

The Civil War has ended. The long nightmare of occupation during Reconstruction is finally over. Rebuilding with the goal of survival beyond mere subsistence levels requires difficult decisions; some of which involve questionable legality.

Aftermath: Book Five of Conveyance

By Jeff Babb Willis, with C.K. Gurin

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AFTERMATH

Book 5 of

Conveyance



JEFF BABB WILLIS

with C.K. Gurin

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NOTE: This novel is fact-based fiction, passed down through the years to the author by elderly members of the author's own family. Stories were painstakingly verified with multiple family members privy to the same information; and further verified by area genealogists.

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Conveyance

Book Five – Aftermath

Chapter 1

My eyes opened to the cracked masonry in the corner of the bedroom. There also appeared to be some tiny spider webs. This used to be my parents' room before the two of them decided to leave the plantation and move to Hope, Arkansas.

I lay there in the dim morning light, quietly thinking. The year was 1886. So much had happened. So much had changed over the past twenty years, I reflected.

You're not doing a very good job, Frank Bryan, I mentally scolded myself.

I remembered a time when my parents had still lived here. Even during hard times, the plantation had always been well maintained. Deterioration aside, I thought ruefully, and all things considered, we were just lucky we hadn't lost the house itself, along with everything else those damned carpetbaggers had robbed my family of.

I sighed heavily and contemplated the cobwebs again. Time to get on a ladder with a broom and sweep them out! But repairing the ceiling, which loomed twelve feet above the floor, would be something else entirely.

No less than a half-dozen water stains were visible, even in the semi-darkness. Roof repair, if not complete replacement, was already years overdue. It looked as if yet another rainy season would come and go without being able to provide the necessary attention to regular home maintenance, much less afford the desperately needed repairs.

Carefully, I turned over in the bed, trying not to awaken my sleeping wife. Nona was again pregnant. She was clearly made for childbearing. The lump in her abdomen represented our fifth child. The first three we had lost. Our only living child, our precious little girl Alma, was sound asleep in her bedroom.

The anguish of losing a child was beyond description. I recalled our first, Richard, whom we had named for Daddy. He certainly had seemed healthy enough. Then without warning, two years into his young existence, he was suddenly drenched in sweat, running a high fever, vomiting, whimpering, and I thought his skin looked somewhat jaundiced. I searched his little body to make certain he hadn't experienced a spider bite or something similar that might be making him ill, but all I noticed was a small mosquito bite on an ankle. We had quickly summoned the local doctor, a younger man, who described the symptoms as "a fever," which we already knew. He instructed us to try to make our baby as comfortable as possible, and pray that he would overcome whatever this sickness was. Our little boy wasn't able to. Two years and six days after his birth,

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our beautiful little firstborn son, Richard Bryan II had died.

I could not recall such agony. The memory of the baby's clear blue eyes and innocent smile was constantly with me. I could still feel his soft, warm body in my arms as he rested his little head on my shoulder. The baby sounds that he made when I gently bounced him on my knee, were constantly in my ear. I still sensed his strong fingers grasping my thumb. Every day's awakening brought tortured traces of memory that were destined to be my constant companion.

The only reassurance that we had held on to, was the thought of having more children, and of course, we did. A daughter and then a second son followed. But neither saw their fourth day. Nona concluded that God must be punishing the both of us.

The children had been buried in the family graveyard there on the grounds. Nearby was the people's graveyard. Aunt Ester had died, following the death of our third child. I wondered if it had been from a sad heart. She seemed to have felt the loss of my children as deeply as Nona and I had. Aunt Ester had clearly adored our toddler Richard, and he her.

I often strolled both graveyards alone in the early hours, lost in thought. During the years following the war, the people who had originally come over from Georgia with Daddy, including Uncles Elijah, Ezekiel,

Ebenezer and Avery, as well as Aunt Naomi, had gradually passed away. To me, they were family and always had been.

I suppressed a sardonic laugh as I passed the food bunkers, which were still disguised as more graves. We had continued to store smoked meats in them, even after the occupying army was ordered to leave the state. The fear of quick loss had been permanently ingrained in us all. No matter what we built, accumulated or earned, it was subject to immediate confiscation. Anything of value best not be visible!

My wife Nona was seven years my junior. When we at last summoned the aged Dr. Egan from his comfortable retirement in Shreveport, he had discussed a “chemical disorder” in my wife, promising her that it might dissipate with time.

I privately recalled talking at length with Doc Egan years ago, when I belatedly learned about the death of my parents’ first child, a little girl named Mary, who would have been my older sister. Doc Egan told me then that one in four children died before the age of five, and although heartbreaking, it was not at all unusual.

During the visit from the retired Doctor Egan all those years later, he reminded me of that earlier discussion. As for miscarriage, he had told me, those things happened as well.

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So I couldn't help but wonder whether that the story Doc Egan had told Nona about some mysterious "chemical disorder" that would likely fix itself, had been fictional, purely intended to buoy her spirits, since she appeared to have no problem getting pregnant.

Regardless, he proved to be correct. Our fourth child, a baby girl we named Alma, was born in 1884 and the child continued to thrive. I was still but 31-years old at the time of her birth. It felt as if I had lived much longer.

Why had Daddy not heeded Henry Warmoth's overture, some twenty years earlier? I started each day asking the same question. As I looked out the window, I forlornly viewed the fall landscape. It seemed slightly diminished from that day, exactly twenty years earlier when Warmoth had warned Daddy about the rough times ahead. Quietly, I eased out of the room and tiptoed down the stairs to the comforting smell of fresh coffee.

"Mohnin' Mista Frank!" I heard Merriam's familiar greeting as I made my way into the dining room.

Accepting a steaming cup of black coffee, I mumbled. "Just some hot biscuits with butter and some of that crabapple jelly y'all made please, Merriam."

I didn't seem to have much of an appetite these days. As always, it was a question of "what next?" I had seen empires built. I still recalled the pride of being recognizably affluent. The respect that came with such

a distinction remained, even though it was more of a mirage than anything.

Spying an opened letter I'd left resting on the dining room table, I paused to re-read it.

"I seen dat lettah, Mistah Frank." Merriam refilled my coffee cup. "I wuz gwyne ax you iffen I could read it. It's been a while sincet we had wohd from Chanti 'n Billy."

I looked up as I heard footsteps approaching.

"Mornin'!" I watched Augustus Rhodes enter the room. "I heard y'all wuz back here 'n I let myself in. Figured it'd be okay."

"Sure Augie." I motioned Merriam to bring him a cup of coffee. "There's some biscuits 'n jelly on the stove. Merriam will bring you some." Augustus Rhodes had married Augusta Upton, my first real girlfriend, years earlier. For the longest time, I had been cool to him. As the years skipped by however, we had become close friends.

"Thanks." Rhodes took a seat. He was now a middle-aged man nearing forty with a sagging girth and drooping mustache. "I come over this mornin' to let you know that we're sellin' a milk cow. We don't need her and I heered y'all got another little 'un on the ways."

“That’s true, Augie.” I picked up Billy’s letter. “Don’t know if I can spare the cash now though. How much?”

“Well, I wuz thinkin’, mebbe fifteen dollar, or close to it.” Rhodes nodded his thanks to Merriam as he accepted a plate with hot biscuits.

“Maybe. I’ll think about it.” I sighed, knowing the answer. “I was getting ready to read Billy’s letter, Augie.” I cleared my throat and Merriam paused to hear the letter.

“Dear Frank,

Stockton is booming and the cattle business is ripe for success. I purchased another forty acres this past week. Our spread is now up to 310 acres. We not only have cattle, but close to twenty acres in peach trees. The winters here are no worse than Louisiana.

Chanti is pregnant! After all these years, she is with child again! This will be our fourth. We are hoping for a girl this time. But having three boys will eventually pay off on the farm. You can never get enough help. Have you heard from Lem? I asked him if he had written. Maybe he’ll get around to it. He is settling in here right nicely. He started a business rounding up mustangs and breaking them. I think it will be good. People will always need horses.

We hope that you will consider coming out, to visit and hopefully to stay. There seems no end to how much

California will grow. People are pouring in to settle from all over country.

Chanti bids you “hello” and wishes Nona all the best with your coming child.

Truly yours,

Billy”

“I remember Billy.” Rhodes buttered his biscuit. “He left sometime after that big lake ruckus, didn’t he? Never heered where he went.”

I folded the letter and returned it to its envelope, smiling at the thought of Billy’s improved diction. Marriage to the better educated Chantilly had made its impact on his overall literacy. It was wonderful that Billy and Chantilly had found happiness in Central California. That they were expecting a fourth child was slightly inaccurate!

“California, Augie. They went to California.”

“Californy?” Rhodes took a bite of the biscuit. “And Chantilly? Didn’t she used to live here?”

“Yes.”

“I heered that she had left Mt. Lebanon.” Rhodes reached for the crabapple jelly. “Didn’t she go to New Ahlins, ‘n take up with that damned carpetbagger governor, Henry Warmoth?”

“That she did.” I smiled sardonically. “Chantilly named her first child after his biological father, Henry Warmoth, but she employed both the French spelling, the name ending with an ‘i’ instead of a ‘y’ and she used ‘on-ree’ the French pronunciation, for the boy’s name. Henri is nineteen now. Their second child, Richard, is eighteen months younger. Their third son, George, should be turnin’ fifteen before year’s end.

“All old enough to hep out around the place.” Rhodes muttered.

I gratefully accepted the two hot biscuits Merriam brought me. There was freshly churned butter and the crabapple jelly, the fruit of the trees that Daddy had brought from Kentucky many years previously. As I buttered the biscuit, I thought about Chantilly.

“I wonder why Chanti waited ‘till now, to get pregnant again.” I remarked, looking squarely at Merriam. “This new child, as Amos would have said, will be the “second settin’. I do hope that it survives!”

“Mistah Frank, you know dat dem lil’babies, sometimes dey jes happens.” Merriam volunteered.

“How’d she end up with Billy?” Rhodes took a gulp of coffee.

“Things sometimes seem to fall in place.” I smiled. “Billy had relatives livin’ not far away. He happened to be in the neighborhood. Chantilly was alone and

pregnant, livin' with Mama's half-sister in Crawfordsville, Indiana. She rendezvoused with Billy at the bank in Vincennes. Billy, and later Walter Shantz and Luther Hawkins, you remember Luther, who used to live here on the plantation, played piano in the church, you've had a glass or two of Luther's famous 'recipe'..." Rhodes nodded as he remembered. "Anyway both he and Walter Shantz identified Chantilly as the proper recipient of Henry Warmoth's promissory note."

