

Assistant Surgeon Duncan Cleary lay sprawled in the churned-up mud of the encampment, the rifle shot still ringing in his ears. He swore, rolled over, and looked up at the sky. The rain clouds were breaking up, and scintillant white stars appeared between them. He labored to his feet, slapping mud from his mismatched uniform.

A man clutching a rifle ran up beside him and whispered, "It's the Spanish?"

"No, goddamnit, it's a land crab. Stop shooting at crabs. You're going to kill one of us. Maybe me."

The soldier, unconvinced, said, "Could be 'Spanards' sneakin' in."

"The Spanish would be shooting, not sneaking." Cleary turned away, stopped, and said, "And pass the word to stop eating the crabs."

"Not much else to eat around here," said the soldier.

"The crabs are eating the dead. You're eating the crabs. That's cannibalism once removed. Are you that hungry?" Cleary stared at the man as he straightened his tunic.

"God! You sure about that, Doc?"

"Yes. And it's Lieutenant. Stop shooting at every little noise, or maybe the Spanish will start shooting too."

Cleary walked away. He did not get far before two red and black land crabs confronted him, their angular legs clicking on the rough ground as pairs of massive claws snapped mechanically at him. He kicked them out of his way.

What do these things eat when there aren't dead soldiers and mules to feast upon?

He followed an imagined path among the white pup-tents and the random clumps of men huddled around reluctant campfires. After a little maneuvering, he came to a large field tent and

poked his head inside. An oil lamp hanging from one of the support poles cast a faint yellow light over the interior. Two wounded soldiers lay sleeping on the muddy ground. A hospital corpsman sitting beside them gave Cleary a thumbs-up. He nodded a reply.

Stepping back, Cleary dropped the canvas flap and pulled his hat off to scratch at his matted brown hair. He knew he should lie down and sleep, but he was restless from the stalled invasion and wanted to do something more than wait for the blinding dawn of another tropical morning.

He picked his way to the top of a small rise covered in palmetto and boot-high cactus plants. Sharp needles scraped against the brown leggings that corseted his legs from ankle to knee. The last of the rain clouds had drifted away. A jagged half-moon hung low in the sky, and to the northwest Cleary could make out the blacker shadows of a dense jungle. Around him the open scrub was dotted with tents and wagons and the dull red lights of campfires. Hidden within the crowded encampment were the Army's wounded and sick, and those healthy enough to grumble about too much waiting and too little eating or fighting. In the distance Cleary saw a larger, open-topped hill called El Pozo—he had no idea what the name meant. Beyond the hill lay a jumbled line of darkness that he guessed were the Heights, where Spain was making its last stand in the New World. Beyond the Heights was the city of Santiago, the bottled-up Spanish fleet, and the end of the war.

“Can you see them? The Spanish?” a voice called from near the bottom of the mound.

Cleary looked down, saw the dark outline of a large man, his head wreathed in blue smoke, and shook his head. “Just shades of black and bits of starlight.”

“A poet,” said the voice.

Cleary started downward. “No. Just a fella who thinks he might have been better off

staying in Hartford.”

At the foot of the mound a black man in a blue wool uniform stared up at him. The man took off his forage cap, and Cleary noticed a head of close-cropped hair. A pipe drooped from his mouth, which was encircled with a sweaty goatee. He slipped the pipe free and smiled.

“Contract Surgeon William Brown from Chicago. With the 24th Infantry. Under Colonel Wikoff.” Doctor Brown put his cap on again and stuck out his right hand.

Cleary stepped closer. “The Buffalo Soldiers?”

The campsite and the initial beach landings had been crowded with Negro soldiers. He had seen them encamped in Florida, watched them march inland from the Cuban beachhead, and even treated some of their wounded after the first encounter with the Spanish Army at a place called Las Guasimas. Yet he had never met a Negro doctor. That one might exist was not in doubt; there had been two Negro medical students at Yale though Cleary had, for the most part, ignored them. Now one—a living, pipe-smoking surgeon—had emerged from the Cuban night.

“I have the privilege of serving with them,” said Brown, his hand still extended.

Cleary reached for Brown’s hand, fumbled, shook it briefly, and said, “Uh...First Lieutenant Duncan Cleary. Assistant Surgeon, 71st New York Volunteers.” He did not know what more to say, so he pointed off to the left and said, “Some of us from the 71st are set up over here. Most of the regiment is back down in Siboney.” He was aware of rambling on. “I should be too, but then some of the surgeons and hospital corpsmen got pulled up this way for the fight around Sevilla and that Las Guasimas village. Now we’re scattered...like everything else in this army.”

“Our units too seem to be all mixed up. Maybe that is why supplies are taking so long to find us,” said Brown. “I have been asking about...”

“Everything seems to be stacked up down the road in Siboney. Or still on the transports. Or all the way back in Tampa. As far as I know, my medical chest is still not ashore. It’s been four days now.”

