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Opening Extract from...

Serena

Written by Ron Rash

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One

When Pemberton returned to the North Carolina mountains after three months in Boston settling his father's estate, among those waiting on the train platform was a young woman pregnant with Pemberton's child. She was accompanied by her father, who carried beneath his shabby frock coat a bowie knife sharpened with great attentiveness earlier that morning so it would plunge as deep as possible into Pemberton's heart.

The conductor shouted "Waynesville" as the train shuddered to a halt. Pemberton looked out the window and saw his partners on the platform, both dressed in suits to meet his bride of two days, an unexpected bonus from his time in Boston. Buchanan, ever the dandy, had waxed his mustache and oiled his hair. His polished bluchers gleamed, the white cotton dress shirt fresh-pressed. Wilkie wore a gray fedora, as he often did to

protect his bald pate from the sun. A Princeton Phi Beta Kappa key glinted on the older man's watch fob, a blue silk handkerchief tucked in his breast pocket.

Pemberton opened the gold shell of his watch and found the train on time to the exact minute. He turned to his bride, who'd been napping. Serena's dreams had been especially troubling last night. Twice he'd been waked by her thrashing, her fierce latching onto him until she'd fallen back asleep. He kissed her lightly on the lips and she awoke.

"Not the best place for a honeymoon."

"It suits us well enough," Serena said, leaning into his shoulder. "We're here together, which is all that matters."

Pemberton inhaled the bright aroma of Tre Jur talcum and remembered how he'd not just smelled but tasted its vividness on her skin earlier that morning. A porter strolled up the aisle, whistling a song Pemberton didn't recognize. His gaze returned to the window.

Next to the ticket booth Harmon and his daughter waited, Harmon slouching against the chestnut board wall. It struck Pemberton that males in these mountains rarely stood upright. Instead, they leaned into some tree or wall whenever possible. If none was available they squatted, buttocks against the backs of their heels. Harmon held a pint jar in his hand, what remained of its contents barely covering the bottom. The daughter sat on the bench, her posture upright to better reveal her condition. Pemberton could not recall her first name. He wasn't surprised to see them or that the girl was with child. *His child*, Pemberton had learned the night before Pemberton and Serena left Boston. Abe Harmon is down here saying he has business to settle with you, business about his daughter, Buchanan had said when he called. It could be just drunken bluster, but I thought you ought to know.

"Our welcoming party includes some of the locals," Pemberton said to his bride.

"As we were led to expect," Serena said.

She placed her right hand on his wrist for a moment, and Pemberton felt the calluses on her upper palm, the plain gold wedding band she

wore in lieu of a diamond. The ring was like his in every detail except width. Pemberton stood and retrieved two grips from the overhead compartment. He handed them to the porter, who stepped back and followed as Pemberton led his bride down the aisle and the steps to the platform. There was a gap of two feet between the steel and wood. Serena did not reach for his hand as she stepped onto the planks.

Buchanan caught Pemberton's eye first, gave him a warning nod toward Harmon and his daughter before acknowledging Serena with a stiff formal bow. Wilkie took off his fedora. At five-nine, Serena stood taller than either man, but Pemberton knew other aspects of Serena's appearance helped foster Buchanan and Wilkie's obvious surprise—pants and boots instead of a dress and cloche hat, sun-bronzed skin that belied Serena's social class, lips and cheeks untinted by rouge, hair blonde and thick but cut short in a bob, distinctly feminine yet also austere.

Serena went up to the older man and held out her hand. Though he was, at seventy, over twice her age, Wilkie stared at Serena like a smitten schoolboy, the fedora pressed against his sternum as if to conceal a heart already captured.

"Wilkie, I assume."

"Yes, yes, I am," Wilkie stammered.

"Serena Pemberton," she said, her hand still extended.

Wilkie fumbled with his hat a moment before freeing his right hand and shaking Serena's.

"And Buchanan," Serena said, turning to the other partner. "Correct?"

"Yes."

Buchanan took her proffered hand and cupped it awkwardly in his.

Serena smiled. "Don't you know how to properly shake hands, Mr. Buchanan?"

Pemberton watched with amusement as Buchanan corrected his grip, quickly withdrew his hand. In the year that Boston Lumber Company had operated in these mountains, Buchanan's wife had come only once, arriving in a pink taffeta gown that was soiled before she'd crossed

Waynesville's one street and entered her husband's house. She'd spent one night and left on the morning train. Now Buchanan and his wife met once a month for a weekend in Richmond, as far south as Mrs. Buchanan would travel. Wilkie's wife had never left Boston.

