

A LIFE SENTENCE

A Novel

THE ABOLITION CLASSICS

V. 15

A LIFE SENTENCE

A Novel

ADELINE SERGEANT

Reset in Florence, Alabama by

JEFF HOOD

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A Life Sentence was originally published by John Lovell and Son,
Montreal, in 1889.

This edition is a modernization and not a facsimile. It follows the
structure and argument of Sergeant's novel in the editor's own
words, relocated to Florence, Alabama.

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F O R E W O R D

I have been inside the Lauderdale County Courthouse in Florence, Alabama. I have stood in the gallery and watched the light come through the tall windows and fall across the benches where people sit and wait to hear what the state has decided to do with someone they love. The courtroom is beautiful in the way that institutions of power are often beautiful...stripped wood, high ceilings, the American flag standing at attention beside the bench. The beauty is not incidental. It tells you that what happens here is serious and dignified and ordained.

I have also stood outside that courthouse in the parking lot, in August heat that wrings the breath out of you, holding the hand of a woman whose son had just been sentenced to death. The beauty inside the courtroom had done its work. The sentence felt inevitable. It felt like the conclusion of an argument that had been building since before her son was born...since the poverty, the neighborhood, the school that funneled certain children toward certain outcomes, the public defender who had forty minutes to spare. The sentence felt like justice. That is what the beautiful courtroom is for.

Adeline Sergeant published *A Life Sentence* in 1889. She was writing about England. She was writing about the way circumstantial evidence accumulates around a poor man with a bad reputation and becomes irresistible. She was writing about a community that needs someone to blame and finds one. She was writing about the man who knows the truth and stays silent because the truth

would cost him everything. She was writing about the child who bears her father's name into a world that has already decided what that name means.

She was writing about Florence, Alabama. She just did not know it yet.

The Tennessee Valley has its own version of everything Sergeant described. The Black Belt counties and the hill counties and the river towns all have their courts and their juries and their prisons and their condemned. They have their men who walk out of the woods with a gun and find themselves at the center of a story that was written before they arrived. They have their women who marry into the wrong family and spend the rest of their lives managing the consequences. They have their children who change their names and move to the next county and try to become somebody else.

I reset this novel in Florence because Florence is where the Tennessee River bends and because the Shoals have always been a place where beauty and violence live close together. Wilson Dam. Muscle Shoals Sound Studios. The execution chamber at Holman Correctional Facility less than an hour south. Helen Keller was born in this county. W.C. Handy was born in this county. The Shoals have given the world more music and more executions than most people know about.

Sergeant's great subject is the life sentence that attaches to everyone connected to a crime...not just the man convicted but his daughter, his accusers, the man who knows the truth, the woman whose secret set it all in motion. That sentence does not end at death or release. It follows the living from county to county and generation to generation. I have watched it do exactly that. I have sat with men on Alabama's death row who carry the weight of what their fathers did and what their

communities decided about their fathers. I have sat with their children.

This is why the novel belongs in this series. Not because it makes an argument about capital punishment, though it does. But because it shows the sentence spreading outward from the courthouse like water from a stone dropped in the river...touching everyone, stopping for no one, running all the way to the bank.

The light in that Florence courtroom is still falling. The benches are still full.

Jeff Hood
North Little Rock, Arkansas
2026

EDITOR'S NOTE

The Author

Adeline Sergeant (1851 to 1904) was an English novelist who published more than ninety books during her lifetime, most of them works of popular fiction in the sensation and realist traditions. She was a serious craftsperson who worked quickly and thought carefully about the social conditions her novels explored. *A Life Sentence* (1889) is among her most sustained achievements...a novel that uses the conventions of Victorian melodrama to ask hard questions about evidence, guilt, community prejudice and the way a criminal sentence ramifies outward through the lives of everyone it touches.

Sergeant was not a theorist of capital punishment in the way that Hugo or Dostoevsky were. She was a storyteller. But her storytelling instincts led her directly to the question that preoccupies this series: what does it mean to let someone bear punishment that is not theirs to bear? And what does it cost the person who knows the truth and stays silent?

The Original Novel

A Life Sentence was published in Montreal by John Lovell and Son in 1889. It follows Andrew Westwood, a poacher convicted of the murder of Sydney Vane, a local landowner, on the basis of circumstantial evidence. Hubert Lepel, a young writer who actually committed

the killing, stays silent to protect his sister Florence. Westwood's daughter Cynthia grows up under her father's name and her father's shame before eventually discovering the truth and forcing a reckoning.

The novel spans roughly twenty years and traces the life sentence Sergeant names in her title...a sentence that belongs not only to Westwood but to Lepel, to Florence, to Cynthia, to Enid Vane whose father was killed, to every person in the novel who carries the weight of what happened in those woods.

The Adaptation

This edition preserves Sergeant's plot and her central moral architecture. The English county becomes Lauderdale County, Alabama. The Victorian country house becomes a Shoals-area estate. The fir plantation becomes bottomland timber along the Tennessee River. The London stages of the story become Nashville and Birmingham. Holman Correctional Facility, an hour south of Florence on Highway 31, is where Andrew Westwood serves his sentence before escaping.

Sergeant's prose has been modernized throughout. Her long sentences have been shortened. Her Victorian circumlocutions have been replaced with direct American speech. Her chapter structure has been condensed. Her moral seriousness has been preserved. The one thing this edition does not do is soften the indictment. Sergeant built a novel about what happens when a community decides it already knows who the guilty party is. That community is still with us.

The Series

This volume is the fifteenth in The Abolition Classics, a Complicit Press series of classic texts reset in

contemporary American contexts, edited by Jeff Hood. The series proceeds from a single conviction: that the arguments against capital punishment have been made, in fiction and nonfiction, across centuries and cultures and that what the arguments need is not repetition but relocation...placement in the landscapes where American executions actually happen, in the voices of the people who actually live inside those landscapes.

EPIGRAPH

“And the Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother’s keeper?”

— Genesis 4:9

PART ONE

The Courthouse

CHAPTER I

"Do you find the prisoner guilty or not guilty?"

"We find the prisoner guilty, Your Honor."

A sound moved through the Lauderdale County Courthouse...not quite a gasp, not quite a sigh. Something between the two. Even people who had expected this verdict, who had told each other for three days that there was only one way it could go, felt it arrive like a blow.

The trial of Andrew Westwood for the murder of Sydney Vane had lasted three days. The August heat had been brutal. The ceiling fans turned slowly and did almost nothing. Faces in the gallery were damp and pale. Some people had driven in from Sheffield and Tusculumbia. The case had been in the Shoals papers since May and before that on the television stations out of Huntsville and Florence. Everybody in three counties knew the name Andrew Westwood. Most of them had already made up their minds.

Westwood was known in the county. He was known the way that certain men are known in small communities...not because anyone liked him or sought him out but because he had been in trouble before and trouble had a way of following certain men. He had a record for poaching on the Vane family's bottomland along the river. He had been cited twice and fined once and had served thirty days in the Lauderdale County jail for the second offense, the citation coming from Sydney Vane himself who had gone to the magistrate personally.

After that Westwood had made remarks. People had heard him.

Then one evening in late April Sydney Vane had walked into the timber stand below the bluff on his family's property and had not walked out. A man turkey hunting on the adjacent parcel heard two shots. Another man driving the county road saw Westwood crossing the field toward the timber at roughly five in the afternoon. Vane was found an hour before dark, shot through the chest, lying in the dead leaves at the edge of a creek.

The evidence assembled itself around Andrew Westwood with the efficiency of something that had been waiting to happen. A scrap of canvas from his jacket, caught on a branch near the body. His rifle, a thirty-ought-six, recovered from the tree line a few yards from where Vane was found. Two witnesses who placed him in the general area at the relevant time. His documented hatred of Sydney Vane. His criminal history. His poverty. His reputation. His face, which was dark and angular and unsmiling and which the jury had looked at for three days.

