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{Unabandoned}

Davis raised his musket and aimed for the doe on the edge of the clearing. The flintlock sparked and fired, but the target was out of range, and the deer bolted for the trees. *Fine then.* He didn't really need the meat anyway.

"Sorry," offered his sister beside him. *As if it were Hannah's fault.*

When his father had given him the gun on his birthday three years ago, he had given him a sort of charge: "God-breathed life is better lost than abandoned. Guard it carefully, or you will suffer its price." The seventeen-year-old whitened his knuckles around the musket, needing to feel something hard and firm. But he could not press down the thoughts welling up inside his throat.

"Is that so, Father?" All he could do was spit out his question in a mutter. "And you died in some foolhardy Patriot ambush before we even have a war?" He kept his voice low so Hannah would not hear him.

The two siblings continued across the empty cornfield back towards the house.

Nearly three months ago, Malachi had come to the print shop in Williamsburg with the letter. "I've got something for Davis Highman," was all the manservant had said. Underneath Davis' inky fingerprints, the apprentice had recognized his name twisted in his mother's handwriting.

His father had been wounded in a skirmish, and he needed to come home immediately. But when he had returned, Henry Highman had already breathed his last.

Davis had only gone back to the printer's once after the funeral to get his shirts and his pens.

That was November. It was early March now. A yellowed green tinged the death-brown grass stretching in front of the brother and sister. The refraction of color hinted of springtime and life returning to the farm. But even the token of life twisted a knife in Davis' gut. *I wanted to grow and be and do with my life. So much for guarding your life carefully, Father! You threw away yours! You threw away mine.*

"Now I am here, desperately trying to mend the hole you left in everything." He whispered the scream.

Hannah turned to him with a question in her brown eyes.

But nothing was spoken.

Though she was two years younger than Davis, Hannah could keep up with her brother's strides for the most part. The house was only a few yards away now.

Malachi was coming across the yard from the stable directly toward them. "Master Davis," he called.

Davis stopped and turned toward the manservant. "Yes, Malachi?"

"Your mother's been looking for you." The black man reached them. "She has some particulars about the accounts to ask you, I believe."

Davis nodded. "I will look for her then." Keeping accounts was one of the many skills he had had to pick up as man of the house in the past months. "We were just going up to the house."

"I think it is nearly time for tea," Hannah added.

"Well, you should find her there," Malachi replied before heading off.

Davis and Hannah continued on their way to the house. It was no mansion, but as the residence of a gentleman farmer, it was no disgrace. They went up the steps and inside. Still holding his gun, Davis went to the parlor, hoping to find his mother in the corner at her desk. As he suspected, Mrs. Highman was looking over a sheet of paper. She looked up on hearing her son's steps at the doorway.

"Malachi said you were looking for me, Mother?"

Mrs. Highman pushed her inkwell away from the edge of the desk, and stood up. "Yes. I was looking for the receipts for the seed Father purchased last fall, and I can't seem to find them in any of the ledgers."

"Do you think Father threw them away?" Davis asked.

His mother shook her head. "No, he wouldn't have done something as thoughtless as that."

*Would he?* The thought formed in Davis' mind before he could check it.

"I thought you might have found it in his study when you looked over it the other day," she wondered, pushing a piece of fading brown hair back in place.

Davis felt something tighten. "I didn't go through every single thing in Father's study." He set his words out carefully.

“I thought you were organizing it,” Mrs. Highman looked at him questioningly.

Her maternal probing changed as she read her son’s face. “I know, Davis.” Her own words trembled. “Believe me, I know.”

Davis flushed at one more evidence of pain caused by his father’s absence.

“Can you see if you can find me the receipts?” she asked.

“I’ll try.” He nodded, leaving the room before his feelings could spill over.

His father’s study was not large. A south-facing window splashed daylight across the desk and floorboards. Davis leaned his musket against a small cabinet in the corner opposite the door and turned to the desk. Letters sat piled on the dark wood in a single stack. That was Davis’ handiwork. Last time he had come in here, he had put all the papers in one stack and wiped the dust off the windowsill. And then he had left before he choked.

