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1

The Net Closes

Corporal Majors!”

Jeff stopped abruptly as a harsh voice came across the frozen air. He turned slowly, guiltily. As he expected, he saw his father, the colonel, standing outside his tent, glaring at him.

Jeff snapped to attention and brought his right hand up to a salute, touching the forage cap as he had been taught. He had been a drummer boy for two years in the Stonewall Brigade, but now at seventeen had been mustered into the regular service and appointed a corporal.

“Yes, Colonel,” he said. His lips were so cold that he found it difficult to speak. He brought his hand down, knowing he was in big trouble.

Col. Nelson Majors walked up to his soldier son. They looked alike, these two. They had the same coal-black hair and black eyes. Jeff was fully as tall as his father, though much slimmer.

“Where have you been, Corporal?”

After a slight hesitation, Jeff said, “Into Richmond, sir.”

“How many times does that make that you’ve been to Richmond in the last week?”

“Three times, Colonel.”

“Well, that’s about three times too many!”

Nelson Majors was ordinarily a soft-spoken man, but today his face was drawn with tension.

The siege of Petersburg had drained all the energy out of him. He had been wounded at the beginning of the siege and had not gotten his full strength back. He held himself up straight and said sternly, "Corporal, just because you're the son of the commanding officer doesn't give you any special privileges! I thought I'd made that clear to both you and your brother!"

"I'm sorry, sir." Jeff had no excuse. He had gotten permission from his lieutenant to go to town, but he knew that he had taken a shortcut. He was well aware that his father was never one to permit one of his sons to merit special attention, and now he made no defense.

"You can stand guard for an extra watch, Corporal Majors."

"Yes, sir."

Jeff returned his father's angry salute, and when the colonel ducked back inside the tent, he made his way down through the camp to the front lines.

Here were trenches protected by large logs and anything else that would stop a musket ball. They were not quite deep enough for a man to walk upright, so Jeff kept his head down. As he wound through the fortifications, from time to time he heard the explosion of a musket and the screaming of a minié ball as it split the air. Both sides were firing, and their trenches were less than two hundred feet apart in places.

A mortar exploded somewhere behind the lines, and he dropped down flat. When the dirt settled, he got up and continued his journey, finally arriving at the location where his squad was detailed to hold off the Yankees.

“Hello, Jeff. You bring anything good back to eat?”

Sgt. Tom Majors, Jeff’s older brother, was sitting on a cracker box. He’d been talking to Charlie Bowers, the undersized drummer boy who had entered the service the same time as Jeff but was one year younger.

“Well, yes, I did,” Jeff muttered. He flung down the bag. “There! You can have it!”

Charlie stared at him with his wide blue eyes. “What’s the matter, Jeff? You look all put out.”

“Pa—I mean the colonel—just bawled me out for going into Richmond.”

“You had permission, didn’t you?” Tom asked as he picked up the bag.

“Sure, I did. From the lieutenant. But that wasn’t good enough.”

Tom was barely listening. He had opened the bag and was pulling out its contents. “Cookies!” he said. “My, I haven’t seen a cookie in years, it seems like!”

Jeff, however, was not thinking of cookies. “I don’t see why he has to pick on me! What difference does it make whether I’m here or not?” he grumbled. He plopped himself down on a log that formed a part of the fortification and watched as the other two soldiers eagerly went through the rations. He refused the cookies. He had filled up on cookies when in Richmond.

Charlie said, “I think you’re crazy, Jeff—turning down cookies just because you’re upset with your pa.”

Tom was munching happily, making a chocolate cookie last as long as he could. Then he said, “You

know Pa's pretty tense, Jeff. He's got a lot of responsibility here."

"That's right," Charlie said. "We're trying to hold too much of the line. Spread out all thin-like. Why, if the Yankees made a run at us, I don't know if we could hold 'em or not."

Jeff knew that both were right, and it was not his father's fault.

"Well," he muttered, "I guess it was worth it. Leah and I cooked up all this stuff, and I ate all I could so the rest of you could have what I brought back. But food's getting so scarce there that they couldn't give us much."

"Seems they found a chicken anyhow." Tom bit down on a fried chicken leg. "It beats anything we've had here lately."

