



TRULY ARE
THE FREE

Jeffrey K. Walker

Book Two of the *Sweet Wine of Youth* Trilogy

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Also by Jeffrey K. Walker

None of Us the Same

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For Kathy

These truly are the Brave,
These men who cast aside
Old memories, to walk the blood-stained pave
Of Sacrifice, joining the solemn tide
That moves away, to suffer and to die
For Freedom—when their own is yet denied!
O Pride! O Prejudice! When they pass by,
Hail them, the Brave, for you now crucified!

These truly are the Free,
These souls that grandly rise
Above base dreams of vengeance for their wrongs,
Who march to war with visions in their eyes
Of Peace through Brotherhood, lifting glad songs,
Aforetime, while they front the firing line.
Stand and behold! They take the field to-day,
Shedding their blood like Him now held divine,
That those who mock might find a better way!

"The Negro Soldiers"
by Roscoe C. Jamison (1917)

CHAPTER ONE



Adèle

The French insisted on throwing open their windows even in the dead of winter. He found this both odd and cold, lying naked on the bed as Adèle unlatched two windows and pushed back the wooden shutters. She stretched over the sills to fasten them back on rusty iron hooks and he squinted past her into the brilliant morning sky. Such unadulterated blue came only on rare winter days. Sometimes it was all you could see looking up from the trenches, if you were lucky and it wasn't raining. This morning, the freshness and clarity made up a little for the iciness of the air. He pulled the crumpled quilt tight around him.

"Don't snug yourself," Adèle said, kneeling on the mattress while yanking at the bedclothes. He pulled back in a feigned tug-of-war, but soon surrendered. Adèle crawled across to him, the loose front of her old silk peignoir falling open. She placed a chaste kiss on his mouth, thinking to signal an end to the morning's lovemaking, but he ran the back of his fingers over an exposed breast. This earned him an insincere slap to his arm, just below the puckered skin left by a German bullet. He caught her wrist and kissed the underside, feeling her pulse against his lips.

"I have to return to the Machine Gun School this afternoon," he said, tongue following a turquoise vein to her elbow. "Who knows

when I'll be able to beg another pass." He continued up her arm and slid his hand under the dressing gown, pushing it off one shoulder. She sighed with showy exasperation, knowing he'd scarcely missed a weekend with her since they met. The school was less than ten kilometers away and officers were not subject to restrictions. She kissed him again, less chaste this time.

"Oooh, my Neh-deee! Yoo are zo beeg, zo *formidable!* *Mon Dieu!*" She fell back on the pillows as he rolled to his side and untied her robe.

"Much as I love that Frenchy girl talk," he said, kissing her neck, "it's a little disappointing that you usually sound like an English schoolgirl." Adèle wrapped her leg around his hip and nuzzled into his chest. Ned slid the watered green silk from her other shoulder.

"My granny would have something to do with that," she said. "After Maman died, we spoke French only when Papa was home. Otherwise, it was proper English." Adèle gazed out at the perfect sky and smiled with the memory of her indomitable English grandmother.

Ned inched down the bed and placed a moist kiss just above her navel. He mumbled into the smooth skin of her stomach, "How did the old girl come to marry your grandfather anyway?" Adèle ran fingers through his hair, not near long enough to twirl. Better for dealing with the lice, although he'd kept himself clear of the trenches these last months.

"She was governess to some petty English aristocrat with a sickly wife. Went with the family to Vichy while the mother took a cure." She squirmed and lifted her hips as Ned brushed his nose through the patch of hair between her legs. "Grand-père was there on holiday with some friends, I suspect for the casino. He saw her airing the children along the boulevard and was smitten at first sight, so he claimed. He spent the next month on a quest to woo her and..." She gave a sharp inhalation followed by a low moan as he moved back up to her breasts. "...it seemed to have worked."

Ned discovered this high school *maitresse d'école* after she'd rescued him struggling to order dinner in unintelligible French. His previous brushes with French women consisted of a few prostitutes and the surly daughter of the owner of a grubby *estaminet* where

they'd drunk bad wine when out of the trenches on the Somme. They were quite different from American girls, unfussy and confident in their sexuality. Adèle wasn't much like them, more discriminating to be sure. Once Ned proved he was interested in more than another *française* for his wartime brags, she'd become quite fond of him. There weren't many Americans in Amiens, just a few volunteers with the British and Canadians. He'd joined up with the Newfoundlanders, a regiment from that remote British dominion with long connections to Ned's New England home.

He intrigued her, this man from Boston. Americans seemed to her, unlike the English or French, a people without any fixed place in life, endlessly reinventing themselves without a thought it might not be the most natural thing in the world. In Ned's case, he wanted her to teach him French, thinking an officer—even a newly minted one—ought not sound like a Tommy from east London, massacring the language with jovial impunity. Then she'd taken him into her bed without regret, which had proven delightful to them both.

Her legs were loose about him as he melted inside her. He kissed her neck, letting his tongue run along her skin, tasting the saltiness from her sheen of perspiration. He pulled himself up and was drawn into her eyes, dark as chestnuts, saying in a thick whisper, "You're the loveliest woman I've ever known, Adèle Chéreaux." He spoke with such wistfulness it made her wonder what his life had been before. "I'm afraid I'll never meet one more lovely. You think that makes my future somehow disappointing?"

She let out an incredulous burst of laughter. "It would seem rather bad form for a gentleman to muse over future prospects with unknown beauties, having just deposited his seed within a woman he claims is the loveliest he's ever seen."

A blush of pink rose in his cheeks. "Seems they may have overlooked the 'gentleman' in my hasty promotion." He tumbled off her and onto his back, easing her head down on his shoulder. She placed a palm on his chest as she settled, accepting his tacit apology in smiling silence.

Glancing over him at the chiffonier against the wall, she pointed with her chin at a small framed portrait sitting there. "You're sure that picture of Gilles doesn't annoy you?" The hand-tinted photograph

had been atop the old mahogany dresser since Ned first came to her apartment. He'd examined it closely once, just able to make out the regimental numbers on the young officer's collar. He wore the old uniform with which the French began the war. The red kepi and trousers—so crucial to *élan*, it was thought—made easy shooting for the Germans, as Gilles discovered at Charleroi before the war was even a month old.

"No, not at all. He looks like a decent fellow. Was he?"

Adèle smiled, not sure she could even answer. "I suppose he was. Decent is a good word," she said. "We hardly knew each other as man and wife. We married in such a rush after the mobilization."

Ned felt a kinship with the poor French officer, dead more than two years, just as he did with the *poilus* at the front when he was still a private soldier. Their country needed defending and the French infantrymen fought with a stoic resolve, resigned to their fate. Pity this fellow died so early. Or maybe it was his good luck.

"I like to keep the picture up," Adèle said. "I wake with a start sometimes, afraid I've forgotten what he looks like. I've long forgotten his voice."

Ned rubbed her arm. "He deserves that much, not to be forgotten. Keep the picture up."

Adèle craned her neck and kissed his cheek. "That's very kind of you, Ned." She then raised her head and smiled until he turned his face to hers. "We've made love many more times than Gilles and I ever managed."

She peeled herself from under his arm and rolled to her feet in a fluid motion. Ned watched her cross the bedroom, bending for the robe he'd tossed against the yellowing plaster wall. She slipped it on, the cold silk pleasant against her skin. "This is my last day of freedom before the *lycée* commences, where I'll again be tortured by ninety girls speaking the worst English imaginable." She bent and kissed him, chaste again, on the mouth. "I expect my overpaid Allied officer to treat me to a fine luncheon at a fashionable café." She wrapped the robe tight. "The least a girl can ask in exchange for her virtue."

Ned rose from the bed and wrapped his arms around her, warming her with his body. "You're a scandal, Adèle." Releasing her, he went to the wooden washstand across from the bed, peering into the small

mirror as he ran a hand over his chin. "I'll need a shave. An officer must not present himself unshaven in public." She nudged in front of him and poured from the pitcher stored below the basin.

"I need a good wash after my morning calisthenics," she said, elbowing him and fingering the water in the basin. "Brace yourself. It's bloody cold." He kissed her on top of her head while wetting a shaving brush. She soaked a small sponge, then reached for a bar of soap.

She slapped his arm with the wet sponge and said, "And now that we're up, it will be French only, *s'il vous plaît*. You need the practice."

"*Oui, commandant! Je suis à votre service!*" he said, lathering his chin while she bent to wash between her legs, shaking back her thick sable hair.

"*Ah oui, chéri*. You've done very well this morning *à mon service*," she said with an improper glance back at him.

CHAPTER TWO



Chester

For as long as either could remember, their father had hidden behind the reliably Republican *New York Tribune* during breakfast. In their younger days, they made faces at him through the newspaper when their mother was in the kitchen with Maddie, their cook. Maman's was the only voice for which he'd glance above the newsprint. After she died, they left him to his reading, waiting for him to emerge in his own good time. It was small consolation for him, after all.

