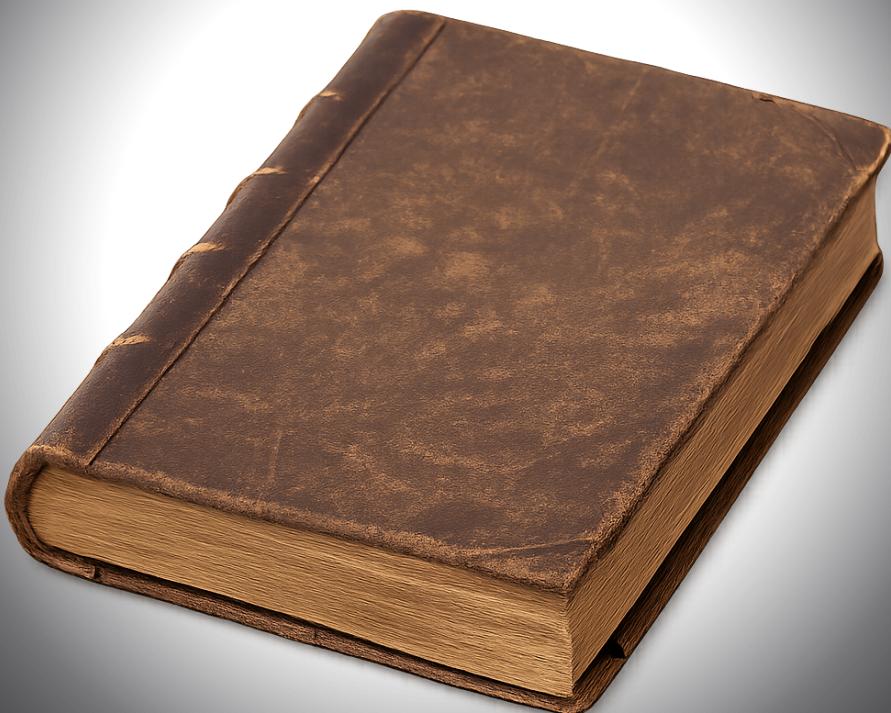


# ECHOES *of* FORTUNE

## THE LAST LEDGER

*A Short Story*



DAVID RLENG

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THE LAST LEDGER

*A Short Story*

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# Chapter 1

**Richmond, Virginia**

**April 3, 1865**

**A**bove him, Richmond was dying.

Samuel Ward felt the explosion through the stone floor before the sound reached him. The basement archives shuddered. Dust sifted from the ceiling and settled on the open ledger before him.

He brushed it away and continued his work.

A second explosion, closer. The oil lamps swayed on their hooks, throwing shadows that lurched across the shelving. Somewhere overhead, glass shattered. Voices rose in tones that violated every convention of the Treasury Department's decorum.

Ward's hands did not pause. He had learned years ago that accuracy was its own form of survival. You did your work. You did it correctly. You did not look up.

The stairwell door burst open and cracked against the stone wall. His immediate superior stood in the doorway, face flushed, collar torn loose, coat hanging open.

“Burn them.” The words came out ragged. “All of it. Every record in this room. Orders from Secretary Trenholm himself.”

The three clerks at the far tables looked up. Ward recognized their expressions. He had seen the same look on men ordered to retreat. The moment when order becomes its opposite.

“The Yankees are at the bridges. Now! Burn everything!”

The room erupted. Clerks abandoned their posts and descended on the shelves, pulling volumes and carrying them toward the iron stove in the corner. Smoke began to rise, thick and acrid, as decades of financial records curled into ash.

Ward gathered documents as instructed. His hands lifted ledgers from shelves he had organized himself. He had been given an order. He had always followed orders.

Yet his pace was measured where others scrambled. His selections deliberate where others grabbed wildly. He could not have explained this.

No one asked him to.

\*

The man appeared without announcement.

Ward noticed him only because stillness had a presence of its own. Where the superior had burst through in panic, this figure simply stood in the doorway, occupying the threshold as though he had always been there.

The chaos parted around him like water around stone.

He wore a dark suit of fine wool, unmarked by ash or sweat. His collar was precise. His cravat knotted with care. The building shook from another explosion, and he did not flinch. Did not blink. His eyes, dark and patient, moved across the burning room with the unhurried attention of a man taking inventory.

Ward's hands stopped moving.

Something was wrong. Not the burning. Not the panic. This man. Standing motionless while Richmond died around him, watching the destruction with the calm of someone observing weather.

