

HELENA

A movie poster for the film 'Helena'. The title 'HELENA' is written in large, red, gothic-style capital letters at the top. A thick, light-brown rope hangs from the top, forming a large loop. Inside the loop, the name 'Paul Cox' is written in a gold, cursive font. Below the name are several gold nuggets. In the background, two men in cowboy hats stand on either side of the rope, holding long poles. The scene is set against a dark, silhouetted mountain range under a blue sky.

Paul Cox

HELENA

PAUL COX

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First Edition

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to X. Beidler,
a man not to be forgotten.

CHAPTER 1

After a night of cold drizzling rain, the barren field south of Salem was shrouded in dense fog. Unable to sleep, Tyler Grayson had arrived early. He sat on his horse, listening to the muffled hoof beats drifting through the Virginia mist. Riders of Mosby's command were approaching the rendezvous point from every direction.

Feeling a chill crawl down his back, Grayson fastened the top button of his Confederate jacket. As he had done before every battle, he then adjusted his pistols and felt for the pocket Bible tucked deep in his vest pocket.

Ghostly outlines of cavalymen began to appear. They rode toward Grayson without a word and then, side by side, began forming a line. Black ostrich plumes protruded from the bands of their narrow-brimmed hats. All wore full-dress uniforms, many complete with gold braid, gilt buttons and gauntlets. Every boot was freshly blackened and, except for Grayson, a brace of forty-four caliber Colt Army pistols was belted around each waist. Grayson alone carried a pair of the lighter thirty-six caliber Colt Navies.

Hundreds of men silently jostled into six companies. There was no rattle of rifles or clanking of swords as they formed their ranks. Operating entirely behind Union lines, Mosby's Rangers had no use for such cumbersome weapons. The Rangers rode fast, struck hard and then vanished into the countryside. No fighting unit, North or South, could match their speed, ferocity or cunning. No battalion was more praised by the Confederacy or more loathed by the Union.

Grayson eyed the haggard but stoic faces to his right and left and then thoughtfully glanced down at his mount, a large sorrel gelding. Only days before, it had belonged to a younger man, hardly more than a boy. He was a Yankee lieutenant of the 8th Illinois Cavalry.

A lead ball from Grayson's Navy had cleared the saddle. A single shot took the man's life and yielded a horse. That day, like so many others, was fought for the Cause. Hours later, however, word came that General Lee had surrendered the previous day. The smooth-

faced lieutenant, dashing and brave, had been killed to protect a confederacy of states that no longer existed.

Seeing the officers assemble in front of them, the companies came to attention. With his scarlet-lined cape draped over his shoulders, Colonel John Singleton Mosby rode forward. He veered to his left and then somberly began the last review of his 43rd Battalion of the 1st Virginia Cavalry. As he rode past Grayson, their eyes held briefly. Mosby gave a slight nod and then continued down the line. A few moments later, Mosby wheeled his horse and returned to the head of the battalion. Squadron commanders then rode to the front of each company. With Mosby looking on, the commanders read aloud his last words.

“Fauquier County, April 21, 1865,” began the commanders. “Soldiers, I have summoned you together for the last time. The visions we have cherished of a free and independent country have vanished, and that country is now the spoil of the conqueror. I disband your organization in preference to surrendering it to our enemies. I am no longer your commander. After an association of more than two eventful years, I part from you with a just pride in the fame of your achievements and a grateful recollection of generous kindness to myself. And at this moment of bidding you adieu, accept the assurance of my unchanging confidence and regard. Farewell. John S. Mosby.”

When the commanders finished reading, the battalion gave three raucous cheers for Mosby. As the hurrahs drifted into the fog, a heavy silence engulfed the field. All eyes were on the Colonel, the man General Grant labeled a guerrilla and Lincoln, out of grudging respect, had nicknamed The Gray Ghost.

Slowly, Mosby dismounted. He removed his gauntlets and then his plumed hat. No one spoke or broke ranks.

One by one, the officers rode to Mosby, dismounted and shook his hand.

Only after the last officer had paid his respects did the men begin to stir. An oath to continue the fight erupted from someone in Company B. A few defiant threats against Yankees penetrated the dampness, but the intensity of those cries quickly faded into silence.

Moments later, a few soft voices were heard, but in seconds, a low-pitched rumble of hundreds of solemn goodbyes spread through the battalion.

As the men began to disperse, a lone private began to weep. Unable to endure the finality of their defeat, others soon followed. Then, everywhere, hardened soldiers who had ridden unflinchingly into battle and through countless fields littered with the dead and dying began to break down.

Grayson felt for his pocket Bible and grudgingly clenched his jaws. Silently, he shook a few hands and then led his gelding away from the men to the far edge of the field. He reined in next to a dead oak to wait. In time, he knew Mosby would come.

When Mosby first heard Lee had surrendered, the colonel dismissed it as rumor. When dispatches declaring the surrender were delivered to Mosby by unarmed Union riders, everyone began to wonder. It took more than a week to get confirmation. During that time, Grayson clung to his hope that Lee was still in command and to his abiding faith that God would deliver the Confederacy from the northern invaders. But in his darkest moments, he wrestled with the gnawing sensation that defeat might have become a devastating reality.

Years before, the Yankees had burned the Grayson farm to the ground. His father's grave was still there, but his mother was living with her sister. There was nothing left of his home or of his belongings. Another kind of man might have gone back and tried farming the ground, but Grayson had always been more of a woodsman than a farmer.

Since childhood, Grayson knew he was not cut out to walk behind a plow. In fact, Tyler Grayson was not cut out to walk behind much of anything. It was his continual resistance to following orders that eventually led to his transfer from the Confederate infantry to Mosby's cavalry battalion.

When Grayson's infantry commander discovered he was a friend of Mosby, the officer immediately had him pulled from the guardhouse and escorted to the Partisan Rangers. The Confederate commander, along with a good number of his fellow officers,

considered the Virginia 43rd little more than a band of misfits. To them, it was a good dumping ground for troublemakers.

Dropping his reins, Grayson reached into his jacket and took out his pocket Bible. His mother had given it to him when he signed up to fight the Yankees. In a recent fight at Mount Zion Church, the little book stopped a forty-four caliber pistol ball. The lead ripped through his sleeve and the front of his jacket but then lodged in the first pages of Ecclesiastes. Since shooting the Illinois lieutenant and the fall of the Confederacy, Grayson had read from Ecclesiastes every day. Afterward, he would brood for hours.

Grayson fingered the bullet hole in the leather cover of his Bible. He opened it to Ecclesiastes and then thoughtfully glanced into the field. The men were beginning to disperse and go their separate ways. Like Confederates everywhere, they were finally going home. But home to what? All their suffering, all their bravery, blood and sacrifice had been for nothing. For Southerners, there would be no freedom or independence. Now, nothing would stop the Yankee invasion. They would infest the entire country and destroy everything. The South, all that it was and all that it might have been, was lost forever.

“Vanity, vanity,” quoted Grayson, “all is vanity.”

Grayson focused his eyes on a single rider. Apparently having said his last farewell, the colonel was riding toward the oak. A faint smile brightened Mosby’s face.

Shaking his head, Grayson replaced the Bible and buttoned his jacket. On this day, if anyone could possibly find a reason to smile, it would be Johnny Mosby.

The friendship of Johnny Mosby and Tyler Grayson had started when they were six years old on the schoolhouse steps just outside Charlottesville, Virginia. The two of them sat next to each other in the first grade, with a freckle-faced girl named Sherry sitting in front of them. That year, and the ten following, Johnny and Tyler did their best to court Sherry. And whether by design or indecision, Sherry had kept them guessing and courted them both.

When Johnny was sixteen, he went to college. Sherry married a lawyer the following year and Tyler went to work on his father’s

farm. It was during the last weeks of the courtship Grayson came to understand that, unlike Johnny, he never had the slightest chance to win Sherry's affections.

Johnny, like Sherry, was born into the upper crust. He and Tyler were friends and their childhood bonds were unbreakable. But each knew there was an indelible difference between them. As with other time-honored Southern traditions, that divide was never discussed. It was simply understood and accepted.

Mosby rode beside the oak and extended his hand. "Well, Tyler, will you be going back to Charlottesville?"

Shaking hands, Grayson's eyes flickered uncertainly. For the last two years, Mosby had made it a point to address him by his surname as he did the other privates. Perhaps it was a matter of pride or perhaps one of honor, but both he and Mosby had kept their friendship a secret.

"Sounds odd to hear you call me by my given name," said Grayson.

"The war's over. The sooner we accept that bitter fact the better we'll all be."

"Maybe," grunted Grayson. He eyed Mosby suspiciously, "So why are you smiling, Johnny?"

Mosby nodded indicating Grayson. "You, Tyler. You sitting over here by yourself. Just like old times." Mosby thought for a moment then grinned. "Those were good times."

"Times gone for good, Johnny. Nothing'll bring them back now. Not for any of us. It's over. It's all over."

"The war's over, Tyler, but not everything. We just have to move on and do our best with what we're given. Looking back will get us nowhere."

Grayson pointed at some of the men who still lingered in the field. "If they heard you talk like that, I doubt many of them would understand."

Mosby's brow wrinkled. He turned and glanced at the men. "No. No, I suppose not."

"But they don't know you like I do. You're different from other men, Johnny. That's what made you such a good commander. Most

of us are going to have a hard go if it from now on. We won't get along as well as you."

"We did our best," said Mosby. "There was no better regiment in either army. We fought honorably and we disbanded honorably. They should all be proud of what they've done. I wish the best for all of the men."

"I know you do."

"So, will you return to Charlottesville?" Mosby asked the question a second time but now with more concern in his voice.

"No. There's nothing to go back to."

"Didn't you have a sweetheart back there?"

Grayson produced a humorless smile. "I think she took lessons from Sherry."

"How's that?"

"She married a druggist six months ago. I guess farming didn't qualify as a promising future."

Mosby shrugged. "But there are lots of women to choose from. I found a good one and so will you."

"How is Pauline?" asked Grayson.

"She is splendid. She's been busy taking care of the boys until I get back."

"Good," nodded Grayson. "Do you think you'll get the charges against us cleared up? General Lee must've told them by now we aren't guerillas. Rumor has it they've put a bounty out on you."

Mosby waved a disregarding hand. "General Lee will straighten it out. Once he explains I was a commissioned officer and we were a sanctioned regiment, all will settle down. I'll just stay out of their reach until then. We'll all get paroled eventually."

"After that happens, what will you do?" Grayson asked.

"I think I'll take up law, or even politics."

Grayson smiled. No matter what, Johnny Mosby had a way of landing on his feet. Whether pure luck or destiny, it never seemed to fail him.