"Promissory note?"

I smiled and gave him a quick overview. "Chantilly's father was very wealthy. He died without a will. Warmoth was the lawyer who represented her while the judge was deciding who the proper heirs to the estate were. Chantilly was one of eleven who received an equal share of the estate. But you know Warmoth, he did his best to steal all of her inheritance. He presented Daddy with a promissory note for part of the money that was hers. It was made out to Chantilly and it required her to show up in person at a bank in order to cash it. It was like bait. He thought she'd have to show up in New Orleans. Daddy was seriously worried that he intended her physical harm."

"So what happened?" Augustus demanded. "Did she get her inheritance after all?"

"Oh, you might say she got what little he didn't steal." I guffawed. "Warmoth had expected her to return to

Louisiana to cash the note, but he knew she wasn't with us so he suspected that Daddy might have sent her to stay with his friend Walter Shantz and his family in Evansville, Indiana. Warmoth had a private investigator posted there in the event she showed up."

"Wadn't Shantz that feller your Paw knowed from up that-a-ways?" Rhodes accepted a refill of his coffee cup.

"Yes. I didn't know if y'all had met him when he and his family were here." I carefully returned Billy's letter to its envelope.

"Warmoth had made serious threats to have both Billy and Luther arrested if Daddy didn't immediately produce Chantilly, so Daddy arranged to get everybody out of town fast."

"Billy had family in Vincennes, Indiana so he headed there. Walter Schantz had offered Luther a job, so Luther and his wife headed for Evansville, Indiana.

"Warmoth was aware of Daddy's friendship with Walter, and figured there was a possibility Daddy had sent Chantilly to stay with them there. But Daddy and Mama had secretly taken Chantilly to Mama's sister's place in Crawfordsville, Indiana where they knew she'd be safe.

“Nevertheless, Shantz is pretty smart and he figured Warmoth would likely have someone in Evansville shadowin’ him, in case Chantilly showed up.

“Daddy wrote Walter in Evansville, telling him he was sending Chantilly’s promissory note to him via Luther. The plan was for Walter to join Luther on the short train ride that would take them to Vincennes, where Billy was living and where his brother-in-law was part-owner of a bank.

“Vincennes was only about a hundred twenty-five miles from where Chantilly was living with Mama’s sister in Crawfordsville. So the plan was for Billy to go collect Chantilly and accompany her back to Vincennes where they would then meet up with Walter and Luther.

“But Walter Shantz in Evansville had a hunch he was being followed by Warmoth’s man when he headed for the train station. At the last minute, he abruptly decided to make a quick detour to Nashville. He made a big commotion at the train station so if anybody was following him, they’d take notice and get on the train heading for Nashville, as I recall.”

“I see.” Rhodes nodded. “So, Warmoth’s spy figured Shantz was headin’ to Nashville; obviously figuring that Chantilly might already be there. Meanwhile, Shantz doubled back, gave ‘em the slip?”

“Probably. I’m not exactly certain what he did.” I laughed. “But it was there, in that local bank partly

owned by Billy McFain's brother-in-law, that they met. Chantilly was identified by Billy, Luther and Walter Shantz. Ten days later, the bank deposited \$20,000 in Chantilly's name!"

"Twenty thousand dollars!" Rhodes whistled. "I'd heered somethin' 'bout her havin' interest in an estate! Never heard how much!"

I shook my head silently smirking. "Even the best laid plans can go awry! Warmoth returned to Mt. Lebanon, shortly after New Year's 1867, accusing Daddy of deception, promisin' not to be of assistance with the upcoming shit that was comin' down with radical reconstruction in Louisiana. I would say that the son-of-a bitch was vexed in a big way!

"Daddy never knew if it was strictly over the money. Or, if Warmoth just wanted Chantilly back in his bed chamber. Maybe it was a bit of both! But when Daddy asked him about the rest of the money, I honestly thought he might shoot Daddy! And he had these two, six-gun totin' bodyguards who looked like they'da been happy as a pig in shit, just shootin' someone! Anyone!"

"You in dehr, Frank?" I heard George's husky voice from the front door.

"Yes, come on in and get yourself some coffee and biscuits!" I called.

George, now a mature man of thirty-eight, joined us at the table. Accepting a cup of coffee from Merriam, he ventured. “Dehr’s sum hosses up de road, wit ahmy brands on dem. I seen dem dis mohnin’.”

“Who do you reckon they belong to?” I accepted a second cup of coffee.

“Doen know, but dey’s likely stolen.” I had always admired George’s uncanny ability to determine upon sight if the horse was stolen!

“I reckon I’d better be gittin’,” Rhodes quickly got up from the table, sensing the coming of a private conversation.

“I’ll let you know about the cow, Augie.” I left the table and quickly walked him to the door.

Returning to the dining room, I looked hard at George. “How many?”

“Fohr.”

“Where?”

“Dey’s not fahr frum hyer, mebbe uh mile.” George accepted a plate of biscuits.

“I’s got eggs ‘n bacon iffen yo wants!” Merriam enticed.

“N’oam. Dis fine.” George retorted. “Dey’s gittin’ thihty dollahs foh hosses at Hahd Times Landing, Frank. Dat’d be one-hundret- twenty dollahs.”

“N you think we can slip in ‘n get ‘em?” I took a large bite of biscuit.

“Ah does.”

“Well, I guess we’d better get ourselves over there!” I said casually. “Merriam, when Mrs. Bryan arises, please inform her that George and I are doing some business east of here. We’ll be back in a few days.”

Yessuh.” Merriam responded.

Making our way to the barn, I was greeted by Nathaniel, now also a grown man. He was thirty-six. We had known each other since we were kids, and he had been a natural when it came to smoking meats on the plantation. Nathaniel had recently returned from Alexandria, sporting a wife and two small children. He was looking for work. I had asked him to work as a groomsman, although the total number of horses we now owned was but six.”

“Mistah Augie say he got a milk cow foh sale. Said he’d sell it to me, if you didn’t want ‘im.”

“How much did he quote you?” I smiled wryly.

“Twelve dollahs.” He admitted. “De missus say we needs a cow. Dem churlren do drink lotsa milk deese days.”

“Sounds like a good deal to me, Nathaniel.” I smiled, wondering if he had that much money to his name. “Wish we had a couple more horses, now that we have a groomsman!”

“Yessuh, but you gots de bes’ hoss in de Parish in yo Rennie.” Nathaniel’s reference to Renaissance, my three-year old stallion who measured an impressive eighteen hands, was not exaggerated.

“Daddy was always reluctant to allow Will and me to have our own personal horses.” I mused. “I think it was on account of his losing a horse due to illness as a boy. He used to say, “Getting too attached to a horse, often leads to later misery,” and that was just taken as gospel.”

“Yessuh, I ‘member Mistah Richard saying dat.” Nathaniel was leading Rennie out of the barn saddled. “Den yo brothah talked ‘im inta trainin’ dat colt. Wadn’t he name, Rojay? “N, sho nuff! Dat leetle hoss broke he leg jes’ befoh Christmas ‘n dey had ta put ‘im down. Damn! Cain’t believe dat wuz twenty year ago!”

“Yes, Nathaniel,” I said, remembering Will’s agony over his sweet little gray’s death. ““Rennie” is the white stallion I always dreamed about having as a kid.

He's my friend. Nona says he's God's compensation for the loss of my brother, Will."

Will had died tragically, fourteen years earlier. The memory still hurt my heart.

"Yessuh, Will wuz a good man." Nathaniel agreed, as he handed me a neatly coiled lariat.

"You know, for as long as I could remember," I reflected, "Will and I were inseparable as brothers." I shook my head ruefully and tied the lariat in place on the saddle. I gathered the reins in my left hand and mounted Rennie, comfortably settling myself in the saddle.

"We were ten months apart, together constantly. We shared the troubled times of Civil War and the subsequent radical reconstruction."

"Yessuh, Uncle Amos say you two be he lef'ahrm 'n right ahrm. He also say dat dey wadn't no finah person dan yo fathah. He say Mistah Richard wuz a good man, an' he wuz revered by his fambly an' hiz friends.

"I reckon." I smiled, inwardly amused by Nathaniel's mixture of plantation slang and a surprisingly extensive vocabulary that reflected Juliene Mayeaux's meticulous instruction.

"Yessuh, dem Yankees done did yo Daddy in." Nathaniel's tone was sympathetic.

“Unfortunately, Daddy was slow to realize that our northern invaders held only contempt for their conquered statesmen.” I shook my head. “Twas a long time sinkin’ in. High taxes, and no voting rights for white Louisiana. That certainly brought reality to a painful climax.”

“Yessuh.” The pained expression on Nathaniel’s face as he shook his head in dismay, reflected genuine remorse, as if he himself had been the actual victim of radical reconstruction.

I sat easy on my horse as I remembered the past. “As the years slipped by, we watched as the world Daddy carved out of these North Louisiana forests gradually disappeared.” I shook my head. ‘You know, Nathaniel. My brother was really a farmer at heart, but he never forgot that magnificent payday in the fall of 1865.

“When Hector spoke of the wild Longhorn steers that could be had in Central Texas for merely catching them, Will listened. There was one hitch: Once caught, they would need to be driven to Abilene, Kansas where the buyers were.” I noticed that George had silently joined us, already mounted.

“Hector and Carmen married in 1866 and parented four children.” Lost in thought, I continued reminiscing. “In early spring 1873 it was, that they had a decision to make: Find a way to generate cash or move. The Ramirez brothers had loved their life on the plantation.

And Luis had started a stonemason business in Bienville Parish.

“It was not the most lucrative of trades, as Daddy would say. But it had put food on the table and a roof over his head.” I paused, remembering my father’s efforts to get the word out on Luis’ skill. “He was living on the forty acres Daddy had deeded him. He married a local girl. I think she was from Castor. They had two children, as I recall.”

“Yessuh, Luis was good wit dem rocks ‘n sich.” George said quietly. “But we had to haul ‘em in. I member oncet, we went up to Arkansas to git rocks for ‘im. Peoples wanted fiahplaces. But, dey wadn’t no rocks ‘round hyers.”

“You know, Luis never completely healed from that near fatal gunshot wound.” I recalled. I remembered the long convalescence period inside the house and his sharing a room with the Union officer, Lieutenant Briggs. “That was the cattle drive that generated almost nine-thousand dollars. Good money back then,” I silently nodded to myself.

