

Kiss of a Traitor

ONE MORE MOMENT
CAT LINDLER

Ford's Folly, Virginia, 1791

Killer's funeral wagged tongues for months in the James River valley.

Brendan Sinclair, occupying a place to one side of the open grave, said beneath his breath, "Damned ridiculous, if you ask me."

"Quiet!" Willa Sinclair said in a forced whisper as she pinched his forearm.

Beside them stood Plato and Jwana, parents to eight-year-old Aristotle, the Sinclair children's best friend. With a sharp intake of breath, Jwana added to Willa's rebuke, "Mistah Brendan!" She shook her head, the tight dark curls of her closely cropped hair gleaming in the sun. "Dis be fer the chil'en, not fer you. B'have yerself."

The Sinclair children had turned out in Sunday-best form, and all the tenant farmers gathered around the

small gravesite beneath a robin's egg sky to view the proceedings and pay their respects. Lancelot, the eldest of the eleven-year-old Sinclair twins (by fifteen minutes, he constantly reminded his sister Guenevere), had arranged a procession. Dressed in his father's blue Continental coat, with sleeves rolled up and coattail flapping about the backs of his knees, Lancelot led a sleek black horse from the manor house to the grave. A worn pair of military cavalry boots sat backward in the saddle's stirrups.

As five-year-old Isolde walked beside her older sister, she piped up in a clear, high voice that carried over the assembly, "What's the boots for?"

"Shh," Guenevere said. Having been assigned the honor of carrying the casket, a metal box that once held dynamite, she walked with proud, stately steps. The box had miraculously survived the explosion in her chemistry laboratory that blasted a hole in the west wall of the house. After that unfortunate incident, her father moved her laboratory to a shed some distance away, and both her parents forbade her experimentation with explosive materials. "The boots are for Killer. They're empty because he's not with us."

Isolde's face crumpled in a frown. "But Killer didn't wear boots!"

"Shh!" Lancelot said, turning his head and directing a glower at his younger sister. "Have some decorum for the deceased."

Undaunted, she replied, "What's deceased?"

Tristan, Isolde's twin brother, said from behind her, "Dead."

"As a doornail," added Aristotle.

"What's decorum?"

Four voices, sounding like an agitated nest of snakes, hissed, "Shhh!"

While the children slowly made their way to the gravesite, the sultry mid-August day unfolded like a bolt of blue satin fabric, shiny with sun glinting off the verdant leaves of the cottonwoods and the rolling swath of grassy pastures. The family graveyard occupied a small plot at the convergence of two pastures on an overlook above the calm waters of the James River. Below them, the silvery river flowed as thickly and slowly as molasses. Meadowlarks trilled from the fence posts delineating the sacred ground, and swallows twirled like bright parasols above the water.

Once the horse reached the company, Tristan took the cat figure he had carved from a knot of burled oak and solemnly laid it in the makeshift casket. Guenevere had read him stories of carved effigies being placed in graves as companions and guides to heaven. 'Twas a pagan practice, but Tristan stated that Killer, considering his disposition, needed all the divine guidance he could get.

An embroidered silken shroud, stitched by Aristotle, decorated the inside of the coffin and cradled the body of the unfortunate Killer.

While Guenevere gently laid the dynamite box in the open grave, Isolde took over with a poem she had written in her childish scrawl. It began with “Killer good cat” and ended with “Rattler bad snake.” Though the poetry lacked rhyme and meter, all assembled bowed their heads, more than a few to hide their smiles.

Soon came the part Brendan had dreaded all morning. The children had chosen their father, as family patriarch, to give the eulogy. Brendan stepped forward and sucked in a breath.

“We gather here today to mourn Killer, a . . . um, member of our family. What can one say about him? Having been the primary victim . . . ah, recipient of Killer’s peculiar expression of . . . um, love, only one thought comes to mind. He was a cat. ’Tis a miracle he lived so long, this blasted devil’s cat. He was too mean to live.”

A chorus of dismay issued from the onlookers: “Brendan!” “Father!” “Papa!” “Mistah Brendan!”

With a black look for his father, Lancelot came forward and elbowed the older man aside. “I can see this was an ill-conceived notion, to expect Father to show the proper respect. I shall finish the eulogy.”

Brendan shrugged and moved back beside his wife, who sent him a glower fit to murder.

