

Mercy

by Richard Turner,

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Chapter 1

Louisiana

September 19, 1865

Roy Stone shuddered. The night had never seemed so cold and dark. He watched as a thick fog rolled up from the river, blanketing the wet ground. The only thing going in his favor was the rain had finally let up.

Stone was a tall, strong man. He was wearing a long coat and black hat as he strode through the underbrush. In his left hand was a lantern; in his right he carried a shotgun. Just ahead of him was a row of men, some black, some white. No one said a word as they walked through the knee-high grass. Most held a lit torch in their hands. A couple of old trackers gripped the leashes of several bloodhounds, whining to be let loose. Stone glanced up at the heavens just as the dark clouds parted. For a few seconds, the silvery light of a new moon shone down on the clearing. They had been pushing through the brush since just before sunset. No one complained nor asked to turn back; finding the two missing youths was all that mattered.

"Mister Stone, sir, I think I found something," called out one of the men.

Stone ran to the man's side. In the black man's hand was a torn piece of clothing. Stone took it from him. Right away, he saw there was fresh blood on the dirt-stained gray cloth.

"Miss Willow's dress?" said the man. It appeared to be the type of fabric used to make the garments worn by the colored women who lived and worked at Mercy Plantation.

"I think you may be right, Thomas," answered Stone. Deep down, he wished he was wrong.

Thomas pointed at the ground. "Sir, their tracks lead deeper into the woods."

Stone gritted his teeth. The forest, especially at night, was no place for a pair of rash young people to be in. Earlier in the day, he had learned of a foolish plan by his love-struck nephew, Andrew, to run off with Willow, a sixteen-year-old black girl who was the daughter of the family's cook. When he confronted Andrew, the conversation turned heated and words were exchanged, which only helped to make the situation worse. Andrew stormed off, telling Stone he wasn't his father and couldn't tell him what to do with his life. The naive young man swore he would do as his heart demanded of him. Now Roy Stone was tracking them both through his sister's vast plantation, trying to bring them home before they ran into trouble. With gangs of demobilized Confederate soldiers prowling the countryside, it wasn't safe for a young white boy with a freed slave girl at his side to be on their own.

When they reached the edge of the thick forest on the skirts of the plantation, the dogs started to bark and pull at their leashes.

"Sir, the dogs, they've got a whiff of something real close," said one of the handlers.

"Let them go," ordered Stone.

The instant the hounds were released they ran off into the woods, barking and yelping as they chased after the scent.

Stone waved for everyone to follow him. As he stepped into the thick woods, the temperature seemed to drop. A chill ran down his spine. Stone wasn't a superstitious man, but something didn't seem right. Raised a Catholic, he crossed himself and said a quick prayer under his breath.

"Sir, their tracks have changed direction," called out one of the trackers. "I think they're heading toward the old storehouse on the river."

"Follow their trail and whatever you do, don't lose it," replied Stone.

Within minutes, the search party strode out of the woods into a small glade. Off to their right was the Mississippi River. In the dark, the water looked ink black.

Stone held up his torch and looked over at the dilapidated ruins of what had been the plantation's main cotton storage barn. Shipped downriver on barges, the cotton used to be sold in the markets of New Orleans. But that had all changed when Union troops arrived in 1862. As the plantation was owned by a Confederate colonel, they burnt the cotton and tore down most of the building.

"Spread out, and remember no shooting. They're our kin we're looking for," called out Stone. He was about to take a step forward and join the search when he realized that the world around them had turned deathly quiet. Not a single animal or insect made a noise. He held his shotgun tight in his hand as if to reassure himself everything was going to turn out all right.

A shot rang out startling Stone. His heart jackhammered wildly in his chest. He turned to face an old plantation hand holding a shotgun in his hand. "God damn it, Horace, I said no shooting."

"Sorry, sir, I done thought I saw something in the woods," replied Horace, avoiding eye contact with his boss.

Stone fought to control his growing anger. "Don't be sorry, Horace, be careful. I need you to pay better attention to your surroundings. We didn't come all this way to shoot one of our own by accident."

Stone was the first man to reach the ruined barn. He stepped inside and raised his lantern high above his head so he could look around. Dark shadows hid most of the interior. He went to take a step but hesitated. On the floor was a dark pool of blood. There was even more blood splattered on the wall beside him. His chest tightened. He feared for the lives of the missing youths.

Outside, Thomas called out, "Mister Stone, I think I found something!"

Stone's heart began to beat faster. He rushed out of the barn and came to a sudden halt when he saw a dark smear of blood on the grass. "Jesus, what the hell happened here?"

Thomas brought his hands up to his mouth and yelled, "Master Andrew... Miss Willow, it's Thomas, please show yourselves."

Silence answered the call.

"Andrew, it's your uncle here," said Stone. "There's no need to keep on hiding. If you're here, please call out. You're not in trouble. We just want to take you both back home."

Not a word was said in reply.

"Sir, over here," yelled a man. His voice was tense.

Stone and Thomas ran toward a group of men standing in a semi-circle at the far end of the dilapidated barn.

"Have you found something?" asked Stone.

"I'm sorry, sir," said Horace as he lifted his torch over his head.

"Oh God, no," mumbled Stone when he saw what the men had found. Andrew's naked body lay on the ground. There was a deep gash from his neck to his groin. The pale skin had been peeled back. A quick glance told Stone most his nephew's internal organs were gone. The sight of his nephew staring wide-eyed at him shook Stone to the core. He bent down and closed the boy's eyes. Stone removed his jacket and draped it over Andrew. He and his nephew had never been close, but he was his sister's son. He dreaded the thought of telling her that her only son not killed during the war was dead.

Pastor Melancon, the local Baptist minister, dropped to his knees beside the body and began to recite a prayer.

"Find Willow. I'm not leaving until we find her," ordered Stone, finding his voice once again.

The search party spread out into the woods, calling out her name. No one said it but with Andrew dead, no one expected to find her alive.

A minute later, one of the dog handlers shouted, "Over here. I think I found her!"

Stone and Thomas ran to the man's side. When they arrived, they found the old tracker bent over examining something with his torch. Stone pushed the man aside and looked down. In an instant, he felt his stomach turn. At his feet was an arm. Stone took a deep breath, removed his hat, got down on one knee, and carefully picked up the bloody limb. He shook his head when he recognized the small gold ring on the hand as one Andrew had given to Willow last Christmas. Stone felt his heart grow heavy. He placed the hand back down on the ground.

"Looks like the arm was torn from the poor girl's body," said the dog handler. "I bet whoever killed Master Andrew turned their dogs loose on her."

"That ain't no way for a young lady to go," said Thomas as he removed his hat.

A young black man called out, "Sir, please come here."

Anger and hate welled up inside Stone as he walked over to the body lying on the ground. The sight that greeted him was horrific. Willow's throat had been torn out. Her stomach was a bloody mess where an animal had gnawed at her innards.

"As God is my witness, whoever did this will pay with their life," vowed Stone. He turned and looked into the faces of the men huddled around, staring wide-eyed at the remains. "Spread out and find the murderer's tracks."

As the men combed the muddy ground, Thomas removed his long jacket and laid it over Willow's body. Stone got down on his knees and prayed in silence for Willow and Andrew's souls.

"Sir ... sir, I think I found something, but it don't look right to me," said one of the trackers.

Stone joined the man and looked down at a set of tracks in the mud. The old man was right; the footprint didn't make any sense. It was long and appeared to have a man's heel, but the toes looked like that of a large animal. "You ever see anything like this before?" he asked.

“No, sir. I’ve been hunting all my life and I ain’t never seen a track like that. It ain’t natural.”

Stone looked into the woods. A shiver ran down his spine. For a moment, he had the feeling he was being watched. He shrugged it off as nerves and turned to face Thomas. “Have the men pick up the remains. We’re going home.”

Roy Stone had stayed neutral during the war. He had worked hard to keep what was left of his sister’s family safe from the turmoil brought about by the end of the conflict. As a man walked past him carrying Willow’s body, he knew nothing was ever going to be the same when the sun came up in the morning.

Chapter 2

New Orleans, Louisiana
November 7, 1865

The incessant pounding in his head would not go away. Like an approaching locomotive, the noise grew louder by the second. With his eyes still closed, Captain Robert Cooper reached over and felt along the nightstand beside his bed until he found his pocket watch. He brought it over until it was inches away from his face. He opened his heavy eyelids and tried to focus his dark brown eyes on the timepiece.

“Are you awake in there, sir?” asked a deep voice from the other side of his closed bedroom door.

Through the haze in his mind, Cooper recognized the voice as belonging to First Sergeant James Hawkins, his company sergeant. “Aye, I am, and I’d appreciate it if you’d stop that infernal pounding.” Cooper’s Scottish accent came on strong.

“I’m just doing my job, sir,” replied Hawkins as he tried the doorknob and found it locked. “It’s getting late and you’ve got to get ready for your meeting. I’ve brought you some hot water and a pot of coffee.”

Cooper swore when he saw that it was already after eight in the morning. He sat straight up in his bed. His head felt as if he had just been kicked by an angry mule. He held his breath as he waited for his stomach to turn. After a few seconds, Cooper realized he wasn’t going to be sick, just very queasy. The painful pounding in his head reminded him he had once again drank far too much bourbon and smoked too many cheap cigars with his friends at the hotel bar. Cooper stood up, stretched his arms over his head, and saw his naked image in the mirror. He knew he’d gone too far again with his drinking. Cooper looked around for his underclothes and found them in a pile on the floor with the rest of his uniform. The funny thing was, he didn’t remember taking them off.

“Sir, will you open the door, or do I have to kick it open?” asked Hawkins.

Cooper didn’t doubt Hawkins would force his way inside if he had to. He pulled on his underwear and his light blue uniform pants before reaching over to unlock the door.

Right away, the door swung open and Hawkins stepped inside. A runaway slave, Hawkins had been among the first to volunteer to fight for the Union when they asked for freemen to fight the Confederacy. Whereas Cooper was tall with a trim build, Hawkins was a head shorter than the captain and six years his senior. He had broad shoulders and thick, muscular arms. Hawkins could easily lift his weight over his head and was the undisputed bare-knuckle boxing champ of his former regiment. Hawkins placed the bowl of water and coffee pot down on a small wooden table sitting against the wall. There were several empty bottles of whiskey lying on the floor at his feet. He turned and looked over at the young officer.

Cooper could see the disappointment in the eyes of his sergeant. They had served together for over two years and had grown to trust and respect one another. He quickly became self-conscious about his current predicament. To cover up his embarrassment he busied himself by gathering the rest of his rumpled clothes on the floor.

Cooper looked down at his hands and saw there were fresh cuts on his knuckles. *Odd*, he thought to himself. He couldn't recall injuring himself, again.

Hawkins said, "In case you're wondering, sir, you were in another fight last night."

"Who with?"

"Captain Nolan. I heard he called you a Scottish catamite. You took exception and the two of you ended up in the alley behind the bar."

Cooper shook his head. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't remember a thing about the fight. "Do you know how Nolan is doing?"

"From what I was told, you were plenty pissed. Hell, you broke Nolan's nose and his jaw. You're lucky there weren't any Provost Corps troops patrolling this part of the city. They wouldn't have cared if you were an officer or not. If they had caught you two gentlemen scrapping in an alley you'd have been arrested and thrown in jail for drunkenness and fighting."

"You're right. I've really got to stop drinking."

"I've been telling you to take it easy for months. Moderation is the key to everything. You have to lay off the bust head." Hawkins used a soldier's term for cheap booze.

"I'll have you know Sergeant Hawkins, it was very expensive champagne not some watered down whiskey that did me in last night."

"That doesn't excuse your behavior, sir."

Cooper nodded and took a seat.

"Who's that in your bed, Captain?" Hawkins asked, eyeing the sleeping blonde-haired girl in Cooper's bed.

Cooper glanced over his shoulder. Wrapped up in a white blanket was a young woman. "I don't know," he replied, struggling to recall the girl's name. "I suppose she's some local lass I met last night."

"Well, sir, there's no time to worry about her right now," admonished Hawkins. "You've got an appointment with Colonel Marshall in an hour, and I'll be damned if you're gonna be late. What you do or don't do reflects on me as well. Now hand me your tunic, I'll press it while you wash and shave."

Cooper hesitated for a second. He had entirely forgotten about his meeting with the officer in charge of the Freedman's Bureau for the State of Louisiana.

"Your tunic, sir," said Hawkins, holding out his hand.

Cooper surrendered the garment before staggering over to the table to splash some water on his face. The refreshing water helped to clear his clouded mind. After lathering up his face, he reached down for his straight razor and saw that his hand was shaking. Cooper closed his eyes and took a couple of deep breaths to calm his hand. When he opened his eyes, he saw his hand was still, but his stomach began to churn. It was going to be a long day indeed.

Captain Robert Cooper checked himself out in the tall hallway mirror of a palatial home that had once belonged to a Confederate general. After his ride through the dusty streets, he wanted to make sure he was presentable before knocking on the door of Colonel Frederick Marshall, head of the Freedmen's Bureau for the Fifth Military District. Captain Cooper stood just over six feet tall. He had thick, chestnut-colored hair and dark, piercing brown eyes. With his father's good looks, Cooper had become quite popular among the ladies of New Orleans' high society. He brushed off some dirt from his blue tunic and made sure his kepi was sitting straight on his head. With the war over and his regiment recently disbanded, Cooper thought he was going to be released from the army. Instead, his commanding officer had recommended he be employed by the newly formed Freedmen's Bureau until his service ended in just over six months' time.

An ornate wooden door opened and a young black corporal stepped outside. He came to attention and saluted Cooper. "Sir, Colonel Marshall will see you now."

Cooper returned the soldier's salute and followed him inside. The room had once been a study with books from the floor to the ceiling; now, however, it was Colonel Marshall's office. He had cleaned out the room leaving only a desk and a U.S. flag on a pole inside. The senior officer was standing with his back to Cooper, looking out a window.

"Good morning, sir," said Cooper as he brought up his right hand to the brim of his cap.

Colonel Marshall turned and returned the salute. "Take a seat, Captain." The colonel looked as if he were in his late fifties. To Cooper, he resembled a walrus with his bald head and thick, drooping gray mustache. He was overweight and his uniform barely fit him anymore. Cooper doubted the man had ever served a single day in the field against the Confederacy.

Cooper sat down in a chair directly across from the colonel's desk.

Marshall took his seat and opened up a file on his desk. He read it over mumbling a few words to himself before looking over at Cooper. "I have in my possession a letter dated the twelfth of August requesting a transfer for you and your first sergeant to the Freedman's Bureau. Along with this letter is a note from your former commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Augustus York, in which he calls you a smart, talented, fearless leader, but a man who when not in battle is far too fond of the bottle. Would you call this a fair assessment, Captain?"

Cooper clenched his jaw. York had told him that he intended to be blunt in his letter of recommendation. He was just surprised how frank he had been. Cooper looked over at Marshall and chose his next words carefully. "Aye, sir, it is an accurate assessment. I do tend to drink a wee bit too much when not properly challenged."

Marshall snorted like a bull. "Challenged, eh?" He glanced down at the file on his desk. "I see in your service records that you were wounded at Vicksburg. Nothing serious I hope?"

Cooper held up his left hand. There was a scar in the center of his palm. "I was waving my men forward when I was hit. The reb bullet traveled straight through my hand. It only bothers me when it's cold or damp outside."

"Very well," said Marshall. "I see you joined the Eleventh Louisiana Regiment, a colored unit, when it was formed in 1863. What had you been doing up until then?"

Cooper removed his kepi and ran a hand through his hair. "Colonel, I was in London, England studying international law. My father has always wanted me to follow in his footsteps and work as a lawyer. It was his idea for me to attend school outside of the United States to gain a broader perspective. With my gran and grandad still living in Scotland, he figured I could stay with them when not in school."

"How did things go for you in England?"

Cooper knew there was no point in lying. He didn't doubt Marshall already knew the answer. "I was kicked out of school for drinking and for having what one professor described as an overly active libido. Less than a year into my studies, I was sent packing back to the States."

"I bet your father was pleased to learn this."

"He was mortified and told me I had sullied the family's good name. He said the only way to erase my dishonor would be to join the army and get my head blown off my shoulders by a Confederate cannonball."

"Smart man, your father," Marshall said, slapping the top of his desk with his hand. "So tell me, Captain, why did you enlist as an officer in a colored regiment?"

Cooper sat straight up and looked into the colonel's bloodshot eyes. "Sir, I may have let my father down; however, we have always shared the same visceral dislike of slavery. When my family immigrated to the States, we arrived via Baton Rouge and lived there for a number of years. Although my father's law practice is in Washington, D.C., I thought it best if I joined a Union regiment raised in Louisiana."

"With the fighting over and your predilection to wander, your former commanding officer thought it best if you were kept busy until your enlistment papers expired. He'd rather you were doing something useful than becoming just another drunk. That is why you're here today."

"Yes, sir." Cooper knew he couldn't refute what was being said about him. As his father was fond of saying, facts were facts. He saw he was being given the opportunity to keep himself busy even if it were only for the next few months. It was better than the alternative and Cooper knew it. He had to do something or he'd end up on the street with the thousands of other demobilized soldiers flooding back into New Orleans looking for escape in the bottle from the horrors of the war that had scarred their bodies and their minds.

"What do you know about the Freedman's Bureau?"

"Sir, from what I've been told, it was created to help freed slaves start new lives, free from the bonds of oppression. It sounds like a noble endeavor if you ask me."

Marshall reached up and absentmindedly twirled his mustache. "Noble endeavor!" chuffed the colonel. "I think you'll find it will take more than fancy words and good intentions to make the Freedman's Bureau work. Mister Cooper, how old are you?"

"I just turned twenty-eight."

Marshall pursed his lips while he drummed his fingers on his desk for a moment. "I prefer my agents to be a bit older. Most of my agents are in their late thirties. It gives them gravitas when dealing with the local authorities, but I suppose with your education, as flawed as it is, and your wartime service, that you'll have to do."

Cooper smiled politely, unsure if he should be insulted by the colonel's backhanded compliment or not. "Thank you, sir. I know I've have a weakness for alcohol, but I also know if properly motivated I can put it behind me. You can count on me to do whatever it is you need to be done."

Marshall reached into a drawer in his desk and pulled out a letter. He quickly skimmed the document before placing it inside Cooper's file. "Captain, I hope you aren't setting yourself up for a fall."

"No, sir. I will do my job to the best of my abilities."

"The army has been petitioned by a certain Mister Roy Stone to have someone come up to Williamstown."

"Sorry, sir, I've never heard of it."

"It's a small community in the parish of Saint John the Baptist. It's no more than two days' ride from here."

"Did Mister Stone explain why he'd like someone to go there?"

"In his letter, he wrote that over the past month or so that there have been a string of murders and disappearances. Most of the missing are colored folk, although some white people have also been reported missing as well. Whatever is going on has put everyone on edge. I'd like you to go up there and put an end to whatever is going on in Williamstown."

Cooper sat back in his chair. He was confused. He thought he would be helping freed slaves and their families find employment, not solving a series of alleged crimes. "Sir, would it not be better if a provost officer conducted the investigation?"

"I asked the very same question when this assignment was given to me. I was told that there's none available, so you're it, Captain Cooper. Sort this mess out and you'll have proved your value to the bureau and to me." Marshall handed Cooper a sealed letter. "This is a letter of introduction. Give it to the mayor, Elias Payne, when you present yourself to him. I expect you to set up your office in Williamstown and to get to work right away. This assignment shouldn't take you more than a couple of weeks to tidy up. Mind yourself and keep out of the bottle."

Cooper squirmed on his seat at the last remark.

"Captain, I want this matter dealt with the utmost tact and discretion. My understanding is there are a lot of demobilized Confederate soldiers in Williamstown who do not feel they lost the war. For them, the war is only in abeyance. Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly clear, sir."

Marshall stood and offered his hand. "Then I wish you Godspeed, Captain."

Cooper got out of his chair, shook the colonel's hand, placed his hat back on his head, and saluted his superior. He took his introductory letter and put it away in a pocket on his tunic. Behind him, the door opened and Cooper turned to leave.

Marshall brought up a hand. "Captain, I can't stress enough how delicate an assignment this is. Do what you must, but do nothing to antagonize the people of Williamstown. I don't want to hear of your demise at the hands of one of the guerrilla groups still roaming the woods up there."

Cooper smiled. "I share your sentiments, sir. If there is nothing else, First Sergeant Hawkins and I have to purchase some supplies before leaving."

The old colonel shook his head. Cooper could not help but see the look in the colonel's eyes as if he had just given him a death sentence.

Outside on the dirt road that ran past the colonel's headquarters, Cooper found First Sergeant James Hawkins standing next to their horses. The sergeant saluted and handed Cooper the reins to his horse.

"What's the word, sir?" asked Hawkins.

Cooper returned the salute, placed his left foot into a metal stirrup, and hauled himself up onto his horse. "It would appear we have been given a job with the Freedman's Bureau up in Williamstown."

"You don't sound too enthusiastic about it," said Hawkins as he got up onto his horse.

"I'll explain as we go. However, with all of the guerrilla activity still going on up there, I don't think our new boss expects us to last more than a week up there."

Hawkins let out a low whistle. "Well, sir, I guess we had best prove him wrong."

"I don't intend to die either, Sergeant." Cooper pulled on his horse's reins and tapped its sides with his boots. "Come on, let's visit the commissary before it closes for the day. I suspect we're going to need supplies to last us a week or two. After that, hopefully, we can purchase supplies from the good people of Williamstown."

Chapter 3

Williamstown.

The sun began to slowly dip behind a long row of trees, lining the road leading to Williamstown, sending long shadows down the dirt trail.