He sat down in his father’s chair at the desk and leaned both elbows on the edge, pressing his head in his hands. All he had to do was find the receipts for his mother.

The top letter in the stack was from Williamsburg – something about the Committee of Safety with a string of names and dates. He set that one to his left. The next letter related something about the farm. The next was another from Williamsburg. He found a letter of his own to home. Lists and details in his father’s handwriting were layered throughout – chronicles of both militias and farm records.

*“He wouldn’t have done something as thoughtless as that.”* He knew that his mother was probably correct in assuming that the receipts were somewhere in this collection. *But how could you have done something so stupid, Father?* Davis cried inwardly. *If you were so organized and*

*thorough and disciplined, how could you have thrown yourself into such a reckless mission that ruined everything else?* At least, it felt like everything else.

After a few more minutes, Davis had come to the bottom of the stack on the desk without finding the receipts. He pushed the chair back and opened the drawer in the desk. Orderly compartments of paper, pens, pounce, and sealing wax fit neatly.

He sank back in the chair and stared at the window. The more he thought, the more he felt the anger beating through his veins, and the more it hurt.

Hannah came in with a cup of tea. "Here, Davis." Setting it down, she took in her brother's thrown back shoulders and lifted head. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

He shook his head. "Not in the desk."

She ran her finger across the top of the cabinet, leaving behind a long scar in the dust.

"Did you look in here?"

Davis turned from the window to his sister. "No, not yet."

She knelt down to open the cabinet, and he joined her. Inside there were three shelves. Hannah pulled out the stack of papers on the first shelf. They were mostly receipts. Davis easily found the ones he was looking for in the top few.

The second shelf held more of the same kind of thing. The largest was the third shelf, and it held string-tied bundles of letters with chunks of broken red wax. Hannah picked up one of them. "Oh!" she exclaimed softly. "I think 'tis Father's personal correspondence! These ones are all from Mother." She passed the bundle to Davis, and reached for the next. "These are all

your letters from Williamsburg this past year!” A couple others were from personal friends of Father’s whom he had consistently written with.

Underneath them, Hannah pulled out a wooden box with a sloped lid. “Davis! A writing desk!”

He looked up from the letters in his lap as she lifted the smooth lid. She scanned the contents, and Davis saw her brow furrow. “I think this was for you, Davis. Perhaps for Christmas,” was all she said, and handed it to him. Surprise and curiosity darting across his face, Davis set all the bundles aside and took the writing desk from his sister. The contents were nearly the same as what he had found in the desk drawer. But on top of the stack of paper, in Henry Highman’s handwriting, he read:

*Three years ago, I gave you a musket. Now I give you another weapon. Make use of it to live, to govern yourself, and to pursue the passions God has granted you.*

Davis reread the note. Father knew how much he loved writing.

“Why do you think Father was part of that ambush anyway?” He glanced at Hannah. There. He had asked it – the thing he had been wanting to scream since November.

Fear? Pain? Contemplation? Something flitted in her eyes. “Possibly for the reasons he wrote there, I think.”

“To live, to govern yourself, and to pursue the passions God has granted you?” His eyes still narrowed with disbelief.

“Father said that Parliament was restricting our rights to govern ourselves and live that way.” His sister stared at the wall, trying to fit the pieces together. “And God created us to live that way, to live in the freedom and responsibility He breathed into us.”

*God-breathed life.*

Davis grasped at bits of thoughts. “God granted us the right to think and say when He gave us life. So, to have a say that does not matter – only what Parliament would make it...”

“...Is parting with that life for pieces of silver – like Judas.” Hannah finished decidedly.

Davis swung his gaze to study his sister’s face. She seemed to have determined something.

“God-breathed life is better lost than abandoned,” he repeated quietly. “Guard it carefully or you will suffer its price.” He looked at his musket leaning against the cabinet.

“But Father didn’t.” Hannah had heard him. “He didn’t suffer the price. His life was taken, but not abandoned.”

Something fell in place in Davis’ mind as well. “You threw nothing away, Father.” His own voice was barely a whisper. “You lost it to save something else.” He read his father’s note with a new resolve.