

Harper's Rescue Excerpt

Harper could take his time. He would not repeat the mistake he made at Fort Donelson when he was captured. He waited to develop a sense of people's normal movement in Bosley's yard. Also, the dog needed to lose interest before Harper could approach the wagon.

The moon wouldn't be up for another couple of hours, but the dim starlight might be enough. If he looked slightly off-center, objects became clearer. He knew the sounds of the night, even in the city. Through years of practice, he had learned to merge what he could see, what he heard, what he smelled, what he felt, with a sixth sense in order to understand his surroundings, even on the darkest nights. Tonight, the starlight made the task easier.

In the shadows of the saloon a man sat smoking a pipe next to the cellar door, visible only by a soft red glow when he drew on his pipe. The pipe-smoker would have seen him leave *The Officers' Club*, and without a doubt, would track him across the yard when he left. The dog next door snuffled at the fence behind the outhouses. Harper would have to wait until the dog calmed down. He might be the only one in all of Paducah who could do what came next—move silently without being seen. The desk-bound soldiers in Norman's office or the fort could not. He was one of the few with those special skills needed to complete this assignment.

The glow from the pipe across the yard flared and fell to the ground. Here was his chance. Harper slid past the outhouse door and made his way in a low crouch to the shadow of nearest pile of junk. Hopefully, his dark uniform would merge into the black silhouette of the junk.

Sparks from the pipe scattered under the guard's stomping foot as he ground the ashes into the dirt. Harper took the opportunity to crouch-run to the next closest shadowy area along the rear fence where he stopped and waited again. Not knowing if the guard had seen him, Harper made the final bound which brought him to the side of the cook house and out of sight from the watchman.

From this angle, he could see the silhouette of the watchman who had remained seated during Harper's maneuvering. If Harper's luck held, the man would still be focused on the outhouse. Harper kept the wagon between himself and the watchman. He crouched along the side away from the clubs, aligning himself with the shadows of the rear wagon wheels to ensure his own dark outline matched the dark shadows of the stable behind him. Satisfied, he rose from his crouch.

Under its canvas cover, the wagon sat empty with a tarpaulin crumpled in the bed. Only the strong odor of coal oil gave any clue regarding its previous contents.

Bosley did not sell coal oil.

Alone in the darkness, despair began to tinge her thoughts and she fell into a full-on crying jag. Katie had been in The Box right after she arrived in Paducah. Then, Loreena told her they would need to teach her what to do before she entertained the soldiers.

Tonight, she sat alone on the crude bed in the dark, dank cell awaiting her punishment. Eleanor wouldn't learn what had happened until morning. However, even Eleanor might not be able to stop Loreena from keeping Katie locked here, or allowing the workmen at her.

Katie shivered as much from the cold as from her fear. No sheets or blankets covered the bed—not even a mattress. She felt along the walls around the small space but couldn't find any other objects on the dirt floor except the dry, empty honey bucket. Katie moved her hands along the walls to search for something she could use to keep warm. She found nothing there, only the ladder up to Mister Bosley's office. The soldiers had taken everything.

Feeling had left her toes. They scuffed across the dirt floor. She paced the length of The Box several times to keep the blood moving before she sat on the bed to rub them hard and fast. After a minute or so, pain of the cold stabbed at them. Frustrated, Katie pulled her feet under her. She squeezed into the corner, propping herself into a tight ball while covering her feet with the pillow sack. Hoping she had found the daguerreotype of her mother, she pulled it from the sack along with the dagger next to it.

Katie gripped the picture and the knife to her chest. She wished her mother would come visit now, while she waited for her punishment to begin. She rummaged into the sack to find the bottle of opium extract. Her mother came to visit her when she last used the opium. She would come again if Katie used it again. Katie pulled the cork stopper to smell the concoction. No odor. She froze. Opium was more powerful than laudanum. If she took any, she might not be able to protect herself.

The noise from some creature scuttling across the floor startled her before she realized it was not a threat. Katie slumped into the corner of the cell. Her shoulders, back, and arms burned from the stings of the riding crop. She wore stinking clothes bought from a stable hand with everything she valued bundled into the sack made from a pillowcase. A single tear rolled along the side of her nose, onto her lips. They would be here in the morning, the way they had the last time she stayed in The Box.

This time, she had her dagger.

Magnusson bolted upright on his cot, wide awake. A layer of thick black smoke boiled a foot above his head, lit from below via the two stairwells. Firey-hot air filled his lungs when he took a breath. He looked across the aisle to where Fridholdt and Eberhart still slept. Cooke's empty cot showed he was not there.

He rolled from his cot and grabbed his trousers. Barefoot, he crossed the room in a crouch to stay below the smoke layer. "Wake up you fellas! Fire, fire, fire!" He pulled the blankets back from both men. Schmidlapp's man Friholdt blinked rapidly while he stared back at Magnusson. Eberhart rolled from his bed onto the floor but quickly knelt on the opposite side of the cot to stare at Magnusson with wide, uncomprehending eyes.

"Get out of bed, fella! Now, Fridholdt. Move it. The stable's on fire." Magnusson looked past Eberhart. "Get them men out of their beds. Fast!" He turned to look at the rear of the stable. There,

men crowded around their escape path. One screamed after he fell into the flaming vortex swirling up through the void where the staircase once stood. Several men had fallen to their knees, coughing, trying to catch their breath.

Magnusson turned back to Fridholdt and saw him button his trousers. The sight reminded Magnusson he still held his own trousers in his hand.

The remaining men at the rear stairwell stampeded past to the other end of the building where another crowd had collected. There, men had made their escape. Unable to cross into the aisle because of the crowd, Magnusson stepped into his own trousers.

With the mob past, Magnusson grabbed his remaining clothes. He ordered the others to do so as well. At the front stairway, flames shot up through the opening, immolating three men on the stairs. The crowd backed away from a man enveloped in flaming long johns.

That will be all of us soon.

Some of the uninjured men ran to the walls. They pounded or kicked against the wooden planks. In their haste, others stood too tall and inhaled the choking smoke before they collapsed. Eberhart needed to hurdle several bodies when he rejoined Magnusson.

For the first time in his life, animal fear spread through Magnusson's body. Rising through the churning flood of his own emotions, Magnusson knew he had to lead these men out, had to think in spite of the fear. What could he do?

"Hold these." Magnusson handed Eberhart the pile of clothes.

The three Iowans fell to their knees, driven down by the layer of black smoke, now barely three feet above the deck. Somewhere beyond their little circle, the pounding on the walls continued. Horses screamed below them. More men dropped, unconscious.

Fridholt's eyes had grown to full circles, his face pale. "Gus? What d'ya want us to do?" He glanced to both ends of the stable.

Magnusson heard the quiver in Fridholdt's voice. He looked at Eberhart's wide, round eyes and noted his short, frantic gasps. That boy would soon yield to panic.

Think, soldier!

Magnusson did not have an answer for them.