A gray-feathered Mississippi kite gripped her sharp talons on a long branch of a birch tree and looked out over the open field for an easy meal. With two chicks to feed back in her nest, the kite was keen to catch a mouse. She watched two young children as they dashed across the ground, hoping they would stir up something for her. Her patience was rewarded when a brown mouse scurried away from the kids. With a flutter of her wings, the kite left her perch and dove straight for the unsuspecting rodent.

For the first time in hours, Cooper noticed the farms and plantations they were riding past were not abandoned. Many of the plantations outside of New Orleans

had been ransacked or burnt to the ground during the war. Some of the former occupants had been forced to move away from their homes when their former slaves left them at the end of the war.

"Looks like we've got company, Captain," said Hawkins to Cooper as they rode down the winding road.

Cooper looked over and saw two black children, no more than seven or eight years old, rush up to a wooden fence marking the extent of a farmer's land. Their clothes were dirty and ill-fitting. From the dirt on the boys, he guessed they had been working all day in the field. Cooper and Hawkins were in their blue uniforms. They had left their kepis back in New Orleans and now wore black cavalry-style hats to keep the sun from shining in their eyes.

"Afternoon, soldiers," said the taller of the two young boys as he gave the riders his best attempt at a salute.

"Afternoon, lads," replied Cooper, returning the child's salute.

The boys stared up at Cooper.

Hawkins chuckled. It was obvious that Cooper's accent was something the children had never heard before. "He said afternoon boys."

The boys laughed, jumped down from the fence, and started jog along, following the two strangers.

"You two be big bugs?" asked the tall boy.

Cooper looked over at Hawkins and mouthed, "Big bugs?"

Hawkins had worked hard in the army to erase the slang he had grown up with from his vocabulary. "The boys want to know if we're important people."

With a smile on his face, Cooper looked over at the youths and shook his head.

"You be a sergeant?" asked the other child, a skinny boy without any shoes on his feet.

"Yes," replied Hawkins.

"Sergeant, you done fight in the war?" asked the thin boy.

"Yes, I did."

"You done shoot some rebs?"

Hawkins shook his head. Children always seemed to ask the same question. He said, "The war's over, boys."

The boys pretended their hands were pistols and shot at each other until a loud call from their father sent them rushing back home.

"They seemed happy to see you," observed Cooper.

"Yeah, I guess so," said Hawkins. "I doubt they've ever seen a free man in a uniform before."

"In this part of the state, probably not."

"Sir, I've been thinking about our assignment and the more I think about it, the less I understand it. Surely, Williamstown will have a sheriff who should be able to deal with whatever problems they may have."

"One would hope so. But he may be unable or unwilling to do anything about these murders and disappearances. Hopefully, it'll all become clear when we arrive."

"Amen to that."

Cooper dug out his canteen and took a long swig of water. "For November, it sure is hot and humid."

Hawkins pointed over at a growing mass of dark clouds on the horizon. "It looks like it's going to storm."

"Let's hope we get to Williamstown before the heavens open up on us." Cooper placed his water bottle away.

A few minutes later, Williamstown came into view. It was a small community which had sprung up in the 1820s alongside the Mississippi River. The town's wooden buildings were spread out on both sides of the road. As it was nearing supper time, there was only a handful of people moving about on the street. Cooper counted a total of twelve buildings on the main road with at least as many more on a side road which looped around like a horseshoe and came out at the far end of the town. They stopped outside the only inn in town: a two-story structure with a sign out front announcing rooms were available to respectable men for four dollars a month.

Cooper got down from his horse and looked around. He saw a one-legged man on the other side of the street eyeing him with suspicion. He knew goodwill toward the North in this part of the state was in short supply and the unannounced arrival of two soldiers, one of whom was black, was not going to endear them to the town's residents.

Sergeant Hawkins joined Cooper. "Captain, shall I see if the stable across the street will take our horses?"

Cooper nodded and handed off his horse's reins. He walked up the steps onto the front porch of the inn; the old wooden boards creaked under his weight. He opened the front door and stepped inside. There wasn't a soul in sight. The pleasant smell of roast beef filled the air. After a long day in the saddle, Cooper's stomach grumbled. He removed his hat, closed the door behind him, and walked over to the front desk. He tapped his hand on a silver bell and waited. A woman in a long brown skirt with a matching shirt walked into the room smiling. She looked to be in her late thirties and had light brown hair which was pulled back and tied off in a bun on the back of her head. The instant she laid her eyes on Cooper in his blue uniform her welcoming smile evaporated.

"Good day, ma'am. My name is Captain Robert Cooper. I saw your sign out front and was wondering if my Sergeant and I might rent a couple of rooms from you."

"Good day to you, sir," replied the woman. The tone of her voice was bitter and inhospitable. "How long do you plan on staying with us?"

"A week, possibly two."

"How will you be paying?"

Cooper reached into a pocket and placed a gold coin worth twenty dollars down in front of her. "I think this should cover our rooms and meals for the next two weeks." Cooper knew banknotes were despised as worthless by most businesses in Louisiana, so he had brought along gold.

The woman's green eyes lit up at the sight of the coin. "Yes, sir, that should do nicely." She cracked a smile, placed her hand on the gold, and slid it toward her. "I only have two rules. No women in your room and no drinking either."

"I shan't be a bother, ma'am."

"See that you aren't, Captain."

Cooper looked meaningfully at his proprietor. "My sergeant is a colored soldier. I hope this isn't going to be an issue."

The woman stood ramrod straight and shook her head. "I'm sorry, sir, but this is a hotel for white folks only. Your boy is welcome to take a room out back. I have a couple that would do him nicely."

"Sergeant Hawkins is not a boy. He is a United States soldier." Cooper regretted the tone of his words the second they came out of his mouth. He had been warned not to antagonize the people of Williamstown and had already failed.

"Be that as it may, he cannot stay at my establishment. You're welcome to go elsewhere, but as we're the only inn in town, you're out of luck,"

The front door opened and Hawkins stepped inside. He was carrying their weapons in his hands and their saddlebags over his left shoulder. "The horses are being fed and looked after, Captain."

"Thank you, Sergeant."

Hawkins removed his hat. "Evening, ma'am. Mighty fine-looking place you've got here."

The woman nodded ever so slightly in greeting.

Cooper turned to face Hawkins. "I have secured us a couple of rooms, yours is out back."

Hawkins grinned. He hadn't expected to be housed among the other guests at the inn. "A roof over my head, any roof, will do just fine, sir."

"John ... John, please come here and take these soldiers' luggage to their rooms," called the woman over her shoulder.

A black youth about fifteen years old in clean, pressed clothes appeared. "Will do, Mrs. James," said the boy.

"The captain will be in room number four and the sergeant will be in the spare room out back," said Mrs. James as she handed the youth a couple of room keys. She looked over at Cooper. "Supper will be served at precisely seven o'clock in the dining room. Please try not to be late. Your sergeant can eat in the kitchen with the help."

Cooper fought the urge to tell her to stuff it when Hawkins said, "Your food smells mighty delicious, ma'am. I can't wait to try some of your establishment's fine cooking."

Mrs. James didn't respond; she turned and left the room.

Cooper had to hand it to Hawkins, the man knew how to act around the people of Williamstown far better than he did. He took his carbine and saddlebag from Hawkins and looked down at John. "Lead on, young man."

"Yes, sir," replied John, reaching over to take Cooper's possessions.

"I'll carry these if you don't mind. They're kind of heavy."

"If you say so, sir." He led Cooper upstairs and unlocked the door to his room.

Cooper handed the boy a five-cent coin as a tip before he stepped into his room. There wasn't much to the lodging. A narrow bed along with a table and one chair was all there was in the room. Cooper didn't care. He wasn't planning on getting comfortable. The sooner he was done and away from Williamstown, the better as far as Cooper was concerned. He dug out his pocket watch and looked at the time. It was nearing six-thirty. Cooper decided it was already too late to meet with the mayor and sheriff. That would have to wait until the morning.

Downstairs Hawkins waited for John to return. He had grown up on a plantation on the outskirts of Morganza, a small community north of Williamstown. Hawkins had learned at an early age how to act around the Mistress of the house and her children. He'd heard the same scorn and condescension in Mrs. James' voice and knew it would do Captain Cooper no good if he were to object to being treated the way he was.

John came bounding down the stairs. He smiled when he looked at Hawkins' chevrons on his uniform. "Please follow me, Sergeant," said the young boy, stressing Hawkins' rank. They walked to the back of the hotel and then outside. It was already beginning to get dark. John placed his key into one of two small rooms built adjoining the hotel and opened the door. He rushed inside and lit a candle.

Hawkins followed John inside and threw his saddlebags down onto the bed. The room was simple, a bed and not much more. Hawkins rummaged in a jacket pocket and pulled out a nickel for the boy.

"Glory be, this is my lucky day," said John, accepting the coin. "Most folks don't tip more than a penny, not that a lot of people been staying here since the end of the war."

"Why's that?" asked Hawkins.

"On account of the troubles, that's why."

Hawkins saw an opening and took it. "What troubles might that be?"

The youth looked over his shoulder before stepping closer to Hawkins as if afraid. "Sir, some people, both white and colored, they be killed or gone missing."

"John, how many people are we talking about?"

"No one rightly knows as most of them who go missing are never found. Some say it done started when them two young lovers from the Mercy Plantation done run off together. Others say it done been going on longer than that. All I know is no one done talk about it anymore. Us colored folk in town be quiet for fear we be next."

Hawkins placed a hand on the youth's shoulder. "John, you seem like a smart young man. What do you believe is going on?"

John looked over his shoulder once more to make sure no one was listening. "It be the Maclean Gang. They be wicked men. I hear they done killed all them folk."

"What makes you so sure?"

"They be a bunch of reb cutthroats who live out in the swamp. They done fought against the Union during the war and when it ended, they all done vowed to keep on fighting. I've heard it said that they oppose freedom for us colored folk and will kill any white person who tries to help us."

Hawkins nodded. What the young boy had said made a lot of sense. "Thanks, now you had best head inside. You don't want Mrs. James getting mad at you, now do you?"

"No, sir," replied John.

Hawkins watched the youth scamper off. He intended to question the household staff over dinner. If John's story held true, then they had something to go on. If it turned out to be nothing more than a story, then they had eliminated one possible lead. Perhaps come the morning the truth would be known.

After dinner, Cooper and Hawkins stood out back smoking cigars, talking about what the sergeant had learned. The cook and her husband had confirmed John's story. The one thing they added was that no one in town would lift a finger to stop the Maclean Gang. In fact, most quietly agreed with them. The general feeling was that unless the coloreds were kept in their place, the people of Williamstown feared an armed black insurrection would occur.

"Well, all of this talk about the Maclean Gang terrorizing and killing people gives us something to go on," said Cooper.

"Captain, if it is a bunch of Confederate renegades we're dealing with, I doubt the two of us will be able to put an end to their murderous ways."

Cooper nodded. "If the sheriff is incapable of dealing with them, I'll send a message back to New Orleans asking for additional support. The army, like it or not, will have no alternative but to send soldiers up here to run these rebs down."

Overhead, a loud clap of thunder heralded the beginning of the storm. A couple of raindrops hit the ground outside the inn.

"I think that's my cue to head to my room," Hawkins said, looking up at the dark sky.

"Looks that way. I'll see you first thing in the morning, Sergeant," said Cooper. He watched Hawkins dash for his room just as the rain began to pour. Cooper butted out his cigar, turned about, and walked inside. He wasn't tired enough to lay down, so he walked into the parlor at the front of the establishment and took a seat. He looked around the room and saw he wasn't alone. A married couple sat at a table playing cards. He judged them to be in their mid-thirties. By the way they were dressed in expensive clothes he knew they came from money.

"Good evening," said Cooper to the couple who glanced over and gave him a dismissive look. He muttered under his breath, "I see the only thing welcome here in Williamstown is my money."

The door to the parlor opened and John stepped inside. In his hands was a silver tray with a decanter and a couple of glasses on it. He smiled at Cooper and said, "A glass of brandy, sir?"

Cooper could taste the amber liquid in his mouth. His hand reached for the tray. It took all of his willpower to stop. He lowered his hand to his side and shook his head. "Not tonight, John, another night, perhaps."

John nodded and walked over to the couple who accepted a drink.

Cooper heard the front door open and someone walk in. With the rain coming down as hard as it was, Cooper was curious to see who had ventured out into the dark night. He stood up as the door to the parlor opened and in walked Mrs. James with a man in a blue suit wearing a soaked bowler hat. In his hands was a drenched raincoat, which he gave to another one of Mrs. James' servants. The man was short and looked to be somewhere north of forty. He had curly black hair which was thinning on the top of his round head.

"Captain Cooper, I'd like to introduce you to Elias Payne, our mayor and owner of the hardware shop at the end of town," said Mrs. James.

"Your obedient servant, sir," said Cooper, holding out his hand in greeting.

Payne thrust out his hand and shook the captain's. "We haven't had any Union soldiers in Williamstown in years. What brings you here unannounced?"

Cooper could tell the man liked to be in charge. He motioned to a couple of chairs. "Shall we take a seat, sir."

"Yes, of course." Before he sat, Payne said. "Mrs. James, some coffee would be wonderful. If isn't too late?"

"It's never too late at my inn," she responded, looking over at John who hurried off to the kitchen to fetch the coffee.

Cooper reached inside his tunic and pulled out his letter of introduction which he handed over to the mayor. Payne opened the letter and read the note, twice, before slipping it away in a jacket pocket.

"Captain, would it surprise you to learn that I know Colonel Marshall?"

"Really, sir?"

"Yes, we were both in the army during the Mexican War. We fought together at Veracruz and Chapultepec."

"That would make sense. Many an officer on both sides during the last war had once served together in Mexico."

"We were both second lieutenants in a regiment of Louisiana volunteers back then. He's a good man. I had to sit this last one out. My left knee was hit by a spent bullet at the storming of Chapultepec Castle and has bothered me ever since. I don't agree with my friend siding with the North instead of his home during the war, but I still respect him."

"Yes, sir."

"I read in Frederick's letter that Roy Stone petitioned him into sending someone to investigate what has happened to the people who have allegedly gone missing in these parts."

"That is correct."

John walked into the parlor holding two steaming cups of coffee. He set them down on a table between the two gentlemen and left the room.

Payne picked up a cup and took a sip. He smiled. "Mrs. James makes the best coffee in all of Williamstown."

"Yes, sir. I had a cup with my dinner," said Cooper.

The mayor put his cup down and looked Cooper right in the eyes. "I think Mister Stone was wrong to ask the army to send you all the way up here. I believe he is trying to cover his family's shame on account of his nephew who died attempting to run off with a colored girl."

"Sir, have there not been other disappearances from the farms and plantations around Williamstown?"

Payne slapped the arm of his chair with his hand. "Runaways! Mark my words, those people were all runaways."

Cooper was skeptical. "They all can't be runaways. White, as well as colored folk, have gone missing, have they not?"

"At the end of the war, fully a third of the Negroes living in these parts got up and left their former owners. Can you believe it, after all we had done for them, they deserted us in our hour of need? Over the past few months, the exodus has slowed to a trickle but barely half the Negroes that once worked the fields are here anymore. As for the white people reported missing, well, they are deadbeats running away from their families and their debts. Or perhaps hopeless alcoholics

who have turned their back on society and wandered off into the woods to live out the rest of their miserable lives by themselves. It's all as simple as that."

Cooper didn't accept Payne's explanation. Some of it may have been true, but not all of it. Something in the back of his mind told him to keep prying. "What of the talk that former Confederate soldiers known as the Maclean Gang, who are active in these parts, killing freed slaves and any white people who may have helped them?"

"Poppycock," snorted Payne. "The Maclean Gang is nothing more than a story concocted to frighten colored children into going to bed quietly. They don't exist. Take my word for it. You'd be wasting your time chasing down these imaginary ghosts. Runways and ne'er-do-wells, there's your answer, Captain."

Cooper sat back in his chair. "Thank you for your advice. It will help me conduct my affairs here in a more discreet manner now that I know the truth."

Payne took a long swing of his coffee before standing up and offering his hand.

Cooper stood and shook the mayor's hand. "I bid you goodnight, sir."

"And to you, Captain. I hope that your stay here in Williamstown will be productive and *short*."

After listening to Payne trying to steer him away from Maclean and his people, Cooper doubted it was going to be either.

Chapter 4

The loud boom of thunder tearing through the air above the small ramshackle dwelling shook the walls. A child cried out in terror and ran to her mother's side. Jagged lightning heralding the approach of more thunder lit up the night sky.

"For God's sake, keep Clara quiet," snapped Darcy Wright at his wife as he reached for the double-barreled shotgun he kept over the front door.

"Hush, child, it's nothing more than thunder," said Maude Wright, running her hand over her six-year-old daughter's long golden yellow hair.

Darcy grabbed his shotgun and loaded two shells. He threw an old poncho over the top of his dirty, red long underwear, picked up a lantern from the dinner table, and moved to the door.

"Now, Darcy, are you sure you heard someone moving about outside?" asked Maude. Fear filled her voice.

"There's someone out there, all right. I heard the pigs squealing in their pen and they never do that unless there's they're spooked. We lost a fat piglet to a coyote last week, and I'll be damned if I'm gonna lose another one tonight."

Maude reached out a hand. "Be careful, Darcy, something don't feel right about this."

Darcy shook his head at his wife's warning. He'd fought in the war and wasn't afraid of any man alive. Darcy opened the door and stepped out onto the front porch of his home. In the dark, with the rain coming down, he could barely see ten

feet in front of him. He lifted up his lantern and peered out into the night. "Hey, you out there. I know you're there. Leave now or I'll have to shoot you."

The only response he got was the sound of his pigs squealing in terror.

Darcy pulled back on the dual hammers on his shotgun and stepped off the porch. "I told you to leave my pigs alone." The cold rain struck his hands and face. He hadn't gone more than a couple of yards when his pigs ran straight past him and carried on into this house. Darcy walked toward the pen. He found the gate wide open. Darcy reached over to close the gate when he saw there were prints in the mud. He lowered his lantern to check out the tracks, but couldn't tell who or what had made them. All he knew was whatever had left the prints was large and heavy. Darcy swore aloud and took a couple of steps away from the pen. A bright flash of lightning lit up the farmstead. Out of the corner of his eye, Darcy thought he saw something big run toward the woods. His blood turned cold. He spun around, brought up his shotgun, and pulled back on both triggers. With a loud boom, a flash of flame shot from the end of his weapon.

Maude Wright, standing in the doorway, nearly leaped out of her skin when she saw her husband turn and fire his shotgun into the night.

Clara hid behind her mother and began to cry.

For a moment, Maude held her breath. She saw her husband lower his shotgun. Darcy brought up his lantern so he could see if he could spot what he had fired at. Fear gripped her heart. She was going to tell him to come back inside when his body seemed to jerk to one side. He let go of his lantern. A second later, she watched in horror as he was lifted up off the ground and pulled back into the dark. The light from his lantern, laying in the mud, sputtered for a few seconds before going out. The world outside of her house went black. She tried to scream, to cry out in horror but found her voice had vanished. With her heart pounding away, Maude never saw who or what had taken her husband away from her. She staggered back, slammed the door closed, grabbed hold of her child, and found her voice. She began to scream as loud as she could until she could scream no more.

Chapter 5

Cooper popped his head into the kitchen and found Hawkins sitting at a table with John. Both were just finishing off their breakfast of fried ham and potatoes. It was Cooper's first sober morning in weeks. He was surprised at how much energy he had.

Hawkins stood and looked over at a clock on the wall. "Sorry, sir, am I late?"

Cooper shook his head. "No, Sergeant, I'm early. Please sit down and finish your meal." He poured himself a fresh cup of coffee and joined them at the table. Only after John had wolfed his food down and gone about his chores did Cooper tell Hawkins about his conversation with Payne from the night before.

"Do you believe him?" Hawkins asked.

"Not in the slightest. If this had happened back in April right after the war ended, I might have fallen for his explanation, but not now. It's not as cut and dry as deadbeats and runaways. I wonder if the sheriff will give us the same cock-and-bull story about Maclean as the mayor did?"

Hawkins shrugged. "So, what's the plan for today, Captain?"

"Once I finish my coffee I say we pay the sheriff a visit and see what he has to say. After that, we'll ride on out to Roy Stone's plantation and speak with him."

Hawkins stood up. "I'll send John to the stables to tell the boy there to get our horses ready."

Cooper nodded. "Good thinking."

"That's why I'm a sergeant, sir," replied Hawkins, toasting him with his coffee cup.

"Yeah, okay, First Sergeant. Drink up, we've got work to do."

Outside the sun climbed high in the cloudless sky. The road running through town had turned into a muddy mess during the night. Steam rose from the ground as it began to dry. The sheriff's office was four buildings down from the inn. Cooper spotted a couple men standing outside of the saloon across the road watching them. No matter how carefully they stepped, their once clean boots were soon caked with mud.

Cooper and Hawkins wiped their boots off on a set of wooden stairs, trying to get them as clean as possible before walking into the sheriff's office. From inside they could hear the sound of a woman crying. Cooper opened the door and saw a distraught woman holding a sleeping child tight in her arms. He removed his cap. "Morning, ma'am."

The woman looked over with tear-filled eyes but said nothing. She looked exhausted. Her dress was covered in mud. It was clear she had walked some distance through the muck to see the sheriff.

"What do you want?" asked a man sitting behind a desk at the far end of the room. Cooper saw that the man was wearing an old Confederate uniform with sergeant's stripes on the sleeves. He had thick reddish-blond hair and appeared to have not shaved in several days. The sheriff wore an eye patch over his left eye and looked to be in his late twenties.

"Good day, my name is Captain Cooper and this is First Sergeant Hawkins. Are you the sheriff?"

"I am and I'm doing my job right now, so why don't you and your boy wait outside," replied the sheriff with a wave of his right arm.