"You think the Yankees will let you practice law again?"

"If they don't hang me first," chuckled Mosby.

"Sure you want to be a lawyer in a country run by Yankees?"

“Practicing law or getting into politics is the only way I can help our people now. And God knows we’re going to need all the help we can get.”

Grayson sighed. “Vanity, vanity, all is vanity. I don’t see the use.”

Mosby glanced at Grayson. “I heard you were stuck on reading Ecclesiastes. Ever since our skirmish at Mount Zion Church. Is that where the ball stopped, in Ecclesiastes?”

“It is. And the words seem to fit. I swear, Johnny, since Lee surrendered, it feels like the whole world has come to an end. There’s not much point to anything anymore. That’s what old Solomon figured out, too. Not much point. All is vanity.”

“You’re just feeling low right now,” countered Mosby. “That’ll pass in time. As for me, there’s a point to enforcing the law. It’s not vanity to be reining in the unruly and immoral. Even Solomon said that was needed.”

Grayson looked up, a question in his eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Chapter eight, verse eleven. My father used to read it to me all the time. It’s one reason I studied law.”

Grayson asked skeptically, “What’s it say?”

Mosby patted his horse’s neck and then raised his hand, his finger pointing upward. “Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, the heart of men is fully set in them to do evil . . . or words to that effect, anyway.

“You said a moment ago I was different from others. But so are you, Tyler. You don’t share my passion about the law because you have no need of it. You answer to the Almighty. But most men, Tyler, do what’s right only because of the law. They require laws to control their base impulses. Without law, men will behave like beasts.”

As Grayson pondered the verse Mosby had quoted, Mosby leaned forward. “Tyler, you and I aren’t so different. Why don’t you come with me? I think you’d make an excellent sheriff. We’re going to need to maintain law and order now that the war is over. Everything will be in disarray for years.

"I should still have some influence remaining in Virginia. I'm certain I could help you."

"I heard you had some powerful friends before the war," Grayson admitted. "I wasn't sure it was true."

Leaning back, Mosby smiled shrewdly. "It always helps to know people, Tyler. You should try it. Rub elbows, get to know more people. They can open doors for you."

Grayson huffed. "You know me better than that."

"That I do," agreed Mosby. "Do you remember the time it flooded and you and I built that raft and we floated it out in the fields?"

"I remember."

Mosby smirked. "We were in the third grade. We would have drowned if that raft had fallen apart, but off we went. I was telling you about Romans and Greeks and you were telling me about snares and deadfalls. What a pair. I was the bookworm and you the woodsman."

"You were always a better student, Johnny. And it's served you well."

"No," said Mosby. "I was never good in arithmetic. You always bested me there."

"Sherry was a better student than you or me," muttered Grayson.

Mosby laughed. "And that is why she chose neither of us."

"Well," said Grayson, "she was half right."

There was a slight pause before Mosby spoke again. "There's one thing I've been wanting to ask you, Tyler."

"What's that?"

Pointing at the pistols on Grayson's hips, Mosby said, "I insisted every man in the battalion use forty-four Army pistols. Every man but you complied. It was brought to my attention, but when your company commander told me how many Union saddles you emptied, I looked the other way. So now I'm asking. Why did you stay with those Navies?"

"Balance," replied Grayson simply. "I know the Armies carry more of a wallop, but I could never get used to the feel of 'em. I figured accuracy was more important than a bigger hole."

Mosby nodded grimly. "Well said. I dare say, if you were not the best, you were one of the best pistol shots in the battalion."

"That won't do me much good now."

Suddenly serious, Mosby asked, "What about my offer? Your talents would go a long way in keeping the peace. You were always good at solving puzzles and you can track a snake as easy as you can a horse. You and I could work together. We would make a great pair."

Grayson held up his hand. "Thanks, Johnny, but no. I appreciate the offer."

"Alright, then. I have given something else some thought. May I make one more suggestion, perhaps a less selfish one?"

"Fire away."

"I know you, Tyler. When you came to the battalion, I told the commanders to give you a loose rein. I let them know you needed only to be pointed in the right direction and then let go, that you were a law unto yourself. They were not disappointed in your conduct. Several times they came to me and suggested you be made an officer. But like I said, I knew better than to do that to you."

"And I have a good idea what is in store for the South. I don't believe you will like it, at least not for a while. I was thinking you might go west, maybe to the gold strikes or even to California. The war didn't touch that country. It's new and wide open. They'll need men like you to settle it, to build it up. There's opportunity there, no limit to what you might accomplish."

Grayson thought for a moment then shrugged. "All I know for certain is I won't live under Yankee rule."

"Then at least consider going west, Tyler."

In a profound silence, both men knowingly looked into each other's eyes. Words were unnecessary.

Shaking hands, Grayson said, "See you around, Johnny. Do what you can to keep those damn Yankees off our backs."

Mosby released Grayson's hand. "Good luck, Tyler."

* * *

Jake Moran plodded across the windswept sand toward the wall tent of Colonel Barrett, the new commanding officer. At first, Private Zeb Hathaway was ordered to report to the colonel, but then they said there had been a mistake. Hathaway looked so much like Jake Moran, the men of the 34th Indiana Volunteers nicknamed them “the twins.” Since both men were assigned to Company B, switching their identities was a source of amusement for the battle-hardened Volunteers. The brunt of most of their jokes was the white officers and soldiers of the 62nd Colored Troops, a battalion of ex-slaves that had never been in battle. Other than playing cards or dominos, there was little for the veteran soldiers to do on the barrier island of Brazos Santiago.

Moran stepped inside the colonel’s tent and out of the constant sea breeze that swept the island. Colonel Barrett looked up from a map that was spread open on a small camp desk. Waiting for Moran to salute him, the colonel’s young face flushed red with anger.

After a deep sigh, Moran saluted and said lazily, “Private Moran reporting as ordered.”

Barrett came to his feet. He stiffened but did not speak.

Moran spoke again. “Reporting as ordered . . . sir.”

The colonel glared at the disheveled private. His uniform was tattered and filthy. He hadn’t shaved in days. “You are Private Jake Moran, are you not?”

“I’m him, alright.”

“You’re sure?”

“Get me mixed up with Zeb, did ya?” goaded Moran. “Happens all the time.”

“So I’ve heard,” said Barrett. “My troops have informed me of your shenanigans.”

“You mean your colored boys?”

“I mean,” snapped Barrett, “my troops. And you will address them as such!”

Moran casually looked around the tent. “Whatever you say, Colonel.”

“Orderly!” shouted Barrett.

A black private appeared, saluting sharply.

“Get this man a new jacket. This one is filthy.”

After the private about-faced, Barrett lifted a long leather case from his bed along with a pair of binoculars. “Lieutenant Colonel Branson says you’re the best sharpshooter on the island. He suggested I give you this. You are to familiarize yourself with it and be expert with it in two days.

“Take a spotter with you and have him use those binoculars. Fire as few rounds as possible to get your range.”

With his eyes narrowing, Moran stared at the case. “What is it?”

“It’s a Whitworth rifle, forty-five caliber muzzle load. Effective range one thousand yards. It’s equipped with a telescope sight. It came in on the last steamer but with precious few bullets.”

A scowl twisted Moran’s face. “What do I need that for? Lee surrendered. The war is done with.”

“No, Private. It is not, as you say, ‘done with.’ The Trans-Mississippi army of the Confederates is fully intact.”

“But Lee surrendered a month ago,” protested Moran.

Barrett handed the rifle and a packet of bullets and primers to Moran. “You have your orders, Private. Be ready in two days.”

Taking the rifle and packet, Moran asked, “What happens in two days?”

Before Barrett responded, the private returned and handed Moran a dark blue wool jacket. It had a high stiff collar with two gold cloverleaves embroidered on the front.

Moran took the jacket, his eyes full of suspicion. “You do know we got a truce with the Rebels.”

“If you are referring to the Wallace-Slaughter affair,” said Barrett, “that was a mere gentlemen’s agreement. I am in command now and I had nothing to do with that so-called truce. Until I hear from Washington, we are still at war.”

“Well, if we do run into any Rebs, what good is this one rifle going to be?”

Barrett paused. His eyes flickered in thought.

“I doubt the Confederates guarding Brownsville have any artillery, but if they do, your assignment will be to shoot the gunners. Should you see any officers, you are to shoot them, also. Artillery

and officers. That alone can make the difference in the outcome of any engagement.”

“So I’ll just be sharpshooting, then?”

Barrett glared at Moran and sneered, “From a safe distance, of course.”

“Well, now, I always wanted to get me an officer or two,” returned Moran. “So, are we going to take Brownsville? Word is, there’s a million dollars worth of cotton there just waiting to be taken and sold to the Brits.”

Barrett’s face twisted with disgust. “We are soldiers, Private, not pirates. You are dismissed.”

Moran saluted and then made his way back to the disheveled encampment of the Indiana Volunteers, where several men of Company B were lying on blankets playing cards while others were standing around a small fire sipping coffee from smoke-blackened cups.

Zeb Hathaway was sitting on a camp stool reading a letter. He looked up at Moran and smiled.

“That Barrett thought I was you for the longest time. You should’a seen his face when I told him who I was. Turned redder than a beet.”

“He’s a jackass,” said Moran and then tossed the new jacket on the ground and dropped the binoculars on top of it. Opening the rear strap of the rifle case, he announced, “Boys, come see what I got. Got me a play-purty.”

As the men gathered around, Moran slid the Whitworth rifle from its case, eyeing the long brass tube attached to the side of the barrel.

“See this?” said Moran rubbing his fingers along the brass tube. “This is a sharpshooter rifle with a fancy telescope sight.”

“What the hell is it for?” asked a soldier.

“Shooting a long ways,” answered Moran. “A thousand yards. Maybe longer.”

“Why’d you want to do that?” Hathaway asked.

“Boys,” sighed Moran, “let me be the first to tell you, I think we’re going to take Brownsville.”

"The hell we are," bellowed another soldier. "We had us a deal since January with them Rebs. We've had no fightin' in almost three months. And Lee surrendered already."

Moran hefted the rifle and looked through the scope. "Barrett says that agreement to stop fighting wasn't his agreement and it wasn't in writing, anyhow. And he says the Rebs got a lot of army yet, even if Lee did give up."

Hathaway shook his head. "Them Rebs in Brownville will be awful mad at us if we break the truce. Those Southern boys put a lot of store in a man's word of honor. Just 'cause it ain't set down on paper don't make no difference. It don't change nothing for them."

"No matter," replied Moran. "There's not many of them Rebs left over at Brownsville, anyhow. And it sure beats sitting on this island with a bunch of niggers and fighting sand fleas."

