

Thousands of men descend upon Gettysburg determined to kill one another.

What are the townswomen to do but get busy -



Thursday June 25 1863

Three miles west by northwest of Gettysburg Pennsylvania

Seventeen-year-old Megan Loren grabbed both rough-hewn doorjambs and leaned from the hayloft. The little doorway opened to nothing but hot sticky air. The corral lay twenty feet beneath her toes. A matched pair of black Kentucky Walkers and a small strawberry mare looked on as eleven Union cavalymen dismounted. Most were strangers. Two were locals. Megan called and waved. Their captain, her sister's husband Edwin Brown looked up and winked then slowly licked his lips.

Megan grabbed a pitchfork and stabbed the hay so hard she jarred her shoulder. Edwin had not been home since April 27, 1861. Her sister had hosted a going away picnic that day for Adams County boys and men who had enlisted with the Union. *Not the least of whom was her beloved husband.*

Angry tears obscured Megan's vision as Edwin disappeared into the farmhouse. *Kathin will be thrilled.*

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Megan's elder sister Kathin was in the hidden loft above the Loren kitchen. The tiny room sizzled and stank with sweat.

"I'm sorry we couldn't make you more comfortable," she said to the young Negro woman on the rumpled cot.

"S all right," the woman said. Her breath labored as she brought her infant to her breast.

"It won't be much longer," Kathin said. "Our friends will move you to the next station as soon as they dare. I'd have put you in the cellar where it's cooler, but we haven't felt safe using that hidey-hole since the Governor's warning that the Confederates might be moving north again."

"We fine," the young mother said tiredly. "See? He sleepin' now. Don't know it's hot. You go ahead on."

"Rest well," Kathin whispered as she left.

The door at the foot of the steps opened at her slightest touch. The weight of the cupboard that concealed it swung it closed behind her. The kitchen felt cool after the swelter of the loft. Kathin heard a scuffling noise from the adjacent dining room and she grabbed a skillet. With the skillet raised above her head, she skirted the kitchen worktable and stepped through the doorway to the dining room ready to conk the groundhog that sometimes sneaked in through the cellar.

"Edwin!"

Edwin Amadeus Brown lounged at the dining table resplendent in Union blue with one booted foot on the table, the other extended toward her and serving as a hat-rack. The

pale blond waves flowing to his shoulders looked thinner than they had when he rode away in '61. Other than that, he seemed little changed.

“Where the hell have you been woman? I’ve waited twenty minutes.”

“In the necessary.” Kathin lied knowing he would not have checked the outhouse. He preferred chamber pots emptied by others. “Why are you here?”

“I’m often in the neighborhood to escort supplies and recruits from Carlisle Barracks,” he said. “The whores in town are most accommodating,” he added with one brow cocked as if anticipating her reaction. When Kathin did not react, he kicked his hat up into his hands and muttered, “Only came by today because I’ve a couple local telltales in tow. A gentleman must guard his reputation,” he said as he donned his hat then took a step toward her.

Kathin raised the skillet, her habitual fear of him diluted by his absence.

Edwin sniggered. “Is that anyway for a dutiful wife to greet her husband after two long years of war?” He wrenched the skillet from her hand then forced her into a rough embrace. Kathin pummeled his chest with her fists. He laughed and ground her breasts against him. “Keep it up kitten. You know I love it when you fight me.”

Kathin went limp.