

Tennessee  
October 11, 1809  
5:47 AM

Silent hooves churned through the road's fresh mud. Steaming breath came slowly from his horse's nostrils with each stride. His own breath, too, formed and faded, formed and faded in the sharp, morning air. The bits of mud spraying up all about them hung as if weightless in that same malevolent, unmoving air. Time and fate conspired against man and beast it felt, had grabbed hold of them with the crack of the first gunshot and held them tight, seemingly leaving his horse to vainly stride in place. Yet Clark willed he and his horse to break free, willed them both to ride faster, to fly like the wind of God. The life he had been sent out to protect, the only life he cherished above his own, depended on it. He would not get there too late. He would not allow them this evil deed. This time he would obey a higher law.

A second shot ripped the morning's unnatural silence.

In a rush and all at once time and fate released them from their maddening bondage. Suddenly the curtain of red, orange and yellow oak leaves crowding the road again swept past in a solid blur. Sound returned to his ears. The thundering of his horse's hooves striking deep into the earth. The rhythmic inhale, exhale of man and beast. And the splattering of mud against them both. Leaning into the next bend as one, he and his horse cut the corner, shooting out the other side and finally bringing into sight a rough-hewn country inn that had yet awakened from its slumber. Dark windows looked out upon his unexpected approach. No smoke drifted from the stone chimney. Though evil was afoot, he had no target at which to aim.

And then he saw the nearby stables with their double doors swinging slightly ajar in the ill breeze.

The shadowed darkness within was all he needed to see. He shifted his weight, pulled a touch on the reins, and launched man and horse through the doors in one blinding leap of rage. He felt the press of hand-cut timber compress against him then suddenly give way, heard the final slam of the stable doors swinging back shut behind him, and at first saw nothing as he and his horse came down in a slop of mud, hay, and manure.

Jerking back on the reins, his horse rose defiantly back on its haunches as it came to an unbalanced stop in the center of the stable. Chickens squawked in the unseen rafters. Their loose feathers drifted about in the dim light that granted him enough vision to see two men in a corner near the rear doors.

Slumped in an awkward sitting position with his back to a short stack of hay bails, the first man was bootless and dressed in brown trousers with dangling, unshouldered suspenders, and a loose, white-and-blue striped gown, which was open to expose his bare breast and that bore a dark, spreading stain above his left hip. The man's right arm was held outstretched, bare wrist up. His eyes rose with a sleepy far-off stare and found Clark's own.

Meriwether.

Suddenly alert and alive in that same instant, his eyes grabbed hold of Clark like a man on a cliff would a helping hand, seizing him with all hope and faith that death might yet be averted.

Lewis.

His brother was yet alive.

And then the second man, who Clark now realized held Lewis's outstretched arm, rose from his crouch, dropping an object that glinted at the moment it fell into the muck. The man was reaching into his open black overcoat, to the handle of a pistol protruding from his belt. From

beneath the dark brim of his hat, the assassin's eyes, much like Lewis's, had grown large, only his dilation was out of mortal fear rather than mortal hope. And the man was right to be afraid. For his life would end before that of his innocent victim's.

His horse dropped its front hooves back down into the mud as Clark kicked hard and snapped the reins. Snorting in mutual anger, his mount launched forward, driving into the assassin as his weapon came up in aim. Both man and firearm were sent rudely through the lumber of the adjoining stall, sending splintered shards of wood into the murk of the hazy air. Clark charged his horse through that same hole a breath later, shredding the wall further.

Hidden in thicker shadow, the stall was in full motion and chaos. Sheep cried out as they ran headlong into each other, the walls, and Clark's unrelenting horse whose hooves churned with deadly force. A rooster took raucous flight. A pig snorted its disgust from the other stall. Yet Clark's focus remained fixed on the pitiful figure prostrated chest down in the manure, mud, and sheep urine. The man's boots refused to find purchase, keeping him from rising to his feet and fleeing.

An iron hoof stabbed down and through the back of the man's left knee. Then another crushed the opposite ankle. His scream cut through and rose above that of the panicked sheep, and then faded into gurgled silence as his face buried itself in the slop.