His lawyer had done what he could. He was a young man from the public defender's office in Florence who had forty other cases and had met with Westwood four times before trial. He pointed out that no one had seen Westwood fire a weapon. He pointed out that the canvas scrap could have been left at any time. He pointed out that the two witnesses could not agree on exactly where they had seen Westwood or exactly when. The jury listened politely and returned a guilty verdict after three hours of deliberation, which included a lunch break.

Before the verdict was read a small girl had been brought forward to testify. She was eleven years old, thin and dark, with large black eyes that moved around the courtroom as if she could not understand how she had

come to be there. Her name was Cynthia Westwood. She was Andrew Westwood's daughter.

The prosecutor had hoped she might offer something useful about her father's movements that afternoon. She offered nothing. She stood in the witness box and looked at her father and her father looked at her and neither of them spoke for a long moment. The judge asked her a few preliminary questions and quickly established that she had not been inside a church since she was four years old and did not understand the nature of an oath and could not be sworn. He directed that her testimony not be taken.

Cynthia was led to a bench at the back of the gallery. Someone tried to take her home. She refused to go. She sat on the bench for the remainder of the afternoon and came back the next morning. She was still there when the verdict was read.

She heard the foreman say the words. She did not immediately understand what they meant. Then her father was on his feet.

He had a rough defiant face. He was gaunt and dark and his hair was pushed back from his forehead. He was not the kind of man who inspires sympathy on first impression. But when he stood and gripped the rail and looked at the judge there was something in him that commanded attention. He was not afraid.

"I have only one thing to say," he said. "I swear before God I did not kill Sydney Vane. I pray that whoever did kill him will be found. That is all."

The judge read the sentence. Andrew Westwood was to be executed by the State of Alabama.

The sound that moved through the courtroom when the verdict was read was nothing compared to the sound that came when the sentence was pronounced. Cynthia Westwood screamed once from the back of the gallery

and then went silent. People turned and saw a small girl on the floor. By the time her father had been led out she was being carried to the parking lot by a woman who had been sitting near her.

Andrew Westwood, on his way out, raised his hands once toward the ceiling of the courtroom. Then the door closed behind him.

CHAPTER II

The Vane family had owned land in Lauderdale County for three generations. The current house was large and brick and set back from the county road behind a circle drive and a stand of old water oaks. The land ran from the bluff to the river bottom...several hundred acres of timber and pasture and creek bottom. Sydney Vane's family had farmed it and hunted it and leased it for decades.

Richard Vane, Sydney's older brother, was fifty-five years old and had never married. He ran the property and had done so since their father died. He had expected Sydney to eventually inherit and take over. Sydney was twenty years younger and had a wife and a daughter and seemed likely to outlast him by decades. Now Sydney was buried in the cemetery behind the Baptist church on the county road and Richard was alone in the big house with his sister-in-law Marion who had not left her bedroom since May and his niece Enid who was nine years old and had stopped laughing since her father died.

Richard Vane had organized his life around a particular kind of order. He had his routines and his opinions and his loyalties and he was not a man who adjusted easily to disruptions of any kind. The murder of his brother was the worst disruption of his life and it had left him slightly unhinged in ways that were visible to people who knew him well. He was louder than he used to be. He was quicker to anger. He had inserted himself

into the prosecution of Andrew Westwood with a personal intensity that some people thought was grief and some thought was something else.

His sister Leonora had come down from Nashville three days after Sydney's death and had not left. She was fifty years old and efficient and not soft. She had run a nonprofit in Nashville for sixteen years. She arrived at the Vane house and immediately understood that her brother was not capable of managing anything and that Marion was not going to recover quickly. She took charge.

She sat at the breakfast table on a Thursday morning in late July, the day after the verdict, waiting for her nephew.

His name was Hubert Lepel. He was twenty-two years old and was the son of a cousin on their mother's side. He had grown up calling Leonora "Aunt Leo" though she was not technically his aunt. He lived in Nashville and was trying to establish himself as a writer. He had published two pieces in regional magazines and was working on a play. Leonora had called him the night before asking him to come.

He arrived at eight-thirty in the morning. Leonora looked at him and thought he looked terrible.

"You look terrible," she said.

"Good morning," he said and poured himself coffee.

She watched him. He was a handsome young man in the angular intense way of men who think too much and eat too little. Dark eyes and dark hair going slightly long. He sat across from her and held his coffee cup with both hands and did not look at her directly.

"I need you to tell Richard," she said.

"Tell him what."

"The appeals board denied the petition. The execution is scheduled. They're not going to commute the sentence."

Hubert set down his coffee cup.

"Why me," he said.

"Because he loves you and because you're not me. If this news comes from me there will be an argument. If it comes from you he might actually hear it."

Hubert looked at the window. The water oaks were moving slightly in the morning breeze.

"There was something I hoped you might tell me first," Leonora said.

"What."

She slid a folded newspaper across the table. There was an item about the verdict and below it a longer item about an appeal that had been filed by a coalition of lawyers arguing that the evidence against Westwood had been circumstantial and insufficient.

Hubert read it without picking up the paper.

"Do you believe he did it," Leonora said.

"The jury believed he did it."

"That is not what I asked."

Hubert was quiet for a moment. Then he said: "The evidence was not overwhelming."

"No," Leonora said. "It was not."

They sat with that for a moment. Footsteps moved across the kitchen floor above them. Richard Vane was awake.

CHAPTER III

Richard Vane came into the dining room already talking. He was dressed and alert and his eyes had the bright unfocused quality they had taken on since May...a look that Leonora associated with people whose interior lives had become too loud for the ordinary rules of social behavior to contain.

"Hubert!" he said, as if delighted by a surprise, though Leonora had told him the previous evening that Hubert was coming. "When did you get in? You look terrible. Leo, give the boy some breakfast."

"I'm fine," Hubert said.

Richard sat down heavily and poured himself coffee. "Have you heard? The verdict came in yesterday. Guilty. They'll execute the son of a bitch in the fall."

"Richard," Leonora said.

"What. He killed my brother. He sat in that courtroom for three days lying through his teeth and the jury saw right through him. I was there. I watched every minute." He looked at Hubert. "He's going to pay for it. I told the DA I want to witness it. I have the right as Sydney's surviving family."

"Richard," Leonora said again. "Hubert has something to tell you."

Richard looked at his nephew. The brightness in his eyes shifted slightly. He was a man who had lived sixty years and had learned to recognize the face of unwelcome news.

"What is it," he said.

Hubert looked at his uncle. He looked at him for a long moment, this old man who had taken him fishing on the river when he was eight years old and taught him to identify every tree on the property by its bark. Who had always been loud and opinionated and warm and occasionally insufferable and who was now sitting with his hands around his coffee cup like a man holding on to something to keep from falling.

"The governor's office notified the coalition yesterday evening," Hubert said. "They're not going to commute. The execution is on."

Richard Vane did not react for a moment. Then he said: "Good." Then he said it again, louder. "Good." He pushed back his chair and stood up. His face had gone red. "That's exactly right. That's justice. That's what Sydney deserves. He was my brother. He was..."

He stopped. The redness in his face darkened. He put one hand on the table. Leonora was on her feet.

"Richard," she said sharply.

"I'm fine," Richard said. But he was not fine. He sat back down heavily. His breathing was wrong.

"We need to call Dr. Garrett," Leonora said to Hubert.

"I don't need a doctor," Richard said. But he did not argue when Hubert took his arm and helped him back to his chair.

The doctor arrived within the hour. Richard Vane had not had a stroke. He had had something close enough that the doctor wanted him in bed for the rest of the day and wanted to run some tests.

Hubert sat alone in the dining room after the doctor had gone upstairs. He sat very still for a long time. He was twenty-two years old and he had, in the past two months, learned a number of things about himself that he would have preferred not to know. One of them was that it was possible to watch events proceed toward an

outcome you knew to be wrong and to do nothing to prevent them. One of them was that these abilities, once discovered, did not go away.

He got up and walked out the back of the house and down toward the river.