“You may stop.”

His voice was quiet. It should not have carried over the crackling flames, the shouting, the thunder of artillery. But it did. The room fell silent. Clerks froze with armfuls of records. Even the fire seemed to quiet.

“The destruction of these documents is no longer required.”

The superior turned, face twisting. “Sir, you have no standing here. I have orders from the Secretary himself.”

“Your orders have been countermanded.”

No credentials produced. No documentation offered. The man simply stood there, and the superior's protest died unvoiced. Whatever name he had recognized, whatever reputation preceded this figure, it was enough.

“My name is of no consequence. You may refer to me as the Accountant.”

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His gaze moved across the room. Four clerks. His attention passed over the first. The second. The third.

It stopped on Ward.

The weight of that gaze was physical. Ward felt it settle on him like a hand pressing against his chest. He did not know why he had been selected. He did not know what criteria had been applied. A decision had been made about him.

“You,” the Accountant said. “You will separate the ledgers marked according to the following pattern.”

He recited a sequence. Years combined with department codes and sub-classifications. Numbers Ward had never been formally taught.

Yet as the sequence unfolded, Ward recognized it. Not as memorized knowledge but as pattern. As logic. The kind of system that revealed itself to those who had spent years learning how systems worked.

He did not ask what the numbers meant.

“You have nine minutes.”

Ward moved to the nearest shelf.

\*

His hands found the spines with the certainty of long practice. 1861, third quarter, foreign accounts. 1863, first quarter, cotton futures. 1864, fourth quarter, bullion transfers.

Around him, the other clerks stood frozen. Unwilling to resume destruction. Equally unwilling to assist. The Accountant watched from his position near the door, his stillness unbroken.

Ward pulled the fifth volume from its shelf. His fingers brushed the spine, and something made him open it.

He told himself he was verifying the selection. A final check.

The pages fell open to a section of accounts he did not recognize. Names, dates, sums. Standard format. He turned several pages, scanning entries, and then his finger stopped.

His own name looked back at him.

*Ward, Samuel R.* The entry appeared in the leftmost column. The date beside it was from six months ago.

Six months.

Before Richmond fell. Before this morning. Before the Accountant walked through that door and selected him from four clerks with a single glance.

His name had been entered into this ledger six months ago.

Ward's hand did not tremble. A clerk's hand, trained for steadiness. But something cold settled in his chest and did not leave.

He had been chosen before he was chosen.

His eye moved to the right side of the page. His name appeared again. *Ward, Samuel R.* A second column, its header abbreviated to letters he could not read. No notation. No explanation. Simply his name, entered twice, serving purposes he had never been told.

The room was silent except for the crackle of flames. Ward could feel the Accountant's gaze on his back. Patient. Unhurried. The gaze of a man who already knew what Ward had found.

Ward closed the ledger.

He added it to the stack and continued his work. His hands did not pause. His expression did not change. But the cold thing in his chest had a name now.

He had been selected. He had been entered into a system. And he did not know the rules that governed what happened to the men whose names appeared in columns they could not read.

\*

Nine ledgers. The stack stood apart from the chaos, leather bindings of varying age and condition.

The Accountant approached. His steps were measured, unhurried, as though the smoke and fire and distant artillery occupied a different world than the one he moved through. He examined the ledgers without touching them, his dark eyes moving from spine to spine.

Then he placed his hand on the stack.

“These records are not for the war.” His voice carried no emotion. “They are not for the Confederacy. They are for what follows.”

Ward waited. The fire crackled. Above them, something crashed hard enough to shake plaster from the ceiling.

“Wars end, Mr. Ward. Records endure. Those who carry the ledgers

carry the future.”

He paused. His eyes met Ward’s, and Ward saw something there he could not name. Not threat. Not reassurance. Something older than either.

“Those who carry the ledgers must understand that the ledgers will be remembered long after the carriers are forgotten.”

The words were delivered quietly. Almost gently.

Ward heard them.

\*

The office had belonged to someone important. Mahogany desk, leather chair, bookshelves lined with volumes that would not survive the day. But the room showed signs of hurried departure. Drawers stood open. Papers scattered. A half-empty glass of brandy abandoned beside an inkwell.

The Accountant closed the door.

“You will travel south. The routes I provide are clear as of this morning. Conditions may change. You will adapt.”

Ward stood with the ledgers against his chest.