“So, come eight years later, in 1873, we were talkin’ about a thousand-mile round trip to Central Texas, and then Kansas, before returning to Louisiana. Luis wanted to go with us in the worst way, but physically, he just wasn’t up to it. And between his brother, his wife and Daddy, the three of them talked him out of it.

I wanted to make the trip, too. But I managed to get myself snake bit, four days before we were to leave.”

“I ‘membah you sho wehr sick, vomitin’ ‘n sich.” George added.

“Twas just’ a baby copperhead,” I demurred, but I distinctly remembered a near week of nausea that followed the snake bite.

“Doctah Egan say you wuz lucky to have been alive.” George commented. “Missy Mary say no way you wuz goin, ‘n de doctah ‘n Mistah Richard agreed.”

“That’s right.” I touched the dark blonde mustache and goatee that partially covered my face. My gloved hand then briskly brushed back the curly dark blonde hair that by now nearly covered my ears and drooped over my collar. “I recall Mama ‘bout had a conniption fit when I told her that I aimed to go. In the end, as y’all recall, it was only you George. You, Lem, Hector, and Will were the ones who lit out for the Texas Hill Country.”

“Yessuh, de roundup stahrtd in gran’ fashion.” George recalled. “Dem wild steers wuz ever’where. Hector and especially Lem, wuz supuhlative hossmen. Will was de designated leadah of de quahtet and things did seem to be goin’ well. Over two-hundret Longhohns wuz herded noth. Den, at dis crossroads town ‘o Gainesville, jus’ south of de Red Rivah, we foun’ trouble!

“Dey wuz rustlers evahwhere. Dey wanted to “peel off”, dat wuz dey word foh stealin’, herds, ‘o pahts of herds, den make tracks to dem Indian Nations, on the noth side ‘o de Red Rivah. Our men knew ‘bout dem mens. When dey ambushed, we kicked dey ass!

“Most of de herd remained in ahr possession. But yo brothah took a bullet in the midsection. Wit no doctah within fifty miles, der wadn’t much we could do, ‘cept try ta ease his pain. That boy managed to last the rest of de day and mos of de night. Nex mohnin’, he wud daid.”

“Two weeks past his 21st birthday.” I said softly.

“We buried ‘im in de town graveyahd dahr.” George continued. “Den, de three o’ us tuk, what ended up, 176 steers, an’ made it on to Abilene. Dem cows brought a passable price.”

“Yes, but as with that fateful drive in sixty-five,” I reminisced painfully, “the price had ultimately proven far higher than the reward.”

“I membah we gave Will’s share to Mistah Richard. Latah, I regretted not givin’ him all ‘o de money, considerin’.” George’s revelation of his own guilt over an action twenty years past, was unexpected.

“Nonsense, George!” I clarified. “Daddy wouldn’t have allowed that. Hell, y’all were gone five months! Y’all had families!”

“Dat right, Jawge!” Nathaniel broke his silence. “Mistah Richard nevah woulda let y’all do dat!”

“Well, we sho cain’t do nuthin’ ‘bout it now!” George sighed ruefully. “We’d bettah git a move on, Frank,” he reminded me. “Time doen wait foh nobody!”

“If we’re not back by nightfall day after tomorrow, Nathaniel, then head for Hard Times, please.” I requested, as George and I made our way to the edge of the clearing.

George and I rode silently for better than a half hour. It was a beautiful, cloudless day with a soft breeze coming from the west. Our pace was slow, as it always was when using the old Indian trail. Fingering my water-stained, gray felt hat, I looked over at George.

“You know George, it still pains me to talk about Will. It really does!

“It was like he was neither alive nor dead; simply nowhere at all. I was kinda in a fog for the longest time. Maybe it was ‘cause there was no funeral; we never saw a casket. I ‘member Daddy and Mama were shattered. Especially Mama! You know, George, Will was my sounding board. I could always talk to him. About anything!”

“I know, Frank.” George sympathized. “I ‘member when we los’ mah baby sistah. My mothah wuz nevah de same.”

“Mama talked about that cattle drive in sixty-five and how close Daddy came to gettin’ killed.”

“Yessuh, I was dehr!” George frowned. “We wuz lucky. Hadn’ta been foh Billy McFain, we’d a been in deep shit! I membah nobody knew dat boy could handle a six-gun de way dat he did!”

“I remember findin’ him on the side of the lake; that day we met General Kirby-Smith,” I mused.

For some reason simply talking to George always had a calming effect on me. As my remaining human friends went, there was certainly no doubt that George topped the list.

“I wadn’t sure Daddy’d let him stay. It’s a good thing that he did. He was a big help in those early days when we were tryin’ to figure out what the Yankees were goin’ to do.”

“I used to tell ‘im, dat iffen he kept playin’ cahds dey way he did at dem saloons, he’d nevah save ten dollahs!” George laughed. “Hit’s a good thang he went to Indiana! Iffen he’d a stayed around hyers, he’d been eventually playin’ pokah wit you, Frank! Den he’d a been no bettah dan dat man you won yo hoss frum!”

I chuckled silently, appreciating George’s reference to Rennie. My relationship with my horse was special. It was as if he were an extension of my own personality.

Somehow, I figured Rennie understood what it was like for me going through life without my brother Will.

“I guess you might say that Rennie was one of the fruits of my acquired skill at cards.” I surmised. “I recall it being Otto Shantz’ who taught Will and me the art of poker when we were still young boys.”

I thought silently to myself how valuable that lesson had turned out to be. Over the years I had eventually become not merely adept, but masterful at five-card draw and seven-card stud.

“I declare, winning that stallion in a poker game, when his previous owner had put him up to “call,” was quite delicious!” I recalled.

“Well put, Frank!” George laughed heartily. “Iffen I didn’t know bettah, I’d think dose wohds come from Mistah Richard!”

“Thank you, George!”

“We git dehr quick, dey not see us.” George abruptly changed the subject. “Den we gets dem hosses ovah ta Raven, ‘n he fix dem brands.”

“I can’t believe that I’ve become nothin’ more than a fuckin’ horse thief.” I gritted my teeth. “And the truth is, it’s not at all unnerving. It seems that compunction in general has vanished during Reconstruction.”

“Dem Yankees taught us all dat we need to know ‘bout stealin’.” George admitted ruefully. “Today, it’s all ‘bout survivin’!”

I paused, patting Rennie’s strong neck. It was as if the pain of loss had grown to such a degree that there was only a numbness. “Does Raven know we’re comin’?” I referenced the small black man who lived in a solitary cabin deep in the woods.

“He know.” George’s answer was short and assured.

The plan was simple. We would attempt to spirit the stolen horses from the small tavern up the road, where someone had exchanged them for fresh horses, some hours earlier. We would then take them to Raven, who would meticulously change the appearance of the brands. The man was a creative artist with a branding iron. Since horses were in demand, there would be little scrutiny when attempting to sell them at Hard Times Landing, some one-hundred twenty miles to the east.

That the entire trip, coming and going, would take upwards of two weeks, was not important. The fact was, we would receive between thirty to thirty-five dollars per horse. Depending upon the number of buyers, the price might be even higher. With the growing numbers of mouths to feed, this would be needed.

“How’re your little ones doin’, George?” I asked cheerfully.

‘Dey fine. Dey’s boff at home playin’ wit Daddy, right nows.’ George responded.

I was always glad to hear positives about Amos. Now seventy, he was often crippled with rheumatism during cold and wet weather. But, today it was neither. I knew that he relished playing with Anthony and little Amos, George’s young sons. “How old are your boys now, George?”

“Seven and eight.”

“Time certainly does fly, doesn’t it? They no doubt keep Abigail busy?”

I guessed that George’s wife Abigail was spending the day, like she spent most of her days helping Riley and Lilly in the chicken houses. To be sure, the egg business had been the most consistent producer of “hard money.”

“She be hepp’n Riley and Lilly, today.” George nodded affirmatively. “Hit good dat Daddy over dehr to watch dem boys. Dey likes he stories.”

“When you think about how productive that little confectionery used to be, and the fact that it’s a mere shadow of itself today,” I sighed, “it stands as evidence as to how much better a manager Daddy was than me.”

“Oh, Frank! You cain’t look at it dat-a-way!” George consoled. “Wit none ‘o Aunt Naomi’s sweets or Luthah’s homemade wine, you doen have yo mainstays

no mohr. Back den, de stage cum three-fohr days a week and there wuz peoples to buy thangs . Now, we's lucky iffen hit comes once.

“Speakin’ ‘o Luthah, all de local peoples who experimented with he Injun Grass, learnt how to cultivate dey own!” George winced. “Aunt Naomi taught Ruth evahthang she knowed. But den, Ruth and Joseph and dey two boys moved to Minden.”

“What was that? Fifteen years ago?” I couldn’t believe how much time had elapsed since their departure. “Sure can’t blame ‘em! As Daddy used to say: “You can’t expect people to live year in and year out on a side of salt pork and a bushel basket of sweet potatoes!”

“This morning, when I awakened and looked up at the ceiling, I was painfully reminded of how the house itself has fallen into disrepair over the years. Where we averaged a dozen guests every month during my boyhood, we’re now lucky to receive a dozen paying guests in a year.”

“Dat’s jes de way dat it is.” Amos admitted soberly. “We ain’t got no railroad in Mt. Lebanon, and dere’s less peoples usin’ de stage nowadays. No stage, no sellin’ pies, or wine or Injun Grass to dem peoples.”

“Glad Amos is in good spirits.” I said evenly. Amos seemed to be at least partially recovered from his wife Hosanna’s death, two years earlier.

“I saw dat you gots a lettuh frum Billy.” George noted. “He say anythin’ ‘bout Lem?”

“Sure did.” I stroked Rennie’s graceful neck. “You can read it when we get back, George. Seems like he’s gotten into the horse business himself. He’s rounding up mustangs, breakin’ ‘em, then sellin’ em. It’s a good business. But, he’s sure to have some bruises from it!”

“Yessuh, dat boy allus could ride!” George agreed. “Daddy say it de Injun in ‘im!”

“The son-of-a-bitch is tougher ‘n whitleather.” I laughed.

“It good dat he keepin’ busy.” George paused. “When he wife died in chile burf, I wuz ‘fraid he’d not make it.”