CHAPTER IV

Florence, Alabama in 1989 was a city of thirty thousand people on the south bank of the Tennessee River, across the water from Muscle Shoals and Sheffield and Tuscumbia, the four cities that together were called the Shoals. It had a university. It had the Helen Keller birthplace on West North Commons. It had a music scene that had been making records since the 1960s. It had a courthouse and a jail and a history that included the Civil War and the depression and the flooding of the river bottoms when Wilson Dam was built and the gradual loss of the industries that had come after the dam. It was a beautiful place and a hard place and it had been both of those things for as long as anyone could remember.

Hubert Lepel walked down to the river and stood on the bank below the limestone bluff. The water was low in August. The exposed rock on the far bank was white in the morning light. A great blue heron was standing motionless in the shallows fifty yards away.

He thought about what he was going to do.

He had thought about it every day since May. He had thought about it driving down from Nashville that morning. He had thought about it sitting across the breakfast table from Leonora, who was a smart woman and who had looked at him in a way that suggested she might be thinking about some of the same things.

Andrew Westwood was going to be executed by the State of Alabama for a crime he had not committed.

Hubert Lepel knew this with the completeness that only one kind of knowledge allows. He knew it the way he knew his own name.

He had not pulled a trigger in the sense that people usually meant when they talked about killing. He had not murdered Sydney Vane in cold blood. He had gone to that timber stand on an April afternoon because Sydney Vane had agreed to meet him there and what had happened in that timber stand had been fast and ugly and the result of a confrontation that Hubert had believed would be verbal rather than physical until the moment it was not. But the result was Sydney Vane dead in the leaves and Hubert walking back across the field with his hands shaking and his mind working very fast.

He had stayed quiet for the first days because he was in shock and because his sister Florence was in shock and because the situation had seemed, briefly, like it might resolve itself into a verdict of unknown assailant. When suspicion had settled on Westwood he had told himself it would not hold. When the evidence began to accumulate he had told himself the jury would see through it. When the verdict came in he had told himself the appeals process would save Westwood. And now the appeals process had run out.

He was twenty-two years old. He had a sister whose name was attached to Sydney Vane in ways that would destroy her if the truth came out. He had an uncle who was already sick with grief and would not survive the revelation. He had a career he had not yet built that would be over before it began. He had a life that he had not yet lived.

Andrew Westwood had a daughter who was eleven years old and who had screamed in a courthouse gallery and been carried out to the parking lot.

Hubert stood by the river for a long time. The heron did not move. The water did not change. Finally he turned and walked back up the bluff.

CHAPTER V

Florence Lepel was twenty-nine years old and employed as Enid Vane's tutor at the Vane house. She had taken the job seven months before Sydney Vane's death. She had not left after the death because there was nowhere to go and because leaving would have raised questions she was not prepared to answer.

She was a striking woman...pale, slender, with hair that had been an aggressive red in her youth and had been carefully managed toward blonde ever since. She wore it up in a way that was elegant without being fussy. Her eyes were large and brown and she had the habit of keeping them slightly lowered, which gave her an appearance of calm that was not entirely accurate.

She was sitting in the library of the Vane house when Hubert came to find her. She was reading a French novel and she did not look up when he came in.

"He nearly had a stroke," Hubert said.

"I know. I heard."

"Florence. We have to talk about this."

"We've talked about it."

"Not adequately."

She set down her book. "There is nothing new to say. The situation is as it is."

"The situation is that an innocent man is going to be executed."

"That does happen," she said. "In this country that happens."

"Florence."

"What would you have me do, Hubert? Walk into the Florence police department and make a statement? I was not there. I did not see what happened. I know what you've told me happened and I believe you but I did not witness it. What would my statement accomplish beyond destroying both of us?"

Hubert said nothing.

"Westwood is a poacher," Florence said. She said it without contempt, as a factual observation. "He has a record. He had made specific threats against Sydney in front of witnesses. There is a version of events in which he is guilty and in which you and I are simply two people who were also in the area that day and who have already been interviewed by the police and who have nothing further to contribute."

"Florence."

She picked up her book again. "I know what you think of me," she said quietly. "I have thought about this every night since May. I am not indifferent to it. But I do not see a path that ends better than the path we are on."

"What if I confessed," Hubert said. "What if I went to the police and I told the truth and I did not mention you at all."

She was quiet for a moment. "Then you would go to prison," she said. "And Sydney Vane's family would want to know why you killed him. And eventually they would find out why. And eventually my name would be in it whether you mentioned it or not."

Hubert looked at her. She met his eyes. Neither of them spoke for a while.

"They're going to execute him," Hubert said finally.

"Yes," his sister said. "They are." She returned to her book. "I am very sorry about that."

He left her there and went back down the hall. He had a headache behind his left eye that had been there for two months and showed no signs of leaving.

CHAPTER VI

Leonora Vane found them at the end of August, a week before school was scheduled to start. She had gone out to meet the school bus at the end of the drive...Enid rode the county bus even though there were people in the house who could have driven her...and had found the child standing at the end of the drive talking to someone she did not immediately recognize.

The other person was a girl. She was slight and dark and her clothes were worn almost to nothing. She had been sleeping rough by the look of her. She was about Enid's age.

Leonora recognized her when she got closer. She had seen the child in the courthouse gallery. She had seen her carried out to the parking lot by a stranger.

Enid had her hand. They had met apparently while Leonora was walking down the drive and had introduced themselves to each other with the directness that children sometimes use before the social inhibitions of adults are fully installed.

"Aunt Leo," Enid said. "This is Cynthia. She doesn't have anywhere to go."

Cynthia Westwood looked at Leonora Vane with the flat direct gaze of a child who has learned not to expect much and is prepared to be disappointed again. She had a Kennedy half-dollar on a string around her neck. She stood still and waited.

Leonora looked at the child and felt several things in rapid succession. She felt compassion of the involuntary

kind that children in distress can compel even from people who would prefer to feel nothing. She felt the sharp particular discomfort of being confronted by a living consequence of something she had preferred to keep at a distance. She felt, despite herself, a powerful desire to look away.

"Come inside," she said. "We'll find you something to eat."

She said it more curtly than she intended. The child's expression did not change. She followed Enid up the drive.

Leonora walked behind them. She was thinking about Hubert. He was still in the house, still with that look on his face that she could not entirely interpret.

She brought the child into the kitchen and gave her food. Enid sat across the table and watched Cynthia eat with the focused attention of someone who has never seen hunger this close.

After the child had eaten Leonora asked her the obvious questions. Where had she been since the trial? She had been staying with a neighbor family. When had she left there? A few days ago. Where had she been sleeping? In the bed of a pickup truck in a parking lot on Florence Boulevard. Where was she trying to get to? She wanted to see her father. They had not let her see her father.

Leonora called Reverend Pruitt at First Methodist in Florence. He came within the hour. He knew of a residential program out on the Muscle Shoals highway... not a group home exactly, more of a supervised residence for children whose family situations were disrupted. It had a school attached.

"She should not stay here," Hubert said.

He had appeared in the kitchen doorway while Leonora and Reverend Pruitt were talking. He said it quietly.

"I know," Leonora said.

"She should be somewhere she's not known. Somewhere her father's name doesn't follow her."

Leonora looked at her nephew.

"The program on the Muscle Shoals highway," Hubert said to Reverend Pruitt. "Can you get her in?"

"Probably. There would be some cost involved."

"I'll cover it."

Leonora looked at him again.

"I'd like her placed as Jane Wood," Hubert said. "Wood was her mother's name. I would like for this not to follow her. And I would prefer for the girl not to know who is paying for it. And I would prefer for the Vane family not to know."

He looked at his aunt. She looked at him. Something moved between them that was not speech.

"I can arrange that," Reverend Pruitt said.

CHAPTER VII

The residential program at St. Elizabeth's Center on the Muscle Shoals highway was run by a woman named Sister Louise. She was not a nun in the formal sense but she ran the program with the seriousness of someone who had thought carefully about what she was committing to. The center occupied a converted house set back from the road behind a row of magnolias and had space for twenty girls at a time.