Hathaway thoughtfully scratched the back of his neck. "Maybe so. How soon do we go?"

"I'm guessing two days."

"Good," Hathaway said. "The sooner the better."

"Why's that?" asked Moran.

Hathaway shrugged. "Well, I got some news, too. It's in my letter from home."

"What might that be?" asked Moran, stroking the wood stock of the Whitworth. "Anything as important as this rifle?"

"It is to me," replied Hathaway. "My Uncle Jesse is in the goldfields out west, in a place called Last Chance Gulch. He's got a claim and needs me to come right away and help work it. He says we'll be partners and to come as soon as the war's over. He says I should come soon as I can."

"Gold?" questioned a soldier.

"I hear," offered another soldier, "there's gold all over out west. Folks is gettin' rich off it."

"Any of you heard of Virginia City?" asked Hathaway.

A few of the men nodded but it was Moran who answered. "Sure. It's one of the biggest gold strikes ever."

"Yep. And my uncle says this Last Chance place is close by Virginia City. He says it's loaded with gold."

Jake Moran's eyes narrowed and then, almost imperceptibly, his lids began to flutter. As a child, whether plotting to steal cookies at home or planning to cheat at school, his eyes had always flickered as his mind raced.

Even at an early age, his plans had bordered on genius, and as they took root in the deep recesses of his mind, his eyes invariably danced. As he matured, minute details of complex schemes often fell into place in mere seconds. But his eyes still fluttered.

The fact that some of his earlier machinations had landed him in jail never dampened his enthusiasm or his confidence. He had merely learned from his mistakes, taking smug satisfaction in the knowledge that he would never make the same mistake twice.

At the beginning of the war, he had worked by day as a longshoreman in New York City, but most of his money was made at night burglarizing homes. When Lincoln signed the Military Draft Act, he joined the Copperheads to avoid being drafted into the Union army. For a while that plan kept him from military service, but when the Copperheads incited city riots and the riots were put down by Union bullets, he quickly adopted a safer strategy.

When he learned Lincoln's Draft Act allowed men who were drafted into the army to hire a substitute to fight in their place, Moran's eyes had flickered for a full minute. The next day he accepted a payment bounty of three hundred dollars from the son of a wealthy banker and eagerly joined the Union army. But just as the newly formed company was ready to march off to war, Moran deserted.

From New York he went to Maryland. There he collected a bounty of four hundred dollars from the son of a doctor. In Ohio, a senator paid him one thousand dollars. By the time he joined the 34th Indiana, he had jumped bounty twelve times. Had he not gotten drunk in New Orleans, he would have jumped again. Instead, he ended up on a steamer that docked at Brazos Santiago Island just off the southern tip of Texas.

Moran picked up the binoculars and new jacket Barrett had given him. He put his hand on Hathaway's shoulder. "Zeb, come on and

help me shoot this rifle. While we're at it, you can tell me all about your letter."

Moran thought for a moment as more details of his latest scheme fell neatly into place. "Barrett says you're to help me call the shots."

Hathaway folded the letter. "Do I get to shoot 'er, too?"

After glancing over his shoulder, Moran handed the binoculars to Hathaway. "Sure. Barrett won't know. Come on."

Starting for an empty stretch of beach, the two men cut through the bivouac of the 62nd Colored Troops. When they passed in front of a cook tent, Moran picked up a cast-iron skillet.

A black corporal stepped out of the tent. "What you doin? Dass my skillet."

"Barrett's orders," quipped Moran.

"Da hell. You juss stealin' my skillet."

Ignoring the corporal, Moran gave the skillet to Hathaway and the two kept walking. Loud enough for the trooper to hear, Moran croaked, "Stupid niggers."

Hathaway looped the binoculars over his neck and laughed. "Nothin' but government pets, all of 'em."

"Every last one them is an ex-slave," said Moran. "I bet not a single one could read a word of that letter you got."

"I didn't join up to free no darkies," sneered Hathaway.

"You should have seen the slaves when they come up to New York," said Moran, nodding in agreement. "They tried to take all the jobs from the whites, especially along the docks. Us Copperheads killed a mess of them during the riots. We hung one and burned him. Nobody on the docks wanted anything to do with them. And let me tell you, those Irish bastards hate niggers. They even set fire to a darky orphanage."

"I thought you was from Ohio," Hathaway said as he glanced curiously at Moran.

"I joined up in New York," said Moran. Thinking quickly he added, "We lost so many men, my regiment was reorganized and we went west to Ohio. You know how it is."

"Sure."

The men walked past the last tent belonging to the colored soldiers and onto a blanket of white sand that stretched several miles to the north. Hathaway glanced down at the heavy iron skillet and switched it from one hand to the other. "Why'd we bring the skillet?"

"A target," answered Moran. "If a bullet hits it, I'll hear it even a long ways off."

"How far you going to shoot?"

"I was thinking to start at four hundred yards and then go out to eight."

Hathaway stopped walking. "Nobody could hit this little old skillet at four hundred yards. You can't even see it at eight hundred."

"Wait and see, Zeb. We'll walk on down a mile or so and set up. Meantime, you tell me all about that uncle of yours. Is he from your mama's side or your pa's?"

For the next half hour, Moran asked Hathaway about his uncle and his family. Careful not to arouse suspicion and to keep Hathaway talking, he offered a few lies about his own relatives. However, Moran had learned long ago that people enjoyed talking about themselves. All they needed was a little encouragement and most would go on for hours.

Reaching a barren stretch of sand, Moran halted by a drift-log and unbuckled the straps on the rifle case. Pointing to the north, he interrupted Hathaway. "Take that skillet out four hundred paces."

Hathaway paused and then glanced at the skillet in his hand. "Four hundred? You sure?"

"Yeah. And stick the handle all the way into the sand and face the bottom back toward me."

Watching Hathaway trudge up the beach, Moran smirked then pulled out the Whitworth. With a barrel measuring close to three feet, it was the longest rifle he had ever seen. And the brass telescope sight attached on the left side of the barrel was an invention he had only heard about.

Moran ripped open the bullet packet with his teeth and then fingered one out. Examining the six-sided piece of lead, he swore softly. It looked nothing like the massive mini-balls he was accustomed to loading.

With his dirty thumbnail, he tried to scratch the lead. He bit into it and swore again at the hardness of the metal.

By the time Hathaway returned, Moran had the barrel loaded and the nipple capped. The sea breeze was barely churning the humid air.

“Good time of day for this,” said Hathaway. “Not much in the way of windage.”

Moran took off his new jacket and lay down behind the log. He folded the jacket, placed it on the log and then rested the long wooden stock on top. “You look through them glasses and watch where the sand kicks up.”

Wiping the sweat from his eyes, Hathaway raised the binoculars. “I’m ready.”

After carefully cocking the hammer back, Moran peered down the scope and placed the crosshairs dead center on the jet black skillet. He fingered the trigger for a moment then squeezed.

An instant after the rifle exploded, Moran yelped and slapped a palm over his right eye. Peering down range with his good eye, he swore as he waited for the gun smoke to clear.

Hathaway took down the binoculars and looked at Moran. “What’s wrong?”

Moran took his hand down. A red half-moon tattooed the corner of his eye. “That telescope kissed me good. Is it bleeding?”

Stooping for a closer look, Hathaway answered, “Nope.” He stood again. “I’d say your shot was twenty paces short and five to the right.”

Blinking his eyes, Moran cranked the scope’s windage and elevation and then poured more powder down the barrel. Before ramming down the second bullet, he held it out to Hathaway. “You ever seen anything like that?”

Hathaway scratched the back of his hairy neck. He picked up the bullet, turning it between his fingers. “Nope.”

“There’s six sides on it just like there is inside the barrel. And the lead is hard, real hard.”

Handing the bullet back, Hathaway shrugged. “Kind of puny, though.”

“Must be big enough to do the work,” replied Moran.

With his head back an extra inch from the rim of the scope, he again took aim at the skillet.

On his fifth shot, the men heard the metallic ring of lead slamming into the skillet. Hathaway grinned. "You knocked that skillet plum flat. Must've hit it smack-dab in the center."

Moran stared at the rifle for a moment. "This is going to change everything. From now on, killin's gonna get a whole lot easier."

"As long as you can make out your target," said Hathaway. "I could hardly see you by this here log when I looked back at you."

"It's easier to see with the telescope sight," Moran said and then his eyes flickered slightly. "Forgot to tell you, Zeb. The colonel give me this new jacket. I think he wants his sharpshooter to dress like a dandy. But the damn collar's too stiff for me. Chafes my neck. You want it?"

Hathaway picked up the jacket and admired it. Taking his old one off, he tried it on. "Fits good. Sure is better than my old faded one."

"It's yours, then."

Hathaway worked his shoulders comfortably into the jacket. Running his palms over the embroidered cloverleaves, he said, "Let's see what that rifle will do at eight hundred."

A smile turned Moran's lips. "Sure, Zeb. Let's do that."

* * *

Two hours after Private Moran was given his assignment, Lieutenant Colonel Branson received orders to report to Colonel Barrett. The lieutenant colonel walked swiftly, the heels of his polished boots digging deep into the island sand. As he hurried toward Barrett's tent, he straightened his jacket and adjusted the brim of his hat.

Branson, like Barrett, was a politically appointed officer. At twenty-three and with no military experience, Branson had been placed in command of the untested 62nd Colored Troops.

Neither Branson nor Barrett had ever been under Confederate fire. Both secretly envied the battle record of the Indiana Volunteers, but they openly displayed their resentment for their slovenly conduct and lack of military discipline.

Barrett had retaliated against the Indiana troops by blatantly favoring Branson and the 62nd, giving them fewer menial tasks than the Volunteers as well as supplying the colored troops with better uniforms and equipment. And, months earlier, when a new shipment of Enfield rifles had arrived, Barrett had issued them to the 62nd.

Branson approached the tent. He stooped slightly to enter and then snapped to attention and saluted. "Reporting as ordered, sir."

Barrett returned the salute and came to his feet. "I want two hundred and fifty men of the 62nd to be ready to march tonight. They are to carry seven days' rations and one hundred rounds of ammunition. I want them at the north end of the island before sunrise."

Stunned by his orders, Branson momentarily lost his military composure. "Sir?"

"You are to probe the Confederate resistance between here and Brownsville."

"Probe, sir?"

"Yes. Probe."

"But the truce, sir. It's been in place for two months."

"There was no formal agreement, only a handshake. And my hand was not involved."

"But what of the plans to join with the Confederates and drive the French from Mexico? Wouldn't an advance on Brownsville jeopardize those plans? Or were those plans only a rumor?"

"That was President Lincoln's idea—his so-called Mexican Project. He believed it was merely an extension of the Monroe Doctrine. But John Booth put an end to all things Lincoln."

