

# Dead Soldiers

by L.B. Baillie

## Black April

*“The sun, with all the planets revolving around it, and depending on it, can still ripen a bunch of grapes as though it had nothing else in the universe to do.” (Galileo Galilei)*

A foul wind pummeled the windows; icy droplets turned to sleet as darkness fell—Nature’s gentle reminder that April was still winter in Wisconsin.

He poured the last of the Ardbeg 23-Years Old into his glass, and dropped the empty green bottle into the waste basket by his desk. *Another dead soldier.*

Once each year, on this date, he took the book from its place on the shelf—his self-imposed penance. The familiar pages passed beneath his fingertips:

*Twenty thousand were safely evacuated in the weeks leading up to that day. More than thirty thousand were left behind, to face arrest, torture, and death.*

He leaned back in his chair and cradled his drink in both hands. Thirty-three years had passed since the book was published; forty-four years since his return from darkness. The photos brought back terrible memories with visceral fidelity: *the concussive beat of choppers hovering over the rooftops; the distant whump of artillery and crackle of small arms fire getting louder as the morning wore on; smell of sweat and fear as frightened civilians jammed together in a mad rush to escape, pushing and shoving, fighting and screaming, trampling and dying; and worst of all, the flat eyes staring at him, through him, into his soul—the eyes of the dead. Dead soldiers.*

It had been *his* job to help them—his mission to *protect* them. He was trained to defend the defenseless, and he had *failed*.

The outline drawn in black permanent marker around the date on his flip calendar—today’s date—marked the anniversary of his *failure*, forty-four years ago, when he was ordered to abandon his post and go home.

April 30. Liberation Day.

*Black April*

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He checked his watch. She should be on her way, *if the roads are still safe*.

He slid the photos between the pages and returned the book to its place on the shelf.

Closing the door behind him, he made his way through the den with its huge fireplace and the warming gas fire, and into the brightly-lit dining room. The table had been carefully laid by Mrs. Coswell; a silver chafing dish kept their dinner warm beneath its domed lid.

He continued to the wine room where he selected a Mink River Meritage, Lot 5. He set the bottle on the table by his plate and chose two Bordeaux-style glasses and a corkscrew from the sideboard. He laid the corkscrew next to the bottle, and used an extra linen napkin to meticulously polish the two glasses. *He wanted everything to be perfect.*

He placed the glasses at their respective settings just as the doorbell chimed. Turning toward a video monitor, he eyed the lovely lady standing at the entry—an umbrella providing protection from the icy rain. He pushed a button on the remote and buzzed her in.

A moment later, she appeared in the doorway.

“Mr. Fox . . .” Her left hand rested against the door jamb, her right hand grasped a black clutch bag and coat. She wore a sleek, black silk dress that just reached the tops of her knees. The low neckline gave a glimpse of soft curves. Her bare shoulders were kissed by long, straight hair the color of soft chestnut. Her hazel eyes asked the question, do you approve?

“Please, come in,” he exhaled. “Excuse me if I don’t stand or get your chair. I don’t mean to be unchivalrous; but as you must remember, I am a bit . . . limited in my abilities.” He smiled. “Please, join me.” He rolled to the head of the table and indicated the place on his right. She pulled out the chair, draped her coat over the back and sat down. She laid her clutch bag on the white linen cloth beside her plate.

“Hungry?” he asked as he lifted the lid of the silver dish, releasing the mouthwatering aromas of Mrs. Coswell’s incomparable beef bourguignon. He held the serving spoon at the ready.

“No, thank you,” she said. “But please, go ahead. I’ll chat while you enjoy your meal.”

He scooped a large portion of the rich stew onto his plate. “Let me know if you change your mind. Mrs. Coswell is an excellent chef!”

He replaced the silver lid and flourished the corkscrew. “But you will have some wine,” he said. He pulled the cork.

“Of course. Just a little. I’m driving, remember.”

He poured a small amount in the bottom of his glass, swirled it lightly and lifted it to his nose. Breathing in deeply, he sighed. “Oak, vanilla, a hint of tobacco. He tipped his glass and held the ruby wine in his mouth for a moment before swallowing. “Ah, perfectly balanced.” He looked at her. “Made right here in our fair state.”

