

Chapter 1 - Fort Robinson

November 13, 1890

Corporal Matt Davys pressed his ear against the heaving chest of the sick cavalry horse, his eyes closed in concentration. The horse's breaths sounded like the wind rushing through the sagebrush, whooshing and whistling, changing direction and timbre every second or so. There was another sound, ominous and barely audible: a harsh, dry murmur.

"Yes, sir, I hear it," Matt said to Lieutenant Harding as he straightened up next to Molly, his regular mount for the past eighteen months. At twenty-five, Matt was young for his rank, having made corporal after only eight years in the peacetime Army. He was tall and slim; his skin was darker than many of the other colored enlisted men in Troop K, so dark that his friend Jim claimed he was a menace when they were together on night guard duty.

Next to him, Molly stood shivering in the clean straw of the horse stall, her eyes closed and her breath swirling around them in the cold of the Nebraska early winter. Lieutenant Harding and the gouty old veteran, Stable Sergeant Johnson, looked on. Like all the officers in the regiment, Harding was white. His small moustache was peppered with gray, and he stooped slightly, the result of an injury acquired at Shiloh, twenty-eight years before.

"She gonna be okay, sir?" Matt asked.

"Hard to say. My guess is lung fever."

"Lung fever," Matt repeated carefully. "Yes, sir." He leaned against Molly's shoulder, feeling the heat of her fever through his woolen uniform shirt and overcoat. She didn't respond, but

he hoped that she took some comfort from his presence.

“Keep her in,” Lieutenant Harding said to Johnson. “And assign Corporal Davys another mount for today.”

Johnson paused to send a well-aimed stream of tobacco into the corner of the stall and then drawled “Yas, suh.” He glanced at Matt, his calculating eyes almost lost in the fat of his puffy face. Johnson hadn’t been on a horse for years. He was insolent with the younger white officers and got away with it because he ran his stable with ruthless competence. “Corp’l,” he said to Matt, “I reckon Tom Hendricks’ horse suit you jus’ fine.”

“Okay, Sarge,” Matt replied, his voice cracking. He cleared his throat and repeated, “Okay.”

“Hendricks rides that big black gelding, doesn’t he?” Lieutenant Harding asked. “Sammy, right?”

“That’s right, suh. Hendricks, he’s on sick call so Matt here can take him.” Johnson spat again, and Matt thought he saw amusement dancing in the man’s eyes.

Harding glanced at Matt and then at Molly. Matt held his breath.

“I suppose you could stay in today, Corporal,” Harding said.

Matt was tempted. He could take care of Molly. He wouldn’t have to go out in the cold. And he wouldn’t have to deal with that monster of a horse.

“Thank you, sir. But I reckon I should be out with my squad. What with the rumors and all.” And, he added to himself, I’ll never make sergeant sitting back here in the stable.

“Good,” Harding said. “I wish I could join you, but I have reports to write.” Then he pulled himself up straight and said, “Corporal Davys, get Sammy watered and saddled and then report to the Captain. He’s drilling the troop just east of the river.”

“Yes, sir.”

Harding stepped closer, touched Matt’s arm and added quietly, “Why don’t you stop by this evening after mess? Mrs. Harding would like to see you.”

Matt brightened. “Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. I do that.”

“Carry on, Sergeant Johnson.” With that, Harding left the

stall, heading in the direction of the Troop K barracks.

Johnson waited until Harding was out of earshot. “Davys, you best not mess up with that Sammy,” he said. “Or you be dealing with Tom Hendricks.” Squinting at Matt, he added, “And with me.” He turned and hobbled away, heading toward the far end of the big stable building.

Tom Hendricks was the platoon bully, mean and stupid. Matt stared after Johnson for a moment, his shoulders sagging and then turned back to Molly. He spoke to her quietly and soothingly, but she still didn’t seem to notice him. At fifteen hands, she was small and squat for a cavalry horse and with Matt being so tall, he knew they made an odd looking pair.

Passing his hands over her damp flanks, Matt tried to say things that might calm and comfort her. Not a natural horseman, he was uncomfortable around most horses and afraid of some. Jim found this endlessly amusing, as Matt had spent the past eight years in a cavalry regiment.