"But, sir, even General Sheridan was in agreement."

Barrett sighed impatiently. "Since the Confederates assassinated our president, I am certain there no longer exists any desire in Washington for such a joint venture. The Mexican Project died with Lincoln. The *Juaristas* will have to take care of Maximilian by themselves."

Branson thought for a moment, his surprise and bewilderment slowly yielding to visions of glory. "You said we are to probe the Confederates. What, sir, are my orders if we meet armed resistance?"

"This conflict is almost over," Barrett said. "Our colored troops deserve to go home with a war record. I intend to give them that opportunity. As you know, most of the 62nd are ex-slaves. I should hope they would be eager for a chance to get at some of the Rebels."

"Indeed they are, sir."

"Reports have come in," Barrett continued, "that since Lee's surrender as many as two hundred Rebel soldiers have deserted the Brownsville garrison. General Slaughter commands that garrison, but he is no fighter. The Confederates are actually commanded by that wretched excuse for an officer Rip Ford, a man old enough to be my father."

"I've been assured that all Ford has left is a handful of ragged hooligans."

Branson hesitated for a count of ten. "Then, how far should the probe go, sir?"

Smiling, Barrett answered, "I have specific orders not to invade Brownsville. You are strictly probing. However, if there is no resistance or should it be very light, your probe would naturally take you all the way into Brownsville, would it not?"

Branson beamed. "Understood, sir."

"Brownsville," resumed Barrett, "has been the backdoor to the South since we blockaded the eastern seaboard. The cotton bales are floated down the Rio Grande and then across to Matamoros. The Mexicans claim it is a neutral port, but they sell the cotton to Europe for the Confederates. Millions of dollars have come in through Brownsville. That money has funded the Rebels for years. Taking Brownsville will be hailed as the last major event of the war."

"You said we are to march to the north end of the island," Branson said. "What happens then?"

"You will meet a steamer and be taken across the Laguna Madre to Point Isabel on the mainland. From there, you will proceed southwest to White's Ranch via the Brownsville road. White's Ranch is the first Confederate outpost you will encounter . . . on your probing mission."

CHAPTER 2

Even though a storm was brewing, Jake Moran and Zeb Hathaway stayed up late. Wrapped in blankets, they shared a bottle of rye around the campfire. Prompted by Moran's questions, Hathaway did most of the talking until the storm and lack of whiskey finally drove them to their tents.

Moran had stirred an hour before first light. Amid the wind and rain, he thought he heard drums and bugles but then went back to sleep. When he finally woke it was midmorning, but the gale was still howling.

Shortly after noon, with water pouring off his oilskin overcoat, Hathaway stepped inside Moran's tent. A handful of soldiers sat cross-legged on a blanket playing cards. Moran sat on a cot cleaning his rifle.

"Guess what?" said Hathaway.

The men looked up.

"What?" asked Moran.

"Just before daylight, half the coloreds marched off to the north end of the island. More than two hundred of 'em. Now they're coming back. They look like drowned rats."

A corporal folded his cards. "Why would Barrett do that to his pet regiment? Sounds like the kind of stunt the damned coffee cooler would pull on us."

"I don't know," answered Hathaway. "But them boys said they was supposed to meet up with a steamer but it broke down, so they turned around and marched all the way back."

A private cupped his cards and held them close to his chest. "You don't suppose they were going to get off this damn island? You don't reckon Barrett was taking them back to New Orleans and leaving us to rot?"

"No," said Moran. "Just why the coloreds was out in the storm I couldn't say. But they sure as hell weren't bound for New Orleans. Brownsville's more likely."

All eyes turned to Moran. Somehow he always knew more than anyone in his squad. How he did it no one knew, but in just about everything, Jake Moran was always a step ahead of them.

“Barrett thinks it’ll be easy to take Brownsville. He wants his niggers to get the glory and not us.”

“If that was what they was up to,” joked Hathaway, “it was a hell of a start.”

The corporal sneered. “The Mexicans I’ve talked to say that Rip Ford fella is a curly wolf. He’s the head of what they call the *Diablos Tejanos*. Means Texas devils. They say he’s been fighting up and down the border of Texas for thirty years. If ole Ford’s still got an army, he’ll cut those coloreds to shreds.”

“I heard the Rebs all but pulled out when they heard Lee surrendered,” said Hathaway as he slid out of his oilskin and hung it on a tent pole.

“Even if Ford has half an army,” countered the corporal, “they’ll be mounted and likely have some artillery. Only a fool would send infantry up against cavalry and cannon.”

The soldiers went back to their card game. Moran glanced at Hathaway’s new jacket and nodded. “Fits good.”

“We’re about the same size, I figure,” Hathaway said, rubbing a knuckle over his whiskered chin. “You think the Rebs have artillery?”

“Barrett wouldn’t have give me this rifle if he didn’t think so.”

“But he didn’t send you with the coloreds.”

“Nope.”

“What do you make of that?”

“I’d say if his pets get into trouble, Barrett will send us out after ’em.”

Hathaway swore. Squatting to watch the card game, he said, “If this goes bad, somebody’s going to earn the honor of being the last man killed in this damn war.”

Moran went back to cleaning his Whitworth while Hathaway joined the other soldiers in a game of euchre. The men played through their evening mess but an hour later switched to poker. On

the second hand, the muffled sound of drums and bugles interrupted the corporal's dealing.

Hathaway jumped to his feet, grabbed his oilskin and tugged his hat down tight. "I'll bet it's them coloreds again," he said flipping open the tent flap and then stepping into the night.

Moran listened to the muttered rattle of drums filtering through the soaked canvas. "Sounds like they're going south. This morning they headed north."

"They're going for the skiffs, I'll wager," said the corporal.

"They're going to cross the Boca Chica," scoffed a soldier. "In this storm?"

"Maybe they'll all get drowned," grinned Moran, "and save us all a lot of trouble."

In a matter of minutes, Hathaway returned. He wiped the rain from his eyes. "It's the 62nd alright. But this time they have two mule trains loaded with supplies. Looks like they mean business."

* * *

By noon the following day, the gale had slowed to a steady rain. By evening it was a breezy drizzle. Tiring of cards, some of the soldiers had paired off in checkers, others passed the time with dominos. Hathaway was whittling a pipe and talking about his family. Moran sat next to him carving pieces for a chess set. Occasionally, Moran paused to blow wood dust from his figurine and ask a few questions.

Hathaway was explaining how his sister met her husband when the tent flap flew open. An angry-looking sergeant stuck his head inside.

"We're moving out. Light marching orders. One day's rations. We'll assemble in the parade grounds in one hour."

"What the hell for?" growled the corporal. "It's the middle of the night."

"To reinforce the 62nd. Last night they crossed over to Texas, and early this morning they met up with the Johnnies at Palmito Ranch. They held the ranch for a while but then got their black asses kicked all the way back to White's Ranch."

“The whole regiment retreated?” asked Hathaway. “All two hundred of ’em?”

“The Rebs were mounted. Word is, they were fighting like damn Injuns. The courier said he’d never seen anything like it. Said they had long beards and wore dirty buckskins. Screaming and yelling like they were, he said they looked like wild animals.”

Immediately after the tent flap dropped, the men scrambled to their feet. Swearing bitterly, they methodically began securing their gear. When the bugle sounded assembly, the soldiers pulled on their oilskins. They grabbed their Springfield rifles, turned their collars up and then stepped out into the ink-black storm heading for the parade ground.

After waiting for close to an hour, the Indiana Volunteers received their orders. Forming into columns, they marched double-time for three miles over a beach of wet sand. When they came to a halt next to the skiffs at Boca Chica, a cloud of sweaty steam shrouded every soldier.

Without rest, the Volunteers loaded into the skiffs and were ordered to row. A half-hour later, three hundred battle-hardened Union soldiers landed on the mainland of Texas. In minutes they reassembled into ranks facing the salt water of Boca Chica. Company commanders took their positions and readied for the landing of Colonel Barrett.

The drizzling rain slowed and then finally stopped. In its place, a cold wind started to blow. It swept through the ranks, carrying with it the dank smell of wet wool and rancid body odor.

The men stood waiting. They began to cool, then to chill. In the blackness someone bellowed. “Where the hell is the colonel?”

A wave of laughter erupted and though a rumble of grumbling soon followed, none of the officers called for quiet in the ranks. The Indiana soldiers were veterans. The officers knew they would do their job when the time came, even if it was for a commander like Barrett.

Ten more minutes passed, and then Barrett’s skiff arrived. As soon as his horse was unloaded, the colonel mounted. Prancing back and forth in front of the regiment, Barrett began barking out orders.

Moran stood next to Hathaway. Ignoring Barrett, Moran strained his eyes to see the head of the column. "Who's Barrett putting in charge?"

"I think that's Lieutenant Morrison up there," answered Hathaway.

Moran grunted his approval. "At least he knows what he's doing."

Suddenly, company commanders shouted out orders and the three hundred soldiers of the Indiana Volunteers did an about-face. After forming into columns, the men started forward.

"How far to White's Ranch?" Hathaway asked.

"I heard it was seven miles," Moran replied. "In the dark about three hours march . . . if we don't get lost."

"Going to be a long night," groaned Hathaway.

"Well then," Moran said, "tell me some more about your uncle and his gold mine. That'll pass the time."

As the men marched, Moran listened. Slowly, however, he began asking Hathaway for more details about his family. By daybreak the soldiers reached White's Ranch, but by then Moran was confident he had everything he needed from Hathaway.

Breaking ranks to take a much needed rest, the Volunteers built small fires and started to boil coffee. The men had barely finished their first cup when the regiment was ordered back on its feet. They were to be the rear guard of the well rested colored troops, bringing up the rear as the 62nd advanced to retake Palmito Ranch.

With sporadic skirmish fire of the 62nd blasting in front of them and the rising sun heating their backs, the Volunteers reluctantly formed into skirmish lines and started across an open plain dotted with cactus and Mexican chaparral. By midmorning the soldiers reached Palmito Ranch only to find it deserted.

The 62nd had pushed the Confederates off the ranch and were skirmishing a short distance away on Palmito Hill. With the colored troops engaged to the north and the Rio Grande river to the south, the Volunteers were finally allotted time to make their breakfast.

Moran and Hathaway were snapping twigs for their fire when they heard shouts ordering Indiana companies K and I to the front as skirmishers.

“What do you think is going on?” Hathaway asked.

Moran searched his pockets for a dry match and then answered. “Barrett needs some real fighters, I suppose. But if all he needs is two companies, it can’t be much.”

