or twenty yards, saw something wasn't right. The scene was off kilter and at first he thought it was how the smoke obscured them, then understood a shell had taken one brother's head off, though his body still stood with its twin as if yet living.

A lone horse, its saddle empty, its hide fouled by gore, bounded between him and the brothers. In that instant, the twins disappeared as if the horse had erased them. Jersey's gaze followed the animal then, saw a hole open in its neck, saw the blood spurting. It fell to the ground in a clumsy mass of flesh.

Jersey took off at a run, leaping others as he went. No longer a man, he'd soared into the soldier's Valhalla—where glory abounds and death is sanctified; where blood is a badge and bone a medal. He put a hand up to signal, felt little pain as a fragment chiseled a finger off. He came by three pairs of legs laying in the grass—nothing more, just legs. He kept moving.

The air tasted of dirt and cinder. A canister of grape hit the air beside him and Jersey saw another man subtracted, as if the air itself opened and swallowed him whole. Another soldier, one leg blown off, dragged himself yet toward the enemy, leaving a wide trail of red as he went. The major viewed this last as if from a distance; it didn't seem real. None of it seemed real.

An explosion flung him to the earth beside a winded infantryman. The man sat the ground trying hard to catch his breath, clutching desperately at his chest. Jersey talked to him but received only a blank stare. He eyed him for a wound, saw no tell-tale red. The infantryman's breath shallowed, then stopped altogether. A flag bearer slumped to the ground at their feet, shot through the head. Jersey picked up the flag even as its bearer fell. He turned, shouting to his men with his last ounce of voice.

"Over there men! The enemy is that way! That way men, the enemy is that way!" It never occurred to him these were the same words Colonel Oppley had shouted twenty-four hours before. He held his saber aloft in one hand and the flag of the 18th North Carolina fluttered over his head as he gripped the pole hard in the other. He advanced, and it had the desired effect. His men ran forward, yelling, trying to fit themselves to shallow folds of the ground as they came on. He found Oppley's body, recognized it only because of the rank insignia—the face was unpleasant and ugly. Jersey thought of the waste—the terrible waste—and his determination was renewed. He took another dozen steps and dropped beside the split rail fence. Bodies were piled high here, cut down by close and grueling fire as they rose to climb it. He watched as more men were cut in half at the fence, dismembered in ways terrible to see.

Jersey looked back at the colonel's body, saw the colonel's saber lying broken in the soiled grass. The words of the brigadier came to him: *Major, you must take that hill there. It's the enemy's extreme left flank and the commanding general believes they are vulnerable there.* The words branded his mind. *Can you do that, Major? Can your men take that ground?* Jersey recalled too the sniveling private, and the tall, bearded veteran: *We'll all be okay If'n we jus' please to do our duty today.* The words echoed in his skull. They drowned out the clamorous rush of battle; focused his mind like rays of sun through a magnifying glass. *Yes sir, my men will take that hill, sir. This will be a proud day for the 18th North Carolina. Sir.*

Jersey stood and clambered over the fence, using those who had come before him for traction. He accomplished it smartly, in one fluid motion with both flag and saber held high. He

crossed the road quickly before gaining the shade and safety of the trees. He caught his breath and watched others come the way he had, then passed the flag to a soldier with no words going between them. The hill loomed before him larger than even the field had, and he wondered that he still breathed. Looking back the way he'd come, he saw glimpses of the army crossing the wheat field; vast, jostling blurs of men. Smoke obscured the detail, and it was as if the earth had frayed, as if the surface had been abraded and what lay below was hell itself.

Jersey motioned to his men: move into the trees and up the hillside. They charged forward, screaming and shouting in exhausted pleas. They knelt and fired their muskets, moved forward, knelt again, fired again. They made it fifty yards through the trees before being turned back the first time, twice that far the second. They charged six times up that hill, certain the next lunge would break the Federals. The seventh charge broke their own spirit, however, as the Federals came running down the hill with bayonets shining before them.

A fierce hand to hand ensued. Men choked, stabbed, kicked, punched, clubbed, shot, and otherwise burdened each other. Some of the rebels ran out of the trees and scooted over the rail fence, retreating into the wheat field beyond. Jersey fell after a sharp blow to the back of his neck and lay momentarily paralyzed. He was up again before long though, saw the day was lost, and retreated with his men. His soldierly edge was gone, exhaustion crowded its place. He fought off two Yankees as he climbed the fence, dropping his saber in the process, and began to run back across the field, where he was tackled by a third. Holding his side, Jersey regained his feet and reached for his sidearm. Before he could pull his pistol out though, he felt a terrible jolt in his hip and was knocked to the ground like gravity defined.