Cooper was already tired of playing nice with the town's folk and wasn't in the mood to be pushed around by an ex-rebel lawman. He smiled, pulled out a nearby chair, and sat down. "Please ignore us and carry on with your work."

Hawkins remained standing. He crossed his arms and looked over at the sheriff with a stone-faced visage.

The sheriff stood, and Cooper noticed the man was missing his left arm from the elbow down. His sleeve had been bent up and pinned to his gray tunic. The sheriff walked over and took a seat across from the woman. "Mrs. Wright, please try to ignore the ill-mannered Yankees in the room and tell me what happened last night."

"My husband, Darcy, thought he heard someone moving around outside near our pig pen," said Mrs. Wright, her voice cracked. "We didn't have many to start with and as we had already lost one, he didn't want to lose anymore. So he grabbed his shotgun and went to see what was going on. With the rain coming down, it was as black as pitch out there. I was watching from the front door when I think he saw someone moving around and fired his shotgun." Mrs. Wright paused for a moment to wipe the tears from her eyes.

"Please, take your time," said the sheriff.

"A second or two later, something grabbed a hold of my Darcy. Before I could do or say anything, he was dragged away into the night. Oh, it was horrible, Sheriff ... absolutely horrible."

Cooper sat up in his chair. No matter what the mayor had said last night, this poor man had not run out on his family, he had been taken. "Were there any tracks, ma'am?" he asked.

"Be quiet, Yankee!" snapped the sheriff. "I'm talking to Mrs. Wright, not you."

"I waited for first light before stepping out of the house," explained Mrs. Wright. "I had Darcy's revolver from the war with me just in case whoever it was, was still around. I looked everywhere, but there was nothing to be found. If there had been tracks, they were long gone, washed away by the rain. My poor husband was nowhere to be seen. It was as if the Devil himself had come out of the woods and taken him from me."

"Why don't you and Clara go visit Mrs. James and get something to eat. Tell her to bill me. I'll arrange for William, my deputy, to give you a lift back to your farm when you're feeling up to it."

Mrs. Wright stood, as did Cooper and Hawkins. She wiped the tears from her face and tried to smile. "Thank you, Sheriff." With that, she shuffled out of the office looking as if she were still trapped in some horrible nightmare.

The sheriff waited until Mrs. Wright was gone before looking over at Cooper. "What the hell did you say your name was again?"

"Cooper, Captain Cooper, and this is Sergeant Hawkins, mister?"

"Sheriff Tom Owens. Now, what are a couple of blue-bellies doing in Williamstown?"

Cooper couldn't decide if the man was being deliberately confrontational or not. "Sheriff Owens, we are here at the request of Roy Stone to help investigate a rash of murders that have taken place in the past month or so."

Owens shook his head. "Now why would he go and do a damn fool thing like that? I don't need outsiders, especially ones from the Union Army, coming up here to tell me how to do my job."

"We wouldn't be here if Mister Stone had any faith in you to put an end to the ever-increasing number of unexplained disappearances in your jurisdiction."

The sudden flash of anger etched across Owens' face told Cooper that he had touched a nerve. "Listen here, Captain, I looked around Mercy Plantation and found nothing. Absolutely nothing. He's just ashamed his nephew ran off with the cook's daughter . . . a hussy Negro no less."

"The mayor seems to share your sentiments regarding Mister Stone, but I've heard there have been other disappearances," countered Cooper. "What about them?"

"Since I became sheriff of Williamstown, back in May, there has been a total of six people reported missing. The two up at Mercy, a poor farmer and his son a mile out of town, a drunken plantation overseer, and now Darcy Wright."

"What about colored folk?" asked Hawkins. "How many of them have gone missing?"

Owens shrugged. "I honestly don't know and don't care. So many of them ran off during the summer that it would be impossible to tell if anything happened to them."

"Surely the plantation owners would know how many of their former slaves have left them recently?" said Cooper.

"They may, and then again, they may not," replied Owens.

Cooper quickly grew tired of the sheriff's less-than-helpful attitude. "Okay then, Sheriff, what can you tell me about the Maclean Gang?"

Owens chortled. "Who told you about them?"

"Does it exist or not?"

"Yeah, they do, but they're not what people think they are. They like folks in this part, especially the coloreds, to think that they are a gang of outlaws which is pure bull. Alexander Maclean and I rode together raising hell behind Union lines. He's nothing more than a blowhard. After the war, we both came home to Williamstown. I got the job as sheriff, which pissed him off to no end. You see, he wanted the job for himself. The day after I was elected sheriff, he and a bunch of his drunkard friends took off out of town. They've been caught causing a bit of mischief every now and then. But it's nothing that would warrant me chasing them through the bayou."

"Mischief for who?" asked Hawkins.

"I think you know the answer to that."

Cooper wondered what it would take to get Owens to care enough to do his job. "Well, I guess we've learned all we're going to. Thank you for your time, Sheriff."

"Glad I could be of assistance. I take it you'll be riding up to see Roy Stone later today?"

"Correct," said Cooper as he placed his hat back on his head. "However, I think Sergeant Hawkins and I will first take a look around Mrs. Wright's farm to see if we can learn anything out there."

Owens looked at Cooper for a moment. He cleared his throat. "Mister Wright's disappearance is a local matter. There is no need for you to get involved. If you insist in poking your nose where it isn't wanted, I will have no recourse but to place you both under arrest for interfering with the law."

Cooper smiled and stepped closer to Owens. The sheriff had overplayed his hand. "In case you missed it, Sheriff, the South is still under military occupation. Louisiana may be legally considered to once again be part of the Union. However, the state and all who live within her borders are still part of the Fifth Military District, and right now military law trumps all others. Have no doubt in your mind that I can do as I bloody well please and there is absolutely nothing you or anyone else around here can do about it."

Owens ground his teeth and took a step back. "People aren't going to take too kindly to you being here. I won't be held responsible should something happen to you while you and your boy root around in other people's business."

"If you think two Yankees in your town is intolerable, just imagine what would happen if something were to happen to us. In less than a week, hundreds of soldiers would march up here and set up camp. Unlike us, they'd be here as long as it takes to put an end to your troubles, and they'd have no qualms about hunting down Maclean and his bunch of rabble-rousers. In fact, they'd probably relish the chance to hunt him down and kill him."

"Knowing the commanding general, I'd be willing to bet he'd happily dispatch a regiment or two of colored troops to sort out this mess," added Hawkins.

"Jesus, why did you two damned Yankees have to come into my town?" muttered Owens.

"I've already told you why," replied Cooper. "Now if you'll excuse us, Sergeant Hawkins and I have a lot to do today."

Owens held up his right hand. "Hold on a minute, Captain. You can't just go riding around these parts by yourself, it's not safe. I'll come with you. Let me get me grab a few things and I'll meet you both at the stables."

"Thank you. I welcome your assistance."

"Trust me, I'm not doing this because I want to. I'm already looking forward to the day when I get to watch the two of you ride out of this town for good."

"I think I speak for the captain when I say, so do we," said Hawkins.

The Wrights' home was a small, decrepit shack built on a small patch of land in the woods one mile to the east of Williamstown. There was an old mule tied up to the side of the house, drinking rainwater from a trough.

Cooper got down off his horse, tied off its reins to a post, and drew his carbine. He checked that it was loaded. The pigs were back in their pen, sleeping.

"I'm gonna check out the home," said Owens. "There's no reason to take Mrs. Wright on her word. Something else may have happened to her husband."

"Sergeant, go with him," said Cooper. "I'll check around the farm for tracks."

"Yes, sir," Hawkins replied. He turned and followed the sheriff inside the rundown home.

Cooper looked over at the thick woods surrounding the farm. Long strands of moss hung from the old branches. If there had been someone standing there watching him, Cooper doubted he would have seen him. With his carbine held tight in his hands, he walked slowly, studying the ground.

The inside of the Wrights' home was the complete opposite of its exterior. As best she could, Maude Wright had tried to keep her home neat and tidy. Besides the two unmade beds and some mud on the floor, everything was placed where it ought to have been.

"What are you looking for, Sheriff?" Hawkins asked.

"Signs of a fight," answered Owens. "I know the Wrights, they're a good couple; however, people do change. If they had drunk a little too much and gotten into it with each other things in here would be a mess."

"Don't look that way to me."

"No, it doesn't." Owens opened a pantry cupboard and saw a couple of cans of food. There wasn't a bottle of alcohol in sight. "I guess she was telling us the truth."

Hawkins took one last look around before stepping back outside. He saw Cooper and walked to his side. "Any luck, sir?"

Cooper shook his head. "Nothing so far. It looks like the rain wiped the ground clean. If Wright was taken, his attacker's tracks will probably never be found."

"I guess this is a bit of a dead end."

"Did you and the sheriff find anything?"

"No. It looks like the woman was telling the truth."

Cooper looked at Owens. "Sheriff, do you think you could round up a couple of men with dogs to search the woods for any sign of Mister Wright?"

"I could, but it ain't gonna help," replied Owens as he reached into a pocket, pulled out a wad of plug tobacco, and took a bite.

"Why's that?"

Owens spat a dark gob of tobacco juice onto the ground. "Because there ain't a man in Williamstown who would volunteer to help you."

"This isn't about me, it's about Darcy Wright. Get them to help you in your investigation."

"If I do this, you two can't be anywhere near me."

Cooper was growing exasperated with Owens. "If it'll help you do your job, then I agree. Sergeant Hawkins and I will keep out of sight."

"I'll see what I can do. Are we finished here?"

"No. I want to try something. Where do you think Mister Wright was standing when he was taken?"

Owens spat out another mouthful of tobacco before walking about halfway between the shack and the woods. "I'd say about here. Why?"

"Sergeant Hawkins, get some rope off your horse and make a lasso," said Cooper.

"Right, sir," replied Hawkins. A minute later he returned with the rope in his hands.

"Now, Sergeant, move to the woodline and see if you can throw your lasso over the sheriff."

"Just a minute, Captain," yammered Owens. "There's no way in hell I'm going to allow your boy to lasso me."

Cooper shook his head, walked over, and pushed Owens out of the way. "Sergeant, see if you can get the rope over me from where you are."

Hawkins raised the lasso over his head and swung it around a couple of times before letting go of it. The rope flew through the air and landed on Cooper, ensnaring him.

"Pull it tight!"

The noose tightened around Cooper's body, trapping his arms.

"Now, Sergeant, pull me back toward the woods."

With a hard yank on the rope, Hawkins jerked Cooper off his feet and pulled him back toward him. Cooper landed on his back. It took only a few seconds before he was at Hawkins' feet.

"I think you can let me go now," said Cooper, looking up at his sergeant.

"Right you are, sir," replied Hawkins as he bent down and removed the rope from around Cooper's chest.

"What was that all about?" asked Owens.

"I was trying to see if someone hiding in the trees could have pulled Darcy to his death without ever being seen by his wife," explained Cooper. He stood up and brushed the dirt and leaves off his blue tunic. "It's obvious your killer was standing exactly where Sergeant Hawkins is right now. Might I suggest you begin your search from this very spot when you return with your dogs."

"See here, I don't need no foreign-born Yankee officer to tell me how to do my job," growled Owens.

"I think we'll have to agree to disagree on that, Sheriff."

Owens' face contorted in anger. Before he could speak, Cooper said, "I think we're done here. How do we get to the Stone plantation from here?"

"It's about a mile down the road."

"Sergeant, saddle up, we're leaving."

"Right, sir," replied Hawkins.

Owens stepped in front of Cooper and glared at him. "You people may have won the war, but I'm the law in these parts. I'd prefer if you didn't speak down to me in front of your boy."

Cooper's eyes narrowed. "Sheriff, Sergeant Hawkins is no boy. He is a sergeant in the Union Army and you will call him by his rank from now on. Do we understand one another?"

"Like hell I will!"

"Fine. Have it your way. Sergeant Hawkins and I will carry on by ourselves. I'll come by your office after supper to see how the search for Mister Wright's body went." Cooper stepped past Owens and walked away.

"God damn it. Wait a minute!" called out Owens. "I told you it ain't safe to be riding alone out here."

Cooper stopped and looked back. "We'll take that risk."

Owens swore under his breath and ran after him. "That's fine and dandy for you, but I can't. When it's just us, I'll call him Sergeant even if I don't think he's real one. But there's no way in hell that I'll ever call him mister. He ain't no officer."

Cooper looked over at Hawkins, who chuckled as he climbed up onto his horse.

"Very well, Sheriff, if it's not too much trouble, could you escort us to the Mercy Plantation."

Chapter 6

The road leading up to Mercy Plantation was lined with tall oak trees, standing like soldiers on parade. The smell of fresh cut grass hung in the air. Through the trees, the three riders could see the many cotton fields. The crop had already been harvested, leaving the ground empty. Except for a couple of men cutting wood, the estate looked deserted. Before long a majestic mansion came into view.

Cooper had lived in New Orleans for the past three months but had never seen as palatial a home like the one in front of him. The white house was long and had

two stories. There were curved stairs on either side of the front entrance that led from the ground floor to the second story. Tall Greco-Roman columns ran across the front of the mansion supporting a sloped red-brick tiled roof. Red and white roses were in bloom in large ceramic pots lined up next to a brick footpath leading to the front doors.

The men dismounted their horses and looked around. Within seconds, a young boy who had been picking up wood ran over and took hold of all three horse's reins. His eyes lit up when he saw Hawkins in his uniform.

"Gentlemen, can I take your horses?" asked the boy.

"Of course it is," replied Cooper, noticing how well the youth spoke. "If you promise to take good care of them, I'll give you a nickel for your troubles."

"Yes, sir," said the youth, smiling from ear to ear.

"Be mindful of what you do here, Captain. It doesn't help the others if you spoil the child," cautioned Owens.

"Whatever do you mean?" asked Cooper.

"I don't know what Mister Stone pays his Negroes to work the land, but it probably isn't much. Lincoln may have set them free, but they sure as hell ain't being paid the same wage as a white farmhand. Trust me, you don't want to make the others jealous of the boy. It will only lead to trouble."

Cooper shook his head as he stepped to the front door and knocked twice on the large, oval brass door knocker that looked like it was being clenched in the mouth of a wild boar. A few seconds passed before the entrance swung open and a white-haired black man wearing a black suit with long tails stepped out.

"Good day, gentlemen, my name is Maurice. I am Mister Stone's butler," said the man. "How may I be of assistance?"

Cooper removed his cap. "Good day to you as well. My name is Captain Robert Cooper and these gentlemen are First Sergeant Hawkins and Sheriff Owens. I was wondering if we could have a word with Mister Stone."

"Is he expecting you, sir?"

"No. I'm here because of a letter Mister Stone wrote to the commanding general of the Fifth District. I think he'll understand if you tell him that." Cooper couldn't help but see the look of suspicion in the butler's eyes when he glanced over at Owens.

"Very good, sir. If you would please take a seat while I go and see if Mister Stone will see you," said Maurice, indicating to a couple of white chairs on the porch.

Cooper turned to face Hawkins. "Sergeant, this will probably bore you. Why don't you check on the horses?"

Hawkins nodded his understanding, saluted Cooper, and carried on.

Cooper took a seat and looked over at the empty cotton field. His mind wandered back to the years before the war when he visited his cousin, Kyle McTaggart, who had lived on a plantation a few miles outside of Baton Rouge. They were what Cooper called minted. They were a rich family who owned almost one hundred slaves. They never discussed the issue of slavery, at least not in front of Kyle's father, a strict and religious man who like his son died during the war fighting for the Confederacy. Cooper decided once the troubles plaguing Williamstown were sorted out he'd pay a visit to his late cousin's plantation. He

was curious to learn what had happened to it and the remainder of Kyle's large family.

Owens interrupted the silence. "I think you'll find that I'm none too popular with Roy Stone."

Cooper wasn't surprised. "Why would that be?"

"Like I told you, I think that he's making a fuss to cover up the fact that his nephew tried to run off with a colored girl. I looked for the young uns' killer but never found a thing. Not a single track was ever found."

"As I told you before, Sheriff, the tracks were there, I saw them. However, by the time you bothered to ride out to investigate, the rain had washed them away," said a gruff voice. Both men had not heard a man join them on the porch. He was as tall as Cooper with a graying beard that hung down to his sweat-stained shirt. He wore a straw hat to keep the sun off his weathered face.

Owens shook his head. "You said the ones you and your men found were animal tracks, not a man's footprints."

"I told you then and I'm saying it again, you should have gone after the Maclean Gang. Only a blind man couldn't see they're the ones behind the murders."

"What are you saying?" said Owens as he stood.

Cooper could feel the tension building between the two men. He got out of his seat. "Gents, this is not helpful."

Owens shot Cooper an angry look. "I don't need anyone, especially not a Yankee, to tell me what is and isn't helpful."

Stone dug a handkerchief from a pocket and wiped the sweat from his neck. "Sheriff Owens, Andrew, and Willow were killed by Maclean and his murderous friends and you know it. Why you haven't done anything about them is beyond comprehension." He turned to face Cooper and held out his hand in greeting. "Good day, Captain, my name is Roy Stone. I manage Mercy Plantation on behalf of my sister, Eliza Legrand."

Cooper shook Stone's hand. He had a firm vise-like grip. "It is an honor to meet you, sir, my name is Captain Robert Cooper. I see you already know the sheriff."

"That I do."

Maurice walked over holding a silver serving tray in his hands. On it was a pitcher of lemonade and three glasses. He placed it down on a nearby table and bowed slightly at Stone before leaving.

Stone poured the drinks.

Owens sat but didn't take a glass of lemonade.

"No one makes lemonade like Mrs. Patrick," said Stone before downing his glass in one drink.

Cooper took his seat, picked up his glass, and tried a sip. It was perfect, not too sweet or tart. "My compliments to Mrs. Patrick."

"I'll make sure to pass them on," said Stone. "I saw another soldier over by the stables, who is he?"

"That's First Sergeant Hawkins. He was my company sergeant when our regiment was disbanded. He's a fine soldier and a son of Louisiana."

"Captain, I take it you are here because of the letter I wrote?"

"Yes, sir, I am."

"Are there any more soldiers coming?"

"No, sir. Sergeant Hawkins and I are it."

Stone took a deep breath. He shook his head and let out a weary sigh. "I guess my letter didn't generate the effect I had hoped for."

"Sir, I was not privy to the contents of your letter. If I knew what you had written perhaps it would help me to better understand what you believe the problem to be. Since arriving here yesterday, I have heard several different and conflicting interpretations of the troubles plaguing this community."

Stone looked over at Cooper. "About a month ago, my nephew, Andrew, announced his intention to run off with Willow, Mrs. Patrick's daughter. I forbade it, but being young and in love, they ran off anyway. That night, we followed their tracks for miles through the forest all the way to an old storage barn on the Mississippi. There we found Andrew's eviscerated body. As for Willow, the animals who murdered my nephew let their dogs maul her to death. I still have nightmares when I think back on that night."

"If we're going to talk freely about their deaths you might as well tell the good captain what you told me about the tracks you found," said Owens.

"I know it will sound damned peculiar, but I found a set of footprints leading from Willow's body into the woods," said Stone. "The tracks were unlike any I had ever seen in my life. Even one of my trackers, who had grown up in the bayou, couldn't identify them."

"What did they look like?" Cooper said.

"The only way I can describe them is half-man, half-wolf."

Owens snickered. "There ain't no such thing."

Stone's voice grew angry. "I know that, but I also know what I saw that night. One of Maclean's men could have been barefoot and walked in the same tracks as the animal that killed Willow."

Cooper asked, "Sir, are you aware of any other murders in the area?"

Stone nodded. "I have been in regular contact with the other plantation owners and they have all reported colored workers going missing. We know quite a number of them left in the summer of their own volition, but not all of them. It's always the same. People go missing in the night and all that is found is blood, a lot of blood. I am convinced Maclean is behind this. He's nothing but a coward and a common thief."

"He's no coward!" snapped Owens. "He at least fought in the war to preserve our way of life. What did you do?"

Stone stood and glared down at the lawman. "Our way of life was ruined by that war. Instead of being able to manage our own affairs, we are now an occupied people." He glanced at Cooper. "No offense, Captain, but our politicians failed us and we marched off to war as if it were some great game. My sister's husband and three of her children died in that war. What did it get us? Nothing but death and misery. Maclean and his thugs claim to have fought for people like my family during the war. Truth be told, he and all his people are nothing more than wild animals who need to be hunted down and killed."

Cooper waited for Stone to sit back down. "How long would you say this has been going on for?"

"The troubles began about five months ago. It started with the DuBois, followed by the King Plantation, and now finally my own."

"Sir, Negroes aren't the only people going missing. We were at a small farm earlier today looking for a man who vanished in front of his wife last night."

"Who was it?"

"Darcy Wright," said Owens.

Stone shook his head. "It was most likely the work of Maclean or some of his men. The bastards hung one of my workers last week. They accused him of stealing from another plantation. It all happened while I was away in New Orleans tending to family business. Unfortunately, I didn't learn about it until I got back and the man was already dead."

Cooper asked, "Had he stolen anything?"

"No, he most certainly had not. I spoke with Mister DuBois, who owns the plantation a few miles down the road, and he said my man had been there to visit a young woman. He was stopped by Maclean and his murderous gang on his way home and strung up from the nearest tree. I complained to the sheriff but was told I should let it go. He even went so far as to say these things will happen from time to time." Stone's voice grew louder and more agitated by the second.

Owens said, "Mister Stone, if you can provide me with evidence of a crime then I can do something about it. There were no witnesses. Absolutely no one saw your boy get hanged. Anyone could have done it. You just want to believe it's the work of Maclean and his men."

Stone looked at Cooper. "Did the sheriff tell you that he rode with Maclean during the war?"

Cooper nodded.

"Did he also tell you the mayor's only son is a member of Maclean's posse?"

"No ... no, he did not," replied Cooper. He fixed his gaze on the sheriff. "That would explain a lot."