After checking that Molly had plenty of hay, Matt stepped out of her stall and paused. Overhead, gaps in the roof ventilators admitted scattered shafts of sunlight that pierced the dusty air. The smell of hay and manure, intolerable in the summer, was now just noticeable in the cold of the Nebraska winter. Matt squinted into the darkness. About halfway down the left side, an enormous dark horse shifted uneasily on one side of a double stall.

Matt cautiously approached the stall and then stopped well back, worried that this monster, this Sammy, might hear him and kick out with his iron-shod rear legs. He stared at the horse’s twitching tail, holding his breath, his heart beginning to drum in his chest.

“Easy boy. That’s a good boy,” Matt whispered as he stepped into the stall and pressed himself against the half wall on Sammy’s near side. He edged forward. As he reached the horse’s hip, Sammy suddenly stepped to his left, pinning Matt against the wall. Matt gasped for breath and his eyes widened with fear. Sammy settled into place. Hoping desperately that Sergeant Johnson was close by, Matt tried to yell out, but with a sixteen hundred pound horse crushing the air from his lungs,

he could not.

Then, to his surprise, a rising sense of amusement began to displace his fear, and it seemed as though he was standing to one side, watching this ridiculous scene. You sure are some fine cavalry trooper, he said to himself, can't even saddle a damn horse right here in the stable.

Managing to free his arms, Matt placed both hands flat against Sammy's thigh and pushed. At first, nothing happened. Then as Matt forced a breath into his burning chest, gritted his teeth and pushed harder, Sammy slowly responded to the steady pressure, shuffling over a few inches.

Matt slid forward to Sammy's head and gasped for breath. Then he turned and grabbed the horse's halter. "Look you" he said through clenched teeth. "You got no call to do that." He started to shake the halter, wanting Sammy to understand his anger, but he stopped. That ain't gonna help, he told himself, and he dropped his hand to his side.

Sammy, his dark eyes flat and unblinking, stared back at him.

It took just a few minutes to clip on the watering bridle and slip the saddle blanket onto Sammy's back. Matt unhooked the manger line from the halter and coaxed Sammy back out of the stall.

Squinting as he stepped from the gloomy stable into the winter sunlight, Matt led the horse outside. As the wind cut through his heavy uniform and overcoat, and Sammy snorted and shook behind him, Matt broke through the thin layer of ice at the water trough so Sammy could drink. When he had finished, Matt took him over to the picket line and tied him using the reins of the watering bridle. He went back into the stable and returned with Sammy's saddle, curb bridle and his own Springfield carbine in its scabbard.

Inspecting the split-back McClellan saddle, Matt saw that it was heavily scarred, having been repaired many times. Like much of the Ninth Cavalry's equipment, it had probably first been used by a white regiment and then discarded. He gently set the saddle on Sammy's back, three finger widths behind the point of the shoulder blade. Crossing to the off side, he

smoothed the blanket and let down the cinch strap. When he returned to the near side and reached under Sammy's belly and pulled the strap through the cinch ring, the horse took a deep breath and held it.

"You tryin' that on me?" Matt said.

Sammy wanted him to tighten the cinch while his chest was expanded. This would make the saddle more comfortable for him but leave the girth dangerously loose. Matt, anxious to join the Troop drill and take command of his squad, thought about giving Sammy a quick knee to the ribs. He knew that's what many troopers would do, but it was against regulations, and it wasn't good for the horse.

"Okay, if that's the way you want it, I can wait."

A full minute passed before Sammy expelled a cloud of steam into the bitter air. Matt jerked the cinch strap tight and said, "Ha."

Sammy did not turn his head.

Matt replaced the watering bit with the curb bit, secured the rifle scabbard and watering bit to the saddle and was ready to mount up. He stepped back and looked at Sammy. The horse was at least seventeen hands at the shoulder, maybe more. Matt had never ridden a horse this big.

A hundred feet down the picket line, Sergeant Johnson stood watching the farrier fit a new shoe to a gray filly. It would be easy to ask Johnson to hold Sammy's head while Matt mounted. But I can't give that bastard the satisfaction, he said to himself, remembering the look Johnson had given him back in Molly's stall. Instead, he walked around to face Sammy. He grabbed the reins just below Sammy's chin and shook them to get the horse's full attention.

"Look," he said quietly, "I don't want no trouble from you."

The horse cocked his head slightly and stared straight at Matt, unblinking.