The three soldiers were tired and dirty. A siege was a nasty sort of way to run a war, Jeff thought. There was no glory in it—no flags flying, no bands playing—just day after day risking death every time a man raised his head.

"The net's closing in," Tom said, glancing toward the Federal fortifications. "General Grant is getting more reinforcements all the time, and we're getting thinner. There's only one end to that."

Jeff nodded. "I reckon you're right, Tom. And Pa's got too much to do. I shouldn't have gotten sore at him like that."

Colonel Majors had been fortunate enough to commandeer a horse that would hold his weight. He was in Richmond, on his way home for the first time in days.

"Come on, boy. You can make it just a little farther." He urged the weary animal down the street.

Richmond was a pitiful sight, he thought. The mortars and the big guns of the Federals had arched over their deadly missiles, blowing large chunks out of the city.

He rode through the heart of town and saw that little was left of the daily life he remembered. When he'd first come here from Kentucky to join the Confederacy, Richmond had been a busy, prosperous city. Now, only a remnant was left of all of that. He saw bombed-out buildings, burned houses, holes in the street big enough to hide a horse. And he saw little hope in the eyes of those who were still trying to keep the Confederate war machine going.

Finally he reached home, a small, white frame house, which so far had been spared the destruction of the inner city. He slid off the bony animal, slapped him with some affection, and said, "You did a good job, boy. I'll see if I can find you some fodder." He tied the horse to the hitching post, then opened the door and called out, "Hey, where's my welcoming committee?"

Instantly he heard a child's voice, and then a blonde girl, no more than three years of age, came like a whirlwind. She hit him full force, and he laughed, picking her up and holding her high in the air.

"Well, here's my Esther!" He kissed her rosy cheek. His wife had died bringing Esther into the world, and for most of her life the child had been in the care of Dan and Mary Carter in Kentucky. Now, however, she was here to stay, and she had a new mother.

"Nelson, you're home!"

Eileen Fremont Majors greeted him with almost as much vigor as the child. At twenty-nine, she had

brilliant red hair, green eyes, and, he knew, a great love for her new husband.

Nelson kissed her and then said, "You smell better than anything I've smelled in the last three weeks!"

Eileen ran her hand through his hair. "I'm glad you're here, dear. Come on. I know you're hungry. I'll fix you something to eat."

He followed her into the kitchen, noted the pleasant warmth of the wood stove, and sat down, saying, "I wish I could carry that stove back to the front lines with me."

"I'm afraid we don't have much to cook on it, but the fire's nice."

"How's the firewood holding out?"

"We'll manage."

Eileen busied herself making a meal, and soon it was set before him. "Only two eggs," she said, "but we got a piece of bacon yesterday, and here are some biscuits that I made this morning."

As her husband ate, Eileen sat beside him. Esther demanded her father's attention, and he pulled her up onto his lap and began to tell her stories, which she loved. After a time, however, he said, "Now, you let Daddy have a little time with Mommy, all right?"

"Will you tell me more stories after you talk to her?"

"Sure I will, sweetheart." He kissed her firmly, and she toddled off happily to play. "Where's Leah?" he asked.

"Oh, she's out fishing again."

"In this weather? She'll freeze to death!"

"She doesn't seem to mind, and the fish come in handy. Until the water freezes over, she says she'll keep at it. We'll have fish for supper."

Then Eileen plumped herself down in her husband's lap. "There," she said. "I've missed this lap of yours."

"I've missed having you in it." He stroked her hair. "I've missed you more than I should. I couldn't keep my mind on my business."

Eileen hesitated, then said, "I've got some more business for you to think about."

"What's that?"

"How would you feel if you had to buy another plate for the table?"

For a moment Nelson could not understand what she meant. He saw that she seemed somewhat apprehensive. And then the meaning of her question came to him. His black eyebrows went up with astonishment. "You don't mean that we're going to have a baby?"

"Yes! That's the business at hand." Eileen looked at him carefully and then said, "I hope you don't mind, Nelson."

"Mind? Why would I mind? I think it's wonderful!"