Chester flipped through last week's *Chicago Defender*, a publication Chester had mailed to their Harlem address and his father thought so radical he barely tolerated it in the mailbox. Lena scribbled notes from her pedagogy textbook for the morning's lecture. Both looked up when they heard the familiar rustling that signaled their father had finished consuming his *Tribune*.

"Pop, I ran into Genevieve Harrison walking home yesterday. She's very pregnant," said Chester. "How come you never mentioned it? We were kids together."

Clarence Dawkins peered over his glasses and said, "Didn't know m'self. She must be seeing another physician." He smoothed the refolded paper and rose. Patting the front of his vest, he produced a heavy gold watch and gave it a perfunctory glance. "Off to work," he said with a wan smile.

Lena gave her brother a worried look and made to say something, which he quashed with a discrete shake of his head. She pretended to look over her notes until their father left the dining room. They could hear him rummaging in the hall closet for his hat and umbrella, then the sound of the front door. Lena leaned toward Chester across the table and said, "The Harrisons have been Papa's patients forever, the whole family." She didn't want the cook to hear, so she switched to French. Chester saw his sister's panicked face. He was worried, too.

"He's been distracted since we lost Maman, that's all. You know that he adored her."

"She has been dead four years now." Her worried look was undiminished.

Chester met his sister's eyes with forced calm, but she'd known him too long for this to be convincing. He sighed, then said in French, "I do not know what can be done for him. His patients are losing confidence, abandoning him. Only the oldest remain."

Lena closed her notebook and gathered her things from the table. "Well, you must complete your studies with M. Davis and take admission to the Bar. We could be without a home before I finish my studies." She stacked her books and notes then said, "At least you had your time at Howard, like Papa."

"Let me speak with him, Lennie. He must know what's happening to his practice. He is just too proud to say anything."

Returning to English, Lena said, "You think you can talk to him without turning it into one of those fights you two love so much? You're not to mention New Negroes or Dr. Du Bois, you hear me? You know how that sets him off."

"Not respectable." Chester said, an octave lower in imitation of their father. "Have to keep our heads down and shoulders to the wheel. Back to the plantation."

"For pity's sake, Chester, we haven't had a slave in the family for more than a century. And that's exactly the kind of talk doesn't sit well with Papa." Lena pointed a finger at him and narrowed her eyes in mock threat, although she'd never been able to tell him anything.

"You need to speak with him before he gets into the brandy," she said in whispered French.

“That’s becoming earlier and earlier,” Chester replied.

“And what if you’re sent to France? You’ve been with the regiment since last year, since the beginning,” Lena said. “Isn’t it likely you’ll have to go? Then I’ll be left alone to look after Papa.”

The recent declaration of war on the 6th of April was not unexpected. German submarines had brought a little of the violence raging in Europe across to America. Even a reluctant President Wilson had been pushed too far when the Germans proposed a Mexican invasion of the United States, no matter how far-fetched it was in reality. All the National Guard units across the nation, white and black, expected to receive word of their mobilization for overseas duty any day.

Chester hadn’t been enthusiastic about joining the new National Guard regiment when it started recruiting six months ago in Harlem. The 15th was formed after repeated attempts in the state legislature to approve raising a unit from the Negro population. The old lawyer he clerked for, Mr. Davis, had thought it a fine opportunity for Chester to show himself a young leader in the community. When Chester, ink on his diploma scarcely dry, was offered a second lieutenant’s commission, his father likewise thought it a laudable addition to the family escutcheon. With the two most influential men in his life pressing him, Chester bowed to their wishes and had been drilling with the 15th on nights and weekends ever since. They had no armory, few rifles and not enough uniforms, but the regiment recruited a remarkable band that played dances all over Upper Manhattan and Brooklyn. And Chester’s tailored uniform with its high collar and tall brown boots impressed the ladies of Harlem, too.

“I need a few hours in the library this morning before lecture,” Lena said. She bustled around the table and kissed her seated brother on the top of his head, then wrapped an arm around his neck and squeezed him against her waist.

He patted her arm. “We’ll get by, Lennie. You know we will.” She kissed his head again and turned to leave.

“Lennie?”

She looked back to her brother, “Yes?”

“I still miss her.”

Lena bit her lower lip through a trembly smile and said, "I know. Me, too."

Their mother was the daughter of the noted Dr. Antoine Villere, who taught their father pharmacology at Howard Medical School. Grand-père Villere, the scion of a colored Creole dynasty of pharmacists in New Orleans, had studied medicine in Paris. He was an exemplary medical scholar, but he'd also delved into chemistry while in France. Having seen for himself the inexactness of the concoctions sold at his family's pharmacies, he sought to apply the rigors of laboratory chemistry to the compounding of drugs. Upon his return, he joined the family business while building his new medical practice. Ten years later, he was offered the chair of pharmacology in the medical school of the new and prestigious Howard University in Washington, D.C.

Their father, from an old freeman family in New York City, arrived at Howard as a seventeen-year-old, eager to begin his medical studies. He met his pharmacology professor's daughter at a Sunday reception. There was never to be another woman, in his eyes, after that day. He begged to stay on after graduation as Grand-père Villere's assistant, much to his own father's consternation. He wasn't particularly interested in pharmacology or chemistry, but he had ulterior motives. It required two years of courting, but Maman finally agreed to marry him.

As a child, Chester thought there could be no other woman more beautiful than his mother. She often retired to her room soon after supper to answer letters or read. Chester and Lena would sit with her at night as she shed her daytime dress behind an intricate Chinese screen. She'd perch in her dressing gown on a small cushioned stool before her vanity mirror and unpin her hair. As it fell to her shoulders, Chester sometimes twirled his finger in the long, glossy curls. She was very fair and at a glance, her hair pinned up, white people often took her for one of their own. It was in the evenings when Maman spoke French with them. As they grew to school age, she'd read with them in French and supervise writing letters to cousins in New Orleans.

Lena inherited her mother's lustrous skin—just a shade darker, the palest caramel—as well as Maman's jet-black ringlets. When Chester was five or six, he'd sometimes hold his forearm against Lena's or Maman's and rub to see if his darker brown would wipe off.

He favored his stouter father in both stature and looks. His mother's features were finer than Lena's, almost sculpted from marble it seemed to him, but Lena also had some of the Dawkins's height and wide shoulders. Still, the similarity was profound, and Chester's breath caught sometimes when his sister entered a room.

When he was eleven or twelve, Maman gently banished him from their evening rituals. He understood as he grew that this intimacy wasn't deemed appropriate for a young man whose desires were awakening. Instead, his mother expanded the use of French into the dining room and front parlor. Although this annoyed her husband a little, she didn't want her son to lose his mother tongue from want of use. Maman and Lena began sharing quiet words in French and Chester felt pangs of exclusion when they giggled over some nonsense.

However, having been banished from his mother's boudoir, Chester was able to see her with more detachment. The fineness of her beauty was somewhat overwrought. She was what people called delicate when they meant she had tenuous health. He'd heard passing comments about the difficult time Maman had delivering Lena and how she'd never recovered her strength. Sometimes, his mother appeared to him as ethereal as the carved angels he'd seen standing watch over the tombs of distant relatives in a New Orleans graveyard.

In the end, forty years was all she was allowed. Her last illness was a matter of a few days and Chester learned of it through the brief telegram announcing her death. On the train up from Washington, mile upon mile of awakening green countryside sliding by, he couldn't understand how his beautiful mother could pass in such a lovely season. He was never quite sure why she slipped away. His father could never speak of it. When he arrived home for the funeral, she was simply gone. The absence was yawning, echoing. Lena was just fifteen, devastated yet expected to run a household that would never be the same.

Chester shook himself out of his bittersweet daydreaming, realizing with a start that he should have left for the office ten minutes ago. He stuck his head through to the kitchen to let Maddie know he was off, then retraced his father and Lena's footsteps out onto the morning streets of Harlem.

CHAPTER THREE



Ned

From below erratic grey eyebrows, the gruff commander examined Lieutenant Tobin with suspicion. The order from British Expeditionary Force Headquarters lay heavy in its officiousness on the desk between them. The colonel, indignantly recalled to active duty from a boozy retirement, had tossed the paper there to demonstrate how unimpressed he was that one of his junior officers might possibly warrant such a thing.

“Seems HQ wants you at the American Embassy in Paris toot-sweet, Tobin. More’s the mystery to me as to why.” He sniffed at the paper as if it emitted some unpleasant odor. Although he treated his junior officers with public contempt, he looked after them with vicious protectiveness when it mattered. “Mightn’t it have something to do with your damned dilatory countrymen deigning to join our little shivaree?”

Ned took the order from the desktop and returned to a position of attention, where the commander always left his junior officers, regardless of the length or breadth of the ensuing conversation. Something about teaching respect for rank.

“That seems likely, sir. However, I’ve scheduled a swing through some of the battalions to inspect machine gun companies. I was meant to depart this morning.”

The commander did not like complications of any size or description and assumed a most aggrieved look. "That order says to report within seven days to your bloody embassy. I see no need to disrupt the workings of my unit." He sniffed again at the order in Ned's hand. "They damned well took their time getting into this donnybrook. They can wait a day or two for you. Proceed with your inspections."