Pemberton's partners appeared incapable of further speech. Their eyes shifted to the leather chaps Serena wore, the beige oxford shirt and black jodhpurs. Serena's proper diction and erect carriage confirmed that she'd attended finishing school in New England, as had their wives. But Serena had been born in Colorado and lived there until sixteen, child of a timber man who'd taught his daughter to shake hands firmly and look men in the eye as well as ride and shoot. She'd come east only after her parents' deaths.

The porter laid the grips on the platform and walked back toward the baggage car that held Serena's Saratoga trunk and Pemberton's smaller steamer trunk.

"I assume Campbell got the Arabian to camp," Pemberton said.

"Yes," Buchanan said, "though it nearly killed young Vaughn. That horse isn't just big but quite spirited, 'cut proud' as they say."

"What news of the camp?" Pemberton asked.

"No serious problems," Buchanan said. "A worker found bobcat tracks on Laurel Creek and thought they were a mountain lion's. A couple of crews refused to go back up there until Galloway checked it out."

"Mountain lions," Serena said, "are they common here?"

"Not at all, Mrs. Pemberton," Wilkie answered reassuringly. "The last one killed in this state was in 1920, I'm glad to say."

"Yet the locals persist in believing one remains," Buchanan said. "There's quite a bit of lore about it, which the workers are all aware of, not only about its great size but its color, which evolves from tawny to jet-black. I'm quite content to have it remain folklore, but your husband desires otherwise. He's hoping the creature is real so he can hunt it."

"That was before his nuptials," Wilkie noted. "Now that Pemberton's a married man I'm sure he'll give up hunting panthers for less dangerous diversions."

"I hope he'll pursue his panther and would be disappointed if he were to do otherwise," Serena said, turning so she addressed Pemberton as much as his partners. "Pemberton's a man unafraid of challenges, which is why I married him."

Serena paused, a slight smile creasing her face.

"And why he married me."

The porter set the second trunk on the platform. Pemberton gave the man a quarter and dismissed him. Serena looked over at the father and daughter, who now sat on the bench together, watchful and silent as actors awaiting their cues.

"I don't know you," Serena said.

The daughter continued to stare sullenly at Serena. It was the father who spoke, his voice slurred.

"My business ain't with you. It's with him standing there beside you."

"His business is mine," Serena said, "just as mine is his."

Harmon nodded at his daughter's belly, then turned back to Serena.

"Not this business. It was done before you got here."

"You're implying she's carrying my husband's child."

"I ain't *implying* nothing," Harmon said.

"You're a lucky man then," Serena said to Harmon. "You'll not find a better sire to breed her with. The size of her belly attests to that."

Serena turned her gaze and words to the daughter.

"But that's the only one you'll have of his. I'm here now. Any other children he has will be with me."

Harmon pushed himself fully upright, and Pemberton glimpsed the white-pearl handle of a bowie knife before the coat settled over it. He wondered how a man like Harmon could possess such a fine weapon. Perhaps booty in a poker game or an heirloom passed down from a more prosperous ancestor. The depot master's face appeared behind the glass partition, lingered a moment, and vanished. A group of gangly mountaineers, all Boston Lumber employees, watched expressionless from an adjacent livestock barn.

Among them was an overseer named Campbell, whose many duties

included serving as a liaison between the workers and owners. Campbell always wore gray chambray shirts and corduroy pants at camp, but this afternoon he wore overalls same as the other men. *It's Sunday*, Pemberton realized, and felt momentarily disoriented. He couldn't recall the last time he'd glanced at a calendar. In Boston with Serena, time had seemed caught within the sweeping circle of watch and clock hands—passing hours and minutes unable to break free to become passing days. But the days and months had passed, as the Harmon girl's swelling belly made clear.

Harmon's large freckled hands grasped the bench edge, and he leaned slightly forward. His blue eyes glared at Pemberton.

"Let's go home, Daddy," Harmon's daughter said, and placed her hand on his.

He swatted the hand away as if a bothersome fly and stood up, wavered a moment.

"God damn the both of you," Harmon said, taking a step toward the Pembertons.

