

A *NOVEL* of West Point and The Civil War

Duty,
Honor,
Country

West Point to Shiloh



NY Times Best-Selling Author and West Point Graduate

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Electronic ISBN: 9781935712442

Print ISBN: 9781935712381

DUTY, HONOR, COUNTRY

A Novel of West Point and The Civil War

(West Point to Shiloh)

by

Bob Mayer

Who commanded the major battles of the Civil War? ----- There were 60 important battles of the War. In 55 of them, graduates commanded on both sides; in the remaining 5, a graduate commanded one of the opposing sides. Required Plebe knowledge at West Point.

Dedicated to the men and women of The Long Gray Line.

Military Academy
West Point, NY
Sept 22d 1839

To R. McKinsty Griffith from Ulysses Grant

Dear Coz,

I was just thinking that you would be right glad to hear from one of your relations who is so far away as I am, so I have put aside my Algebra and French and am going to tell you a long story about this prettiest of places, West Point. So far as it regards natural attractions it is decidedly the most beautiful place I have ever seen; here are hills and dales, rocks and rivers; all pleasant to look upon. From the window near I can see the Hudson; that far famed, that beautiful river with its bosom studded with hundreds of snow sails. Again if I look another way I can see Fort Putnam frowning far above; a stern monument of a sterner age, which seems placed there on purpose to tell us of the glorious deeds of our fathers and to bid us remember their sufferings—to follow their examples. In short this is the best of all places—the place of all places for an institution like this.

I have not told you half its attractions. Here is the house Washington used to live in—there Kosciuszko used to walk and think of his country and ours. Over the river we are shown the duelling house of Arnold, that base and heartless traitor to his country and his God. I do love the place. It seems as though I could live here forever if my friends would only come too. You might search the wide world over and not find a better. Now all this sounds nice, very nice, “what a happy fellow you are” you will say, but I am not one to show false colors the brightest side of the picture. So I will tell you about a few of the drawbacks.

First, I slept for two months upon one single pair of blankets; now that sounds romantic and you may think it very easy. But I will tell you what coz, it is tremendous hard. Suppose you try it by way of experiment for a night or two. I am pretty sure that you would be perfectly satisfied that is no easy matter. But glad am I these things are over. We are now in our quarters. I have a splendid bed and get along very well. Our pay is nominally about twenty-eight dollars a month. But we never see one cent of it. If we want anything from a shoestring to a coat we must

go to the commandant of the post and get an order for it or we cannot have it. We have tremendous long and hard lessons to get in both French and Algebra. I study hard and hope to get along so as to pass the examination in January. This examination is a hard one they say, but I am not frightened yet. If I am successful here you will not see me for two long years. It seems a long while to me. But time passes off very fast. It seems but a few since I came here. It is because every hour has its duty which must be performed. On the whole I like the place very much. So much that I would not go away on any account. The fact is if a man graduates here he is safe for life. Let him go where he will. There is much to dislike but more to like. I mean to study and stay if it be possible. If I cannot—very well—the world is wide. I have now been here about four months and have not seen a single familiar face or spoken to a single lady. I wish some of the pretty girls of Bethel were here just so I might look at them. But fudge! Confound the girls.

I have seen great men plenty of them. Let us see. Gen. Scott. M. Van Buren. Sec. of War and Navy. Washington Irving and lots of other big bugs. If I were to come home now with my uniform on. The way you would laugh at my appearance would be curious. My pants sit as tight to my skin as the bark to a tree and if I do not walk militarily. That is if I bend over quickly or run. They are apt to crack with a report as loud as a pistol. My coat must always be buttoned up tight to the chin. It is made of sheeps grey cloth all covered with big round buttons. It all makes me look very singular. If you were to see me at a distance. The first question you would ask would be: "Is that a Fish or an Animal"? You must give my very best love and respects to all my friends particularly your brothers. Uncle Ross & Sam'l Simpson. You must write me a long, long letter in reply to this and tell me every thing and every body including yourself. If you happen to see my folks just tell them that I am happy, alive, and kicking.

I am truly your cousin

And obedient servant

U. H. Grant

(West Point class of 1843)

(Vicinity Shiloh, TN 23 years later, regarding Grant's invading Army of the Tennessee)

5 April 1862

To The Soldiers of the Army of the Mississippi:

I have put into motion to offer battle to the invaders of your country. With the resolution and discipline and valor becoming men fighting, as you are, for all worth living or dying for, you can but march to decisive victory over the agrarian mercenaries sent to subjugate and despoil you of your liberties, property and honor. Remember the dependence of your mothers, your wives, your sisters, and your children on the result; remember the fair, broad, abounding land, the happy homes and the ties that would be desolated by your defeat. The eyes and hopes of eight millions of people rest upon you; you are expected to show yourselves worthy of your lineage, worthy of the women of the South, whose noble devotion in this war has never been exceeded in any time. With such incentives to brave deeds, and with the trust that God is with us, your generals will lead you confidently to the combat—assured of success.

C.S.A. General Sidney Albert Johnston

(West Point class of 1826)

Chapter One

27 May 1840, West Point, New York

“To, duty, honor, and country,” William Tecumseh Sherman proposed, raising his mug of ale.