The colonel sized Ned up anew, the slightest softening around his mouth and eyes. "Damn it, Tobin, you've been a serviceable enough officer and I don't like losing men I've spent so much effort training up. Nothing more important than machine gunnery, not in this bloody trench war we've bungled into," the old officer said, harrumphing to regain composure after this uncharacteristic eruption of decency to a subaltern. "Damnable waste, really."

From the contemplative look on the commander's face, Ned knew there was more to come. He stood silent, eyeing the pink leave-and-railway ticket sitting at the colonel's elbow.

So he already had the orderly room arrange my travel, Ned thought. I'll miss the old bastard, even with the regular rations of shit.

"Whatever the outcome of your *tête-à-tête* with that bloody American attaché, you've done a man's work here with the British Expeditionary Force, Tobin. Not many of your countrymen can say that." He rubbed a finger under his mustache and searched the desktop for some nonexistent paperwork, covering this flicker of emotion. "Stout fellow, Tobin, damned stout fellow. We'll not forget your kind when this bloody cotillion is over." The colonel shoved the leave card across and nodded for Ned to pick it up, then fell into a silent funk of indignation. Ned took this as his cue to exit.

"Will that be all, sir?" The old colonel's head snapped up, perturbed at being roused from his tetchy reverie.

"Yes, yes, that will be all," he grumbled, then returned to his thoughts. Relishing the chance to tweak the old gent, Ned cocked a parade-ground salute. He held it until the colonel returned it with a desultory wave at his forehead.

Outside the headquarters, Ned wandered around the forecourt packed with vehicles, finally recognizing a large hatless corporal lounging against the arcing fender of a green Peerless lorry. He was smoking in an admirably relaxed manner.

“It is customary for a soldier to wear a cover when out of doors, Corporal King,” he said in as pommy an accent as he could manage. Geordie King’s head snapped up and he jumped to attention. Seeing it was Ned Tobin, he broke into a toothy grin and tossed his cigarette into the pea gravel.

“Why as I live and breathe, ’tis a walking silk purse stitched from a sow’s ear!” he called out, forgoing a salute. No one would’ve expected much else, these being Dominion troops.

Ned shook his head and smiled back at the big, bluff Newfoundlander. “You’re the only soldier in France who finds this damn war a great relaxation, Geordie.”

“Like a summer’s holiday, b’y.”

Ned offered his hand and Geordie grasped it with a crush. They stood for a moment, recalling in the brief silence the last time they were together on the Somme. Geordie slapped Ned’s shoulder and hooked a thumb at the open driver’s compartment of the lorry. “Up we go then, Lieutenant Tobin,” he said, stepping up on the running board. Ned circled around and climbed to the passenger’s side of the long bench seat.

“Three units to visit, if we’ve the daylight. I don’t want to spend a night in a dugout, so we may cut this short,” Ned said. “I thought we’d start with Will Parsons’s Glamorgans. They’re just north of here, near some burg called Belmarais.”

Geordie shifted the idling lorry with a great grinding and set off. “Strange when our William left us after the Somme that he ended up with a Welsh battalion,” Geordie shouted over the roar of the four-cylinder laboring along the rutted road. “But his ma’s English, so the Royal Army had equal dibs. Divided loyalties, eh?”

Ned looked out over the plowed and seeded fields, their winter brown broken by new green shoots, low hills undulating toward the horizon. Spitting rain fell from the overcast, just enough to keep the roads in their perpetual state of muddiness.

“That’s right,” Ned said, his mind turning to the changes coming his way. “Divided loyalties.”



The young lieutenant seated behind the gilded Louis Quatorze table in the Hôtel de Crillon's lobby scanned Ned's orders. "You'd best see Major Waller. He seems to be behind most of these drop-ins. Main stairs to the fourth floor, then left, last room at the end of the hall. Number 410. Knock before you go in—no anteroom or secretary."

Ned nodded his thanks and made his way to the switchback marble staircase, running his hand along the curving brass balustrade as he climbed to the fourth floor. He knocked twice on the door, the sounds of a telephone conversation and a clacking typewriter leaking out through the dark wood. The door flew open almost as he lifted his knuckles and a broad-shouldered officer with short-cropped salt-and-pepper hair filled the opening. He seemed to Ned rectangular in every way—square head, jaw, shoulders.

"What can I do for you, Lieutenant?" the major said, bursting with bustle and efficiency.

Ned offered his orders and said, "Lieutenant—'lef-tenant'—Edmund Tobin, sir. Ordered to report to the American attaché's office."

The big American officer looked over the order, then studied the British officer with the Boston accent standing in front of him. "Took your time getting here." He examined Ned's lapel insignia and sleeve rank. "You're the Boston man with the Newfoundlanders," he said, adding so Ned knew he was home, "Isn't that correct, Loo-tenant Tobin?" The square major broke into a large, rectangular grin.

"I've been with the British forces for over two years, Major. You'll have to allow me some slippage."

The American stuck out his large quadrilateral hand and said, "Major Wally Waller, and no tittering. My dear mother thought it a fine name." He motioned for Ned to enter, then nodded to a chair by a very utilitarian desk standing before a very large window that overlooked a very grande Place de la Concorde. Cigarettes were lit.

Could've watched the guillotining not so many years ago, Ned thought.

"I expect you've a good idea why we asked the Brits to send you along, Ed?" the major said with deliberate informality.

"Has to do with the declaration of war, I suppose?" Ned returned the relaxed attitude. *Yep, just us Yanks here.* "My friends call me Ned, sir."

“We’re in it now, Ned, and our forces are as unprepared as they could be. We’re starting from scratch with almost no officers with experience of this kind of warfare. Hell, only combat I saw in the fifteen years since I graduated West Point was chasing *banditos* back across the Mexican border. I’m trying to locate all the American volunteers here and bring ’em home to the colors.” Leaning forward and giving Ned his best recruiting-poster stare. “Your country needs you, Lieutenant, and trusts you’ll not disappoint her.”

So there’s the pitch. Ned intended to play a little ball before agreeing.

“I’ve been with the Newfoundlanders since December of ’14, Major. I was wounded on the Somme with them. They made me an officer and I’m doing important work at the Machine Gun School.” Ned paused to make a show of agonizing. With a dejected and confused look, he added, “I don’t see how I can leave the lads now, Major.”

Anticipating nothing but enthusiastic acceptance, Major Wally Waller stared across the desk, fidgeting with his cigarette. Ned stared back, placid as an iced-over pond. It was the major’s move. Knowing this was an officer with experience the U.S. forces desperately needed, the major leaned back in his chair, counting his chips in this bluffer’s game, and blew out his cheeks. “Now I understand loyalty to a unit you’ve fought with—hell, bled with. I truly do.” He eyed the cocksure lieutenant with a little suspicion above his ingratiating smile. “But the United States is your home, and you owe her your loyalty, too.”

Ned looked back at the major and, silent and calm, went on smoking his cigarette.

“Seeing how you’ve gained so much experience with the Newfoundlanders and at the Machine Gun School, I’m authorized to offer specific rank with a U.S. commission.”

Here comes the payoff.

It looked like this was physically paining Wally Waller. “So let’s say you come back home as... *Major Tobin?*”

Ned sat with a genial smile and said nothing. Major Waller’s growing impatience was very evident on his square face.

“I’d be honored to accept, Major.”

The angular man relaxed into his chair with a self-satisfied smile. “Perilous times we’re facing. All the peacetime rules out

the window. Hell, they're promoting me to *colonel*." Major Waller pursed his lips and raised his eyebrows, telegraphing that he'd not given away half as much as young Lieutenant Tobin thought. Ned returned a slight nod and leaned back in his chair, flashing Major Waller an admiring smile.

The two understood each other now. They sat with the congenial smiles of two well-fed diners awaiting their *digestifs*, while taxis dashed around the Egyptian pylon protruding from the wide traffic circle below.



It took a genuine effort for Ned to stay engaged with his work at the Machine Gun School. The attaché's office instructed him to return to his British unit while awaiting orders. His commander reacted with a put-upon pout when Ned informed him of his decision, congratulated him on his impending promotion to field-grade rank, warned him not to forget he was still a subaltern under his command, then poured whiskies to toast the imminent arrival of American forces in France.

With an open-ended wait stretching before him, Ned took every advantage to spend as many nights with Adèle as he could manage. He decided not to tell her of his impending departure until he had orders in hand. All too familiar with the vagaries of military administration, he had low expectations of heading back across the Atlantic anytime soon. No need to upset her until he knew when that would be.

Adèle was thrilled to see more of him, although the concierge continued her cold, fish-eyed inspection whenever he turned up for an overnight visit. No matter, since wartime rules applied, particularly to romances. Reveling in this time together, they hid themselves away from the daily horrors to the east.

Harboring the secret of his imminent departure was a strain, but Ned was too happy to agonize much. Nevertheless, the wheels of Army bureaucracy ground relentlessly onward and his orders arrived in mid-June. After six weeks without a word, the U.S. Army now wanted him at Le Havre for transport in forty-eight hours. Tomorrow

would be their last night together until the American Expeditionary Forces arrived in earnest, bearing Major Tobin back with them.