He opened the frock coat and freed the bowie knife from its leather sheath. The blade caught the late afternoon sun, and for that brief moment it appeared Harmon held a glistening flame in his hand. Pemberton looked at Harmon's daughter, her hands covering her stomach as if to shield the unborn child from what was occurring.

"Take your father home," Pemberton told her.

"Daddy, please," the daughter said.

"Go get Sheriff McDowell," Buchanan yelled at the men watching from the livestock barn.

A crew foreman named Snipes did as commanded, walking rapidly not toward the courthouse but to the boarding house where the sheriff resided. The other men stayed where they were. Buchanan moved to step between the two men, but Harmon waved him away with the knife.

"We're settling this now," Harmon shouted.

"He's right," Serena said. "Get your knife and settle it now, Pemberton."

Harmon stepped forward, wavering slightly as he narrowed the distance between them.

"You best listen to her," Harmon said, taking another step forward, "because one of us is leaving here with his toes pointed up."

Pemberton leaned and unclasped his calfskin grip, grabbled among its contents for the wedding present Serena had given him. He slipped the hunting knife from its sheath, settled the elk-bone handle deeper in his palm, its roughness all the better for clasping. For a lingering moment, Pemberton allowed himself to appreciate the feel of a weapon well made, the knife's balance and solidity, its blade, hilt and handle precisely calibrated as the épées he'd fenced with at Harvard. He took off his coat and laid it across the grip.

Harmon took another step forward, and they were less than a yard apart. He kept the knife held high and pointed toward the sky, and Pemberton knew that Harmon, drunk or sober, had done little fighting with a blade. Harmon slashed the air between them. The man's tobacco-yellowed teeth were clenched, the veins in his neck taut as guy wires. Pemberton kept his knife low and close to his side. He smelled the moonshine on Harmon's breath, a harsh greasy odor, like coal-oil.

Harmon lunged forward and Pemberton raised his left arm. The bowie knife swept the air but its arc stopped when Harmon's forearm hit Pemberton's. Harmon jerked down and the bowie knife raked across Pemberton's flesh. Pemberton took one final step, the hunting knife's blade flat as he slipped it inside Harmon's coat and plunged the steel through shirt cloth and into the soft flesh above the older man's right hip bone. He grabbed Harmon's shoulder with his free hand for leverage and quickly opened a thin smile across the man's stomach. A cedarwood button popped free from Harmon's soiled white shirt, hit the plank floor, spun a moment, and settled. Then a soft sucking sound as Pemberton withdrew the blade. For a few moments there was no blood.

Harmon's bowie knife fell clattering onto the platform. Like a man attempting to rescind the steps that had led to this outcome, the highlander placed both hands to his stomach and slowly walked backward,

then sagged onto the bench. He lifted his hands to assess the damage, and his intestines spilled onto his lap in loose gray ropes. Harmon studied the inner workings of his body as if for some further verification of his fate. He raised his head one last time and leaned it back against the depot's boards. Pemberton looked away as Harmon's blue eyes dimmed.

Serena stood beside him now.

"Your arm," she said.

Pemberton saw that his poplin shirt was slashed below the elbow, the blue cloth darkened by blood. Serena unclasped a silver cuff link and rolled up the shirtsleeve, examined the cut across his forearm.

"It won't need stitches," she said, "just iodine and a dressing."

Pemberton nodded. Adrenaline surged through him and when Buchanan's concerned face loomed closer, his partner's features—the clipped black hedge of moustache between the pointed narrow nose and small mouth, the round pale-green eyes that always looked slightly surprised—seemed at once both vivid and remote. Pemberton took deep measured breaths, wanting to compose himself before speaking to anyone.

Serena picked up the bowie knife and carried it to Harmon's daughter, who leaned over her father, hands cradling the blank face close to hers as if something might yet be conveyed to him. Tears flowed down the young woman's cheeks, but she made no sound.

"Here," Serena said, holding the knife by the blade. "By all rights it belongs to my husband. It's a fine knife, and you can get a good price for it if you demand one. And I would," she added. "Sell it, I mean. That money will help when the child is born. It's all you'll ever get from my husband and me."

Harmon's daughter stared at Serena now, but she did not raise a hand to take the knife. Serena set the bowie knife on the bench and walked across the platform to stand beside Pemberton. Except for Campbell, who was walking toward the platform, the men leaning against the livestock barn's railing had not moved. Pemberton was glad they were there, because at least some good might come from what had happened. The

workers already understood Pemberton was as physically strong as any of them, had learned that last spring when they'd put down the train tracks. Now they knew he could kill a man, had seen it with their own eyes. They'd respect him, and Serena, even more. He turned and met Serena's gray eyes.