I sighed, recalling the tragedy that had befallen Lem, several years earlier. For the longest, he had been, as Daddy called, “his left-hand man,” commonly referring to Amos as “his right- hand man.” The two men had worked hard to help Daddy keep the farm going. Lem claimed to have been true to his aim of marrying a “redbone” girl.

The young woman was not actually what natives would classify as “redbone. But she was of purely Acadian origin, growing up on a small farm, just outside of Marxville. Loretta Broussard and Lem had enjoyed a brief “sparking” period, before tying the knot in 1868.

Aftermath

Lem's dedication to learning French under Miss Mayeaux's meticulous instruction had paid off royally. He was welcomed into Loretta's Cajun family without discrimination. At the time Lem was twenty-four. His bride was but sixteen.

"I know yo Daddy wuz sho happy dat, dey 'cided to stay on de fahm." George pointed out.

"I remember Loretta became pregnant almost immediately." I continued. "I believe it was April 1869. They had a baby boy. Naturally named him "Billy." Billy Brooks he was. A fine boy!

"Lem and Loretta had wanted more children, but none were forthcoming. Then, exactly twelve years from the very month that Billy was born, Loretta became pregnant again."

"I member Auntee Estah couldn't undahstand why de furst pregnancy wuz so easy." George reached into his saddlebag for of piece of jerky. "'N de second one wadn't."

"That's right." I motioned for George to throw me a piece of the jerky. "Loretta's first pregnancy was as smooth as silk, according to Doctor Courtney. Not the second one though! Mama said that Loretta was constantly sick and in severe pain.

"The baby finally came, a month ahead of schedule. I recalled Dr. Courtney anguishing over Loretta's blood

loss! She wadn't able to nurse the child; it was a baby girl. Then, on the third day Loretta passed. Quietly. Mama said that it was like you blew out a candle. The baby went two days later."

"I know dat Lem wuz nevah de the same aftah dat," George recalled remorsefully.

"True." I agreed. "Before, he had been the key protector of our dwindling plantation. Soon, Daddy couldn't pay him consistent wages. So, he began deeding him acreage. At the time of his Loretta's death, I recall Daddy saying Lem owned better than 400 acres of land."

"Dat much?" George's mouth flew open. "I know he allus looked for somethin' to trade. And, dat boy was sho good at carpentry, fahming 'n hosses. I knew he stayed in Billy's cabin all dose years. 'N he land wuz once paht of de original estate."

"3700 acres!" I tightened my lips. "Warmoth's prediction proved accurate. The carpetbagger's damnable government turned out to be an overly bloated, corrupt affair, constantly requiring extreme revenue producing measures. This equated to taxation beyond anyone's imagination! There was even an attempt by those greedy bastards to make taxes retroactive. Thank God that measure was overturned by the Supreme Court in 1868."

“No shit! I’d damned near fohgotton dat.” George shook his head.

“Daddy’s dwindling savings were soon exhausted.” I continued, gloomily. “There were more poor cotton crops, continued low cattle prices, and our inability to adequately harvest and process the timber.”

“Wit no Cecil Taylah to fix dat sawmill kit, we couldn’t process all dem trees we’d cut.” George acknowledged with a sigh and a shake of his head.

“In the end, Daddy was forced to sell off his lands; just to pay the damn taxes!” I could feel the anger rising in my chest.

“Whenever possible, Daddy tried to deed acreage to those who remained. But, they were facing the same problem: no hard money to pay the sky-high taxes imposed by those goddamned radical Republicans and their government!

“There was also the specter that came from a confused, often malicious occupyin’ army that never could catch the continuous wave of rustlers camped in the nearby woods. Yet, when it came to renderin’ discipline on those who attempted to take on the problem firsthand, they were quite proficient!

“Lem wuz smaht to get out ‘o hyer, if you ax me!” George agreed.

“Lem knows horses and cattle.” I remarked, gently prodding Rennie to pick up the pace.

“Yes, he do.” George simultaneously quickened.

Soon we spotted the broken-down hotel, tavern and livery stable. In the rear shed were four army horses, bearing the brand. They looked to have been ridden hard. I quickly realized that there was minimal observation in the shed.

Conveyance

Chapter 2

It proved surprisingly easy for us to lead the four stolen army horses out of the shed, and then a quarter mile into the woods, which is where Raven lived. He would skillfully alter the U S brands burned into the coats of each of the horses' left front shoulders. Within a week or so, the updated markings, which would by then look like a D-8, would have healed over to the point where the newly reconfigured brand looked to be the same age as the original brand. Nobody would question what looked for all the world like a private owner's (*D DASH EIGHT*) brand. Once the two of us left Raven, George and I split up, each leading two horses, to make it more difficult for anyone who chose to attempt to follow us. We each chose circuitous routes as we separately made our way south toward Sparta.

The man we dealt with in Sparta had an unfamiliar accent. I couldn't quite place it. Perhaps East coast. A second man entered the room, who had reportedly examined the horses. Without further ado, he offered \$150 in silver for the four horses. Thirty dollars more than we were expecting. There was but one hitch... we would be required to get them all to Delta, the landing near Hard Times Plantation.

“When?” I asked.

“As soon as you can get ‘em there!” The man introduced himself as Newman.

The next step was leading the four horses about seventy miles via the back roads, all the way to Monroe. Many would have paled at the notion, but George and I knew the most intricate of trails. Some had originally been established by the long-departed Caddo Indians.

West Monroe was a bustling, somewhat grimy collection of cattle yards, steamer docking stations and saloons. We figured from West Monroe to Hard Times would probably be another seventy miles. Here, we crossed the river and followed “the train road” to the Delta landing near Hard Times on the Mississippi River. As previously agreed, Nathaniel had met up with us and accompanied George and me.

It didn’t take long to meet the man called “Sparky” who was the man the buyer Newman had directed us to. After a brief inspection of the horses, he handed me a heavy cloth bag. In the bag were one hundred silver dollars and one hundred half dollars.

Extracting fifty dollars, I handed the remainder to George. “I’ll take the stage back to Mt. Lebanon from Monroe. Hopefully, this will be a fruitful trip.”

That was the plan. It had actually been the continuous plan going on four years now. I would board the

southbound steamer at the Delta landing, following a successful horse sale. It was then a matter of riding the steamer down to New Orleans and back. The outcome was totally dependent upon who happened to be a passenger on the boat, and how big the card game was.

With any luck, I would make the voyage to New Orleans and find a card game on the boat during the steamer trip. My length of stay would be determined by my luck. When concluded, I would take a steamer up the Ouachita to Monroe. A good run might net as much as \$300; a princely sum for four-day's work. A bad run, on the other hand, might amount to me barely having sufficient money to pay the stage rate to return. It was truly a precarious way of making a living. But so far it had at least managed to keep food on my family's table.

"You know, Frank," George mused. "You might oughta take the train. It's 'bout the same price 'n I kin ride over to Gibsland wit Rennie foh you."

"We'll see." By now there was a westbound train that connected Monroe to Shreveport. Unfortunately, it had bypassed Mt. Lebanon in favor of Gibsland, some three miles to the north. "I'll send you a telegram, prior to departure," I told him.

We had always taught and been taught that stealing was wrong. Now, however, stealing anything from the United States Government felt fully justified. Few felt any remorse at the thought of taking anything from the occupying army.

Even after President Rutherford B. Hayes ordered the withdrawal of federal troops from Louisiana, there remained a secret zeal among many to gain even the smallest bit of an edge over those who were still viewed as the oppressors. With the sale of those four horses, I had sent home a hundred dollars. That would buy food and clothing for all of us on the plantation over the upcoming winter. Thanks to the vile carpetbaggers, we had been reduced to devoting all of our efforts toward mere survival. Actually, getting ahead was naught but a dream. But I now had a chance, with the remaining fifty dollars, to add to the amount we'd earned by selling those stolen horses. It all depended upon my luck at the card table.

“Nat ‘n me take good keer ‘o Rennie. Don’t you worry, Frank!” George’s responsible demeanor had always been a comfort to me. There had seemed little that the Yankees couldn’t take from us, at a time of their choosing. The optimism and confidence of my boyhood had gradually been replaced with an air of resignation and pessimism.

“You gwyne haf uh good day, Frank. I’s feelin’ it in mah bones!” George patted me on the shoulder. “We git home, den we gwyne ta Minden foh ahr shoppin. Slat’s stoh’s got sum good deals on tools ‘n werk clothes, dey say.”

“Yes, Slat’s will fix us up, I’m sure!” I laughed, briefly lighthearted at the thought of the young Union Corporal, who had lived at Mr. Lebanon for three years.

He was now the owner of a dry goods store in Minden, having befriended and successfully cultivated the occupying army for their business. A mature man of forty-three, the Iowa native had found himself a home in Minden. He had married a local woman and fathered three children.

“George, tell Nona that I will try to bring back something nice for her. I’ll do my best, anyway.” I felt somewhat guilty leaving Nona in her state. Yet, this might be our best chance to have an easy winter. It depended on how well I did at the tables.

Mama and Daddy had urged me to sell the homestead and move to Shreveport, saying we’d fare better financially there. The advice was not without credence. Only ten acres remained of my parents’ original 3700. I once again considered the huge loss we’d incurred. Ten acres was hardly sufficient for producing even a meager living. There were jobs available in Shreveport, of course. But most were jobs that were uninteresting at best, mundane at worst.

It seemed that, to me anyway, anything which didn’t involve a certain degree of chance, mixed with a mild bit of risk, was not worth pursuing. I was now the sole owner of the homestead of my childhood. That was something to be proud of, even though it was little more than an estate house with no estate.

“The next steamer should be departing around four this afternoon.” I added. “Y’all need to be getting’ back.

You can stay at that little boarding house, just east of Monroe.”

“I saw de sign.” Nathaniel proffered. “It say six bits foh de night and de breakfus cum with de room, but iffen you wants a hot baff, it a quahtah moh.” At that price my guess was that the proprietor was rather hoping to discourage bathing.

I couldn’t help but smile. Even after the money had run out, Daddy insisted that all the people, especially those under 15, continue schooling under Juliene Mayeaux Lebeau. Every person under that age who lived on the plantation could read and write. Most had taken advantage of Daddy’s insistence upon literacy and had found jobs in nearby cities. I thought back to Ira, the scrawny boy of eleven, an orphan who had shown up on Amos’ doorstep, one cold, rainy January night back in 1863. The boy had pretty much grown up as Amos’ adopted son. Ira had first attended and later had become a faculty member of Arkansas A. M. & N. in Pine Bluff, Arkansas.