"Okay," Matt said, and he led Sammy away from the picket line. He stood at the horse's near side for a few seconds.

"Prepare to mount," he said aloud, hoping that the familiar command would steady both Sammy and himself. Gripping the saddle's pommel, Matt lifted his boot to the stirrup and grabbed

a handful of mane.

“Mount!” he said.

Matt bent his right knee and then sprang upward, minimizing the pressure on the stirrup. As he swung his leg over Sammy’s rump, the horse shied to the left and skidded on the frozen ground. Matt felt his momentum carrying him over the top of the saddle and, almost losing his left stirrup, he started to slide down Sammy’s right side. He grabbed desperately at the saddle with his left hand, his fingers slipping into the gap between saddle halves, and he managed to check his fall.

“Shit!” he said, hanging on desperately and feeling like a fool.

Extending his long right leg, Matt touched the ground with the toe of his boot, and he boosted himself back up into the saddle. As he secured his feet in the stirrups and found his seat, Matt felt his heart racing. Hope nobody saw me, he said to himself as he looked around. No one was nearby; even Johnson had disappeared.

Sammy stood motionless and Matt pulled his head around, turning him away from the stable. He gently squeezed his knees, and Sammy slipped into an easy trot.

* * *

Fort Robinson lay between the White River and Soldier’s Creek. To Matt’s left stood seven large, L-shaped barracks and beyond them were the old adobe houses used by some of the officers and their families, including Lieutenant Harding and his wife Margaret. Matt remembered the Lieutenant’s invitation for that evening and smiled, pleased. For some reason, the Hardings had taken an interest in him. While he never really felt comfortable in their presence, he knew they could be a big help in his quest for sergeant’s stripes.

Above the adobe houses, gray-pink sandstone buttes filled the horizon. To his right and behind him stood the four long narrow stables, each with space for seventy horses. This complex of buildings made up the new West End section of Fort Robinson.

Heading east toward the river, Matt passed a group of

marching white soldiers, members of the Eighth Infantry Regiment. His own regiment, the Ninth Cavalry, shared Fort Robinson with them. The Ninth was a colored regiment, with black enlisted men and white officers. The Eighth was composed entirely of whites, as was most of the Army.

The two colored cavalry regiments, the Ninth and the Tenth down in Oklahoma, had come to be known as “Buffalo Soldiers.” First Sergeant Maxwell had told Matt that the name originated with the Indians, the soldier’s black curly hair apparently reminding them of buffalo fur. Matt had also heard that the name came from the big buffalo skin coats that the Ninth and Tenth still used in cold weather.

Matt and Sammy came to the buildings of the East End, where more barracks and officers’ quarters rimmed the old parade ground. Fort Robinson looked more like a small town than the walled forts portrayed in newspaper stories and dime novels. With two railroad lines passing through the nearby town of Crawford, the soldiers and their families enjoyed many luxuries unknown at most western forts. The frequent trains brought mail, food, the Chicago papers and just about anything else from the new mail-order companies.

There had been no serious Indian trouble at Fort Robinson for years. The huge Pine Ridge Reservation was just over the state line in South Dakota, less than fifty miles away. Until recently, the eight thousand Lakota Sioux at Pine Ridge had been quiet. But last year the government had cut the food ration again and given away more reservation land for white settlement. At the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota, the famous old medicine man, Sitting Bull, was rumored to be stirring up some kind of trouble.

Leaving the fort behind them, Matt and Sammy crossed the railroad tracks and soon came to the frozen White River. Matt dismounted and led Sammy down the shallow bank to the edge of the ice, where the horse suddenly stopped. There had been little snow so far this winter, and the ice was bare and slippery. When Matt turned to face him, Sammy stood stock-still, his legs spread and his head down.

“Come on,” Matt urged, tugging at the reins.

Sammy didn't move. From the far side of the river, a trumpet call sounded. Matt recognized the six-note call, which rose and then fell and signaled *Form Rank*.

"Damn it, Sammy. We got to go!" he said.

The horse ignored him and kept his head down.

Bending over, Matt grabbed the reins just below Sammy's jaw and forced his head up. "Look! I been patient with you. And what do I get back? Nothing! We gonna cross this here ice and we gonna do it now."

Sammy met his eye. They stared at each other for a moment. Then Sammy blinked.