“These records must survive.” The Accountant moved to the desk, stepping around scattered papers without disturbing them. “Their preservation is more important than the Confederacy. More important than the war. More important than any individual involved in their transfer.”

He opened a drawer and withdrew a bundle of cloth, a leather wallet, a pouch that clinked with metal.

“Civilian clothing. The papers identify you as Samuel Warren, cotton factor. The name is close enough to your own that you will respond to it naturally.”

He set each item on the desk.

“Gold. United States currency. Confederate notes are worthless now.”

Then he withdrew a sealed folio. The wax bore a geometric symbol Ward did not recognize. The Accountant held it for a moment, his thumb resting on the seal.

“You will carry this with the ledgers. You will not open it. You will not read its contents.”

His eyes found Ward’s.

“If you are captured, if circumstances make preservation impossible, you will burn this folio before it can be examined. Burn it unread. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

The Accountant held the folio a moment longer. Something passed across his face. Not quite hesitation. Then it was gone.

“The contents of this folio are not your concern. What matters is that it reaches its destination. Or that it is destroyed. There is no third option.”

He placed it in Ward’s hands.

The paper was heavy. Legal weight. The seal pressed into Ward’s palm like a brand.

Outside, artillery struck close enough to rattle the windows. The brandy glass shivered against the inkwell and toppled, amber liquid spreading across documents no one would ever read.

The Accountant did not react.

“Change your clothing. I will provide route details before you depart.”

\*

The passage was dark and narrow, smelling of damp brick. Ward moved through it by touch until he reached a door that opened onto daylight filtered through smoke.

Richmond burned.

He emerged into an alley choked with ash. Through the gap between buildings, flames rose from structures to the east. The air was thick with cinders that fell like black snow, coating shoulders and hat brims and the faces of people who fled past without looking at him.

Ward turned left and walked toward Main Street.

The crowds were a river of desperation. Bodies pressed together, civilians carrying whatever they could hold. Portraits ripped from walls. Silver clutched against chests. Children crying. Women calling out names. Men shouldering past with the wild energy of those who knew that delay meant capture.

Ward moved against the current.

He did not run. He kept his pace measured, his expression neutral. The merchant’s clothes made him invisible. The face that had let him disappear

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into Treasury bureaucracy now let him disappear into catastrophe.

The satchel pressed against his hip. Nine ledgers. One sealed folio. His name in a column he could not read.

The Accountant's words followed him through the smoke and the screaming.

*The ledgers will be remembered long after the carriers are forgotten.*

Ward walked south through the dying city.

He did not look back.

## Chapter 2

Dawn came gray and smelling of char. Behind him, columns of smoke still rose from the ruins of Richmond.

The roads were empty in the way roads are empty after disaster. Ward passed the evidence of flight: a cart abandoned, a child's shoe half-buried in mud, a dead horse drawing crows. The people had fled or been taken. He walked through their absence, the satchel pressing against his hip, until a farmhouse appeared at the end of a rutted lane.

The door opened, and a man stood in the gap.

Perhaps fifty, with gray in his beard and eyes that moved from Ward's face to the satchel to his hands and back again. Evaluating.

"Your papers."

Ward produced the wallet. The man examined each document with methodical attention, holding them to the light, checking details Ward could not see. The silence stretched. A bead of sweat traced down Ward's spine.

The man paused at the second page. His thumb moved to the corner. He tilted it.

Ward's chest tightened. He kept his breathing even. Whatever test was being applied, he did not know the criteria. He did not know what failure looked like. He only knew that this man had the power to decide whether he continued south or disappeared into a shallow grave behind the barn.

The pause extended. Three seconds. Five.

Then the man returned the papers.

"Enter."

Ward stepped inside. The rooms were bare. A table, two chairs, a narrow bed. No portraits. No personal effects. The house existed for no purpose except passage. A waypoint in a network designed to move cargo without leaving evidence.

The man gestured toward a chair. Ward sat. A cup of water was placed before him. No food. No conversation.

“The account is acknowledged.”

Ward drank and said nothing. He had passed. He did not know what he had passed. The next link in the chain would come when it came.

\*

The barge sat low in the water, deck stacked with cotton bales that had not moved in months and would never move now. Ward found his berth in the forward compartment, a space barely wide enough to lie down, separated from others by thin wooden partitions.

He was not alone.

Four men shared the barge. They offered no names. They moved with purpose even when no task required movement, positioning themselves at intervals along the deck. Never clustering. Never leaving any approach unobserved.