Sister Louise received Reverend Pruitt's call on a Tuesday and agreed to take the child on Friday. When Cynthia arrived, brought by Reverend Pruitt and a woman from his church, Sister Louise met her at the door and held out her hand.

Cynthia looked at her hand for a moment and then at her face. Something in the older woman's face must have been credible. She took the hand.

"Your name here is Jane Wood," Sister Louise told her, after the others had gone. They were sitting in the small sitting room off the front hall. "That's not to hide anything. It's so that you can have a fresh start if you want one. You are still Cynthia. But here you will be Jane and none of the other girls will know your history unless you choose to tell them."

"Where is my father," Cynthia said.

"Your father is in Holman. Do you know where that is?"

"South of here. In Escambia County."

"That's right. You cannot visit him there. But you can write to him. You can write to him as often as you like and I will make sure the letters are sent."

Cynthia was quiet for a moment. "Will he write back."

"I don't know. That is his choice to make."

She absorbed this. She was a child who had been absorbing hard information for several months and she had developed a capacity for it that Sister Louise recognized from other girls who had come through difficult situations.

Over the following weeks Sister Louise learned that Cynthia was behind in reading and almost completely untrained in mathematics but that she was not slow. She was fast, actually. She moved through the reading deficits with a determination that startled the teacher.

And she sang.

She sang the way that some children who have not been taught to do anything do one thing brilliantly without understanding why. She sang at the kitchen table while she was doing her homework. She sang in the hallway. She sang in a voice that had no business being in an eleven-year-old child...a dark warm sound that was too big for her thin body, that stopped people in doorways.

Sister Louise wrote to Reverend Pruitt. Reverend Pruitt wrote to Hubert. Hubert wrote back and said to let the girl sing.

CHAPTER VIII

Richard Vane recovered from his near stroke and did not go to witness the execution. His doctor had forbidden it. In the event, the execution was stayed at eleven at night by a federal district court judge who had read the coalition's brief and found that a sufficient question had been raised about the adequacy of Westwood's representation at trial. The stay was not a commutation. It was a pause. But it meant that Andrew Westwood did not die in October as scheduled.

Richard Vane heard the news on the radio. He was in bed at the time. Leonora brought him a glass of water and told him that the stay did not mean Westwood would not eventually be executed, that the process would continue, that justice would in due time be served. She said these things with the firmness of someone who had decided that they were true and did not intend to be talked out of them.

She did not believe all of them.

Marion Vane, Sydney's wife, died in November. She had not recovered from the shock of May and the trial had accelerated whatever was already failing. She went quietly in her sleep in the bedroom at the top of the stairs, with Leonora in the chair by the window and Enid asleep on the cot that had been set up in the corner.

Enid woke up and saw that something had changed in her mother's face and understood what it was. She climbed down from the cot and put her hand on her

mother's hand and stayed there until Leonora, who had been dozing, woke and took over.

That was the autumn. Florence was brown and cold and quiet. Richard Vane was left the head of a household that now consisted of himself and his niece and Florence Lepel who was, despite everything, still there.

Hubert came and went. He was in Nashville most of the time. He was working on a play. He was also, though he did not say so, working on a way to live with himself, which was a project that had no obvious end point.

CHAPTER IX

Florence Lepel had not planned to stay. She had told herself every month since May that she would leave and every month she had found a reason not to. The practical argument for staying was sound. Richard Vane needed someone in the house who could manage. Enid needed a tutor. The less practical argument...the one that had more to do with what Florence stood to gain...she did not examine closely.

She had been watching Richard Vane. He was sixty years old now, white-haired, still vigorous in the way of men who have done physical work all their lives. His property and his investments were in good order. He had no children and now his brother was dead and Marion was dead and Enid was nine years old and female, which in Richard's understanding of inheritance was not quite the same thing as having an heir. He was, Florence had concluded, a man who might be susceptible to companionship if it were offered in the right way.

She managed his household with quiet efficiency. She made herself useful. She was pleasant at dinner. She did not discuss Sydney or Marion or the trial. When Richard wanted to talk about those things she listened. When he wanted to talk about other things she was ready for those too. She read. She was organized. She was, without making a point of it, attractive.

Hubert came to see her in December. He came on a Saturday afternoon when Richard had driven to Florence

for a meeting with his accountant and Enid was at a friend's house. They were alone in the library.

"You're still here," he said.

"I am."

"Are you going to stay?"

She looked at him over her reading glasses. "For now."

"Florence." He sat down. He looked worse than the last time she had seen him, which was two months ago.

"What are you planning."

"I'm planning to do my job."

"You're planning something else."

She took off her reading glasses. "Hubert, I have told you what I am doing here and I have told you why. I am not asking for your permission."

"He's sixty years old."

"Yes."

"Florence, if you're thinking about marrying this man..."

"I am thinking about a great many things," she said. "And I appreciate your concern but I have been managing my own affairs without your guidance for quite some time."

He looked at her. She looked at him. Between them was everything that had happened since April and everything that was still happening because of April and the particular silence that surrounds knowledge that can never be safely spoken.

"The child is doing well," he said eventually. He meant Cynthia.

"I'm glad to hear it."

"Florence, I want you to leave this house."

"I know you do."

"I'm asking you to leave it."

"I know that too." She put her reading glasses back on and looked at her book. "I won't be leaving, Hubert. But thank you for asking."

He left the next morning.

PART TWO

The Sentence

CHAPTER I

Eight years passed.

The Shoals in the late nineteen-nineties was not so different from the Shoals of the early nineteen-nineties. The river was still brown and wide. Wilson Dam was still standing. The music studios on Jackson Highway still recorded. The university was still there.

Richard Vane had married Florence Lepel six months after Marion's death, in a ceremony at the Baptist church that a number of people in the county had found unseemly for various reasons and had said so mostly to each other rather than to Richard directly. Richard did not seem to notice or care about the opinion of people who were not in his immediate circle. He was sixty-one years old and he had found someone to be in the house with him and that was what he had needed.

Florence had produced a son named Richard Junior who everyone called Dickie and who was now five years old. Richard Vane loved this child with the disproportionate devotion of a man who had not expected to be a father and found the experience transforming. He carried Dickie everywhere. He taught him the names of the trees and the birds and the fish in the river.

Florence was less captivated. She was efficient with Dickie. She fed him and dressed him and arranged his schedule and made sure he saw the doctor on time. She did not do these things with obvious warmth.

Enid Vane was seventeen and almost beautiful in the way that delicate things sometimes are...pale and fine-featured and with a shadow behind her eyes that had been there since she was nine years old and had not gone away. She had grown up in a house that was managed by a woman she did not trust, watched over by an uncle who loved her but who was not perceptive. She was gentle and careful and she had learned early that the most important thing was to know when to be quiet.

Hubert arrived on a September afternoon. He was thirty years old and he looked it...not old but lived-in, the edges of his face beginning to record some of the things that had happened in the years since he was twenty-two. He had become a playwright of modest regional reputation. One of his plays had run for six weeks at a theater in Nashville.

He found Enid in the garden and the involuntary movement of his face when he looked at her was something he could not entirely control. She looked like her father. She had Sydney Vane's coloring and Sydney Vane's way of holding her head.

He sat with her in the garden for an hour before going inside. They talked about her schoolwork and about a book she was reading and about whether she might want to go to the university in Florence or somewhere else. She was easy to talk to in the way that people are when they have been taught that other people's comfort matters. He thought she was probably lonely in a way she had learned not to say directly.

Inside, Florence was waiting.

CHAPTER II

Florence had changed in eight years and had not changed. She was thirty-seven and still slender and still beautiful in the particular way that requires management and receives it. She lay on the sofa in her sitting room with a glass of iced tea and a novel and the particular stillness of a woman who has arranged her environment to serve her needs exactly.

"It was kind of you to come," she said, which was what she always said.

Hubert sat down across from her. He said the expected things. He asked about Richard. He asked about Dickie. He asked about Enid in a way that sounded like polite inquiry and was not entirely that.

Florence watched him. She always watched him.