"Okay." Matt stepped back onto the ice, pulling firmly at the reins. Sammy took a step, and then another. Matt turned and led the horse across the ice. That's it, he thought. I just got to be firm with him.

At the far bank, Matt again stood next to Sammy. "You be good," he said as he confidently swung up onto Sammy's back. Just as he started to settle into the saddle, Sammy jumped slightly with his front legs, bumping Matt up into the air. He landed hard on the horse's rump and once again had to grab at the saddle to keep from sliding off, this time over Sammy's tail. As Matt pulled himself forward and up into the saddle, he shook his head. This sure is some kind of horse, he thought.

The riverbank was steep on this side and at least twenty feet high. "Okay, let's see what you can do," Matt said aloud as he pulled Sammy around and kicked his sides. Sammy responded immediately, galloping straight up the bank without a slip and stopping at once when Matt pulled back the reins at the top.

"Yeeehaaa!" Matt shouted. That was something! This Sammy *is* some kind of cavalry horse. Then it flashed through his mind that Molly would have struggled to get up that grade. He looked down and saw that the big horse was not even breathing hard.

Before he could think about that any more, Matt caught sight of Troop K of the Ninth Cavalry Regiment, sixty-three mounted troopers in a single rank, spread out against the prairie sky. All up and down the line, both horses and men expelled white clouds of steam into the crisp air.

Captain William R. Campbell stood his horse before them, talking with First Sergeant Maxwell. Matt's friend, First Trumpeter Jim Howrey, stood a few feet away. As Matt came closer, Jim saw him and said something to Captain Campbell, who pulled his mount around to face Matt.

Matt pulled up, saluted and said, "Corporal Davys reporting, sir."

"Very well, Corporal. How's your horse?"

"The Lieutenant says it looks like lung fever, sir. Sergeant Johnson, he looked at her too, sir."

"I see." Turning to First Sergeant Maxwell, Captain Campbell said, "Sergeant, keep an eye on Corporal Davys's mount. Report her condition to me tomorrow morning."

"Yes, sir."

"And have Corporal Davys join the formation."

"Yes, sir." Turning to Matt, Maxwell said, "Corporal, take charge of your squad."

"Yes, Sergeant."

Saluting Captain Campbell, Matt turned Sammy and headed down the line. He found his squad and pulled up in front of the seven troopers who were his particular responsibility.

Matt felt the eyes of Captain Campbell, First Sergeant Maxwell and most of Troop K watching him as considered the minor command problem of inserting himself into the formation and reordering the squad. This could be done quietly and informally, or Matt could use the appropriate drill commands.

"Well, look who's riding Sammy!" Private Virgil Hammond shouted. He was the squad's newest recruit, and he was leaning back in his saddle with his hands on his hips.

"Hey, Matt! Don't you fall off that tall horse, or you'll bust your skinny neck."

There were a couple snickers at Virgil's clumsy joke. Matt also saw one man roll his eyes. He drew himself up straight in the saddle and threw back his shoulders. "Squad," he shouted, "Atten-TION!"

After a moment of hesitation, the seven troopers pulled in

their reins, checked the relative positions of their mounts and came to the position of attention. Matt waited a few more seconds, making sure of his next series of commands.

“Squad, Backward, MARCH!”

Each trooper reined back and the horses stepped to the rear. Virgil Hammond struggled to keep his mount in line.

“Dress that line, Hammond!” Matt shouted. “DRESS! DRESS!”

When the squad was about twenty feet behind the original line, Matt halted them, maneuvered Sammy through the resulting gap and then turned and placed himself on the right end of his squad. He ordered them forward and the squad squeezed eight horses into the gap that had previously held seven.

First Sergeant Maxwell looked critically at the squad while Matt waited for the blistering blasphemy that indicated his disapproval. Instead, to Matt’s relief, Maxwell backed his horse a couple of steps and bellowed, “First Platoon, First and Second Squads, Left, DRESS!” Matt’s squad, and the one on the right, spread out to the proper spacing.

For the next hour, Captain Campbell drilled the troop as a whole. They practiced moving from single line formation into column of platoons and back, and then maneuvering as platoons, squads and groups of four. They charged across the field at a full gallop; they dismounted and advanced on foot. To Matt, it was both familiar, having done it all a thousand times before, and brand new, with this powerful and responsive new horse beneath him.