She obviously had been concerned about how he would take the news. Life during wartime was hard enough without any complications. She seemed to desperately need his assurance. "I'm so glad," she whispered. "I was afraid you wouldn't like it."

"Of course I like it, and don't you worry a bit. We'll make out fine."

Eileen whispered, "I hope it'll be a boy. That would be good, wouldn't it?"

"That would be very good!"

The dead of winter had not stopped the Yankee determination to take Richmond. Gen. Ulysses S.

Grant kept Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia off balance constantly. Lincoln had been reelected, General Sherman had captured Atlanta, and Savannah had surrendered. Now Sherman was on his way north to join Grant in a full-scale attempt to seize Richmond, which would end the war.

Even the promise of spring's coming could bring no hope to Lee's men. They were freezing and starving daily. Death, disease, and desertion slowly destroyed the once proud Army of Northern Virginia. In one five-week period, more than three thousand men simply walked off to go home and did not return.

General Lee knew that the biggest problem that winter was food. He said, "Unless the men and animals can be fed, the army cannot be held together and our present lines must be abandoned."

Colonel Majors was one of the officers called to a special staff meeting one day, and he saw that General Lee looked tired and worn. *He's become an old man!* Nelson thought with some astonishment. *This war is killing him!*

General Lee was indeed worn out and was suffering from the heart condition that would eventually kill him. However, there was always a dignity in the man, and as he explained to his officers how grim the situation was, that inherent strength that had kept the Army of Northern Virginia intact was still there.

"I must inform you gentlemen that our plight is severe," he said quietly. "As you must know, the Federals are increasing their strength daily while we are growing weaker with each hour."

"We can hold out, General," one of the officers spoke up at once.

“I pray so, but we must face reality.” He went on to speak about the lines that had been cut and about the lack of food and ammunition.

When he dismissed the men, Nelson slowly walked back to his own sector, where he found Tom waiting.

“What did the general say, Colonel?” Tom was still learning to adapt to the use of an artificial limb. After losing a leg at Gettysburg, he had been mustered back into the service as a courier. It was intended that he would serve on horseback, but now he was in the trenches with the rest of the men.

His father frowned. “I’ve never seen General Lee like this. He’s always been such a tower of strength, but now it seems that he has lost hope.”

“If *he’s* lost hope,” Tom said, “I don’t think the rest of us can do much better.”

The colonel felt the biting air cut through his uniform. “I don’t think so either. It’s just a matter of time, Tom. We’ve got to realize that.”

Tom rubbed his hands to warm them. His thoughts seemed far away.

Finally his father said, “I could guess what you’re thinking.”

Tom looked up and smiled guiltily. “Are you a mind reader now, Colonel?”

“I know my boys pretty well. You’re thinking about Sarah.”

Tom bowed his head. He and Sarah were practically engaged, but she was back in Kentucky and he was here in the frozen trenches—and he had been maimed by the war. “I still don’t reckon Sarah would want a one-legged man, Pa.”

“Don’t be foolish, son!” Nelson said. “A leg is not a man!” But he knew Tom had not fully gotten over

the loss of the leg. His older son had always been strong and athletic and now felt he was not the man he'd been.

Tom looked out over the fortifications, thinking. Slowly he turned back to his father, saluted, and then limped toward the trenches to take his place in the line.

The colonel watched him go and thought, *That boy's hurting—and he's wrong about Sarah. But I guess every man has to learn to get along with his own handicaps.*

He walked away, wondering how to make the food go a little farther, how to make the lines stretch a little longer, and how to keep the Yankees at bay for just one more day.

2

Jeff Goes to Richmond

A hard freeze had transformed the clothes that Leah hung out earlier in the day. They had been soft and fluffy from the washing she'd given them in the iron pot, but now they were frozen stiff. As she approached the line, she muttered, "I should've known that this would happen!" But then she shrugged and began to take them down.

At sixteen, Leah had probably reached her full growth. She still saw herself as tall and gawky, but lately young womanhood had sculptured her into a more graceful figure. Her green eyes caught the light of the noon sun, and her blonde hair escaped from the woolen stocking cap that she had pulled down tightly.