She sensed as soon as she opened the door something was strange. Ned kissed her and handed over a tin of coffee with a sheepish smile. She turned the tin over in her hands, noting it was American. "A gift from home?" she said, wary that he was bringing food. He'd never done so before.

"Picked up a few tins on that trip to Paris last month," he said, in a glancing attempt to introduce the unpleasant topic. "Thought you might like some."

She left the door open and turned toward the long thin table she used as a kind of kitchen, tucked into the back corner of her sitting room. It held a small gas ring, a kettle, and a few cups and dishes. Trying to shake off the awkwardness saturating the room, Ned walked up behind her as she fussed at the table and wrapped his arms around her. She relaxed into the smooth worsted of his uniform, the familiar smell of him, the feel of his chin resting against her hair. Then it all went away.

Looking down at her hands, not turning, she said, "Out with it, Ned."

Slumping from the ineffectiveness of his jittery affections, he turned toward a half-open window. An early hint of the looming summer mugginess rendered the people on the street a little indistinct, their sounds muffled by the thick humid air. He turned back, reluctant and slow, and saw her eyes filled with tears. His chest constricted.

"Adèle, the U.S. has been in the war over two months," he began. She remained very still. "That's why I was called to Paris, to see the American Attaché at the embassy." Almost imperceptible at first, she began moving her head in little oscillations. "They offered me a commission, as a major. They need all of us back, all of us who volunteered here." The shaking grew wider and faster while she looked over his shoulder, out the window.

He was becoming frantic at her reaction. "We... they... the Americans..."—casting about, he struggled on—"there's no one back home with any idea how terrible the fighting is here. They'll be lambs to the slaughter unless some of us go back to help train them."

She began to sob, hands to her face and shoulders curling down around her chest, collapsing into herself. She choked out, between heaving catches of breath, "You've... you've done your... bit and now you're... you're safe here. It's not... fair."

Hearing her voice, meek as it was, steeled him. He rushed to her and pulled her close against his chest. The rise and fall of her shoulders as she breathed, ragged and uneven, steadied him. "I'll be back. They won't keep me in the States once we've got some divisions trained. There are so few officers with any experience. I'll be needed back here, you'll see." He rocked her in the middle of the echoing room, a place where they'd known such pleasure and contentment.

She pushed away, wiping the back of her hand under her nose, then glared up at him. "Do you think I want that? For you to come back to be shot and bombed in a different uniform?" He saw the shocking look of disappointment at how little he understood her. "I want you to cling to America with both your hands. Do anything you can to remain there. Stay alive, Ned!" She grabbed his upper arms and held them tight. "For God's sake, be shed of this bloody war once and for all!"

When he answered, his voice came thick and shaky. His vision clouded, her face a soft aura as he gazed down at her. "Adèle, if I stay home, we'll not see each other again."

She clung to his arms, her weight hanging from him now. "I buried a husband I hardly knew, Ned. I'd rather lose you to home than bury the first man I've truly loved."

They held tight to each other on her bed, not making love this last night. Neither slept, although she pretended, matching his breathing for long stretches to deaden her dread of the creeping morning. First, she could just make out the shapes of her familiar furniture, hulking black forms in the greyness, like shadows on a cave wall. Then she began to perceive colors, blues and greens, then the yellows and reds. Finally, she could count each of her black hairs spread loose across the white pillow.

Then he was gone.

CHAPTER FOUR



Ned

WAR DEPARTMENT
PERSONNEL PLANS OFFICE
WASHINGTON

August 30, 1917

MEMORANDUM FOR Major Edmund Tobin

Re: Enclosed orders, Officer Assignments Branch (29 Aug 17), assigning you UFN as Liaison & Training Officer, 93d Infantry Division.

I feel obliged to enclose this letter with your orders, by way of introduction to your unit of assignment. Secretary of War Baker, with the concurrence of the President, is keen to see all Americans participating in the war effort, including the Negro population. In furtherance thereof, two combat divisions have been authorized, the 92d and 93d Infantry Divisions, to be comprised entirely of colored soldiers and non-commissioned officers.

A majority of junior officers in these divisions will be Negroes, drawn either from the officer ranks of colored National Guard units or from graduates of the Negro Officer Training School

recently established at Fort Des Moines. The commanders, field-grade officers, and (with few exceptions) captains will be white. The 93d Infantry Division will be comprised of colored National Guard regiments from Ill., N.Y., and Washington City, as well as separate colored companies from Conn., Mass., Ohio, and Md.

The Divisions will not be mustered until reaching France, with their constituent regiments training at separate locations to minimize impact upon local white communities. I understand you are a Boston man and will therefore bring a more open attitude toward this difficult assignment. You are being sent to the 15th New York, which is to commence training at Camp Wadsworth near Spartanburg, S.C.

You were recommended for this assignment by the Military Attaché's Office in Paris. Col. Waller highly commended your excellent French and experience in training with the Allies.

Although unstated in your orders for reasons you will appreciate, you are to keep this office informed of any peculiar difficulties arising during the 15th New York's tenure in South Carolina or at any other training depot in the United States. Once the unit embarks for France, they will no longer be of pressing interest.

I wish you the best of luck and Godspeed,
Philip R. Newsome
Lieut. Col.

Encl: assignment order



Summoned to Washington while the 15th New York awaited relief from their temporary duties, Ned lingered more than two weeks in the capital without much to do but attend a few useless meetings. He'd slept late, ate long meals full of things rationed or unavailable in Europe, and drank his way around the District of Columbia. Being of that still rare breed of American with experience in the trenches of France, he seldom paid, drinking off his compendium of war stories. He was finally released for a few weeks' leave and jumped a Friday overnight train. Arriving at South Station, he walked across the

Summer Street bridge, hoping to rouse himself after too little sleep and too much drink in the club cars of the four trains it took to reach Boston. The September morning chill made it clear another New England summer had run its course.

Ned arrived at the house on 5th Street, a short walk from his father's three stores strung along East Broadway, right at breakfast time. He could hear the uproar from the front steps, his throbbing head already the worse for it. Fortifying with a few deep breaths and a good stretch, he hefted his bag and stepped inside.

Arrayed around the big dining room table sat the family he'd not seen for almost three years. No one heard the door or his footsteps through the arguing and clinking. He looked through, drinking in the familiarity, not quite ready to intrude. His father sat at the head of the table, back to Ned, easy to pick out from his thick head of hair.

He's going fast to white, Ned thought.

His sister Irene—Renie inside these walls— sat at the other end, from where she'd run the household from the age of fifteen, ever since they'd lost Ma more than six years ago. His big brother, Bobby, sat next to a striking woman with sweeping blond hair of suspect provenance. His youngest brother and sister sat on the other side of the table. In profile, Ned scarcely recognized the smaller ones.

Renie was reaching across to slap away the hand of a younger Tobin when she happened to glance through to the parlor and caught a glimpse of her brother. "Holy Mother of God!" she gasped, leaping to her feet. She clutched at her throat and clapped the other hand over her mouth as her eyes filled.

"What the divil are ye on about, Renie Tobin?" her father shouted down the table, turning to follow her with annoyed eyes as she flew from the room. Emmett Tobin caught a snatch of his son's face over Irene's shoulder.

"Ned! Praise be to God, ye've come home t'us at last!" he said, rising with such force that several coffee cups sloshed over into their saucers.

Irene was already in the parlor, her arms around her brother's neck, sobbing into his shoulder. Emmett stood back, antsy to greet his son, but knowing his daughter wouldn't be denied. He pulled out a crumpled handkerchief and blew his nose with deliberate gusto to

remind her he was waiting. Bobby joined him, draping an arm over his father's shoulders.

Ned looked from his sister to his father. The two locked eyes and Emmett nodded both recognition and welcome. Ned smiled in relief. Easing his sister away, Ned stepped to his father and offered a hand. Emmett grasped it with both of his. "Oh Ned, my own dear boy," he said, barely able to choke out his endearments. "We thought to never see you again this side o' heaven, so long were you away from us."

Seeing so close the whiteness of his father's hair and the deep lines of his face, it struck Ned that he was becoming an old man. But the malachite eyes still shone with mischief and that was both a comfort and a warning.

Ned reached for his brother Bobby's hand and received a crushing reply. Bobby had been the bigger and stronger since grade school, but the handshake challenge was something they'd done even longer. Ned was the first to wince and pull away. "Still the runt of the litter, Ned boy," Bobby said, slapping his brother hard on the shoulder, "even with that fancy uniform."

The blond woman from the table sidled to Bobby and slid under his arm, batting large eyes. Bobby scarcely noticed her.

"Edmund Tobin, at your service, ma'am," Ned said, offering his upturned palm to the woman. She placed her hand lightly in his, sighed, then unleashed a shining smile.

"Marion Gillespie. Pleased to make your acquaintance, Colonel Tobin."