He kept a close eye on his squad, occasionally shouting orders to augment those of the Captain. Eventually, it was time for that part of the drill Matt most looked forward to. The troop split into individual squads, and each moved to a different area of the field. Matt had twenty precious minutes to practice giving commands and to refine the performance of his squad. The First Sergeant looked on, correcting Matt only once.

Finally, the troop re-grouped, and Captain Campbell spent a few minutes reviewing the morning’s drill. After some general words of encouragement, he paused dramatically, waiting until

the troopers gave him their full attention.

“Men, I have some news from the Colonel. He just received a telegram from the Indian Agent up at Pine Ridge. Maybe you’ve heard about this Ghost Dance business. It’s some kind of new Indian religion, as I understand it. Well, the agent is worried that it’s riling up the Oglala Sioux. The Colonel wants you to know that we may be going into the field soon, probably up to Pine Ridge. You will spend the afternoon getting your mounts and equipment ready. First Sergeant, take the troop back to stable.” He and the Second Lieutenant turned and trotted toward the fort.

“Fours right, MARCH!” First Sergeant Maxwell shouted. Each group of four troopers pivoted to the right like a swinging gate and started forward at a walk, four abreast. Maxwell commanded “Route Order,” and the men relaxed a little. They were now allowed to talk, and a buzz of conversation quickly rose.

“Damn, you think we might do a little Injun fightin’?”

“Shit, it so cold, my spit freeze up before it hit the ground.”

“Think I can get a pass tonight? If we be moving out tomorrow, it sure be good to get into town.”

“Katie be giving me hell, what with the new baby and all.”

“You ever seen one of them Injun Ghost Dances?”

“How’s Molly?”

Matt, lost in thought, looked up as Jim Howrey pulled up next to him. As First Trumpeter, Jim had some freedom of movement during a march, especially with the officers gone.

“Harding and Johnson say it’s lung fever,” Matt replied. “She sure don’t look so good.”

“That’s tough,” Jim said, looking down at Sammy. “So why didn’t Johnson assign you a *big* horse?” he asked with a straight face. “He knows you like a challenge.”

Matt grimaced. “He enjoyed it, I could tell, the son of a bitch. You know, I was just thinking that unless Hendricks suddenly gets over the clap tonight, most likely I be taking Sammy out into the field tomorrow.”

“Yep, I bet that’s right. Well, he’s bigger and stronger than Molly and that’s a help.” Jim looked serious. “You gonna be

able to handle him okay?"

"Jim, I just don't know." Matt leaned over toward his friend and added quietly, "To tell you the truth, I'm still kind a scared of him."

Around them, the chatter of the men was going full-bore. They were excited and seemed in good spirits.

"Hey Virgin!" one of them called out. "Virgil the Virgin!"
Virgil Hammond looked up.

"You goin' to town with us tonight, Virgin? I know someone who give you somethin' to think about when we sleepin' out in the snow. How 'bout it?"

The men laughed, including Matt and Jim. Virgil Hammond gazed down at the back of his horse's neck, a look of tired resignation on his face.

* * *

"Why good evening, Matthew," Margaret Harding said as she opened her back door.

"Good evening, ma'am." Matt held his forage cap in his hands.

"Please come in out of that cold."

"Thank you, ma'am."

Matt followed her down the cold hallway and into the warmth of the Harding's front room. James Harding sat in a rocking chair next to the iron stove holding a week-old copy of the *Army and Navy Journal*. He had his boots off and had replaced his uniform blouse with a plaid wool shirt. As he had before, Matt noticed how old James Harding looked when he was at home and off-duty.

"Hello, Matt," he said, not getting up.

"Evening, sir."

"Please hang up your coat and have a seat," Mrs. Harding said.

The Hardings had only been married for ten years, having found each other late in life. Now fifty-two, she was still considered to be a handsome woman. Once a fellow trooper had made an admiring but indecent remark about her to Matt. In the short and violent exchange that followed, that trooper quickly regretted sharing this confidence.

Margaret Harding was teaching Matt to read.

“So how are you, Matthew?” she said.

“Well enough, Ma’am. The boys is pretty excited about going out tomorrow.”

