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The River of No Return

Written by Bee Ridgway

Published by Michael Joseph

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The River of No Return

Bee Ridgway

MICHAEL JOSEPH
an imprint of
PENGUIN BOOKS

MICHAEL JOSEPH

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2YR
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)
Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road,
Penguin Group (Australia), 707 Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3008,
Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)
Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, Block D, Rosebank Office Park, 181 Jan Smuts Avenue,
Parktown North, Gauteng 2193, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

www.penguin.com

First published 2013
1

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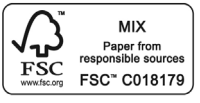
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Set in Adobe Garamond
Typeset by www.five-twentyfive.com
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

HARDBACK ISBN: 978–0–718–17698–3
PAPERBACK ISBN: 978–0–718–19981–4

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



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ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

For Paul

Prologue

Castle Dar, Devon, 1815

Julia sat beside her grandfather's bed, holding his hand. The fifth Earl of Darchester was dying.

Heavy velvet curtains were drawn across the tall windows, but the late-afternoon sun found a thin opening and as the day grew older a narrow ribbon of light moved slowly across the floor and over the bed. Lord Percy's breath was shallow. Julia felt life guttering in his fingers, saw death written on his beloved face. Motes of dust moved slowly in the shaft of light. Once Grandfather was dead, Cousin Eamon would be the new earl and would live here, at Castle Dar. Julia sighed, making the dust dance with her breath, then squeezed her eyes shut, willing herself to be calm. Time enough to worry about tomorrow's problems.

The house was almost completely silent, except for Grandfather's painful gasps. The sun inched up the counterpane, touching their fingers now.

The sound of hooves and jangling harness broke the spell. Julia went to the window and pushed aside a swathe of curtain with the back of her hand. Far away across the lawn, where the long drive disappeared into the wood, she saw a tired old travelling coach, piled high with luggage and drawn by a team of broken-down job horses, lurching toward the house.

'Is it Eamon?' The voice from the bed was little more than a whisper.

Julia turned back, letting the curtain fall. 'Yes.'

Lord Percy closed his eyes. 'I will be dead before the sun goes down. Why couldn't he wait until morning?'

'Because he is cruel.' Julia walked back to the bed.

Only a few weeks ago Grandfather had been as hearty as an oak. But the disease that was wasting his flesh had progressed with terrifying speed. And now here was Eamon, rushing to gloat over a dying man.

Lord Percy's hand moved anxiously on the counterpane, as if searching for something.

Julia caught it. His fingers were terribly cold. 'What do you need?'

He swallowed, then whispered. What he said clearly pained him. 'I can no longer protect you.'

Julia sat on the bed, raising the hand she held and kissing the knuckle above the emerald ring that once looked right on a strong hand but now seemed too big. 'It is you he has tormented all these years. I mean nothing to him.'

His fingers tightened around hers. 'It isn't only Eamon. There may be others. Julia . . .' He raised his head, and his whispering grew harsh. 'Tell no one anything. No one at all. You must pretend –'

'Hush.' Julia pressed his palm to the counterpane, and his head fell back against the pillows. She bent and stroked his high forehead. 'I have nothing to tell. I have no secrets.'

'You have no secrets, because you don't *know.*' His fierce gaze softened; he let out a long shuddering sigh and closed his eyes. 'I am a fool,' he said. 'A blind fool.'

'Hush now.' The sound of the approaching carriage was

getting louder. 'You must remain calm. He is coming.'

His eyes fluttered open. 'If only I had time.'

'You have had your share of time, old man.' Julia smiled.

His lip twitched, the shadow of a grin. 'I am greedy.'

'It's not a nice trait.' She smoothed one of his eyebrows with her thumb.

'I have never been nice. I have taken what I wanted. Time, money, women.' His voice took on some of the volume it used to have when he would thunder through the house, and he raised himself to one elbow. 'I have lived my life! But I have never snivelled and whined. Always I have taken what was given willingly, or I have paid with money or passion or blood . . .' He collapsed back against his pillows. 'I hate this blasted dying!'

Julia let her fingers rest against his sunken cheek. 'So do I.'

Together they listened to the carriage drawing close, a growing percussion beneath the old man's laboured breathing. They heard the wheels hit the bump just before the driveway split to curve in front of the house. Julia's stomach clenched; soon Eamon would be in this very room.

'Julia?'

'Yes?'

