

Afterword
to
Sing My Name
by
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Afterword

Texas, June 1881

Captain J.T. Edler sank into the hotel room chair, leaned his head against the back and closed his eyes.

“Are you all right, Jim? Was it as dreadful as we feared?” Jenny asked.

He pried his eyes open and smiled at his wife. “For the most part, it was exactly what you’d expect. Senator Carter Macauley enjoyed rubbing my nose in the fact he has the power to have me assigned as a drudge to this commission, and I boiled with hate and resentment, but you can stop worrying. I’m not going to climb in a whiskey bottle and pull the cork tight behind me tonight.”

“I know that, but if there’s anything I can do to make you feel better...”

Edler closed his eyes again as her voice drifted off. Jenny knew nothing of the sort. She’d endured almost two years of his nightly drunkenness after what happened in Charon years ago. Fearing the effect taking orders from Carter Macauley again would have on her husband, Jenny had left the children with friends and accompanied him on this trip, and he was glad of it.

If Macauley had stayed at Fort Grissom.... Edler hated admitting to himself what he knew to be true. So long as Macauley's arrogant, bad tempered presence served as a constant reminder of his own guilt and cowardice, he'd never have crawled out of the bottle. His first sober day had been the one after Macauley followed his ambitions East.

Edler rolled his head towards his wife and watched her working on a piece of embroidery. How did she stay so serene? "You must be having a harder time of it than I am," he said. "Keeping Mrs. Senator Macauley company is above and beyond the call of duty. Why don't you come down with something tomorrow. You can stay here in peace, and maybe I can convince the head big wig I need to stay with you."

A smile crossed Jenny's face although she kept her head bent to her needlework. "Let's save deceit and maneuver for the days ahead. You don't need to worry about me, although she may be his match for arrogance. She told me her family made him a senator, said it just like that."

"One of the commissioners hinted at the same thing. We know he would never have married someone from a family of modest means for love."

"No, and I suppose it's a good thing she's useful to him. There are no children, and I'd worry about her physical well being otherwise."

"There's a brother. Maybe there are nephews to continue the Macauley dynasty. After the way he used to go on and on about it, it's hard to believe he's abandoned the idea."

They sat in silence for a while. Edler finally roused himself to say, "I don't have to be back on duty until three. What do you

say we ask downstairs and see if there's some quiet little restaurant we can walk to and get away from everybody."

"We may get away from the commissioners, but I understand the whole town is packed with Confederate veterans."

Edler laughed. "Yes, it is, and they're the bright spot in all this. The commissioners had no idea when they decided to meet here that the place would be overrun with a Rebel reunion, and by forcing me to attend resplendent in dress uniform, Macauley ensured that they recognized the whole group as a government commission. Even shut in that meeting room, we heard Dixie and Rebel yells right outside the door so regularly they must have set up a schedule. You should have seen Macauley's face. He was so red I kept hoping he'd fall over with apoplexy."

"Jim."

He grinned at her, unrepentant, then sobered. "You know it's Hood's Texas Brigade down there. Slade was one of Hood's men."

"I know," Jenny said quietly, concentrating on her needle placement.

"Did you ever wonder why it was always Sarah I thought I saw in my drunken wanderings, never Slade?"

"I know why."

Edler regarded his wife with astonishment. She had assured him a thousand times he bore no guilt for what happened to Sarah and Slade, and nothing she said ever made any difference. Being here, enduring Macauley again, fighting the old feelings — for the first time he wanted to talk about it. "Tell me then because I never figured it out myself."

Jenny's hands stopped, and she put the embroidery down. "You hope to see Sarah because you believe there's a chance she found someone, married and has a decent life. You dread seeing him because you believe he will be begging on a street corner or something equally degrading. You blame yourself, and you can't bear it."

Her words hit like a punch in the stomach. "I'm not sure I'm sober enough to hear that much truth."

"You must be. You haven't slammed out of the room."