“I have only the first-aid packets I can take off the wounded,” said Brown. His voice was deep, and each word seemed measured with care. He dug charred tobacco from his pipe with a penknife. “Half of the men appear to have lost theirs or thrown them away to lighten their burdens.”

A single rifle shot sounded to the east. Cleary swore under his breath. He said, “Yeah, probably the length of the Camino Real is littered with gear dropped by tired or foolish men not wanting to haul their kit into a jungle fight. We’re leaving a trail of bread crumbs, so to speak.” Then, almost to himself, he said, “Be nice to retrieve some of it. Follow the trail through Sevilla, all the way down to the depot at Siboney.”

“Well, that sounds like an excellent idea,” said Brown. “But can we? What about the Spanish troops?”

Cleary looked at Brown and wondered about the *we*. “Spain? They’re a couple of miles west of here. Waiting for us to come to them. Likely the only danger is getting lost along the trail or shot by our own troopers.” Still staring at the shadowy image of the doctor, he said, “Care to do some scrounging in the jungle, Dr. Brown?”

“That is what I was doing here when I saw you, but there are no medical supplies to be had here, and no food to share with the soldiers of the 24th.”

Cleary glanced up at the sky, found the half-moon, and said, “Dawn’s not far off, and we’ll get no chance again during the day.” He looked back at this unexpected doctor. “Well, come along if you like. Two can carry more than one.”

They walked back to his tent. Cleary reached inside for his haversack. He lifted a brass lantern from the sack, unfolded the handles, and said to Brown, “Hold this. Please.”

Cleary struck a match and lighted the oily wick. A pale-yellow beam emerged from the lens and fell across the muddy ground. Cleary reached back into the sack, pulled out underclothes, a book, a Kodak Bulls-Eye camera, and a toothbrush, and tossed them on his damp bedding. His fingers brushed a piece of smooth steel, skipped over a half-empty canteen and a surgical field kit. He wrapped his hand around a bottle of five-grain quinine tablets and placed it on the bedding. Then he swung the haversack over his shoulder and asked Brown for the lantern.

“The skimmers and wagons are this way.” Cleary headed away from the camp to a patch of low ground where the Army’s surviving mules and horses were crowded into a makeshift paddock.

They passed small groups of whispering soldiers, cleaning rifles, nervously telling jokes, and waiting for the morning. Several other soldiers shared around a bottle of whisky smuggled out of Tampa in a blanket roll. No sentries were posted. A makeshift fence of rope and stakes appeared in the darkness. The smell of manure grew stronger.

“Do you know anything about mules?” Cleary asked.

“No.”

“All right then. Wait here. I’ll see if I can get us some animals to carry whatever we find.” Cleary walked off with the lantern, thinking it would be easier for one Army lieutenant to order up a couple of mules from the civilian drivers than for two doctors—one of them a Negro—to wangle the same favor out of them.

Half an hour passed. Cleary appeared out of the dark leading two mules with flaccid leather panniers draped across their backs. “I promised them a portion of whatever food we

might scrounge.” He handed a length of rope to Brown and said, “Now you’re a muleskinner. Give a little tug and she’ll come along.”

Cleary led his mule along the camp perimeter and Brown hurried to catch up. He looked back at the mule at the other end of the rope and then at Cleary. “Did you grow up on a farm?” he asked.

“A small town across the river from Hartford, but there were horses and such about.”

“Connecticut. Why are you with the New York 71st? Did your state not raise a regiment?”

“They did. Two infantry and some artillery, but they’re stuck in Connecticut. Guarding the Niantic beachfront, I expect. My uncle—he’s a jobber for Colt—he knows people in New York City, and they got me into the 71st. So here I am.”

“Here you are,” Brown said.

Cleary caught the man’s brief grin. “Yeah, here I am.” He tugged on his mule’s lead.

Pushing through the mud and clumps of sharp palmetto, they came to a picket of soldiers, who halfheartedly pointed their Springfields at the two men.

Cleary said, “We’re heading down the road to scavenge for food and medicine. Don’t be too quick on the triggers if you hear any noise coming back up the track. That’ll be us.”

“Got orders, Doctor?” asked one of the older men.

Does he care, or is he trying to annoy a fresh-faced surgeon and a Negro? Cleary stayed calm. “If you can find Colonel Downs or any of the staff officers, tell them Doctors Cleary and Brown from the 24th are looking for medical supplies and food. We’ll be back.” To Brown he said, “Let’s go,” and led his mule off to the right.

Behind them Cleary heard one of the men say, “Nobody but doctors,” and then a quiet

chuckle from some other men. It was common derision among the line and staff officers to refer to the Army's powerless Medical Department as "nobody but doctors," and that official disregard had filtered deep into the ranks. Cleary pulled at the Red Cross brassard on his left arm and wondered if he would get more respect without it.

Trying to lighten his mood, Cleary said to Brown in a low, affected brogue, "Na where be the Spaniards when they're needed?" He aimed the lantern ahead at the muddy trail, which sloped down into a black tangle of lanky palms and wet ferns.