As the world dissolved to piss and vinegar around him, Tom Jersey found himself staring into the face of the gap-eared dog. At intervals, the entire mutt jerked. It grinned pathetically at him, tongue dangling at an odd angle, eyes shot with blood skewed crazily. A trickle of blood dripped from an ear. The thing kept circling a paw in the air, uselessly, as if unable to right itself. That seemed to him a measure of the day's losses. With the last of his strength, the major drew his sidearm from its holster and shot the dog.

Private Ezra Coffin was just four days past his twentieth birthday, but he feared he had drawn his last breath in this world. In the hour just passed, he'd seen a half dozen comrades, the best friends he had in this world, killed in one rebel charge after another. On the extreme left of the Federal line, the beleaguered 118th Pennsylvania had turned back the advancing Confederates five times, though at a high price. The 118th had numbered three hundred tired and weary souls ninety minutes before. A third of that number now lay wrecked and bloodied, doing little more than soiling the ground. And, while those still able whooped and called to the rebels down the hill—taunting them to come meet their betters once again—Ezra stood behind a large oak and tried to calm the pounding in his chest. He tore open yet another powder cartridge with his teeth. Its bitter taste mingled with the metal of blood as he bit his tongue in the process. He cursed and with a shaky hand—he was one who'd never got used to the thrill of battle—poured the black grit down the muzzle of his Springfield. He dumped a lead minié ball into the barrel and drove the lethal mix to the breech of the weapon with a brass ramrod. All the while, rivulets

of sweat carved streams through the soot on his face.

Behind the dirt, that face was a rounded mass with simple features; in ordinary times, not the face of a killer. His eyes, a soothing hazel green, were large and their whites stood out boldly against the black powder encircling them. He had a blunt, crooked nose and his yellowed teeth were still crusted with bits of the salted pork he'd chewed on the march hours before. His pale lips were hidden behind more black soot and his dirty hair scragged this way and that. A few blond whiskers curled from his round chin. Overall, the face of a boy, of any son, on either side of the line.

Ezra made himself small against the tree, musket tight between his fingers. He looked to the tree beside him. A soldier sat, neck extended, head back as if dead weight. His face was dirty, his eyes wide, dazed. His mouth was open, a dark O mocking the hole in his forehead. Beneath the blank sleeve of a private, dead hands still gripped the musket, clutching so hard his fingers were ghostly white, the blood long since drained from them. Ezra looked upon this sight with no emotion. Emotion created hesitation, and hesitation would kill him. This much he had learned. So he tried not to think how much the boy looked like him. Actually, the dead soldier didn't favor him at all, or so he decided.

Ezra gripped his canteen, shook it. No splash within. The dead private stared up at him again, the canteen against the soldier's belt apparent for the first time. Ezra tasted the salty powder on his lips anew, grit dry as dirt. His throat was raw and scratchy. Water seemed as necessary at that moment as breathing, and each breath renewed this idea. His eyes stung and he closed them tightly. He ran a hand over the whole of his grimy face, felt the woods closing in on him.

The air was heavy with sulfur and stank powerfully. Smoldering clumps of dead leaves lay all about. The boom of cannon was far off. Close in, the laborious breathing of the soldiers caught his ear, but the cries of the wounded—unavoidable, pitiful, nearly unbearable—assaulted his senses and psyche both. Ezra thought them prayers to a merciless God, saw the woods had become one large church. Everyone's a believer now. Chaos. Misery abundant.

He timed the booms of the cannon to his heartbeat, every ten or so. His breathing slowed. His fear waned. He gripped his musket and saw his fingertips blanch, like the dead soldier beside the tree. *Where are the rebels?* He hated waiting. The worst part of battle. Anything could be imagined in the waiting.

Ezra felt his parched throat again and shook his empty canteen. He tossed the useless thing aside, saw the dead private's canteen still at arm's length. His throat was stinging now. Too much waiting. Too much thinking. Too much noise. Too much of everything—except water.

He swallowed and the little spit he had hung in his throat like a thick web.