He shoved his chair back, along with his classmate who sat at the same table. The mugs were clunked together, whereupon the two turned their backs to each other and imbibed. Done, they turned to the table and reclaimed their seats inside the tavern on the west bank of the Hudson River, just outside of the Military Academy post limits.

“Tell me, Mister Sherman,” a young cadet leaning against the bar asked, “why do you say honor in the center as the linchpin between duty and country, and not loyalty?”

Before Sherman could respond, his classmate, a lean young man with a hatchet face under short, thick black hair, drawled in a low, southern voice. “Why, honor is all a man has, Mister Cord.”

Cord laughed. “Where I come from, we couldn’t afford honor, Mister King.”

The three cadets were the only customers left in the dimly lit tavern, with dawn less than an hour off. A rough wooden plank bar stretched across one side of the room. Behind it, head slumped onto the scarred surface, was the proprietor, Benny Havens. His loud snoring sawed through the room. Clanking noises came through the curtain behind him, where his daughter, Lidia, was cleaning up the remains of the party that had covered most of the night as many members of the class of 1840 had celebrated their pending graduation. Cord was not a member of ’40, but finishing his plebe year, class of ’43.

King shook his head, but didn’t immediately pursue Cord’s observation. “A toast without a fine cigar is practically wasted.” He unbuttoned his dress grey tunic and withdrew a pair of cigars. “Direct from my home in Charleston, where they came straight from Havana.” He extended one to Sherman.

The two Firsties went through the lighting ritual, to add to the lingering cloud from the night’s revelries.

King blew a puff of smoke Cord's way. "With your grades and conduct record, Mister Cord, one could not expect any different."

"Here, here." Sherman slapped a hand on the scarred wooden table. "None of that. It's not fair." He had fiery red hair and thick sideburns that tapered toward the point of his chin, not quite meeting.

"Cord is the Immortal in every section, Cump," King said. "Last in every one! An honorable man would not hold such a record. He should have more pride. He should have the decency to study."

"Mister Cord studies," Sherman said. He turned to Cord with a grin. "You do, don't you?"

Benny Havens lifted his head off the bar and blearily gazed about, like an old hound dog sensing trouble at a distance.

Cord was of average size and tightly built. His face was pleasant, made more so by a wide mouth that was most amendable to a cheerful expression. His nose had a slight crook to it, broken long ago in some waterside tavern and set as well as a drunken ship's doctor could manage on a drunker patient. He had pale blue eyes and pale blond hair from his family's Nordic ancestry.

His dress grey tunic, unlike the others, had the top three buttons unfastened, and was lacking the starched white collar the other two wore.

"No need for you to step in, Mister Sherman, and defend my lack of schooling. I could study every minute and I believe I'd still be the Immortal in every section. So why fight such a futile battle?"

"It's your duty," King said. "All of us share the same duty as cadets." He turned to Sherman. "Perhaps, Mister Cord is just dull in the wits. And it's more than academics being indicative of lack of character, there are the demerits, his inattention to duty and his shabby appearance. And his presence at a gathering of firsties when he is just a plebe."

"Well, none of us really are allowed to be here." Sherman held up his mug in a token of peace. "I say we take another draft, then make our way back to our rockbound highland home and get some rest before First Call."

He and King stood once more, raised their mugs, no toast this time, turned their backs to each other, and drank. The turning of the backs had both a logical and traditional purpose. It

was illegal for cadets to drink alcohol. They were also bound by the honor code to report another cadet they saw breaking regulations. So the practice had begun years ago at Benny Havens to turn backs to each other when drinking in order to be able to truthfully say, if questioned, that one had not seen the other drink. They turned to the table and thumped the mugs down, King with a bit extra force.

Sherman grabbed his cadet hat. "Time to be off."

"Perhaps I am just sorta stupid," Cord said as he peeked at the curtain, hoping for one last glance at Lidia before departing. "To the barracks and--"

"I believe," King said, his low voice cutting Cord off, "that an honorable man is one who judges himself accurately."

Cord smiled. "Why thank you, Mister King. That's the nicest way anyone's ever agreed when I said I was stupid. Kind of. Sort of."

King's eyes narrowed. He placed both fists on the tabletop, as much for balance as emphasis. "Are you saying I don't know the judge of a man?"

"I say no such thing, Mister King," Cord said, brightening as Lidia came out from behind the curtain.

Lidia had curly red hair, fair skin and sparkling green eyes. An enticing allure, like the dark blue water of a small harbor in the Bahamas that Cord had sailed by as a younger man. A harbor with such sublime depth and surrounded by perfect sand and palms, it wanted to draw you in, but the ship's master had warned Cord that such apparent havens often held hidden reefs and shoals that could cause the vessel to founder and be trapped forever.

"You spoke out of turn, plebe," King said. "As we say in South Carolina, if the dog is slapped, it barks."

Sherman sighed. He once more grabbed his mug, trying to douse the growing tension with more alcohol. "One *last* toast, George. To country at least. We can all agree on that."

"I might not be the best judge of every trait in a man," King continued, ignoring Sherman, "but I know honor and I can clearly see lack of honor."

Cord's grin disappeared. "Because you believe you're honorable, you question it in others?"

"You question *my* honor?" King demanded, face flushed.