Ned flushed crimson from the electric charge that jolted through his hand. He hesitated, holding her fingers longer than proper, then said, "I'm afraid it's Major Tobin and I certainly hope you'll call me Ned, Miss Gillespie."

Bobby slapped Ned's shoulder again, oblivious to the flirtatious exchange between Marion and his brother. "Get yourself to the table and put some breakfast in you. Looks like you could use a good fry-up. They not feedin' you in either of those armies of yours?"

Renie bustled about the dining room and kitchen, producing a chair and place setting. "Bobby's right. Sit yourself down, Ned Tobin, and tuck into a proper breakfast with your family." She disappeared into the kitchen, muttering about eggs.

Emmett straightened his chair and reclaimed his place at the head of the table. He glanced along the faces, settling everyone with a sweep of his hand, his composure fully recovered. "We weren't expectin' you 'til tomorrow, Ned. You gave us quite a start."

Ned plucked a half-slice of toast from a small rack and slathered it with store-bought blueberry jam. They'd eaten the last of the preserves put up by his mother, gone almost four years by then, before he left for Newfoundland. Renie had decided it would go bad soon, so they might just as well eat it.

"I'd enough of Washington and managed to take the overnight train."

The youngest of the Tobin boys, Charlie, couldn't contain himself a second longer. Gawking across at his big brother, eyes wide as saucers, he blurted, "How many Germans did you kill, Ned?"

Although it shouldn't have surprised him coming from a twelve-year-old, Ned stopped chewing and looked over to his father. Emmett was examining him with intensity in light of young Charlie's question. He'd been wondering the same thing, it seemed.

"It's an odd sort of fight, Charlie. We hardly saw any Germans. We sat in our trenches, dug deep in the earth, and they sat in theirs. Then we lobbed shells and fired machine guns at each other. It's a strange war." He took a long draught of the coffee Renie poured for him. He could still feel his father's eyes on him. "And all the more deadly for it," he said. "Too many good men gone."

Charlie seemed satisfied with this answer, so he returned to his food with renewed vigor. Emmett continued studying his soldier son while Bobby and Marion slid back into their chairs.

"You wrote of your woundin', son. Was it somewhat bad? You look hale and hearty enough now."

"Not so bad as many, Pa. I was hit early the first day on the Somme. I got pipped behind our own lines, long-range machine gun fire, so didn't have to lie out all day and half the night waiting for a stretcher party." Irene returned with hot eggs and took her seat again. She went quite pale at the thought of poor men left bleeding in the dirt for so long.

"Oh, Ned. It must have been terrible," she said.

"It was worse than anything I'd ever imagined, Renie. The worst kind of nightmare and more." Charlie was rapt again,

while little Bessie, youngest of them all, sat with a trembling lip and watery eyes at the very thought of what the worst nightmare imaginable could possibly be. "They sent us against uncut barbed wire. It was almost untouched after eight days' shelling. The Germans had kept their machine guns underground until our bombardment stopped, then hauled them back up and mowed us down like green hay."

This knocked the flirtatiousness from Marion and she sat with terrified eyes, mouth agape. Bobby belatedly noticed and slipped an arm around her. She collapsed into him with a great show of emotion.

"We had almost eight hundred men jump off the 1st of July." Ned's voice was as sharp and cold as a knife blade. "One of the lucky lads from the regiment told me months later that sixty-eight answered roll the next morning." Renie crossed herself. Bessie let out a tiny sob. Marion wept copious tears into Bobby's shirtsleeve. And Emmett understood a little of what had become of his second son.

Bobby slapped the table, palms each side of his plate, breaking the horrified silence and leaving Marion to dangle over his chair back. "Well, it's a grand thing that we're in it now to put an end to all such foolishness. The Yanks are comin' and the Kaiser will be goin' soon enough."

Emmett leaned a little toward Ned and said, "You think that's right? You think our boys'll make the difference?"

"Maybe by weight of numbers," Ned said, picking up another slice of toast. "The Germans and the French and the Brits, they've bled themselves dry and it's all at a standstill. Has been for over a year."

Bobby blew out his cheeks and said, "One American's worth five of them Froggies."

Ned stuck a knife in the jam pot and said, calm as he could manage, "The French die brave as any. It's their country bein' burned and bombed, after all." He hated the quick reemergence of his local accent.

Bobby rose and lifted Marion by an armpit. "Well, we'll see who's right soon enough, won't we?" Marion shouldered away from him, smoothed her dress and patted her hair, the adjustments necessitated by her turbulent emotional display. "It was an honor to meet you, *Colonel* Tobin," she said, extending a limpid white hand. Ned took it with his fingertips and gave it a gentle squeeze.

“We’re off for the shoppin’, my sweet girl bein’ in need of a fine new hat for my fight next Saturday,” Bobby said, giving a large wink to his little brother Charlie, who stared back with a puzzled look. With that, Bobby and Marion were out the door.

Renie stood and gathered their plates. “Bessie, be a good girl and help me clear away.” Bess slid sideways from her chair and took her own plate to the kitchen. “Lord knows Her Highness there wouldn’t lift a finger,” Renie said, jerking her head at Marion’s empty chair. “Bobby spoils that one and he’ll pay the price for it soon enough. And a Presbyterian to boot, not that she’s darkened the door of any church for a month of Sundays.” She pushed the swinging door harder than needed with her hip and set about washing up with a deliberate clatter.

“Charlie, why don’t you run along and find your mates outside,” Emmett said. Charlie moved closer to look over his brother’s fine uniform, gave Ned a tight hug, and jogged to the front door.

Ned produced a green packet of Lucky Strikes from an inside pocket and offered one to his father, then smiled at this reflex. “Your mother would be pushin’ you out the door with those,” Emmett said, smiling back at his son. “I never developed a taste for the tobacco, what with the asthma as a young one.”

Ned lit the cigarette and said, “They were a comfort to us in the trenches. Settled the nerves when there was shellin’.” He looked around the familiar room, so much of his mother still in everything.

Ned’s father was well known throughout the Irish neighborhoods. He’d built a fine grocery from the fruit-and-vegetable cart he’d bought with a little money raised from pawning his grandmother’s locket when just off the boat from Ireland. After moving his trade into a proper greengrocer’s store, he’d always extended credit when some poor soul fell on hard times, never forgetting how he himself started out. Building on the resulting loyalty, he opened a tobacco store and then a sweet shop, staffing them with sons of neighbors and the odd distant cousin over from Tipperary. But first and foremost, he was the father of the middleweight champion of all the New England boxing clubs, just turned professional, known to all and sundry as Bobby “Tearin’ Tip” Tobin.

“Ned, I know you were anxious to get into the fightin’ and that’s why you left us for the north. You fought for the English against my very wishes, as you well know.” The older man said this without accusation or any intent to dredge up old hurt, merely restating the facts as they both knew them. “You did your bit and took a bullet as proof of’t. There’s no need to prove anythin’ more to yourself or any man.”

Ned knew this conversation was bound to occur but hadn’t thought it would be within an hour of his arrival. “Our country’s in this now, Pa. I can’t turn my back, knowin’ all that I do. I had months in the trenches and was at the Machine Gun School for seven more after I was made an officer. There’s a need for men like me, powerful need.”

Emmett frowned and looked out the window opposite. Charlie and his pals were kicking a rusty can down the street in a wild gaggle. “Our country or no, ‘tis more blood shed for an English king. And this isn’t our only country.”

Ned sighed and took one last long drag from his cigarette before stabbing it into a saucer. “Ireland’s not my country, Pa. It was once yours, but it’s not any more.”

Emmett straightened in his chair, color rising. “There’s not a drop of blood in your veins isn’t that of a good Irishman, Edmund James Tobin, including that you spilled on the fields of France, mind you.” Emmett was not about to let this matter drop, no matter how tired his son might be. Ned sat passive as a stone and let his father ramble.

“Twas a Tipperary man I was born. And your dear mother’s parents straight from the County Clare, they were.” Emmett tapped a long finger into the tabletop as he spoke. “If you’ve a nose for the fightin’, there’ll be plenty to be had in Ireland, soon enough. Sure, hasn’t it already started? And in a righteous cause.”

Ned unhooked his high collar and loosed the first few buttons on his tunic, slumping with exhaustion. “That’s not my fight, Pa.”

“More so than when you took the King’s shillin’ three years ago, my boy.” The bitterness from his Republican leanings was burning clear and bright. “You bled for him, now ‘tis time to bleed for Ireland, if need be.”

Irene burst out of the kitchen and began swooping up the remaining plates on the table. Seeing the ashy saucer before Ned,

she tut-tutted at her brother and whisked it away. "Now stop your yammerin', you two," she said in a manner that brooked no dissent. "Ned'll be needin' a bath and a good rest, Pa. He has to be sharp and look smart for his homecomin' tomorrow." She rubbed her brother's shoulder, then looked minutely at his tunic. "That uniform will need a good brush up. Leave it out for me. And those boots, too. Charlie'll be over the moon polishin' a real soldier's boots."

Ned looked up with a deep sigh and pained expression at his sister. "Renie, tell me you haven't planned some big party. You know full well I hate that sort of fuss."