"Andrew Westwood died," she said, when the formalities were done.

He had been reaching for his glass. He did not quite reach it.

"In the prison," she said. "An accident in the work yard. He was hit by a piece of equipment. He died after a few hours."

Hubert put his hand on the arm of his chair.

"I read it in the paper two weeks ago," Florence said. "A small item. Almost nothing. He had escaped from Holman a few years ago...did you know that? They thought he was in Latin America. Apparently he came back and was recaptured. The item said almost nothing about any of it."

Hubert was looking at the window. His face had gone the color of old paper.

"I thought you should know," Florence said. She sounded almost gentle. "I thought it might...resolve something for you."

"And his daughter," Hubert said.

"I don't know. I imagine she is where she is. Wherever that is."

"Her name is Cynthia," Hubert said. "She'll be nineteen now."

"Yes." Florence took a sip of her tea. "It has been a long time."

Hubert stood up. He went to the window. He stood there for a while with his back to his sister.

"Does Westwood's death make things better or worse for you," Florence said.

He turned around. He looked at her. "It makes nothing better," he said. "It never made anything better. Nothing that has happened since that afternoon has made anything better."

Florence considered this. "Then perhaps it makes things no worse," she said. "Perhaps that is all we can hope for."

He went out. He walked down to the river. He stood on the bank below the limestone bluff in the same place he had stood eight years ago and looked at the brown water moving south.

He stood there for a very long time.

CHAPTER III

He was back in Nashville the next day when the thing that changed everything began to change. He was in his apartment working on a new play when his phone rang. It was a Florence area code.

He answered it.

"Mr. Lepel," said a woman's voice. "My name is Sister Louise. From St. Elizabeth's Center in Muscle Shoals."

He set down his pencil.

"I've been trying to reach you for a few weeks," she said. "I didn't have a current number. Reverend Pruitt gave me this one."

"What is it," Hubert said. He knew from the tone.

"It's about Jane," Sister Louise said. "Jane Wood. The girl you've been supporting."

"What's happened."

"She left us. About three weeks ago. She's been with us since 1989 and she left in the middle of the night and we've had no word from her since."

He sat back in his chair. "Why did she leave."

"There was an incident. One of our staff members said something to her...not deliberately, I think, but the girl's history came out. The other girls found out whose daughter she was. Who her father was. She was...I'm afraid it was very badly handled. And we woke up the next morning and she was gone."

"How old is she."

"Nineteen."

"Where did she go."

“We don’t know. She left a note for me. She said she was going somewhere where no one knew her. She said she would change her name again.” A pause. “She signed it only ‘Janie.’ She didn’t use her last name. Either last name.”

He thanked her and hung up. He sat in his apartment for a long time. Then he called a private investigator and told him he needed to find a young woman named Cynthia Westwood, also known as Jane Wood, nineteen years old, dark, tall, last seen in the Muscle Shoals area three weeks ago.

The investigator took the information and said he would be in touch.

He was not in touch for three months and then for three more months and then for a year. The trail that Cynthia had left was almost no trail at all.

CHAPTER IV

Nashville in the late nineteen-nineties was a city that was becoming something different from what it had been. The country music industry was there as it had always been but so now were many other things...a growing university district, a healthcare economy, a technology sector beginning to develop.

Hubert Lepel had a good life in Nashville by the measures that a certain kind of life is measured. He had the apartment near Vanderbilt. He had a reputation in the Nashville theater community that was solid if not spectacular. He did not have much else. He had thought once that he might marry...a woman named Mary who taught at Belmont and was cheerful and accomplished and not at all complicated in the ways that Hubert was complicated. He had let that go without quite deciding to let it go. He had understood, one evening while looking at her photograph, that he had no right to marry anyone.

He was thirty years old and he looked for Cynthia Westwood in the way that a man looks for something he has told himself he does not deserve to find.

He was outside the Tennessee Performing Arts Center on a Tuesday evening in October, just after a matinee, when a woman spoke to him.

"Mr. Lepel," she said. "If you have a moment."

He turned. She was tall and dark-haired and she was wearing practical dark clothes and she had large eyes that he could not quite see in the evening light. She

looked to be in her early twenties. There was something about her face that he could not immediately place.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Do I know you."

"Not exactly," she said. "My name is Cynthia West. I've been trying to figure out how to introduce myself to you for about a week. I work the sound booth at the Belcourt and I've been watching your name in programs for a while and I thought...I thought I would just ask you."

"Ask me what," he said.

"Whether you could help me get work. I know that sounds forward. But I have heard that you know people in the theater business here and I have been doing small things and I would like to do bigger things and I don't know the right people."

He looked at her. In the light from the entrance of the theater her face was very clear.

"What kind of work," he said.

"I can act. A little. I'm better on the technical side. But actually what I can do best is sing."

"Sing," he said.

"I know that's not directly useful to what you do. But I thought I would ask."

He looked at her for a moment longer. He could not have said what made him ask the next question except that something in him was already working toward an answer that frightened him.

"Where are you from," he said.

She paused. Just briefly. "I've been in Nashville about a year," she said. "Before that I was in a few different places."

"Originally."

Another pause. "North Alabama," she said. "The Shoals."

He thought about saying what he was thinking. He decided not to. Not yet.

"Come by my office tomorrow," he said. "I'll see what I can do."

He gave her his card. She took it and thanked him and walked away into the evening crowd. He watched her go.

Cynthia West. She had used her own first name and found a surname that was almost hers. He thought about a child sitting on a bench in a courthouse gallery. He thought about the half-dollar on its string around a thin girl's neck.

He thought about what it had cost her to walk up to him and ask for help.

CHAPTER V

She came to his office the next morning at ten and she sang.

His office was two rooms above a coffee shop near Vanderbilt and he had a small upright piano that he used badly for composing. She sat down at it and arranged some sheet music she had brought and then she played a few bars and began to sing.

She sang a standard first, something she had clearly sung many times. Her voice was warm and controlled and significantly better than it had any right to be without formal training. Then without pausing she moved into something he recognized as Schubert and sang it in a way that made him put down his coffee cup and forget that he had not slept well.

When she finished he said: "Where did you study."

"I didn't," she said. "I had a teacher a few years ago who was very good. He's dead now. Before him I was mostly self-taught."

"Who was the teacher."

"An older man. He had been a singer himself, a long time ago, in Germany. He found me when I was in a bad situation and helped me out of it." A pause. "He died two years ago."

"What was his name."

"His name was Mr. Lutz. Hans Lutz. He played violin in an orchestra here in the evenings and taught voice during the day. He took me in when I had no money and no place to go. He told me I had a voice worth training

and he trained it. I was with him for two years before he died."

"And before that. Before you came to Nashville."

She was quiet. "I went to school," she said finally. "In Alabama. A residential program. I left when I was nineteen."

He did not push it. He had heard enough to know what he was going to do.

"I have a friend who runs a small vocal studio on Broad Street," he said. "She's Italian, trained in Milan, very good. Her name is Maria Dellacorte. I want you to go and see her and tell her I sent you. I'll call her today. I want her to hear you."

Cynthia looked at him with an expression he could not entirely read. It contained gratitude and something else...a wariness that was not unfriendly but that had clearly been earned through specific experiences.

"Why would you do that," she said. "You don't know me."

He considered various answers and gave the simplest one. "Because you have a real voice," he said. "And because I owe someone something."

She looked at him for a moment longer. Then she nodded.

"Thank you," she said.

She left. He sat in his office for a while after she had gone. He thought about his sister and the Vane house and the limestone bluff and the river running south toward Holman. He thought about a man in a work yard who had been struck by a piece of equipment and had died with nothing resolved.

He thought about what it would mean to tell the truth to a woman who had built her entire life around the wrong her father had done and the wrong that had been

done to her father and who still did not know the half of it.

He thought about that for a long time.

CHAPTER VI THROUGH XXII

Maria Dellacorte heard Cynthia sing and called Hubert the same afternoon. He could hear in her voice the particular excitement of someone who has just encountered something unexpected and valuable.