The Camino Real was a grand name for a narrow jungle trail connecting tiny towns and primitive villages scattered along the southeast coast of Cuba. It snaked east to west through dense jungle, over jagged chaparral, and across narrow beaches of stone and coral. It eventually evolved into an appreciable road as it approached the port city of Santiago. Four days ago, it had become the Americans' invasion route into Cuba.

Cleary stooped to pick up a canvas-covered first-aid kit. He tossed it into one of the panniers and said, "Someone will want that in a couple of days."

"There is a canteen here," said Brown.

Cleary saw it dangling from a tree branch. "Leave it for now. We want medicine and food. If there's room on the way back, we'll pick up whatever else might be handy."

They continued down the muddy path, watching for loose stones and puddles of rainwater. On the south side of the road they passed a small clearing of fresh-dug graves—dead men from the 1st Volunteer Cavalry, the Rough Riders. Beyond the makeshift cemetery they found discarded ponchos and bedrolls and Army wool shirts in piles of three and four. They collected a few more first-aid kits and wondered over the foolishness of soldiers throwing away sterile bandages and antiseptic dressings.

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Days earlier, on June 22, a ramshackle flotilla of ships had dumped six thousand men and the implements of war onto a rocky beach at an inhospitable place called Daiquiri, seventeen miles east of Santiago. The beach was a narrow boundary of rock and sand that backed up to black cliffs and green jungle. There was no harbor. An iron pier that had once received coal deliveries for a local train now began receiving a trickle of blue-clad invaders. Most of the men of the U.S. Army V Corps rowed to the beach, and when their boats capsized in the warm blue surf, they swam ashore. Naked, laughing men helped pull in the Navy's overloaded launches and cutters. Supplies landed in random fits. Horses and mules were pushed out of the ships' belly hatches; some of them recognized land, heard the encouraging calls of the soldiers, and managed to swim toward the beach. Many more drowned.

Except for the dead livestock bobbing on the tides, the beachhead was fun—Atlantic City with guns and camping equipment. Had the Spanish decided to oppose the landing with a few armed men up on the surrounding cliffs, it would have been a massacre.

Away from the beach and the blue water, there was less to laugh about. On Thursday, June 23, a column of the 22nd Massachusetts Infantry trudged eleven miles west to the larger town of Siboney. The terrain was hilly scrub. Mid-day temperature hovered near one hundred and twenty degrees. Fine volcanic dust—which in the afternoon rains became a sticky black mud—coated wet wool uniforms that were never meant for the Caribbean. The heat, the terrain, and the burden of heavy clothes, ammunition, first-aid packs, half-shelters, and horse-collar rolls of rubber ponchos and blankets became too much. Men peeled off their shirts and dropped haversacks, blankets, and other equipment, leaving a trail of cast-offs for the rest of the army to follow or for the local Cuban rebels, *los insurrectos*, to grab. If they gave any thought to needing

those cast-off things later, they assumed the Army would re-supply them.

By the evening, seventeen thousand Americans were ashore in Siboney and Daiquiri, and the vague outlines of an invasion force had emerged. A defensive line was established around Siboney. The town's foundry and machine shop, both sagging beside a mangled railroad track, became part of the Army's budding supply depot. A string of iron-roofed buildings between the machine shop and the beach became the base hospital. Long canvas surgical tents popped up beside the makeshift hospital. At the beach, a scow was anchored parallel to the shoreline and decked over with rough-cut lumber, to make a dock and gangway for cutters and launches bringing supplies and men from the offshore fleet.

During the night, Assistant Surgeon Duncan Cleary waded ashore with the 71st New York Volunteer Infantry.

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Tonight, four days after landing, the sinking moon and the oil lantern eased the jungle's darkness. Cleary kept his eyes on the trail ahead. After an hour, Brown and Cleary came to a steep slope. They slipped their way to the bottom, using the more sure-footed mules as brakes, and stopped in a flat clearing. To the right, part of the thick foliage had been chopped away. Cleary played his lantern over the area. He stepped into the hacked clearing and looked behind a fat palm tree.

"My God, it's a whole medicine chest. Who would leave this?"

Brown looked back toward the muddy slope and said, "Probably they could not carry it up the hill and left it here expecting to retrieve it later. I think there are not many wagons ashore yet. This is a heavy thing for two men to carry."

"Our good fortune." Cleary yanked the wooden chest around by one of its brass handles.

He started to ask Brown to hold the lantern again, thought better of it, and placed it on the ground in front of the chest. He snapped the two brass clamps loose and opened the top. A deep tray of wooden compartments separated a neat collection of bright steel saws, knives, forceps, probes, and other equipment.

Cleary turned to Brown. "What do you need?"

"I have my traveling surgical set. Perhaps a needle case or two."

