

**CARVING**  
out  
**LOVE**

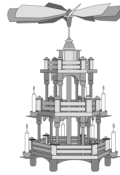
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*For Jenny Carlisle and Tonya B. Ashley. These ladies are fabulous writers and the best collaborators anyone could wish for while creating a novella collection. Their kindness, support, encouragement, and faith in me and our project never flagged.*



# I



July, 1861

Mexico, Missouri

A warm, humid breeze buffeted George Hunter as he bounced on the family buckboard into town. Beads of sweat covered his neck as the temperature rose. Since dawn, he'd spent hours doing chores for Papa on the farm, then loaded lumber into the wagon. This drive into town should have been easier. Instead, guiding the draft horse around the more prominent furrows was challenging as the wagon pounded through a sea of ruts along the dusty road.

The town's recent occupation by the Union Army left the main thoroughfare damaged from their constant vigil against secessionist raids. New posts dotted the road—likely poles for telegraph lines—an additional gift from the Union troops upon the landscape.

Once in town, George guided his horse into the alley behind Dawson's Mercantile, where the owners accepted

deliveries to their storage barn. He slid off the wagon seat and limped to the back to unload the lumber.

Moments later, Johnny Dawson flung open the back door of the mercantile. "Morning, George."

George nodded at the young man as he approached. "Thank you kindly for your help."

Johnny was a gangly lad with a perpetual smile on his freckled face. "Are these dried or fresh cut?" He leaped on the wagon as easily as a cat claims a windowsill, then grabbed the opposite end of the board George struggled to unload.

Observing Johnny's dexterity, George experienced a pang of jealousy. Even though he was a few years older, he should have the same nimbleness. "They've had some time to dry. More air could get to them if they're stacked for a while."

"With the call for building materials now, we'll be lucky if this lasts more than a few days."

They stacked the lumber in the barn, allowing space for air to reach most of the boards. When they'd finished, George followed Johnny into the mercantile.

The aroma of spices, coffee, and stale air greeted them. Although it was technically still morning, the air hung thick in the room as if it were late afternoon. George limped his way to the cash register manned by the elder Dawson.

"Morning, George. Did you bring the usual white oak?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Dawson. I wish I had more mature red oak or black walnut to cut, but those trees are too small to fell this year. Maybe next year. This lumber's had some time to dry, but needs more. Young Johnny says you have a high demand and no drying time is available."

"I will take all you can cut and bring to me. Fresh cut or dry. You can even throw in some short boards. With such high demand, length doesn't seem to matter. Either the Army or our

local people will take all we've got." He gestured to the brass register. "Are you looking for payment in trade or coin?"

"Papa said to trade." George pulled a list from his pocket. He handed the paper to Dawson. "Between everyone in my family, we're always hankering for something."

Dawson glanced around the store. "Can we go to the barn for a moment? I have some business I'd like to discuss."

George hesitated. He couldn't imagine what Dawson could want with him. Since he'd returned from the war, they'd conducted business in the store, in public. A talk in private usually meant something illegal.

"I see your concern, George. I promise this is a legitimate business deal. Just hear me out."

George noted the strain in Dawson's voice and nodded his assent. He'd never seen the man rattled before. That was saying a lot. He'd been coming to this store since before he could see over the counter.

Dawson turned and looked around. "Johnny, come here."

Johnny appeared by the register, broom in hand. "I was going to sweep while George was here."

"Hold off on that for a bit. I need you to gather things up for him." Dawson handed him the list. "He and I are stepping away, but we'll be back."

Johnny eyed the list. "I think I can find everything."

Dawson patted Johnny's shoulder. "Much obliged." Then he nodded at George, and together they made their way to the barn.



ONCE INSIDE, George stood silently as Dawson shifted his weight from one foot to the other. He had no idea how to

relieve the man's anxiety. George resigned himself to waiting for Dawson to find the right words to explain.

After some time shuffling, Dawson spoke.