"Let's go to the camp," Pemberton said.

He placed his hand on Serena's elbow, turning her toward the steps Campbell had just ascended. Campbell's long angular face was typically enigmatic, and he altered his path so as not to walk directly by the Pembertons—done so casually someone watching would assume it wasn't deliberate.

Pemberton and Serena stepped off the platform and followed the track to where Wilkie and Buchanan waited. Cinders crunched under their feet, made gray wisps like snuffed matches. Pemberton gave a backward glance and saw Campbell leaning over Harmon's daughter, his hand on her shoulder as he spoke to her. Sheriff McDowell, dressed in his Sunday finery, stood beside the bench as well. He and Campbell helped the girl to her feet and led her into the depot.

"Is my Packard here?" Pemberton asked Buchanan.

Buchanan nodded and Pemberton addressed the baggage boy, who was still on the platform.

"Get the grips and put them in the back seat, then tie the smaller trunk onto the rack. The train can bring the bigger one later."

"Don't you think you'd better speak to the sheriff?" Buchanan asked after he handed Pemberton the Packard's key.

"Why should I explain anything to that son-of-a-bitch?" Pemberton said. "You saw what happened."

He and Serena were getting in the Packard when McDowell walked up briskly behind them. When he turned, Pemberton saw that despite the Sunday finery the sheriff wore his holster. Like so many of the highlanders, the sheriff's age was hard to estimate. Pemberton supposed near fifty, though the sheriff's jet-black hair and taut body befitted a younger man.

"We're going to my office," McDowell said.

"Why?" Pemberton asked. "It was self-defense. A dozen men will verify that."

"I'm charging you with disorderly conduct. That's a ten-dollar fine or a week in jail."

Pemberton pulled out his billfold and handed McDowell two fives.

"We're still going to my office," McDowell said. "You're not leaving Waynesville until you write out a statement attesting you acted in self-defense."

They stood less than a yard apart, neither man stepping back. Pemberton decided a fight wasn't worth it.

"Do you need a statement from me as well?" Serena said.

McDowell looked at Serena as if he hadn't noticed her until now.

"No."

"I would offer you my hand, Sheriff," Serena said, "but from what my husband has told me you probably wouldn't take it."

"He's right," McDowell replied.

"I'll wait for you in the car," Serena told Pemberton.

When Pemberton returned, he got in the Packard and turned the key. He pressed the starter button and released the hand brake, and they began the six-mile drive to the camp. Outside Waynesville, Pemberton slowed as they approached the saw mill's five-acre splash pond, its surface hidden by logs bunched and intertwined like kindling. Pemberton braked and slipped the Packard out of gear but kept the engine running.

"Wilkie wanted the saw mill close to town," Pemberton said. "It wouldn't have been my choice, but it's worked out well enough."

They looked past the splash pond's stalled flotilla of logs awaiting dawn when they'd be untangled and poled onto the log buggy and sawn. Serena gave the mill a cursory look, as well as the small A-frame building Wilkie and Buchanan used as an office. Pemberton pointed to an immense tree rising out of the woods behind the saw mill. An orange growth furred the bark, and the upper branches were withered, unleafed.

"Chestnut blight."

"Good that it takes them years to die completely," Serena said. "That gives us all the time we need, but also a reason to prefer mahogany."

Pemberton let his hand settle on the hard rubber ball topping the gear shift. He put the car into gear and they drove on.

"I'm surprised the roads are paved," Serena said.

"Not many are. This one is, at least for a few miles. The road to Asheville as well. The train would get us to camp quicker, even at fifteen miles an hour, but I can show you our holdings this way."

They were soon out of Waynesville, the land increasingly mountainous, less inhabited, the occasional slant of pasture like green felt woven to a rougher fabric. Almost full summer now, Pemberton realized, the dogwood's white blossoms withered on the ground, the hardwood's branches thickened green. They passed a cabin, in the side yard a woman drawing water from a well. She wore no shoes and the towheaded child beside her wore pants cinched tight by twine.

"These highlanders," Serena said as she looked out the window. "I've read they've been so isolated that their speech harks back to Elizabethan times."

"Buchanan believes so," Pemberton said. "He keeps a journal of such words and phrases."