Handlers. Watchers. Part of the system that carried him south.

Or they were something else.

His papers were checked at noon. A man emerged from the pilot house and approached without greeting. Ward handed over the wallet. The documents were examined, each page held to the light. Then they were returned without comment.

At dusk, the papers were checked again. The same man. The same silence.

Ward sat near the forward rail and watched the riverbank slide past. The other men watched him. He could feel their attention even when he did not meet their eyes. Patient. Unhurried. The attention of men who had done this before and would do it again and felt nothing about the cargo they carried.

The barge stopped at a landing Ward had not been told to expect.

Two men descended the gangplank carrying something heavy between them, wrapped in canvas. The shape was unmistakable. The weight was distributed as weight distributes when what is carried no longer carries itself. So was the satchel strap trailing beneath the shroud, the same style Ward carried against his hip.

No one spoke. No one looked at Ward. The men disappeared into the treeline, and the barge continued south as though nothing had occurred.

Ward did not ask what had been unloaded. Asking was not part of the transfer protocol.

\*

Night came without transition. The barge found anchorage in a shallow bend. Ward retreated to his berth and lay in the narrow space, staring at the wooden boards above his head.

He did not sleep.

The voices came sometime after midnight.

Two men, somewhere beyond the partition. They spoke barely above a whisper, but the gaps in the warped wood let the words through.

“The shipment is on schedule.”

“The route has held.”

Ward lay motionless. He breathed slowly, maintaining the rhythm of sleep.

“The last courier did not return.”

The words hung in the darkness. Ward felt something clench in his chest.

“This one will.”

A pause. The sound of one man shifting position.

“The verification was satisfactory?”

“Adequate. He follows instruction. He does not question.”

“That is sufficient.”

Silence. Ward stared at the boards above him, his heart beating hard enough that he could feel it in his throat.

*The last courier did not return.*

He had suspected. Now he had confirmation. Not proof. But confirmation.

Men carried the ledgers south. Men did not come back.

Ward lay in the darkness until dawn. When the light came, he rose and presented his papers at the scheduled hour. His face showed nothing. His hands did not shake.

He did not speak of what he had heard.

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Not a courier. A delivery.

And deliveries, once completed, were disposed of.

# Chapter 3

Four men in blue emerged from the treeline.

Ward's driver did not react. He sat with the reins loose, expression blank, as though Union cavalry were no more significant than weather.

The patrol leader approached. Young. Maybe twenty-five. His eyes moved from the driver to Ward to the satchel.

“Papers.”

Ward produced the wallet. A soldier dismounted to take it.

“Samuel Warren. Merchant. Bound for New Orleans.”

“Yes, sir.”

The patrol leader's gaze lingered on the satchel. Ward felt the weight of the ledgers, the sealed folio, the answers to questions these men did not know to ask.

“What's your cargo?”

“Personal effects. Business correspondence.”

The pause stretched. Ward watched the soldier's face for any sign that he knew, that he suspected, that this was the moment the chain broke.

“Proceed.”

The papers were returned. The patrol withdrew. Ward's heart did not slow for miles.

The patrol had asked a single question and accepted his answer. The network had checked his papers six times in three days, and each examination lasted longer than the Union soldier's entire inquiry. The men in blue were easier to pass than his own handlers.

\*

That night, Ward found himself alone in another waypoint room. Bare walls, water-stained ceiling, a narrow bed. On the table, a candle burned.

The satchel rested on the floor.

Ward sat on the edge of the bed and looked at it for a long time. Then

he reached down and withdrew the sealed folio.

The wax caught the candlelight. Geometric pattern. Unknown symbol. Heavy paper holding secrets he had been forbidden to read.

*Burn it unread.*

The Accountant's instruction. Clear and absolute.

But the Accountant had selected him six months before this morning. The Accountant had looked at him in a burning basement and chosen him with a glance. The Accountant had said that the ledgers would be remembered long after the carriers were forgotten.

And the last courier had not returned.

Ward held the folio above the candle flame.

The heat gathered against the wax. He watched it begin to soften, edges growing glossy as the material warmed. The paper remained untouched, held high enough that fire could not reach it. But close enough that a single lowering of his hand would end everything.

He could burn it. Destroy whatever was inside. Never know what the system had written about him. Never confirm what he suspected.

The wax softened further. The seal began to lose its shape.

Ward's hand stopped.