"I have a job I'd like to offer you." Dawson held up his hand to stop George from interrupting. "Please, let me finish. You don't want another obligation besides everything you do on the farm. I understand. I'm in a bad way. A real bad way."

"What is it?"

"Two days ago, the new colonel ordered me to do something."

George sucked in air. "The federal colonel? Grant?"

"Yes, I believe that's who he said he was. It surprised me to have any officer appear in my store. Before this, they'd always sent some foot soldier. The whole time he talked, I stared at him, stunned that he'd come in person instead of sending one of his men. When he told me what he wanted, I was speechless."

"What did he want?"

"He demanded a weekly delivery of supplies to their encampment in the area called 'the commons,' about a half mile from John Clark's house."

George nodded. He knew the location.

"A runner will drop off the order at the beginning of the week. I'm to fill requests and deliver them by the end of the week. Weekly! They will pay me if a man sympathetic to the Union delivers it."

Dawson paused and fiddled with the top board of the lumber he and Johnny had just stacked. "Since John Muldrow gathered the 'Audrain Rangers'—foolish secessionists—the Union forces find it hard to trust anyone local. Even after Muldrow surrendered himself to Grant and took an oath of loyalty at Clark's house. They don't want a spy anywhere near their camp, yet they want the supplies brought in. I tried to



talk him into sending their wagon to pick them up, but he refused to consider any other way I suggested.”

“Why can’t you do it yourself?”

“I’m unacceptable because I sell to both sides of this conflict. Puts me under suspicion.” Dawson paced. “I’ve hardly slept since he’s been here, trying to think of a solution. I thought about sending young Johnny but wondered if the Audrain Rangers might shoot someone delivering to the camp, even if he wasn’t a soldier. I already have his father, Big Johnny, at risk in the war. I’ll not have my grandson in danger.”

“No. Don’t put young Johnny in harm’s way. He’d be subject to a random attack, with no experience in such situations. Besides, since he’s your grandson, the Army would think he’s as objectionable as you. So, why don’t you tell Grant you won’t do it?”

“He threatened to cut off my railroad shipments if I didn’t take on the responsibility. That would put me out of business in a matter of weeks.”

“Why are they approaching you now for these supplies? They’ve been here for nearly a month.”

“He wasn’t specific, but I got the feeling a lot more troops are coming in. Speculating about that could get me in trouble. It’s just a guess.” Dawson threw his hands up. “Bah! This is a fine mess!”

Dawson stopped pacing and walked to George. He was so close that a drop of sweat slid from Dawson’s nose onto George’s arm that was crossed in front of him. “See my dilemma? I don’t know what to do. When you entered the store, it gave me an idea. You were a soldier for them. What if you did it?”

“I was a soldier for the militia, which was under federal rule. But when they thought I would die, they discharged me and loaded me onto a train.”

“Did they give you discharge papers?”

“Sure. I’d have been mistaken for a deserter without them.”

Dawson pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his sweaty brow. “Those papers would be proof of your service and proper discharge.”

George’s face twisted into a wry grin. “You mean my limp isn’t enough?”

“Oh, George, it’s your saving grace.”

“How’s that?”

“Your injury got you out of the fighting before you got yourself killed. Everyone in the county respects your service. So much so, I don’t believe any of the rogue secessionists would try to kill you for delivering supplies there. They might jump you, but I don’t think they’d kill you.”

“No, Dawson. My limp isn’t my saving grace. God is. He allowed me to survive when men to my right and left fell in that battle. I’m left to walk with a limp. My brothers in arms don’t walk this Earth anymore, with or without a limp.”

Dawson stared at him for a moment, twisting his handkerchief. After several moments, he asked, “Know of anyone else I could hire? Someone who’d be trustworthy to Grant and his troops?”

George pondered the question. “I’m the only one from my militia discharged and sent back home. The ones I enlisted with have either committed to a three-year enlistment as full federal troops—or they’re dead.”

“This terrible war. Here we are, caught in the middle between both sides.”