There continued to be an emphasis on humanities at the school. Amos often complained that there was too much so placed on Shakespeare and Chaucer and not nearly enough on practical matters. But his pleas went unanswered.

Mama had supported Juliene wholeheartedly. All on the plantation were graced with a classical education, not available anywhere else in the parish. This

continued until the middle of 1869, when Juliene landed a faculty job at Louisiana Normal in Natchitoches.

“We do jes’ dat,” George jerked my wandering attention back to the present, confirming where he planned to stay. He was familiar with that small boarding house which was used almost exclusively by colored travelers. “Dat lady make sum fine breakfas’es, iffen you ‘membah.”

“I do.” I’d eaten at the house on several occasions. It was one of those local places, only known about by the select few. I’d found it to be great rendezvous spot, a good place to conduct business. “You know, George, if I were smart, I would be running a store like Slats, Daddy and the Shantz’s. Look at them and look at me!”

“Mt. Lebanon wouldn’t be rite widout you, Frank!” Nathaniel jokingly pointed out.

“They say a cat’ll always land on its feet!” I smiled wistfully. I remembered how Daddy had managed to buy his friend’s hardware store in Hope, Arkansas, the year before Will’s death. Amos and Lem had continued to run the farm, accepting acreage in lieu of pay.

In the end, my father never returned to Mt. Lebanon. It was as if his heart was no longer in it. The excessively high property taxes were sufficiently demoralizing. The fire was the final nail in the coffin.

My memory had once again taken me back. “I remember us back in 1865,” I mused quietly, “Luther had begun storing his recipe in oak barrels,” I painfully recounted. “You know, it was all about allowing the moonshine to properly age. We believed that by the end of 1868 or maybe the early part of 1869, the moonshine would become bourbon whiskey. Daddy called it, ‘the fruits of the wait.’ Then suddenly, the wait was over! We needed hard money; everyone did. But there was always someone willing to part with it for liquor. Especially for real bourbon!

“Daddy had secured a purchaser in Baton Rouge, who was willing to pay handsomely for that liquor. They had already set a date for pick-up. I believe the buyer’s name was Simon. He was so afraid that Daddy might meet somebody on his way to Baton Rouge that would offer a higher price, that he offered to come to the plantation himself to get it!”

“Ummm hmmm,” George nodded. “I do membah dat Mr. Simon.” George said quietly. “He say dat whiskey wuz bettah dan any he’d evah had. I membah Mistah Richard tellin’ ‘im ‘bout Luthah.”

“Then, on a routine inspection,” I remained in a semi-trance, “some rowdy Union soldiers had discovered the barrels. When Daddy offered to give samples to everyone, a Union Lieutenant, I can’t remember his name now, a fanatical teetotaler whose religious zealotry was on full display, accused Daddy of “corrupting God-fearing farmers” and he ordered the

entire barn full of fine, aged, and very valuable bourbon to be burned to the ground.

“Bastahd,” George muttered quietly.

“It was such a huge loss,” I sighed. “During 1866 and 1867, more than 100, ten-gallon barrels of three and four-year-old Bourbon went up in flames. Daddy estimated the loss had topped \$3000. Those sons of bitches! We had been counting on that money to pay the damn taxes!”

“We all wuz countin’ on dat money to pay foh dem taxes.” George spat.

“Daddy was ready to kill that little bastard! Will and I had to restrain him.” I could still feel the rage of the moment.

“But den dey woulda hung you daddy,” Amos reminded him grimly

“We begged him to dig up the treasure that was supposedly buried.” I resumed. “He told us that he was saving it for the two of us. We begged him to buy Tyler Blanchard’s Hardware store in Hope, Arkansas, instead.”

“Uh-huh. Dat wuz de man Cecil Taylor wohked foh.” George recalled.

“Cecil Taylor had written us the previous week, informing us that Tyler Blanchard had suffered a mild

stroke and could no longer run the store. Together we talked Daddy into digging up his buried treasure. You know, there was close to \$900 in gold! Within a month, Daddy had made the necessary arrangements to buy the hardware store along with about fifty head of cattle, and a small house in town.” I paused as I thought back.

“Blanchard’s wife made the arrangements. In the end, Daddy was reunited with Cecil Taylor, who had managed the store, but was unable to come up with the money necessary to buy it. It was actually good that Daddy and Mama got out of here! It was everything that Will and I could do to keep Daddy from going after that little Yankee Lieutenant. I have never seen him so vexed!”

“Didn’t y’all say dat dey wuz moh treasure buried round hyer?” George asked.

“Yes, there used to be treasure buried all over the place.” I mused.” Daddy had this thing about hiding money, food, damn near anything! I even recall finding a deed to a warehouse in Sparta.

“Actually, it was Nona who was cleaning cobwebs out of a closet. Sure enough, she found a little box under one of the boards. It was no bigger than half a cigar box. Inside it was twenty silver dollars, a couple of half eagles and the deed. We later learned that the warehouse itself had already burned down, so only the land it had stood on was left, but it was still worth something.

“Then, I recall Will turning up a rusty strongbox that’d been buried underneath the big chicken house. That was just before he took off to Texas for that blasted cattle drive! Aunt Rosa told Will she recalled how Uncle Emanuel had once mentioned to her that Daddy had buried that strongbox way back when he first got to Louisiana.”

“Whut wuz in de strongbox, Frank?”

“Fifty dollars, in gold!” I shook my head. “I surely wish we could have found that now and not then! Had we not found it back then, Will and the boys wouldn’t have had the money to make the cattle drive. I recall Daddy surely wasn’t enthusiastic about them lighting out like they did! Hell, if I found fifty dollars today, we have had damn near enough to feed everyone for the winter!”

“Find anything else?” George inquired thoughtfully.

“No.” I frowned. “Not a thing. And it had been so long by then that Daddy couldn’t recall where anything else might have been hidden. But we surely did poke around! Uncle Elijah said that Daddy had probably hidden more gold coins in the barn somewhere, but we never managed to find any, and likely never will. Nowadays, the only treasure to be found is what we can scrounge up or win in a poker game.”

“Yo daddy done good, buying dat place ‘n Hope” George agreed. “You evah think you be gwyne up deah wit ‘im ‘n heppin’? I know he gittin’ up in he years.”

"I probably should, George," I sighed. The daily quandary presented itself. "But, I don't want to work in a hardware store. I like being out and about. And if I leave Mt. Lebanon, who'll mind the Stage House?"

"Yes, Frank, but, you gots no customahs, no moh!" George acknowledged ruefully. "Mebba oncet in whiles! But, de Stage House wuz nevah yo daddy's main source 'o income. We sells eggs, sweet tatahs, pecans 'n stuff we's traded foh, at de confectionery. Dat's all! 'N dat rickety building gwyne need repairs!"

I unconsciously felt for the small pistol in my side coat pocket. You can never be too careful when you're traveling.

"Daddy did a remarkable job accumulating firearms shortly after the war." I recalled, quietly. "Their sales allowed him to sustain his barony well into 1867. But eventually they too expired. With no Cecil Taylor to make munitions or fix broken weapons taken in on trade, there was no ready means to produce "hard money."

"You got yo Webley?" George was asking about the nickel plated British double action pocket revolver in my pocket. "We's still got plenty 'o hardwahr back at de homestead. Folkes still cum askin' if you has any foh sale!"

"I was thinkin' about Luther." Reaching inside my breast pocket and extracting a small, metal flask, I

ignored the question. Taking a small draw, I handed the bottle to Nathaniel. "Go ahead. Keep it. I'll not be drinkin' on this trip. That's the way to lose! Sober always wins."

"Why wuz you thinkin' 'bout Luthah?" George asked. "An oh, I fohgot to tell you I gots a lettah from him. Dat boy be doin' bettah dan all of us is! He wrote me dat he done bought a house jes' off Jeffahson Street in Nashville!"

I smiled. "Glad to hear it, and yes, you're most likely correct about him doing better than most of us." I thought about that revelation, twenty years earlier, when we had learned about Luther's fate. It was a happy ending to a sordid tale!

"Yassuh, Luthah 'n dat Shantz boy runnin' a big stoh in all! Dey's all doin' right fine," George nodded. "He say Nashville uh fine city."

"You know, Daddy talked briefly about joining Walter." I pondered the recollection. "He and Mama really thought about it. But they said it was too far away. I like Nashville myself. But I guess somebody had to stay. It turned out to be us, wouldn't you say, George." I sighed and dismounted, handing the reins to Nathaniel.

"Frank, do say hi to Bucky, iffen ya seen 'im." George reminded. "Everthang be okay at de big house. We all's

be dehr waitin' foh you. Miz Nona be alright. She knows whut you has ta do."

"I'll do that." I smiled, thinking of our cobbler friend turned Crescent City shoe and boot retailer. "Depending on my luck at the tables, I might buy all three of us a fine pair of boots! You could do with that, couldn't you, Nathaniel?"

"I needs new boots, Frank. My whole family needs shoes." Nathaniel replied. "You think mebbe Mistah Bucky could give you some ole ones foh a good price?"

"At the very least, he always has a place for me to stay, when I come to New Orleans." I reminded. "That's worth a bunch, if y'all think about it."

The steam whistle blared loudly. I grabbed my traveling satchel from where I'd had it strapped to the saddle and made my way toward the landing stage amid the growing line of passengers. I had very few extra clothes with me. I had three white shirts including the one I was wearing, an extra pair of long johns, two additional pair of socks, a silk tie, and a duster rolled up and stuffed in the bottom of the satchel in case I encountered unexpected weather. The neutral colors and fine quality of what I was wearing to travel could stand me in good stead for several days. Although my knee-high brown leather long boots really would need to be resoled very soon, they had been polished to a high shine that contrasted nicely against my beige

riding trousers, and double-breasted patterned waistcoat.

The coat I wore gave me a particular amount of pleasure and amusement. It was a very high end 3/4 length covert coat, the color of a newborn fawn, which hit me mid-thigh. It had notched lapels and a dark brown velvet collar which could be replaced if need be. Covert was the name of the cloth, a steeply woven twill, a wool-silk blend, which was not only hard-wearing, wind and water resistant, it was designed so that horsehair wouldn't show up on it. I could wear it in place of a traditional suit coat, and it would look every bit as proper. The coat was bespoke, custom made for its original owner by Huntsman, a Savile Row tailor in London. I had won it in a game of poker with a man about my size a few years ago. It had fit perfectly. It also had very generous pockets. The suit had been cleverly constructed by the tailor to enable its wealthy owner to discreetly carry valuables or weaponry on his person without any of the numerous inner or outer pockets displaying an obvious bulge.