She smiled. “You seem to know what you like.”

“I do.” He poured wine for both of them, and then held up his glass to peer through the red liquid by the light of the chandelier. “*Wine is sunlight, held together by water.*” “Galileo.”

“*Esattamente. Salud!*”

She tapped her glass against his and took a small sip.

“This is exquisite,” she said. “And it’s a local wine?”

“Door County. A boutique vineyard at the northern tip of the peninsula.” He set down his glass and started into his meal. “I have them ship me a few cases now and again.”

“It’s amazing. I had no idea.”

“Are you sure you won’t have some of this delicious meal?”

“No, thank you. But the wine is extraordinary.”

“As is the company,” he said, and he raised his glass for another toast.

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“So, why did it take so long for you to call me?”

“Hmm,” he said absent-mindedly. “Did it?”

“I gave you my card eight months ago, at your reception,” she said.

He stared at his wine glass a moment, remembering the release of his new book. That warm August night on the Terrace at Memorial Union; live jazz, cold champagne, the moon reflecting on Lake Mendota. His agent leading him through the crowd, introducing him to the mayor, the council president, the chancellor, several local VIPs. And Vivienne. She had been with one of the aldermen, he couldn't remember which. He had assumed she was the trophy wife. But, learned different, when later they drifted into conversation. Vivienne Buchanan. Single, self-employed. She handed him a calling card. Quality, off-white linen stock with only a number printed in a simple, black Baskerville font. Her number.

"I really don't know why I waited so long to call," he said. "But, tonight is special. It seemed fitting to have a special guest share this dinner with me." He looked at her empty plate. "Though, it seems you're not hungry. Still," he picked up the wine bottle, "at least you can enjoy this magnificent nectar with me."

She laid her hand over her glass. "One glass is enough. Remember that I have a long drive home."

"If you choose to go home," he said, wistfully. "Oh well, more for me." He poured the last of the bottle into his glass. He held up the empty bottle, and a sadness swept his face. "Another dead soldier." He looked at her and smiled warmly. "We need a new bottle." He pushed back from the table.

"Can I get it for you?" she asked.

"Oh no. I'll be right back." He rolled down a hall, opened a door, and disappeared through it. A moment later, he reappeared with a bottle, closed the door and rolled back to the table. He tore off the wrapper, opened the bottle, and refilled her glass before she could stop him. Then he filled his, drank it down and filled it again.

She laughed. "Oh my. You *are* in a celebratory mood." She sipped her wine.

He winked at her and drank half the glass. "You could say that."

"So why is tonight special?" she asked.

A dark cloud momentarily passed over his face. His eyes glazed as he saw something in the far distance, or the distant past. He shrugged and smiled at her. "Maybe later."

She took another sip from her glass. Her head tilted the merest fraction.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

She smiled and shook her head. "No." She reached for the bottle. "Allow me," and she refilled his glass.

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His head sagged, his chin touched his chest.

"Hey. Okay?" she asked.

He looked up, his eyes unfocused. "Just a bit too much of this glorious elixir." His words seemed to slur.

"Maybe I should go," she said.

He frowned. "Mebbe," he replied. "I feel kind of . . ." He pushed his chair away from the table and rolled towards the den. "You can let yourself out, can't you?"

"Sure." She stood and slipped into her coat. "Call me again."

He waved as he disappeared into the next room.

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He hoisted himself out of his chair and onto the sofa in the den. He propped up his legs and lay back against the pillow. The gas fire warmed him (thank you Mrs. Coswell). He felt ill. (Too much vino, perhaps?)

His mouth and nose were numb. He rubbed his hand across his face, and his fingers tingled. His arms felt heavy, leaden. Breathing seemed like a difficult task.

Suddenly, his stomach twisted violently. He rolled to the side and threw up on the carpet. The room spun out of control; dizziness engulfed him, and he gasped for air as if he were drowning. He felt sharp pains in his chest and lungs. His heart raced, like a hammer banging away in his chest. He could not get his breath; his body refused to respond to his desperate need for air. The room grew dark as his vision narrowed and blurred. Everything was shrouded in a purple haze. He sank into the cushions and vanished beneath the black waters of unconsciousness.