The land began a steep ascent, and soon there were no more farms. Pressure built in Pemberton's ears and he swallowed. He turned off the blacktop onto a dirt road that curved upward almost a mile before making a final sharp rise. Pemberton stopped the car and they got out. A granite outcrop leaned over the road's right side, water trickling down the rock face. To the left only a long falling away, that and a pale round moon impatient for the night.

Pemberton reached for Serena's hand and they walked to the drop-off's edge. Below, Cove Creek Valley pressed back the mountains, opening a square mile of level land. At the valley's center was the camp, surrounded by a wasteland of stumps and branches. To the left, Half Acre Ridge had been cut bare as well. On the right, the razed lower

quarter of Noland Mountain. As it crossed the valley, the railroad track appeared sewn into the lowland like stitches.

"Nine months' work," Pemberton said.

"We'd have done this much in six out west," Serena replied.

"We get four times the amount of rain here. Plus we had to lay down track into the valley."

"That would make a difference," Serena acknowledged. "How far do our holdings go?"

Pemberton pointed north. "The mountain beyond where we're logging now."

"And west."

"Balsam Mountain," Pemberton said, pointing it out as well. "Horse Pen Ridge to the south, and you can see where we quit cutting to the east."

"Thirty-four thousand acres."

"There were seven thousand more east of Waynesville that we've already logged."

"And to the west, Champion Paper owns that?"

"All the way to the Tennessee line," Pemberton said.

"That's the land they're after for the park?"

Pemberton nodded. "And if Champion sells, they'll be coming after our land next."

"But we'll not let them have it," Serena said.

"No, at least not until we're done with it. Harris, our local copper and kaolin magnate, was at the meeting I told you about, and he made clear he's against this national park scheme as much as we are. Not a bad thing to have the wealthiest man in the county on our side."

"Or as a future partner," Serena added.

"You'll like him," Pemberton said. "He's shrewd and he doesn't suffer fools."

Serena touched his shoulder above the wound.

"We need to go and dress your arm."

"A kiss first," Pemberton said, moving their joined hands to the small of Serena's back and pulling her closer.

Serena raised her lips to Pemberton's and pressed them firm against his. Her free hand clutched the back of his head to bring him nearer, a soft exaltation of her breath into his mouth as she unpursed her lips and kissed fiercer, her teeth and tongue touching his. Serena pressed her body fully into his. Incapable of coyness, as always, even the first time they'd met. Pemberton felt again what he'd never known with another woman—a sense of being unshackled into some limitless possibility, limitless though at the same time somehow contained within the two of them.

They got in the Packard and descended into the valley. The road became rockier, the gullies and washouts more pronounced. They drove through a creek clogged with silt, then more woods until the woods were gone and they were driving across the valley floor. There was no road now, just a wide sprawl of mud and dirt. They passed a stable and a shotgun frame building whose front room served as the payroll office, the back room a bar and dining area. To the right were the workers' dining hall and the commissary. They crossed over the railroad track, passing the line of flat cars waiting for morning. A caboose that served as a doctor's office sat next to the track, its rusting wheels sunk into the valley floor.

They passed below a row of three dozen stringhouses set precariously on Bent Knob Ridge, their foundations propped by ragged locust poles. The stringhouses resembled cheap wooden boxcars, not just in size and appearance but also in the way cable connected each in the line to the other. On top of every one was an iron rung. Axes had gouged splintery holes through the wood to serve as windows.

"The workers' housing, I assume," Serena said.

"Yes, as soon as we're finished here we can set them on flat cars and haul them to our new site. The workers don't even have to move their belongings."

"Very efficient." Serena said, nodding as she spoke. "How much is the rent?"

"Eight dollars a month."

"And their pay."

"Two dollars a day right now, but Buchanan wants to raise it to two-ten."

"Why?"

"He claims we'll lose good men to other camps," Pemberton said as he pulled up in front of their house. "I say these government land grabs mean a surplus of workers, especially if Champion sells out."

"What does Wilkie think?"

"Wilkie agrees with me," Pemberton said. "He says the one good thing about this stock market crash is cheaper labor."

"I agree with you and Wilkie," Serena said.