“Honor,” Cord said, “is a mirror in front of you and loyalty is a pane of glass that must be carefully nurtured and kept clean.”

King’s eyes narrowed. “What the devil does that mean?”

“It means you don’t quite see me,” Cord said. “You only see me as reflected by you.”

“So you *do* say I am not honorable?” King pressed.

“No. You’ve had too much to drink, sir,” Cord said, “as have I. We can continue this conversation some other time.”

“Gentlemen,” Sherman interjected, “we must be off. We’ve all had too much to imbibe.”

King slapped the table. “I demand clarification!”

“Hey now!” Benny Havens called out from the bar. “Enough of that.”

Unseen by her father, Lidia placed a hand on Cord’s forearm and shook her head.

“We are speaking of honor,” King said, dismissing Havens as uninvited to the argument.

“You can have whatever honor you want to claim for yourself, sir,” Cord said with a shrug.

“I claim that which I have earned,” King said, “which is more than can be said of you.

You are no gentleman, sir.”

“Now, now!” Benny Havens came from around the bar and his daughter quickly pulled her hand back. He was a florid-faced, full-bodied rock of a man. He sported close-cropped salt and pepper hair atop a craggy face. His apron was dirty from a night of serving food and drink to cadets. He pointed at a large flagon on the end of the bar, trying to defuse the situation. “How about I rustle the three of you up a hot flip?” The concoction of rum, beaten eggs, sugar and spices, heated by a red hot poker shoved into it, was his specialty, especially for cadets trying to beat the inevitable hangover.

King folded his arms across his chest. “I will have an apology or satisfaction.”

“There isn’t going to be any duel,” Sherman said. “And the insults are the result of spirits, not bad intention.”

“You southerners,” Cord said. “You take things that aint important, awfully serious, but I apologize.”

King opened his mouth to speak, but before he could, Havens’ wife, Letitia, came through the curtain. Tears stained her cheeks. She walked up to Benny and held out her hands. Stretched across her palms was a limp white cadet collar.

“Where did you find it?” Havens demanded.

Letitia responded by turning to her daughter. "On her bed."

Benny Havens staggered back as if he'd been punched in the chest.

Sherman hurried forward to the tavern keep. "Mister Havens, I understand your anger at the trespass into your daughter's quarters by Cadet Cord. Let me take him back to the barracks for now and we'll deal with the matter later, when cooler heads might prevail."

The old man was slowly shaking his head, as if to dislodge the last few moments. He ignored Sherman and looked at his daughter. "Lidia, did you lay with Mister Cord this night?"

Lidia closed her eyes for a moment, and then met her father's gaze. "I did not lie with him tonight, father." She swallowed. "I wished to speak with him. He took the collar off to be more comfortable in the heat."

Letitia spoke: "What could you have to speak to him about that it needed to be in the sanctity of your room?"

Lidia looked at her mother, then her father, and finally the young cadet. "It's a private matter, but I couldn't bring the subject up with him. I couldn't bring it up with anyone." Tears began to flow as did the pent up words. "I made a mistake. Three months ago. And now—" she began sobbing and Letitia hurried to her daughter and wrapped her arms around her.

It took a moment for the implications to sink in to Benny Havens brain. When it landed, he howled with rage.

"Sir!" King was at Havens' side. "Allow me the privilege of defending your daughter." Before the old man could respond, King stepped forward and slapped Cord across the face. Hard. "You truly have *no* honor, defiling a young woman's reputation. In thirty minutes, on the river field, with pistols, which I will fetch from town." He stormed out of the tavern, brushing off Sherman's attempt to stop him.

Havens glared at Cord. "I'm going to let Mister King shoot you like the dog you are. And if you run, I'm sending my man for the Superintendent right now. One way or the other, I'll have you, Mister Cord!"

Cord was blinking, trying to sort the rapid series of events through his drunken haze.

"Mister Havens!" Sherman exclaimed. "Dueling is illegal and if the Superintendent comes, that'll at the least cost Mister Cord his cadetship, if not entail a court-martial. And if they duel, *both* Mister King and Mister Cord will be dismissed immediately from the Corps."

"So be it." Thunder rumbled in the distance, as if to punctuate Havens' resolve.

“Sir, let the Vigilance Committee take care of the matter,” Sherman suggested. “At least for Mister King’s sake. His anger and the alcohol have gotten the better of him.”

“It’s beyond the Vigilance Committee’s scope,” Havens said. “It happened here, in my house. To my daughter.”

Sherman gave a slight bow, both in actuality and to Havens’ resolve. “With all due respect, sir, then I’ll make my way back to the Academy as I’m not involved and I have a busy day ahead. Perhaps I’ll come back when things are peaceful.”

Havens vaguely nodded. “You’d best be on your way then.”

Sherman ran outside and jumped on his horse, galloping off, not in retreat, but in search of reinforcements.

Fifty miles up the Hudson River from New York City, the river narrows and makes a sharp bend to the west. The craggy highland on the left bank is called West Point and was first fortified to keep the American colonies united during the Revolutionary War. The placement of a military outpost at West Point was dictated by both strategy and terrain. The strategy insisted that the fledgling colonies stay connected and the British had seen the obvious: control the Hudson River and they could sever the particularly troublesome New England colonies from the Confederation of rebelling states to the west and south.