He held it there, suspended between knowing and not knowing, between obedience and the need to understand what kind of death waited at the end of this road.

Then he lowered the folio and set it on the table, adjusting it so its edge aligned with the wood grain. The gesture was automatic, the reflex of a man for whom disorder was noise.

The wax would harden as it cooled. The seal would show evidence of heat but remain unbroken. He had not opened it. He had not burned it. He had come close enough to understand what this moment meant.

Ward returned the folio to the satchel. He lay down on the narrow bed and did not sleep.

Three more days to New Orleans.

\*

The outskirts of the city announced themselves in smoke and sound. Ward sat in the carriage with his hands on the satchel, watching the landscape

change. Mud and vegetation. The smell of the river delta. The decay that fed new growth.

The carriage slowed.

Three men stood across the road. No uniforms. Civilian clothes. But they stood with the stillness of men who expected obedience, and when the driver pulled the horses to a stop, he did so without question.

One approached. Features unremarkable. Eyes sharp. He stopped beside the carriage and looked in at Ward.

“Do you still carry the item you were instructed to destroy?”

The question hit like a fist.

Ward felt the folio’s weight in the satchel. The softened wax. The seal he had almost broken. They knew. They had always known. The instruction to burn it unread had been a test, and he had failed it, or passed it, or proved something about himself that the system had needed to see.

His hesitation lasted three seconds.

“Yes.”

The man studied his face. Then he inclined his head, stepped back, and gestured to his companions. They moved aside.

Ward did not turn to watch them. He sat with his hands on the satchel and looked ahead at the city rising through the haze.

\*

The building bore no sign. Weathered brick, unremarkable among the commercial structures. No workers near the entrance. No wagons loading or unloading. The stillness of a place that did not want to be noticed.

Ward descended from the carriage. The driver disappeared without a word.

A door opened. A man stepped aside and gestured him inward.

The interior was ordered to the point of severity. The smell of old leather and something astringent, like vinegar for ink stains. A desk of dark wood occupied the center. Behind it, shelves rose floor to ceiling, lined with ledgers arranged by size and age.

The Receiver sat behind the desk. Unremarkable face. Indeterminate age. He rose as Ward entered and inclined his head in a gesture that carried professional courtesy and nothing more.

“You have arrived in good time,” the Receiver said. “As most do.”

Ward set the satchel on the desk and opened it. He withdrew the ledgers one by one, placing them in the order they had been stacked. Nine volumes on polished wood.

The Receiver lifted the first ledger with hands that moved in a manner Ward recognized: the careful positioning of fingers to avoid strain on the binding, the distribution of weight to prevent damage to the spine. Ward had handled records the same way for four years. He was watching his own precision reflected back at him.

The Receiver opened the volume, examined entries, and closed it with precision. He set it aside and reached for the second. The process continued. Each ledger received the same treatment. The Receiver’s hands moved with practiced efficiency that suggested he had performed this ritual many times before, and would perform it many times again, and found in its repetition neither tedium nor significance.

Ward was not offered a seat. No one asked about his journey. No one inquired whether he had encountered difficulty or danger, whether he required food or rest. He was a delivery. The delivery had arrived. The contents were being assessed.

When the final volume had been verified, the Receiver placed his hands on the desk.

“Something expected has not yet been produced.”

The folio. Ward felt its weight in the satchel.

“The item remains in my possession.”

He spoke without inflection. He had been instructed to carry it. He had not destroyed it. He had not opened it. He carried it still.

The Receiver inclined his head. Neither approval nor condemnation. Simply acceptance of fact.

“The verification is complete.” Without turning, he added: “You have arrived in good time. As most do.”

Ward’s fingers tightened on the satchel strap. The Receiver did not look at him.

\*

They gave him a room. Not hospitality. Procedure.

Bare walls. Narrow bed. A single lamp. Ward set the satchel on the table and sat on the edge of the bed, listening to the sounds of the building settle around him.

Footsteps in the corridor. The creak of floorboards. Papers rustling. Ledgers being shelved.

Then voices.

They came from beyond the wall. Two men, their tones low, speaking with the casual familiarity of colleagues discussing routine business.

“A shipment delayed by weather.”

“The schedule will adjust.”

Ward sat very still.

“The Richmond matter has been reconciled.”

The word struck him like cold water.

“The timing was appropriate.”

“There was concern regarding excess retention.”

“That concern has been addressed.”