Enjoying the warmth of the sun, Hathaway stretched out on the wet ground and closed his eyes. “Poor bastards,” he muttered. “I’m too tired to even eat.”

Yawning, Moran struck a match and held it under the damp twigs. “Me too. This is no way for a man to be treated. Not even a horse gets rode hard and put away wet.”

* * *

A sergeant kicked the foot of Moran and then Hathaway to wake them. “We’re moving out.”

Moran woke quickly but Hathaway rubbed his bloodshot eyes, temporarily disoriented. “What the hell?”

“We’re ordered up to Palmito Hill,” said the sergeant. “We’re meeting up with companies K and I. I’m thinkin’ the 62nd is up there, too.”

Hathaway looked into the sky, checking the sun. “Barely past noon. We only got two hours sleep since yesterday.”

“Well, I think Barrett’s had enough,” offered the sergeant. “We’re going up to the hill so we can take the only high ground around here. We’re going to bivouac for the night. Them Rebs didn’t even have Rip Ford with ’em and they still give the colonel all the fight he could stomach.”

“Barrett had companies I and K out all day trying to catch Confederate cavalry in the brush. Our boys just run around like chickens with their heads cut off. Word is, we’ll be headed back to the island tomorrow.”

A dark frown turned the stubble on Moran’s face. “You sure about that?”

“It’s what I heard. But with Barrett, who knows what he’ll do. He’s as useful as tits on a boar hog.”

Moran stood then worked the stiffness from his legs. He glanced thoughtfully at Hathaway and then shouldered his cased rifle. “We broke the truce, sergeant. I doubt them Rebs will just sit back and watch us leave. I bet they fight us all the way back to Brazos.”

“Right now,” replied the sergeant, “we outnumber the Johnnies two to one and we still can’t whip ’em. If Rip Ford shows up and brings reinforcements, we’ll have hell to pay.”

Hathaway cleared his head and buckled on his gear. After retrieving his stacked rifle, he fell in line next to Moran. In minutes they were marching up the base of Palmito Hill. At its peak, a U.S. banner waved in a sultry mid-afternoon breeze. Under it, scores of men were milling about.

The order was given to rest, but before Moran could find a place to sit, Captain Morrison called out the names of four soldiers from Company A and then added Moran to the list.

When the five men were assembled, Morrison pointed to the highest point of Palmito Hill. “You five men go up there. Disperse along the ridge as sentries. Moran, you unlimber that rifle and use it on anything you see fit.”

“Understood, sir,” Moran replied, a faint grin turning one corner of his lips. “It’s about time.”

Knowing what he needed for his plan to succeed, Moran stepped out quickly, leading the squad up the hill and out onto the chaparral covered ridge. When he had a panoramic view of the entire battlefield, he took a position between two bushes. From his point position on the ridge, he could still see the Union regiment lower down on the hill and yet had a clear shot in every direction. From where he sat, he could even make out the lighthouse on Point Isabel twelve miles to the east.

There was no log in sight or even any rocks to use as a rifle rest so Moran broke two sturdy branches from a chaparral bush. After trimming them with his jackknife, he took a lace from his shoe and tied two ends together. Spreading the wide base of his crossed sticks, he jammed them into the sandy soil.

One of the soldiers twenty paces down the ridge asked, "What are doing, Moran?"

"Sharpshooting. I got me a rifle with a telescope sight."

"Where'd you get it?"

"Barrett gave it to me three days ago. He was expecting artillery and I was to shoot the gunners or pick off any officers I could see."

"How far can she hit?"

"Eight hundred yards, easy as pie."

"Damn!" exclaimed the sentry. "Heard of such a thing but I never saw it done."

Moran laughed. "Me neither."

For two hours, the sentries watched the plain below. Through the rippling heat waves they occasionally saw a Confederate rider dart from behind a clump of brush only to disappear. But as the third hour began, more horses were seen. Some appeared two miles to the west, a few were seen a mile and a half to the north.

Raising his voice, Moran asked, "You boys see that?"

"We see it," answered a soldier farther down the ridge. "Something's not right out there. Maybe we should go tell the colonel."

"Not much to tell," said Moran. "And what if he decides we should go take a closer look? I don't know about you boys, but I don't plan on being the last man killed in this damn war. I say we sit tight unless we see something for sure."

For several seconds there was silence, then one man spoke. "Suits me."

Another voice followed. "Me too."

Moran continued to scan the battlefield with his binoculars for the next half-hour but nothing moved.

The soldier closest to Moran stood up. "I don't like it. It's too quiet out there. I'm going to . . ."

His last words were drowned out by an aerial explosion. It was followed by three more blasts as cannon shot detonated overhead. Two miles to the west, two hundred men let loose with a Rebel yell as two companies of cavalry charged from out of nowhere. Instantly, another blood-curdling yell rose from the north and another two

companies of cavalrymen charged from less than a mile away. Rifle fire erupted from the hill's southern flank.

Four of the men positioned on the ridge sprang to their feet and ran back toward Palmito Hill to rejoin their regiment, but Jake Moran sat where he was. Instead of watching the attack, he turned his binoculars to Palmito Hill. Through the dust and smoke, he could see men scrambling for their rifles. He spotted Barrett on his horse waving his arms, apparently shouting out orders.

As more shells exploded at the base of the hill, two companies rapidly formed and started downhill to the west. Moran looked through his telescope sight. The dark blue of a new Yankee jacket was easy to pick out among the faded uniforms. Companies A and B were being deployed as skirmishers and Hathaway was among them. Their orders, Moran knew, would be to protect the regiment from the charging Confederates.

Caring only for the whereabouts of Hathaway, Moran's eyes locked on Company B. He watched as the infantrymen halted fifty yards beyond the base of Palmito Hill. In a tall stand of heavy brush, they formed their skirmish line and then, unable to see the enemy, started through the tangled branches heading straight for the Rebel yells.

"Fools," muttered Moran. "Damn fools."

In seconds the horses appeared. Darting and lunging, the Confederates fired from horseback and some of Company B dropped. Those remaining returned fire, but the speeding cavalry were untouched. Hathaway ducked into some brush to reload as the soldiers galloped past his position.

Moran glanced back over his shoulder and was shocked to see both the 62nd and the 34th scrambling down Palmito Hill heading east in full retreat. He scanned the battlefield between the hill and the skirmishers of Company B but saw no reinforcements, no one carrying orders. Without warning, Barrett was abandoning the skirmishers, apparently sacrificing them in order to protect his rear.

Looking back to the skirmishers, Moran watched for several minutes as they fired at the swirling cavalry with little success. The distance was four hundred yards. He waited for his chance,

occasionally catching sight of Hathaway as he rose from the brush to fire a shot.

The cannon fire and the crack of Union rifles were fading rapidly. Barrett was wasting no time in his retreat. In the brush below, the skirmish fire was slowing.

Moran rested his rifle on the shooting sticks and peered through his sight. The men of Company B were closing ranks. He saw the dark blue jacket of Hathaway, but it was moving too fast.

Suddenly, the men of B Company dropped their rifles and raised their hands in the air. Horses encircled them.

In seconds, the dust cleared. A moment later, a Confederate horse stepped out of the way exposing Hathaway. Immediately Moran placed the crosshairs of the site squarely in the middle of the dark blue jacket. He took an easy breath and then gently squeezed the trigger.

Knowing there was no way he could be seen if he didn't move, Moran remained motionless after the rifle blast. He also knew that even if he were caught, he would claim he was aiming at a Confederate. No one would think anything of it. And, if he had planned correctly, the Southern soldiers would leave the Union bodies where they fell. After all, the damned Yankees deserved no burial. They had broken their word and the truce.

The cavalymen took cover for several minutes but then emerged and began driving their prisoners to the north. An hour later, when the Confederates were out of sight and the sounds of battle were miles to the east, Moran cautiously began working his way down the ridge.

Finding Hathaway face down in a patch of blood-soaked sand, he paused and studied the bullet hole between the shoulder blades. Kneeling next to the body, he stuck his finger in the hole of the jacket and then wiped Hathaway's blood off on his pants.

"Dead center," muttered Moran as he rolled the body over. Casually opening Hathaway's jacket, he took the letter. Discarding the bloody envelope, Moran came to his feet and calculated his next move.

The Rio Grande was easy to cross and Matamoros would have whiskey and women. Steamboats came often to that Mexican town. According to Hathaway, a man could take a steamer and get all the way from New Orleans to Fort Benton in six weeks. From there, a stagecoach or a wagon train could get you to Last Chance Gulch in two days.

It was a simple plan and the Whitworth would make it easy.

CHAPTER 3

A pair of towering smokestacks belched black clouds into a lemon-yellow sunrise. With a jolt, the broad paddle blades of a sternwheeler dug deep into the placid water, once again nudging the bow of the steamboat out into the current of the upper Missouri River.

Tyler Grayson took his place on the forward deck of the *Cutter*. He leaned against one of its massive wooden spars and thoughtfully gazed eastward. It had been seven weeks since he'd said goodbye to Johnny Mosby, and this was to be his last day employed as a deckhand.

Even with constantly trading horses and riding all day and most of each night, it had taken Grayson eight days to get from Virginia to St. Louis. Racing cross-county as he had, he was still the last passenger to board the *Cutter* before it headed up the Missouri. Selling his horse and saddle had produced just enough money to cover the fare, but fifty Yankee greenbacks only paid for a straw mat and the privilege of sleeping on the lower deck.

For being ferried upriver, all deck passengers had to agree to collect and haul firewood for the ship's boilers. Then, few of them had any idea the *Cutter* burned twenty chords of four-foot logs each day or that the steamer would make seven or eight stops every day to cut and load those twenty chords. But even if the men had known, it would have made no difference. For them, the war was over and the goldfields beckoned at the end of the line.

For days after leaving St. Louis, Grayson had cut and hauled more than his share of logs onto the steamer. He labored quietly beside white deck passengers as often as he did beside the colored deckhands, but aboard the *Cutter* he kept to himself. It wasn't until a lantern-jawed woodcutter with a northern accent threw an insult his way that Grayson paid attention to much of anything or anyone.

That day, Grayson was sweating at one end of a whipsaw, with a colored deckhand working at the other. When the woodcutter passed by blustering about Southern trash and stinking niggers, Grayson

stopped sawing. He shoved his hat back and wiped the sweat from his forehead and eyes.

Since leaving Virginia, he had lost track of time. One day had drifted uneventfully into the next, each filled with nothing save an abysmal sense of emptiness. But that day, he felt a twinge of anger, a welcome spark of passion in a catacomb of despair.

Grayson asked the colored man on the opposite end of the saw his name. It was Caleb.

Turning to the Yankee, Grayson said, "In Virginia, it's considered proper to say 'colored' or 'Negra.'"