Unpinning a suit of men's long underwear, she held it up for a moment. She grinned, bent the frozen garment in the middle, and began waltzing around with it, humming a song.

Then abruptly she halted. "This is *not* going to get the work done!" She gathered up as many of the stiffened clothes as she could and went back into the small frame house, set only twenty feet from the Richmond street.

A black-and-white cat met her as she entered the back door. He stared at the frozen long underwear. Then suddenly he made a jump. He dug his claws into the garment and bit at it fiercely.

"Cap'n Brown, you stop that!"

Leah picked up the cat and nuzzled him. "You'll have to behave yourself. These are just underwear—they're not going to hurt you." Holding the cat under one arm, she crossed the kitchen to the hallway and made her way to a large bedroom, where she leaned the long johns against the wall. "Now you stay there," she admonished them, "and I'll go get the rest of you!"

After several trips, Leah had the room filled with frozen clothes. When she had them lined them up, waiting for them to thaw, she began preaching at them. "Now," she said, "listen to what I have to say. You're all good Confederate underwear, so I want you to behave yourselves like good Confederates. Do you hear me?"

"What in the world are you doing?"

Leah whirled, feeling red coming to her cheeks. "Oh, nothing, Eileen!"

"Did I hear you talking to those clothes?" Eileen asked curiously. But she smiled, and a dimple touched her cheek.

"I was just having a little fun." Leah picked up a petticoat. "See—they're all stiff as boards."

"They're clean anyway. I'm glad for that." Eileen touched a shirtwaist that was beginning to lose its stiffness. "It's hard enough to wash in the summer-time, but in the winter it's terrible. I just hope the soap holds out."

"They didn't have any anywhere in town that I could find," Leah said. "All the stores are out of just about everything." She gave the older woman a close look and said, "Eileen, what'll we do when there's no more soap?"

"I don't know, Leah. I just don't know."

There was a tinge of hopelessness in Eileen's voice, and in that she was like most Southerners. The Army of Northern Virginia was now trapped in Richmond, encircled by 100,000 Union soldiers. Every day the ring grew tighter, and everyone knew that things could not go on much longer. The South would have to surrender.

Eileen bit her lip suddenly and dropped the shirtwaist. She went to a chair and sat down.

Leah looked at her with surprise and crossed to stand beside the chair. "What's wrong, Eileen? Don't you feel well?"

"Not really."

"What is it? I hope it's not something serious."

Eileen looked up with a smile. "I'm afraid it is."

"Not *smallpox*?" Leah gasped.

"No, not smallpox." Eileen was pale, but she managed another smile. "I'm going to have a baby, Leah."

"A baby? You don't mean it!"

"Yes, I do." She took Leah's hand and squeezed it. "It's an awful time for having a baby, isn't it? Here in the middle of a war with our side about to be demolished."

Seeing the trouble in Eileen's eyes, Leah leaned over and kissed her on the cheek, then gave her a quick hug. "I think it's a wonderful time to have a baby, and it'll be a beautiful baby too. It'll either be beautiful like you are or be handsome like his father. Either way, it will be wonderful."

That seemed to cheer Eileen. She got up, saying, "I'm all right now. I just seem to get a little dizzy from time to time. Come along, and we'll see what we've got for supper tonight."

The two women went into the kitchen, and as they began to put together a meal, Leah said quietly, "I get lonesome for home sometimes."

Home for Leah was Kentucky. It had been home for her family, the Carters, and for the Majors family too, until the war had separated them. Leah had brought Colonel Majors's little girl to Richmond, but now that he was married again she felt in the way.

She turned suddenly to Eileen. "I think I'd better be going home soon."

"Perhaps you should. Not that we're not glad to have you, but with the war going the way it is, it's not safe for you here."

There was a pause, and Leah had another thought. "But if you're going to have a baby, you'll probably need help."

"You can't stay around here for that long!" Eileen exclaimed.

"I can stay as long as you need help," Leah said. "Let's talk about it later."

Jeff mounted the skinny army horse and sat looking down at the animal's bony shoulders. "I think I'm about as able to carry you as you are me," he muttered.

But a horse was a horse. In Petersburg there were few animals—there was no feed for them. He had obtained this mount only because his father had put in a word with the quartermaster.