A youth named Joel Vaughn waited on the front steps, beside him a cardboard box, in it meat and bread and cheese, a bottle of red wine. As Pemberton and Serena got out of the Packard, Vaughn stood and doffed his wool golf cap, revealing a thatch of carrot-colored hair. A mind equally bright, Campbell had quickly realized, and trusted Vaughn with responsibilities usually given to much older workers, including, as evidenced by the scraped forearms and purple swelling on his freckled left cheekbone, tussles with a horse as spirited as it was valuable. Vaughn retrieved the grips from the car and followed Pemberton and his bride onto the porch. Pemberton opened the door and nodded for the youth to enter first.

"I'd carry you over the threshold," Pemberton said, "but for the arm."

Serena smiled. "Don't worry, Pemberton. I can manage."

She stepped inside and he followed. Serena examined the light switch a moment as if skeptical it would work. Then she turned it on.

In the front room were two Coxwell chairs set in front of the fireplace, off to the left a small kitchen with its Homestead stove and ice box. A poplar table with four cane-bottom chairs stood beside the front room's one window. Serena nodded and walked down the hall, glanced at the bathroom before entering the back room. She turned on the bedside lamp and sat on the wrought iron bed, tested the mattress's firmness and seemed satisfied. Vaughn appeared at the doorway with the steamer trunk, which had belonged to Pemberton's father.

"Put it in the hall closet," Pemberton said.

Vaughn did as he was told and went out, came back with the food and wine.

"Mr. Buchanan thought you might be needful of something to eat."

"Put it on the table," Pemberton said. "Then go get iodine and gauze from the caboose."

The youth paused, his eyes on Pemberton's blood-soaked sleeve.

"You wanting me to get Doctor Cheney?"

"No," Serena said. "I'll dress it for him."

After Vaughn left, Serena stepped closer to the bedroom window and peered out at the stringhouses.

"Do the workers have electricity?"

"Just in the dining hall."

"It's best that way," Serena said, stepping back into the room's center. "Not just the money saved but for the men. They'll work harder if they live like Spartans."

Pemberton raised an open palm toward the room's bare rough-board walls.

"This is rather Spartan as well."

"Money freed to buy more timber tracts," Serena said. "If we'd wished our wealth spent otherwise we'd have stayed in Boston."

"True enough."

"Who lives next door?"

"Campbell. He's as valuable as any man in this camp. He can book keep, repair anything, and uses a Gunter's chain as well as any of the surveyors."

"And the last house?"

"Doctor Cheney."

"The wag from Wild Hog Gap."

"The only doctor we could get to live out here. Even to get him we had to offer a house and an automobile."

Serena opened the room's chifforobe and looked inside, perused the closet as well.

"And what of my wedding present, Pemberton?"

"In the stable."

"I've never seen a white Arabian."

"It's an impressive horse," Pemberton said.

"I'll take him for a ride first thing tomorrow."

When Vaughn had delivered the iodine and gauze, Serena sat on the bed and unbuttoned Pemberton's shirt, removed the weapon wedged behind his belt. She took the knife from the sheath, examined the dried blood on the blade before placing it on the bedside table. Serena opened the bottle of iodine.

"How does it feel, fighting a man like that? With a knife I mean. Is it like fencing or . . . more intimate."

Pemberton tried to think of how what he'd felt could be put in words.

"I don't know," he finally said, "except it feels utterly real and utterly unreal at the same time."

Serena gripped his arm harder but her voice softened.

"This will sting," she said, and slowly poured the auburn-colored liquid into the wound. "The cause of your notoriety in Boston, did that knife fight feel the same as the one today?"

"Actually, it was a beer stein in Boston," Pemberton replied. "More of an accident during a bar room brawl."

"The story that I heard involved a knife," Serena said, "and made the victim's demise sound anything but accidental."

As Serena paused to dab iodine leaking from the wound, Pemberton wondered if he detected a slight disappointment in Serena's tone or only imagined it.

"But this one, hardly an accident," Serena noted. *"Myself will grip the sword—yea, though I die."*

"I'm afraid I don't recognize the quote," Pemberton said. "I'm not the scholar you are."

"No matter. It's a maxim best learned the way you did, not from a book."

As Serena loosed gauze from its wooden spool, Pemberton smiled.

"Who knows?" he said lightly. "In a place this primitive I suspect knife-wielding is not the purview of one sex. You may do battle with some snuff-breathed harridan and learn the same way I have."

"I would do it," Serena said, her voice measured as she spoke, "if for no other reason than to share what you felt today. That's what I want, everything a part of you also a part of me."