Owens leaped from his chair. His face twitched. "I don't have to take this from the two of you. I'm a good lawman and I do my job to the best of my abilities."

"You do as the mayor tells you to," Stone shot back.

"That's not true and you know it!" replied Owens. "If I still had both my arms I'd demand satisfaction from you."

"And I'd oblige you."

Cooper stood between the two men. "Gentlemen, I must ask that you put your differences aside. What has happened to date is in the past and must be left there. Neither of you can deny there is a very real and deadly threat to the people of this community. We must all work together to stop these killings."

Owens looked aside for a moment before taking his seat.

"You are correct," Stone said to Cooper. "We southern gentlemen sometimes allow our passions to cloud our minds. I apologize for my behavior."

"There is no need to apologize. You and your family have suffered a tragic loss. I would be just as angry if not more so if I were in your shoes."

Stone and Cooper sat down, picked up their glasses, and had another drink of lemonade. For a while no one spoke.

It was Cooper who broke the silence. "Gentlemen, if, for the moment, we say that it isn't Maclean's people behind all of these disappearances, who are we left with as a possible culprit?"

"Drifters," offered Owens.

"I didn't see many people on the road leading to Williamstown," said Cooper.

"And you won't. These people travel at night and use the side roads and trails through the woods. Most of the vagrants I've had to deal with are ex-soldiers. They're just passing through on their way home and steal the odd thing from here and there to eat. I usually just run them out of my jurisdiction with a warning to never come back. To the best of my knowledge, none of them ever have."

Cooper said, "What if you missed one and he's still hiding out in the woods?"

"Why would he stay here?" asked Stone. "There are far richer plantations a day's ride or two to the east of here."

"Perhaps he has a predilection for killing. It wouldn't be the first time a man has been driven mad during a war. I once read of a man who months after returning home from the Revolutionary War, took an ax and chopped up his family and neighbors, before he was killed."

"God, I hope that isn't the case. The last thing we need is a madman running loose to add to our woes."

"At the moment, it's all conjecture. Before it gets dark, could I see where the two young people's bodies were found?"

Stone scratched his head. "Why would you want to do that? There is nothing there anymore."

"It'll help me understand what happened that fateful night."

Stone stood. "If you think it will help, I can lead you there myself."

Sergeant Hawkins stood by the stables and looked down the dirt road and the long line of small cottages that had once been slave quarters but were now homes to the families living and working on the plantation. A shiver ran down his spine when he recalled the brutal conditions he and his family had to endure before he couldn't take it anymore and ran away.

A black man in his late fifties, wearing work clothes and with a small shaggy dog by his side, walked out of a nearby vegetable garden and waved over at Hawkins. "Good day to you. My God, I can hardly believe my eyes. You're the first colored soldier I done ever laid my eyes on."

Hawkins smiled and held out his hand. "I'm not the only one. There's plenty more of us in the army these days."

The man shook Hawkins' hand. "The world, she surely has turned upside down since Mister Lincoln freed us slaves."

"It surely has. My name is First Sergeant James Hawkins."

"Thomas, Thomas Legrand. What brings you to Mercy, Sergeant?"

"Captain Cooper and me were sent up here from New Orleans to help the sheriff look into the disappearances of several white and colored folks in these parts."

Thomas looked at the ground and shook his head.

"Mister Legrand, do you know anything that might help us?"

Thomas looked up. "No one around here except for Mister Stone gives a damn about all those poor black people who have gone missing. Hell, most of the white folks didn't even give a damn until some of them disappeared."

"How many people are we talking about?"

"If you add in Miss Willow and Master Andrew, it's four from here. I heard folks say there could be another ten or twelve folks missing from the other nearby farms and plantations."

"How do you know some of them didn't just leave and head north?"

Thomas shook his head. "The white folk maybe, but not us. When the war ended, we all done made our mark on contracts to live and work here for the next three years. The money ain't much, but it's better than being a slave. A young couple who done vanished from Mercy three weeks ago were taken in the middle of the night when it was raining. I was told that something spooked the horses in the stables. When they went to see what was bothering them, they never came back."

"Surely, Mister Stone looked for these people."

"He did, but we never found any tracks. It was as if they had been dragged off into the dark by something that doesn't want to be found."

Hawkins didn't believe in ghost stories; they were something parents told their children to get them to behave. He decided to try a different approach. "I was told in town that the men behind these killings are from the Maclean Gang, is this true?"

"I couldn't say. All I do know is that whoever or whatever it is that is doing all the killing lives somewhere far back in the woods and only hunts at night."

Cooper spotted Hawkins chatting with a man and called out. "Sergeant, get the horses, we're heading out right away."

Hawkins waved back and walked to the stables.

Stone saw Thomas and walked over to him. "I'm taking these gentlemen to the old warehouse on the river. Would you like to come along?"

"Yes, sir, I'd like that a lot," replied Thomas. "I'll saddle up a couple of horses for us to ride."

"Before we leave, could you ask one of the young boys to tell Mrs. Patrick that we will have three more mouths to feed at dinner time."

"Yes, sir."

Owens raised his hand. "Make that two. I'm sure Madame Legrand would not take it very well were I to join you at your dinner table. Besides, I have work to attend to back in town."

"Sheriff, aren't you afraid we'll get lost on the road later tonight?" said Cooper, sardonically.

"We have plenty of space here," said Stone. "Please say you'll stay the night here as my guests."

"We'd be delighted to accept your gracious invitation."

The hour long ride to the old warehouse took the four men past the empty cotton fields and through a dark, dense forest before coming out in a clearing.

Cooper looked over at the dilapidated barn and tried to imagine the terror the young couple had gone through before they were brutally murdered.

Stone got off his horse and pointed to a tall tree on the far side of the building, "We found Andrew under that tree over there."

Everyone else dismounted. Cooper could see the sadness on Stone's face as they walked toward the tree. He'd lost a younger sister to pneumonia when she was

only four. He couldn't imagine how he would feel now if he were to lose someone close to him.

"We found Master Andrew's cut-up body lying on the ground right here," explained Thomas, standing at the base of the tree.

Cooper looked around. "Where did you find the girl's body?"

"Willow's body was discovered by one of the dog handlers about fifty yards away," said Stone.

"Show me."

They walked through the brush until they came to a small hollow in the ground. No words were exchanged. All eyes were fixed on the woods surrounding them.

"She was here," pointed out Stone. "It was a ghastly sight. Her throat had been torn from her body. The bastards had allowed their dogs to eat her intestines."

Hawkins removed his hat and bowed his head. "Lord, please look after these poor children now they are by your side."

"Amen," added Thomas.

Cooper shook his head. He had seen men kill each other by the thousands, but he had never met a man willing to feed a child to a dog. His skin crawled at the thought. He walked to the river's edge and looked out over the muddy brown water. The far bank was a good sixty to seventy yards away. He had no idea how deep the water was, but the current flowed fast past him.

"What's that?" asked Hawkins.

Cooper turned his head and saw a large paddlewheel riverboat stuck on a sandbar at a bend in the river.

"That's the GENERAL BRAGG," said Stone. "At the start of the war, an old paddlewheel boat was confiscated by the army and turned into a floating gun battery. As you can see it met a rather ignominious end when it bottomed out on a sandbar. When the Union arrived, they confiscated the cannons and anything else of value. Now it sits there as a hazard to navigation for boats going up and down the river."

"I'm surprised no one has tried to burn it down," said Cooper.

"I'm sure one of these days someone will drink a little too much whiskey and torch it for a laugh."

"How deep is the water?" asked Hawkins.

"I don't rightly know," responded Thomas. "All I do know is it's over your head a few feet after you leave the riverbank."

"Is there anything else you would like to see, Captain?" asked Stone.

"No, sir. I know this was difficult for you," said Cooper. "However, it was important that I see where the crime was committed."

Stone nodded. "As it's getting late, I say we all leave this accursed place, head back home, and see what Mrs. Patrick has prepared for us."

"She is a mighty fine cook," added Thomas. "No salted horse for us."

"Sounds good," said Cooper, knowing the term for preserved meats. He took one last look around. His eyes lingered on the woods. There was only one trail leading away from the spot where they found the young girl's body. If there had been a group of men on horseback with their dogs, rain or no rain, a track or a broken twig would have been found. Something wasn't adding up in his mind and it

bothered him. For the first time since leaving New Orleans, he wished he had a bottle of whiskey with him.

Chapter 7

It was twilight when they arrived back at the plantation. The mouthwatering aroma of a wild pig cooked over an open fire greeted them.

"I'll put the horses in the stables for the night," said Thomas as he climbed off his horse.

Hawkins took his and Cooper's horse's reins in his hand. "Hold on, Thomas, I'll give you a hand."

"Your sergeant seems like a good man," noted Stone. "How long have you known him?"

"I've had him by my side for the past two years," replied Cooper. "He may not have much in the way of a formal education, but Sergeant Hawkins has more common sense than anyone I've ever met. If it weren't for him, I'd be dead several times over. I owe him my life."

"Is he looking for work now that the war is over? I could use a man like him to help run the plantation."

"Sorry, sir, Sergeant Hawkins and I already have a job with the Freedmen's Bureau for at least the next six months."

"Well, if he ever tires of working for the government, he can always come here. Please let him know that a job will be waiting for him."

Cooper chuckled. Stone was not going to let go. "I'll pass on your kind invitation to him."

"Come, let's go inside and get washed up for dinner. Smells like Mrs. Jackson has prepared a boucherie for us." Stone used the Cajun word for a roast pig as many of his former slaves spoke a mix of English and Cajun French.

At the back door, they were met by Maurice, who greeted them, and took their hats and gloves from them.

Captain Cooper will be staying in the guest bedroom tonight," said Stone to his butler. "Please arrange for some hot water to be sent up there right away."

"Yes, sir," replied Maurice, dryly.

Cooper knew better than to ask about Hawkins. He wouldn't see him again until the morning. The sergeant would be eating and sleeping with the servants who lived in the back of the mansion.

An hour later, Cooper walked down the curved staircase and into the main hall.

A young man dressed in a dark suit with a pressed white shirt and a black bow tie held a silver tray covered with champagne flutes. The young man briskly walked toward him. "Sir, would you like a drink?"

Cooper could taste the bubbly alcohol in his mouth. At that moment, he wanted a drink more than he ever had. It took all of his willpower to raise a hand and wave off the offer.

"If you would prefer something else, I can have Jacob fetch you whatever you like," said Stone as he walked out of the parlor.

"I have to abstain from alcohol . . . doctor's orders," replied Cooper.

"That is most unfortunate. Mercy Plantation may have seen better days, but her cellar is filled with the finest champagne brought all the way from France before the war." Stone had changed his clothes and now wore a dark gray suit with a white shirt and black tie. The best Cooper had been able to do was brush the dirt from his uniform while one of Maurice's younger servants cleaned and polished his boots for him.

"Sir, I've been meaning to ask, what is behind the name of the plantation?"

"Mercy was Mister Legrand's mother's name. When his family established this cotton plantation, they named it after her. Now, please let me introduce you to the rest of the dinner guests," said Stone, leading Cooper into the parlor.

In the candle-lit room were four people, three men and one woman. Stone smiled and said, "Lady and gentlemen, may I present to you, Captain Robert Cooper of the United States Army."

A man wearing a plain brown suit with broad shoulders walked over and offered his hand. He had a tanned face, and dark, almost black eyes. "Good evening, sir, my name is Cyrus Eyre. It is a pleasure to meet you."

"Cyrus is the head overseer of the entire plantation," explained Stone.

"I am honored," said Cooper as he shook Cyrus' calloused hand.

The next man to introduce himself was a short, sickly looking man in an ill-fitting gray suit. He wore glasses on his hawk-like nose. "Evening, Captain, I am Henry Legrand. Madame Eliza Legrand is my sister-in-law."

"Henry's brother, Lawrence, was a colonel in the Confederate Army," explained Stone. "He and his three oldest boys died in the war."

"I would have joined up too, but my ill health and bad eyesight prevented me from doing so," said Henry.

"Be glad you didn't, sir," responded Cooper, doubting the man had ever held a gun in his life. "Noble intentions aside, it was murder on an industrial scale."

"Are you saying the North was wrong to fight a war to free the slaves?"

Cooper shook his head. "Not at all. It was the right thing to do. I just think the very nature of war has changed. It has become a horrid endeavor. We must find a way to avoid it at all costs in the future or it will destroy us all."

"Such philosophical words for a man in a soldier's uniform," said the last man in the room. His accent was Cajun.

"Robert, may I introduce to you Louis Melancon," said Stone. "He is a Baptist minister, who graciously offered to teach the word of the Lord to the farmhands." Melancon was a slender man who stood ramrod straight in his black suit. He looked to be in his late forties and had a stern look on his face. His thinning, greasy hair was combed back on his head.

"Pastor, it's a pleasure to meet you," Cooper said, extending his hand. Melancon shook Cooper's hand.

Melancon stepped to one side "Captain, this is my wife, Rose Melancon. She is a teacher who also helps spread the good word."

Cooper bowed slightly. "My pleasure, Madame."

Rose was a lovely woman who looked to be a good twenty years younger than her husband. She had milky white skin and pale blue eyes, with curly black hair that hung down to her shoulders. Her dress was as black as pitch.

She smiled at Cooper. "Captain, I hope your stay here in our parish will be fruitful."

"Ma'am, if you don't mind me asking, what do you know of my visit?"

"I teach the young children on the plantation. Your arrival here did not go unnoticed by the workers. Word travels fast among the people here. I hope you find who was behind those awful murders and bring them to justice."

"So do I, ma'am."

Cooper looked over at his host. "Sir, I must commend you for what you are doing here. However, I believe there are laws still on the books in this state that prohibit the teaching of Negroes to read and write."

"It was never unlawful to read to them from the Bible," replied Stone. "If we want them to understand the word of the Lord, then they must also be able to read from His good book. Besides, I consider such a law to be unjust especially now as there are no more slaves in this state."

"Hopefully, it won't be long before such archaic legislature is struck from the books of our great state," added Louis Melancon.

"Captain, please don't confuse my actions with those of the pre-war abolitionists who risked their lives to end slavery," said Stone. "What I am doing for the people on my sister's plantation is just good business sense. If all of our freed Negroes were to leave us, we would lose our livelihood. Rather than move north in search of a better life, I'm trying to create a stable one here for the workers and their families."

"Mister Stone is an enlightened man," said Rose Melancon. "The Lord will reward him in Heaven."

Cyrus said, "It's not as if we're advocating giving the coloreds the right to vote."

"That'll be the day," chuffed Henry Legrand. "Darkies smart enough to know who to vote for. Why, the very idea is preposterous."

Cooper forced a smile but kept his lips firmly sealed.

A bell chimed in the doorway. "Dinner is served," announced Maurice. In his white-gloved hands was a small silver bell. He stepped aside as Roy Stone led his guests to the dining room.

Cooper saw there were seven place settings on a long, polished mahogany table. He stood behind a chair while they waited for the last dinner guest to arrive. A couple of seconds later, a pale woman in her early fifties with chestnut-colored hair entered the room. She was wearing a long, black dress that buttoned up around her slender neck.

Maurice pulled out her chair at the head of the table. The woman nodded slightly and took her seat. Once seated everyone else joined her at the table.

Two young servants walked in and began to pour water into crystal glasses on the dining table.

Stone stood up and looked over at the family matriarch. "Eliza, I would like to introduce Captain Robert Cooper."

Cooper stood and bowed slightly. "My pleasure, ma'am."

Stone and Cooper took their seats while Maurice waved for a young boy carrying a pot filled with soup to come in.

"Captain, I take it you are here to bring an end to the troubles plaguing our parish?" said Eliza.

"Yes, ma'am."

"I am sorry that you could not have come sooner. My home is so empty now. I have lost all that I once held dear to me. My poor Andrew would still be alive if he hadn't fallen under the spell of that colored witch."

"Eliza, please, we've been through this a dozen times already," said Stone. "Andrew wasn't a child. He was old enough to know what he was doing."

Cooper could feel the palpable tension between the siblings.

Eliza shook her head. "My dear brother, you're wrong. My broken heart tells me he'd still be here if that little whore hadn't gotten her claws into him."

The young man serving the soup stopped and looked over at Maurice, unsure what to do. With a nod, the old butler told him to ignore the conversation and carry on with his duties.

"She wasn't a whore," countered Stone. "Her name was Willow and she had lived her entire life here in this house. She and Andrew had been friends for years."

"No. I won't hear another word. You're a damned fool, Roy!" screamed Eliza. "I never should have asked you to run my plantation. You've always been too soft on the coloreds." With that, she stood up, threw her cloth napkin onto the table and stormed out of the room.

Everyone at the table stood and watched her leave.

"I'm sorry," said Stone. "She hasn't been herself since her son was killed. Please sit down and enjoy your soup. I'll go see to my sister and join you all shortly."

Cooper took his seat and looked across the table at Cyrus, who was shaking his head. "Is this normal?"

"No. It's been worse, a lot worse," replied Cyrus. "The woman has been grief-stricken ever since she learned her last living child had been murdered."

"Still, you have to feel for her."

"I don't. She's always had a nasty streak in her. If Stone weren't here, Willow's mother, Mrs. Jackson, would have borne the brunt of her wrath and been thrown out of the home she has lived in all her life."

Cooper dipped his spoon into his soup and tried it. After a long day, the rice and tomato soup tasted delicious. He was about to say something to Cyrus when he noticed no one else was eating. All of their heads had turned toward the windows, looking out onto the plantation's empty fields. A flash of lightning lit up the outside world. A second later, the crash of thunder rolled over the mansion. The look on their faces was a mix of fear and apprehension. It was clear something deeply troubled the people living at the Mercy Plantation.

Chapter 8

Cooper lay on his bed staring up at the ceiling. He reached over and picked up his pocket watch. It was well after midnight, yet his mind wouldn't let him rest. Try as he might, he couldn't get two words out of the other dinner guests after the rain began to fall. It was as if they wanted to finish their meal and head back to their quarters before it got too late. He sat up. If he wasn't going to sleep, he decided to have a late night snack, hoping it would help him catch some shuteye. Cooper reached down and pulled on his boots. He picked up his tunic and put it on before heading downstairs to the kitchen to grab a glass of water and something to eat. When he pushed the door open, he was surprised to see Maurice sitting at a table polishing a silver candle holder.

"Good evening, sir," said Maurice. "Is there something I can do for you?"

Cooper shook his head. "I'm just nosing around for something to eat."

"There are some leftovers in the pantry. I can make you something, sir."

"Thanks, that sounds great. But if you don't mind, I'll make my own sandwich." Cooper opened up the pantry, grabbed a piece of cooked lamb, and some bread. He found a jug of water and poured a tall glass before taking a seat at Maurice's table.

"I take it you couldn't sleep?" said Maurice.

Cooper took a bite of his sandwich and nodded. "There's too much on my mind to let my body rest."

"Perhaps I can put your mind at ease."

"Sure, why not. At dinner, I couldn't help but notice the mood in the room change the instant it began to rain outside. Why was that?"

Maurice stopped polishing the candle holder and placed it down on the table. "Sir, after Master Andrew and Miss Willow's deaths, a lot of strange things started to happen around here."

"Such as?"

"The men working the fields started to find odd-looking tracks leading from the woods toward the old slave quarters."

"Odd, how?"

"Well, I never saw them but I heard Mister Stone and Cyrus having a heated discussion one day about the tracks. Cyrus kept insisting the prints were identical to the ones they had found the night the two young people were killed. Mister Stone refused to believe what he was being told. He kept insisting it was the Maclean Gang, not some strange animal, that had killed the children."

"Is that all?"

"I wish it were. A few weeks ago, we lost a young married couple on a night just like tonight. They lived in one of the shacks at the far end of the workers' quarters. In the morning, all they found were more of those animal tracks and a lot of blood spilled on the ground."

"Do you know if Mister Stone told the sheriff what had happened?"

Maurice shook his head. "No, sir. He doesn't trust the sheriff to do his job. Mister Stone, Thomas, Cyrus, and a dozen farmhands went looking for the missing couple but came back a day later empty-handed."

"I beginning to see why people here are nervous. Have there been any more sightings of these tracks since that couple went missing?"

"None that I'm aware of, sir."

The crash of thunder above the mansion sounded like a battery of cannons firing just outside the kitchen door.

Cooper stood up. "Thanks, Maurice."

"Are you going to bed now, sir?"

"No. I think I'm going to take a walk around the plantation grounds."

"You'll need a lantern, sir, I'll get you one," said Maurice as he got up from his chair.

A couple of minutes later, Cooper opened the door and looked outside at the pouring rain. He was wearing his cavalry hat and a rubber rain poncho. He had with him his repeating carbine and Maurice's lantern.

"I shan't be long, I hope," said Cooper to the butler. He stepped out into the cold rain and looked toward the back of the mansion where Hawkins would be staying. Cooper decided to see if his compatriot was also having troubles sleeping. He had barely gone ten feet when he saw a tall, dark shape standing silently in the rain, looking out toward the stables. Cooper pulled back on the hammer of his carbine with his thumb.

"Captain, please lower your gun. It's me, Sergeant Hawkins."

Cooper walked to Hawkins' side. The sergeant was dressed just like Cooper, only he looked as if he had been outside for quite some time.

"What are you doing out here?" asked Cooper.

"I was looking out the window in my room and thought I saw something moving around near the stables," replied Hawkins.

"I take it you were told over dinner about the strange things going on around here?"

"I sure was, Captain. The folks living here are scared for their lives."

Cooper held up his lantern, trying to see the tall barns only fifty yards away in the dark. "Sergeant, what did you think you saw?"

"I'm really not sure. I only saw it lit up by the lightning for a brief second or two. It looked to be the same height as a man, but I could have sworn it was covered from head to toe in fur."

"It could have been a man in a long fur coat. Or a bear on its hind feet. Come on let's take a look around the stables and see if we can find it."