The voices moved on. Other matters. Arrivals expected. Supplies for transit rooms. The mundane concerns of an operation that processed people and documents with equal efficiency.

Ward sat in the dim room.

The Accountant was dead.

The man who had walked into a burning building without flinching. Who had selected Ward with a glance. Who had handed him a folio with instructions to burn it unread and spoken words about carriers being forgotten.

Reconciled. Eliminated. Not by Union forces. Not by the chaos of defeat. By his own network.

*Excess retention of information.*

The Accountant had known too much. The patterns and protocols. The routes and contacts. He had known enough to be dangerous, and the system had responded the way systems respond.

Ward looked at the satchel on the table.

The folio waited inside.

\*

He did not decide to open it. His hands simply moved.

The wax seal broke with a soft crack. The evidence of heat made the fracture uneven. Ward unfolded the sheets and spread them on the table.

Careful script. Measured hand. The same precision he had seen in the ledgers.

The first sheet outlined courier procedures. Routes in code. Timing intervals. Verification phrases Ward recognized from his own journey. “The account is acknowledged.” “The transfer proceeds under favorable terms.”

The second sheet contained names in columns. Beside each name, a location, a date, a status code. Some entries bore a single word in the rightmost column.

*Reconciled.*

The word appeared again and again. Names he did not know, followed by dates, followed by that single word. He counted. Fourteen entries preceded his own. Fourteen couriers who had carried what needed carrying and been erased when carrying was complete.

Ward turned to the third sheet.

A schedule. Dates running down the left margin, extending forward. Names in the central column. Codes and annotations on the right.

His eye found his own name near the top.

*Ward, Samuel R.*

Beside his name was a date. Three days from now.

Beside the date was a location. This city. This district. Perhaps this building.

Beside the location was a single word.

*Reconciliation.*

Ward’s finger traced the line. Name to date to location to conclusion. His pulse continued its work, steady and indifferent, as though his body had not yet received the information his eyes had gathered.

He had carried the ledgers. He had delivered them successfully. He had passed every test, answered every question, obeyed every instruction.

And in three days, men would come for him. They would not wear uniforms. They would simply appear, as men had appeared at every stage

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of his journey, and they would perform the procedure that had been scheduled.

His name would move from one column to another.

The network would continue.

Now he had proof.

Three days.

He had three days to decide what kind of ending he would write for himself.

# Chapter 4

Unless.

Ward sat on the edge of the narrow bed with the folio spread before him and read his death three times. The words did not change. His name, the date, the location, the single word that would move him from one column to another.

*Reconciliation.*

The lamp burned low. Somewhere in the building, footsteps moved through corridors, doors opened and closed, the ordinary sounds of an operation that would continue long after he was gone.

Ward thought about the men who had carried ledgers before him. Their names appeared on the second sheet, each one followed by a date, each date followed by that same word. He did not know their faces. He did not know their stories. He knew only that they had served the system and the system had consumed them, and now their names existed only as entries in a record no one outside this network would ever read.

He would join them. In three days, his name would move from the schedule to the completed list, and the network would continue, and no one would remember that a clerk named Samuel Ward had once carried nine ledgers through a burning city.

Unless.

Ward looked at the folio. Then he looked at the satchel, empty now except for his personal notebook.

The system was built on precision. Every handoff verified. Every document checked. Every figure confirmed against figures held elsewhere. The network survived because its records were perfect, because the men who maintained them understood that a single error could cascade through the entire structure.

Ward had spent four years learning how errors cascaded.

He knew which entries linked to other entries. He knew which columns fed calculations that fed other calculations. He knew that a number changed in one place would require corresponding changes in dozens of others, and that those changes would require still more changes, spreading outward like cracks in glass.

The system could not be destroyed. It was too large, too distributed, too deeply rooted.

But it could be made to doubt itself.

The network recognized only its own language. Ward could not fight it from outside because there was no outside.

But he was inside now. And inside, he understood the grammar.

\*

Morning came gray through the shuttered window.

Ward folded the folio and returned it to the satchel. He washed his face in the basin. He dressed in the merchant's clothes that had carried him south. He sat in the chair by the table and waited.

The Receiver would call for him. The final verification would proceed. Ward would stand in that room surrounded by ledgers and watch his work disappear into the archive.

And if the opportunity arose, he would do one small thing.

Not revenge. Not justice. Not exposure.

Just one small thing that only a clerk would think to do.