Pemberton watched the cloth thicken as Serena wrapped it around his forearm, iodine soaking through the first layers, then blotted by the dressing. He remembered the Back Bay dinner party of a month ago when Mrs. Lowell, the hostess, came up to him. *There's a woman here who wishes to be introduced to you, Mr. Pemberton,* the matron had said. *I should caution you, though. She has frightened off every other bachelor in Boston.* Pemberton recalled how he'd assured the matron he was not a man easily frightened, that perhaps the woman in question might need to be cautioned about him as well. Mrs. Lowell had noted the justness of Pemberton's comment, matching his smile as she took his forearm. *Let us go meet her then. Just remember you were warned, just as I've warned her.*

"There," Serena said when she'd finished. "Three days and it should be healed."

Serena picked up the knife and took it into the kitchen, cleaned the blade with water and a cloth. She dried the knife and returned to the back room.

"I'll take a whetstone to the blade tomorrow," Serena said, setting the knife on the bedside table. "It's a weapon worthy of a man like you, and built to last a lifetime."

"To extend a lifetime as well," Pemberton noted, "as it has so fortuitously shown."

"Perhaps it shall again, so keep it close."

"I'll keep it in the office," Pemberton promised.

Serena sat down in a ladderback chair opposite the bed and pulled off her jodhpurs. She undressed, not looking at what she unfastened and let fall to the floor. All the while her eyes were fixed upon Pemberton. She

took off her underclothing and stood before him. The women he'd known before Serena had been shy with their bodies, waiting for a room to darken or sheets to be pulled up, but that wasn't Serena's way.

Except for her eyes and hair, she was not conventionally beautiful, her breasts and hips small and legs long for her torso. Serena's narrow shoulders, thin nose and high cheekbones honed her body to a severe keenness. Her feet were small, and considering all other aspects of her features, oddly delicate, vulnerable looking. Their bodies were well matched, Serena's lithe form fitting his larger frame and more muscular build. Sometimes at night they cleaved so fiercely the bed buckled and leaped beneath them. Pemberton would hear their quick breaths and not know which were Serena's and which his. *A kind of annihilation*, that was what Serena called their coupling, and though Pemberton would never have thought to describe it that way, he knew her words had named the thing exactly.

Serena did not come to him immediately, and a sensual languor settled over Pemberton. He gazed at her body, into the eyes that had entranced him the first time he'd met her, irises the color of burnished pewter. Hard and dense like pewter too, the gold flecks not so much within the gray as floating motelike on the surface. Eyes that did not close when their flesh came together, pulling him inside her with her gaze as much as her body.

Serena opened the curtains so the moon spread its light across the bed. She turned from the window and looked around the room, as if for a few moments she'd forgotten where she was.

"This will do quite well for us," she finally said, returning her gaze to Pemberton as she stepped toward the bed.

Two

The following morning Pemberton introduced his bride to the camp's hundred workers. As he spoke, Serena stood beside him, dressed in black riding breeches and a blue denim shirt. Her jodphurs were different from the ones the day before, European made, the leather scuffed and worn, toes rimmed with tarnished silver. Serena held the gelding's reins, the Arabian's whiteness so intense as to appear almost translucent in the day's first light. The saddle weighting the horse's back was made of German leather with wool-flocked gusseted panels, its cost more than a logger earned in a year. Several men made soft-spoken observations about the stirrups, which weren't paired on the left side.

Wilkie and Buchanan stood on the porch, cups of coffee in their hands. Both were dressed in suits and ties, their one concession to the environment knee-high leather boots, pants cuffs tucked inside so as not to get

muddied. It was clothing Pemberton, whose gray tiger cloth pants and plaid workshirts differed little from the workers' attire, found faintly ridiculous in such an environment, now even more so in light of Serena's attire.

"Mrs. Pemberton's father owned the Vulcan Lumber Company in Colorado," Pemberton said to the workers. "He taught her well. She's the equal of any man here, and you'll soon find the truth of it. Her orders are to be followed the same as you'd follow mine."

Among the gathered loggers was a thick-bearded cutting crew foreman named Bilded. He hocked loudly and spit a gob of yellow phlegm on the ground. At six-two and over two hundred pounds, Bilded was one of the few men in camp big as Pemberton.

Serena opened the saddle bag and removed a Waterman pen and a leather-bound notepad. She spoke to the horse quietly, then handed the reins to Pemberton and walked over to Bilded and stood where he'd spit. She pointed beside the office at a cane ash tree, which had been left standing for its shade.