His cheekbones and his nose were sharp; it was the look of death. 'Let's speed the time. Let's outwit him. Just once more.'

'Do you have the strength?'

'Yes, yes. I shall twist time to my own ends and then . . .' He paused and tremblingly tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. 'Then you shall be orphaned after all.'

Julia bit the inside of her cheek, tamping down the tears. He would never do that again, that little motherly gesture.

He let his hand fall from her face. 'I had hoped . . .' He sighed. 'Well. The angels must watch over you now.'

'Religion, Grandfather? At the eleventh hour?'

'Ha!' He flashed her a real grin then, the irrepressible, scapegrace expression that she loved. 'It is not the eleventh hour, my dear. It is a minute or two before the twelfth. And those minutes crawl. We must bid them gallop. Come. Let us play, my little foundling. My darling one.'

Julia's tears spilled over then, and she didn't care. 'One last time.'

'Good girl.' His hands fluttered, and she took them both in hers. The sliver of light streamed between them, illuminating their fingers.

'Watch the dust, there in the light. Watch as I make it dance, my poppet.'

Together they focused on the dust. Julia felt her grandfather's great power, felt how he willed the dust to dance. At first it only shivered, then it began to move faster and faster until it seemed to blow like snow in a blizzard. In the light on either side of them, the dust moved as slowly as it ever had. Lord Percy's eyes blazed, then broke focus. His fingers clasped hers strongly, then released. He fell back with a choked cry.

The dust slowed immediately, and Julia was left gripping hands that responded not at all to her kisses and tears.

Eamon Percy, now the sixth Earl of Darchester, threw open the door to find Julia pressing her grandfather's palm to her wet cheek. The old man's head was thrown back, his dead face grinning defiance.

Hartland, Vermont, 2013

Nick was on his way into town when the text came through from Tom Feely: 'get here now cheese inspector'.

Nick pulled a youie, then made a sharp right onto Densmore Hill Road. It was a cold December and the hill would be hard going, but Nick had chains on his tyres. He'd get to the farm in time to charm the inspector.

The pickup crested the hill with a groan and Nick patted the dashboard. The sky was a thin blue and the bare trees shivered resentfully in the wind. Still, the view out over the snowy valley struck Nick much as it had the first time he'd seen it on a glorious fall day four years ago: This corner of Vermont was a place he could learn to call home. He let the good feeling in and burst into a loud rendition of 'The King Shall Enjoy His Own Again'.

Down below him, Thruppenny Farm hugged the base of the hill like a child trying to hide in its mother's skirts. Nick could see the red barns with their thick caps of snow, and the barnyards, tramped to mud by the forty Guernsey cows that Tom Feely kept for his artisan cheese business. Nick bellowed as the truck picked up speed: '"Then let us rejoice, with heart and voice! There doth one Stuart still remain!"'

Nick downshifted and eased around the last curve. He was happy to play lord of the manor for the elderly cheese inspector, who was a dyed-in-the-wool Anglophile. The visits were always the same. The old man would greet him with shy deference, they would chat for a few minutes about the queen or crumpets, and then they would go into the cheese-making room, and from there into the smaller cheese cave. Immediately on the left were the shelves dedicated to raw-

milk Bries and Camemberts, cheeses yielding enough to melt a heart of stone – and entirely against the law. The inspector would pass them right by, saying something like, 'English cheese! People go on and on about French-style cheeses but they don't even exist for me. No, I don't even see them. Give me a good, firm English cheese every time. Isn't that right, Mr Davenant?' His eyes would twinkle at Nick, and Nick would murmur his agreement. Then the inspector would linger over the shelves of stolid Cheddars, aged enough to be lawful – the prize-winning truckles for which Thruppenny Farm was becoming famous.

Nick didn't mind indulging the old man with a touch of Merrie Olde. It had been so very long now since Nick had been home that he took a guilty pleasure in following the cheese inspector to his green and pleasant fairyland. And Tom had nothing to complain of. For nigh on four years the inspector had given Thruppenny Farm top marks in every category, signing off on his list of checkboxes even as the seductive funk of bloomy rinds filled his nostrils.

Nick parked nose to nose with Tom's Methuselah of an old Farmall tractor, its pigeon-toed front wheels capped with snow. Downgrading his song to a whistle, Nick swung out of his pickup, shoved his hands into the pockets of his coat and walked into the barn. The sweet smell of well-tended animals and hay hit his nose. He stood for a moment breathing it in while his eyes adjusted to the dim light. Tom usually waited for him here, but aside from the cows shifting in their stalls and an insinuating cat making free with his ankles, there was no one around.