“We shall miss Killer,” Lancelot said, “his mischievous ways, unfettered fidelity, and unbounded energy.” When Brendan snorted, Lancelot scowled and continued: “Killer fell foul to a rattlesnake, Satan’s instrument

and the fate of many innocents in these wild lands. We can only trust in God's mercy to one of His perfect creatures. May Killer run the fields of heaven and feast on rats 'til eternity. Amen."

A refrain of *amens* and more than a few sighs followed, but above those sounds rose another.

"Oh!" Willa said with a gasp, cradling her extended stomach. "This babe is coming quickly."

"Tis reincarnation," Guenevere said, her voice filled with wonder. "Killer's spirit is to be reborn."

"Is it true?" Isolde asked, turning to her older brother.

Lancelot smirked at Guenevere. "You birdbrain. Killer is gone to heaven, and reincarnation is a myth for weak minds."

A fiery hue arose on Guenevere's cheeks. "Birdbrain? Weak minds? Were any here possessed of a weak mind, 'twould be you, my lackwit brother!" Her arms windmilling, she flew at Lancelot and knocked him flat on his back. The reins to the horse he was holding dropped from his hand, and the nervous steed pranced and danced over and about the bodies rolling on the ground.

"Cease!" Brendan shouted. "Plato, secure that horse!"

Plato ran to carry out the orders while Brendan tried to pull apart the combatants. The other children cheered on their individual favorite, and scooping up clods of dirt, threw them at all and sundry, further agitating the horse, who spun on his hindquarters and thundered off across the meadow. In his haste, Plato tripped over a

gravestone and sprawled onto his stomach, wedging his head and shoulders in Killer's open grave. When Jwana grabbed one of his legs and tried to pull him free, she lost her footing and tumbled into three mourners. They went down one by one like falling timber. A woman's dress tore, and a man's hat, knocked from his head, was mangled beyond recognition. The meadowlarks shrieked from the fences and soared upward to scold the sources of the uproar, and a solitary osprey left his river hunt to circle overhead with sharp, beady eyes and short, chirping whistles: *chewk, chewk!*

"Brendan!" Willa bent over and wrapped her arms around her body. "For God's sake, leave this fray for Plato to settle, and take me back to the house . . . *now* . . . unless you wish this child to be born in a graveyard!"

Brendan turned, torn between keeping his children from maiming each other and obeying his wife. He settled for Willa. Gathering his wife into his arms, he tore into a sprint to cover the quarter mile between the graveyard and the house, jostling her with every long stride.

"Ouch! Put me down," she said, breath coming in spurts from her open mouth. "'Tis not so urgent that you must kill me. I can walk. This abuse will only accelerate matters."

Anxiety furrowed his brow. "You're certain?"

She nodded and sighed when he halted and settled her on her feet.

Having disentangled herself from the melee by the

gravesite, Jwana, skirts gathered in her fists and lifted to her knees, labored behind them. "Mistah Brendan, youse gonna kill Miz Willa an' dat babe!" she panted. When she reached them, she bent over, blowing hard, her hands on her knees. "G'own back ta de chil'en an' dat mess o' fools. I be takin' care o' Miz Willa. You done done yer part nine months past. We'n don' need you now."

With a last concerned look, Brendan handed off his wife and returned to chastise his unruly children.

A lusty boy arrived six hours later. To everyone's astonishment and relief, he was a singleton, though Jwana and Miriam, the wife of a tenant farmer, waited with bated breath for the appearance of a brother or sister. True to Willa's penchant for fanciful appellations and to Brendan's consternation, she named the boy "Siegfried." The children had lobbied for "Killer II."

When Brendan visited the birthing chamber to view his son, Willa sent him a pointed look. "The last," she said. "This shall be the last for awhile. I shan't be used like one of your mares, to do naught other than breed offspring. We shall have to come to some accommodation."

Brendan barely attended her words, mumbling merely, "As you say, wildcat." He looked up from the cradle with a grin. "I say, isn't he a strapping child?"



Ten years had passed between the Revolutionary War, during which Brendan and Willa met and fell in love, and Killer's funeral. With the institution of a Constitutional government, peace held in the former British colonies, and now, around the time of Siegfried's birth, the country's founders codified the rights of man into a document as Amendments to the American Constitution—ten rights Americans vowed no power would ever deny them again. Virginia played a large role in the process, only this autumn being the tenth state of the new United States of America to ratify the Bill of Rights and make it the law of the land.