"I'll make a wager with you," Serena said to Bilded. "We both estimate total board feet of that cane ash. Then we'll write our estimates on a piece of paper and see who's closest."

Bilded stared at Serena a few moments, then at the tree as if already measuring its height and width. He looked not at Serena but at the cane ash when he spoke.

"How we going to know who's closest?"

"I'll have it cut down and taken to the saw mill," Pemberton said. "We'll know who won by this evening."

Doctor Cheney had now come on the porch to watch as well. He raked a match head across the railing to light his after-breakfast cigar, the sound audible enough that several workers turned to find its source. Pemberton looked also, and noted how morning accentuated the doctor's unhealthy pallor, making the corpulent face appear gray and malleable, like dirty bread dough. An effect the wattled neck and pouchy cheeks further emphasized.

"How much we wagering?" Bilded asked.

"Two weeks' pay."

The amount gave Bilded pause.

"There ain't no trick to it? I win I get two weeks' extra pay."

"Yes," Serena said, "and if you lose you work two weeks free."

She offered the pad and pen to Bilded, but he didn't raise a hand to take it. A worker behind him snickered.

"Perhaps you want me to go first then?" Serena said.

"Yeah," Bilded said after a few moments.

Serena turned toward the tree and studied it a full minute before she raised the pen in her left hand and wrote a number. She tore the page from the pad and folded it.

"Your turn," she said and handed the pen and notepad to Bilded.

Bilded walked up to the cane ash to better judge its girth, then came back and examined the tree a while longer before writing his own number. Serena turned to Pemberton.

"Who's a man we and the workers both trust to hold our estimates?"

"Campbell," Pemberton said, nodding toward the overseer, who watched from the office doorway. "You all right with that, Bilded?"

"Yeah," Bilded said.

Serena rode out behind the cutting crews as they followed the train tracks toward the south face of Noland Mountain, passing through acres of stumps that, from a distance, resembled grave markers in a recently vacated battlefield. The loggers soon left the main train line that went over the right side of the mountain and instead followed the spur, their lunches in tote sacks and paper bags, metal milk pails and metal boxes shaped like bread loaves. Some of the men wore bib overalls, others flannel shirts and pants. Most wore Chippawah boots and a few wore shoes of canvas or leather. The signal boys went barefoot. The loggers passed the Shay train engine they called a sidewinder and the two coach cars that brought and returned workers who lived in Waynesville, then the six flat cars for timber and the McGiffert loader and finally at the spur's end the hi-lead skidder already hissing and smoking, the boom's long

steel cables spooling off the drums and stretching a half mile upward to where the tail block looped around a massive hickory stump. From a distance, the boom resembled a huge rod and reel, the cables like cast lines. The boom angled toward the mountain, and the cables were so taut it looked as if the whole mountain was hooked and ready to be dragged down the tracks to Waynesville. Logs cut late on Saturday yet dangled from the cables, and men passed heedfully under them as they might clouds packed with dynamite. All the while, the air grew thinner as the workers made their way up the steep incline toward tools hidden under leaves, hung on tree branches like the harps of the old Hebrews. Not just axes but eight-foot cross-cut saws and steel wedges and blocks and pike poles, the nine-pound hammers called go-devils and the six-pound hammers called grab skips. Some of these implements had initials burned in their handles, and some were given names as might be allowed a horse or rifle. All but the newest had their handles worn slick by flesh much in the manner of stones smoothed by water.

As the men made their way through the stumps and brush they called slash, their eyes considered where they stepped, for though snakes rarely stirred until the sun fell full on the slopes, the yellow jackets and hornets offered no such respite. Nor did the mountain itself, which could send a man tumbling, especially on a day such as this when recent rains made the ground slick and yielding to feet and grasping hands. Most of the loggers were still exhausted from last week's six eleven-hour shifts. Some were hung over and some were injured. As they made their way up the mountain, the men had already drunk four or five cups of coffee, and all carried with them cigarettes and chewing tobacco. Some used cocaine to keep going and stay alert, because once the cutting began a man had to watch for axe blades glancing off trees and saw teeth grabbing a knee and the tongs on the cable swinging free or the cable snapping. Most of all the sharded limbs called widow makers that waited minutes or hours or even days before falling earthward like javelins.

Pemberton stood on the porch as Serena followed the crews into the woods. Even at a distance he could see the sway of her hips and arched