The terrain was the dictate of geography on military tactics. At West Point, the narrow twist in the Hudson causes any sailing vessel to tack and slow to a crawl. Add a massive chain floated across the river on rafts, covered by heavy artillery lining the bluffs above, and the small American garrison at West Point kept the colonies united throughout the Revolution.

After the Revolutionary War, the founding of the Military Academy at West Point had been dictated by necessity. The country’s third president, Thomas Jefferson, detested the idea of a standing army, but accepted the reality that the country had to have such a beast. So Jefferson determined to place a leash on the animal. To keep the officer corps from becoming filled with sycophants who would support a particular party or person over the country, in 1802 he ordered the establishment of an Academy to train a professional cadre of officers that would draw its cadets from across the country and across the strata of society. As West Point was a chokepoint

in the geography of the new country, the Academy located there was to be a chokepoint to the power of the military that had to sustain a democracy. Cadets would swear an oath—the very first law the First Congress enacted, an indication of its importance to the young country—to defend the Constitution, not any party or individual.

Thirty-eight years after the founding, two of these cadets, one from Ohio and the other from Mississippi, were in the Academy stable, preparing horses for a ride on a rare day exempt from duties and training.

“You can surrender now, sir, or you can fight me and suffer inevitable defeat,” the young Mississippian, clad in West Point dress gray, declared. “This is going to happen, one way or the other.”

Standing with arms folded across his broad chest, the boy-man considered his opponent. The massive horse had refused to be bridled for ten minutes and Lucius Kosciusko Rumble was beginning to take it personally. Rumble desired to be the first to ride York, but the magnificent beast wasn't being agreeable. He'd tossed a coin with his friend, Sam Grant, for first try at York, and gotten what he'd thought was a lucky break. Grant had dawdled saddling the horse in the next stall, giving Rumble some leeway to have his chance with the Hell Beast.

This early morning, in the midst of the summer of 1840, was not the best to go for a ride. To the northwest a dark halo of clouds gathered round Storm King Mountain's forested slopes. Flashes of lightning preceded the thunder from summer squalls scattered across the Hudson Highlands with dawn yet twenty minutes off.

Rumble was a solidly built young man, filling out the dress gray coat as if his body had been tailored for it. Broad shoulders cut in to a tapered waist. His dark hair matched his dark eyes. For all his strength and intensity, he had met his match. York was a bay stallion, at least a hand taller than any other horse in the stable, well muscled and newly arrived. It had already achieved a reputation as intractable and unridable, thus the Hell Beast. There was a gleam in the horse's eye that indicated more resistance would be forthcoming.

Rumble cautiously took a step into the stall, bit in hand. As he reached for the horse's mouth, thunder reverberated through the stables and York reared, lashing out with a massive hoof, narrowly missing Rumble's head and splintering wood. Rumble beat a hasty retreat, bumping into the young Ohioan who'd finished equipping the other horse.

“You can't force him,” Ulysses S. Grant said in a level tone. “You have to lead him.”

While Rumble filled out his uniform coat, Grant was lost in his. He was slender to the point of emaciation, his frame slightly stooped, and the dress gray tunic hung loosely from his shoulders as if they were a thin hanger. He was several inches shorter than Rumble's six feet and dwarfed by York.

Rumble shifted uneasily as Grant took a step toward the horse. "Careful, Sam."

Grant was focused on the horse. His piercing blue eyes stared deeply into the bay's. Grant took another step closer, within hoof range, but it was also close enough for something to pass between man and beast.

The horse twitched, began to rear, but stopped, nostrils flaring. The bay shivered, took a step back and glared at Grant. Outside the stall, Rumble remained perfectly still. Grant slipped the bit in the horse's mouth, whispering all the time to the beast, calming, forceful, reassuring. The horse's ears had been laid back, but now they relaxed, twitching forward to catch the young man's soft voice.

Grant led York out of the stall, Rumble making sure to get out of the way.

"Where's your former roommate, Cord?" Grant asked as he ran a hand over York's neck.

"Restricted to quarters."

Grant gave a low laugh. "Again?"

Rumble shook his head. "He's no Robert Lee," he said, referring to the legendary cadet from ten years prior who had graduated without a single demerit. It was a feat most cadets viewed as a result of divine intervention of some sort. Either God or Satan, depending on one's perspective of the disciplinary system, and the touchstone by which many cadets could clearly gauge their own lack of self-discipline. "Cord's never going to get ahead on demerits. He'll spend the next three years restricted to his room if he has any hopes of graduation. Superintendent Delafield has him in his sights."

"And it causes you no great trouble that Cord is locked up," Grant said.

"That is true," Rumble allowed.

"Because he's your rival for young Lidia's attention or because he's over on demerits and deserves the punishment?"

"Both."

Grant was heading toward the stable doors. “Bring the other mount, if you don’t mind, Lucius.” Grant said it casually, one friend to another, but Rumble followed as if it were an order, unaware of his reaction. Such was Grant’s way with people as well as horses.

“The storm will be upon us soon,” Rumble said, leading the more compliant, and smaller, horse Grant had saddled toward the stable doors.

“We’re the first to bridle York,” Grant said, making Rumble feel part of something special, the type of comment as natural to Grant as breathing was to the horse. “Waste not to ride him.”