They walked through the mud to the closed barn doors. Hawkins tried the doors and found them locked.

"I don't see any tracks other than our own," said Cooper, holding the lantern near the ground. "Why don't we split up. I'll go this way and you the other and we'll meet up behind the stables."

"Captain, if you see something, just make sure it's not me before you shoot."

Cooper patted his colleague on the shoulder, turned about, and began to walk along the front of the barn. Jagged lightning tore across the darkened sky, illuminating the area for a few brief seconds. The way ahead was clear. He gripped

his carbine tight in his hand and walked to the end of the barn and turned the corner. Aside from a few tools leaning against the side of the stable, there was nothing there. Cooper was beginning to wonder if all the talk of mysterious happenings had led Hawkins to think he saw something in the shadows.

A terrified scream pierced the night.

Cooper froze in his tracks. Right away, the hair on the back of his neck went up. He looked toward the old slave quarters just as another scream met his ears. He ran for the dirt road leading toward the rows of shacks. Behind him, he could hear Hawkins racing to catch up with him. Cooper headed for a group of people standing in the rain in their undergarments.

"What happened?" asked Cooper as he came to a halt by the frightened people.

"Something horrid looked in my window," said a woman, shaking uncontrollably.

"What did it look like?"

"It wasn't anything I've ever seen before," replied the woman. "It had the eyes of a devil."

"Get her inside," ordered Hawkins, "and put a warm blanket on her right away."

"Did anyone else see anything?" asked Cooper.

A young man pointed toward the animal pens. "I saw something large run off in that direction."

"Alright, everyone back inside and lock your doors," said Hawkins.

Cooper walked away from the group and lowered his lantern so he could see the wet ground. His eyes lit up when he found a set of odd-looking tracks leading to and from the house the woman lived in. He called over his shoulder, "Sergeant, come here."

"Well, I'll be damned, those do look like a cross between a man and a beast," said Hawkins, looking down at the prints.

"Whatever left them went that way," said Cooper, indicating to the pens with his carbine.

Hawkins pulled back the hammer on his pistol. "Let's find out what the hell is going on around here, sir."

"Wait up!" hollered Thomas as he pulled on his jacket and rushed to join the two soldiers.

"Sir, you really should stay with the others," said Cooper.

"I got me one of these," replied Thomas, holding up a shotgun in his hands. "And I know how to use it, too."

"Okay, but stay behind Sergeant Hawkins and only fire if we tell you to,"

The sound of pigs squealing in terror made the men turn their heads and look into the night.

"Let's go," said Cooper, taking off at a jog.

The animal pens were on the other side of the kitchen gardens. The fence surrounding the field didn't slow the men as they climbed over it and kept on running. Just before they reached the pens, a terrified piglet scampered past them followed by a couple of dozen more pigs trying to flee some unseen danger.

Cooper raised up his lantern and saw the gate leading into the pens had been pushed to one side, allowing all of the pigs to escape.

"There in the mud," said Hawkins, pointing at a set of prints like the ones found outside of the slave quarters.

Thomas looked around with fear in his eyes.

"What is it, Thomas?" asked Cooper.

"Them be the tracks of a Rougarou," said Thomas, his voice quivered as he spoke.

"A what?"

"It's nothing more than a story told to frighten children," said Hawkins. It was clear by the tone in his voice he didn't believe in the legend.

"Well, whatever made these tracks, can't be too far from here. Let's spread out in a line and sweep the pens for any sign of the intruder."

With their weapons at the ready, the three men moved a few yards apart from one another and warily walked through the muck.

A flash of lightning lit up the orchard behind the pig pen. Cooper's heart skipped a beat when he saw something looking at him from the woods. It was tall and looked just like Hawkins had described. Its eyes shone bright like gold in the light for a brief second before the night once more turned black.

"Did you see that?" he asked, not believing his eyes.

Hawkins nodded. "It was the same thing I saw by the stables."

"I done told you it was a Rougarou," said Thomas.

Cooper took off running. "I don't believe in monsters." He jumped over the fence and ran to where he had last seen the creature. He shone his light at his feet and saw more tracks.

"It looks like it went further back into the orchard," said Hawkins.

"We must have scared off whoever it was sneaking around the plantation."

"Or whatever it was," added Thomas.

Cooper bristled at the last remark. He wasn't ready to concede that whatever he saw wasn't a man. "Gents, I think it best if we patrolled the plantation grounds until the sun comes back up. Thomas, you can take the old slave quarters, Sergeant Hawkins the area between the stables and the animal pens, and I'll take the mansion to the road. We'll all meet back here at dawn to see if we can determine where these tracks lead to."

Thomas and Hawkins nodded their concurrence.

"Be sharp and remember to not fire at anything until you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that it's not friendly."

Cooper walked with Hawkins to the stables before carrying on toward the manor alone. He was tired and soaked to the bone. With the sun not due on the horizon for several more hours, Cooper knew he was in for a long night.

Chapter 9

The smell of freshly baked biscuits was a welcome sign as the three weary men walked into the kitchen and took a seat at a table in the back of the room.

Mrs. Jackson was already up preparing breakfast. As soon as she saw the tired look on Cooper's face, she grabbed three cups and filled them with hot coffee.

"You men look as if you spent the whole night outside in the rain," said Mrs. Jackson.

"Almost," replied Cooper. He took a sip of coffee and felt it warm his exhausted body.

A side door swung open and Maurice walked in. He took one look at the men sitting at the table, turned around, and walked out. A minute later, Roy Stone joined them.

"Captain Cooper, if you thought something was amiss, you should have woken me up last night," said Stone.

"Sir, I didn't know anything was wrong until I was long gone from the house," replied Cooper.

"Was there another intruder on the plantation grounds?"

"Yes. Someone was poking his nose around the stables and the workers' quarters."

"Sir, we done saw it last night," said Thomas.

"Saw what?" asked Stone.

"The Rougarou. I done saw it as did the captain and Sergeant Hawkins. Its tracks were in the mud."

Stone shook his head. "Utter nonsense."

Cooper raised a hand. "Sir, I share your sentiments, but we all saw something out there I cannot properly explain. Before coming in to warm up, we went back to the orchard where we saw whatever it was last night and followed its tracks until they disappeared in the woods at the far end of the cotton fields."

"What do you mean they disappeared?"

"Unfortunately, the rain had washed them away. I'm sure Sergeant Hawkins could have tracked them if it hadn't rained so much."

Thomas said, "Sir, Cyrus and I were talking after dinner last night and we both feel it might be useful if we were to go and bring Madame Toussaint here from the King Plantation. If anyone can make sense of what is going on around here, it will be her. She might be able to tell us how we can deal with this devil."

"Who is Madame Toussaint?" asked Hawkins.

"She's an old woman who was old when I was a child," explained Stone. "We all knew about her. She's a Haitian priestess."

"Pardon, sir?"

"She claims to be able to read signs and tell the future from them. It's nothing more than a foolish superstition."

Cooper sat up in his chair. "Sir, will she be able to tell us more about this swamp devil?"

"Captain Cooper, please don't tell me you want to go along with this folly?" said Stone.

"I've already stated I'm a skeptic, but I'd like to hear more about this legend so I can gain insight into the mind of the person or persons committing these crimes."

"Captain, you done saw it," said Thomas. "It were no man standing out there in the orchard."

Cooper knew better than to dismiss Thomas' fears as nonsense. If he truly believed them, there would be no changing his mind. He smiled at the old farm hand and said, "Thomas, until we have a body in front of us to examine, we have to go with the most logical conclusion and that would be we are dealing with a man."

Stone let out a deep sigh. "I can have Horace ride out to the King Plantation after breakfast and see if Madame Toussaint will come back with them to talk with you."

"Thanks. I really do believe talking to her will help us in the long run."

"After you get some food into you, you three should put your heads down for a few hours. If she agrees to our request, Madame Toussaint won't be here until almost suppertime."

"Sounds good," said Cooper as he reached over to grab a biscuit fresh from the oven.

It was well past seven in the evening before Madame Toussaint arrived at the plantation. She was helped down from the carriage and escorted to the parlor by Maurice. When she entered the room, Cooper saw she stood no taller than five feet and was wearing a black dress with a shirt that buttoned up at the neck. She had a small silver rose pinned to her shirt. Her skin looked as old as worn leather. Blind in both eyes, she walked with the assistance of a slender, ornate ivory cane.

Cooper stood as did all the men in the room.

"Please be seated, gentlemen," said Toussaint. Her Haitian accent came on strong. "I may not be able to see you, but my hearing is still good."

"Thank you for coming, Madame Toussaint," said Stone.

"Ah, mon cher. It is good to hear your kind voice once more. How long has it been since we last met, Roy Stone? Thirty-five years, if memory serves me."

Stone nodded. "Yes, ma'am, it's been about that long."

Toussaint sat down at the table. "I'm sorry I kept you all waiting, but there was a funeral at the plantation and I couldn't leave until the child was in the ground."

Stone took his seat. "How did the child die?"

"She caught a fever. There was nothing the doctor or I could do for the poor child. I just wanted to be there to help her soul reach the otherworld. Roy, I can hear the fear in your voice, even if you won't admit it."

Stone cleared his throat. "Ma'am, with me in the room are Captain Cooper and Sergeant Hawkins from the Union Army. There are also a couple of my most trusted men here as well."

Toussaint smiled. "Thomas and Mister Eyre, I was told it was you who asked for me to come here."

Cooper was stunned. There was no way she could have known who else was present in the parlor.

"Yes, ma'am, it surely was us," said Thomas.

The old woman turned her head in Cooper's direction. "Well, Captain, what do you want to know?"

"I'm not from these parts so I'm not familiar with the legend of the Rougarou," said Cooper. "Last night, Sergeant Hawkins, Thomas, and I saw something moving

around outside that I cannot rationally explain. What can you tell me about this legendary beast?"

Madame Toussaint took a sip of water. She looked across the table at Cooper through her milky white unseeing eyes. A hushed silence fell on the room. "Captain, the thing that haunts the land is an old evil. One that has existed since time began. It is not from these parts. No, it comes from across the water, from the Old World. The French settlers brought it with them without knowing and now the creature lives out there in the woods."

"What is this thing?"

"It is a creature with the body of a man and the head of a wolf or a bear."

"That would explain the tracks we done found," said Thomas.

Toussaint continued. "It will only come out at night to hunt. By day, it reverts back to its original form and will look to you like an ordinary man or woman."

"Ma'am, did you say it could be a woman?" asked Hawkins.

"Yes. It has even been known to hide as a child. It could be anyone amongst you and you would never know until it decided to strike."

"Most of the attacks seem to have come during periods of overcast skies," said Cooper. "Is this something we should be aware of?"

Toussaint pursed her lips for a moment. "According to the legend, the beast will roam free when the moon is full. This one may be different and can change at will."

"Lord, protect us," said Thomas.

"Ma'am, do you know how to kill this animal?" asked Cooper.

"There is only one way, Captain," replied Toussaint. "You must cut off its head. Nothing else will do."

Cooper had heard enough. He stood and said, "Thank you for your time, ma'am. It has been most enlightening."

"You don't believe the legend do you, Captain?"

"Ma'am, until I see a body, I have to believe we are facing a man, not a monster."

Toussaint shook her head. Her voice turned cold. "I'm sorry, Captain, but you are wrong. You are dealing with a monster, one that won't stop until it and all its disciples are dead."

"Dear God, there's more of them?" blurted out Cyrus.

Toussaint raised a hand. "Gentlemen, I'm old and very tired. Would someone be so kind as to show me my room for the night?"

Stone stood. "Most certainly, ma'am. One of our maids, June, will look after you while you are here."

Everyone stood while June helped Toussaint to her feet and led her to the servants' quarters at the back of the mansion.

Cooper spoke first. "Well, that was interesting to say the least."

"How so?" asked Stone.

"Madame Toussaint may believe we are up against some kind of supernatural beast, but I don't. Think about it for a moment. Whatever or whoever it is only comes around when it is likely to rain. Now, why would it do that?"

"To better mask its tracks," said Hawkins.

"Precisely. That shows intelligence, not the actions of some mindless animal. At the Wright farm, I demonstrated that Mister Wright could have been dragged off into the night by a man hiding in the woods using a lasso."

Stone looked down at his pocket watch. "Captain, it's already getting late. You're not planning on heading back to town tonight, are you?"

"No, sir. If it's not too much of an inconvenience, I'd prefer if Sergeant Hawkins and I spent the night here. We can walk the grounds to make sure nothing happens during the night."

"I can join them," said Cyrus.

"Misery loves company," said Cooper. "We can all take turns getting cold and miserable. Sergeant Hawkins will work out a sentry roster for anyone who wants to volunteer. In the morning, the sergeant and I will head into town and see what, if anything, Sheriff Owens has learned in our absence."

Chapter 10

Sheriff Owens' ill-fitting rubber poncho seemed designed to funnel the cold rain down his back. He did his best to ignore the discomfort as he stood in the muddy field in front of Maude Wright's home. He held a lantern in his right hand. The rain sizzled as it struck the hot glass on the lamp. After escorting Maude and her child back home, Owens had decided to take a look around to make sure it was safe. He was still fuming from the way Captain Cooper had spoken to him. Owens may not have had the northerner's fancy education, but he knew his job and tried his best to keep the peace. *So what if a few coloreds went missing now and then*, he thought to himself. It was a small price to pay to keep things quiet, besides he knew that's the way most of the people in town liked it.

Behind him, his horse neighed and shook its head. It was enjoying standing out in the rain as much as he was.

"Easy does it, girl," said Owens. "We'll be leaving soon enough."

"That you will, Tom Owens," said a voice in the dark.

Owens spun about and raised his lantern high above his head. If he still had two hands, he would have gone for his pistol. A second later, two men on horseback emerged out of the gloom. Owens shook his head when he recognized the men as Alexander Maclean, the leader of the Maclean Gang, and Moses Payne, the mayor's young son. Both men held shotguns in their hands.

"Come to finish what you started, Alex?" said Owens to Maclean.

"We had nothing to do with Darcy Wright's disappearance," replied Maclean, "You have my word on it, Tom."

"You'll forgive me if I don't believe you."

Moses pointed his shotgun at Owens and pulled back on the twin hammers with his thumb. "You take that back, Sheriff, or I'll blow yer head clean off yer shoulders!"

"Go ahead, you half-wit. If you kill me, the Yankees will send a regiment of coloreds up here to run you and your friends out of the parish."

"Moses, put your damn gun away," ordered Maclean.

"But he insulted you," whined the youth.

"Do it, boy, or there'll be hell to pay when we get back to camp."

Moses hesitated.

"Jesus, boy, do you want a whipping or not?"

Moses released the hammers on his shotgun and slid it back into a leather holster on his saddle. The only son of Elias Payne, he had been nothing but trouble his entire life. Shunned by his father because of his inability to learn how to read and write, Moses had been too young to enlist in the war and had gravitated to Alexander Maclean when he returned to Williamstown. Moses was easily confused and almost always solved his problems with his fists.

"What are you doing out here, Tom?" asked Maclean.

"He's sniffing around Maude, that's what he's doing," said Moses.

"Be quiet, boy!" snapped Maclean.

"Hell, her husband ain't been gone more than a couple of days and he's already looking to crawl into her warm bed."

Maclean turned his weapon on his young accomplice. "Not another word, Moses."

The boy shut his mouth and looked down at the wet ground.

"Leave us. Ride back and join the others on the road."

Maclean waited until Moses was out of earshot before continuing. "I asked you a question, Tom. Why are you out here on a night like this instead of drinking yourself to sleep in your office?"

"I'm doing my job. What brings you out in the rain?"

"I heard there were a couple of blue-bellies poking their noses around these parts. Is that true?"

Owens nodded. "This time you've gone too far, Alex. You never should have killed Stone's nephew and his colored girlfriend the way you did."

"We had nothing to do with their deaths. I ain't gonna lie to you, we've strung up a couple of colored runaways over the past few weeks, but we didn't lay a hand on that boy or his black Jezebel. Hell, the good Lord knows he deserved to die for his carnal sins. But we didn't do it."

"Alex, you'll have to forgive me, but after all you have done since coming back home, I'm having a hard time taking you at your word."

"Believe what you want, Sheriff. I've told you the truth. As God is my witness, I had nothing to do with Darcy Wright's disappearance or them young 'uns from Mercy Planation either."

"Roy Stone is hell-bent on having you hung, that's why them two Yankees are here. He's probably trying to convince them to come after you in the morning. It doesn't matter anymore if you laid a hand on those two kids or not, Roy believes you did and he wants you and all your men to face the gallows."

Maclean spat on the ground. "Let him try. As for his nephew, he was a sinner and all sinners need to be punished. Why don't you head back home, Tom, and get a good night's sleep? Come the morning, all of your troubles will be behind you and we can go on living the way we ought to in these parts."

Owens walked forward until he was next to Maclean's horse. "Alex, if you're planning on doing what I think you are, you're a bigger fool than I ever thought you were."

"I should strike you down for speaking to me like that, but the good book tells us to turn the other cheek. Good night, Tom."

Owens hated Maclean's pious moralizing. It had driven him to distraction during the war. He walked back to his horse, blew out his lantern, and climbed up onto his saddle. As he rode out onto the road leading back toward town, he passed Moses and six other riders.

"Bye, Sheriff," taunted Moses.

Owens ignored the boy and rode on in silence. Whatever was about to happen was not going to end well, why Maclean couldn't see that confounded Owens. Once, they had been close friends, now the gulf between them was insurmountable.

Alexander Maclean waited a minute before joining up with his men.

"What do you want to do about the sheriff?" asked Moses.

"For now, nothing."

"And the Yankees?"

Maclean turned his head and looked over at a couple of his riders. "John, Samuel, I want you to ride out to Mercy Plantation and hide in the woods. When the two blue-bellies show themselves in the morning, I want you to kill them."

Samuel said, "They're soldiers, ain't they? Shouldn't we take a couple more men with us?"

"No," replied Maclean, shaking his head. "Wait until they ride by and then shoot them in the back. How hard can that be?"

"We'll kill 'em, Maclean," said John. "I hear one of them Yankees is a colored soldier wearing sergeant stripes no less. I'm gonna shoot him in the gut and let him bleed out. The last thing that boy will ever see will be me cutting them stripes from his shirt."

"Just make sure you don't miss," stressed Maclean.

The two groups split apart. John and Samuel rode toward the plantation while Maclean led the rest of his men back to the woods and home.

Toward midnight, the rain stopped and the clouds parted. A nearly full moon shone down, bathing the woods in a bright silvery light. John sat on a fallen tree while he wiped the water from his rifle. Samuel had built a small fire and was brewing a pot of coffee over the open flame.

"How come we always get picked to do the dirty work?" griped Samuel. "You never see that idiot, Moses, doing anything like this."

"Keep your voice down," admonished his friend. "You know Maclean has a soft spot in his heart for Moses. He told the mayor he'd look after his boy if he didn't make a fuss about us stringing up the odd Negro or stealing food from those who have more than they need."

"Yeah, but there's more than just you and me who could be doing this. That's all I'm saying."

"The others rode with Maclean during the war. We didn't, that's why we always get the shitty end of the stick. Now quit yer bellyaching. Is the coffee ready?"

Samuel shook his head. "A few more minutes yet and she'll be good and hot." The murderer stood up and looked at the darkened forest all around them. "Keep an eye on the coffee. I'm gonna take a piss."

"Don't get lost," chuckled John as he loaded a round into his pistol.

After five minutes, John was becoming worried for his friend. He stepped back from the fire and looked in the direction Samuel had taken into the woods. He called out, "Hey, Samuel, I told you not to get lost. Are you okay?"

Aside from the sound of insects buzzing and chirping all around him, the forest was silent.

John felt his heart begin to beat faster. "This ain't funny, Sam. Quit screwing around and come out of there right now!"

With his pistol held tight in his trembling right hand, John walked into the woods. A cloud moved across the night sky blocking the light of the moon. John's mouth became dry with fear. He wanted to turn around and run back to the fire, but he forced himself to keep going. He had to find his friend.

"Samuel Walker, quit being an ass. Stand up and show yourself?"

As before, his call wasn't answered. This time, however, the forest grew deathly silent; not even the insects made a noise.

John broke out in a cold sweat. His guts felt like jelly. He'd had enough and spun about to run when his feet got tangled up in a tree root. With a cry on his lips, he fell to the damp ground. His gun flew from his hands and landed in a bush a few feet away. He lay there for a few seconds before rolling over and sitting up.

"You idiot," he said to himself as he wiped the mud from his hands onto his pants. He looked over his shoulder for his pistol and nearly screamed in fright when he saw a tall, dark shape next to a tree looking down at him.

"Jesus, Sam, you almost made me crap my pants."

His friend didn't answer him.

John got up on his feet and took a step toward Samuel. Only at the last second did he realize it wasn't his friend standing there. His bladder let go when a dirty fur-covered hand reached out and grabbed him by the throat. In an instant, the hand constricted, crushing John's throat and snapping his neck like a dry twig. The last thing he saw before his miserable life ended were a pair of eyes staring deep into his soul as if devouring it. Then he was gone.

Chapter 11

The next morning, after a long but uneventful evening, Cooper met Hawkins at the stables. Their horses were saddled and ready to leave.

"Sir, do you think Sheriff Owens has bothered to take the time to search the woods surrounding the Wrights' home?"

Cooper took his horse's reins in his hands. "I doubt he did anything other than crawl into bed. Still we had best pay him a visit, he may yet surprise us."

As they walked their horses out of the barn, Cooper noticed Roy Stone walking toward them. He had the look of a man with something on his mind.

"Why don't you go on ahead, Sergeant," said Cooper. "I'll meet you on the road."

Hawkins nodded and carried on, accompanied by a young boy who had run over and was pretending to march alongside the sergeant.

