

# Chapter 15

The grass in the field was as high as Yves' hip, and was dry enough to rustle loudly as he moved through it. He held his musket before him as he walked slowly, half-crouched, trying to move slowly enough that he would make no sound, despite the dry grass. He held his musket at the ready, with the pan primed and the bore packed with an innovative load that the Americans were fond of, consisting of a standard ball, preceded out of the muzzle by several small buckshot pellets.

Gerard had urged him to try the new load, saying, "General Washington insists that all of his troops load this way. They call it 'buck and ball,' and it's said to increase the likelihood of striking your target significantly."

"But can the buckshot stop a target as well as a ball?"

"No, but it's better than a miss, and if, on the other hand, you are a lucky shot, you will strike your target with the entire load, which will drop most anything you might shoot at."

Yves had nodded thoughtfully and had taken a handful of the premade paper cartridges Gerard had offered. Now, out in the field, he had torn the back off one with his teeth, primed the pan, and dropped the rest of the cartridge down the barrel of his musket, following it with the ramrod, which he used to gently tamp the load down firmly into place at the back of his gun's barrel.

His musket was prepared, then, as he saw a rustling in the

grass ahead of him. He did not hear his quarry's telltale sound, but he could now see the grass moving about, perhaps thirty yards away.

Moving very deliberately, he brought the musket to his shoulder and sighted down the barrel at the point at which he anticipated that his target would appear. He took a deep, calming breath, his finger sliding inside the loop that protected the trigger and resting on the fatal bit of metal gently.

As he expected, a group of geese burst up from the ground, taking flight and presenting a multitude of targets, wheeling into the sky. Yves pulled the trigger, and over the deafening roar of the gun firing by his ear, he thought he heard the high-pitched shriek of . . . a girl!

Two of the geese he had fired at faltered and dropped to the ground with distinct thumps. It sounded as though one still had some fight in it, honking and struggling in the grass, but the other made no sound at all. Between Yves and where the birds had fallen, though, a head popped up, dark of hair and skin. The look of utter terror in her eyes made the horse seller's slave girl all but unrecognizable at first. She looked at Yves and the terror on her face gave way to recognition, and her shoulders slumped as she sighed audibly in what sounded to Yves like resignation.

She lifted her hands into the air, tears streaming down her cheeks, and she called out in her oddly-accented French. "Please don't shoot, *monsieur*. I do not want to return to my master, but I want to live, even . . . even if it means going back."

Yves' mind was awchirl with confusion as he realized that he was still holding the butt of his gun to his shoulder. Immediately, he lowered it and slung the weapon back over his shoulder. He called

back, holding his own hands up in reassurance, “I did not mean to frighten you; indeed, I did not even know you were there.”

She nodded and said, “I was hiding and was not aware of your presence in this field, either, until you shot at me.” She glared at him, her dark eyes flashing, and he gasped in disbelief that she could think that he would have fired on her.

“What? I did not shoot at you!” He gestured past her, to where the wounded goose could still be heard struggling. “I am here hunting for my supper only, and did not think that there was another soul in this field.”

She began to lower her hands, looking over her shoulder at where the geese had fallen. He could still see the apprehension in her expression as he said, “Let me but put that poor beast out of its misery, and then we shall talk, all right?”

She nodded, but did not move from where her feet were rooted in the field as Yves passed by on his way to the fowl. He could feel her eyes on him, wary and scared, as he walked past.

One goose lay silent, victim of a clean shot through the neck. The other had been struck in the wing, incapacitating it, and the bird hissed and beat at him with its good wing. He closed in on it, disregarding the bruises it was inflicting with its struggles. A quick flash of his blade, and the wounded bird joined its companion in the quietude of death.

Yves turned away from the geese to see the slave girl running in the opposite direction, toward some low, wooded hills. She ran with her hair streaming out behind her where it had escaped from her cap, and for the first time, Yves noticed that she was now clothed in what he might consider “proper” fashion, with what appeared to be a worn, but serviceable apron tied over a relatively

new-looking linen shift. He was relieved for her sake, and wondered if her master's improved fortunes with the sale of his horses to the regiment had led to some improvement in her condition.

He sighed and shook his head, turning back to deal with the birds. They would make for a rich meal, a welcome break from the steady diet of corn and the occasional beef. They would also be a heavy load for the long walk back to camp.

When he returned to the encampment with the geese, Gerard was the first to spot him.

"Well, so I see that you've had a successful day. You got two with one shot?"

"Indeed—one very lucky shot." Yves hesitated, then added, "I very nearly got a blackbird with the same shot."

Gerard gave him a quizzical look and said slowly, "Not enough meat to bother with on those, though I suppose that the red feathers are pretty enough."

"No, you miss my meaning. That slave girl from the horse seller—the one that caused us the . . . misunderstanding."

Gerard's eyebrows disappeared under his hairline and stayed up. "You mean to say that you encountered her out in the field where we saw all the geese the other day?"

"That's the very place, yes. What's more, she thought that I meant to shoot her, and lit off for the woods as soon as I turned my back."

"Oh no, that's bad," Gerard said, a look of grave concern coming over his face. "She must have run away from her master."

It was Gerard's turn to hesitate before speaking. "He will probably publish a reward for her immediately. . . it's a pity that you didn't bring her in, for her own safety."

Yves was taken aback. “Assist in capturing a slave? It is bad enough that the brutal institution is so widespread in this country, but for us to act in its defense or preservation in any way is abhorrent.”

Gerard held up a hand in a mollifying gesture. “I understand your position, but consider that every farmer and trader in these parts will be looking for her by week’s end, when her master’s notice appears. She has no legal protection that any of them are obliged to observe, and not everyone has your fine sense of right and wrong.”

Yves looked startled, then concerned. “She might come to grief for my failure to persuade her to return to her master?”

Gerard nodded. “It is possible, though you cannot hold yourself responsible for her actions.”

Yves swallowed hard, shaking his head. “I did not think about the implications of suffering her to run away from me, as I had the geese to contend with. When she lit off, I just accounted it to distrust of my person, and did not give any consideration to others taking up the chase.”

He unslung the geese from his back and handed the carcasses to Gerard. “Here, give these to the cook with my compliments. I hope that he can prepare them more delicately than the last ones he was given.”

Gerard looked startled as he took the two heavy birds from Yves. “Why will you not give the geese to the cook yourself?”

Yves gave his friend a grim look. “I need to go find that girl, for her own safety.”