

CHAPTER

1

W*ill she remember me?*
He's walking through a moonlit night to a woman who doesn't know he's coming. The black shape of an owl coasts silently above his road through deep woods and his eyes go up to it and back down to the rutted dirt in the full moon's dream-like glow. But he's not dreaming and here's the owl again with its still wings gliding the skyway over the road to a clearing ahead. A graveyard. He shivers but shakes it off and shifts his bag to the hand away from the graves and picks up his pace.

He slows when the owl settles on a gravestone leaning close by the road. The owl flutters noisily up as he comes near, then beats its wings a few times into the trees leaving a single call over the luminous cemetery.

Come even with the marker the bird's just left, he stops and puts his satchel down to look at the worn gray stone. In the gothic moonlit setting and the melancholy feel of the world as he's known it, he half expects the inscription to spell his name: *Lincoln.*

That's what would happen, he thinks, if this were a story.

He's walking into a story that will be told for hundreds of years but doesn't know it. The gravestone is part of it, but not the worn-down run of flowing heading, probably a first name and a last, that time has taken like their owner. Below the unknowable name, in smaller but deeper block letters, are legible words:

Life is not forever
And neither is death

A decorative image at the bottom has the last wordless word, projecting rays upward from a setting sun.

Or, he thinks as he picks up his things, *is that sun rising?*

Finished with his momentary optimism, he veers back to habit. *She probably has someone.* As he goes back to hiking the ankle-turning grooves and clumps of the road, he sees pictures. Him the gangling poor boy with only a canvas satchel to his name, speechless before her, dumbstruck. Him bent and stumbling into the woods when she has someone.

What will I do if she has someone?

Give up.

Sometimes he thinks things he doesn't like. It started after his mother died. That windowless cabin in the woods got darker then, and more than from the want of his mother to keep the fire. He was nine and got stubborn and silent like his father, and though his sister Sarah and then his new step-mother gradually brought him back to life, a voice got in him in that dark year and didn't leave. *Take what you want or someone else will,* he thinks and dislikes himself for it. *Cheat a little, everyone does...*, grasping and blaming like the dad he butted heads with every day. Finding something wrong with everything, the voice spews contempt on Abe's father for being illiterate and on Abe for reading. It can't be satisfied. One day it says: *If you stay here with this fool of a father, you'll end up the nothing he says you are.* And the next: *If you go off on your own, you know you'll fail.*

A few months ago, afraid to stay and afraid to leave, Lincoln let go into a long-chained urge to bust free of his daddy's farm. Was it working on him since he saw the slaves? Three years ago his father hired him out as a hand on a flat boat taking farm goods down the Mississippi and he saw the dark men chained in a line being loaded on a steamer. He'd seen a few Negroes walking behind owners when he was young in Kentucky, but never a shackled bunch of Africans put in a boat like cargo. *Woebegone,* he said to himself when he saw their wet bloodshot eyes. *Like ghosts,* he thought and shivered when he heard their chains clank as the white man forced them down below where there was no light.

Nineteen at the time, Abe turned over his earnings for that trip to his father and went back to plowing and planting on the scrubby family farm until he reached twenty-one and freed himself. Now here he is in this year of 1831 just back from a

second trip to New Orleans with corn and hogs in a log boat he pegged together himself and piloted for pay that's all his own. His employer Denton Offut wants to use his profits to start a store back up here in the frontier north. It's growing, Lincoln, he keeps saying. You put your money where it grows. Lincoln talked Offut into putting his investment in New Salem, a town they'd stopped in for a day on their way downriver. For all the young Lincoln knows he'll like storekeeping and do it all his life. But why in New Salem?

It's only got a hundred souls but it's the up and coming town of the region and you'll be in before the big money knows. That's what his scheming inner voice said to tell Offut instead of the other truth that New Salem's where Abe saw the woman he wants so much he's walking through the night to get to her. It worked.

If she's got a man, the voice says, there are ways to change that. If you're a man.

When he gets to New Salem the sun is still down behind high virgin oaks but the sky is so bright it must be eight. He doesn't come into town from the east where he got his boat stuck on the dam. Better not see that dam first thing, that dam where he was the town fool back in April.

He comes in as far as you can from the dam and still be in New Salem, down at the west end of the town's one house-lined road that runs east a few hundred yards to the tavern by the dam and mill on the river. At first he feels important as the only man striding toward the sunrise-backed tavern like a temple on a sacred day. But then he sees how the shadows come toward him and how he's on display to anyone in the houses fronting the narrow dirt road. Are eyes watching him from hiding? Birds call from trees behind the houses. Why?

One, two houses... he stills his fear by calculating, a habit that helps when he feels uncertain. He counts the houses, or the buildings rather because he sees... long after he first heard the clanging anvil... the blacksmith's place, and across the road from it the half-bound barrels and leaning staves of a cooper's shop. Left and right, north and south he counts them, all log buildings,

not one of frame, and reckons their different shapes the way eyes inside them might be reckoning him.

Not much to reckon, he thinks, but he stiffens as he walks the last of the gauntlet to his goal. He passes a store on the north side of the road and opposite it on the south the office and shingle of "Dr. John Allen." Seven buildings on the north side of the village road, he makes it, ten on the south. And there it is. Where she is.

The Rutledge Tavern. It's a double log building that stops him with the shock that now he has to knock on the door. He overpowers an urge to turn and rush away, and instead puts his bag down and crouches as if to find something in it. There's no way he can know that he'll remember this moment when he enters the White House thirty years from now, and remember what he was looking for.

Courage. He stands angrily and yanks the handles of his canvas bag and marches the last steps wiping the defiance off his face and knocks three times on the big plank door.

Will she remember me?

The tavern door swings open, sparks leap from blue eyes in a woman's bright face framed by long auburn hair and she exclaims, "I remember you!"