They stepped out of the stables into the dark pre-dawn, occasionally illuminated by the approaching lightning. Rain was pounding on Storm King. Rumble resigned himself to getting wet soon. Grant had decided to ride, and ride they would.

“That Hell Beast will kill you,” a cadet coming down the road called out. He was instantly recognizable by his size, towering over his classmates.

Grant grinned at his best friend. “Well, I can’t die but once, Pete.”

James ‘Pete’ Longstreet addressed the small cluster of upper-class cadets who had gathered upon hearing his deep voice, always a herald of some interesting activity. “I bet that Sam here eats dirt within a minute of mounting.”

Some of the cadets nervously peered about, checking for the duty officer, or of greater consequence, the Superintendent. Major Delafield was a good soldier, a solid officer who had the cadets’ respect, but also a leader who had little tolerance for rule breaking. Not that Longstreet seemed to care as he took the bets, as good with the money as Grant with horses.

Rumble spotted Cord’s current roommate and couldn’t resist a needle. “Too bad Cord’s restricted, Fred. He’d love to get in on the action.”

Frederick Dent hunched his shoulders, looking particularly guilty. “Cord snuck out of the room earlier.”

“I told you that would happen,” Rumble said.

Longstreet let out a booming laugh. “Cord’s a marked man. Crazy Virginian. Supe finds out he’s gone, he’s done here.”

The cause of Dent’s discomfort was that officially he should report Elijah Cord’s disappearance to the duty officer or risk an honor violation. The saber’s edge of duty and honor that cadets tiptoed around almost every day because strictly following the honor code might entail betraying a classmate.

It was more personal for Rumble. “Did he ‘run it’ to Benny Havens?”

Dent shrugged, wanting no part of this. “He left after midnight. He didn’t say where he was going, but he’d been imbibing most of the night, so where else but a run to Benny Havens?”

“Many cadets made a run to Benny’s last night,” Grant noted.

“Many firsties,” Rumble said, referring to the senior cadets who would graduate shortly.

“Easy,” Grant said to Rumble in a low voice. “You know Cord. Maybe he just went for a flip?”

“I do know Cord,” Rumble said, “and that’s exactly what worries me. Lidia’s a good girl but—” he shook his head, focusing on the more immediate problem. “Be careful.” He pointed toward York, who had that look back in his eye and whose nostrils were flaring.

Grant put a foot in the stirrup and York sidestepped away, twisting and turning, trying to rip the rein from Grant’s hand. His foot slipped out of the stirrup and he stumbled, but didn’t fall. Grant’s grip on the rein was tight though the horse outweighed him by a thousand pounds. Grant kept whispering to the horse the entire time, a low soothing tone. York tried to jerk his head back, but Grant anticipated the move and pulled sideways, surprising the horse. Grant’s foot was back in the stirrup and then he was swinging the other leg over the saddle as York reared, trying to throw the interloper off.

However, Grant was firmly on board. York bucked and spun as if chasing its own tail. Grant was leaning forward, his slight body melding into the horse’s back, his mouth next to York’s right ear. The horse stopped spinning for a moment and glared at the cadets. Grant twitched the reins and gave a slight kick of his boot heels. Grant and York raced off as one, sprinting along the dirt road between stable and riding hall.

“You should’ve known better and been more careful with your money,” Rumble said to Longstreet, tightly clutching the rein of the other horse as it strained to follow Grant and York.

The Georgian laughed once more. “Damnation, Lucius, I just wanted to see him ride the Hell Beast. It was worth it. Besides, I took all the bets on Sam conquering it.”

In a minute, Grant returned, the horse at a steady trot, the young cadet’s face split in a wide grin. “York is superb.” He swung down off the horse and held the lead. “Come, Lucius, let’s walk him off post and put him through his paces on an open trail. We’ll switch off once we get a few miles under us.”

“I think we should pay a visit to Benny Havens,” Rumble said, desiring to find out what Cord was up to, and no longer as concerned about taking a turn on York.

Grant laughed. “In search of Mister Elijah Cord and his latest adventure? Certainly. At least we’re authorized to leave post today.”

The two, horses in tow, walked away from the other cadets. They headed toward the south gate and the path to Benny Havens. Grant nodded toward the Library, where he was known to spend a considerable amount of time, curled up with some novel, rather than reading the texts and military treatise a cadet ought to. “Maybe Cord is in there studying, rather than at Benny Havens?”

“You jest,” Rumble said. “You know where he is and what he’s trying to do.”

Grant’s blue eyes focused on Rumble. “Cord enjoys himself. You, on the other hand—” Grant stopped, concerned he had gone too far.

“It’s true, I’ve no claim on Lidia,” Rumble acknowledged. “Nor could I have one. But she’s a good friend and I fear Cord might take advantage. And I do take things seriously.” There was more tension on the lead. “Sometimes I look at my life as one of those novels you read, Sam. The book of Lucius Rumble is written—and not by my hand. I’m just following the words as they’ve been determined for me. I accept Lidia isn’t my future because there’s another woman who’s been chosen for me, even though a future with her is an empty one in the most important of ways. Still, Lidia is dear to me.”