"We be waitin' on you, Frank." Nathaniel called.

"Jes be careful." George added knowingly.

Conveyance

Chapter 3

There had been six or seven people waiting for the landing stage to be lowered to the muddy banks of the Mississippi at Delta, Louisiana and a few more hurriedly joined them. When they were hailed, most steamboats obediently pulled over to collect passengers. While Delta was not an official stop, it may as well have been, since there were always passengers to be had, and the boat was usually close to being on time. My plan was to buy passage on the famously luxurious “City of Natchez” steamboat, which was headed for Ferriday Landing, where the Ouachita emptied into the Mississippi. If all went well, and I won enough to pay for further passage, I would probably continue the voyage on to Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

The big steamer, over 303.5 feet long with a 46.5’ beam, was the property of the legendary Commander Thomas Paul Leathers. She was the seventh of the Leathers family’s list of steamboats to continue the “City of Natchez” name. The sixth Natchez had been world famous for having raced the steamboat Robert E. Lee.

This one, known as the “Natchez VII” was famous for its exceptional luxury. The ornate interior was so filled with “gingerbread” that its décor had been described as “steamboat gothic.” Ornate wood fretwork, spindles, scrolls, carvings, what looked like slices of Corinthian columns, cove, crown and “picture frame” moldings along with lavishly sculpted appliques abounded. The decorative work on the ceilings alone would have put even the most beautiful of wedding cakes to shame.

Her massive, polished brass, oil-burning chandeliers sparkled during the day and come nightfall their crystal globes glittered ferociously. Vertically mounted pierced woodworking elements descended from gently arched ceiling beams and achieved that softly draped effect sometimes known as “jigsaw curtains.” The main deck boasted rich, plush carpeting in a subtle floral pattern. Rumor had it that the oriental rugs had come from Persia and the thick plush carpeting was custom woven in Brussels. The cost of those lavish floor coverings, it was whispered, had exceeded five thousand dollars. Graceful mahogany armchairs on the main deck were upholstered in burgundy silk brocade and exquisitely crocheted oversized lace antimacassars were gracefully draped over chair backs.

There was absolutely nothing subtle about the exuberant level of luxury the City of Natchez trumpeted. She boasted 47 elegant staterooms with elaborate stained-glass windows. The construction cost of the boat itself was one hundred twenty-five thousand

dollars. Once interior furnishings were added, the costs had reached \$207,000. I figured even purchasing passage on one of the deck's pew seats would likely be expensive.

The City of Natchez VII had been launched in 1879, so by 1886 she was already seven years old. Most steamboats operated for five years before a major renovation was expected, since even the hulls were constructed of wood and the Mississippi was a harsh mistress. I supposed that the Natchez VII would be due for renovation before long, but it was not yet readily apparent. To my appreciative eyes the boat represented a veritable floating palace.

Like most steamboats on the Mississippi, the Natchez raised and lowered a very long landing stage instead of extending a traditional gangplank to a dock. This allowed the boat to access virtually any port along the river, providing a sturdy and reliable means of ingress and egress for passengers, livestock and cargo.

As the small line of passengers traversed the long landing stage and boarded the boat, I overheard the woman in front of me assure the steward. "My husband has been detained in Monroe. He'll be along shortly."

"Well, the boat departs in a half-hour." The steward said brusquely.

"Oh dear!" The woman looked to be about my age. Her soft auburn curls had been carefully secured beneath an

artfully positioned Gainsborough hat. One side of the brim was flirtatiously turned up and accented with a tasteful clutch of pheasant feathers. The hat nicely complimented her stylish maroon silk and wool traveling suit with its delicate little fluff of cream-colored lace at the throat, and dangling from a wide leather strap on her wrist was a maroon leather and velvet striped reticule. Her fashionable, medium-sized purse was cleverly designed to look like a drawstring bag with a rounded hatbox inside.

“He has our ticket confirmation!” she murmured, concern evident in her voice.

“Well, if he doesn’t get here and you wish to travel, you’ll just have to buy another ticket.” the Steward responded gruffly.

“My husband books passage on this steamer with regularity,” she snapped indignantly. The woman’s expression had changed from concern to one of distinct annoyance. “I am certain that he would find your behavior quite unacceptable!”

“Just doing my job, Ma’am.” The steward’s resolve was fixed.

“How much would it cost to buy her a ticket?” I asked, using this as an excuse to learn for myself.

“I’ll not have this kind of treatment!” The woman interrupted, her eyes flashing. “What is your name, sir?” she demanded of the steward.

“Whoa! Whoa! Whoa! Hold your horses!” An older gentleman stepped forward. He was easily over six feet tall, with a healthy physique, deep set stormy-colored eyes and a thick head of white hair. His rugged features were accented by a square-jaw, professionally trimmed beard and mustache and he wore what appeared to be a perpetual scowl. I gauged his age at about seventy. He was attired in a well-cut, fine quality suit, and I watched him discretely tug on a heavy gold watch chain to retrieve a handsome pocket watch from his vest pocket. I pegged it as 18k. Expensive. I could tell by the richness of the color gold. In a split second of observation, I also was able to make out finely engraved images on the watch as he deftly flipped it over and pressed the lever to flick open the lid. There looked to be a duck hunting scene on one side, and a pair of sulky racers on the other.

He discretely glanced at the time, then quickly snapped the cover shut and returned the watch to his vest pocket. The visible portion of the matching 18k gold chain made a gentle loop, elegantly festooned upon his vest, subtly announcing his position as a man of importance.

The elderly gentleman quickly sized up the situation in front of him and made a logical decision. The steamboat’s passenger trade wasn’t as active as it had been before the railroad cut into his business. And as

for cargo, he reflected, well, New Orleans was already receiving three quarters of its supplies by rail. It definitely wouldn't do to permit an unpleasant scene to unfold on deck or to inadvertently offend a passenger. "What seems to be the problem, Madame?" he asked diplomatically.

"My husband was unexpectedly delayed in Monroe," the woman replied somewhat distractedly. "Something that necessitated the handling of an urgent matter for a client, he said. He told me to go on ahead and he'd be right along. I do not normally accompany him when he travels on business, but we also have a social occasion that demands the presence of both of us in New Orleans. He mentioned he'd be wiring funds via Western Union for our passage. He needed to make certain the boat knew to stop for us. He expects to join me in time for departure. He'll have a copy of the wire. Oh, I do hope he hurries," she added worriedly, looking off in the distance with concern.

"And what might his name be?" The older gentleman had a stern, yet somewhat regal air about him. I watched with interest as the scene played out in front of me.

"Arnold Singleton." The woman's eyes flashed. She had felt offended and the expression on her face made that fact abundantly clear.

“Arnold Singleton. Arnold Singleton.” The old man’s eyes narrowed as he mused, “A.W. Singleton. Is your husband A.W. Singleton?”

“Yes.”

“A.W. Singleton.” A half smile emerged on the man’s face. “Haven’t seen him in years! I did see his name on the manifest some time ago. Can’t remember when...Is he still practicing law over in Arkansas?”

“He is.”

“Wait a minute!” The older man’s eyes became hard. “The man I know is twice your age, Madame.”

“That because my husband is his son,” the woman replied tartly.

“Ah, of course.” The elderly man sighed. “Arnold, did you say? Makes sense. Is he following in his daddy’s footsteps, lawyering?”

“’Fraid so! The woman’s wry smile was playful.

“Well, I know how it is with busy lawyers!” The man seemed satisfied with his interrogation. Turning to the steward he instructed, “Thibodeaux! Please escort Mrs. Singleton to one of the forward staterooms.”

“And my brother-in-law, who accompanies me?” she exclaimed as if an afterthought, while suddenly casting a wanting gaze at me.

“Brother-in-law?” The older man looked confused. Looking at me he questioned. “And who might you be, sir?”

“How do you do? Frank Singleton, at your service, sir,” I said with a smile, politely extending my hand. “Although I originally had other travel plans and was going to take leave of my brother and his wife here, I’m afraid that if my brother doesn’t arrive post haste I may of necessity find myself pressed into duty as chaperone for my sister-in-law. Surely it would hardly be seemly for a lady to travel by herself,” I reminded him.

The gentleman shook my hand and smiled. “Well, I reckon I’d prefer to have my brother escorting my wife on a New Orleans bound steamer myself.” The man laughed, his decidedly southern accent becoming more pronounced. “Thibodeaux can prepare Mrs. Singleton for either eventuality. Will a double stateroom suffice if your husband doesn’t make it Mrs. Singleton?”

“We’ll manage fine, thank you.” The woman nodded with a demure smile as she answered for me.

“Stern staterooms, Thibodeaux,” the gentleman amended his instructions to the steward. I was particularly gratified. Stern staterooms represented the safest locations on the boat, far from the engines and boilers, which still had an unfortunate tendency to explode.

“You do have us at a disadvantage, sir,” I interjected.

“Quite right, young man.” The older man pursed his lips. “I am Thomas P. Leathers, owner and Commander of this fine vessel. My son Bolling Leathers is your Captain on this journey. Perhaps you’ll meet him later. He’s accompanied by his pretty little wife Blanche, who for some totally unknown reason remains absolutely fascinated with every aspect of steamboats. Hardly a ladylike preoccupation,” he joked, laughing heartily at the notion before turning toward the steward and issuing instructions. “The Singletons will be my personal guests on this journey, Thibodeaux. See to first-class accommodations for my friends.” The steward silently nodded.

“My land! Generous as well as handsome, good sir,” the woman smoothly flattered our benefactor. “How kind of you, Commander!” the woman exclaimed flirtatiously while Letters visibly preened at the compliment. “I am Mary Beth, Arnold’s wife, as you may have surmised,” she continued.

“We thank you for your gracious hospitality, Commander!” I verbally applauded his gesture. For a moment, the previous twenty years melted away and I felt as if I were part of my father’s gentle, more refined era.

“Come along,” he invited, motioning for the two of us to follow him. With a glance he silently directed the steward to carry Mary Beth’s valise. I politely waved the steward off and carried my own leather satchel.

Leathers continued speaking as we headed toward our stateroom, and he was addressing me personally. “Your father and I had some old business relating to an investment that I wrote him about,” he commented. Halfway down the corridor, he paused as if remembering something and motioned to the steward who trailed behind us to take over. “I will call on you later, once you’ve had time to settle in,” he advised me. “I trust you’ll find your accommodations acceptable,” he said with a smile.