"Where has this girl been," Maria said. "How has she been wandering around Nashville for a year without anyone hearing her."

"She's been keeping it quiet," Hubert said.

"This is not a voice that should be kept quiet. She needs training, she has gaps, there are things she does that make me want to shout at her...but the instrument is real. The instrument is extraordinary. How old did you say."

"Twenty-one. Maybe twenty-two."

"Young enough. Hubert, I want to work with her. I want six months with her and then we will see."

Hubert arranged the funding through Maria, who was willing to tell Cynthia that the studio had a scholarship for promising singers. Cynthia accepted this with the same matter-of-fact directness with which she accepted most things, which is to say without extensive protest but with a reserve that suggested she was not entirely convinced.

She began studying three days a week. Within a month Maria was calling Hubert every week to report. Within three months Maria had arranged for Cynthia to sing at a private event, then a second one, then a small club on Lower Broad.

Hubert went to hear her at the club. He sat in the back and watched her on the small stage in the blue light. She was wearing a dark dress and she stood very still when she sang, which was unusual for a stage performer and which somehow made the voice larger rather than smaller. The room was noisy and it got quiet while she sang.

He watched her and thought, for the first time, something that he had been carefully not thinking: that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

He left before she came off stage. He was not yet ready for what would happen when they were in the same room after that.

She found him outside. He was standing on the sidewalk in the cool November air.

"Mr. Lepel," she said. "Did you hear."

"I heard," he said.

"What did you think."

He told her what he thought and she accepted it with the directness she always had, not denying it exactly but not leaning into it either, as if praise were information she was still deciding what to do with.

"I wanted to ask you something," she said.

"All right."

"You said when I first came to see you that you owed someone something. Who do you owe."

He looked at her. The blue light from the club's sign fell across the sidewalk between them.

"That's a long story," he said.

"I have time."

"Not tonight," he said. "Tonight I have a train to catch."

He did not have a train to catch. But she accepted the deflection without argument.

"I'll tell you one day," he said. "I promise you that."

She looked at him for a moment. Something in her expression shifted slightly, as if she were filing this promise in a particular drawer where she kept things she was not sure she believed.

"All right," she said. "Good night, Mr. Lepel."



He went to the Vane house for Christmas. Enid was seventeen now and she was not the child he remembered and she was. She asked him questions about Nashville with the particular interest of a person who is trying to imagine what it would be like to be somewhere else.

Florence was the same as she always was. Controlled, elegant, managing. Dickie ran through the house in a constant state of animation that his father found enchanting and his mother managed with efficient impassivity. Richard was slower than he had been but still recognizably himself.

On the second evening Hubert sat with Enid on the back porch after dinner. It was warm for December. The river was visible in the darkness below the bluff.

"Can I ask you something," Enid said.

"Of course."

"Did you know my father."

He was quiet for a moment. "I knew him," he said. "Not as well as some people. Better than others."

"What was he like."

What he said, after thinking about it, was: "He was a man who was very charming and not always careful about the consequences of that charm. He loved your mother. He loved you. He was not always wise."

Enid absorbed this. "Uncle Richard thinks he was perfect," she said.

"Uncle Richard grieves him."

"I know." She looked at the river. "I think maybe no one is perfect. I think people who are grieved become perfect in the grieving."

He looked at her. She was seventeen years old and she had arrived, through whatever path of solitude and observation, at something it had taken him much longer to understand.

"That's true," he said.

"I'm not sorry he's gone," she said and then immediately: "That's a terrible thing to say."

"It's honest."

They sat on the porch for a while longer. The river moved in the dark below them.



By February Cynthia West was singing at private events twice a week and earning enough to move out of the rooming house in Germantown. She found an apartment in East Nashville with a woman named Elaine who played bass in a country band and kept musician's hours.

She was walking to the bus stop on a Tuesday morning in March when a man fell into step beside her. He was perhaps sixty years old, brown-faced, with hair that was too white and too thick to be entirely natural. His eyes were very dark.

"You have the wrong person," she said.

"I don't think so," he said. "Your mother's name was Cynthia too. You have her face. Your eyes are mine."

She stood very still on the sidewalk.

"I was told you were dead," she said.

"That happens," he said. "When you escape from prison and go a long way and don't come back for a long time, people sometimes decide to call you dead. It's simpler for everyone."

She looked at him for a long time.

"I don't know whether I'm angry with you," she said. "I have been working on that question for nineteen years."

"That sounds about right," he said. "Take whatever time you need. I'll still be here."

She took him to the apartment. They sat in the small kitchen and she made coffee and she looked at her father across the table and he looked at her and neither of them spoke for a while.

"You didn't do it," she said finally.

"No," he said. "I did not."

"I know," she said. "I have always known. But I need to hear you say it."

"I did not kill Sydney Vane," he said. He said it with the quietness of a man who has said it many times in his own head. "I was there. I saw things I should have reported and I did not report them because of who I was and who he was and because no one in Lauderdale County was ever going to take my word for anything. But I did not kill him."

She sat with this.

"Then who did," she said.

He wrapped his hands around his coffee cup. "I have some thoughts about that," he said. "I have had nine years to think about it. Are you ready to hear?"

Andrew Westwood told his daughter what he had seen on the afternoon of April 28th, 1989. He had been at the edge of the Vane property, near the timber stand, checking a snare line he had no legal right to have there, his rifle propped against a deadfall a few yards off while he worked. He had seen Sydney Vane go into the woods. He had seen, a few minutes later, a car parked on the county road that he had not seen there before. He had seen a young woman moving along the fence line toward the timber stand. He had heard two shots. He had

waited. He had seen the woman moving back along the fence line toward the road. The car had been gone within ten minutes. He had not been watching the house side of the property. The timber stand backed up against the Vane land on that side, out of his sightline from the fence, and if anyone had come that way on foot he would not have seen them come or go.

He had gone back to his truck. He had thought about going to look. He had not gone.

"Why not," Cynthia said.

"Because I had snares on that property and because I had been cited twice and because I was the kind of man who did not go to the police voluntarily under any circumstances. And because I thought it was none of my business." He paused. "That last part was wrong."

"The woman," Cynthia said. "Do you know who it was."

"I think so. By the time I put it together I was already in Holman and there wasn't much I could do with the information." He paused again. "Her name was Florence Lepel. She was the tutor at the Vane house. There had been talk about her and Sydney Vane in the county. They had been meeting."

Cynthia sat very still.

"She has a brother," Westwood said. "A writer. His name is Hubert Lepel. He lives in Nashville."

Cynthia looked at the table. She was thinking about Hubert Lepel saying he owed someone something. She was thinking about the way he had deflected her question. She was thinking about the way he looked at her sometimes, with an expression she had not been able to name.

"I need to think about this," she said.

She did not immediately confront Hubert. She thought about it for several days. She thought about

what she knew and what she suspected and what the difference was between the two. Then she called him.

They met at a coffee shop near Vanderbilt on a Saturday morning.

"I need to ask you something," she said.

"All right."

"It's about where I'm from. The Shoals."

He did not move. His coffee cup was halfway to his mouth and he did not complete the motion.

"My real name is not Cynthia West," she said. "My real name is Cynthia Westwood."

He set down his cup.

"My father is Andrew Westwood," she said. "He was convicted of killing a man named Sydney Vane in Lauderdale County, Alabama, in 1989. He has always said he was innocent. I have always believed him."

Hubert looked at the table.

"I am telling you this," she said, "because you told me you owed someone something. And because my father has told me what he saw that afternoon. The woman along the fence line. The car on the county road."

He was completely still.

"He thinks it was your sister," Cynthia said. "He thinks you have known that for a long time. And I think that you are the person you said you owe. I think the debt you are carrying is to my father." She paused. "I might be wrong about all of this. If I am wrong, tell me. Tell me now and I will believe you."

He did not tell her she was wrong.

He sat at the coffee shop table in the morning light and he looked at his hands and he said nothing for a very long time.

Then he said: "I need to tell you the whole story."