“Matthew, I think you want to say, ‘The boys *are* pretty excited,’” Mrs. Harding said gently.

“Yes, ma’am. The boys *are* pretty excited,” Matt repeated. Turning to the Lieutenant, he said, “You hear anything more, sir?”

“Not really. We’ll know more in the morning.”

“Lieutenant, sir. Can I ask you a question?”

Harding put down his newspaper and nodded.

“Did you talk to the Captain, sir? About my promotion?”

“Yes, I did. I’m afraid he doesn’t want to do any promotions right now. Not when we’re about to go out into the field. I’m sorry.”

Matt looked down at his hands.

“But listen, this may not be so bad. If the Sioux are really riled up, then, well...” Harding glanced at his wife.

“What he wants to say,” Mrs. Harding said, “but hesitates to say front of me, is that there might be some fighting. If that’s so, then that may be your best chance to excel and be promoted.”

“That’s right, Matt,” Harding said. “We all know it’s a fact of Army life that peacetime promotion is slow. This might be your best chance. Just keep your nose clean and look after your squad.”

Matt thought for a moment and then nodded. “Yes, sir. I understand. Thank you.” He turned to Mrs. Harding. “And how *are* you, ma’am?” he asked.

“Very well, thank you,” Mrs. Harding replied with a smile. “I received a letter from my sister in Virginia, and she enclosed a book that you might find interesting. And no, it’s not another *McGuffey’s Reader*.”

She handed Matt a new looking copy of *Stories of the War Between the States*. Matt flipped the pages. Most of the books he had struggled through with Mrs. Harding were reading exercises or stories for children.

“I reckon it’s real interestin’, Ma’am.” Looking carefully at the text, he said, “I ain’t sure—”

“Matthew, I know you are quite capable of this. Why don’t we start together now?”

* * *

Later that evening, Matt hurried across the dark parade ground toward the barracks, tightly gripping his new book. *Tattoo*, or last roll call, had sounded a minute before, and he didn’t want to be late. This book was an exciting development for him. Although he had crossed five states and one territory in his journey to Fort Robinson, he knew little of life outside the Army. Some of the sergeants did subscribe to newspapers and magazines, and a few other troopers could read well enough, but there was no real love of learning in the ranks. Matt had tried to interest Jim Howrey in reading, but he was more interested in honing his musical skills so he could join the regimental band.

Matt tucked the book out of sight inside his overcoat as he slipped into formation in front of the barracks. He looked down the rank and counted the men in his squad. When called on by the Second Sergeant, Matt was happy to report that all were present. The men were soon dismissed, and everyone rushed for the barracks door.

It was relatively warm inside, as it was early in the winter, and there was still plenty of firewood. The squad room occupied the longer wing of the L-shaped building and housed seventy men. Thirty-five iron bunks stretched along each side of the long room. A wide aisle down the center contained three big iron stoves and four kerosene Rochester burners that provided a dim light. Also in the center were the rifle racks, a water barrel, and a few tables and chairs. Although the room had a generally beat-up look, it was clean and neat.

Matt hung his overcoat on one of the pegs near the head of his bunk. He pulled his saddlebags from beneath the bunk and found a safe place for the book. The bags were stuffed with all of his spare clothes. Matt knew what a winter march was like.

He wandered over to Jim’s bunk and found him polishing his trumpet.

“Hey there, Jimmy. How *are* you doin’?”

“Hey yourself, Matt, I *are* doin’ jus’ fine,” Jim said with a laugh. “How *are* Molly doin’?”

Matt’s shoulders sagged. “Jeez, I was gonna go see her again before tattoo,” he said. “I just got busy over at the Lieutenant’s. And it be lights out pretty soon. If I go now, I won’t have time to get back.”

“You could...”

It was not unknown for a trooper to slip out after *Taps*. Usually the men did it to see a girlfriend or slip into town for a drink. Matt looked at the barracks door and shook his head. “I know. But I got to keep my nose clean,” he said.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” Jim said, putting his trumpet on his bunk and looking up at Matt. “The Capt’n, he says us trumpeters got to bunk along with the sergeants when we’re in the field. He wants us nearby, I guess. Course, you’re gonna bunk with your squad.”

“Yeah. Well, I guess we both got to find new bunkies,” Matt said. On winter marches, the troopers doubled up to sleep, allowing them to share blankets and body warmth.