Yet the assassin's legs kept kicking, finally bringing himself to his knees in an obvious position of hellish pain. He brandished a broken-handled pitchfork, the tines of which dripped with soggy strands of straw. His weight was held in part by his leaning back against a sturdy vertical timber supporting the rafters above.

His horse still pursuing with lusted vigor, Clark had no time to alter course. In a single motion, he slid his knife from its sheath and threw with sure aim, the blade piercing through the assassin's throat, pinning him to the beam at his back. A thin, dark line appeared beneath the blade, running down the short, stubbled beard and disappearing behind the collar of the overcoat. The knife's handle twitched with the man's last breath. The pitchfork fell harmlessly to the ground, landing in the mud the same instant as did Clark's boots.

Clark strode through the bewildered sheep, out through the hole in the stall, and... stopped, his resolve vanishing at the sight before him. Lewis, the man who had not been his brother at birth though had become one in both name and spirit by the time they had set eyes on the Pacific, lay surely lifeless, unmoved from moments ago. Then miraculously Lewis's eyes rose yet again and found Clark's. This time little life was left in them.

His steps slow and heavy now, Clark made his way to his friend, brother, unable to accept the man before him was indeed the very same who had been his closest of partners for more than those three years of the expedition. Nowhere in this man's features existed that vitality of life, or that twinkling hunger for knowledge in the eyes, or that soft, compassionate smile that had defined the man Clark knew as Meriwether Lewis. The features of this man were hollow and dark, as were the eyes that watched Clark's slow approach.

"William."

The voice was but a forced whisper, but it was Lewis's.

Clark found himself crouched at his brother's side, taking in the gunshot wound to his abdomen, a second glancing wound to his head, the hastily sliced wrist, and the rusty and bloodied razor at Clark's boot.

He felt a faint, cold touch to his hand. "William."

By some unknown means, Lewis had found the strength to locate and hold out an envelope stained by his own blood. "The President."

Clark gently accepted the envelope from the feeble grasp of Lewis. His brother's eyes searched his own, seeking confirmation he need say no more. And he needn't. Clark understood far too well—his heart ached with the horrid sadness of his understanding. Unable to bear the pain, the fast approaching eternal separation from a soul he had shared so much with and depended so much upon, he could not help but pull Lewis's limp body into his own in a futile attempt to ward off what could not now be stopped.

What little strength and posture remained in Lewis wilted at Clark's touch, his body seemingly melting into Clark's, save for his uninjured hand which managed the strength to raise up and rest on the back of Clark's neck.

The splash and squish of hesitant boot steps approaching from outside.

Time and fate. Fate had won. And Lewis and Clark's time was up.

Clark eased Lewis back against the hay bails. Eyes vacant. Face ashen. Meriwether Lewis was dead.

Sniffing and blinking away tears, Clark slipped the envelope inside his coat, turned, and noticed two small chests tucked at Lewis's side. The journals. Lifting them both, he carried the chests inside the stall and secured them inside his saddlebags while his horse watched and waited. His motions quick, Clark pulled his blade free of the assassin's throat, sheathed it with one hand while throwing the limp body across his horse with the other. Dropping into the saddle, he pulled on the reins and led his horse back out the shattered wall. Allowing himself but one brief glance at the lifeless husk of the man that once had been his brother in every sense of the word, Clark strode his horse straight out the rear stable doors. There was no reason to look back.

Cutting the morning air once again, he grabbed a fistful of the back of the assassin's overcoat to hold the body in place as he kicked his horse into a sprint through the trees and toward the solitude of the road.

A scream, a woman's. And then a second.

Back on the road, heavy hooves thundering away, Clark paid the cries little heed as he was finally listening to a still small voice within himself; to the bitter words he'd been unable to hear until now: He'd failed Lewis. Failed his nation, his God.

And they had silenced yet another.

But as long as he yet drew breath, as long as he yet possessed the journals, the truth they so feared had not yet been fully silenced.

The road forked. He took the one to the left—the fork which began a long journey north and east to Monticello.

The duty and authority, however, of bringing a voice to that dark truth was not his. No, that awful responsibility lay upon the head of but one man. Jefferson.