Thibodeaux led the two of us down the long hallway of the main deck. This was the elegant dining and stateroom level of the *Natchez*, and it was meticulously painted in gloss white lacquer. Handsome murals depicting the daily lives of Indians had been painted on the fore and aft panels of the main deck while large stained-glass windows, continuing the same theme, portrayed members of the Natchez tribe engaged in sun worship, ceremonial dancing, or other scenes. I had noticed that some of the outer windows of staterooms featured similar stained-glass designs.

As we followed the steward down the hallway of the main deck, I admired the care that had gone into the décor. The white-on-white rows of stateroom doors along with the generous spaces which separated them, were all richly embellished with decorative appliqués, scrolls, fans, and gracefully curving frames, to which were added gilt, gold leaf, and other embellishments. Above each of the doors were jewel-like beveled glass

clerestory windows, some of which featured individual stained-glass portraits of assorted Natchez Indians. I had once overheard a wealthy lady from Boston describe the Natchez décor as “an unfortunate mixture of gimcrack, jigsaw, and rococo.”

To be honest, it was actually a puzzling pairing of interior design features, decidedly European, highly ornate, exuberantly ornamented, curiously interspersed with images of Natchez Indians. But somehow it seemed to work.

The center of the wide hallway had been set up for dining. Although on most steamboats the tables were set side by side to form one gigantic banquet table, here I saw waiters positioning tables for eight at slight angles which ran the length of the not inconsiderable main cabin. The better to facilitate conversation I wondered or, perhaps disguise the fact that there were not as many passengers aboard as the boat was capable of hosting. Walkways had been left open on each side of the dining area to facilitate ingress and egress from the stateroom doors that flanked each side of the long main cabin, the far end of which terminated in a spacious seating area with a huge floor to ceiling presentation of highly ornate, beautifully gilded mirrors.

The steward stopped abruptly in front of one of the many elaborately ornamented doors, opened it, then politely ushered us in ahead of him. Once inside he turned to his right and unlocked a pocket door leading

to an adjoining stateroom. He motioned for me to take a quick look as he retrieved a small mahogany folding luggage rack upon which he set Mary Beth's bag. I quickly stuck my head in the door of the adjacent cabin. At first glance the room struck me as a nicely furnished shoebox.

The steward then provided helpful information. "We anticipate three stops between here and New Orleans."

He then presented me with a pair of keys, a menu, and an explanation. "This key will open both outer doors as well as the pocket door between staterooms," he said. "The second key opens the outer door to the smaller stateroom door only."

"As you'll have noticed, the great central hall outside your door is periodically converted for dining. Breakfast is served at 7:30, dinner is at 2 P.M., tea at 7 P.M., and a cold supper is served from 9 P.M. to midnight."

"A pleasant assortment of house wines will accompany dinner as well as supper. As the commander has specified that you are to be traveling as first-class passengers, there will be no charge for your meals."

"Sounds like the St. Charles hotel!" I smiled broadly, relishing my ability to make the comparison.

“Do not hesitate to let us know if there is anything else that you require.” Thibodeaux’s expression did not change. “Good afternoon.”

Once the steward was ready to depart, I tipped him and politely thanked him for his service. I then found myself taking a moment to more fully assess the cabin’s interior. Richly paneled, the gleaming wood was complemented by a large oil painting, a bucolic landscape in a wide gilt frame. I guessed that the room might easily measure 9’ x 12’, a size considered huge by steamboat stateroom standards. The compact sized adjoining cabin, nicely furnished and perfectly appropriate for my use as a “chaperone” barely measured 8’ x 8’ but held little more than a small writing table with a matched pair of short, weighted brass candlesticks, what looked to be a comfortable reading chair, and a narrow twin bed.

The larger room, although lovely, still felt a bit crowded to me, what with the four-poster bed and its lavishly carved mahogany headboard. Obviously, this particular stateroom was kept in reserve for VIP passengers. There were also a pair of $\frac{3}{4}$ size hobnailed wingback chairs upholstered in pale blue silk brocade. Each chair boasted ivory colored crocheted lace antimacassars with matching lace doilies draped over bolstered arm rests. The mahogany four-poster bed was tastefully covered by a generously sized forest green silk quilt, across which a delicately embroidered field of tiny pink tea roses and blue cornflowers had been

tastefully strewn. The latter flower perfectly matched the soothing cornflower hue of the wingback chairs.

The two wingbacks sandwiched a circular tea table, once again mahogany, but with fluted piecrust edges. The matching vanity, a narrow piece, was accented by an oversized oval trio of ornate gilt-framed mirrors. The vanity chair, with short back and pink satin upholstery was discretely tucked beneath the skirted dressing table. A small, crystal oil lamp had been positioned on the dressing table near the mirror. The entire room made a perfectly elegant presentation.

The door closed quietly behind the steward, and I turned to see Mary Beth watching me with a twinkle in her eye.

“The St. Charles hotel, is it?” Mary Beth looked at me mischievously. “It would appear that you get around, Frank!”

I’ve found that my powers of observation, of picking up on subtleties, noticing things that others might allow to pass unnoticed, had grown sharper over the years. Mary Beth was wearing a fashionable suit for traveling, but now in closer quarters, I found myself giving her outfit a second look. The color, a rich maroon, was a practical hue for travel and the style corresponded with the latest of ladies’ fashions. The silhouette displayed a rigidly defined shelf-like bustle, as opposed to the softly sloping bustles of an earlier time. But in looking more closely, it occurred to me that her suit was likely

a redesign by an expert seamstress, using some wealthy woman's gently worn cast-offs. I found that somewhat curious for the wife of a successful attorney. I doubted anyone else would have been equally observant, however.

"Yes," I nodded, acknowledging her comment about the hotel. "My father and brother share my affinity for the St. Charles. It's where we always stay when we're New Orleans." I added, making no reference to the fact that a good twenty years had passed since last we stayed there.

"I hope to stay there soon." Mary Beth sighed. I noticed that while her accent was comfortably Southern, it did not suggest Louisiana origin.

"Tell me, Mary Beth," I laughed. "Why did you tell that old gentleman that I was your brother-in-law?"

"Why did you play along?" she parried with a smile.

Her quick response momentarily knocked me off balance. "I don't know. Maybe I have a soft spot for helpless women."

"I see."

"Won't Mr. Singleton be unhappy that his wife is embarking on a river voyage with a total stranger?" I felt a twinge of remorse, quickly thinking of Nona.

“There is no Mr. Singleton.” Mary Beth laughed. “Or at least, none that I know of.”

“You made up that name and it turned out to be somebody that Commander Leathers knew?” I burst out laughing. “That’s the kind of luck that I need on this trip.”

“What is it that you do; it is Frank, isn’t it?” Her eyes looked suggestive, as I heard the Natchez Seven’s deep whistle pierce the air.

“Yes, it is Frank. But, not Singleton.” I was suddenly reluctant to reveal my business to this obviously devious female. “I own a plantation near Shreveport. I am on my way south to procure tools. That’s why I’m dressed as I am.” I was increasingly embarrassed by my attire which, although of fine quality and perfectly respectable, would hardly be classified as Sunday best amongst the typical first-class passenger on a boat of this caliber.

“A plantation?” Mary Beth had removed her hat and slipped the wide leather strap of the commodious maroon leather reticule off her wrist. I watched as she gently positioned the purse next to her smart little hat on the dressing table.

“So... you’re a farmer?” she queried as she casually perched on the side of the bed.

I removed my wide brimmed hat before replying. "Farmer, rancher, and entrepreneur," I answered confidently, taking a seat in one of the wingback chairs, placing my satchel on the floor, crossing my legs and balancing my hat upon my knee. I found myself making a concerted effort not to expose the small hole in the sole of my right boot.

"I see." Mary Beth nodded, her eyes narrowing as if she saw through me. "Well Frank, I find that I am a bit tired, and I'd definitely welcome a short nap. So if you would be so kind as to excuse me," she nodded towards my quarters in the adjacent cabin, "I would be most appreciative."

"Of course," I murmured, as I arose from the wingback, and ducked into the adjacent cabin to quickly place my satchel on the narrow bed before heading back toward the main door, replacing my hat as I walked. Before grasping the doorknob, I was startled to hear a knock. Instantly opening the door, I found Commander Leathers, accompanied by a competent looking black waiter shouldering a large silver tray.

"Forgive me if I'm imposing, Mrs. Singleton," he said as Mary Beth rose and stepped forward to greet him, "But I did bring a spot of refreshments and I hoped your brother-in-law and I might talk for a few minutes."

He then turned to me. "You look as if you were just leaving," he spoke to me. "I hope I'm not keeping you from something important?" The commander's excuse

sounded vaguely hollow, but his generous hospitality demanded our acquiescence.

“Not at all!” I invited him in, and Mary Beth wordlessly welcomed him with a pleasant smile. I removed my hat and placed it on the hat rack.

“What about?” I asked curiously, while experiencing a mild sense of alarm.

“A business venture. Surely your father shared it with you and your brother?” I noticed the commander was squinting, as if to get a better look at both of us. I wondered if perhaps those deep frown lines on his forehead were vision-related as opposed to being indicative of a mercurial temperament.

“Why, my father and my brother Arnold have so many things going, I can hardly begin to keep up with them.” I motioned Leathers to the second wingback while Mary Beth deftly moved the vanity stool closer, so as to better hear the conversation. The waiter relocated the occasional table to the center of our little group, placed the larger tray on top of it, and commenced opening a chilled magnum-sized bottle of wine. He poured a small amount into a wine glass and offered it to the commander who then nodded his approval.

“This is an excellent French Chablis,” Leathers volunteered. “And do try the boiled shrimp in the server,” Leather invited. “I’m certain you’ll enjoy the sauce as well. The cook combines catsup, horseradish,

and lemon, with a dash of Worcestershire sauce. It's quite tasty. I've grown quite fond of it myself."

"Wine, madame?" the waiter asked Mary Beth, who nodded enthusiastically. "Shrimp?" he offered, "with sauce?"

"Yes indeed!" she replied delightedly.

The waiter piled a dozen fat shrimp, thoughtfully peeled in advance, on a small plate, ladled a generous spoonful of red sauce off to one side and handed it to her. The plate was accompanied by a cocktail fork and a white linen napkin. He did the same for Commander Leathers and me.