Renie gave him a terse back of her hand. "Then think of it as a duty for the honor of your family, Ned. The whole South End wants a look at you and they'll not be denied. Tomorrow afternoon at Saint Brigid's parish hall."

"For the love of Mike..." Ned grumbled back at her.

"Now hush yourself!" she said, swatting his complaints away like a late-season fly. "Didn't our councilman want a parade all the way to the Fenian Hall? Count yourself fortunate it's just to be at the parish." She stood, arms crossed, at her end of the table. Both men knew there was no hope in resistance, so like her mother had Renie become.

Ned went out to the long front stoop and sat on the steps. It had turned to a fine cool morning. After milling about the house to no discernible purpose, Emmett came out and sat behind his son, a few steps higher. With lingering discomfort at how their conversation had turned, Emmett remained quiet. Finally, Ned spoke.

"They already have an assignment for me, the brass hats at the War Department."

Emmett sighed at the granite stairs. "Then it's back to the fightin' with ye."

"I'm to join up with a National Guard regiment in ten days, down in South Carolina. The plan is to mash three or four Guard regiments together into a new division."

"They just announced the same with our Massachusetts boys," Emmett said. "They've gathered them out on the Cape for trainin' and such, before shippin' them off to France. So what state are these battalions from?"

“From all over.”

“Strange for the Guard, wouldn’t you say? Them bein’ state militia.”

“Yep, strange indeed, Pa.”

“Seems a lot of nonsense, especially those from big states,” Emmett said, suspecting there was more to this than his son was letting on.

Ned studied his feet, brushed off his sleeve, and fished for another cigarette.

“Speak your mind, lad. I know well enough when you’re himmin’ and hawin’.”

Exhaling a long blue stream, Ned straightened and said, “None of the state Guard divisions will have them. They’re Negro regiments.” He fished a few shreds of tobacco from his lip. “It’s to be a colored infantry division.”

His father stood and came down the steps. The calm and control had sloughed away revealing a bright red face. “Jayzus, Ned! Are ye daft? How could you agree to such a thing, ever in the world?” Emmett sputtered, spreading his hands for an answer.

“It’s got the Secretary of War’s attention, Pa. He’s determined to have all the people supporting this war,” Ned said. “There’re millions of Negroes in this country.”

Emmett rubbed a hand along his mouth and around to the back of his neck. “There damned well are, more’s the pity.”

“They can fight and die as well as white men.”

Emmett shook his head and scoffed. “So you’re to train these darkies how to die like white men then? More’s the fool y’are.”

“I saw Negroes from the African colonies fight with the French, and right well, too.”

“And you’ll not lift so much as a finger to help the cause in Ireland, but you’ll parade yourself around with a gang o’ niggers, playin’ at soldier?” Emmett spat at the pavement and said, “What a fine time you’ll have with those jolly white fellas down there in the Carolina states, too.”

“We could put a million Negroes in uniform.” Ned tried to steer the conversation to less dangerous waters. “You’ve no idea how many men we’ll need to end this bloody mess.”

Emmett turned his back to his son and jammed his hands deep into his pockets, shoulders bunched and tense. “Well, have the

decency not to tell anyone while you're here. Sure not that brother o' yours. Mouth like a bargeman and less like to keep a secret, too. Boy could never hold his liquor nor his tongue."

Emmett brushed past and pulled the front door hard. He turned and added, "Some of us have to carry on livin' and doin' business here."

CHAPTER FIVE



Chester

By nightfall, the soldiers were nodding in and out of restive sleep, rocked senseless by the clack-clack rhythm. After the first half-day in packed train carriages, all anyone smelled was sour sweaty wool and the permeating acridness of thousands upon thousands of cigarettes. Their commander made enough of a nuisance that they'd received movement orders along with the units of the all-white Empire Division, now finally traveling as a regiment. Somehow, somewhere within the War Department, someone thought it a fine idea to send two thousand colored New Yorkers to South Carolina for training. Word had gone ahead and everyone from political leaders to the poorest whites was in an uproar. Unruly northern Negroes, after all, were sure to be unfamiliar with the folkways governing the relations of the dominant and subordinate races in Dixie.

By the time they reached Spartanburg, in the environs of which sat Camp Wadsworth, the men were listless and hungry. The cool October air of New York City had not dropped this far south and the omnipresent odor of pine-forest decay was cloying to men more accustomed to the grittier smells of a well-drained and paved cityscape. Their first several days were spent repairing the rundown or unfinished facilities they were assigned. As was the way with soldiers, once this flurry of immediate work was completed, the men wanted

off the post. There was no justifiable way to keep them confined to the installation, but each man knew, like it or not, he'd be under constant scrutiny as a representative of the Negro race.

Into this tense situation Ned Tobin arrived from Boston. After locating the regiment's mess hall, he begged coffee and a sandwich from the cook sergeant, an animated railroad porter from Poughkeepsie who appeared from his girth to be a zealous devotee of his own cooking. The sergeant escorted Ned to the back. "Officers' country," he said, spreading his beefy arms before two less battered tables with place settings and a carved regimental seal as a centerpiece.

By 4:30, men began straggling in for evening chow, exhausted and sweaty, forming a dusty green serpentine of scraping feet and razzing voices. Ned knew by long tradition the officers would eat after their troops, so he waited for the platoon lieutenants to follow behind the flow of privates. Soon enough, two men in Sam Browne belts pushed through the double doors and followed a mess orderly toward the officers' tables. They conversed easily, turning their heads to emphasize occasional points. Neither was much younger than Ned, though he looked some years older. They walked with confidence, trim and fit in their khaki green uniforms. One was clean shaven, but the other had a well-tended black mustache and brilliantined hair that radiated rakish fastidiousness. As they closed on the back tables, both pulled up short at the unfamiliar white major sipping coffee behind a plate of half-crusts.

Ned set down his cup and stood. The two lieutenants made no move, not sure what was expected of them. "Major Ned Tobin." He extended his hand a bit further with a nod of encouragement. The clean-shaven officer moved first.

"Lieutenant Dawkins, sir."

Ned nodded again and pumped Chester's hand. "Pleased to meet you, Lieutenant."

The other lieutenant followed, offering his hand. "Lieutenant Sharpe, sir. Benjamin Sharpe," he said, flashing a smile the ladies of France would find very fetching.

Real flapper's delight this one, Ned thought.

"Glad to make your acquaintance, Lieutenant Sharpe. Please join me, if you haven't any other place to be, gentlemen. The mess

sergeant has been plying me with enough sandwiches and coffee for six majors, but I hope you'll enjoy your supper."

Chester pulled a chair back from the table and moved around to seat himself. He glanced over his shoulder toward the kitchen and said, "You've met Sergeant Ames then? The men would mutiny if the Army transferred him to any other unit."

Benny Sharpe added, "The Sergeant has taken Napoleon's admonition regarding armies traveling on their stomachs as a point of personal honor, sir. The 15th could circumnavigate the globe on Sergeant Ames's efforts."

Steady, lad. Don't need to impress the new major all at once.

The mess orderly returned with two plates and the lieutenants went at their meals with vigor. After listening to several minutes of clinking cutlery and rapid chewing, Ned spoke again. "I suppose I should solve the mystery. I've been attached to the 93rd Division as training and liaison officer."

Both lieutenants gave a quick look up, deciding to commit Ned's face to memory since he'd be sticking around for awhile. Then they returned to their food without a word. There being no signs of interest, Ned continued, "Since the 93rd Division exists nowhere but on paper, the War Department detailed me to your regiment. Seems you were closer to Washington than the 8th Illinois. Didn't seem to be any better reason than that, far as I could tell."

Ned picked up his coffee and studied the contents. Both lieutenants stared at this odd major. Then Benny gave out a nervous laugh. Chester smiled in turn.

There, we're all friends now.

"So that explains how a Boston Irish boy finds himself in deepest Dixie," Ned said. "How about you New Yorkers?"

Chester gave Ned a curious look, all raised eyebrows and cynical smile, and said, "Begging the Major's pardon, but isn't your question actually how did we *colored* New Yorkers find our way to South Carolina?"

Straight to it, this one. We'll get along fine.

"Alright, fair play to you, Lieutenant... Dawson is it?"

"Dawkins, sir."

"Lieutenant Dawkins," Ned repeated. "It did occur to me there

might have been a more... judicious choice for the 15th New York, given your peculiar... circumstances.”

“Colonel Hayward’s thoughts exactly, Major... Tobias was it?” Chester said, a hint of insubordination. Ned smiled and nodded in appreciation of the cheekiness.

“Tobin. Major Ned Tobin.”

“Of course, Major Tobin. Very sorry, sir,” said Chester, not sorry in the least.

Lieutenant Sharpe said, “Are you regular Army, sir? You don’t seem old enough for your rank.”

“Nope, not a day in the U.S. Army before July, when I returned from France.”

“You were in France, Major?” Chester asked, finding this new white officer much more interesting. Ned nodded a little too modestly. “If you don’t mind my asking, sir, what were you doing in France?”