"Go on into Richmond and see if you can find anything for us to eat, Corporal," the colonel had said.

Jeff dug his heels into the bony sides of the horse, who obliged by moving forward at a slow

walk. Jeff did not urge him. He knew that the animal was old and had not been well cared for. *I feel sorry for all the horses*, he thought.

Still, it was always good to get out of the trenches, for the stench of death was there and the constant danger of being killed. All morning Jeff rode quietly along the road until he reached the capital.

Richmond was depressing too, he thought. Most of the stores were closed, and what few factories were still running were manned by gaunt workers with gray faces. He found no food at all for sale—at least none that could be bought with Confederate money.

“If I had greenbacks, I could buy some, I bet,” he said. Strangely, Union cash was more welcome in Richmond than its own currency. Confederate money was worth practically nothing. Jeff had his pockets stuffed full, but he knew that it would take a miracle to find anyone willing to trade good food for worthless paper.

Then he had an idea. He took a road leading out of town and came, after an hour’s ride, to a large mansion sitting on the left side of the roadway. Kicking the horse with his heels, he muttered, “Come on, boy. It won’t hurt to try here.”

When he slipped off the horse, he was greeted by a grinning black man, who said, “Hello, Mr. Jeff! I haven’t seen you lately.”

“No, Zeno. Been in the trenches at Petersburg.”

“Let me take that hoss. You go on in. Miss Lucy, she’s here on the place.”

“Thank you, Zeno.”

Jeff ran up the steps, knocked on the door, and was met by one of the house servants, a small black

girl that he knew. "Hello, Verbena. Is Miss Lucy here?"

"She sure is, Mr. Jeff. You come on in, and I'll fetch her for you."

Jeff waited in the foyer.

Lucy came, almost at once, and held out her hands. "Jeff!" She smiled up at him. "I'm so glad to see you!"

He took her hands and looked down at the small girl. Lucy Driscoll was one of the prettiest girls Jeff had ever seen. "Good to see you too, Lucy," he said. "How have you been?"

"Just fine. Come on back! Cecil is here." Her eyes twinkled for a moment, and she said roguishly, "But I forgot, officers and regulars don't mix, do they?"

"Not very well."

At that moment a young man wearing the uniform of a Confederate second lieutenant emerged from the drawing room. "Jeff! Good to see you!" Cecil Taylor, at seventeen, was thin as a rail. He had chestnut hair and bright blue eyes and a crooked grin. "I don't guess we have to worry about 'sirs' around here," he added.

The three young people went into the drawing room, where Lucy asked one of the servants to bring in cake and tea. She served it herself, asking Jeff, "How are things at Petersburg?"

"Not very good," Jeff said glumly. He glanced at Cecil. "I guess you know more about the whole picture than I do."

Shaking his head, Cecil said, "It's not the same thing. I've asked a hundred times to be put on active duty in the lines, but they won't let me go."

Jeff swallowed a piece of cake. "I wish they'd let us change jobs. You'd be welcome to mine."

"Aw, you don't mean that, Jeff."

Actually Jeff knew he didn't. He wanted to be with his unit, what was left of the Stonewall Brigade, and he well knew that he did not want to leave his father or his brother. Still, he also knew that Cecil felt bad about not getting in on the fighting, so he said, "Don't worry. Pretty soon you'll be at it. I think everybody will."

"I feel like a slacker," Cecil said.

"You're not that!" Lucy put a hand on Cecil's arm. "You have to do what your officers tell you. If they told you to fight, you'd fight in a minute."

Jeff noted with interest her sparkling eyes and that her fondness for Cecil showed in her face. He knew that Cecil had been in love with Leah, but after finding she didn't care for him, it would be natural enough for him to turn to Lucy Driscoll. The two had grown up together, and both were children of wealthy planters.

After a while Jeff admitted, "Actually, I've come begging. I don't suppose you've got anything to eat I could take back to some of my friends at the front."

"I'll bet we do!" Lucy jumped up. "Let me get on a coat, and we'll go see what we can find."