A dozen white men and a handful of coloreds suddenly stopped what they were doing.

The northerner sneered and said, "You damn Rebs don't know when you're beat, do you?"

Grayson took a deep breath. Letting it out slowly, he wiped his eyes a second time. "Do you want to take care of this man, Caleb?" he asked. "Or do you want me to?"

For a moment Caleb was speechless. "No, sah, missuh," he said, "I'm jus' sawin', dat's all."

Grayson let go of the saw and turned. The Yankee was two inches taller than Grayson and grinning with the confidence of a conceited fool. After spewing several profane comments about the Confederacy and then Grayson's uniform, the northerner cockily stepped toward him.

Grayson, too, started forward. "The trouble with northerners is . . ."

Before Grayson finished speaking, his right fist smashed across the point of the Yankee's chin. As the man crumpled into a limp pile, Grayson finished softly, "they have no manners."

The next day a barefooted negro cabin boy named Jericho delivered a message to Grayson. He was ordered up to the pilot house. There, Captain Moore took a long appraising look at him, and without elaboration, promoted Grayson to deckhand. And to avoid any further trouble with the wooding crew, the captain made Grayson a watchman. Instead of cutting and hauling wood, he was to stand on

the forward deck and watch the river for snags, submerged logs and sandbars.

Grayson turned his attention to the river. This was to be his last morning looking for sunken trees and he was anxious to be back on land. Keeping a sharp lookout, he calculated the days since the *Cutter* had left St. Louis. Thirty-six. It seemed a long trip, but according to Captain Moore they would arrive days earlier than expected. In fact, in less than an hour, the shallow-bottomed packet would finally be docking at Fort Benton, Montana Territory.

In the early light Grayson studied the river. As far as he could see there was nothing but smooth water. The *Cutter* might have been able to reach Fort Benton the previous night, but rather than plow through the last few miles in darkness, Captain Moore had decided to tie up one last time.

When Moore announced his decision to the passengers, Grayson was one of the few who didn't complain.

When Moore had hired him as watchman, he explained in private that if the *Cutter* rammed even a single half-sunken snag, the ship along with its two hundred passengers and thirty tons of cargo could sink in a matter of minutes. The captain also pointed out that this was the third year of low water on the Missouri and even with its shallow draft and wide beams, the steamer could easily get hung up on any number of sandbars. If that happened, it would take hours of hard work to grasshopper over the sand before the ship could continue.

The passengers had grumbled angrily at Moore's orders to lay by one more night. But after five weeks on the murky water, no one argued when he reminded them that the Missouri was treacherous even in broad daylight. Most already referred to the river by its nickname "The Misery," and after their initial disappointment, all agreed with the captain's decision.

With the approaching sunrise and better visibility, the *Cutter* was now picking up speed and steering into the middle of the river. Grayson scanned the water ahead, seeing nothing but a perfect reflection of the glowing sky and ragged bluffs that framed the water's edge. He glanced down at the spoon-billed bow, now plowing a deep furrow into the glassy surface.

In a matter of minutes, they would reach Fort Benton. St. Louis would be twenty-three hundred miles away and Virginia five hundred miles beyond that. Salem, Virginia and the surrender of Lee would soon be three thousand miles behind him. Having lived his whole life in Albemarle County, it was a distance Tyler Grayson could hardly fathom.

Looking ahead into the morning twilight, Grayson searched for the black silhouette of sunken snags. A slight breeze churned the air. The towering smoke stacks bellowed rhythmically as the river swung slowly to the south. A mile ahead, along the west bank, a string of lights suddenly appeared. In seconds, the steam whistle on the pilot house blasted and continued for a full minute. Fort Benton was dead ahead.

Deck passengers rolled off their straw mats and swarmed to the foredeck. Men straining to get their first glimpse of Fort Benton crowded shoulder to shoulder. Those at the front encircled the spar and then Grayson as well. Cheers erupted from the cabin passengers on the hurricane deck and then from the men below. Exuberant voices and steam whistle blasts blended into a thunderous roar of celebration.

Amidst the melee, Grayson felt a tug on his shirt. It was Jericho the cabin boy. For a twelve year old, he was small and almost buried in the jostling bodies. He pointed up.

Grayson managed to reach down. He grabbed Jericho's belt and lifted him high enough for the boy to wrap his arms and legs around the spar pole. He quickly shimmied above the crowd. "I see it, Missuh Grayson," Jericho yelled. "I see Fort Benton!"

Jericho was talkative. He had explained to anyone who'd listen, but especially to Grayson, that he was going to the diggings at Last Chance Gulch to start a chicken business. He would sell eggs, he said. If he didn't get rich with his chickens, only then would he hunt for gold. Grayson had heard the story many times. He assumed Jericho was an orphan but never cared enough to ask.

Grayson looked ahead. He could make out a solid wall that ran perpendicular to the river. Too long for a house or store, he knew it had to be one of the adobe walls of Fort Benton. South of the fort and

just opposite the levy was a single row of wooden structures and tents. Most of the light was beaming through the windows of those buildings or out the open flaps of the tents.

The cheers intensified. Grayson could make out two more steamers docked farther up the mile-long levy. According to what Captain Moore had told him, those two packets would be the *Deer Lodge* and the *Yellowstone*. They would likely have already unloaded their cargo and be getting ready to head downriver with a full manifest of merchants and miners loaded with gold dust.

A dark ribbon of movement snaked itself along the edge of the levy. People were pouring out of the buildings and lining up to welcome the latest arrival. Whether they were up early or out late was anyone's guess. It was common knowledge aboard the packet that Fort Benton, like the gold camps, ran full tilt and wide open twenty-four hours a day.

The crowd on the bow began shifting to the starboard side, all the while waving excitedly. Jericho slid down the spar, his wide grin showing a row of large white teeth. "My layin' hens shore 'nough will be glad to scratch dirt again, Missuh Grayson. They'll be layin' in no time, now."

Grayson looked down at Jericho as he would a stray dog that had taken to him. "How are you and your chickens getting from the fort to the gold diggings, Jericho? It's one hundred and thirty miles."

"Three hens and a rooster ain't heavy. I built me a good cage. I can carry it."

Grayson went back to scanning the river. "What's the longest you ever walked?"

Jericho shrugged. "I can walk all day, Missuh Grayson. How far would dat be?"

"Walking all day, it would take you a week or more to get to Helena. I think you'd likely eat up your chickens before you got there."

"Naw, suh!" Jericho said shaking his head emphatically. "Them hens is gonna make me money. No farmer gonna up and eat his plow horse. You know dat, Missuh Grayson."

Grayson chuckled, vaguely aware he hadn't done so since before Lee's surrender. "Does the captain know what you're up to?"

"He do."

"He's a good man. If I were you, I'd ask him for a loan to get you started."

"Whas a loan?"

"That's when you borrow money and pay it back later. Let's say you borrow five dollars for the stage to Helena. Then, as soon as you can, you pay back six dollars. You send the payment downriver to the captain. That's how a lot of these merchants on board are doing business. They couldn't otherwise."

Jericho thought for a slow count of ten. "Business. I'm goin' into business, sho 'nough. I need me a loan." Spinning on his bare feet, Jericho bounded up the stairs, disappearing in the direction of the pilot house.

Watching Fort Benton grow closer, Grayson rested a foot on the capstan and thought of Jericho. Ever since he had slugged the woodcutter, the boy had latched onto him. The boy was only twelve and had no idea what problems lay ahead. But he was the same age as hundreds of white drummer boys who'd gone to war. They suffered the same hardships as the troops and witnessed the same carnage. Those boys had somehow managed. If Jericho was going to survive, he would have to do the same. Life, for most, was a hard row to hoe.

As the packet neared the safe water of the levy, Grayson turned and watched the deck passengers. Close to one hundred men were bunching together near the gangplank. They began swearing and shoving and then throwing elbows as each tried to get ahead of the other.

As soon as the gangplank slammed down on the riverbank, the knot of men funneled onto the heavy planks and then, like a swarm of ants, scrambled up the sandy levy and into the waiting crowd. Most quickly threaded their way through the spectators and headed toward the row of buildings.

After the deck passengers had cleared the lower deck, the more sophisticated cabin passengers started down the stairs. Among them,

Grayson saw merchants, bankers, lawyers and doctors. He considered how different they were from the mob of deck passengers and even how different they were from someone like himself. They were more like Colonel Mosby, gentlemen of breeding.

Grayson left the bow and started across the deck. A figure in a black dress and bonnet caught his eye and he stopped suddenly. A woman appearing to be in her early twenties was slowly descending the stairs in front of him. She had delicate features and, though not beautiful, was undeniably attractive.

No man was on her arm. A few men spoke to her and tipped their hats as they passed but nothing more. She seemed to be alone.

When the woman reached the bottom of the stairs, she hesitated. When her eyes met Grayson's, he glanced away, but not before noticing her turtle shell earrings and necklace. He looked down at her left hand and caught a glimpse of a black band on her ring finger. She was a widow. The turtle shell jewelry indicated she was in half-mourning.

Grayson removed his hat. He looked into her eyes. They were blue and measuring him from head to toe.

"Good morning, ma'am," Grayson said softly, reverently.

The woman's skin was pale, almost sickly white, but it suddenly flushed red. Her eyes filled with horror. She glared at him for several seconds then, without a word, turned and hurriedly walked toward the gangplank.

Grayson's eyes followed the widow until she was out of sight. He was still staring in her direction when Jericho's voice sounded from the top of the stairs. "Das Missus Kendrick," Jericho said, bounding down the steps. "She's a widda woman. I wuz her cabin boy. Her man was a Union man. She done seen yo' Southern clothes, Missuh Grayson. She done seen 'em a long time back from up on da cabin deck. I'm thinkin' she got a mighty hate fo' all you Johnnies. You 'specially, I suppose."

"From the cabin deck?"

"You was all da talk after you, bein' a Confed'rate, whupped dat Yankee woodhawk. All da cabin folk heard about you. I pointed you

out from up above on da cabin deck. She was curious to see who you was. But lawdy, lawdy, she shore don't like no Johnnies!"

Replacing his hat, Grayson glanced at Jericho. "You get that five dollars from the captain?"

"Yessuh. The cap'n say Fort Benton might have a stage by now. He say if they do, they might could get to Helena in two days. You gonna be on da stage?"

"I've got to help unload the ship first," Grayson said. "After that, I'll see."

"Cap'n say you best wear your pistols in town. He say Fort Benton is full of bad men. Most everybody be wearin' or carryin' guns. Some from the Nawth, some da South, some from nowhere much. Lots a bad men all over. Men gettin' shot right in da streets. Ain't no law here. Da gold camps, now, cap'n say they got vigilantes, but Fort Benton ain't got nothin'. Cap'n say it's ever' man fo' his own self in town. This ain't like no town we ever seen."