"Sir?" the waiter inquired of me, ready to pour a glass of wine.

"No, thank you, but I'd appreciate iced tea if you happen to have it," I replied. The waiter nodded, opened the cabin door and softly whispered his request to a second individual who had been standing by in case something else was needed. He then turned to Leathers, and offered to fill his glass. "Commander, sir?" Leathers smiled and accepted the full wine glass.

"Well truthfully, I didn't even know that your father had two sons." Leathers ran his hand through a thick shock of white hair. His once vibrant red hair, even the steel gray to which it had once turned, were both long gone by now, replaced with this snowy badge of

authority. He wore it well. "In fact, the son that I remembered died several years ago. Typhoid, or so I heard," he said.

"Not true," I casually reassured him as I furthered my participation in the charade. "I have been traveling for a number of years."

"Traveling, you say?" I noted a look of suspicion from my host. "Where 'bouts."

"Indiana, Arkansas... and other places." I was becoming increasingly uneasy with the conversation.

"Well, let me make it easy for you, Mr. Singleton," Leather's directness was invigorating, yet mildly unnerving. "This steamer which is taking you to New Orleans, literally defines luxury. She was launched in August of seventy-nine.

"I contracted her construction myself... specified the best of everything. Spent over two hundred thousand dollars in cash money on her by the time I got through. But keeping her in top shape requires regular maintenance. Compared to what I spent to have her built, the amount required for her update is quite modest."

A light tap on the door signaled that the tea had just been delivered. Seconds later the waiter set my iced tea on the tray in front of me. "Thank you," I expressed my thanks to the waiter. My appreciation was sincere. I

seldom drank wine, finding that what was available and affordable was generally too sweet for my taste. The moonshine, which we had once dubbed Luther's "recipe," had vanished along with Luther. Like my Grandfather Jesse, however, I found that I did occasionally welcome a glass of peach brandy on a cold rainy night.

Leathers had made short work of his shrimp, then signaled to the politely hovering waiter for a few more, along with a generous refill of his wine glass. Once sated, Leathers had comfortably leaned back in the chair, and retrieving his pipe and tobacco pouch, politely asked Mary Beth's permission to smoke. "May I?" She smiled and nodded silently.

"I take it you held Southern preferences, Commander." I placed my hand in a coat pocket, gently caressing the ivory pipe which Corporal Slats had given me on my 25th birthday. My fingers brushed against the poke bag nestled against the pipe.

"That I did, son." The commander exhaled and a small cloud of bluish-gray smoke filled the stateroom. "My home state of Kentucky made a grave mistake by not joining General Bragg when he came through in sixty-two. Forgive me, would you like to try some of this tobacco?" he offered, holding out a small leather bag. "Picked it up couple of weeks ago, when I was in Philadelphia. It's from Turkey."

I politely declined. "No, but thank you, sir." Not insulted, he simply tucked it back in a pocket.

I never had taken to pipe tobacco; finding the aftertaste disagreeable. My pipe was used exclusively for the Injun Grass which Riley continued to maintain. Under normal conditions, I would have welcomed a bowl of it. But this was a business trip.

Mary Beth sighed with contentment. "I do love shrimp, Commander! It was so kind of you to think of us." Leathers nodded graciously then got back to the purpose of his visit. With a curt nod to the waiter, the man quickly took his leave after quietly assuring us that he'd return for the tray once our visit had concluded.

We then spent a fair amount of time on pleasantries and Leathers regaled the two of us with multiple stories of his adventures over the years. He boasted that this Natchez, his seventh of the same name, and one of the fourteen boats he had owned, commanded and operated, was one of the most substantial and elegant steamers ever constructed for the Western or Southern waters. With a gleam in his eye and a self-satisfied smile, Leathers told us that he had designed this boat to be even faster than his prior Natchez, the one which had raced the Robert E. Lee. His Natchez Seven, he told us, was reputed to be the fastest on the Mississippi River. "I don't doubt it," I told him. "And it certainly is a handsome boat." The compliment pleased him immensely.

“Well, down to business then, he finally announced. I wrote a letter to A.W. Singleton about nine months ago. I did receive a reply a few weeks later. Then nothing.”

“And?” I sipped the iced tea.

“I thought that he would be interested in investing in my boat renovation in return for a percentage of ownership. I can tell you it’s not going to be that expensive.”

“How much?” I asked quickly, realizing that I knew nothing of ship building.

“His share would be a mere twelve thousand.” The old man said quickly. “Only twelve thousand. Then, we’ll continue this wonderful business of providing citizens with luxury river travel.

“You know,” he continued, in what began to sound to me like a sales pitch, “Steamers have been a mainstay on the Mississippi since just after Robert Fulton’s glorious inspiration.”

It seemed to me that Leathers was making a case for the entire business concept.

“Wouldn’t you expect that he’d be delighted to invest in an upgrade for a percentage of ownership?” Mary Beth interjected.

“Unfortunately, in his last letter, he suggested that the time of river travel on a steamboat was waning.” I could

see frustration in Leather's eyes. "Said that people were using trains, because they took less time and cost less money."

"Cheaper and faster *are* two benefits of train travel, Commander." I frowned thoughtfully as I considered the response Leathers had received from the real A.W. Singleton. I took another sip of my tea.

"When I didn't hear from him again, I assumed that he had dismissed the idea." Leathers said sadly. "But now I have met you, Frank, and hopefully your brother...by the way! Did he not board?"

"Unfortunately, he wasn't able to make it!" Mary Beth sighed heavily with what sounded almost like near genuine regret.

"So, I was pressed into service as chaperone," I interjected with a rueful grin. "And once again, my gratitude for your thoughtfulness, offering the adjacent cabin, sir."

He brushed my thanks aside as if it were naught but a small favor. "Well, perhaps we can arrange a meeting for later this week." Leathers raised his bushy white eyebrows enquiringly. "Where will you be staying in New Orleans, Mrs. Singleton?"

"Why, barring any unforeseen circumstances, I expect we'll probably be at the St. Charles hotel." Mary Beth replied confidently.

“Splendid! I will contact you when we make port.” Leathers quickly arose from his chair and stepped past me on his way to the door. “It was so good to meet you. No, please don’t get up!” he admonished as I began to rise. A moment later he was gone.

When I was certain that Leathers was out of earshot, I glared at Mary Beth, tersely hissing.” What in the hell are you doing?”

“Oh Frank!” she said dismissively. “He’s just trying to get someone to lend him money for his boat. Seems like everyone needs money these days.”

“But you’re deceiving that old man, giving him the impression that somebody with money will be awaiting his arrival! And you don’t know A.W. Singleton!” I looked down at the handsome Persian rugs that covered the floor.

“Who cares!” Mary Beth replied cavalierly, shrugging and raising her eyebrows.

“Well, I’m certainly not going to the St. Charles hotel for any meeting!” I shook my head defiantly. “I could tell by the tone of his voice, that he was sizing us up. I bet he’s checking that manifest right now, attempting to learn if A.W. Singleton actually made a reservation.”

“So what?” Unconcerned, Mary Beth took a large gulp of her third glass of wine.

“So *what?*” I struggled not to raise my voice, and annoyed, I angrily grabbed my hat and settled it on my head. “It’s going to be chilly tonight, as you may have ascertained. I don’t want to find myself tossed into the river for a late-night swim!”

“You worry too much, Frank.” Mary Beth casually dismissed my concerns.

“Look, I need to get going. The steward gave me two keys. I’ll leave one with you and I’ll try not to disturb you when I return.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Frank.” Mary Beth pulled out a couple of pins, allowing her hair to come tumbling down. “Perhaps I wouldn’t mind being disturbed,” she said flirtatiously playfully tossing her loose auburn hair and picking up her glass. “Let me see how I feel after I finish the rest of the commander’s wine.”

Without a word, I tucked the room key in my pocket, wheeled around and left the room.

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Jeff Willis was born in El Dorado, Arkansas and attended Louisiana State University. He graduated in 1979 with a double major in Journalism and History. He worked in Broadcast Television for 20 years before switching to Banking/Financial Services in 1999. Willis published topical, "E" is for English in 2010.

In 2022, he completed the multi-part, thousand-plus page historical novel "Conveyance", a riveting five-book series following the true adventures of a

Louisiana family that emancipated, educated, and deeded land to their slaves a full five years before the Civil War. The family interacted and had personal dealings with a number of historically notable people. They also found themselves forced, for the sake of personal survival, to kill or be killed, and to keep secrets. The first four books transpire during the Reconstruction era, while the fifth book, "Aftermath," provides the results, along with a truly stunning conclusion, some twenty years later. The historical saga is scheduled to be evaluated by LSU Press.

Jeff Willis has lived in eight different southern states and enjoyed some of the south's finest cities, including, but not limited to, Asheville, North Carolina, Atlanta, Fayetteville, Arkansas, Lexington, Kentucky, Miami and Nashville. He has traveled extensively in Europe, Russia, including Siberia, and Alaska, and is conversant in Spanish and Russian.

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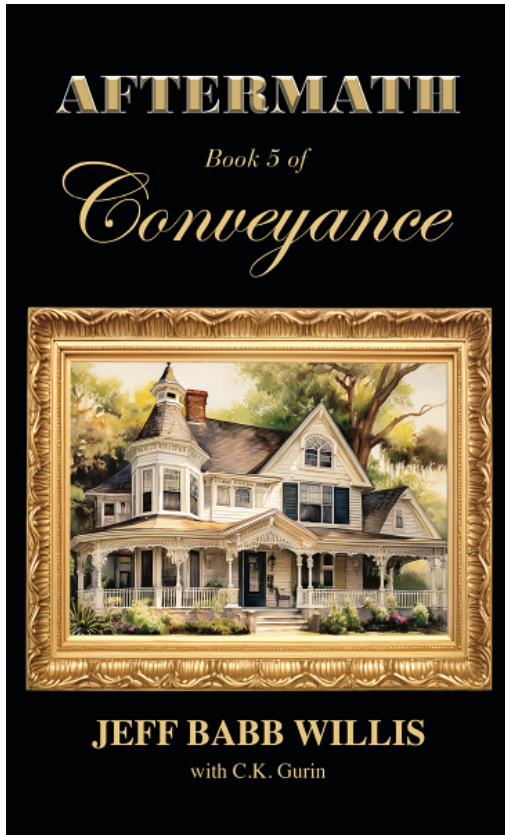
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