Then he heard the distant clank of metal against metal and realized Tom must already be in the cheese room. He

went out the barn's back entrance and across to the small, new building with the stainless-steel door. It opened into a vestibule where Nick took off his boots, fished a pair of Crocs out of the tub of disinfectant, shook them vigorously and pushed his thick-socked feet into them. He opened another stainless-steel door into the brightly lit cheese-making room, the heart of this farm and Tom Feely's pride and joy.

Tom was there, heaving the illegal cheeses out of the cheese cave and into a big plastic trash can that he'd clearly dragged in from the barn; it was far from clean.

'What the hell?' Nick stared as Tom hurled a particularly gorgeous wheel of Brie down into the mess. It burst open like a smashed melon.

'New cheese inspector,' Tom said over his shoulder, already reaching for another wheel.

'Shit.' Nick pitched in. This was serious. Only last summer a dairyman in the next county had been led away from his farm in leg manacles by machine-gun-toting FDA officials for the crime of making unpasteurized cheese. Jailed for months. Nick put some effort into it, scooping up two wheels at a time. A new cheese inspector would want to flex his muscles. Make a name for himself.

In a minute more the shelves in the cave were bare of the beautiful, tender wheels that Tom Feely – a hatchet-faced man who wore his Purple Heart pinned to his Red Sox cap – could not and would not stop making. 'I was born to make Brie,' he said of himself. 'And I was born to make it right.'

Together Tom and Nick dragged the heavy trash can out and behind the barn, and Tom covered the voluptuous ruination of a month's hard work with a hay bale. The scent of hay and cheese together was so good that Nick actually

felt tears behind his eyes. 'By God, Tom, that's the saddest thing I've ever seen.'

'There's always more milk and more time.' The farmer crossed his arms over his chest and stared at the driveway, waiting for the inspector.

The two men had met on the day that Nick had first seen the view from the top of the hill, a mere ten minutes after he had first fallen in love with Vermont. Thruppenny Farm had been on the market, and Nick had pulled in when he'd seen the 'For Sale' sign in the yard. Tom gave him a tour. The farm had been in Feely hands since the Revolution, but Tom told Nick that day with a shrug, 'Nothing lasts for ever.'

Nick knew a good soldier when he met one. He assumed that selling the farm felt quite a lot like dying to Tom Feely, and he also assumed that Tom would rather die than show those emotions. But Tom was an American, and sometimes Nick thought he would never really understand Americans. They were deceptively simple. Tom might have been feeling anything at all under that baseball cap.

The tour had ended in the state-of-the-art cheese-making room and cheese cave. Nick had watched as Tom bent and looked closely at a broad-shouldered, cloth-wrapped Cheddar, his hand resting on its mottled surface. Tom straightened again and closed his eyes, the better to sense through his fingers. He was figuring out if time had done its work. It was as if Nick wasn't there at all.

Nick made his proposition without thinking, before Tom had lifted his hand away from his cheese. And so Nick became the owner of a small Vermont dairy farm. The Feelys paid him a nominal rent and kept him in legal and illegal milk products. For himself, Nick had ended up buying a

house a few miles away. Since then he had bought up a few more struggling farms, and he had four families under his guardianship. Nick spent most of his time in Vermont and was considering abandoning New York altogether.

But now there was a new cheese inspector, one almost certainly less susceptible than his predecessor to the charms of a plummy British accent.

'Here we go.' Tom straightened his blue and red baseball cap on his head, and Nick noticed how his fingers lingered for a split second on the Purple Heart.

Owner and tenant stood side by side, watching as an old white BMW E21, streaked and spotted and marbled with rust, turned into the farmyard.

It was the feeling of it – as if Nick's sabre were an extension of his own body. As if it were his own hand he was thrusting into the young man's neck, as if it were his nails ripping through the soft flesh, catching on the tendons, pulling, then slicing through. The man's eyes, staring with a sort of blank surprise as red blood spilled richly over his blue uniform. Black eyes and red blood. The sabre withdrawing, as if it were Nick's own arm he was pulling back, pulling away – and now he was flying away, backward, into a tunnel of smoke . . . he was being sucked away at hideous speed, and at the distant end of the tunnel the splash of red and the young man's face fixing in death . . .