Grayson looked south of the walled fort. "All I see is a few wooden stores and some tents. Where's the town?"

"Cap'n say dat's all dey is. Dat's da town a Fort Benton. The fort was here first fo' da fur trade. Them buildings come since the gold was found."

Jericho started for the gangplank but stopped and turned when Grayson called his name.

"Yessuh, Missuh Grayson?"

"You stay out of trouble up there. And mind your manners."

Grinning, Jericho said, "Yessuh, Missuh Grayson. I knows my place."

Watching Jericho scamper across the gangplank and then thinking of the widow, Grayson muttered, "Don't we all."

* * *

By evening, crates and barrels from the *Cutter* had been stacked ten feet high up and down the levy. Though the hull still held eight tons of freight, the captain paid Grayson ten dollars and said he was free to leave.

Returning to the *Cutter* for the last time, Grayson rolled his pistols and what few belongings he had into his blanket and then tied it tight with twine. When he looped the bundle over his shoulder, he realized everything he owned was on his back or in his pockets. He was thirty-three years old and hardly more than a vagabond.

Starting for the riverbank, it suddenly occurred to him he didn't have the slightest idea what he was going to do next. Recalling that even the twelve-year-old cabin boy had a plan, Grayson swore.

In the fading light, he walked along the gangplank. As the heels of his cavalry boots popped against the whipsawed planks, a breeze brushed his cheek. He heard music of some sort—nothing recognizable but several tunes mangled together and then carried on the wind.

Working his way through the maze of crates and barrels, Grayson paused to look back at the *Cutter*. Instead, his eyes shifted to the sunset. He marveled at the brilliance of the purplish-red sky and how it contrasted with the black silhouette of a distant mountain range. He gazed up for a moment, convinced that the sky in Montana Territory was somehow bigger than it was in Virginia. But he reminded himself he was not in a Southern state with miles of wooden fences and long-established borders. This was a vast territory of unsettled land. It was untouched by war and free of Yankee domination.

Grayson glanced to his left and, for the first time, took a good look at Fort Benton and what passed as Front Street. He was stunned to see the so-called town consisted of no more than a dozen wooden structures and two canvas wall tents, all facing the river.

The tents glowed white while scores of windowpanes along the street danced with yellow light. Every establishment was overflowing with customers. Men and music spilled out into the dusty street. Across from the buildings, dozens of ox and mule teams were hitched to empty freight wagons. Next to the wagons, stacks of crates and barrels stood waiting to be loaded and then hauled to the gold camps.

Walking toward the town, the music grew louder now, tangling with singing and laughter. Angry shouts were followed by the sound of shattering glass. Most of the voices were men's but not all. When

he heard voices that were clearly those of women, he stopped. He listened for a moment and then thought of the widow.

He looked back at the adobe fort, wondering if it had rooms to rent for the night. Certainly Fort Benton was not the final destination for the young woman. She would continue to Helena or on to Virginia City—but how? Jericho said if a stage were running it would only take two days to get to Helena. It wasn't the only transportation to those cities, but for a lady, it would be the only suitable way to travel. And the sooner she left Fort Benton the better.

Continuing on, Grayson eyed the first building he came to. It had two signs nailed over the door. One said "Lilly's Squaw Dance" and the other read, "In God we trust, all others pay cash." A man came stumbling backward out of the door and landed flat on his back at Grayson's feet. His eyes rolled to the top of his head. He reeked of cheap whiskey.

Grayson stepped over the drunk and walked farther down the street. He passed the Occidental, Break of Day, Cosmopolitan and finally the Medicine Lodge, all saloons. Coming to the end of the street, Grayson was appalled to discover that all but two of the buildings in Fort Benton were either saloons or brothels.

Deciding to sleep on the *Cutter*, Grayson started back for the steamer. As he passed by the Cosmopolitan, a woman walked out the open door. She was young. Her hair was raven black and held up with several shiny pendants. The dress she wore was off-white and open at the neck, and it glistened like silk.

Glancing about, she worked her way through the crowd to step into the street and away from the light. Her hand went to her lips. A cigar gleamed red-orange in the darkness as the woman took a puff. She continued walking and then veered toward Grayson.

Grayson stopped. Hiding his astonishment that a woman should be smoking, he took off his hat. "Good evening, ma'am."

The woman laughed. "You Southern boys," she said with a gravelly voice. "Always the gentlemen."

"Yes, ma'am. I suppose," Grayson said, trying to recall if he had ever heard of a woman smoking tobacco.

The woman lowered her hand and flicked ashes from her cigar. Something on her hip flashed and Grayson could not help but glance down. He was shocked to see not one, but two, pistols belted around her tiny waist!

“I’m Eleanor Dumont,” she said extending her hand.

Grayson’s hesitation was imperceptible, for in that instant of indecision his mother’s words echoed in the back of his mind. “Tyler, the Lord is no respecter of persons.”

Reaching out, he deliberately took the hand of Eleanor Dumont. It was the Christian thing to do and there was a gracious manner in which to do it. He would conduct himself just as Johnny Mosby would have, were he in the same situation.

With Dumont’s hand in his, he bowed and kissed it. “I am charmed.”

Clinging tightly to Grayson’s hand, Dumont took another puff on her cigar. She seemed to be studying him in the darkness. “I run the Cosmopolitan.”

Grayson suddenly felt hot. “Yes, ma’am.”

There was a long pause, then Dumont released her grip. “Well now. You’re not just any old Johnnie, are you?”

Before Grayson could answer, she spun on her heels. “Good night, Mr. Johnnie,” she said, then with a throaty laugh, worked her way back inside the saloon.

For ten minutes Grayson stood where he was, wondering what to make of Eleanor Dumont and trying to absorb the chaos around him. Looking up and down the street, he saw nothing but drunken celebration.

It reminded him of the night the 43rd had captured an entire train belonging to the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. The Rangers ransacked the Yankee cargo and then took whatever they could find from the pockets of the frightened Union passengers. The men were half-crazed with excitement, and if it had not been for Mosby’s control, the Confederate soldiers might have gone wild. But that unfortunate episode occurred in a time of war. To Grayson, the scene on Front Street looked more like the entire town had gone mad.

An abrupt movement of the crowd in front of the Cosmopolitan caught Grayson's attention. Men were stepping aside, making room for someone. Seconds later, a man wearing a black, broad-brimmed hat exited the saloon. He was heavysset and less than average height. His face was round and, except for a drooping black mustache, appeared almost childlike. In his fists, however, he carried a long double-barreled shotgun.

The man carefully looked over the bystanders. Whoever the man was, Grayson sensed he was anything but childlike.

After looking over the men in front of the Cosmopolitan, the man with the shotgun looked into the street. Spotting Grayson, he started walking.

Stopping six feet away, he spoke softly. "Did you just kiss the hand of Madam Mustache?"

"Who?"

"Madam Mustache, the owner of the Cosmopolitan."

"I met a Miss Dumont, sir. If I understood correctly, she is the owner of the Cosmopolitan."

The man laughed. He switched the shotgun to his left hand and took a step closer. "You're him, alright. She said I'd find you out here. Said you was a cut above most Confederates she meets."

"Did she?"

Extending his right hand, the man said, "I'm John X Beidler."

Grayson shook hands. Beidler had a grip of iron. "I'm Tyler Grayson."

"Just call me X, Mr. Grayson. Nobody calls me anything else. You come in on the *Cutter*?"

Grayson glanced at the shotgun. Beidler had a northern accent, but he seemed friendly enough. "I did."

"You wouldn't by chance be the fella on the *Cutter* that thumped that Yankee woodcutter, would you? There's men talking of it in the saloon there."

"Enough liquor and some men will say anything."

Beidler paused. "I see you're not packing a revolver."

"The war's over," replied Grayson.

Beidler nodded. "Glad you feel that way. I was for the Union, myself. But you'll find things are different here than in the states. The restraints of civilization don't hardly exist. Until the law comes to the Territory, a man has to be prepared to defend himself. Virginia City used to have nothing but mountain law, but it's been settled down some. Helena is wide open yet. Fort Benton is the bloodiest town of them all."

Grayson thought of the widow and then of the other cabin passengers, the merchants and businessmen. They seemed to be decent people. What Beidler was saying made no sense. Why would such men spend more than a month traveling up the treacherous Missouri if what he said was true?

"Why are you telling me this?" Grayson asked.

Again Beidler paused. "You, by chance, wouldn't be a Mason would you?"

"No. I've never been much of a joiner."

"Well, that's alright. Lots of good men aren't Masons. There's a good number of Masons in the gold camps, though. All solid men."

"Then why is there no law and order?"

"For one thing, the miners prefer mountain law, which is no more than miner's court. For another, there's too much gold to be had. It changes a lot of folk's idea of what's important and what's not. Most everybody's trying so hard to get rich they quit caring about anything but gold dust. And once they get the gold, they go half crazy spending it.

"In the early days of gold camps, there's no thought of anything but digging gold and having a good time once you've dug it. Whiskey, gambling, Hurdy-Gurdy houses, brothels, shootings, stabbings, robbery. It's the gold. Like I said, it changes people. Most of the men who come to dig for it are uneducated and unprincipled, but I've seen good men, Christian men, get to the diggings and then lose every bit of decency they ever had."

"What about mountain law. What is that?"

Beidler swore softly. "Mountain law is whatever the miners decide it to be. Why, once I saw a man who'd committed murder get away with it just because the miners liked him and didn't like the

man he killed. And if a miner's court is delayed for more than a few hours, the whole case is usually dismissed due to lack of interest. If the miners' blood is hot, though, and they act right on the spot, there can be some justice once in a while. But that's the exception.

"Way too often, when court is held, there's a pile of witnesses waiting to be bought and paid for by whichever side needs them. They'll say anything. When that happens, mountain law is all but useless."

"We had three dozen cabin passengers on the *Cutter*," Grayson objected. "One is a young widow. I hardly think any of them would come here if it's as bad as you say, Mr. Beidler."

"X, if it's all the same to you."

"Alright. X."

"That widow woman you mention, she'll be safe. No harm comes to women, at least from white men. For the most part, the businessmen came here to make money and then go back to the states. Only a few of them are here to settle the country and build a new life. We need more of their kind to set things right. Until then . . . well, let's just say we have our ways."

Beidler tipped his hat. "Good evening, Mr. Grayson." He took a step then stopped and turned back. "I got an idea for that widow, if she's interested. And maybe you, too."

"What's that?"