“No one’s life is written like that,” Grant argued. “You can always rewrite it.” Grant considered Rumble a grave and dependable man, and dependable went a long way in his book.

Rumble shook his head. “I’m truly not the author of my own life. I must do my duty to my family.”

“Certainly you write your own life. And your family back in Mississippi is as rich as Midas, aren’t they? What do you have to be concerned about?”

“They’re not as rich as they appear,” Rumble said. “And what money they do have is tainted.”

“Tainted how?”

“By the blood of slaves.”

“All money is tainted, and usually by blood,” Grant said. “My father makes his running a tannery. Have you ever been in one? I will never go back inside such a place as long as I live.”

Blood and guts all over the place; it's disgusting to see. But what's worse, what's unbearable, is the stench. It's indescribable." Grant shook his head. "Graduate, Lucius, serve your time in Army blue, go back to your plantation and enjoy your life and the woman to whom you are betrothed."

"How important is family to you, Sam?" Rumble asked.

Grant considered the question. "I would like to find a woman who is lively, have children with her, and raise a family. I can think of nothing better, especially raising children." He grinned. "And perhaps attain the rank of major and be able to retire some day."

Rumble nodded glumly. "That's the—" he began, but paused as a mud-splattered rider came racing toward them. York began to shy, and Grant put a hand on the horse's head, murmuring to it.

Sherman reined in his horse, both breathing hard. Sherman was the mouthpiece of a small dark angel flitting about in his brain, always predicting the worst. Unfortunately, he was almost always right.

"You best get down to Benny Havens," Sherman called to Rumble. "It's going to be bad."

"Steady now, Cump," Grant said. "What's going on?"

"Elijah Cord," Sherman got out between gasps. He took a deep breath. Like a scout coming back with a report, Sherman spit out the essential information. "King and Cord got into an argument. Then Lidia came into the room and it seems Cord was in her quarters. Then it turns out, Lidia is with child from a previous visit by Mister Cord. King challenged Cord to a duel and Havens sent his man for the Supe."

"With child!" Rumble was shocked.

Grant took the information calmly. "Let's ride."

"Now Benny, please allow me my—" Elijah Cord searched for the word in the murky recesses of his brain—"freedom."

"And then what?" Havens demanded. He had an old flintlock pistol in his hand and it was pointed at Cord. Letitia and Lidia were huddled in the corner of the tavern. "You're done for boy."

Cord was seated in the corner furthest from them and Havens held court in the center. Benny Havens was a legend among cadets. Not just for his service during the War of 1812, but after it, for the small cottage he'd occupied just west of the Cadet Hospital where he'd dispensed hot flips, ale, cider and wheat cakes to home-sick young men. Among cadets, the oft-repeated story was that Edgar Allan Poe, during his short stint at the Academy, had found Benny Havens to be the only congenial soul in the entire place. Many in the years that followed agreed.

The Academy had not looked at either Poe or Havens with similar empathy. Poe departed within a year of his arrival at the Academy, dismissed for 'gross neglect of duty' and 'disobedience of orders'. The rumor in the Corps was that Poe had shown up for parade formation, the uniform order to be 'with cross belts and under arms'—wearing just cross belts and carrying his musket. True or not, it made for a good tale and good tales made many a gray night pass by a bit lighter.

Benny Havens was also banished from the military reservation. Only to set up a new tavern down by the Hudson River, just south of post limits. It was a magnet for the young cadets, many of who were away from home for the first time and thrust into a harsh disciplinary environment that reshaped their boyish spirit into captains of war. Everyone needed an occasional break from that and Benny Havens was the person to give it.

Right now, though, all the old man wanted to do was break Elijah Cord.

"You best hope the Superintendent gets here before Mister King," Benny Havens said, "although I'll be hoping for Mister King and his pistols." He waved the barrel of the gun toward the door. "Let's move to the river field and wait for whoever shows up first."

As Havens gestured for Cord to move to the door, the cadet whispered a prayer. "Please, God. I've never asked for much. And I never got much, neither, if you really look at it. I asked you to spare mother, but that wasn't to be, though she really believed in you. I know that's the way things are and that you and I have never been close. But if you can help me out of this, please, I'll be a better man. And besides," he added, as he stumbled outside, "Lidia rejected me today, but you can't blame a fellow for trying one more time especially after, well, I suppose you know about that last time. Surely I shouldn't be punished for that?"

"What was that?" Havens demanded, catching a bit of the last.

"Nothing, sir."

"You best be praying, boy. You're gonna need all the help you can get."

The storm broke upon the three riders, sheets of rain descending. Grant led the way, galloping cross-country toward Benny Havens, ignoring the road that followed a more gentle, winding route that switched back several times to the river's edge and the tavern.

Rumble was using every ounce of horsemanship and strength to keep his horse from tumbling headfirst down the steep slope. Sherman was behind, muttering darkly. They both kept their focus on Grant's slight form on top of the huge horse. Grant came to a sudden halt at the edge of a creek.

Normally a small, insignificant trickle of water, it was now a torrent, sending water cascading toward the Hudson to begin a journey downstream to New York City and thence the Atlantic Ocean. Sherman pulled up beside Rumble and Grant, his forage cap drooping over his deep-set, solemn eyes.

"We can't cross," Sherman said flatly. "It'll kill us. We have to go back to the road."