Cleary stared at the coiled chainsaw and shuddered at the thought of having to use it, or worse, having it used on him. He handed two suturing kits to Brown, then lifted the tray out of the trunk. Underneath it were several packages of sterile-wrapped bandages and catheters, two large slings, rubber bandages, a portable irrigator, and an Esmarch chloroform dropper. Cleary picked up the leather-encased dropper and handed it to Brown. "You take it. You don't want to run out of anesthetic and have to work on wide-awake patients. I'm likely to be at an aid station doing bandages and splints. A glass dropper would never survive so close to the danger belt."

Brown said, "You are a surgeon."

Cleary wasn't sure if it was a question or a statement, so he went back to searching the chest. With the lid raised, two spring-loaded pins had popped up, unlocking a drawer in the front of the chest. Cleary pulled it open to find bottles and vials of various powders and oils. He made a face. "I can smell the iodoform." He gave two vials to Brown and stuffed two more in his sack.

Brown, looking over Cleary's shoulder, said, "Chloral and some cocaine."

Cleary handed back three more vials. He picked up a small metal case, flipped the top open, and pulled out a thin glass vial. "Syringe and morphine kit." He stuck two of them in his bag and passed two more to Brown. Then he stood up. "Guess that's it. Unless you want a saw or trocar or something."

“We should leave the rest for the men who left it.”

“Foolish men.” Cleary closed the chest and picked up his lantern. “Well, this little find has helped. Now if we can get hold of some food in Siboney, things will be looking up.” He smiled in Brown’s direction. “’Til the war starts up again.”

They went back to the trail and retrieved the sleepy mules. After a few steps Cleary said, “You know, the Army classifies all doctors as ‘surgeons.’ Even those of us who prefer the nonsurgical parts of medicine. To be honest, I’m more comfortable with infections and fevers. I’m as able as the next man to close a wound or splint a fracture. But I don’t want to make things worse by poking around in someone’s skull or abdomen.”

“Well, likely you will have plenty of malaria and yellow fever infections to practice on if the war drags into the summer. Myself, I like the mysteries and the miracles of surgery.” Brown paused. “And I am good at it.” He glanced at Cleary. “Though the Army does not much care. Do you know what it means to be a contract surgeon in this Army?”

Cleary was still thinking about the words “mysteries and miracles of surgery,” and Brown continued, “Contract surgeons have the rank of ‘acting assistant surgeon’ but no status as officers. We are considered civilian employees. We are paid one hundred and fifty dollars a month—except when we are sick or disabled—and we are not eligible for any medical benefits. There is no tenure, and our contracts can be canceled without appeal. It is a somewhat precarious position to be in. Especially in the middle of a war.”

“Why did you come, then?”

Brown patted his goatee. “My mentor, I suppose. He thought I could learn valuable skills under the less-than-ideal conditions of war. Perhaps you know his name? Allen Wesley. Class of ’87 at Northwestern. He is chief surgeon and lecturer on surgical emergencies at Provident

Hospital in Chicago.”

Cleary ventured a cautious question. “Is he colored?”

“He is. Nonetheless, he felt duty-bound to offer his skills and his service to the war effort. At this moment, he is back home examining recruits for the 8th and 9th Illinois.” Brown paused, then said, “I was not able to join the regiments in time, so Dr. Wesley suggested the contract path into the war.”

Cleary tilted the lantern in Brown’s direction. “So, he was one of your instructors? Where did you go to school? If you don’t mind my asking?”

“Howard University.”

“Washington. How did you like the city? Our train rolled through during the night, so I didn’t get to see a bit of it. Must have been wonderful to have lived there for a couple of years.”

Brown did not answer. Cleary was growing accustomed to the lags that preceded many of Brown’s responses. After several seconds, Brown said, “It is a very Southern city.”

Cleary paused, remembering Tampa’s sweaty white residents, and the devastated vistas of the South he had glimpsed from the train. With some misgivings, Cleary asked, “So what did you think of Tampa?”

Brown exhaled. “It’s hard to say. There were so many signs, ‘No niggers and dogs allowed in here.’” He looked off into the jungle.

Cleary felt a sudden wave of rage from the dark figure walking beside him. Or did he imagine it? His own face flushed with those recited words and the thought of an endless gauntlet of such insults and humiliations. He wondered—How do you put up with it—and thought of the still popular song, *No Irish Need Apply*.

‘Now I wonder what’s the reason that the fortune-favored few,

Should throw on us that dirty slur and treat us as they do.'

He stared down the dark trail thinking he'd made a mistake asking Brown along. This was not something he wanted to think about right now. Or ever. Seconds dragged on in silence.

Cleary pulled his hat off and wiped a sleeve across his forehead, exhaled, and looking along the trail, asked, "How do you supposed the dogs felt about it?"

Brown laughed. Cleary relaxed and Brown said, "They seemed a little disappointed."

Cleary nodded in the dark. "A wee disappointed, were they? Well, 'tis a mean and dispirited land, uncomfortable fer man an' beast. We should be glad to be 'ere an' nah there."