“I just hope you find someone who snores louder than you do,” Jim said with a straight face. “That way you keep wakin’ each other up all night.”

“Snore? I don’t snore,” Matt replied. “Once I stayed up all night to see, and I never snored even one time!”

Jim laughed and Matt slapped him on the back. They said good night.

Matt lay on his bunk and waited. Soon *Taps* rang out through the cold night air, and the men began to settle down. A corporal worked his way down the aisle, extinguishing the Rochester burners and adjusting the stove flues. Matt listened to the men as they whispered about what tomorrow might bring. Eventually the snores began to drown out the conversations.

When Matt first lay down, he had just about decided to go see Molly and take the consequences. But he had been up and active since reveille at six. She be okay, he thought as he dozed off. She weren’t any worse at stable call. There really ain’t

nothing more I can do for her. And besides, I got Sammy now...

Matt sat bolt upright and shook his head. Jesus, he said to himself, I'm being *unfaithful*. He and Molly had an understanding; they looked after each other. And Matt was letting another horse distract him from his responsibility. With a low groan he swung his feet around off the bed and pulled his boots back on.

* * *

Molly was better. She seemed to enjoy the piece of dried apple that Matt had taken from evening mess, and he spent a few minutes with her, scratching her withers and speaking quiet nonsense.

As he stepped out of her stall, Matt thought about going to see Sammy. Deciding against it, he turned to go back to the barracks and then stopped – he heard a voice. He listened. There it was again.

Guess I got to go look, he thought. Could be horse thieves or even Injuns.

Matt crept forward, using the stalls along the right side as cover, past the tails of the sleeping horses. Catching sight of movement in the shadows ahead, he heard, "Easy, girl, easy."

He recognized the voice. It was Virgil Hammond's, and it was coming from the stall containing his horse, Gypsy. Matt understood immediately. Virgil was saddling Gypsy and was going to desert. He was afraid of going out into the field, afraid that he might have to fight.

"Hello, Virgil," Matt said quietly, stepping forward.

Virgil cried out and jumped back. Matt grabbed his arm.

"Oh, God, it's you, Matt. You scared me like to death." He took a breath. "I'm sorry. I can't do it." Matt felt Virgil's body shaking as he talked.

Matt knew he had to make a decision. On the one hand, he had caught a deserter in the act, trying to steal government property and avoid a hazardous assignment. Matt understood clearly where his official duty lay. Virgil should spend two years doing hard labor at Fort Leavenworth.

On the other hand, previously Matt had believed that Virgil

had the makings of a fine trooper. He had only been in the regiment for a month, and Matt had been working him hard. Virgil was bright, good with horses and was the best rifle shot in the squad. Matt would be sorry to lose him.

“Private Hammond, you’re under arrest.”

“Matt, no, please. I’m beggin’ you.”

“I truly am sorry. But you know I can’t just let you go.”

Virgil stood quietly.

“Uh, let’s just forget it, huh?” he said finally. “Look, I’ll unsaddle Gypsy an’ we can sneak back in the barracks and nobody’ll know nothing.”

“I can’t do that neither,” Matt said. “I know you’re scared. Hell, I don’t blame you for that. But if you run away now, then someday you be running when we need you. I can’t have that. It ain’t fair to the other boys.”

Virgil stood quietly in the dark.

Matt tightened his grip on Virgil’s arm, thinking that he might bolt.

Finally, Virgil said very quietly, “I ain’t scared, like that anyway.”

“I know the army is rough,” Matt said. “It was rough on me when I started. I was lonely and scared. Like you. But if you stick with it, I you can make a good life for a colored man. Better than out there, anyway.” Matt gestured, indicating the outside world.

“I know.”

“Listen, you gonna make some friends. And when you do, it make all the difference.”

Virgil nodded his head vigorously. “Yeah, that’s what I figured. So when some of the boys say we should go into Crawford tonight, I goes along. I never done it before. I thought maybe I’d have a drink, get to know them better, more friendly like. Well, that was okay. I had me a beer and was sitting there, real comfortable.” Virgil stopped.

“Yeah?”

“Then everyone says let’s go to the whore house. I don’t want to go, but they keep pulling at me an’ calling me Virgil the Virgin and like that. So, I goes along. They push me in this

little room with this big old fat gal sittin' on this skinny little bed. She had a bottle of something and was drinking out of it and laughing. I don' know what she thought was so funny. Me, I guess."