Rumble shifted in the saddle. "The Superintendent will be taking the road. He'll likely get to Benny Havens before us. And King stores his guns with the smithie in town and will make it back to the river field quickly."

"No point going if we don't get to Cord first," Grant said mildly. "Besides, we set out to get there, we get there. No turning aside."

"I don't like water," Rumble said, hands clutching the reins. "I had a bad experience."

"You won't make it across," Sherman repeated.

Grant turned and placed a hand on Rumble's shoulder. "We'll make it." He looked closer, reading Rumble's eyes. "You really do fear the water, don't you, Lucius?"

Rumble bit his lip, looking between Grant and Sherman.

"If you can't make it," Grant began, "then—"

"Let's do it," Rumble said.

Grant spurred York forward into the surging water. Rumble glanced at Sherman who shook his head. Summoning every ounce of will, Rumble directed his reluctant horse into the stream.

"Damn fools," Sherman yelled. "I'll see if I can delay Delafield." He headed for the road.

The horse shook beneath Rumble as they hit the torrent. He was being shoved down-creek despite his best efforts. Ahead of him, Grant almost got swept away, but mighty York managed to hold against the force of the water. Rumble cried out in panic as his horse lost traction. In a second he was dismounted and underwater, one hand gripping the rein, his only anchor from being washed away.

Grant leaned forward, his head against York's neck, exhorting the horse in a calm, yet firm, voice. Hooves caught in mud and rock deep beneath the water and with a powerful surge, York hauled Grant onto the far bank.

Grant twisted in the saddle and looked back. The only sign of Rumble was a hand above the turbulent water gripping the rein. Grant jumped off York.

"Hold!" he ordered his horse. Using the lead as a safety line, he leapt into the water. The current grabbed his slight frame and tried to rocket him downstream, but York was like a rock. Grant pushed forward to Rumble's horse.

"Steady." Grant grabbed the other rein and held it in place, while staring into the horse's terrified eyes, calming it. Rumble splashed to the surface, blood pouring from a gash over his right eye, flailing to get out of the stream.

"Easy, Lucius," Grant urged, as if he were talking to York, not Rumble.

Using all his strength, Rumble reached out and also grabbed York's lead. He pulled, hand over hand, to York and the shore, while Grant maintained contact with the terrified horse caught in the current.

As soon as he had his feet on solid ground, Rumble turned. There was no sign of Grant, just the horse, head above water, eyes wide with fright. The horse's taut bridle disappeared under the churning water.

Rumble used York's lead as Grant had done. He jumped back into the water, reaching with his free hand for his friend. His fingers grazed across cloth and he grabbed. Hauling with all his might, he lifted the slender Grant up.

Grant spit out water, but he didn't let go of the other horse's bridle. Together, Rumble and Grant heaved on the lead.

"Come on," Grant urged the horse. "Come on."

York must have picked up the urgency because the large bay took a step back. Together, the two men and York pulled the other horse to shore.

Grant tumbled onto the creek bank, breathing hard. Rumble collapsed on his back, staring aimlessly up at the rain pouring down through the leaves.

Grant turned his head, blinking water out of his eyes. "Thank you, Lucius. You saved my life."

"The obligation is mutual," Rumble said.

Grant got up and knelt next to his friend, noting the gash. "I think you're a bit worse for the adventure."

Rumble blinked. He reached up and touched his face. Pulling his hand back he saw the blood. "It's nothing." He stood and shivered like a dog, trying to shake off water and a bad memory. Neither were completely expunged.

Rumble wiped the blood off his face with his sleeve. They both jumped back in their saddles. Grant turned down-slope and galloped toward Benny Havens as fast as the terrain would allow. At neck-breaking speed if they had another mishap, but Rumble followed, blinking blood out of his right eye.

They raced past Benny Havens tavern and down the path to the riverbank. A clearing, thirty feet long by ten wide bordered the Hudson River. To the north, Cord stood alone, his blond hair plastered to his skull, a pistol lying on a flat rock in front of him.

To the south, King had pistol in hand, arm straight down at his side. And in the middle, but not directly between, was Benny Havens, old flintlock in his grip.

"Pick up the pistol and defend yourself with what little honor you have," King called out to Cord.

"Their powder might be wet," Grant observed.

"I wouldn't gamble lives on it," Rumble said.

As suddenly as it had started, the rain ceased. Above the opposite bank of the Hudson, the glow of approaching dawn brightened the sky.

Cord glanced at the pistol and folded his arms across his chest. "I will make amends, but I will not duel."

"Gentlemen," Grant called out. "I suggest we make haste back to the barracks and sort this out later, when cooler heads might prevail."

"This isn't your business, Mister Grant," Havens yelled back.

“Major Delafield has made quite clear his stance on dueling,” Grant said. “And the Superintendent is on his way,” he reminded them as if mentioning it was no longer raining, a fact they were all aware of.

“Sherman will slow him a little bit,” Rumble said as he dismounted. Most likely with some tale of misery and woe that would touch the old man’s heart. Sherman could predict darkness on a sun-lit field, but a cloud would invariably show up to prove him right.

“Let’s get on with this,” King said. “Mister Cord. On the count of three, the duel will begin, whether you have pistol in hand or not.”