Nick's eyes flew open, but it was a while before he fully realized that he had been dreaming. In the dream, it had been a smoky dusk, punctuated by the flash of cannon. But as always the dream had altered his senses. The cannon, the men and horses, the gunfire and shouting had gone silent.

He heard only the sound of his own breathing and the slow, funereal drumbeat of his heart.

He took a deep breath. He was miles and years away from that battlefield. 'Miles and years,' he whispered, and then started playing with rhyme, as he did sometimes to calm himself down. 'Tiles and beers. Piles and jeers. Niles and tears.' *Niles and tears* was a good one, he thought. It captured the weariness of the distances he'd marched and the sorrow of the years he'd lost. 'Niles and tears,' he whispered again, and yet again, letting the sound of his own voice drown out the sound of his heart. The woman next to him was curled into an S, sleeping quietly. 'Niles and tears,' Nick said more loudly, perfectly aware that he wanted her to wake up and keep him company.

But she slept on and now he was wide awake. He sat up, letting the feather duvet fall away from his bare chest. The cold against his skin reassured him; he never turned up the heat, even on the bitterest nights. He kept the thermostat just high enough to stop the pipes from freezing. Just high enough to feel like an English wintertime of long ago.

The night was dark; there was no moon. He could see the showy splash of the Milky Way through the wrinkled old window glass. He savoured the feeling of the cold air in his lungs and the sweet smell of the wood fire they had enjoyed after a first frenzied tumble on the couch, their thick winter pullovers still on.

The pond on the other side of the driveway was frozen over. The frogs of summertime were sleeping under the ice, the crickets gone to wherever they went. Cricket Valhalla? He seemed to remember from some nature show that crickets hibernate. He wished they'd wake up. There was no sound

except his shallow breathing, and his heartbeat, beginning to boom again. 'Niles and tears . . .' He squeezed his eyes shut. The panic was winning. Nick gave up the rhyming game. It clearly wasn't going to work tonight.

So he reached, in his mind, for her. And she was there. As she always was. She stepped into his consciousness with a certain lightness of tread, as if she were walking over wet ground. The dark-eyed girl. Nick's thoughts cleared; his breathing slowed. She was standing at the shadowy edge of a summer wood. Her eyes were candid, friendly. She watched him until he felt his heart begin to mend. Then she faded.

His bedfellow shifted in her sleep, uncurling towards him, her face turning into the starlight. 'Get over here,' she said in a bossy, sleepy tone. She reached for him and, realizing that he was sitting up, murmured grumpily and flounced over onto her other side, soon to be lost deep in sleep again.

He liked her better asleep than awake. She was the kind of person who took life by the scruff of the neck and made it dance to her tune. It was an admirable trait, but experience had taught Nick that such people were best admired from a safe distance. And he was right. But now here he was.

In bed with the new cheese inspector.

Yesterday she had scrutinized every corner of the farm's operations. When she'd passed the bin full of cheese and hay she had stopped and snuffed the air like a bloodhound. Then she'd turned and fixed Nick with a long stare. 'You own this farm?' He'd seen her take in his pristine wax jacket. 'Like to come up on the weekends from New York and play with the cows?'

He'd been surprised at how much that had stung. 'I live in New York, yes,' he'd said. Then added defensively, 'But I

was raised in England.'

'Well now, England,' she'd said, lingering over the *-gland* with contempt. She had a southern accent of some sort or another. 'I'm guessing you have some rather fine raw-milk Camembert in your fridge on . . .' She looked at her copy of the form where Nick's info was printed. 'Jenneville Road. I'll follow you home and give it a try. Then I'll report on this farm.'

Now Nick looked at the curve of the cheese inspector's shoulder, barely visible in this light. Thruppenny Farm would be getting its good report, and the cheese inspector would be off after breakfast, in that jalopy of hers. Back to her usual Burlington beat. The old cheese inspector would return to duty next month.

He sighed, and stared out of the window.

The stars seemed close. It was hard to believe that they were, in fact, very far away, in time as well as space. How many light years into the past was he looking? Long before his own birth, surely. Each one of those stars was an inferno, a terrible burning hell, spilling its light from endless raging fires out into time and space. But from this distance they were beautiful. Watchful. Like the eyes of animals in a midnight barn, shining in the swinging light of the farmer's lantern.