“I’m not caught in the middle. I know what side I’m on. Almost gave my life for the cause.”

“Will you do it? I’ll pay you all the profits from their purchases to do it. Or, give you an equivalent in trade for goods. Whatever you want.”

“I’ll have to think about it. We sure could use the money or trade, but it’s a dangerous job. I’ll need to pray about it.”

“Pray. Think. Just make a quick decision. I don’t want to be forced out of business. I take care of young Johnny, his mother, and his siblings while Big Johnny is off to the fighting. I’d let them shut me down if it were only me.”

“I’ll let you know. In a day or two.” George reached out and squeezed Dawson’s shoulder. “You have my word.”

Both men stepped away from each other at the sound of an approaching cart. “Not a word to anyone about this.” Dawson started toward the barn door. “Not until you decide.”

George nodded. Then he led the way out of the barn.



OUTSIDE, a female easily halted a horse-drawn buggy. Sitting beside her was a young boy, who sprang into motion when they stopped. He hopped onto the ground and ran to the back of the cart.

Only a bit of the girl’s face was visible, hidden as it was behind the sides of her straw bonnet. Yet, George caught a flash of blue eyes and long lashes. What he spotted piqued his interest.

Dawson greeted the new arrivals. “Ah, Miss Zimmer, isn’t it?”

“It’s Zimmerman, Mr. Dawson.” The young lady smiled down at him. Then she motioned toward the rear of the buggy. “That rude young man is my brother, Albert.”

George hitched over to assist her out of the buggy. She took his hand without hesitation. Then, when she stepped to the ground without incident, she flashed him a slight smile for his courtesy.

“Morning, ma’am. I’m George Hunter.” He tipped his hat.

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Hunter.” She gave a slight curtsey. “Alice Zimmerman.” Her blue-eyed gaze was steady on his face. She didn’t search his lower extremities for the reason he limped, as some people did, nor comment on his awkward gait.

Dawson joined Albert at the back of her buggy and surveyed the contents of the wooden crate. “How many eggs do you have for me here?”

“Six dozen.” The boy beamed.

Alice turned from George and walked behind the buggy. “Albert, you say ‘six dozen, Mr. Dawson’ or ‘six dozen, sir.’ You’ve forgotten all your manners. Aunt Berta has been spoiling you.”

George moved to help unload the crate. “You must be the relatives Mrs. Schumacher’s been expecting.”

Her face showed surprise at his remark.

“It’s a small community and word gets around.” George shrugged. “My family has a farm next to your aunt’s land. She mentioned that family was coming when I returned one of her goats. He thought our pasture was tastier than hers.”

Albert ran to spread the doors wide as they entered the barn. The men carried the crate while Alice followed.

“My father is Aunt Berta’s brother. When Uncle Otto went to be with the Lord, she offered Papa the management of her farm. We took over many of the chores around the property. My aunt suffers from a weak constitution.” She opened her reticule, removed a handkerchief, and dabbed her upper lip. “My apologies, gentlemen. Growing up in Boston, I haven’t developed a tolerance for the heat here.”

After placing the crate, George and Dawson looked at each other with amusement. Dawson pulled his handkerchief and wiped his face while George fought to keep his laughter from erupting.

Dawson returned the handkerchief to his pocket. “None of us have developed a tolerance for this heat, Miss Zimmerman.” He gestured toward the mercantile. “Come inside, and we’ll conduct business while George picks up his order.”

George helped Albert latch the barn doors, then shadowed the three of them into the mercantile. While he followed, he admired the back of Miss Zimmerman’s bonnet and gingham dress.

Today had been interesting. It offered a life-threatening duty to consider and the discovery of a pretty maid who now lived a short walk down the road. He might take the wagon delivery job for no other reason than to have an excuse to pass her aunt’s house once a week.

This new job would be dangerous. Possibly deadly. Was this job his fresh path in life? Did God spare him to keep the peace in his hometown inhabited by two warring nations?