Now I’ve got you, Lieutenant. You and me are going to be fine.

Ned pushed back his chair and crossed his legs, his boots the cleanest in the mess hall. He removed a cigarette and, the lieutenants still eating, returned the pack to his pocket. He lit the cigarette with great care from his worn trench lighter, so the other men would notice. “I signed on with the Newfoundlanders in December of ’14. Spent two-and-a-half years with them in the BEF. Missed their turn in Gallipoli, but was with them on the Somme.” His two new colleagues stopped eating, sitting in rapt attention, as any green lieutenants would. “We lost so many junior officers in the fighting on the Somme that they commissioned me straight from the hospital,” Ned said, adding with a self-deprecating smile, “demonstrating the depths of our British cousins’ desperation.”

“You made major awfully fast with them, sir,” Benny interjected, always keen on rank and precedence.

“Just to first lieutenant”—the purposefully affected ‘left-tenant’ again—“and lucky to make that.” Twas dear Uncle Samuel leapfrogged me to major.” Adding to his humble bona fides, “Made the old neighborhood back in Boston right proud, too.”

Just one of the lads, see? And a Yankee, not one of these crackers.

The two lieutenants struggled against appearing wide-eyed. This strange new major had the real knowledge and they wanted to hear

everything. They swallowed the hundred questions that were on their lips, but it was easy enough for Ned to read their thoughts. He'd been this green not so long ago, overflowing with excitement and trepidation. He pulled out his cigarettes and tossed them with casual camaraderie across the table. After they'd each extracted one, thinking it akin to an order to join the major in smoking, Ned slid his trench lighter over with melodramatic reverence.

Benny picked it up like a religious relic, examining each knick and scrape, turning the brass cylinder around and around in his fingers. He fumbled with the wick cap, then with the thumb wheel. Ned didn't want to embarrass him by retrieving the lighter, so he let him struggle. The lieutenant finally managed to raise a flame, lighting his own cigarette, then holding it out so Chester could bend in, too. Benny slid the lighter back to Ned.

"That lighter's seen some duty, hasn't she?"

"Too much, maybe," Ned said, looking over his lighter with a rueful pout. "Glad to see you smoke. Helps steady you during bombardments or before jumping off. Can't let the men see you nervous, after all."

"Of course not, sir. Have to set an example for the men at all times," recited Chester. Hearing his own rote response, he twitched an uneasy smile and searched desperately for somewhere to look other than at Ned.

He's learning, that's what matters. He'll make out. The other one's a little puffed up. That tidy mustache is a giveaway.

Ned decided the war stories had lasted long enough. "So tell me, gentlemen, how has your settling in with the locals been proceeding?" Both lieutenants were disappointed the talk of France had ended, but there would be future opportunities.

"Tense, as everyone expected," Chester said. "Colonel Hayward, the commander, ordered the men to ignore insulting words and actions. He enjoined all the officers to enforce his order."

"How's that gone?"

Chester exhaled a long stream of smoke and tapped his cigarette into an ashtray. "None of the locals take kindly to colored soldiers in general, let alone on their sidewalks or in their stores. Even our officers."

“We’ve had some tense situations,” Benny said. “The commander’s detailed officers and sergeants to patrol the streets whenever our men are off post. Short of restricting everyone to camp, there’s not much more we can do.”

“They’ll be restrictions enough once they get to the front. No need to hurry things.” Ned stubbed his cigarette and uncrossed his legs, elbows on the table. “How’s the training regimen?”

“As rigorous as can be expected, given the strains of the mobilization. Shortages of everything,” Chester said.

“We’ve gotten all the men into new-style uniforms. We started with half in Union blues,” Benny said. “And we finally received our full issue of Springfields yesterday.”

“What exactly have these men been training with?”

“For drill, wooden facsimiles and broomsticks. We collected some surplus rifles in New York City,” Chester said.

“And we got a few new Springfields when we were in camp up in Peekskill,” Benny added. “We had to rotate the weapons to men on guard duty, but we held a dozen or so back to get some riflery in each day. Most city boys don’t have much experience shooting, after all.”

Ned pushed down his rising disappointment and anger before speaking again. “So we have a full issue of rifles now”—two nods across the table—“and can get every man on the range at least a few times each week?” More nods across the table.

“If we have the ammunition,” said Benny.

“And if we can get range time from the other regiments,” Chester said. “We get lowest priority for resources, Major.” He looked Ned square in his green eyes, his own serious and unwavering, until he was sure this new white officer understood.

“I’ll take that challenge, Lieutenant Dawkins. The War Department sent me to assist you with training. The firing range seems a fine place to start.”

“That would be widely appreciated, Major.”

“One of the few advantages the Newfoundlanders brought to the field was their dedication to riflery. We were the finest shots in the BEF, certainly among the New Army battalions.” He eyed each lieutenant in turn, riveting their attention, then continued, “I believe

this regiment can match that skill. It'll serve them damn well in France. Are we in agreement, gentlemen?"

The two lieutenants sat ramrod straight and barked in unison, "Yes, sir!"

As Ned rose to leave them to their close dissection of every word he'd just spoken, he noticed Chester's face radiating excitement and... hard to tell what else.

Maybe relief.



Why are memories of smells so strong?

On order from the range sergeant, twenty rifles fired in ragged syncopation. The biting smell of smokeless powder began to rise on the breeze.

So much time looking, always looking. Sights ought to be strongest, Ned thought.

The sergeant barked again and the popping ceased. The men bent to retrieve their brass, the spent rounds clinking as they dropped into an empty ammunition case. Twenty new men stepped forward to the firing line.

Whiff of rose water sends a grown man right back to grandma's lap.

Having succeeded in getting the men on the range daily, Ned had time to ponder such things. Maybe he'd become too thoughtful since his return to the States. Some smells he'd love to forget—rotting flesh, smoking gun cotton, sweaty wool on terrified men's bodies. But for some reason, he'd always enjoyed the sound of a rifle. The Lee-Enfield was what he carried on the Somme, like every other poor Tommy who drew the short straw that day. Now here he was, jolly friends with the American Springfield. What intrigued him was how he could distinguish the sounds of each. He'd never thought about it in France, so much a part of the background these noises had been. Rifle shots were just staccato grace notes between the ominous rumbling bass of the big guns. The chunky Springfield made a curious *snick* when fired. The sturdy Lee-Enfield said *crack*, while the long French Lebel *chunked* with each round. The differences puzzled him, since the intended result was always the

same. Maim a leg, kill a man, grieve a family. The German's Mauser had its own sound, too.

He was on the range with Lieutenant Dawkins's platoon, redeeming a promise to follow their progress. It also gave him a chance to converse in French. Chester had learned at his mother's knee but Madame Dawkins had overlooked "barbed wire" and "howitzer" and "machine gun." Ned knew none of the names of wild flowers or embroidery stitches, but thought his vocabulary the more serviceable given their current circumstances.

Ned and Chester ambled behind the firing line, giving only passing attention to the soldiers. This pleasant languidness was interrupted by the dusty arrival of a transport truck with a nervous orderly room clerk leaping from the passenger side. The skittish corporal tripped toward them, arms flailing in an unmilitary manner. "Major! Major Tobin!" the clerk shouted, his pitchy voice carrying a surprising distance. He was panting like a blown horse when he reached the officers, threatening to tumble at their feet. He came to disordered attention with a wobbly salute.

"Commander's compliments, Major Tobin. He wants you in town right away. Meet him at the city jailhouse, he says." He urged Ned toward the truck with waving arms, retracing his dusty footprints.

"Can your platoon sergeant handle the rest of the riflery, Lieutenant?" Ned asked.

Knowing this meant an invitation, Chester said, "Of course, sir." Turning toward the firing line, Chester bellowed, "Sergeant Freeman!" The no-nonsense platoon sergeant quick-stepped to his commander and, with a few words and an exchange of salutes, trotted back to the men.

"Let's see what the commander needs, shall we?" Ned said, heading to the truck belching grimy exhaust into the thick morning air. Chester followed, falling into step.

Camp Wadsworth sat three miles west of Spartanburg. Unlike much of South Carolina, the town had done well after Reconstruction, ballooning from a thousand souls to nearly 18,000. The city was chock-a-block with textile mills running full bore with War Department orders for everything from overcoats to underwear, all destined to clothe the mushrooming American Expeditionary Forces.

The jittery clerk jumped into the bed of the truck, leaving Chester and Ned to crowd in with the driver on the bench seat in front. When they reached town, none of them knew where the city jail was located, so Ned hailed a few pedestrians along Main Street. Being seen with two Negroes next to him and another tumbling around the back, the only reply he received was a desultory point and nod from one ancient man loitering in front of the Farmer's Bank, too blind to recognize the mixing of races. Turning off Main, they found the police station and jail a block south. As soon as they made the corner, Chester spotted a crowd lining the sidewalk and spilling onto the street. A military truck stood in the middle of the road.

"We have a little trouble, Major," Chester said, nodding toward the crowd, all of them in uniform and all of them colored.