"Good morning, Mister Stone," Cooper said in greeting. "I'd like to thank you for your more than generous hospitality."

Stone smiled. "You're too kind. I'm still not sure why you bothered to have Madame Toussaint come here to Mercy. Thomas and Cyrus are more convinced than ever that there's a monster hiding out in the bayou."

"Sir, I needed to know the local folklore better than I did. There's always a sliver of truth, no matter how small, in all legends. Do I think we're up against some kind of monster? No. But, someone is going to a lot of trouble to make you believe something otherworldly is killing your people."

"Perhaps. What are your plans for the day, Captain?"

"I'm going to pay a visit to Sheriff Owens to see if he managed to rustle up some dogs to search the woods outside of Mrs. Wright's home. If he hasn't, I may have to ask for your help. I noticed a couple of bloodhounds running around when we rode in here the other day."

"If I can do anything to help, all you need to do is ask."

Cooper held out his hand. "Thanks. I feel I may have to take you up on your offer sooner rather than later."

Stone shook the captain's hand. "I'll have Cyrus put together a search party in case it's needed."

Cooper got up onto his horse and brought his hand up to the brim of his hat. "Good day to you, sir." With that, he turned his horse toward the dirt road and gently tapped its sides with his boots.

At the road leading to town, Cooper found Hawkins standing on the path with his rifle in his hands. Right away, the hair on the back of his neck went up. "What's wrong, Sergeant?"

Hawkins pointed. "There are a couple of horses about two hundred yards down the road. The problem is, I don't see their riders."

Cooper looked down the tree-lined road and saw the horses standing in the tall grass with their heads bowed, eating. He grabbed hold of his carbine and climbed off his horse. He pulled back on the hammer and said, "Shall we take a look?"

The two soldiers walked cautiously to the horses and took hold of their reins.

"They look to be in good health," said Hawkins as he ran his hand down the neck of the nearest horse.

"Let's follow their tracks," said Cooper, pointing at the path made by the animals in the grass. "Perhaps we'll find their owners. Ten to one, they're a couple of locals who drank too much bourbon last night and forgot to tie up their horses before passing out."

A couple of minutes later, they found the ash from a recently lit fire. A pot of cold coffee hung over the extinguished fire.

"Where'd they go?" said Hawkins looking around.

Cooper shook his head. "I don't know. Why would you start a fire to make coffee and then wander off leaving your horse behind?"

"Something about this doesn't feel right, Captain."

"I have to agree. It is odd. Let's see if we can find them."

Hawkins nodded.

"You go to the left for about one hundred yards and I'll do the same to the right and we'll meet back in the middle over by that tall tree," said Cooper, pointing at an old willow tree.

Hawkins walked off with his rifle in his hands.

It took Cooper less than a minute before he found a puddle of blood followed by another. His heart began to beat faster as he followed the trail to a small clearing. He expected to find a man's body lying there. Instead, all he found was a piece of a blood-stained shirt.

"Captain, over here!" yelled Hawkins. "I think I found something."

Cooper stuck the fabric into a pocket and ran as fast as he could to Hawkins' side. His stomach almost turned when he saw the gnawed remains of a man's leg on the ground. The meat had been ripped from the shattered bone which was still inside a worn leather boot.

"Jesus, sir, what could have done that?" said Hawkins.

"A large animal perhaps?"

"Captain, I grew up in Louisiana and was told stories of gators getting people, but there ain't no water nearby."

"What about a bear?"

Hawkins shook his head. "I've never heard of a bear killing a man in these parts. That's not to say it wasn't one, but why attack the men and not the horses?"

Cooper had no answer. He looked deep into the woods and felt a chill run down his back. Something wasn't right about the killings. He said, "Wrap up the foot. We'll take it and the horses to Sheriff Owens. Hopefully, he can sort out who they belonged to."

The look on the faces of the town's folk when they rode back into Williamstown with two extra horses was one of mistrust and anger.

"I don't think the good citizens of Williamstown are overly happy to see us this morning, Captain," said Hawkins as he tipped his hat to a woman walking by. She looked away, refusing to acknowledge his greeting.

"Wait until word gets out that we have a foot and horses belonging to someone they may know," said Cooper. "They'll probably form a lynching mob."

At the sheriff's office, they got off their horses, tied them to a post, and walked inside. A fresh pot of coffee was brewing on top of a potbellied stove. They found Owens sitting behind his desk with a tired look on his face.

"Sheriff, you look like you have been up all night," said Cooper.

"I was," replied Cooper, stifling a yawn. "I half expected to be called out in the middle of the night to identify your bodies."

Cooper raised an eyebrow. "Why would you think that?"

Owens shrugged. "Just a feeling I had."

"Did you manage to get some help to search the woods around Mrs. Wright's home?"

Owens shook his head. "No one would volunteer to help me. So I took a look around last night after I escorted Maude and her child back to her place."

"And?"

"As I suspected, it was a complete waste of my time."

"Well, you should have gotten some rest as your day is about to take a turn for the worse."

Hawkins stepped forward and placed the foot hidden in a blanket on Owen's desk and unwrapped it.

Owens jumped from his seat. The look on his face was one of pure disgust. "Jesus, where did you find that?"

"In the woods just outside of Mercy Plantation," replied Cooper. "We also found two horses. They're both tied up outside."

Owens hurried past the two soldiers and went outside. He returned a minute later, shaking his head.

"Sheriff, do you know who owns those horses?" Cooper asked.

"I sure do. They belong to John Adams and Samuel Walker. They ride with Maclean, or at least they did. I bet these two were waiting in the woods to shoot you in the back as you rode by."

"I think I've heard enough about Mister Maclean and his gang. It's high time we paid him a visit, don't you think, Sheriff?"

Owens sat down and drummed the fingers of his right hand on the table. "Let's not be too hasty. Did you find anything other than that foot out there?"

Cooper shook his head. "Only blood. A lot of blood."

"Besides you two, does anyone know about the foot?"

"No."

"Good, keep it that way. It's bad enough people here are going to believe you two shot and killed two of their own. If they were to learn about this grisly find, they'd accuse you of all kinds of depravity."

"I take it asking the men of this town to join a posse to track down Maclean and his people would be out of the question?"

"What do you think?"

"I guess we're on our own."

"You sure are, Captain. This is a local matter. Why don't you and your sergeant ride back to New Orleans and say you couldn't figure out what all the fuss was about and leave me to deal with things in my own time."

Cooper took a step forward. His eyes narrowed. "Sheriff, I don't take too kindly to people waiting in the woods to shoot me in the back. The answer to all of your troubles is out there in the swamp. If you don't help me, Roy Stone will. How do you think the citizens of Williamstown are going to react when a couple of Yankees, assisted by Roy Stone and who knows how many former slaves, take on Maclean and his band of murderers and bring him back here to face justice?"

"Only a damned fool would take a bunch of fat plantation hands and Negroes up against Maclean and his men."

"When you consider how many blacks have been killed by him and are looking for a bit of revenge, I'd say the odds are probably on my side." Cooper stepped back and turned to leave.

Owens held up his hand in surrender. "Alright, you win, Captain. However, as of now, we don't know if Maclean is guilty of any offense. Just because Roy Stone

claims Maclean killed one of his colored workers and them two kids don't make it so."

"What about the men in the woods?"

"They could have been acting on their own. Let's not forget the idea they were waiting to bushwhack you is only a guess. Hell, they could have been sitting out the storm when they were killed. However, if someone is going to arrest Maclean, it's going to be me. Don't leave Mercy Plantation until I get there. I need to deal with a few things here in town before I can join you."

"Very well, but if you're not there by midafternoon, we'll carry on without you."

Owens nodded. Under his breath, he said, "I'm going to be strung up for this. I just know it."

Outside, Hawkins untied his horse's reins and looked over at Cooper. "Sir, that man can't keep his stories straight. First we were going to be ambushed, then it was just a couple of boys waiting out the storm. My gut tells me that he knows far more about what's going on around here than he lets on."

"I don't trust him either, Sergeant, but our orders were quite clear. We're not to unduly antagonize the people of Williamstown. If the price to pay is dragging Sheriff Owens around with us, so be it. I just hope he and Stone don't get into an argument and try to kill one another before we arrest Maclean and his people. After that, I don't care what they do."

"Yes, sir, they're a pair of hotheads. You'll have to keep them apart as best you can during the ride out."

Cooper took a last look around town, wondering who else knew more than they were letting on. As they rode past the church on the outskirts of the small community, a balding padre standing outside did the sign of the cross, turned, and walked inside.

"I take it the good people of Williamstown have already decided we're as good as dead," said Hawkins.

"Looks that way," replied Cooper. "I for one don't agree with their pessimism. Come on, let's form ourselves a posse and bring Maclean in for questioning, to be followed by a fair trial and a public execution."

"Yes, sir. That'll make us, even more, welcome than we are now."

Chapter 12

"Are you sure?" asked Alexander Maclean, barely keeping his volcanic temper in check. He stood just under six feet tall and had a thick black beard. Like all of his men, he wore a mix of threadbare Confederate Army attire and dirty civilian clothes.

"Of course I'm sure," replied William Clarke. "I got eyes in my head. John and Samuel's horses were brought into town by them two Yankees earlier in the day."

"And?"

"And what?"

Maclean ran a hand through his long, greasy black hair before grabbing ahold of Clarke's jacket collar and pulling him toward him. "Did you find out what happened to 'em?"

"No. Owens' deputy told me they only found their horses."

Maclean let go of Clarke and pushed him back. "If them Yankees got a hold of their horses that can only mean John and Samuel are dead."

"I told you not to trust that Negro-loving sheriff," said Moses, spinning around on his heels. "Didn't I? He's become a Judas. He told them Yankees where our boys were hiding and they killed 'em."

"Be quiet!" yelled Maclean.

"I know I'm right."

Maclean snapped. He lashed out and struck Moses across the face, sending him tumbling to the ground. "God damn it, Moses, I told you to shut yer mouth."

Moses' eyes filled with tears. He brought a hand to his face before scurrying off behind a rundown wooden building to cry.

"He might be right," said Clarke. "John and Samuel weren't as experienced as some of the other boys. But they never would have allowed themselves to be snuck up on. Owens had to have warned them Yankees."

Maclean kicked a rock at his feet, sending it flying off into the brush. "Why would Tom turn against his own? I know we don't see things the same way anymore, but to tell them Yankees where to find John and Samuel is like taking a knife and stabbing it in my back."

"I never really trusted Owens. He may have been a good soldier during the war, but he turned down your offer to join us and took a job in town instead. I tell you he's gone soft."

Maclean spat on the ground. "Maybe."

"Alex, what are we going to tell the others when they get back later today? They're bound to have heard the news."

"That's easy. I'll tell them it's time we hung those two Yankees from a tree on the outskirts of town for all to see."

Clarke grinned. "I like the sound of that."

Chapter 13

"They wouldn't pass muster back at the regiment, but I guess they'll have to do," mused Sergeant Hawkins, looking over at the disparate collection of volunteers.

"Beggars can't be choosers," added Cooper as he checked his carbine before sliding it back into its holster on his saddle.

As expected Stone, Cyrus, Thomas, and eight young farmhands were coming along. Only Thomas was armed with a pistol. The other workers had never fired a weapon in their lives, so they carried an assortment of axes, machetes, and other sharpened tools. What surprised Cooper was the inclusion of Pastor Melancon, who had insisted on coming along with his Bible in one hand and a shotgun in the

other. The other unexpected volunteer was his wife, Rose. She had changed out of her dress and into a pair of pants and a shirt. Like her husband, she carried a shotgun and looked like she knew how to use it. Cooper had initially objected to her riding with them, but when the pastor pointed out that Rose had been a nurse during the war, he dropped his reservations. He knew things could turn deadly in the blink of an eye; having someone along who knew how to deal with gunshot wounds might be the difference between life and death.

The last person to arrive was Sheriff Owens, who was less than enthused when he saw the farmhands saddling up their horses.

Cooper walked over, took hold of Owens' arm and led him away from the rest of the group. "Okay, Sheriff, let's quit wasting one another's time, shall we. I take it you know precisely where Maclean's camp is, don't you?"

Owens hesitated for a moment as if trying to decide if he should answer the question. A second later, he nodded and said, "Yeah. I do."

"Good. Where is it?"

"They hide out at an old farm in the bayou that used to belong to the Norris family until they decided to move to Texas. We used to go there as kids."

"Do you know how many men there are in Maclean's gang?"

"With two already gone, I'd say no more than five or six. You, of course, have assembled a fine fighting force. Let's see now, you've got a bunch of colored farmhands, none of whom are carrying any guns, along with a preacher, and his wife. I'd applaud you, Captain, if I had two hands to do it with."

Cooper ignored the sheriff's flippant remarks. "How long will it take us to ride there?"

"I know a route he won't be expecting us to use. If the river isn't too high, it shouldn't take us more than a few hours to get there."

Cooper looked up at the sun. It was already dipping low in the sky. "Do you think you can get us to within a mile of the place before the sun goes down? I'd like to surprise Maclean and his people at first light tomorrow morning."

"If we get going in the next few minutes, I don't see why not."

Cooper let go of the sheriff's arm. "Very well, you can lead with Hawkins riding behind you."

"I take it you don't trust me."

"Would you?"

Owens shook his head. "There ain't a man alive I trust with my life, Captain."

Cooper walked to Stone's side. "We need to get moving. I'd like Thomas to handle his people. As they're not armed, I want them to ride at the back of the column."

Stone nodded. "I'll have Pastor Melancon and his wife ride with them so he can torture them and not us with passages from the good book."

Cooper chuckled. He was growing to respect Stone. He brought up his fingers to his mouth and let out a loud whistle. When all eyes were on him, Cooper called out, "Mount up, we ride in one minute."

With Owens and Hawkins in the lead, the small column of riders rode past the old slave quarters. Teary-eyed wives and children of the workers stood and waved at their loved ones, not knowing if they would ever see them again. The men

smiled and waved back. The group rode through a grassy field before disappearing one by one into the thick forest surrounding the plantation.

Two hours passed before Owens raised his hand and brought the group to a halt. The sun was already dipping below the tops of the trees, sending long finger-like shadows across the ground.

Cooper asked Owens. "Is this the spot?"

"Yeah. Maclean's camp is no more than a mile off to the east."

Cooper looked at the wide river separating them from the far bank. "I take it we'll have to cross the river in the morning?"

Owens nodded, got off his horse, and walked over to a moss-covered hut. He took a step inside and dragged a dugout canoe out into the open. "There's two more of them here. We used to use them to go fishing with when we were younger. You'll have to leave a couple of the coloreds behind to look after the horses while we proceed on foot."

Cooper didn't like the idea of leaving the horses behind, but he didn't have much choice in the matter. To backtrack and go a different route would waste a day. He had placed his faith in Owens' judgment and would have to live with the consequences.

"Set up camp," said Cooper to the rest of the riders.

It didn't take long for a couple of roaring fires to get going. The party split into two groups. Thomas and the farmhands sat around one of the fires while the rest of the men and Rose got comfortable at the other. Pastor Melancon soon had a hearty beef stew simmering in an iron pot while Cyrus made a pot of coffee over the open flames.

Cooper sat with his back resting against a tree while he wiped down his Spencer repeater carbine. He had waited until Hawkins had cleaned and reassembled his Colt .45 pistol to clean his own weapon. Cooper had learned the hard way during the war to have one of them armed and ready to fight at all times.

"So what's your plan in the morning, Captain?" asked Stone.

"We'll leave the two youngest men behind to look after the horses while the rest of us cross the river," explained Cooper. "After that, we'll march on Maclean's camp and surround it as best we can. I'm going to give Sheriff Owens a chance to try and talk Maclean into surrendering. If that fails, we'll force him and his men to surrender their weapons and come with us back to Williamstown where they can be questioned."

"Don't forget, none of them have been formally charged with anything yet," said Owens. "They're all innocent men in the eyes of the law, regardless how some of you people might feel."

"Innocent!" blurted out Stone. "I saw what those bastards did to my nephew and Miss Willow. Not to mention the two young people who were taken from their home at Mercy Plantation in the middle of the night and the man they hung for no reason a few weeks back. Don't you dare to speak to me of their innocence, Sheriff."

"The law is the law, Mister Stone, even if you don't agree with it. I don't have a signed warrant from a judge to arrest any of them. Like Captain Cooper said, we need to bring them in alive for questioning. Nothing more."

"I say we hang them all out here and leave their bodies for the crows."

"Sir, we can't take the law into our own hands," said Cooper to Stone. "The day we do, we become no better than Maclean and his people. He has to be brought to trial—and then hung."

"What if they open fire on us?" asked Cyrus.

"Then we fire back," replied Cooper. "If they want a fight, we'll give them one."

"Captain, what about Thomas and his men, what will they do if we get into a fight?" asked Stone.

"I'll instruct him to keep his men back from the firing line. I want them to keep anyone from fleeing or reinforcing the camp."

"I'm a man of God, not a soldier, but your plan sounds like it might work," said the pastor.

"Thanks," replied Cooper. "Also, there's no harm in you and your wife saying a few prayers tonight to the Almighty to watch over us tomorrow."

"We'll make sure to speak with the Lord and put the bug in his ear before we lay our heads down."

"That we will," added Rose.

Cooper stood and tossed the dregs of his cup onto the ground. He looked at Stone and said, "I wonder if I might have a word with you."

"Certainly," replied Stone. He got up to his feet. Together, the two men walked out of earshot of the rest of the group. "What's on your mind, Captain?"

"I'm curious, why didn't you go after Maclean after the deaths of the two young people? The folks we have out here are almost all from your plantation. What held you back?"

"A good question, Captain. And one that deserves an honest answer. Trust me, I thought long and hard about going after Maclean but I'm not a fighting man like you and Sergeant Hawkins. I may have a bit of a temper, but I haven't been in a fight since I was a child. I knew if I let my anger guide me, I'd be leading my men to almost certain disaster. I needed someone like you to come along to lead us. With you and Hawkins here I know we can put an end to Maclean's murderous reign."

"Sir, I can't guarantee tomorrow won't end in bloodshed. Some of your men, including you, could be killed if they decide to put up a fight."

"So be it. At least, we will have given it our best shot."

Cooper looked into Stone's eyes. "Sometimes your best isn't good enough. Let's hope things work in our favor in the morning or we're in for a long and bloody day."

A couple of hours later, after they had eaten their supper meal, they began to unroll their blankets and got ready to sleep. Sergeant Hawkins had organized a sentry roster and he was first up. He patrolled the perimeter of their camp with his carbine resting between his powerful arms.

A thin fog crept up off the river and enveloped the countryside. The temperature soon began to drop.

Cooper stood up and stretched out his legs before walking off into the woods to relieve himself one last time before getting some shuteye.

"Be careful, Captain, don't you wander too far from the fire or the Rougarou will get you," said one of Thomas' men as Cooper walked past their fire.

He chuckled and went about his business. When he returned, Cooper noticed the young man who had given him the warning was watching him intently. The farmhand had his hands wrapped tight around an ax handle.

"See, there was no need to worry. I made it back in one piece."

"Yeah, but is you who you say you are?" asked the man.

"Of course he is, Cole," said Thomas. "You're Captain Cooper, ain't you?"

Cooper could see the fear in the eyes of the youth and in Thomas' voice. He smiled at them both, "Aye, I am Captain Robert Cooper of the United States Army. Now, why don't you both get some rest, it's going to be a long day tomorrow."

Cooper walked back to his fire and took a seat. He looked over at Pastor Melancon, who was humming a song to himself while he cleaned the blackened dinner pot. "One of Thomas' men gave me a mistrustful look when I walked past his fire. Pastor, before coming to Mercy Plantation had you ever heard of a Rougarou?"

Melancon smiled. "Yes. It's a made-up story to get young colored children to behave. If a child is being bad, his mother will say go to bed now or the Rougarou will come and get you. I don't know where the legend comes from but it's strongest among the Cajun communities."

"That young man's mother was probably of Haitian descent," added Rose. "There was a lot of mixing of the slaves from the nearby plantations before the war. The DuBois plantation has many former slaves who can trace their family lineage back to Haiti."

"The men are on edge," said Melancon. "I honestly can't blame them. Most of them have never been this far away from the plantation. Put yourself in their shoes. To them, the world is a dark and dangerous place. Until recently they were property who could be sold or traded away at the whim of their slave master. Barely one in twenty can read and write. They grew up on stories told at night around a fire of people who would become a wolf when the moon is high in the sky and hunt down slaves to eat."

"Like tonight," said Cyrus, grinning as he pointed up at the silvery moon as it came out from behind a dark cloud.

"Great bedtime story, Pastor," said Cooper as he laid down on his blanket and pulled his hat over his face.

Chapter 14

Cooper bolted straight up. With his heart racing, he ripped his woolen blanket from his body. Sweat poured down his face as he reached for his carbine.

"Easy does it, Captain. It's me, Sergeant Hawkins."

Cooper turned his head and saw his friend kneeling on the ground beside him.

"You were thrashing about in your sleep. I thought I should wake you. Were you dreaming about the war again?"

Cooper nodded. "Yeah. I dreamed I was back at Vicksburg. It was after the battle and we were scouring the battlefield for wounded to bring back to the regimental aid station when we stumbled across those three men lying in a row who had been disemboweled by a reb cannonball. I can still see the blood and smell the rotted flesh."

Hawkins shuddered. "That was an awful day and one I'd also rather not remember. Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"Yeah, that would be nice. Thanks, Sergeant." Cooper looked around the camp. A damp mist covered the ground. Everyone was fast asleep except for Hawkins and himself. "Do you know what time is it?"

Hawkins dug out his pocket watch. "It's coming up on four in the morning."

"Four! I'm supposed to be on sentry right now, not you."

"I couldn't sleep. So I took your shift."

Cooper shook his head and stood up with his blanket wrapped around his shoulders. "When you were a child did you hear stories of this swamp devil?"