They actually filled a sack with an assortment of food. Jeff flung the bag over the horse's back and mounted behind it. Then he reached down and shook Lucy's hand. "You're making some Confederate soldiers mighty happy, Lucy." He smiled at her. "I thank you for all of them."

"Come back, Jeff, and don't get hurt," she said.

"I wish I were going with you, Jeff."

“You stay here, Cecil. You take care of Lucy now.”

Cecil looked at Lucy, and it seemed something passed between them. But then the lieutenant looked back at Jeff. “I sure wish I could do more than push papers around.”

As Jeff slowly moved down the driveway on the skinny horse, he thought, *Those two are going to fall in love. I'm not much on romance, but I know it when I see it.*

“Jeff! You come in this house!”

Jeff had been standing on the step when Leah opened the door. He let her grab him by the arm and drag him inside.

“Esther,” she called, “come and see your big brother!”

Three-year-old Esther came trotting in. She squealed with delight and ran for Jeff. He caught her up, tossed her high, and said, “How’s my baby sister?”

“Jeff—Jeff! Come on, I’ll show you my dolls!”

“All right. Let’s see your dolls.”

He sat on the floor as Esther named off her dolls, giving their family histories.

“She talks like a parrot, doesn’t she?” Jeff said to Leah.

She sat on the floor with Jeff and his small sister. “Yes, she does. She’s very bright.”

At that moment Eileen came in. “Jeff! I didn’t know you were here!”

Jeff scrambled to his feet, walked over to his stepmother, and gave her a hug and a kiss on the cheek. “Now, that’s from your husband. He’ll do better when he gets here.”

“How is he, Jeff?”

"He's fine!" This was not exactly true, for nobody in the front lines at Petersburg was fine, but Jeff wanted to encourage her.

"Well, I'm going to fix you the best supper you ever had, and you can take some back to Nelson."

Jeff was glad that his father had found a companion. Though he had been opposed to their marriage at first, he really liked Eileen.

"I'll go chop wood for my supper," he said.

"Take me too," Esther said.

Finally, after much pleading, Leah bundled her up, and the three went outside. Jeff split the wood, enjoying that job as he always did, and they went in only when Eileen called that supper was ready.

It was indeed a good supper, better than he had had in some time. Eileen had managed to find a little beef and some vegetables, and Jeff wolfed down the food hungrily.

After the meal, he and Leah sat in the parlor playing with Esther. They had a moment alone when Eileen put Esther to bed.

"I just came from over at the Driscoll place," Jeff said.

Instantly a flush came to Leah's cheeks. "I still feel guilty about the way I treated Cecil—just trying to make you jealous. And I still have trouble forgiving myself for it."

Seeing her face, Jeff said quickly, "I know you feel bad about it—but I don't think you have to." He grinned broadly.

"I don't know why you'd say *that*."

"Because I think you would've made Cecil miserable if you had married him." His grin widened. "You're enough to drive a man crazy!"

"Well, I like that!"

“I honestly don’t think you need to worry though. It looks to me like Cecil has his eye on Lucy.”

After a moment, Leah nodded. “I hope so. They’d be perfect for each other. They’ve grown up together, and they know all about each other.”

“I’m not sure *that’s* a good idea,” Jeff said, concealing a grin this time. “He’ll know all her faults, and she’ll know all of his.”

“That’s right,” Leah said, and she punched him sharply. “And, therefore, there won’t be any bad surprises.”

“I just hope Cecil doesn’t have to fight. This war’s going to be over soon. He could get himself killed meantime.”

“So could you!”

“Oh, I know, but I’m used to fighting. I’ve learned how to handle it, but Cecil’s kind of fragile.”

The next morning when Jeff left, Leah held up Esther for him to kiss.

The child grabbed his hair and held on tightly. “Don’t go, Jeff!” she wailed.

“Got to go, sweetheart,” Jeff whispered. Unexpectedly, he leaned past her and kissed Leah on the cheek. “Now, that’s all the kisses you get for a while,” he admonished her. He laughed at her indignation, then said, “Take care of everything here, Leah.”

As the women and the little girl watched Jeff ride out on the scrawny horse, Leah said, “I wish he didn’t have to go.”

“I wish none of them had to go,” Eileen said quietly.