"No, I haven't. And I'll even admit to you I saw another woman that brought it all back right here this morning. Her back was to me, but she was small and had that unusual shade of blonde hair. Instead of rushing over and sticking my face in hers and scaring her half to death, I walked away. You'd have been proud of me. Surprised, but proud."

"I am proud of you, and we're going to get through this. It's only a few weeks, and we'll be fine."

"It may not even be a few weeks. The head of the commission is already showing signs of realizing there's no reason on earth for my presence. Let's pray that he continues to see the light and sends us home early."

Edler got to his feet and stretched, feeling better than he had a short time ago. "Now what do you say we go see if we can find that Rebel-free lunch."

Sarah glanced at the grandfather clock on the wall of the hotel ballroom. Almost noon. Across the room Matt stood amidst a group of laughing, talking men. She considered excusing herself from the group of women chatting around her

and going to get him. Laurie would be back with the boys all washed up and ready for lunch soon. As Sarah watched, the man beside him slapped Matt on the shoulder, and Matt slapped right back. Better to let him enjoy himself for another few minutes, she decided.

One of the other women detailed the difficulties she and her husband had endured traveling from California to attend the reunion, and Sarah made sympathetic sounds. For her and for Matt, the trip had been the easy part. Deciding on a year to attend the annual reunion around pregnancies and babies had been the hard part.

In fact convincing Matt that this year was the best they would get for a long while had taken some doing. She definitely had a bustle on her belly again, and no matter that she sailed through every pregnancy and gave birth easily, Matt still treated her like a porcelain figurine that might shatter if he didn't fuss enough.

She had felt shy about taking part in the festivities more than six months along — until last night. Last night had been the reunion ball. Of necessity all her dresses were some version of loose-fitting wrappers. A blue silk trimmed with ivory lace and ribbons, her gown for the ball was pretty, but still — a wrapper. Matt banished her concern in nothing flat, of course.

“It has to be against nature for a woman to look more beautiful with every year that passes, Boston, but you do.”

Smiling at the memory, Sarah saw Matt break away from the group of men and start toward her. He stopped at her side and slid an arm around her, his hand resting on the side of her swollen belly. Not one of the women in the group, all of whom

had met Matt earlier, got so much as a mildly disapproving look on her face. Instead the group broke out with various versions of the silly sheep look. Sarah heard a giggle and suppressed a sigh.

Matt said, “Ladies, I hope you’ll forgive me if I steal my wife away. We promised our young uns lunch someplace quieter than this.” As if to emphasize his words, a group of men broke out with whoops and yells across the room.

Matt left his arm around her as they walked out into the hotel lobby. The sight of a man in a cavalry captain’s uniform at the desk caught Sarah’s eye. “Matt, look! That’s Jenny Edler and her husband.” Sarah hurried forward, calling out as she went. She hugged Jenny hard.

“I can’t believe it,” Sarah said, finally letting go. “What are you two doing here? Does the government think it needs to keep a close eye on these old Rebels?”

Jenny laughed at that. “No, Jim has been dragooned into serving on a commission to deal with the Indians. They definitely had no idea they would be right in the middle of the reunion.” Looking past Sarah, Jenny’s expression changed to one of wonder. “Is that who I think it is?”

Sarah beamed at her. “Yes, it is. Mrs. Jenny Edler, I’d like you to meet my husband, Matthew Slade.”

Matt swept his hat across his middle and dipped his head in a way that came off as a courtly bow. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, ma’am. I understand while your husband was saving me, you did the same for Sarah. We are in your debt.”

Jenny’s eyes went wide and her mouth fell half open. *At least she didn’t giggle.*

J.T. Edler had stayed a step back. Now he moved beside his wife and spoke almost angrily. “Jenny had the courage to help Sarah, but you know damned well I walked away like a cowardly dog and let him tear you to pieces with his fist and that ring. He thought he’d killed you, and he almost did.”

Matt answered softly. “The doctor told me the reason I lived was that you carried me there and helped him get me fixed up before the swelling stopped me breathing. He said another thirty minutes would have been too long.”