"For a man who says he doesn't believe the legend, you sure are asking a lot of questions about it."

"Let's just say I'm becoming interested in the folklore. Were you told about it?"

"Sure, I heard about the monster in the dark when I was a child. We all did. It used to scare the pants off my brothers and me when we were young. But as we got older, the threat of a monster taking you in the night for not doing what your momma told you wasn't half as good an inducement to be good as my father's leather belt was."

"All my father had to do was look at me and I'd be good. Until I turned twelve and was shipped off to a boarding school, I was convinced his stare could kill me."

Hawkins laughed as he gave Cooper a cup full of hot coffee. "I bet our fathers would have gotten along."

"Probably." Cooper took a sip of coffee and felt it warm his innards as it slid down to his stomach.

"Sergeant, it could be a long day for all us, why don't you wait another couple of minutes before waking everyone up."

"Sure thing, sir." Hawkins went to check on the horses leaving Cooper all alone by the fire.

Cooper stamped his feet a couple of times to get the blood flowing in his cold, leather boots before taking another mouthful of coffee. He walked to the riverbank and looked over at the misty woods on the other side. He had no doubt in his mind Maclean would never voluntarily surrender. The day was going to end in violence. Maclean and his people were a bunch of die-hard rebels who refused to admit the war was over. Cooper had seen so much bloodshed in the past few years that he had hoped to never raise his fist in anger ever again. Yet, he found himself about to lead men in battle one more time. Cooper said a silent prayer for the men with him while he mentally steeled himself for the coming fight.

An hour later, before the sun had risen high enough in the sky to burn off the fog, they began to cross the river. As quiet as they could, they paddled the small canoes to the far bank. Cooper was the first one out of his boat. He ran a

few paces into the woods and dropped down on one knee. He brought his carbine up to his shoulder and looked over the sights. A few yards to his right, Hawkins did the same.

"I can't see more than a few yards in this soup, but my gut tells me we're alone, Captain," said Hawkins, peering into the mist.

"Yeah, I think you're right. You stay on guard while I get the next bunch moving across the river."

Hawkins nodded, stood up, and took cover behind a tree.

Satisfied that things were going well, Cooper walked back to the river's edge. Already the three canoes were being pulled back to the other side by a rope tied to the bow of the boats.

"Cyrus, please join Sergeant Hawkins in the woods and keep guard until everyone else is across," said Cooper.

Cyrus nodded and dashed off into the undergrowth.

"Which way?" Cooper asked Owens.

"There should be a trail about twenty yards downriver," replied Owens. "We'll follow it all the way to Maclean's camp."

The sound of splashing feet made Cooper turn his head.

Thomas walked out of the fog and tipped his hat at the officer. "That be the last of my men. I done left George and Vincent behind to watch the horses."

"Thanks, Thomas," said Cooper. "Get your men in line and follow the pastor when we head out. Remember, no talking. We all have to be as quiet as a church mouse."

"Don't you worry, Captain, my boys and me we're gonna do you proud."

"I know you will. Now see to your men."

Cooper walked over to Stone and placed a hand on his arm. "Sir, I'd like your word that you won't do anything rash once we have Maclean and his men in custody. If they're guilty, it's not up to us to decide their punishment. That's a judge's responsibility."

"You know how I feel about those murdering bastards, but you have my word that I'll do as you say," replied Stone.

A minute later with Owens in the lead, they began their march to Maclean's hideout.

The smell of bacon cooking in a skillet wafted through the air.

Owens raised his hand. Right away, everyone in line behind him stopped and took one step off the trail.

"That smells mighty tasty," whispered Hawkins.

"Perhaps we should ask them to share," replied Cooper, kneeling next to Hawkins.

"That would be neighborly of them. But something tells me they won't be so friendly when they find out what we have in mind for them."

Owens looked over his shoulder and waved for Cooper to move up. They got down on all fours and crept to the edge of the forest. Smoke rose from the stone chimney of an old farmhouse. There wasn't much to Maclean's hideout. Cooper looked around and saw a ramshackle barn about fifty yards from the home along with an outhouse and a well.

Cooper studied the area for a few minutes before saying, "Okay, here's what we're going to do. Hawkins and I will sneak into that barn over there to cover you. Stone and Cyrus can move around and watch the back door of the farm. While the pastor and his wife take up a position to the west, Thomas and his men will cover the east. No one should be able to get in or out of that cabin without us knowing about it."

Owens nodded.

"Let's give everyone ten minutes to get into position then it's over to you, Sheriff. I hope you know what you're doing."

"So do I," replied Owens.

"Sheriff, if Maclean refuses to come with us, you know I'll be forced to try and drive him and his men out of that home by any means necessary."

Owens bristled. "I heard you the first time, Captain. You do your job and leave me to do mine."

Cooper crawled back a couple of yards before getting up to his feet. He walked back and briefed everyone on the plan. Pastor Melancon and Rose said a prayer together before checking that their shotguns were ready to fire.

"Okay, Sergeant, let's get to work," said Cooper. They moved as quietly as they could through the trees, keeping well inside the forest until they were directly behind the barn. They edged forward and found there was a gap of about twenty yards from the trees to the building. Both men looked at one another, nodded, and sprinted out of the woods. They came to a sliding halt against the side of the barn. While Hawkins covered him, Cooper pulled open a side door and peered inside. Aside from seven horses, there was no one inside the building. Cooper tapped Hawkins on the shoulder and together they crept inside.

"You go up there," Cooper said to Hawkins, pointing at a wooden ladder that led up to the second floor. "I'll stay down here."

Hawkins climbed up to the loft and crawled forward until he could see out of a gap between two broken planks of wood. He brought up his carbine and took aim at the front door of the building.

Cooper walked over and made himself comfortable on an old wooden barrel. He pushed a board of rotted wood aside and peered out. He shook his head when he saw Owens step out of the forest and walk toward the front of the cabin with his arms by his sides. His pistol was still in its holster.

With his thumb, Cooper pulled back on the hammer on his weapon and brought it back. As he watched the sheriff, he said to himself, "Sheriff, you're either a dunderhead or you've got a death wish."

Owens knew he was about to kick over a hornet's nest, but couldn't think of anything better to do other than walk up to the door and ask Maclean to come back with him to town. His stomach began to tighten into a knot the closer he got to the house. When he was less than ten yards away, a man shouted out, "Just stop where you are and raise yer hands, Sheriff!"

Owens recognized Clarke's voice. He stopped in his tracks and raised his one hand.

"Are you alone, Tom?"

"No. That would be damned foolish of me now, wouldn't it be?" replied Owens. "Is Maclean in there, I'd like to talk with him."

"How do I know you won't gun him down the second he steps outside?"

"If anyone shoots at him, you can kill me. I'm not planning on running." He regretted his choice of words as soon as they came out his mouth. The last thing he wanted to do was die.

The door creaked open. Alexander Maclean stepped out with a rifle in his hands. He lowered it until it was aimed at Owens' stomach before walking toward him. He stopped when he was a couple of yards away from the sheriff.

"Morning, Tom," said Maclean. "I take it them two Yankees are with you."

Owens nodded.

"Who else?"

"Roy Stone and a bunch of his people."

"After what happened to John and Samuel, me and the boys were planning on paying you a visit later tonight. I guess you've saved us the ride. What do you want, Sheriff?"

Owens heard the disdain in Maclean's voice. He tried to ignore it and said, "Alex, things are starting to get out of hand. I'd like you to come with me back to town so we can talk things over."

"I'm not stupid, Sheriff. I've already confessed to killing one of Stone's darkies. If I go with you, the people of Williamstown may not convict me, but them Yankees will find a way to. They'd love nothing better than to see me dance from the bottom of a rope for doing the Lord's work."

"That ain't ever gonna happen. You know I would never tell anyone about our conversation the other night. The only way to get them Yankees to leave is for you to come with me. I'll hold you for a couple of days until they've left and then in the middle of the night I'll let you go. Come on, Alex, what do you say?"

"I say this," replied Maclean. With a flick of his wrist, he brought up the barrel of his rifle and pulled the trigger.

The sound of Maclean's weapon firing surprised Cooper. He swore when the sheriff staggered back a few feet before falling to the ground. He brought up his carbine, took aim at Maclean as he turned to run, and fired. A split second later, his target fell face-first onto the wet grass.

The moment Maclean hit the ground, his men came running out of the farmhouse firing as they ran. Some used the front door in an attempt to make it to the barn and their horses while others nipped out the back hoping to make it to the woods. One man with two pistols in his hands shot off a couple of rounds at Cooper before falling back with a hole blasted in his skull by Sergeant Hawkins.

Cooper adjusted his aim and dropped a man dressed only in his dark gray underclothes as he stopped to pick up Maclean's rifle.

The last man to fall made it halfway to the barn. He was reloading his shotgun when he was struck in the chest by two bullets. In less than a minute, it was over. When he couldn't hear anymore firing, Cooper walked out of the barn covered by Hawkins. He surveyed the ground in front of the house and saw five men lying on the ground. None of them were moving. He advanced with his weapon held tight in his shoulder.

Out of the blue, Owens moaned, rolled over, and sat up. He brought a hand to the side of his bloody scalp and looked up at Cooper. "Jesus, my head hurts. I thought I was dead."

"Not today," replied Cooper, amazed to see the lawman still alive.

Owens looked down at his bloody hand. "I guess the bullet only grazed me."

Cooper pulled his kerchief from his neck and tossed it to Owens. "Use that to stop the blood."

A pained voice called out, "Lord, help me."

It was Maclean.

Cooper walked to the murderer's side and kicked his rifle away from him before bending down to see how bad the man was hurt. He rolled Maclean over and saw a bloody hole in his right thigh.

A shot rang out from the doorway of the home.

Cooper threw himself to the ground and looked up. A boy no more than seventeen years old stood there with a smoking pistol in his hand. He had a murderous look of rage on his pockmarked face. "Stand up so I can shoot you, you cowardly blue-belly!" screamed the youth.

With a thud, the boy's eyes rolled up into his head as he dropped to the floor. "You okay, Captain?" asked Cyrus, standing over the boy with a skillet in his hand.

"I am now," replied Cooper. "Thanks." He got up off the wet ground, brushed off the dirt from his tunic, turned, and waved for Hawkins to come down and join him.

"Four of 'em made a run for it out the back door," said Cyrus.

"Did you take any of them alive?"

"No. They opened fire on us. So Mister Stone and I had to kill them all."

Cooper wasn't bothered by their deaths. They probably would have been hung anyway. The man he was after was still alive and that was all that mattered to him right now.

"What would you like me to do, sir?" asked Hawkins.

"Have Thomas and his men join us. We're going to need a stretcher built to carry Maclean and someone to guard the boy."

"I know this kid," said Cyrus, looking down. "He's the mayor's boy, Moses."

"For now, he's our prisoner."

"Captain, the mayor ain't going to like that we have his boy in custody, but to hell with him right now. I'll fetch Mrs. Melancon so she can take a look at Maclean's wounds."

"Thanks, that would be most helpful," replied Cooper. He ran a hand over his stubble-covered chin before walking inside the disheveled farmhouse. Cooper found Stone standing by a table. In his hand was a pocket watch. His face was filled with remorse.

"I thought this was Andrew's," said Stone, fighting back the tears. "It looks like his, but his was inscribed with his initials. This has nothing written on it."

"I'm sorry, sir," said Cooper, knowing nothing he could say would ease the pain in the man's heart.

"Is Maclean dead?"

"No, just wounded. I'm having him seen to. I want him alive so he can stand trial for Miss Willow and your nephew's murder."

"You won't find a judge and jury who would convict him in these parts. You're going to have to take him to New Orleans and have him tried by the army if we're ever going to see justice served."

Cooper placed a hand on the troubled man's shoulder. "That won't be a problem. I can arrange to have him taken into federal custody. Sir, you have my word he won't get away with the murder of your people, not if I have anything to say about it." He left Stone alone and joined Cyrus and Hawkins outside. Rose Melancon was busy looking after Maclean while Thomas had a makeshift stretcher made out of an old woolen blanket and a couple of sturdy wooden poles.

"Cyrus, I'd like you to take a couple of men and go back to the river to get the horses ready for our arrival," said Cooper. "You'll need to build a new stretcher for Maclean. This one will be pulled by one of our horses all the way back to the plantation. We're going to bury the dead before leaving. We shouldn't be more than an hour or so behind you."

Cyrus waved a couple of the farmhands to his side. A minute later they were gone.

"Okay, Sergeant, let's get a burial detail organized," said Cooper.

"Right, sir," replied Hawkins.

Pastor Melancon placed a hand on Cooper's shoulder. "I know these were wicked men who met their end today, but I'd still like to say a few words over their graves before we leave."

Cooper nodded. "Of course, Pastor, you do what you feel is right." He turned and walked back inside the cabin. He found Stone sitting at a table covered with unwashed dishes with a distant look in his eyes. The man looked as if he had aged ten years since leaving home. "Sir, we're gonna bury the dead and then head back to Mercy Plantation."

Stone didn't speak. Instead, he raised a hand to acknowledge he understood what was going on.

Cooper let him be. He looked in every cupboard and box until he had searched the entire cabin.

"What are you looking for, Captain?" asked Hawkins, standing in the doorway.

"Some sign that Maclean and his men were behind this swamp devil nonsense."

"Sir, if he were responsible, why would he have killed two of his own men? Also, Mister Stone and Thomas both said that Miss Willow had been mauled to death by dogs. I didn't see any dogs, did you, sir?"

Cooper shook his head. "No, I didn't."

"Something isn't adding up. I'm beginning to think we've got the wrong man responsible for the murder of them two young 'uns."

Cooper pursed his lips. Hawkins had a point. In his haste to bring Maclean to justice, he hadn't taken the time to step back and examine all the facts before making up his mind who was accountable.

For the return trip to the river, Cooper took the lead. Behind him, Stone walked in silence with his head down. The pastor and one of the farmhands helped a woozy Owens to stay on his feet. Thomas looked after the men carrying

Maclean while Rose and a young man armed with an ax guarded Moses. Last in line was Sergeant Hawkins, who soon found himself busy encouraging everyone to keep moving.

When they finally emerged out of the woods, they were met by a subdued-looking Cyrus.

“What’s wrong?” Cooper asked.

“That,” said Cyrus, pointing to the far bank.

Cooper’s skin crawled when he saw the heads of the two men they had left behind jammed onto the end of a couple of poles. Their eyes and mouths were wide open as if frozen in their last cries of terror. A swarm of flies flew around the heads. From where he was standing, Cooper couldn’t see their bodies. The muddy riverbank was soaked in blood. The horses and the canoes were also nowhere to be seen.

“Oh my God. What happened back here?” asked Pastor Melancon as he helped Owens to sit down on a moss-covered log.

“I don’t know,” replied Cooper. He turned to face Owens. “Is there a ford nearby we can use to cross the river?”

“No,” responded Owens, looking in disbelief at the decapitated heads. “We’re going to have to walk through the woods until we get to O’Doul’s farm. He has a boat we can use.”

“How long is that going to take?”

Owens sat there staring straight ahead.

Cooper snapped his fingers. “Sheriff, how long will it take?”

“Uh, no more than a day or so, I think.”

Thomas and his men stepped out of the woods and halted in their tracks. “Oh, Lord, no,” cried Thomas before dropping to his knees.

“Jesus,” said Cooper under his breath when he remembered Rose. He patted Melancon on the shoulder and pointed back at the woods. “Keep your wife from coming any closer. She doesn’t need to see this.”

The pastor left Cooper’s side and raced to catch his wife.

A couple of seconds later, Hawkins stepped off the path and looked over at the gruesome site on the far riverbank. He shook his head and turned away. “Sir, what do you want us to do?”

“If we had some tools with us, I’d say we make a couple of rafts and try to cross the river, but as we don’t have any, I’d say our options are limited,” replied Cooper.

“We could go back to the farmhouse; Maclean was bound to have had some tools to cut wood with.”

Cooper snapped his fingers when he remembered the horses back in the barn. “That’s a good idea. However, I think we can speed things along. Why walk when we can ride. While everyone else makes their way back to the farm, I’ll send Cyrus and his two men ahead of us to get the horses we found in the barn ready for our arrival.”

“Right, sir. I’ll get everyone turned about.”

The sun soon climbed high in the sky burning off the fog. With the sun came the humidity and the endless swarms of insects. With far less enthusiasm than before, the group trudged back to the homestead.

When they arrived back at the farmstead, an eerie silence greeted them.

Cooper brought up a hand to his mouth and called out, "Cyrus, where are you?"

There was no reply.

Cooper's instincts kicked in, warning him to be wary. He waved the pastor to his side. "Keep everyone with you while Hawkins and I see where Cyrus has gotten to."

Melancon nodded and took cover behind the house with the rest of their party.

"Captain, I got a bad feeling about this," said Hawkins as they strode toward the barn with their weapons at the ready.

"Me too, Sergeant."

When Cooper stuck his head in the barn, he swore at the top of his lungs. The building was empty. There wasn't a horse or person to be seen. They were going to have to walk out of the swamp.

"Sergeant, before this day gets any worse, take a look around for any sign of where they could have gone with the horses. After that, I think it best if we all rested for an hour and had something to eat before pushing on."

"Right, sir, I'll see what I can find," replied Hawkins.

Cooper walked back and joined the others. He found Stone sitting on the ground. "How long have you known Cyrus?"

Stone looked up at Cooper with a tired look on his face. "Why?"

"I know you've been through a lot, but I need you here with me. How long have you known Cyrus?"

Stone let out a deep sigh. "Let me see now. I think it will be two years in December, why do you ask?"

"Sir, he and the two men we sent ahead are gone along with all of the horses."

"I never thought him to be a coward, but you can never know the mettle of a man until he is faced with adversity."

Cooper shook his head. He didn't agree. Cyrus had never come across to him as a coward. "I don't think he ran out on us. Something has happened to him and the two men with him."

Stone shrugged. "All I do know is that his services are no longer welcome at the Mercy Plantation."

From the far side of the barn, Hawkins hollered, "Captain Cooper, Mister Stone, please come here."

"Are you with me?" Cooper asked Stone. The man nodded and stood up. They walked over to where Hawkins was kneeling.

"Have you found something?" asked Cooper.

"There are three sets of tracks leading into the barn," explained Hawkins. "After that, there are only the horses' hoof marks in the mud and this." He pointed to a pair of tracks on the ground.

"Jesus," blurted out Stone. "It can't be. They're just like the ones I found near Willow's body."

Cooper dropped down to examine the footprints. They were similar to the ones they had found back at the plantation with the heel of a man's foot and the toes of a large dog. The tracks led away from the barn.

"They end at the edge of the woods," explained Hawkins. "After that, it's only hoof prints heading away from the farm."

Cooper pursed his lips. What he saw made no sense whatsoever.

"Captain, perhaps we were being followed the whole time by a couple of Maclean's men. They could have murdered the boys by the river and then made their way over here to see what happened to their friends. They must have found the graves and when Cyrus and the two other men arrived they killed them before taking off with the horses?"

"Sergeant, where are the bodies?" asked Stone.

"They could have taken them."

"Why not leave their heads behind like they did at the river?"

"I don't know. Perhaps they heard us coming and took off before desecrating their remains."

"So, how did they cross the river?"

"We didn't see any canoes when we went back. They could have used them to make their way across and then hid them or sent them downriver with the current."

"What about these tracks?"

"What about them?" said Cooper. "Some of the men we killed were barefoot. I was troubled that we didn't find any dogs here. I'm willing to bet that they're with these cutthroats and that's what made your tracks. Sergeant Hawkins' theory makes a lot of sense. I think we have to go on the assumption that some of Maclean's men are still alive and hiding somewhere in the woods. I say we post a couple of sentries and get some food into us before we begin our march to O'Doul's farm."

"How can you think of food at a time like this?" asked Stone.

"Sir, all of our supplies are with our horses, as of now we have no idea the next time we will be able to eat a decent meal. The one thing I learned in the army is to never turn down a hot meal."

"You won't get an argument out of me, Captain," said Hawkins.

Back at the farmhouse, Thomas soon had a fire going.

"Captain, there's plenty of bacon and beans in the house to feed us for a few days," called out the pastor.

"Good. Take what we can carry and leave the rest. Make sure we bring along something to cook the food on. The sooner we eat and get moving the better."

Chapter 15

It was getting late in the day when Cooper called for a stop. He probably could have pushed on for another hour, but most of the others in the party looked tired and in need of rest. He looked over at Hawkins. "Sergeant, this is as good a spot as any to rest for the night. Let's get a fire going and get some food on. I'm sure everyone is hungry."

"I know I am," replied Hawkins. The man seemed eternally hungry.

"Sergeant, I want two men on sentry throughout the night. Make sure you put a man with a gun with each of Thomas' men."

Hawkins nodded and got to work.

"How are you doing?" Cooper asked Owens as he rested his back against a tall, bald cypress tree.

"My head still hurts like hell, but I'll live," replied the sheriff. "How is Maclean?"

"He lost some blood but seems to be okay. Mrs. Melancon thinks she's managed to stop the bleeding."

A short while later, a roaring fire warmed the men standing around it. A couple of skillets filled with bacon sizzled over the orange and red flames. As soon as the sun dipped below the horizon, the air began to cool. A thick fog crept out of the swamp and washed over the small encampment, reducing visibility to a few yards in any direction. Pastor Melancon and one of the farmhands walked around the camp, keeping a watchful eye on the woods. The image of the two decapitated heads was burned into everyone's minds, fraying some of the younger men's nerves to the point of breaking.

"Where should I place the prisoners?" Thomas asked Cooper.

"Down beside the sheriff," he replied.

Moses mumbled something to himself as he sat down on the ground with a sad expression on his face.

Maclean grimaced and moaned when he was placed next to the sheriff. "Hey, Yankee boy, couldn't you put me someplace else," said Maclean, through gritted teeth. "The company here smells."