The stars reminded Nick of bivouacking on frosty winter nights in Spain, a rabbit stew warming his belly, the sound of the slumbering army soothing him to sleep. The stars had been bright and close then, too. Now the war was far away and long ago, very long ago. The world had become a different place. Yet the war still shed the light of its conflagration down through his dreams. Nick pressed his palms against his face. The girl with the dark eyes. She was

also from that time long ago. Only the thought of her could ever beat the dream back into the past.

The past.

Nick Davenant had far too much past.

He had jumped forward in time. Two hundred years.

Two hundred years. It had been unbelievable when it happened and it was still unbelievable ten years later. Nick laughed out loud, and without humour.

'Put a sock in it, England.'

His hard laugh softened into a real smile. He had to hand it to the cheese inspector: she was sure of herself in every way. He was glad she was leaving and never coming back. 'Sorry,' he said.

'Hmpf.' She buried her nose into her pillow and veered sharply back into sleep.

Two hundred years were hard to hide, even in casual relationships. He realized now that when his lovers accused him of being 'uptight' or 'emotionally distant', what they meant was that he was weirder than even an eccentric Englishman should be. American women would overlook a great deal in a passably good-looking British boyfriend. But eventually they began to pry, wanting explanations.

His terrible scars? A car accident, he said. He *had* been in a car accident, but the scars were obviously war wounds. Hence his avoidance of women who were doctors or nurses. The scar that cut across one eyebrow was dashing and ambiguous enough, but the jagged sabre cut up his left thigh was heavily punctuated where the wound had been tied up with thick catgut. Roping his left shoulder, a scar from a gunshot wound. It was the ugliest scar of all, because of the infection that had set in.

There were other, more subtle oddities. The flourishes of his signature were neither manly nor timely. Then there were his antiquated tastes in food. This very evening, as she ate the glorious Camembert, the cheese inspector had reminisced about Oreos and milk and then she had gone on to sing a TV jingle about them. Nick had no favourite childhood commercials, and he craved boiled mutton, beef jelly, blancmange, and bits of pig, pickled.

Sleep was clearly not going to come again tonight. Nick got quietly out of bed and went downstairs, enjoying the bracing cold of the floorboards against the soles of his feet. He loved these floors. The boards were as old as he was. The trees from which the boards had been painstakingly hewn were much older even than that – they must have stood in these hills for hundreds of years before they were felled. This house had been built in the year of his birth – 1790 – and Nick took comfort from its sturdy construction, the way it had hunkered down through all the years like a bear in its den. He imagined it being raised, enormous beam by enormous beam, even as he had quickened in his mother's womb. It was as if the house had been built for him and had simply been waiting across so many winters for him to come home.

The embers were still glowing in the fireplace, and he scrunched up some newspaper, made a pyramid of kindling around it, crouched, and blew the fire back to life. As the kindling crackled into flame, he added two apple logs from the old tree that had fallen in a spring storm. Tending a fire made him feel eternal. It made him feel that he could have been born at any time, in any place. It made him feel that there was nothing so very strange about skipping almost two

centuries in one's twenty-third year, then living out the rest of one's life in a previously unimaginable future. He wrapped his scarred, naked body in a cashmere throw and watched the flames dance.

But as he followed a spark flying upward into the chimney, his eye was distracted by a white envelope propped up on the mantelpiece.

Shit.

The letter from the Guild.

Nick had successfully avoided thinking about it for several days.

He had run into the mailman at the bottom of the long driveway a few mornings ago. 'Looks like an old-fashioned love letter,' the mailman had said, admiring the thick wax seal on the back of the envelope. The wax was stamped with the Guild's symbol: a blooming tulip, bulb and roots and all. He handed the letter to Nick along with the L. L. Bean catalogue that seemed to come every week. 'Romantic.'

It was anything but. As soon as he'd glimpsed the seal, Nick had guessed. And when he had turned the letter over in his hand and seen that it was addressed in Alderwoman Gacoki's spidery hand, he had known. The letter was a summons. Not just any summons, but a Summons Direct. A tulip in wax. A tulip, when they were coming for their pound of flesh.

He had propped the letter there on the mantelpiece and then he had forgotten about it, wilfully. He was good at that. It was another skill he'd learned during the war. Don't want to think about it? No problem. Don't think about it. Think about the girl with the dark eyes instead.

Now, in the flickering firelight, the Alderwoman's writing

seemed to scuttle across the envelope. Nick wanted to rush the letter like it was a living thing and sweep it into the fire. But he couldn't. He had to read it.

If he didn't answer the summons, they would come for him.