Sarah shot Matt a narrow-eyed look. Until this minute he had steadfastly maintained he remembered nothing from the time he blacked out in the jail until he was in the infirmary at Hartsville. Then again, perhaps she hadn’t been too forthcoming with him about Carter’s visit to her in Edlers’ bedroom.

Edler stuttered, “I can’t b-believe.... How can you s-say grateful.... I s-should have stopped him. I should have....”

Matt shook his head. “If you stopped him that night, he’d have been back another time. Then who would have done what you did? I’m grateful, Captain.”

Edler’s eyes glistened, and Sarah thought she saw his lips tremble for a second before he squared his shoulders and drew himself to attention.

“You’re too generous,” he said, “but thank you. I am the one in your debt. You need to know, though. He’s here. United States Senator Carter Macauley is here. He’s on this commission.”

A flash of rage swept through Sarah. She grabbed for the gun Matt had holstered at his waist, hidden under his suit jacket. He knew her too well. His hand clamped over her wrist before

she got near the gun, and he met her eyes steadily until she regained control and smoothed out her expression. Neither of them said a word — or needed to.

Matt turned back to Edler, his tone unconcerned. “So Macauley’s on this government commission the boys have been serenading? What are they really up to? The last of the Comanches were rounded up and shipped off five, six years ago.”

“It’s genuine. The commissioners are meeting with men who took part in the last action against the Comanches. Then we’re heading to Tucson, and using that information to formulate the best plan for dealing with the Apaches.”

“God have mercy on the Apaches,” Matt said sincerely.

Edler looked surprised at the sentiment, but before he replied, cries of “Mama, Papa,” came from the stairs. Matthew and B.J. ran straight across the lobby, and Laurie followed at a more lady-like pace.

Sarah watched the expressions on the Edlers’ faces as they saw Laurie, then glanced back and forth from Laurie’s face to hers, to Matt’s. Thirteen now, Laurie was developing the kind of beauty Sarah never saw in her own mirror. No stubborn chin for her, but Matt’s tapered jawline. The sapphire eyes lit her face, and her hair had taken on a golden cast these last years.

Like Laurie, five-year-old Matthew showed clear signs of his inheritance from both her and Matt, but two-year-old B.J. — Sarah was beginning to hope that someday B.J. would show the world the face she had first seen across a campfire so many years ago.

Sarah said to Jenny, “I wanted to write to you many times, but I was — leery about who might see a letter.”

Jenny tore her gaze from Laurie. “You were right to be cautious. You must have quite a story to tell.”

Matt said to Edler, “We’re on our way to lunch, Captain. We’d be pleased if you and Mrs. Edler would join us, and the ladies can catch up with each other.”

Edler nodded. “We were on our way to lunch ourselves. We’d like that.”

Still alert to danger after the news that Macauley was in the same town, Sarah started at the sound of half a dozen men thumping down the stairs. As they appeared in the lobby, she saw him. Carter Macauley. The broad forehead reached back into his hairline now. He was heavier of body and ruddier of complexion, but her family would still describe him as a fine figure of a man.

Sarah’s fury rose again at the thought that he had ever been that close to her children. They wouldn’t be out of her sight again from now until they left town tomorrow. Matt had to be thinking the same thing. His face had gone hard and still.

The other men walked out into the street, but Macauley caught sight of their little group and strode toward them. “Captain Edler, this afternoon, we’re going to need....” His words stopped as he took in Matt, Sarah and the children. He froze, nothing moving but his head as his eyes darted from Matt to Sarah, Sarah to Laurie and back, then to the boys.

“You should have died,” he said, fastening at last on Matt.

“You did your best,” Matt said, “but your best wasn’t good enough.”

The two men stared at each other, stiff and hard-eyed. Nausea rose in the back of Sarah's throat. Was Carter armed? If Matt shot him here and now, what would the law do to Matt?

A shrill, loud voice broke through the ugly silence. "Senator! I'm so glad I caught you. I've changed my mind. I will accompany you to lunch."