Accuracy had been the only thing Ward was ever good at. Four years of columns and figures, of making numbers agree. They had used that skill to carry their records south. Now he would use it to leave a mark they could not erase.

\*

The summons came at midmorning.

A man appeared at the door and gestured without speaking. Ward followed him through corridors lined with shelves, past doors that opened onto rooms where other men worked at other tasks, until they reached the office where the Receiver waited.

The ledgers sat on the desk. Nine volumes in a neat row, arranged by age and condition. Ward recognized each spine. He had carried them for

days. He had felt their weight against his hip through every checkpoint, every handoff, every held breath.

Now they waited for final verification.

“You will observe,” the Receiver said. “The process requires a witness.”

Ward set his satchel on the corner of the desk and positioned himself to the side. A clerk awaiting instruction. A courier awaiting dismissal. A man whose function was to be present until presence was no longer required.

The Receiver opened the first ledger.

\*

The examination proceeded with methodical precision.

The Receiver turned pages. Traced columns. Verified figures against some internal register he carried in his mind. The work was thorough. It was unhurried. It assumed infinite time and perfect accuracy.

Ward watched.

The second volume. The third. The Receiver examined each one, verified it, set it aside. He worked from left to right across the desk, his progress visible in the growing stack of completed ledgers and the diminishing row of those awaiting attention.

Ward had studied the pattern during his journey. Not all entries were equal. A number changed in the wrong column would be caught immediately, corrected by the next hand, absorbed into the system’s self-healing mechanisms.

But the right number, in the right column, would propagate.

The Receiver reached the sixth volume.

Ward remembered this one. It contained the entries where his own name appeared twice, recorded in columns whose purposes he still did not fully understand. The Receiver opened it and began his review.

Pages turned. The fingertip traced its path down columns of figures.

Then the Receiver paused.

His attention fixed on an entry near the center of a page. His brow drew together. He reached for a reference register at the far end of the desk and opened it to a marked section.

The comparison would take time. Ward could see this in the Receiver’s posture, in the deliberate way he positioned the two volumes side by side.

Ward stepped forward.

“May I be of assistance, sir?”

The words came in the tone he had cultivated through years of service. Polite. Restrained. Deferential. The Receiver glanced up, his attention briefly divided between the discrepancy before him and the courier who had offered to help.

“The reference notation is unclear. Confirm the original entry.”

He gestured toward the ledger without looking at it.

Ward stepped closer.

A pen rested in the inkwell at the table’s edge. Ward’s fingers found it without conscious thought.

He looked at the page.

The entry the Receiver had indicated was there, a figure in the leftmost column. Ward’s gaze moved across the row, following the sequence of numbers that linked this entry to others throughout the volume. He saw the pattern. He saw where the figure connected, which columns it fed, which calculations depended on its accuracy.

He saw where a change would propagate. This figure fed the quarterly summaries. The summaries fed the annual reconciliations. The reconciliations fed the transfer authorizations. One digit wrong here, and every calculation downstream would fail to resolve.

The Receiver’s breathing was steady behind him. The rhythm of a man absorbed in his own work.

Ward’s hand moved.

The pen touched paper. A three. His fingers knew the stroke that would complete an eight. A single line, curved precisely. The kind of correction he had made ten thousand times, except this was not correction. This was corruption.

He completed the stroke.

The Receiver’s hand moved toward the ledger.

Ward’s breath stopped. The ink was still wet. If the Receiver touched the page, if his finger traced that column, the alteration would smear. Evidence. Proof. A correction made by a hand that had no authority to correct.

The Receiver's hand stopped an inch from the page. He turned instead to the reference register, tracing some correspondence that had nothing to do with the figure Ward had altered.

Ward set the pen down.

“The entry appears to conform, sir.”

The Receiver did not look up. He made a notation in his reference register and closed it. A small mark beside the entry number, the kind of verification shorthand Ward recognized from his own years of audit work. A clerk's confirmation accepted by a clerk's process.

“The confirmation is noted.”

He returned to the ledger and continued his examination. His finger traced down columns that now contained one figure that would not balance when checked against records maintained elsewhere.

Ward stepped back.

Nothing had happened. Everything had changed.

\*

The examination continued. The seventh volume. The eighth. The ninth.

“The verification is complete.”

Clerks entered and gathered the ledgers. Ward watched them carry his work to the shelves, watched the volumes disappear into the archive, absorbed into a collection that had existed before him and would continue after him.