Less encouraging news, however, came from across the Atlantic. A raging fire of revolution had erupted in France, and Americans found their sympathies torn, similar to the way they had been during the Revolutionary War. Those who had recently waged their own fight against outrages could understand that a people should desire to be free from an oppressive monarchy, but many felt the French had gone too far in their condemnation—and often murder—of all the aristocrats and much of the bourgeoisie and intellectual classes. These same Frenchmen had helped the Americans throw off the bonds of King George, and friendships remained strong.

Riots, starvation, and other privation in France rent the hearts of the American people, and as heads rolled among their friends—friends they knew had no role in the current misery, having suffered merely by being born

to a particular class—heated debates ignited among the planters and farmers. This past spring, the near escape of King Louis and his wife and children lifted as many hearts as it hardened others.

Some Americans began to aid those wishing to leave France, and Brendan was approached often, his help sought for the fleeing émigrés. This fomented dissention in the Sinclair family.

Willa crossed her arms over her chest. “’Tis a revolution, no more than our own. We have no right to interfere in the free will of a people.”

Brendan paced the parlor and gestured impatiently. “’Tis madness misplaced. Would you have them stifle and annihilate all thought other than that of the lowest classes?”

Willa sighed. “I fear we are at cross purposes here. You are no longer a reckless young man in search of adventure, and I am a matron with five children. Our life has enough complications.”

“But, in the event . . .”

“But in no event, Brendan, and that shall be my final word on this prickly subject.”

He declined to refute her statement; nonetheless, the stubbornness that shone in Brendan’s eyes gave Willa more than a few anxious moments.



Being larger at birth than his siblings, Siegfried grew quickly, becoming in height and girth very like the Viking dragon slayer whose name he bore. But he was a quiet, thoughtful boy, fussing little and causing his mother to remark: “He exhibits great intelligence and patience. He shall be a great scholar.”

“Nay,” Brendan replied. “With his strong limbs, he shall be a soldier.”

“Scholar!”

“Soldier!”

’Twas a moot point, as at merely eight weeks old, Siegfried was unlikely to wield either book or sword for some time.

Though she was still nursing Siegfried, Willa soon took to riding Cherokee again. Thankful to be her slim self once more, she flew across the untamed fields and through the untouched forests near Ford’s Folly, for much of the area still remained wild. The Occaneechi and Nahyssan native tribes peopled this land before the English drove them south in the 1700s, and Lancelot and Ari spent long days searching for Indian artifacts in the known sites of former Indian villages or battles. Brendan had forbidden the two boys to wander far from home without Plato as guide and protector on account of bear and panther that prowled amongst the woods, weedy meadows, and rock outcroppings.

This day, the late autumn sun streamed through the tree canopy and dappled the forest floor in stripes

and dollops of gold. Willa had pulled up Cherokee and turned him about, preparing to retrace her steps, when she caught the yelp of a childish voice in amongst a nearby tangle of blackberry canes.

“Ouch! Don’t bite! That hurts!”

“Guenevere, is that you?” Willa called out.

A boy’s voice, recognizable as that of Lancelot, said harshly, “Blast it, Guenny! See what you’ve done now?”

Willa dismounted and walked Cherokee over to the blackberries. With the suddenness of a flash fire, a small, furry body burst from the cane and streaked past her. Cherokee squealed and reared. Only Willa’s firm hand on the reins kept him from fleeing.

Lancelot fought his way out of the thorny plants and threw himself on the fur-covered animal. Guenevere and Ari followed closely on Lancelot’s heels. When the boy laughed triumphantly and held the squirming animal up over his head, he turned toward his mother, and she gasped.

Bloody scratches, gouges, and what appeared to be bites covered his arms and torso, and his shirt hung about his body in naught more than tatters. The instrument of his condition hissed and spit, twisting in the boy’s firm grasp.

Casting one penitent glance at her mother, Guenevere stripped off her jacket, and as Lancelot lowered the animal, Guenevere smothered it in the cloth, leaving only its head poking out. A yowl fit to frighten the devil

came from its mouth.

“What in God’s name are you doing?” Willa asked. “And where is Plato? You know you are not to go this far into the woods without him.”

Ari hung his head and shuffled his feet in the leaf litter. “He was busy with the mares.”

Her gaze leapt from bloodied face to bloodied face, but only Ari seemed capable of remorse. The other two wore grins as wide and bright as sunshine.