"Well, this is a novel experience...walking through a Caribbean jungle with a leprechaun." Brown chuckled again.

In the darkness ahead, they heard the sounds of hooves on stone, then lantern lights flicked across the trail. A large and noisy party of men and mules was headed back up the trail toward them. Cleary and Brown hesitated, their two mules alert to the approaching company. The others came closer, their lanterns catching glimpses of the two doctors. They stopped at a shout from a man on horseback. The man drew a pistol from his flap holster. Two men on either side of him stepped up and pointed their Karg rifles at Cleary and Brown.

The rider shouted at them again. "Halt." He dismounted and rushed forward, snapping out his words. "Who are you to be about? Deserters? Thieves?"

Cleary's light played over the man's khaki uniform and riding boots. "Doctors," he replied in an even tone.

Hidden among the train of mules Cleary heard a laugh and then "...nobody but doctors."

The rifles came down, and the man with the pistol leaned closer, squinting a bit in the uneven yellow light.

Cleary saluted. “Evenin,’ Colonel.” Brown fumbled a hasty salute.

Colonel Roosevelt appeared reluctant to put his pistol away but then he did. Returning a well-executed salute with a gauntlet-covered hand, he grinned and said, “Dee-lighted to meet fellow soldiers making such excellent use of the night. What are you about now?”

“Yes, sir. Assistant Surgeon Lieutenant Duncan Cleary, 71st New York, and Contract Surgeon William Brown with the 24th.” Cleary craned his head around to look at Roosevelt’s mules. “Looks like the same as you, sir; food and medical supplies from the Siboney depots. If you left any behind?”

“Outstanding initiative, gentlemen,” he said nodding and grinning at the two men. “And indeed, we left plenty behind, but not for lack of effort on our part. The quartermaster, an officious little martinet from Ohio, was under the impression that V Corps’ supplies were in fact his own personal property, by God. I filled out a chit, signed it, and told him it was solid as a five-dollar gold piece and he could take it to General Shafter himself if he needed confirmation.”

Roosevelt nudged his glasses with a gloved hand and said to Cleary, “The 71st New York. They had no action Friday. Missed a fine little fight.” He patted the neck of his horse.

“Ah, yes sir.” Cleary said, “The 71st was recalled back to Siboney. Apparently, someone thought the 1st Volunteers didn’t need any help.”

“And we didn’t,” shouted one of the Rough Riders behind Roosevelt, which raised more shouts of confirmation from other men along the mule train.

“Well, we had our work patching up wounded and getting them to the base hospital.”

Roosevelt nodded again. “Indeed. Indeed. I am certain that had the 71st been along in the fight—fine New York men, all of them—there would have been fewer good American fighting men in need of the surgeons such as yourselves. Nonetheless, General Wheeler did a splendid job

of thrashing the enemy.”

“Yes, sir.”

“On with you then. There is still a fair piece to traverse. We surely will get action taking Santiago. And there’ll be men, hopefully few, who will be looking to you doctors to preserve life and limb. Hasten back as quick as you can. And if that belligerent accountant of a quartermaster troubles you about beans and bandages, tell him I ordered you back for more of the same.”

“Thank you, Colonel.” Cleary saluted and Brown followed suit. They pulled their mules to the side. Roosevelt swung into his saddle and pranced up the trail followed by a train of burdened mules and smiling Rough Riders wearing their distinctive blue polka-dot bandanas.

Brown watched them vanish into the darkness. He looked at Cleary and said, “The man can let loose with words. And in a most peculiar manner.”

Cleary smiled and tugged his mule forward. “Ave you ever listened to yerself?”

After a while, Cleary said, “This war has attracted all kinds.” He jerked his thumb back up the road and said, “The colonel back there. Rich New York politician. Led into battle the other day by an old Confederate general. Did you hear about Wheeler? Must have thought he was still fighting Grant and Lincoln. When the Spanish fell into retreat out of Sevilla, he shouted, ‘We got the damned Yankees on the run’.” Cleary laughed.

“A good story, but probably it’s not true. The 10th Cavalry was there too, and those Negro soldiers would have shot him off his horse.”

“Yeah, probably they would have.” Cleary sounded wistful. “Guess I’d have thought to do the same. One last volley at Johnny Reb.”

The ground flattened out. The trail widened, showing signs of the Army’s engineers at work. They were making good time. The mules snorted and stopped. Cleary flashed his lantern

about as a dozen men stepped out of the jungle. He saw the rifles and the bandoliers. His hands were holding leather traces and the light, so he gave no thought to the revolver in his haversack.

One man put up his hand in a hesitant wave. He said something in Spanish. The men stepped out onto the trail and several of them began speaking to Cleary and Brown. Listening, Cleary recognized a word, *medicina*.

To Brown he said, "I think they're asking for medicine." Cleary turned to the men, pointed at them and asked, "*Insurrectos? Mambises?*"

"*Sí, sí. Mambises*, came a rapid reply. "*Viva Cuba*," another man said.