“Aint that kind of dishonorable?” Cord said.

“One.” King was perfectly still.

Rumble started to move forward, but Havens raised his pistol. “Don’t be getting involved in something that’s not yours to get involved in.”

“Lidia is my concern,” Rumble said. “And my friends are also my concern. Mister King is a distant cousin and Mister Cord was my roommate.”

Cord held up both hands in surrender. “All right. Enough. I apologize.”

As they spoke, Grant spurred York, riding him wide to the north to gather speed.

“You owed me an apology,” King said, “but you cannot take back what you have done to Miss Lidia. Two.”

King raised his pistol, aimed at Cord, and cocked it. He opened his mouth to utter the last number, but galloping full tilt toward Cord’s back, Grant jerked back on the reins and York leapt into the air, right over Cord’s head and landed with a splash in the mud directly between the two cadets, the massive horse blocking any chance of a shot.

“Move, sir, on your honor, move!” King cried out. “Let me finish the cur.”

Two horsemen galloped into the clearing. In the lead, Major Delafield was easily recognizable not just by rank and uniform, but by the carefully shaven fringe of white beard that encircled the lower half of his face. Sherman was behind him.

“Everyone hold fast,” Delafield called out. His gaze went from person to person, assessing, judging and deciding.

“Mister King. You are dueling?”

“I am, sir,” King said, “and I am not finished.”

“With Mister Cord?” Delafield demanded.

“Mister Cord never took up the pistol,” Rumble said, walking over to Cord.

Letitia and Lidia appeared on the path from the tavern and that gave Major Delafield pause. “What is the cause of this duel?”

“A moment with my friend, sir, please,” Rumble said. He leaned close to Cord. “Is it true, Elijah? About Lidia?”

Cord let out a deep breath, almost causing Rumble to step back from the stink. “If she says she’s with child, it’s so. She is an honest girl.”

“And it is yours.”

“I suppose, given nature’s realities.” Cord turned his bloodshot eyes toward his friend. “I can’t be boarded out. I can’t go back to Norfolk.”

“Always about you,” Rumble said angrily. “What about Lidia?”

Cord blinked.

Rumble pressed. “You should have never gone off quarters. And you should’ve never been with Lidia.”

“Should have’s serve no purpose now,” Cord said, shaking his head and wincing in pain. He peered blearily at Rumble. “What happened to your face? Are you all right?”

“Don’t concern yourself with that right now,” Rumble said. “We have to get you out of here. And we must uphold Lidia’s honor.”

Cord closed his eyes in surrender. “I’m sorry, my friend. I’ve done the deed, I must pay the price. Perhaps Benny will allow the marriage to wait until after I graduate and the Supe will go easy on me.”

Rumble knew if the Superintendent found out Cord had lain with Lidia, there would be a storm much greater than the one nature had surrounded them with. Cord was caught between being drummed out of the Corps for being out of quarters or the same fate for being in Lidia’s bedroom and transgressing her honor.

Cord’s shoulder slumped. “I’m done for. You can have my full dress gray. Split out the rest of my gear as you see fit.” He gave a hint of the rakish grin. “Let Old Pete Longstreet have my tar bucket—it won’t fit his big head and it will drive him crazy because he won’t want to give it to anyone else.”

Rumble shifted his focus to the two women standing at the edge of the clearing. Lidia met his gaze. Her eyes flickered momentarily to the wreck of a young man that was Elijah Cord,

then locked in on Rumble. One red eyebrow arched in quiet supplication. The movement wasn't lost to Cord either, and the grin was gone.

Rumble turned to Benny Havens. "I am sorry for causing dishonor to your family and am grateful that Mister Cord interceded for my honor. I respectfully request your daughter in betrothal, sir." A vast emptiness opened up inside of Rumble, as wide as the Mississippi and as mysterious and dangerous.

Benny Havens looked as if he'd been slapped. "It was you?" He turned to Lidia. "But you said you lay with Mister Cord."

"She said she lay with a 'him'," Letitia corrected. She nudged her daughter. "Isn't that so, darling?"

Lidia nodded.

Cord put a hand on Rumble's shoulder. "You can't do that. It's my responsibility."

"I certainly can," Rumble said. "And I am."

"I don't—" Cord couldn't form any more words as his brain tumbled in drunken freefall.

Grant dismounted and walked up to Rumble. As if talking to a horse he needed to calm: "Are you insane, Lucius? You'll lose everything."

Rumble nodded. "Exactly. But I will also gain much."

Grant hesitated for the first time all day. "Are you certain?"

"Very much so, Sam." He looked over at Lidia and met her eyes. "A lot of blank pages now to be written."

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New York Times bestselling author Bob Mayer has over 40 books published. He has over four million books in print and is in demand as a team-building, life-change, and leadership speaker and consultant for his Who Dares Wins: The Green Beret Way concepts. He is the Co-Creator of Who Dares Wins Publishing.

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Bob draws on all of these experiences to write his novels and his nonfiction books, including "WHO DARES WINS: The Green Beret Way To Conquer Fear & Change" and "The Novel Writer's Toolkit: A Guide To Writing Great Fiction And Getting It Published." He is an adjunct faculty member at the University of Washington, and also teaches novel writing and improving the author via his Warrior-Writer program.

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