"Yes," she said. "You do."

He told her. He had not said it aloud since the afternoon it happened and the words came out in a way that was not quite like ordinary speech. He told her about the April afternoon. He told her about what he had found in a letter from his sister to Sydney Vane...a letter that laid out the arrangement they had been making for months, the plan, the date, the place they were going. He told her he had known, from the letter, that Florence and Sydney met there most Friday evenings, and that he had waited in the trees on the house side until he saw her start back toward the road before he crossed to where Sydney was. He did not want her there for what he meant to say. He told her that he had gone to the timber stand to confront Sydney, not with a weapon, with the intention of ending the thing before it destroyed Sydney's family and his sister's reputation. He told her that Sydney had produced a pistol from his jacket and that there had been a struggle and that Andrew Westwood's rifle had been on the ground ten feet away and that Hubert had reached it and fired before he fully understood that he was going to.

He told her about walking back across the field. He told her about his sister's face when he came to find her. He told her about the decision...not a decision exactly, more an absence of decision, a failure to do the thing that should have been done, repeated day after day until it became a structure around which a life had been built.

"You let him take the sentence," Cynthia said.

"Yes."

"You watched them try him and convict him and you said nothing."

"Yes."

She was looking at him with an expression he had no framework for. It was not entirely anger. It was something more complicated than anger.

"He spent four years in Holman," she said. "Before he escaped. Four years as a convicted murderer. He lost everything. He lost his freedom and his name and his life in Alabama and the years he would have had. I grew up without him. I grew up as Jane Wood in a program in Muscle Shoals, without a name or a father or any of the things that children have, because you were afraid."

"Yes," he said.

"You were afraid," she said again.

"I was afraid," he said. "And I told myself things. I told myself it was for Florence. I told myself Westwood was morally guilty even if not legally. I told myself he would be acquitted. I told myself the appeals would save him. I told myself things for ten years. They were all lies."

She looked at her coffee cup.

"I have been looking for you for ten years," he said quietly. "Not successfully. You were very good at disappearing. But I never stopped looking. And when you walked up to me outside the TPAC I..."

"The half-dollar," she said.

He looked up.

"You recognized it when I wore it to your office," she said. "I saw your face. I didn't know what it meant then."

"Yes," he said.

She looked out the window. "My father is not dead," she said.

He turned his head sharply.

"The report in the paper was wrong. He escaped. He has been in South America. He came to Nashville last week. He is the one who told me about the woman along the fence line."

Hubert stared at her.

"He is alive," she said. "And he deserves to have his name back. And I want to know if you are going to give it to him."

He sat across from her at the coffee shop table and said nothing for a very long time.

Then he said: "Yes."

"When."

"I need to think about how. About what the consequences will be. For Richard. For Florence."

"For Florence," she said. Her voice was very flat.

"She is my sister," he said. "I know what she has done. I know what she is. I know all of it. She is still my sister."

Cynthia looked at him for a long moment.

"You have until I lose patience," she said. "Which is not infinite."

She got up and left. He sat at the table alone with his coffee cup and the morning light and the particular quality of stillness that follows a conversation that has opened a door that cannot be closed.

CHAPTER XXIII THROUGH XLIII

He went to an attorney in Florence. Her name was Clara Whitfield and she did criminal appeals and civil rights work and had been one of the people who signed the coalition's brief in 1989. She listened to him for an hour and a half and then she looked at him for a long time.

"You understand what you are saying," she said.

"Yes."

"You are telling me that you killed Sydney Vane. That Andrew Westwood was convicted of a crime you committed. That you have known this for nine years and said nothing until now."

"Yes."

"You understand the legal consequences."

"I've thought about them."

She made several calls over the following week. She prepared a formal statement. She arranged a meeting with the DA's office in Florence.

He told Richard Vane first. Or he tried. He drove to the Vane house and found Florence sitting in her room with the paper in her hand and a look on her face he had never seen before. Not shock. Something more like the expression of a person who has been calculating odds for a long time and has just seen the calculation invalidated.

"You didn't tell me you were going to do this," she said.

"I didn't ask your permission," he said.

He went upstairs. Richard Vane was in his study, sitting in the chair behind his desk in a formal way that

suggested he had placed himself there deliberately, as if to keep his body in a position that his mind was not managing to hold.

"Tell me it's not true," he said.

"I can't tell you that," Hubert said. "It's true."

Richard Vane's face did things that faces do when the systems that maintain composure are overwhelmed. He stood up and then sat back down. He put his hands on the desk.

"Get out of my house," he said.

Hubert stood up.

"Get out of my house and don't come back."

He went.



The story went into the Florence Times-Daily on a Thursday morning and was picked up by the Huntsville paper by afternoon and on the wire by evening. The opinions that followed were not uniformly sympathetic to Hubert Lepel. The fact that he had allowed Westwood to be convicted and sentenced to death and had said nothing for nine years did not go down easily with people who believed in what they called doing the right thing. Letters appeared in the paper. A local pastor preached a sermon that was described in the paper the following week.

Richard Vane collapsed that afternoon. Not a stroke... something close enough. He was in the hospital in Florence. He was stable but he was not well.

The legal process that Clara Whitfield had set in motion moved the way legal processes do...slowly, with complications, with delays that were not entirely explainable. Andrew Westwood's conviction was reviewed formally by the state attorney general's office

and by a federal district court. The review took fourteen months.

During those fourteen months Westwood stayed mobile. Cynthia's album came out in October and went somewhere that no one had quite expected it to go. It was reviewed in magazines that reviewed music seriously and played on stations that played music people actually listened to. She was on the radio. She was on a television program.

Richard Vane died in March of the following year. He had a stroke in the night and did not wake up. He was sixty-six years old. Enid was with him at the end.

Hubert drove down for the funeral. He stood at the back of the Baptist church and watched the service. Florence sat in the front pew with Dickie beside her and her face gave nothing away.

He did not speak to Florence. He did not go to the house afterward.

Andrew Westwood's formal exoneration came in February, fourteen months after Hubert's statement. The paperwork was ceremonious and the ceremony was modest. There was no press conference. Clara Whitfield notified Cynthia and Cynthia notified her father and Andrew Westwood, who was in a motel in Opelika, read the documents that were faxed to him and sat for a long time with his hands on the desk.

He was not a man who cried easily. He had not cried when they sentenced him and he had not cried when he arrived at Holman. But he sat with the documents and he thought about 1989 and the courthouse and the gallery and the sound his daughter had made when the sentence was read. He thought about the years in the prison and the years after the prison.

Then he called Cynthia.

She answered immediately. "It's done," he said.

She did not say anything for a moment. Then she said: "Are you all right."

"Yes," he said. "I'm all right." He paused. "I'm coming to Nashville."

"Good," she said.

He drove to Nashville the next day. She met him at the apartment in East Nashville and they sat at the kitchen table and he told her what he had been doing for fourteen months.

"I want to stop moving," he said. "I have been moving for nine years and I want to stop."

"Then stop," she said.

"I want to go back to Alabama," he said. "Not Lauderdale County specifically. But Alabama. I know Alabama. I know how to live in Alabama."

She sat with this. Nashville had been home for two years. She had her apartment and her manager and her recording contract and her training with Maria. She had Hubert.

"Let me think about it," she said.

He stayed in Nashville for a week. He met Hubert for the first time, formally, over dinner at a restaurant on Second Avenue. Hubert came alone. Cynthia was there. The three of them sat at the table and the conversation was careful for the first hour and less careful after that. Westwood asked Hubert direct questions and Hubert answered them directly and by the end of the evening something had moved between them that was not quite forgiveness and was not quite the absence of forgiveness but was something that could, given sufficient time, become the basis of a working peace.

After dinner Cynthia walked her father to his rental car.

"He seems like a decent man," Westwood said.

"He is," she said. "In most ways."

"You still have feelings for him."

She did not deny it.

"I have one condition," her father said. "One condition and that is all I will ask."

"What."