The owner of the voice walked from the stairs to Macauley and grasped his arm firmly. She might have been pretty once, but now her corset made no indentation where a waist should have been. The fashionable cuirasse-style dress looked like a cruel joke, and a sour expression spoiled her face almost as much as the doughy cheeks and several chins.

"Senator! Who are these people?"

Her voice didn't just hurt the ears. It grated right up the spine and back of the neck. The hard look disappeared from Matt's face, and something else Sarah recognized only too well began to dance his eye.

Macauley showed no sign of acknowledging his wife's presence or answering her, and she responded by raising both her voice and the level of whining discontent in it.

"Senator, introduce me!"

B.J. made a sound of distress and held his arms up to Sarah. Even though Matt fussed every time she lifted the toddler in her present condition, Sarah picked him up and whispered soothing words, patting his back.

Matt once again swept his hat over his middle and inclined his head. He treated Mrs. Macauley to his very best smile and when he spoke his deep voice drawled like thick, warm honey.

“Now, ma’am, don’t you be upset with your husband,” he said. “We only crossed his path for a short time years ago. He most likely can’t remember our names.”

For a few fleeting seconds, Sarah saw Mrs. Macauley’s heavy features relax into the look of a silly sheep, then the woman scowled, regarding them all with suspicion.

Matt put his hat on, signaling they were on their way out of the hotel. Now his voice was full of laughter. “I am Matt Slade, and this is my wife, Sarah Hammond Slade.” He rested his hands on Laurie’s shoulders for a moment. “This is our daughter, Laurie.” He moved one hand to the top of Matthew’s head. “This is our son, Matthew.”

He took B.J. from Sarah’s arms and positioned the boy on his left shoulder with his arm under the small bottom. B.J. wrapped his arms around Matt’s neck and pressed his smooth cheek against Matt’s scarred one. “And this is our son, B.J. We seem to be a pro-lif-ic family. Now if you will excuse us, these young uns are hungry, and we need to get them fed.”

Sarah put a hand very lightly on Matt’s right arm, not wanting to impede his ability to use it in any way. As they walked away, she heard the shrewish voice behind them.

“That’s her isn’t it? That’s the woman you almost married, and she’s still no better than she ought to be. Can you believe she’s here in that condition?”

Laurie and Matthew led the way to the street. Matthew held the door and then skipped to catch up to his sister. Knowing that terrible voice wouldn’t grate over her nerves again Sarah dared to look at Matt and couldn’t help starting to laugh herself.

“Pro-lif-ic people don’t have an eight-year gap between their first and second child,” she said.

“That woman won’t give him time to do the arithmetic.”

“You aren’t calling her a lady?”

He shook his head. “Shrew.”

“Harridan.”

“Nag.”

“Termagant.”

“Scold.”

When they ran out of words and laughter, Sarah turned serious. “Do we need to worry about him?”

“No. Bullies don’t go after people who can fight back. I’m not chained up, and you’re not sick in bed.”

“Do you think I’d look like that if I’d married him?”

“You might. You’d have to do something to keep him away, and I bet that works fine. No man would want to try to make that woman sing.”

He grinned at her, and Sarah grinned right back.

“Do you think Edlers will still join us for lunch?” she asked.

“I expect they’ll be along. In their shoes I’d be running out of that hotel.”

Matt reached his right arm around her and gave the side of her belly a possessive pat before pulling her close to his side. Sarah pressed against him.

She hoped he was right about the Edlers.

But she never looked back.

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Author's Note

For those interested in such things, the bits of information about Hood's Texas Brigade in *Sing My Name* are historic fact. Along with General Thomas J. (Stonewall) Jackson's Stonewall Brigade, the Texas Brigade was one of the premier brigades of General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. There were annual reunions of the brigade held right through the first third of the Twentieth Century. The idea that a federal government commission met at the same time as one of those reunions and in the same town is, of course, strictly mine and fiction.

For more information about the Texas Brigade, see www.hoodstexasbrigade.org.

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