Ned pointed for the driver to pull next to the first truck, then turned to Chester with none of his usual easiness. He grabbed the roof frame and prepared to jump down while the truck was still rolling to a stop. "Lieutenant, take the truck and that nervous clerk back to the post." Chester began to protest, but Ned cut him off. "Get back to your men, Lieutenant. Word's going to spread about whatever the hell is going on here. And your troops are the ones holding rifles."

"Sir, my men would never for an instant..."

More insistent, Ned said, "They're good men, Chester. But good men lose their heads when there's trouble." He slapped the brick pavement with both feet and gave Chester an urgent wave. "Go. Your place is with your men."

As he reached the edge of the roiling group of green uniforms, Ned could make out the commander on the steps of the jailhouse, speaking with agitation to a short wiry man wearing a saggy gun belt. The soldiers opened a begrudging path, forgoing military courtesies and following Ned's progress with hot glares.

"Colonel Hayward, sir," Ned called out as he reached the steps.

Breaking off with the sheriff, the commander turned, anxiety evident in his tensed posture. "Tobin, good. We need to calm the men. Gather up whatever junior officers are in this crowd and get some discipline restored." With that, the colonel returned to the sheriff.

Ned saw two lieutenants at the front of the crowd, attempting with limited success to keep the men away from the sidewalk, sensitive turf in this town. When one turned in profile, Ned recognized half the immaculate mustache of Lieutenant Sharpe.

“Sharpe!” Ned barked, “To me!”

Benny looked over his shoulder and rushed over.

“What the devil’s going on here?”

“Word got around the sheriff has three of our men in there,” Benny said. “Arrested for loitering or some other nonsense.”

“Who are they?”

“No knowing, sir. Colonel Hayward is trying to find out.”

The sheriff stood arms akimbo, shaking his head with a sneering smile. The colonel loomed over him, but this had no visible impact on the intransigent sheriff. Ned could see this was the situation everyone from the Secretary downward had either feared or desired.

Not on my watch, Ned thought.

Stepping up a few stairs to get his head above the men, he reckoned the crowd at fifty or sixty. Coming to attention, he let out a back-street bellow redolent of his younger and tougher days in South Boston.

“Fall in! Five ranks!”

The men made no move to obey, but the surprise of its delivery silenced them. Ned knew that wouldn’t last long. “You will demonstrate to these... Southern gentlemen... exactly what the 15th New York is made of!” Some of the men straightened themselves a little, looking around for direction.

“Form up! Five ranks!” Ned repeated. “At Lieutenant Sharpe’s command!” He was betting the cocksure Benjamin Sharpe would play his part.

Benny had snapped to attention at Ned’s first bellow. He executed a drill-manual about-face and called out in an adjutant’s voice, “Fall in! On me! Five ranks!” The men complied, forming lines and stiffening to attention.

Benny spun on his heels and mounted the steps to face Ned Tobin. He popped a crisp salute and said, “Company assembled in good order, Major.” Ned returned the salute and gave Benny a tiny wink of encouragement. He turned and stomped up the steps to the mulish sheriff and vexed commander.

“Just because ya’ll command a bunch o’ darkies paradin’ themselves ’round my town playin’ soldiers, that don’t give you a right to demand nothin’ from me.” Colonel Hayward was struggling to maintain composure with the petty little lawman and said nothing. “You want some advice from me? White man to white man? It’d be best for all us here ’bout’s if you kept them boys at the camp diggin’ ditches and choppin’ wood. That’s what they good for. Keeps ’em busy and tuckered out so they don’t make trouble. For you or me or any of our women.”

The colonel was steaming from his stock collar upward, crimson creeping up his neck and under his cap. “These men are soldiers of the United States, Sheriff McCall,” the commander said with clipped precision. “They will behave as such under my command. But we have a right to know if three of their comrades are wrongly incarcerated in your jail.”

The sheriff shook his head again, reveling in his power over the misguided Yankee colonel. Ned slapped his heels, startling the commander who turned to face the major a few steps below.

“Command assembled and in good order, sir,” Ned reported, sneaking a glance at the sheriff, who had just noticed the well-formed ranks. There were sixty pairs of eyes glaring back at him in menacing anger. The sheriff’s arrogance drained away like rain down a storm gutter.

Sheriff McCall said in an aggrieved grumble, “I got none o’ yer negrahs in my jail, Colonel.” He looked over the ranks in one last show of disgust, then stalked into the building.

The commander murmured, “Put the men at parade rest, Major.”

Ned relayed the order to Benny Sharpe. The formation executed the command with a synchronized *frumph* as they slapped their feet to the bricks, elbows out and hands crossed in their backs.

“This was very close to disaster, Ned,” the commander continued in a hoarse whisper. “We cannot keep the lid on this pot much longer.”

“I agree, sir.”

Hayward ran a palm over his clean-shaven upper lip and thought for a moment. “You and I are going to Washington tonight.”

“I’m not sure what I can...”

“Don’t start with me, Major. I know damn well you were sent here as much to keep an eye on things as train the men. Might as well make use of you to better effect.”

“Whatever I can do, sir.”

“I’ll have to lodge another protest regarding the treatment of the men. I’ll work the chain of command.” He smiled, his eyes turning to mischief, and added, “And you will work your particular contacts at the War Department.”

I may have misjudged this one. Lot of gumption.

“It would be my pleasure, sir,” Ned said, his back to the men. “Sir, you might say a few words to the troops.”

Hayward nodded. “Of course, to be sure, Major.”

Lieutenant Sharpe made an about-face and took a deep breath, calling out, “Tench-hut!” The reply was a synchronous snap of sixty pairs of heels. The men stared ahead, their anger banked, not extinguished. Benny spun and saluted. “15th New York awaiting your orders, sir.”

Standing at the commander’s shoulder, Ned looked over the ranks. *Not a slacker or complainer among them. Just angry as hell at all the guff they’ve had to swallow.*

The colonel cleared his throat and said, “Men of the 15th! You have today, in the face of grievous provocation, shown yourselves men of substance. Men of honor and character, upon whom this nation can rely in her time of need.”

Lieutenant Sharpe looked as if he were growing inside his boots. The faces of the front ranks were cooling from their rage, eyes telegraphing pride.

“I can think of no men I would rather lead to the fight. I can make no greater boast than to say, ‘I command the 15th New York!’”

The Old Man can rise to the moment. He’ll be a steady one in France.

“All I might add is God help those bastard Germans when the 15th comes over!” The colonel’s voice hitched a little with emotion. *Time to finish*, Ned thought.

“Lieutenant Sharpe, dismiss the men,” he said quietly.

Benny spun a final time and shouted, “Three cheers for the commander! Hip-hip!” The hooraying rolled up and over the two men on the steps. Ned motioned the colonel to his waiting truck, not wanting the men to see tears shining in their commander’s eyes.

Too much to be done. Plenty of time for that at the victory parade.



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HEADQUARTERS
UNITED STATES ARMY
WAR DEPARTMENT, WASHINGTON, DC

October 29, 1917

From: The Director, Personnel Division/Manpower Plans
To: The Commander, 15th New York Infantry Regiment

Encl.: (A) S.O. #17259, Change of Operational Control, 15th N.Y. Inf. Reg.

(B) S.O. #17442, Movement and Embarkation, 15th N.Y. Inf. Reg.

Effective date of Special Order 17259 (Oct. 28, 1917)(Encl. A), 15TH NEW YORK (NATIONAL GUARD) INFANTRY REGIMENT is assigned UFN to operational control of Headquarters, American Expeditionary Forces, Chaumont, France.

2. 15TH N.Y. INF. REG. is designated a constituent unit of 185th Brigade (Infantry), 93rd Division (Colored) upon constitution of the division in Theater of Operation. A.E.F. Commander is delegated authority to reassign unit as deemed necessary and operationally prudent.

3. 15TH N.Y. INF. REG. to depart Camp Wadsworth, S.C., ASAP and report for embarkation, Port of Bayonne, N.J., NLT November 4, 1917, to await next available transport, per Special Order #17442 (Oct. 28, 1917)(Encl. B). Direct liaison with U.S. Navy authorized. Upon arrival in Theater of Operations, forward movement and lodgment will be at the discretion of H.Q. A.E.F. (REAR) OFFICER COMMANDING (Brest, France).

4. SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS: Per Secretary of War Baker, 92nd Division (Colored) and 93rd Division (Colored), with all

constituent units, shall be deemed combat units of the American Expeditionary Forces and treated as such. This directive has the endorsement of the President.

WILLIAM T. HARRELL, Col.
FOR THE DIRECTOR



Form 1204

WESTERN UNION TELEGRAM

NEWCOMB CARLTON, PRESIDENT

GEORGE W.E. ATKINS, VICE-PRESIDENT

BELVIDERE BROOKS, VICE-PRESIDENT

New York, N.Y. 11:20 AM Oct. 31, 1917

RECEIVED AT

SPARTANBURG, S.C.

Lt. Chester Dawkins 15 N.Y. INF. Reg.
Camp Wadsworth

Papa passed in sleep last night STOP Funeral Nov 3 STOP Come home need you STOP

Lena