One of those volumes now contained a figure that would not agree.

The Receiver reached into Ward's satchel and withdrew the folio.

“This item is your concern.”

Ward took it. The paper felt lighter than before. Or perhaps he only imagined it.

“You are dismissed.”

No acknowledgment. No thanks for service.

Ward gathered his satchel, inclined his head, and walked toward the door.

\*

The street was loud with ordinary life.

Men argued at vegetable stalls. A wagon passed with squealing wheels.

Children ran past on errands. The smell of the river pressed against the humid air.

A man stood at the corner. He was not looking at Ward. He was looking at nothing in particular, with the careful attention of someone who was looking at everything.

Ward turned north and walked.

He did not run. He did not vary his pace. He walked as a merchant walks, a man with business elsewhere, a man of no consequence.

At the next intersection, he glanced back.

The man was gone. Or the man had never been watching. Or the man stood somewhere Ward could not see, noting the direction of his departure for a schedule that would be amended.

Ward continued north.

\*

He traveled for six days before he stopped.

The roads carried him through country that had never seen Confederate authority. The network still existed somewhere behind him. Its operations continued. Its records waited in archives, patient and precise.

Except for one figure that would not balance.

On the sixth morning, Ward reached a narrow tributary winding through low hills. The sun had not yet risen above the treeline. The air was cool.

He left the road and made his way down the bank to a place where the current moved slowly past. He gathered wood. Driftwood from the water's edge. Fallen branches from the undergrowth. He arranged them and struck a match.

The flames caught and spread.

Ward reached into his satchel and pulled out the notebook.

It was small, bound in leather softened by years of handling. He had carried it since the beginning of his service. Not officially. A private habit. Names filled its pages. Routes he had memorized. Observations about the network. The phrases that opened doors. The faces of handlers. The patterns he had recognized.

Evidence. Memory preserved in ink.

Ward tore out the first page and fed it to the flames.

The paper curled and blackened. He tore out the next page. And the next. The words became smoke. The observations became ash. He erased the names from the only record that had ever contained them.

When the last page was gone and the binding had followed, Ward sat back and watched the fire finish its work.

He had altered their records. Now he had erased his own.

He waited until the flames died to embers, then scattered them with a branch and kicked dirt over the remains. When he finished, nothing marked the place.

\*

Ward stood at the water's edge.

The tributary moved past with the patience of all waterways.

They would find the error eventually. Not today. Perhaps not for months. But someday, a calculation would fail to resolve. A figure would not balance.

They would not know who had done it. They would not know why.

\*

The sun rose above the treeline.

Ward shouldered his satchel. It was lighter now. The folio still waited inside, but he would burn that too, somewhere further north. The schedule with his name on it. The evidence of what he had been meant to become.

He did not know if he had saved himself. The network was vast. The reconciliation might simply be rescheduled. Men might already be moving north, following routes he could not predict, carrying instructions he would never see.

He had not escaped. He had only left.

The difference might not matter. Or it might matter more than he could know.

Ward walked north.

The road stretched ahead through country he did not recognize. Behind him, the tributary continued its patient work, carrying water toward the sea. The fire's ashes mixed with the soil. The notebook's words were gone.

He had been a clerk. He had been a courier. Now he was something else.

DAVID R LENG

The system would continue. The records would endure. But somewhere in those archives, a number waited that would not agree.

Ward walked north.

He did not look back.

***- THE END -***

## **Echoes of Fortune: The Search for Braddock's Lost Gold**

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for a centuries-old fortune.”*— Kirkus Reviews

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Jack, his fiancée Emma Wilson, and fellow former SEAL Steve Johnson are drawn into a hunt more dangerous than any battlefield. From Washington's archives to New Orleans back alleys, Mexico's rugged coastline to the shadowed ridges of Arkansas, every trail leads deeper into the world of the Knights of the Golden Circle—a brotherhood long believed defunct.

But the Knights didn't disappear.

They adapted.

For 160 years, they've studied what force could never win. They've embedded themselves in the institutions Americans trust. They've waited for the moment when they wouldn't need to seize power...

**They would be invited to take it.**

Now their heirs have risen. And Jack begins to realize he was never hunting the treasure.

He was being led to it.

Joined by Homeland cyber analyst Priya Patel—and hunted by enemies he can't see—Jack must unravel a design older and more patient than anyone imagined...before the trap closes around everyone he loves.

**Some secrets don't stay buried.**

**They grow roots.**

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