“Look,” Guenevere said, thrusting the animal toward Willa and nearly losing her grip on it. “Oops!” She crushed it quickly to her chest.

Lancelot, still grinning, said, “Juliet told us a bobcat had a den in the rocks on the other side of the blackberries.” Juliet was the daughter of Cecil Crawford, one of Brendan’s tenant farmers, and a fey girl with an unnatural affinity for animals.

“She said if we brought her a kitten, she could tame it for us,” Ari said.

“’Tis a replacement for Killer,” Guenevere added and quickly went on. “You know how sad Killer’s death made Isolde. We were thinking only of her.”

“A bobcat? A wild beast for your six-year-old sister? You were not thinking at all, and your fathers will be most displeased that you three disobeyed their orders about roaming through this area with no protection.”

Lancelot whipped out and brandished a pistol tucked behind his back in the waistband of his pants.

“Not to worry, Mother. I brought this in case we encountered any danger.”

Willa snatched the gun from his hand. “Make that two disobedient acts. You know you are not allowed to touch your father’s firearms without permission.”

A horse appeared along the forest trail and drew up to them. Juliet, a twenty-four-year-old girl of pale, ethereal beauty, sat astride the chestnut mare, skirts rucked up to her knees. She smiled and nodded at Willa, then directed a stern glare at the youngsters.

“What are you doing? I told you to leave the kitten to me. That poor animal struggling in your arms is at least two months old and too advanced in age to tame. At any rate, this is the wrong location. The den I spoke about is a half mile from here and the babies not yet weaned. Let it go, Guenevere.”

“Truly?” Guenevere looked up with reluctance in her eyes, obviously not willing to give up the prize they had fought for so valiantly.

“Release it now,” Willa said, steel in her voice and gaze.

A look bounced back and forth among the three children, and Lancelot finally nodded. Guenevere set the bobcat on the ground, unwrapped the coat holding it prisoner, and a streak of fur skittered into the underbrush.

The children retrieved their horses tethered nearby, and with Juliet taking the path to her father’s farm, ’twas a glum trio of children, followed by a hawk-eyed guard, that rode into the yard at Ford’s Folly.

“What happened to them?” Brendan asked, coming out of the house, turning his head, and casting a bewildered look at his battle-scarred children as he passed them on the porch steps.

Willa swung down from Cherokee and looped his reins around the post to one side of the steps. “They caught a bobcat with their bare hands.”

“Where’s my bobcat?” Isolde shouted, apparently having heard the horses, and running out of the barn. She blew past them and clattered up the steps and through the door into the house.

A deeper befuddlement grew lines on Brendan’s face. “*Her* bobcat?”

Willa sighed. “I’ll explain later. Suffice to say for now that your children have, once again, gotten themselves into a mess of trouble.”

His brows climbed his forehead. “*My* children?”

She rounded on him, fists resting on her hips. “Yes, *your* children. Siegfried must be the last, Brendan. I wonder, at times, whether I shall even survive the childhood of the five we have now.”

Brendan grinned. “Children are a gift from God, Willa.”

“No, my clueless husband. Children are a result of faulty planning. Five are enough for any family, and I am done with swelling up like a bred mare and chasing small, wild feet all over the valley. If you kept your eye on them once in a great while . . .”

“We have no choice. We rear what God gives us.” His words parroted the pastor’s sermons, but Brendan was no regular churchgoer and drew on the pastor only when he could not come up with his own argument.

“Balderdash, and you know it. You are merely being trying. There are methods to prevent conception, and from this day forward, we shall employ them.”

His grin evaporated. “You don’t mean—”

Now she grinned up at him. “I do.”

He shook his head. “No, I won’t.”

“You will, or you will sleep alone.”

“But—”

“I mean it.”

He stomped away from her and up the porch steps, yelling, “Lancelot! Guenevere! Ari!”

As Willa headed for the stable, leading the four horses, a cacophony of loud voices emerged from the house’s second-story window. She shook her head, amusement still reflected in her grin. The children would pay, not so much for their disobedience, but for the ultimatum she had given Brendan. Well, ’twas one way to force her lax husband to discipline his children.

Sunshine warmed her shoulders, and autumn sparrows chirped like crickets in the fields. As the mares nickered at her passage, Willa hummed a tune beneath her breath, a lightness in her heart, and strolled across the yard.