"They're rebels, he said to Brown.

"I think this is obvious." Brown watched more of them emerge from the dense foliage.

The brown-skinned men were skeletal and dressed in ragged, cotton pullovers and baggy canvas pants. They wore straw sandals and shapeless hats. A few of the worn-down rebels carried empty denim gunnysacks.

"*Soy un medico*." Cleary pointed at himself. He pointed to Brown and said, "*Medico*." To Brown he said, "Let's give them some of the first aid packs we scavenged."

Brown pulled some first aid kits from one of the panniers and handed them to the ragged rebels. Cleary pointed to one of the kits and said, "*Vendajes*. Bandages. I hope that's the word."

One of men then asked, "*Tiene algo de comer?*"

"*Comer? Comer?* I'm fast running out of words," said Cleary.

One of the rebels put his hand to his mouth to mimic the act of eating and said, "*Comida*." He pointed to another man chewing a stalk of sugarcane.

"Food," said Cleary. "*No tengo. No comida aquí. En Siboney*." He motioned down the road toward the town.

The same man asked, “*Cigarrillos Americanos?*”

Cleary patted the pockets of his blouse to show they were empty. To Brown he said, “Can you spare any pipe tobacco? They want a smoke.”

Brown pulled a small tobacco pouch from inside his tunic and offered it to the rebel. He smelled the pouch and said, “*Gracias, doctor.*” Brown nodded in reply.

Anxious to be on his way before he ran out of words and the desperate-looking Cubans ran out of patience, Cleary pointed down the road again and said, “*Vamos a Siboney. Hospital. Soldados.*” He put up a hand. “*Adiós, amigos.*” He pulled on the mule’s traces and started down the road. Behind him he heard a not unfriendly whispering from the rebels as they blended back into the jungle.

Brown caught up with him. “You know Spanish.”

“A few words I picked up on the ship over.”

“Those rebels, they are not what I expected from having read the newspapers about the rebellion,” said Brown. “Black and brown men, half starved, and grateful for a bit of tobacco.”

“Yeah. They’re not exactly a portrait of the Founding Fathers.”

“It is odd, do you not think, that the U.S. should fight to free colored men from their European masters?”

“Well, there is the *Maine* blowing up. And some in Washington want to make this island the forty-sixth state.

“Puerto Rico. Hawaii. The Philippine islands. It could be a number of new stars in the flag. But then I imagine the good people of Florida and the rest of the Confederacy would not be eager to admit so many non-white races from around the globe.”

“Maybe.” Looking at Brown again, Cleary said, “All that’s way off. Right now, we have

to load these mules, treat the wounded, and stay alive until the war concludes.”

They continued on in silence, content to listen to the rhythmic clumping of hooves, the creak of stiff leather, and the occasional cries and whistles among the dark trees. Cleary was about to speak again when several men stepped out of the darkness and pointed rifles at them. One of them yelled, “Halt.”

Brown stopped and said, “I think we’ve reached the picket line.” Cleary nodded and then identified himself to the knot of men dressed in coarse blue, khaki leggings and slough hats. They shouldered their rifles and one of them said, “Rough Riders just come through. You fellas lookin’ for more beans?”

“Leftovers. Whatever we can find and carry back up to the encampment beyond Sevilla. Men are hungry and the wounded need clean bandages.”

The primitive Caribbean village of Siboney had been transformed into an American headquarters. Army engineers widened the road and cleared the lanes between the huts and the town’s few large houses, the latter now occupied by officers. Under an arc light, a wrecked train engine was producing steam again, and a cast-iron water pipe that snaked along the coast to Santiago was breached in several places to provide the Army with high-pressure drinking and bathing water.

Beyond a row of high-peaked, hospital tents, they stopped to look at the fleet of ships, all of them bright with electric lights and riding their anchors on a calm sea. One ship, close in, let its searchlight probe the jungle and the cliffs beyond the town’s perimeter. On the high cliff, an abandoned blockhouse flying an American flag appeared in the passing searchlight.

As they walked by the last tent, one of the flaps snapped back and a man in a surgeon’s gown stepped out.

“Harry. Harry Stafford,” said Cleary.

Stafford looked around at the mules and the disheveled Doctor Cleary. “Well, well. Where have you been? Thought we’d lost our Connecticut Yankee.”

“Up the road. The encampment beyond Las Guasimas. Guess I got caught up in my work. Now we’re down here for supplies. Things are getting desperate inland.”

Cleary introduced Brown. Doctor Stafford nodded in Brown’s direction. Then Cleary asked, “Major Bell? He been asking about me? I didn’t get a chance to pass him a message.”

“I don’t think he’s noticed. Between the wounded and getting the rest of the medical supplies ashore, well, he’s been occupied. No sense bringing it up when you see him. The 71st is marching your way tomorrow.” He looked up at the starry sky and said, “Well, it’s already tomorrow. We’re brigaded with the 6th and 16th Infantry so, we’ll follow them to Santiago.”