Matt released Virgil's arm.

"I could hear the boys outside the door," Virgil continued, "joking and yelling. And that old lady, laughing at me. She pulled down my pants and laughed some more. That's when I decided I got to leave. I walked out of there and walked straight back to the barracks."

"I hope you pulled up your pants first," Matt said. He started to laugh and then caught himself. "Look here, Virg, I still think you got no call to desert."

"Maybe I ain't cut out to be no soldier," Virgil said. "Seems you got to be a man to be a soldier. Nobody gonna think I'm a man. Not after tonight."

Matt thought for a while.

"You ever been with a woman before this?"

"Course I have. Plenty of times."

"Yeah, well, look. If this was your first time, and I ain't saying that it was, I'm just saying nobody could blame you if you was to have a little trouble. You know, if you, well, didn't feel in the mood."

"I guess."

"And it don't sound like she was the best lookin' woman you ever saw. I can't say as I'd blame you for walkin' out if she weren't pretty enough for you."

"Yeah, that's right. She was awful ugly."

Neither of them said anything for a moment.

"So what you gonna do?" Virgil finally asked.

"Listen to me. I can't be worrying about whether you gonna run out on us. You understand? I got to know right now if I can count on you."

"Yeah."

"Say it."

"Yes, you can count on me. I ain't gonna run. I promise."

"Shake on it." Matt put out his hand and Virgil shook it.

"Okay. Say, you got a bunkie yet?" Matt asked.

“Uh, no, I guess not.”

“Usually I bunk with Jim Howrey, but that ain’t gonna work this trip. What you say we bunk together?” And I can keep an eye on you, Matt added to himself.

“That be good, Matt. I sure appreciate it.”

“Okay. Get Gypsy unsaddled and get back to the barracks. I don’t see you there in five minutes, I’m gonna call out the guard.” Matt turned and started for the door.

“Matt?”

“Yeah?” Matt said without turning.

“The boys gonna ride me pretty hard tomorrow, ain’t they?”

As he pulled open the stable door, Matt called back over his shoulder, “Yeah, Virgil, I reckon they surely will.”

* * *

Outside, Matt stood in a shadow and waited. A few minutes later, Virgil came out, carefully closed the stable door behind him and headed off in the direction of the barracks. Good, Matt said to himself. That’s a relief.

Wanting to let Virgil get inside and settled before he followed, Matt waited and thought about Virgil and the ribbing he would get tomorrow. The boy will be okay, he decided. He’s braver than he thinks he is.

Inside the stable, a horse whinnied and Matt started. Braver than me, he thought. He remembered his fear that morning as he had first approached Sammy, and he remembered almost being thrown off twice as he tried to mount. Staring at the stable door, Matt realized that Virgil Hammond, the new recruit, was going to face his fear. Well then, he thought, I reckon Matt Davy’s, an eight-year veteran, ought to do the same.

A minute later, he stood outside Sammy’s stall. He had lit a kerosene lantern and he held it over his head as he slipped past Sammy’s hip without a problem. Hanging the lantern on a hook over the manger, Matt turned and was startled to see the horse’s big dark eyes staring back at him.

“I see you’re awake,” Matt said. “Look. I got something to say to you. I been the cavalry a long time, and I been around lots of horses. Molly’s my third regular mount. I ain’t no

expert, but I know you're one hell of a cavalry horse, just about the best I've ever seen."

Sammy continued to stare.

"The truth is, I kind a need your help. We're gonna be together for a spell. You help me get my sergeant's promotion and I promise I take good care of you. Really good care. That sound okay?"

Sammy cocked his head to one side then slowly closed and opened his left eye. It looked to Matt like a wink. Naw, that ain't right, Matt thought. Just, the flickering of the lantern flame, he thought. Or something.

Sammy gave no further sign that he agreed, or even understood what Matt was saying. Well, of course he don't, Matt said to himself. He's just a dumb horse. Matt felt foolish and disgusted.

Forgetting the lantern, Matt started to leave the stall. He found himself stopping at Sammy's side. Without thinking, he reached up, grabbed a handful of mane and then leapt up onto horse's bare back.

Sammy stood completely still.