"A couple of miners from Helena had a big load of dust they needed sent down the Missouri to the mint. To avoid the road agents, they secretly rented a stage from Virginia City and sent out extra horses and such in advance. They drove the stage day and night and made it here in two days. They've delivered their gold to the *Yellowstone* and the stage is headed back to Helena tomorrow.

"If you're interested and think the widow will be interested, I'll pass the word to hold a couple of seats for the two of you."

"I'll go. And I'll get in touch with the lady and inquire if she's interested."

"Alright. You tell them at the stage I sent you. There'll be a fare to pay. I don't know how much, but it'll be a fair price. The stage

will have seven or eight folks besides the two of you. It'll be leaving from the Occidental Saloon just before daybreak."

"Thank you," Grayson said. Watching Beidler walk down Front Street, he muttered, "Who are you . . . and what kind of name is X?"

Suddenly tired, Grayson started back to the *Cutter*. When he was just beyond the Cosmopolitan, Jericho called out from the shadows and then trotted up from behind. Coming alongside Grayson, he said, "You know who dat was you was talkin' to, Missuh Grayson? Dat was X."

Continuing to walk, Grayson glanced down at the boy and frowned. "How'd you know that?"

"I been all around dis town. And I done heard him talked about. I been a listenin' all the day. Ain't nobody pay attention to a little darky standin' 'round. They juss talk and talk."

"And what did you hear about our Mr. X?"

Jericho held up one hand near the side of his head and made a gurgling sound. "He's a strangler. Fact, he's da one dat ties dah knots."

"Make sense, Jericho," demanded Grayson.

"Lordy, Lordy. Dat man and a bunch more jus' like him lynches folks."

Grayson stopped. A half-moon was clearing the bluffs along the river. He looked down as the light reflected off Jericho's face and illuminated the whites of his eyes. "What do you mean, he lynches folks?"

"I don't know no mo'. Das juss what town folks was sayin'. Some wants to kill him."

Walking on, Grayson recalled one of Beidler's last comments. He said, "We have our ways." Grayson started to think about the words then swore softly. Whatever the man's reason for talking to him and what he meant by that odd comment was none of his concern.

The Confederacy was gone. He had no country, no home and no allegiance to anything. All he had was himself. What Beidler did, what anyone did, was none of his damn business.

"Do you have any idea where the widow lady is," Grayson asked, suddenly irritated that he had volunteered to contact her.

“Saw her in a merchantile jus’ now. How come?”

“There’s a stage leaving tomorrow morning for Helena. I thought she might want to be on it. I can’t imagine she would want to stay in this hellhole any longer than she has to.”

“Are you gonna be on dat stage, Missuh Grayson?”

“Yes. If I have enough for the fare.”

“They got room for me and my chickens?”

“I don’t know,” snapped Grayson. “Show up tomorrow and find out.”

Following alongside Grayson, Jericho said, “Yessuh, Missuh Grayson. I’m gonna do dat fo’ sho’. I gots to get on to Helena. I gots to get my egg business started. You gonna mine for gold?”

Ignoring the question, Grayson stopped on the levee in front of the *Cutter*. A lantern burned in the pilot house and two others illuminated the bow and stern. “It’s best if you tell the widow about the stage. I need for you to go find her and tell her. If she’s interested, it’ll be in front of the Occidental Saloon and it’ll leave before sunup.”

“Oxy dental?” repeated Jericho.

“Occidental.”

“Yessuh,” replied Jericho, then he spun and started trotting back toward town.

“And don’t tell her I’m going to be there,” ordered Grayson.

Disappearing into the night, Jericho’s voice trailed off. “Wasn’t gonna.”

Grayson walked down the gangplank and found a pile of straw mats on top of some unloaded crates of Drake’s Plantation Bitters. After shoving several crates aside, he unrolled the mat on the bow of the deserted deck. As he untied his blanket, he heard what had to be Jericho trotting across the gangplank. The soft footsteps stopped and then the sound of heavy breathing worked its way through the stacks of crates.

“On the bow,” Grayson said.

Moments later, Jericho appeared with another mat and started unrolling it next to Grayson. “You think dat . . .” started Jericho but

then stopped to catch his breath. "You think dat widow lady is purtty?"

Grayson freed a knot then paused. "I suppose." Rolling out his blanket, he asked, "Did you already talk to her?"

"Yessuh. She's gonna be there."

"It'll be safer for her."

Jericho slapped a mosquito on his arm and then wiped away the blood. "You know, she used to look at you from da cabin deck," said Jericho. "After you whupped that Yankee man, she did it a whole lots."

Grayson lifted his pistols from his blanket and set them on the wooden deck. Envisioning the widow's eyes scowling at him, he said, "Her husband was killed in the war. She was probably trying to get away from all the memories and I reminded her of it all over again. Can't say that I blame her for staring."

Jericho lay down on his mat gazing up at the stars. "You was a Johnny Reb?"

"You know that," answered Grayson. He stretched out on the mat and closed his eyes.

"So, how many slaves did you own, Missuh Grayson?"

"My family didn't have slaves," sighed Grayson. "Most Southerners didn't have any."

Jericho leaned up on his elbows. "Then what was you fightin' 'bout, Missuh Grayson? Wasn't you fo' slavery?"

Grayson's brow wrinkled in thought but his eyes remained closed. "I wasn't *for* slavery, Jericho. I was *against* Yankees. I was fighting for our freedom. The Confederacy was invaded. Nobody was going to come on our land and tell us what to do. That's why we fought."

"What 'bout slaves?" Jericho asked, his voice filled with youthful confusion.

Grayson's eyes opened. He thought for a moment. "What about them?"

"What 'bout slavery? Did you think dat was all right?"

Again Grayson paused, but this time for a full minute. "I never gave it much thought one way or the other. It was just the way things

were, Jericho—the way they always had been. Slavery goes all the way back to Adam and Eve. In the Bible, even God’s people were slaves. Everybody’s been a slave at one time or another.”

“You was never a slave, was you Missuh Grayson?”

Grayson thought of the cabin deck above him, of the widow and the cabin passengers and of Colonel Mosby. “No. But I’m the son of a dirt farmer and that’s what I’ll always be. In a way it’s not a whole lot different.”

Jericho lay back down. “Well, we ain’t no slave and ain’t no farmer no mo’. No suh, Missuh Grayson. We’s free to be what we wants from now on.”

Closing his eyes, Grayson saw the face of the widow. She reminded him of the schoolgirl he and Johnny had courted in Virginia. And he thought of the day he had learned that a dirt farmer’s son was no longer permitted to call on her.

Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, he whispered, “Some things, Jericho, never change.”

* * *

Holding a lantern in one hand and a small carpetbag in the other, Lilly Kendrick gingerly opened the heavy wooden door to her room. Extending the lantern, she peered inside and saw a small bed along one wall. The only other furniture was a crude table and a stool.

Lilly stepped inside. Holding the lantern higher, she looked for spiders. She saw no webs but neither did she see any windows. Thinking how the room reminded her of a tomb, Lilly shuddered.

Moving to the bed, she inspected it closely. It was covered with a wool blanket. She tentatively pulled it back and was relieved to see the sheets underneath were clean.

Turning and taking half a step, Lilly set the lantern and carpetbag on the table then slowly sat down on the bed. Burying her face in her hands, she began to weep.

It was not the cramped room or the decadence of Fort Benton that made her cry. It was the Confederate.

When she boarded the *Cutter*, she had been in mourning for just over a year and a half. The first months were too devastating to

recall, but somehow she had survived the pain and the grief. As the months passed, she had grown stronger. The first anniversary of her husband's death briefly set her back, but she was pleased with how far she had come. And then the loneliness crept in.

It was then Lilly Kendrick had received the letter from her father-in-law. He offered her a store of her own and a life far away from the tragic memories. She was desperate. The letter offered her an escape and, despite the advice of her family, she impulsively packed her things and put them in a trunk.

The first day on the train to St. Louis, she started to have second thoughts. However, as the miles passed, Lilly became more and more convinced she had made the right decision. Her father-in-law was right. It was best to leave home, at least for a time.

The second day on the train she realized she was doing more than leaving the past behind. Her long journey was taking her to a new beginning and an entirely new life. The instant that realization occurred to her, she felt a twinge of excitement. However, that feeble flicker of life was immediately followed by a wave of guilt.

Decent women were in mourning for at least two years. How was it possible she could have such a glimmer of happiness with her poor husband lying in his grave? And why, too, was her loneliness growing so intense? She suffered for the loss of her husband to be sure, but it was more than that.

Lilly had remained in her cabin aboard the *Cutter* for the first several days. The cabin boy brought her meals but finally convinced her to eat with the other cabin passengers. The first evening she ate in the dining room she heard the passengers talking about a Confederate who had defended a colored deckhand.

Some of the men seated closest to her apologized profusely for discussing the actions of a Confederate, but Lilly, in turn, assured them her sensibilities were unharmed and the conversation continued.

Some suggested that for a Confederate to do such a thing, he had to be suffering from "soldier's heart." Others defended him, saying Tyler Grayson's fight was merely an example of Southerner honor.

By the time dinner was over, the men had changed the subject and begun arguing about the war in general.

At that point, Lilly excused herself and went out on the hurricane deck for a much needed breath of fresh air. It was then Jericho came to her and pointed out the much talked about Confederate. He was standing alone at the bow of the ship, facing the current. She was gazing curiously at him when he turned for a brief moment.

Even with the distance between, Lilly had felt her heart jump. It made no sense at the time. She knew that. He was a Confederate, like the one who had killed her husband. She knew that, too. But she could not deny what had pulsed through her body.

Since that day, she heard more talk about the Confederate and found herself spending more and more time on the cabin deck. At first, when she thought no one was paying any attention, she stole a quick glance at him. As the monotonous days passed, she grew more comfortable and watched him for several minutes at a time.

However, on her last night aboard the *Cutter*, Lilly Kendrick told herself she had been behaving like a fool. Her wavering emotions were imaginary, a product of boredom and too much isolation. But the following morning when she met Tyler Grayson face to face, her convictions collapsed.

Her reaction upon seeing him was indecent. If anyone knew what she felt, they would say she was despicable.

Lilly raised her head. "Why here?" she sobbed. "Why now? And why, merciful God, would you allow him to be a Confederate?"

Lilly wiped the tears from her face. She took a deep breath and stiffened her lips. She comforted herself with the fact that the voyage was finally over. And now that she was away from the Confederate, her head would clear. It was the monotony of the trip that had worn her down. And all the talk about Tyler Grayson in the dining room. Anyone would have been curious. Curiosity and a bit of respect would have confused any woman in her weakened condition.

"Tomorrow . . ." Lilly said bravely, "tomorrow I will take the stage and be rid of him once and for all."