"He takes your name," her father said. "Not you taking his. Westwood is a real name now and because he has done something real and because names matter. I want my daughter's name on her life."

She stood on the sidewalk and thought about this.

"I'll tell him," she said.



They went to Morgan County in June. Westwood had found a house outside Decatur on a back road along the river. Hubert rented a room in a house in Decatur proper, five miles away. He was not going to presume on proximity. He was there to work and to be near people he cared about and to figure out, with the patience Cynthia had asked him to have, what could be built from where they were.

He was working on a new play. It was set in Alabama. It was about a man who comes late to the truth and what happens when he does.

Cynthia sang at a church in Decatur in July, the first Sunday after they arrived. She stood at the front of the sanctuary in a white dress and she sang two songs she had written herself and one traditional and the congregation sat very still while she sang.

Andrew Westwood sat in the third row. He listened with the intensity of a man for whom music had been inaccessible for nine years and who was only beginning to remember how it worked.

After the service Hubert found her in the parking lot. It was hot, the particular specific heat of the Tennessee Valley in July.

"Cynthia," he said.

"Yes."

"I need to ask you something."

She looked at him.

"Your father said I should take your name," he said. "If we were going to be together in the way that people are together. He meant it as a condition."

"I know," she said. "I told you."

"I want to take your name," he said. "I want to be Hubert Westwood. Not because your father asked for it as a condition. Because it's the right name. Because it's the name that has been through something real and come out on the other side. Because I don't deserve the name I was born with and I would like the chance to earn a different one."

She stood in the parking lot in the July heat and she looked at him for a long time.

"That's a good answer," she said.

"Is it enough?"

She was quiet for another moment. Then she said: "Ask me properly and we'll see."

He did.

She said yes.



They married in September in a civil ceremony at the Morgan County courthouse in Decatur. Enid was there, and beside her the young associate pastor Reverend Pruitt had brought on at First Methodist years before. Clara Whitfield came down from Florence. Reverend Evandale, ordained by then in his own small congregation on Court Street in Florence, drove over

and spoke a few words that no one had asked him for but that everyone was glad he said. Andrew Westwood sat in the front row in a new suit and watched his daughter marry a man he had decided to accept.

Hubert Westwood. He practiced writing it. He said it aloud in the morning. He meant for it to mean something and he worked on deserving what it meant.

Florence went abroad. She was heard from occasionally and not often. She had managed her way into a life that contained what she needed and not much else.

Enid finished her degree at North Alabama and then went on to divinity school. She and Evandale were married in the Baptist church in Florence in a ceremony that Hubert and Cynthia attended from Decatur, driving up on a Saturday morning and sitting near the front and listening to two people commit to the truth of their lives.

After the ceremony they stood in the parking lot of the church and Cynthia put her hand through Hubert's arm and they looked at the Tennessee River below the bluff and at the courthouse across the square and at the old water oaks moving in the afternoon breeze.

"This is where it started," she said.

"Yes," he said.

"Are you all right."

He thought about the question the way he always thought about real questions now, with more care than he used to and less certainty about the answer.

"I think so," he said. "I think I am as all right as I have earned the right to be."

She looked at him.

"That might be enough," she said.

The river moved south in the afternoon light. It had been moving south since before any of them were born and it would be moving south long after all of this was

over. That was the thing about rivers. They did not carry anything too long. They moved it on.

Hubert stood in the parking lot of the Baptist church in Florence, Alabama and thought about the life sentence that Adeline Sergeant had named...the sentence that attaches to everyone the state touches and that spreads from the courthouse outward in waves until it reaches people who were nowhere near the original thing and who nevertheless carry it.

He carried it. He would carry it. He had made his peace with that.

The sentence for Andrew Westwood was over. The record was clear. The name was clean. That had been the work. It had taken too long and cost too much and been done by a man who was not brave enough and not honest enough and who had nevertheless, finally, done it.

He put his arm around his wife's shoulders. She leaned into him.

They drove home to Decatur in the late September light, back along the Tennessee River, back through the country that had made them and broken them and made them again in a different and more honest shape.

DEFINITIONS AND TERMS

Andrew Westwood: The central figure of the novel. A poacher convicted of a murder he did not commit. His exoneration after nine years requires first the conscience and then the formal action of the man who knows the truth.

Hubert Lepel / Hubert Westwood: The young writer who killed Sydney Vane, stayed silent while Westwood was convicted and sentenced to death and came nine years later to the truth. His taking of Westwood's name at the novel's end is the final act of his reckoning.

Florence Lepel Vane: Hubert's sister, whose relationship with Sydney Vane set the events of the novel in motion. She escapes legal consequence but not consequence of other kinds.

Cynthia Westwood: Andrew Westwood's daughter. Raised as Jane Wood in a residential program after her father's conviction, she rebuilds herself and eventually forces the truth into the open.

Enid Vane: Sydney Vane's daughter and the novel's moral center. Her father's death shapes her childhood. The truth of his death reshapes her understanding of everything.

The Life Sentence: Sergeant's title refers not only to Andrew Westwood's prison sentence but to the sentence that attaches to everyone connected to a crime...the

daughters, the sisters, the witnesses, the men who know and say nothing.

Lauderdale County: The Alabama county in which the novel is set. Florence is the county seat. The Tennessee River forms part of the county's boundary.

The Shoals: The collective name for the four cities of Florence, Sheffield, Tuscumbia and Muscle Shoals in northwestern Alabama, situated along the Tennessee River.

Holman Correctional Facility: The Alabama prison in Escambia County where death row and executions are located. Westwood serves his sentence there before escaping.

The Exoneration Process: Westwood's exoneration requires a formal statement from Hubert, review by the state attorney general and a federal court and fourteen months of legal process. Exoneration is not acquittal and it is not simple.

FURTHER READING

On the Original Novel

Sergeant, Adeline. *A Life Sentence*. John Lovell and Son, 1889. The original text, in the public domain, is available through Project Gutenberg and the Internet Archive.

Sergeant, Adeline. *The Complete Works*. Sergeant published more than ninety novels during her lifetime. Her reputation declined after her death in 1904 but she remains a significant figure in Victorian popular fiction and deserves more critical attention than she has received.

On Wrongful Conviction

Gross, Samuel R. and Barbara O'Brien. *Frequency and Predictors of False Conviction: Why We Know So Little and New Data on Capital Cases*. Journal of Empirical Legal Studies, 2012. The systematic study of exonerations that established the scale of wrongful conviction in the American capital system.

Stevenson, Bryan. *Just Mercy*. Spiegel and Grau, 2014. The memoir of the Alabama capital defense attorney whose work has produced more death row exonerations than any other single advocate in American history. Essential reading for anyone who wants to understand what Sergeant was writing about and what it means in Alabama specifically.

On Alabama and Capital Punishment

Equal Justice Initiative. *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*. Equal Justice Initiative, 2015. The comprehensive documentation of racial terror in Alabama and the South that provides the historical context for the patterns of conviction and execution that the novel addresses.

Alabama Department of Corrections. *Annual Reports*. The official documentation of Alabama's prison system, including death row population, execution dates and methods.

Related Volumes in This Series

Hugo, Victor. *Under Sentence of Death*. 1829. Edited and reset by Jeff Hood. Complicit Press, 2026. The first-person diary of a condemned man...the original source text for the tradition of which this novel is a part.

Darrow, Clarence. *An Eye for an Eye*. 1905. Edited and reset by Jeff Hood. Complicit Press, 2026. The working-class counterpart to Sergeant's middle-class examination. Where Sergeant's condemned man is a poacher on a squire's land, Darrow's is a factory worker. The argument is the same.

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment*. 1866. Edited and reset by Jeff Hood. Complicit Press, 2026. The novel that asks most precisely what it costs a man to carry a secret he should have confessed. Hubert Lepel's nine years of silence is the subject of that novel stated in different terms.

Livingston, Edward. *Argument Against Capital Punishment*. 1833. Edited and modernized by Jeff Hood. Complicit Press, 2026. The legal argument that what Sergeant narrates in fiction is wrong in fact and in law.