He scanned the hillside before him. Bosky on his arrival, trees the size of men's thighs had been gnawed in half by the close fighting. The bushes were stripped of leaves. Soldiers crouched under any cover they could find, like kids in a game of seek. A fellow had his member out, pissing in the dirt. Beside him another bled from the neck like a butchered hog. *Don't know him*, and he was thankful for the fact. Discarded haversacks, abandoned cartridge boxes, blankets, empty shells, kepis, leather straps, gloves, jackets, a single boot with a fancy silver spur (the light caught it just so and it sparkled like a jewel). All these things and more littered the place. He saw a soldier with a harmonica peeking out his breast pocket.

I know him.

Ezra waved and Tim Jewel waved back. Ezra patted his breast, put his fingers to his lips as if playing. Jewel pulled the instrument out and held it up for Ezra to see. He put it to his mouth, played a few notes. They flittered away, unheard in the scourge of battle. Jewel pocketed the harmonica.

A mosquito buzzed Ezra's face, and he slapped at it. *The only real winners today are the bugs.* He began to chuckle at how it must be high carnival for them. *The meek shall inherit the earth after all.* He threw his head back, and grinned wide. He felt himself slipping, felt his grip on the scene around him coming undone. He'd seen men come undone before. Men who were a damn site stronger than he was, too. Officers even. He'd heard about a lieutenant at Bull Run, in the first year of the war, who in the midst of the fighting had inexplicably—and calmly—turned his sidearm on himself and put a hole in his own head. One of Coffin's sergeants had been there and had witnessed the whole thing, had spoken of it around the campfire. "Now the durndest thing I ever did see," the sergeant would say in his down home way, and then he'd launch into the tale all over again. Ezra folded his lower lip over his teeth and bit down. Hard. He righted his head, the grin now gone, and darted his eyes back and forth across the trees in front of him. He sniffled and his nose drooled black snot in the sooty air. His shirt and pants were uncomfortably close in the humidity. He couldn't stand the aching in his throat any longer. A thousand fire ants roosted there. He eyed the dead soldier's canteen, saw that it was still only an arm's length away. He leaned from behind the tree and grasped the canteen in his right hand.

With a single clear ping, a ball broke the flesh of his hand and passed through the tin skin of the canteen. Ezra drew his hand close as the canteen fell, spilling water over the ground. He made himself tight against the tree once more. *Goddurn water. Goddurn rebels.*

"They's comin', men!"

He made his neck long and peered around the tree, saw movement down the slope. The trees themselves trembled. Men in gray were moving with purpose up the hill. They might own the forest. Too many. A terrible yell, hard to believe men could make such a noise. The air once again filled with lead and the sound of popping. Bits of rock and splinters rained like a storm. He thought his position no longer tenable; saw nothing else any better.

Ezra turned, sighted on the first thing that moved, pulled the trigger. The musket bucked his shoulder and a puff of gray smoke obscured his vision. Bits of burnt powder fell onto his face. A ball whizzed past his ear, close enough to prick skin. He turned his back to the tree once more and tore open another cartridge. He rammed a ball home, capped, cocked, turned, and fired again nearly a minute after his first shot. The gray men were closer now, though still behind a fair screen of trees seventy or eighty yards down-slope. He reloaded, noting only three cartridges left in his box. Standing erect, he bit down on his lower lip again and stepped out from the safety of the tree. He took a bead on one of the gray men. His opposite moved in the obscurity of the smoke hugging the earth. Ezra waited the smoke out, aimed for the man's chest but struck him in the head and watched him fall. Another stepped over his fallen comrade, not bothering even to look down but finding his footing nonetheless. He seemed to eyeball Ezra as he did so, but an instant later he fell as well. The oncoming rebels took another step or two forward, then, as they'd done five times already, the wave of gray halted and reversed itself, the men backing carefully but hastily down the hill. Ezra watched them withdraw, reloading as they did so.

His right hand throbbed, the pain only now becoming apparent. Sharp and burning. He slid to the ground behind the tree and looked uneasily at the hand. He had no idea what to expect, saw a hole in the center of his palm large enough to pass his thumb through. Only a little blood. He discovered his hand still fisted, then had some difficulty opening the fist. He had always imagined nausea at such a moment, but he had none. *A tolerable wound*. He fumbled with his haversack and pulled out a faded red kerchief. He wrapped the cloth, a gift from his wife—oh, how he wished he were home by Liza's side just now—around his damaged hand.

"Ammo, I need me some ammo!" he shouted.

"Me too!"

"Over here as well!"

He glanced about, saw there wasn't much left. The place belonged to the dead. The 118th was shredded, more men down than up. Tim Jewel with his tall frame was still up though—a small mercy. The ground was littered with the only waste of battle that really mattered.

Dead men clogged the space between the tree trunks like fish in a net.