“You won’t get any farther than Sevilla or Las Guasimas. The road is mud and rock, and narrow as a New York tenement.”

“So, you’re here now. What’ll you do, march back up with us?” Stafford untied his gown and pulled it off.

“No. We came for supplies. I guess we’ll grab up what we can before muster and get back up the road. That the depot office?” Cleary pointed at a squat iron-roofed building across the lane from the tents.

“Quartermaster, yes. And the next two down the lane.” Stafford balled up his gown and stuck it under his arm. “Well, Duncan, be careful. Keep your head down when the war starts up again. I guess I’ll see you up there.” He waved a hand in the general direction of the jungle.

They shook hands and Cleary pulled his mule across the clearing to the supply depot.

Brown and Cleary stepped through the open doorway, blinking in the sudden flood of

light. A counter of planks and barrels barred their way. Beyond the counter most of the interior was taken up with wooden crates, gunnysacks and tied bundles of blankets. A few plank-and-sawhorse desks were pressed against the west wall. A soldier was hunched over one desk working on a telephone.

Cleary coughed and rapped his knuckles on the rough countertop. The soldier twisted his head around to take in Cleary and his companion. “We’re here for supplies for the forward encampment. Orders from Lieutenant-Colonel Roosevelt. He sent us back down the Camino.” Which is kinda true, thought Cleary.

“He’s come and gone. Practically robbed the place with his cowboy, college-boy, Nancy-boy associates.” The man put down the telephone and walked over to the counter. “First Lieutenant Cyril Bickham, depot quartermaster. I’m responsible for supplies ashore and getting them where they’re needed when they’re needed.”

Christ almighty, it’s gonna be a fight. Over beans no less! Cleary exhaled and said, “I’m assistant surgeon...”

“I can see who you are, Doctor.” He glanced at Cleary’s Red Cross armlet and the modified Cross of Saint John on his collar while ignoring the lieutenant’s bar on his shoulder straps. “Those alleged Rough Riders left with over half a ton of beans. More than enough to get through the day.”

“We also have sick and wounded in need of food and clean bandages.”

“We have sick and wounded across the way too. Doctor.”

Tired, technically outranked—line officer versus medical officer—and feeling desperate, Cleary thought about the Colt revolver in his bag and imagined shooting First Lieutenant Bickham. He looked back at Brown who had remained quiet since entering the depot.

Then he said, “Dr. Brown, don’t you think this man might be delirious with malaria or perhaps the later stages of syphilis? What if he were to contaminate the food supply? Can’t put the whole invasion at risk for one man. He should be examined, maybe quarantined.”

“Unexplained delirium. Yes, could be serious,” said Brown.

“I’m not amused, Doctor. You want something, get Lieutenant-Colonel Roosevelt to put his name to another requisition.”

“Look...Lieutenant, it’s easier for me to walk out there and get Major Bell, my regimental surgeon, to sign off on examining you for typhoid or syphilis or whatever it takes.” Cleary pulled a syringe case out of his sack, popped the lid and pulled out a vial of morphine. “I’ll put you to sleep and we’ll do what we want.” Cleary moved toward the door. “Dr. Brown. Your hands have stopped shaking, haven’t they?”

Brown, quick now to play along, said, “Hands are fine.” He held them up to the light. “But I’ve lost my glasses. If you can point out the general area of pathology I can do all the scrapping, cutting, cauterizing, and sewing that’s necessary. Don’t even need much light.”

“Excellent.” Cleary stared at the Bickham. “Wait here Lieutenant. Doctor’s orders. I’ll get Major Bell’s okay.”

Cleary turned to leave. Lt. Bickham said, “Goddamn...what do you want?”

“Two hundred pounds of beans for starters.”

“I can give you a hundred.”

Don’t push the man too far. We’ve got but two mules anyway and a long march back. Cleary said, “Fine.” He looked over the Bickham’s shoulder and asked, “What’s in the tins?”

“Stewed tomatoes.”

“We’ll take some of those too.”

Bickham walked away and Cleary leaned over the counter to look around. Behind the counter, he saw a waxed-paper bag of Arbuckle's Coffee on an upturned crate. He snatched the bag, stuffed it in his haversack, and started drumming his fingers on the countertop.

Bickham returned, dumping sacks of navy beans on the counter. He placed two cartons of canned tomatoes to the counter.

Cleary pointed to a stack of wooden crates and said, "We'll take some of that beef too."

Brown stepped over and picked up the sack of beans. Bickham banged two small crates of canned beef stew onto the counter. He looked at Cleary and said, "This is supposed to be for Roosevelt's First Volunteers, but you said your regimental surgeon is Bell. He's with the 71st New York, camped down the beach. Who you signin' for? First Volunteers or 71st New York?"

Shit. Nosy Midwest Prod. Cleary hesitated, then said, "I'm detached 'til morning when the 71st marches north. Roosevelt knows we're down here, but I'll sign for the 71st."