Ezra swallowed, his thirst no less parched. He ignored it and counted his shots, regarded his ammo. Two shots left.

He glanced at Tim. Jewel smiled back. Ezra couldn't bring himself to return it, waved his bandaged hand instead. "Lookahere fella, we're giving 'em hell!" Jewel hollered, or something like it. Ezra's ears rang, were no longer reliable. He nodded with more certainty than he felt and sniffled again.

The word came along the line to fix bayonets. It occurred to Ezra that the day, already far along on the road to damnation, was about to tilt further in that direction. Jewel fixed his bayonet with barely a hesitation. Ezra noted the quick compliance of others as well. Ezra understood something then: he no longer cared. He wanted out, then and there. Wanted out any way it came. Amid the smoking and bleeding ruins of the 118th Pennsylvania, death was as good a way as any other. He looked about again. *A good place for dying*. He fixed his bayonet and waited for whatever would come.

He didn't have to wait long. For a seventh time, the rebel attackers howled up the hill. The first cry an hour before had made Ezra weak with anticipation. This time it sufficed only to warn him.

"Let 'em get close boys!"

"Make Pennsylvania proud!"

Ezra stood and stepped from behind the tree. He aimed with purpose on the third rebel he saw, supposing others had already eyeballed the first two, and not wanting to waste the shot. He waited for the order to fire, concentrated all his energies on the effort, stilled his breathing. He and the rifle were one entity.

"Stead-y... Stead-y... Fire!"

Ezra pulled the trigger, and the man dropped. Another filled his place and Ezra reloaded. Live or die, ain't no longer my decision. He felt lighter than air, as if some burden had been lifted—as if every burden had been lifted—from him. He took four steps forward, knelt in the bloody soil, aimed at another boy across the way, squeezed the trigger. The shot missed, went high in the trees.

The enemy came in force, a mass moving with deadly purpose. He wondered where'd

they'd all come from. They moved with frantic effort, pulling bodies aside, stepping on some, stepping over still others. The musket fire was as thick as it had been all day. More men went down.

Crying. Screaming. Confusion.

"Charge! Men, chaaaaaarge!"

Ezra raced down the slope, bayonet in front of him. He, all of them, whooped as they ran. They took the Confederates by surprise. The two lines became an intermingled killing zone, a no man's land of blue and gray bleeding red onto the scorched ground of the woods. The entire mass surged downhill as the gray line turned and ran, the Federals in pursuit. As he ran, he stopped once to reload, though in the confusion he forgot the ball and charged the weapon uselessly. He half ran, half stumbled, and the trees thinned before he realized they'd done so. He crossed a road and climbed a fence, all the while continuing to move at the double step, other blue clad soldiers running with him. Many of the routed rebels stopped and threw their hands up in despair. One such did so a few yards in front of Ezra and the private stopped and raised his musket.

"You my prisoner, Johnny Reb," Ezra said, his weight shifting foot to foot, his nose running again. He tried not to snifle as he looked the man in the eye.

A second gray-clad soldier, musket raised, stepped from behind the first. The two men, the gray in the screen of his comrade and the blue with nothing before him save his raised rifle, stood close enough to exchange pleasantries, yet said nothing. Ezra, not awed, pulled his trigger.

The hammer fell and the rifle bucked against his shoulder with the blast of an empty powder load. The two rebels fell back, stunned and off-balance, perhaps surprised to be still alive. They hesitated at their good fortune, but somewhere off in the cover of the trees, another rebel did not. He fired and a large chunk of meat peeled from Ezra's left thigh. His boot began to fill with blood.

Ezra both heard and felt a loud snap. A corkscrew of pain spiraled from his hip to his knee. He sank to the ground, put an arm up against the blue sky. His heart pounded double and this time there was nausea, instant and unavoidable. He feared he'd pissed himself with the warmth in his boot. He had an incredible sense of falling, that he could fall forever...

With Ezra on his knees, the lucky rebels before him swung their muskets as clubs. One caught Ezra's raised arm and he knew another moment of pain. He groped for his own weapon, but the butt of a musket slammed into his forehead. The last thing Ezra saw before the bright day receded into darkness was the stain of red pooling the grass beneath him.

He thought, *I didn't know it would be like this.*

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Well, gentle reader, thanks for reading. That's the end of this excerpt of NOT ONE AMONG THEM WHOLE. If you liked what you read, there's more—an entire novel's worth—at Amazon, B & N, and Kobo. And it will be available in trade paperback in March 2013!

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