Suspicious and resentful, Bickham took his time finding a requisition form and filling in the details. Brown pushed one crate of canned beef around to read the label, "Libby, McNeill & Libby." He made a noise and Cleary looked around.

"Something wrong?"

Brown pointed at the label. "Worked there—a packinghouse—once upon a time."

"Long ago I assume?"

"Not long enough. I won't eat whatever is in those tins." Brown gave a little shudder. He looked in the second crate to find cans of stew beef painted red. "Red Horse. More bad news," he said and carried the beans outside.

"Sign this." Bickham spun the form around on the counter and handed Cleary a pen.

Cleary poked the inkwell and wrote, 'Lt. D. Cleary, MD, 71st Vol NY.' He dropped the

pen on the counter, stacked the carton of tomatoes on top of the crates of canned beef and dragged the load to the edge of the planks.

Bickham looked down and said, “Had a pound of Arbuckle’s here. Any idea where it might have gone to, Doctor?”

Cleary hoisted his load. “Roosevelt maybe. You know the rich and powerful; always robbin’ hard-working, church-going folk like you and me. Thanks Lieutenant. Try not to get wounded; we might be your only salvation.” Cleary swung around and stepped outside.

Cleary and Brown broke open the cases and cartons, distributing the weight of the cans in the mules’ panniers. Brown eased a fifty-pound sack of beans across the back of his mule. The animal turned its head to watch Brown, then sidestepped, hoping perhaps to shake off the unexpected burden.

Repacked, Cleary led both mules down the lane. He asked a sentry for directions and then stopped in front of a derelict building with light and conversation spilling out into the night.

Three men were talking inside what was now the medical supply depot. One of them—an officer—walked over to Cleary and Brown as they came through the open doorway.

“Hello there. What brings you in?”

Cleary introduced himself and Brown and made a quick pitch for some basic supplies.

“We picked up some cast-off issue along the way, but a little more would help.”

“Major Ogden Rafferty, brigade surgeon, USV. I’m the acting medical supply officer. Nice to meet you Dr. Cleary. Dr. Brown. You’re in luck. A Red Cross steamer arrived today, and we have some kit ashore. But most things are still floating out there,” he said waving out the door to the beach, “including half the ambulances. These gentlemen can help you with minor needs.” He pointed to two hospital corpsmen. “You’ll excuse me. I need to find a bunk before morning

rounds.”

He walked out and Cleary called after him to say thanks, but he was already gone.

Turning back to Brown he asked, “So what do we need? Sterile bandages? Tourniquets?” Brown nodded and said, “The 24th could use more quinine.”

“And some charcoal if any came ashore yet,” said Cleary. “Any digitalis?”

The corpsmen pulled together neat piles of sterile wrapped bandages, self-locking tourniquets, and bottles of quinine tablets, fine-powdered charcoal, and several vials of digitalis. Cleary thanked them, and he and Brown scooped up their goods and hurried outside.

With the mules packed, they headed back through the center of the encampment and up the Camino Real. Behind them, Siboney was coming to life with the sounds of army boots and steel-shod hooves, and a far-off bugle. Offshore, ship lights winked off and puffs of particulate smoke erupted from dozens of smokestacks. The fleet was stirring.

Cleary and Brown marched inland, mostly in silence, stopping along the way to retrieve an abandoned canteen or blanket or shirt. They passed through Las Guasimas, noting for the first time the clumps of palms freshly scarred with bullets. They encountered no more Cubans or Rough Riders, and as the dawn began to break, the surrounding jungle came to life with bird song and the nervous scampering of iguanas.

Beyond the ruined town of Sevilla, they encountered the southern picket protecting the forward encampment. They were waved through without incident or insult. In a little while, they climbed back onto the high ground of sagging pup-tents and tilted wagons that was the American forward position in the war against Spain.

Cleary surveyed the area, his eyes coming to rest on the San Juan Heights not three miles away. He tried to imagine all the thousands of men up there, dug in behind barbed-wire,

barricaded in blockhouses, camouflaged in the thick foliage, and all of them waiting to fire high-velocity rounds propelled by the smokeless gunpowder that would not betray their positions. It was going to be an ugly fight.

“So that’s it,” said Brown looking to the west.

“That’s the place. We get a mile or two closer and the war begins in earnest.”

Behind them, the crown of the morning sun threw narrow shafts of red and orange light on the hills.

Cleary stuck out his hand. “Dr. Brown. It’s been a pleasure.” Brown shook his hand.

“Indeed. An interesting walk.”

“Listen, bring a can of tomatoes around for my two patients and I’ll guarantee you several cups of coffee.” Cleary patted his haversack.

“Absolutely. Stewed tomatoes.”

“I’ll boil some water.” Cleary waved and walked off towing his mule.

“Don’t eat the Red Horse.” Brown called after him. “Or the Libby’s.”