"Be quiet," snapped Owens.

Maclean sat up as best he could on his stretcher and grinned. "Did the sheriff tell you we're related? Did he, blue-belly?"

Cooper raised an eyebrow. "No, he did not."

"Well, we are. We're cousins on my mother's side."

"So what?" said Owens. "Lots of folks are related in these parts."

Moses lifted his head and sprang to life. Like a demented Imp, he danced around. His eyes gleamed in the light of the fire. "Everyone here has secrets. Secrets and lies. I may be simple, but I recall things real good. Like a couple of nights ago when we paid the sheriff a visit while he was sniffing around Maude Wright's place. He wants her and her warm bed for himself, yes, sir, he does."

"Shut yer mouth, Moses," warned Owens, "or so help me God, I'll do it for you."

"No you won't," Cooper said as he placed his hand on his pistol. "Go on, boy."

"Maclean and the sheriff spoke in private, but he later told us he let the sheriff know we had nothing to do with the death of Madame Legrand's boy and his colored whore. Not that we wouldn't have strung them up ourselves had we caught the fornicating sinners. The sheriff went to bed that night knowing we were planning to shoot you and yer colored boy in the back when you rode out of Mercy Plantation. The Lord uses us to punish the wicked like you. Yes, sir, he surely does."

"The boy's insane. Anyone can see that," said Owens.

"Yeah, but he's telling the truth," said Maclean.

Owens reached for his gun.

"Don't!" warned Cooper, pulling back on the hammer of his pistol with his thumb. "Drop it on the ground by your feet, Sheriff."

Moses broke out laughing. "Looks like Sheriff Tom Owens is going to be hanging from a rope with Mister Maclean and me."

Owens tossed his pistol to the ground at Cooper's feet and stood up. "Captain, things aren't as they say. Give me a chance to explain my end of the story to you."

"Don't listen to him. He's a liar," proclaimed Moses. "A sinner and a liar. God's going to punish him."

"That's enough, boy," said Cooper.

Rose took one of Moses' hands. "Hush now, child. Let the Captain speak."

"Alright, Sheriff, you have one minute to tell me the truth," said Cooper.

Owens raised his hand in surrender. "I can explain everything."

Cooper walked over until he was inches from Owens' face. "What about this plot to kill Hawkins and me? Did you know about it?"

"I won't lie; I spoke with Maclean out at Maude's farm. He said he was going to deal with a problem, but that could have meant anything. At no time did he come out and say he planned to kill the two of you. Hell, I even tried to convince him to leave you alone. I used your line about a regiment of coloreds coming up here to deal with him if didn't smarten up."

Cooper's blood was up. He took a step back and took a deep breath to calm himself. He looked over at Stone, who had been listening to the entire discussion. "What do you think?"

"I think he's lying. I've always been of the opinion that he's scum. Owens is no better than Maclean. But we've got no evidence to prove him wrong. I'm no lawyer, but I doubt anything Maclean and the half-wit have said tonight would hold up in court. They'd say anything to save their own skins by deflecting our fears and suspicions onto others."

Cooper took a couple of paces back. His gut told him not to trust Owens, but Stone was right, the prisoners would say anything to shed doubt on their own crimes. "Okay, Sheriff, I guess we're going to have to believe you for now. But don't think about taking off in the middle of the night. I'd hate to let Sergeant Hawkins track you down. Got it?"

"I ain't gonna run," replied Owens. Before he could move, Stone stood up, grabbed him by his jacket collar and pulled the sheriff toward him.

"I've had enough of you, Sheriff," snarled Stone. "I'm going to see you fired from that job of yours for lying and incompetence. After that, you're going to be given twenty-four hours to leave town or face the consequences." Stone let go of Owens and pushed him away.

Cooper smirked at Owens' predicament. He was probably going to lose his livelihood for his troubles.

"I can't believe you'd take the sheriff at his word," said Maclean. "He was a coward and a thief when he was in the army."

"You lying piece of shit!" screamed Owens. He dropped to one knee and reached for his pistol.

Cooper grabbed the sheriff by the shoulder and pulled him back. "No, you don't. He's going to be tried and then hung for what he's done. Shooting him is what he wants."

Moses giggled. "I don't wanna be shot. I wanna look the hangman right in the eye and forgive him for his sins. Yes, sir, that's what I wanna do before I go to meet my maker."

"Rose, please keep him quiet," said Cooper.

"You heard the Captain," Rose said in a soothing tone to Moses. "Be a good boy and I'll read from the Bible to you after supper."

"I'd like that," replied the boy. "Moses, surely would."

"As for you," said Cooper as he stood over Maclean. "One more word out of you and I'll be forced to jam a sock in your mouth to keep you quiet until we reach Williamstown."

After supper, Cooper sat back and watched as Rose read a passage from her Bible to Moses. He hung on her every word and had a gentle look about him. Cooper felt sad for the boy. His own father had probably thrown him out onto the street where Maclean, for all his faults, found him and became a better father to him than his own had been.

Hawkins took a seat and handed Cooper a cup of coffee.

"Thanks," said Cooper. "How are the farmhands holding up?"

"To be honest, not good. If Thomas wasn't here, I'm sure they all would have hightailed it out of here long ago. They've lost four of their friends and are terrified that they're going to be next."

"I can't blame them. I'm scared too. It's a shame Maclean has passed out. I'd really like to know which of his men weren't at the farm when we showed up. I never thought to ask him earlier."

"You were kind of busy."

From out of the dark a scared voice called out, "Help me, Mister Stone. Please help me."

In an instant, everyone in the camp stood and peered out into the night.

"That be young Solomon's voice," proclaimed Thomas. "He was with Cyrus and Nathaniel when they went missing."

"Help me." Solomon's voice sounded weaker and more distant than before.

"Solomon, where are you?" yelled Stone.

Cooper and Hawkins grabbed a couple pieces of burning wood from the fire and held them up in the air to help them see out into the swamp. It was pointless, the thick fog hanging in the air all around them reflected back the light.

"For the love of God cry out, Solomon," shouted Pastor Melancon. "Let your voice guide us to you."

For a close to a minute no one said a word or moved a muscle. Everyone stared intently into the swirling mist. Finally, Stone broke the silence. At the top of his lungs, he yelled, "Cyrus, Solomon, Nathaniel, can you hear me?"

The only sound they heard in reply came from the frogs croaking all around them in the swamp.

"Dear God, what could have happened to Solomon?" asked Rose.

"Perhaps he wandered away from the others and got lost," said her husband. "He may be only a few yards away lying hurt. Unfortunately, until the sun comes up, we'll never know."

"He's right," said Owens. "I spent many a night out here as a boy. There's nothing we can do for him until the morning. If we head out into the swamp in this fog to look for him now, we'll only add to the list of missing people."

"No one is going anywhere," said Cooper. "I have no doubt that some of Maclean's men are out there in the dark hunting us. We can't divide our strength in the face of the enemy."

"God will watch over them," proclaimed the pastor.

"For their sake, I sure hope so," said Stone.

"Who's on sentry right now?" asked Cooper.

"That would be Thomas and one of his men—Francis, I think," replied Hawkins.

"I'd like you to re-jig the sentry roster. Let's go to fifty percent awake at all times. I don't want one of those bastards getting anywhere near our camp without being spotted."

"Will do, sir."

Stone placed a hand on Cooper's shoulder. His voice turned somber. "This isn't how I imagined this day unfolding. Tell me, Captain, what are our chances of getting home alive?"

"If we stay alert and don't give in to fear, I'd say the odds are on our side. However, should we lose our composure, we'll be picked off one by one until there's no one left to bury the dead."

Chapter 16

No one except for Moses and Maclean slept during the long, cold night. Fear and unease gripped everyone else as they stared out at the mist-filled trees. Each noise in the woods was met by nervous hands reaching for their weapons. A fox looking for a bite ambled toward the fire just before dawn and was shot by Thomas, who didn't stop firing his pistol until he ran out of bullets.

Cooper stood, and stretched his hands over his head. He looked over at the pastor and said, "Let's get some food cooking before we step off today."

"You know I can do more than cook, Captain," replied Melancon.

"Pastor, let's hope we don't need you to fire your shotgun or give any more prayers for the dead before we get back home."

Hawkins walked out of the fog. "Sir, I've checked the perimeter. No one got in or out last night."

"Thanks. After breakfast, I'd like you to organize a search party to look for any sign of Solomon and the other missing men."

"I already have, sir. Thomas, myself and two of his men will head out as soon as we can see more than ten feet in front of our faces."

Cooper smiled. "I should have known you'd be one step ahead of me."

"One step, sir?"

Stone said, "Captain Cooper, sorry to interrupt but it looks like Maclean is waking up."

Cooper walked to his prisoner's side and got down on his haunches. "Maclean, I need you to truthfully answer a couple of questions."

"Now why would I do that?" grouched the murderer.

"Because if you don't, I'll tell Thomas to leave you behind. With that festering wound of yours, how far do figure you could crawl before a gator decided to drag you into the swamp to eat?"

Maclean spat on the ground. "What do you want to know?"

"When we attacked your camp, were all of your men there with you?"

"Yes."

"I mean what I said, Maclean, I want the truth, or I'll leave out here to die."

"Do you think I don't know my own men, Captain? Aside from Moses and me, they're all dead. You and your people shot them all."

Cooper looked into his enemy's bloodshot eyes. "I lost five men yesterday. I need to know who else is out here."

Maclean chuckled. "Looks like God ain't on your side this time, Yankee. I'd like to take credit for the deaths of yer men, but I already told you it ain't none of my people doing the killing."

"Okay, I believe you. It's not your men. So who else lives out here who could be killing my men?"

Maclean shrugged. "I have no idea. I never once came across anyone poking around our camp. Sure there's the odd trapper out here in the bayou, but I never once had trouble with any of them."

"It's the swamp devil that's preying on you and your sinful men," said Moses. He smiled as if he knew a secret no one else did. "I heard the coloreds talking last night. They're scared . . . real scared. They say the beast of the swamp is out here in the bayou waiting to kill all of you when the sun goes down. And they're right. The devil is hiding behind every tree. I know because I've seen him with my own eyes, yes, sir, I have. Pray to God, Yankee, because you're going to die."

It was first thing in the morning and Cooper was already growing tired of the boy's outbursts. He smiled at Rose. "Can you keep him quiet for the rest of the day?"

Although tired, she held up her Bible and winked at him. "I'm sure I can."

"Thanks," said Cooper as he stood up and walked over to the roaring fire. Stone, the pastor, and Owens were standing about warming their hands.

"So what did Maclean tell you?" asked Stone.

"He said all of his men, less Moses, are dead," replied Cooper.

"I think he's telling the truth," said Owens. "I checked the bodies before they were laid to rest and identified each and every one as someone belonging to his gang. Unless he's recruited some new people that I don't know about, you killed 'em all."

"How do we know you're telling us the truth?" asked Stone.

"Because I have no desire to die out here with you. That's why."

"How much farther is it to O'Doul's farm?" asked Cooper.

"Until the sun comes up and I can get my bearings, Captain, I'm not sure."

"Take a guess."

"With Maclean slowing us down, it's probably still a full day's march from here."

Stone asked, "Will we get there before nightfall?"

"If your colored boys carrying Maclean can keep up with the rest of us, I don't see why not."

Cooper saw a twitch in Stone's eye just before he lashed out and smashed his right fist into the side of Owens' face. The sheriff, stunned by the savage blow, staggered back before falling to the ground.

"My men are carrying your dear cousin, Sheriff!" snarled Stone. "Perhaps you'd like to carry him on your back all the way home?"

Owens reached for his pistol.

Cooper drew his first and aimed it at Owens' head. "Easy does it, gents, this is getting exasperating. I suggest we save this discussion until we're back at the plantation. Until then, I need you both to behave like civilized gentlemen."

Owens lifted his hand away from his gun. "I'll do as you say, Captain, but only until we're out of the swamp, after that Stone and I are going to settle things man to man."

"I accept," said Stone.

Cooper shook his head and holstered his pistol before reaching down to help Owens up to his feet. "I don't know about you two, but I'm going to get something to eat."

Sergeant Hawkins looked over his shoulder at Captain Cooper and gave him a quick wave before sliding down the muddy embankment and into the cold water. He grimaced as it flooded over and into his boots. With each step he took, the water got higher on his body until it was almost at his waist. Behind him waded Thomas and two of the farmhands. Hawkins had selected a tall tree in the distance as the first spot they would make for. Since no one had seen Solomon, they were walking in the direction Hawkins thought he heard his voice coming from the night before. Hawkins kept his eyes focused on the water. Aside from alligators, he knew the bayous of Louisiana were home to several venomous snakes. Luckily most weren't aggressive, but the thought of being bitten by one made him shudder.

"What if we get to that there tree and don't find Solomon?" Thomas asked.

"We'll keep going until we can't see the captain and the rest of the group," replied Hawkins. "I don't want to lose sight of them—not in this swamp. It would be far too easy to get turned around and wander off in the wrong direction. We'd probably end up walking in circles for days without ever seeing another living soul."

When they came to the bald cypress tree, Hawkins raised his hand. The men with him stopped and looked around, trying to see any sign of Solomon or the other missing men.

"I don't see anything," said Thomas.

"Me neither," replied Hawkins. "But I also don't want to give up the search."

"What do you want to do?"

"Leave one of your men here while the rest of us push on. When we can't see him anymore, we'll turn around and come back."

Thomas turned around and waved a young man wearing a straw hat and carrying a machete to his side.

Hawkins looked ahead and selected a tree with a long branch on it that looked like it was pointing at him for them to walk toward. He was about to place his hand on a log when he spotted a snapping turtle sitting there looking up at him.

Hawkins gently knocked the turtle into the water with the butt of his carbine and watched it swim away.

"Let's go," he said over his shoulder. As he took his first step, he sank deeper into the water. It was soon over his belt.

"I can't go on," protested the young man with them. "I can't swim."

"Okay, stay here with Lucius," said Thomas. "But keep a close eye on us in case we need help."

With Thomas by his side, Hawkins walked through the water until they arrived at their next destination. The sound of buzzing flies combined with the nauseating smell of death told Hawkins they'd found something. He brought up his carbine and looked around. At first he didn't see it, then his eyes spotted a hand sticking out the water. The skin was porcelain white. Hawkins tapped Thomas on the shoulder and pointed. They trudged through the muck and found the rest of the body floating in the water.

"It be Cyrus," said Thomas, looking down at the corpse. His voice quivered with fear.

The foul smell escaping from the body almost made Hawkins gag. He brought up his kerchief to his mouth and bent down to examine the remains. His blood turned cold when Hawkins saw a deep cut from Cyrus' throat all the way to his groin. He pulled the body toward him and peeled back the skin. The man's innards had been removed leaving a bloody, empty cavity in his chest.

"My God, what done happened to him?" asked Thomas.

"I don't know," replied Hawkins as he lifted his head and looked around. "Can you see Solomon or Nathaniel?"

"No."

"Neither can I. I hate to say it but I don't think we're gonna find them out here. Come on, let's take Mister Eyre's body back to the others so he can be given a decent burial."

The mood among the rest of the party when Hawkins returned was one of shock and anger. They were horrified at what had happened to Cyrus and were worried sick about the two other missing men. No one said it aloud, but they didn't expect to find either man alive.

"Since we don't have a shovel with us," said Cooper to Hawkins, "get the men to gather up as many rocks as they can and we'll cover Cyrus' body with them."

"I say we leave his body and get moving," said Owens. "Whoever did that could be still around waiting to attack us."

"Yes, they could be," replied Cooper. "But we're not going to leave him for the animals to eat. We'll leave when I say so and not one second before. Since you're worried about people lurking in the shadows, might I suggest you keep watch while the rest of us bury Cyrus."

Owens muttered something under his breath as he stepped back from Cooper. He turned to face the swamp, drew his pistol, and with his one good eye he stared out into wetlands.

It was only after Pastor Melancon had said a final prayer for Cyrus' soul did they continue their long slog through the bayou to O'Doul's farm. Owens once more was in the lead followed by Cooper, Rose, and Moses. Pastor Melancon,

Thomas, and his men carried Maclean while Stone and Hawkins kept watch behind them.

Toward noon, Cooper saw Owens stop in this tracks. He walked to his side and asked, "Why are we stopping?"

The sheriff pointed at the pool of water at their feet. "I think the river must have switched direction sometime last winter and washed out the path I used to follow to get to O'Doul's."

Cooper saw the trail they were following bend off sharply to the left. "Will this take us to the farm?"

"I don't know. I've never walked it before. It may lead us there or it may take us deeper into the bayou."

"Well, it's the only piece of dry land that I can see, so I say we take it and see where we end up."

"It's your call, Captain. Just remember the swamp isn't too forgiving on people who get lost."

Cooper could see no other alternative. Going back wasn't an option and splashing through the water up to their waists carrying a man on a stretcher wouldn't help them either. He looked at Owens and said, "Lead on, Sheriff, and whatever you do, don't get us lost. I'll pass the word that we're taking a different path to O'Doul's."

Owens nodded and continued his slow but steady pace through the woods.

They never stopped for lunch. Only a fifteen-minute break to rest their weary feet was all Cooper allowed. As the long, humid afternoon wore on, Cooper started to wonder if he had made the right call when they unexpectedly emerged out of the forest into a clearing. Directly in front of them was a small wooden shack with a stone chimney.

"Is this the place?" Cooper asked Owens.

The Sheriff shook his head. "No. I've never seen this home before."

"I'll get Hawkins to hold up in the woods and look after everyone while you and I check it out. Perhaps the person living here knows a way out of here?"

"I don't see any smoke coming from the chimney. The person living there may not be home."

"Well, there's only one way to find out."

Cooper and Owens walked toward the log cabin. As they got closer, they could see numerous animal traps lying on the porch of the home. A large alligator's skull was nailed to the door of the house. Several large animal pelts, most likely from black bears, were hung out to dry.

"The man who lives here must be a trapper," said Owens.

"Looks that way. Why don't you try calling to him before we get any closer?"

"Hello, you in the house, my name is Sheriff Tom Owens from Williamstown. I need to talk to you."

Silence answered them.

Owens stepped a few paces closer. "Mister, you're not wanted by the law. I just need to talk to you."

"I wonder if he's an old timer and only speaks French?" said Cooper.

"Could be. I don't know a single word in French. Do you?"

Cooper repeated the message in French. As before, there was no reply. "I guess we're going to have to open the door and see if there's anyone home."

"After you, Captain," said Owens with a slight bow.

Cooper walked to the closed front door and pushed it with his hand. It creaked open. Right away the smell of rotting flesh assaulted his nostrils. Cooper fought hard not to vomit. He placed his kerchief over his nose and mouth and pushed the door all the way open. On the floor lay a naked man's body with its head missing. Flies hung like a mist above the bloated corpse.

"What the hell is going on out here?" said Owens, looking down at that the corpse.

Cooper drew his pistol and walked inside. He was careful to avoid stepping anywhere near the dead trapper's body. He made his way to the fireplace and placed his hand on the ashes. "There's no warmth left in the cinders. I doubt it's been lit in days."

Owens looked about for anything that could tell them who the dead man was. He picked up a faded picture in a wooden frame of a woman holding a child in her arms. There was writing on it, but it wasn't in English. Owens handed the picture to Cooper.

"The dead man was definitely a Cajun. The writing is French," explained Cooper.

"What does it say?"

"To my dear Andre from your loving sister, Clarisse."

"Is there a last name written on it?"

Cooper shook his head. "I guess the best we're going to get is his first name. When we get back to town, you can ask around and see if anyone ever knew him or his sister."

"That's doubtful. Folks back home like the Cajuns almost as much as they do the coloreds on account of them being Catholic. My father used to say the English never should have kicked the French out of Canada all them years ago."

Cooper had seen enough. He stepped outside and took in a deep breath of fresh air. A shudder ran down his back when he thought of the decapitated body lying only feet away from him. Cooper stood on his toes and waved to Hawkins to bring the rest of the group to the house.

"Now what?" asked Owens.

"We'll bury the trapper and rest up here for the night. I doubt we could go much further before nightfall."

"What if whoever or whatever killed the Cajun comes back?"

"I'm tired of losing people. This time, I want to be waiting for him."

Chapter 17

"Okay, Sergeant, how are things looking?" asked Cooper.

"Sir, I took some of the dead man's animal traps and placed them out in the field," replied Hawkins. "I also found some twine and hung some old cans with

pebbles in them between some of the trees. If anyone tries to get close tonight, we may not see them, but we sure as hell should hear them coming."

"Excellent. What about food and water?"

"We still have a day's worth of bacon and beans. Thomas shot an armadillo just before the sun went down so we've got fresh meat for supper. I made sure everyone filled their canteens from the trapper's well. He had some smoked meats hanging outside of his house. Bear and gator, I think, so we've taken them as well."

"So we won't starve to death, not right away at least." Cooper looked around at the rest of their party sitting on the ground outside of the cabin. They all looked tired and scared. "Does anyone else have anything to add to the conversation?"

Rose Melancon nodded. "Maclean's wound opened up sometime during the day. He's lost a lot of blood. I didn't notice it until I went to check on his bandages and saw that his blood had pooled at the bottom of the stretcher. I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault, Mrs. Melancon," said Cooper. "You've done the best you could have with Maclean. If you hadn't been here, he would have bled to death back at the farm."

"Thank you, that means a lot to me. However, things for Maclean are dire. I'm not sure if he'll make it through the night. I've washed out his wound and put a new bandage on it, but he may already be too far gone."

"Good riddance to the man," said Stone. "It'll be no loss if the bastard dies."

"Justice won't be served if he dies out here," said Cooper. "I'd rather see him hang for what he's done than die out here."

"I'll do what I can, but his fate is in God's hands now," said Rose.

"I've had it," announced the pastor. "This has become a bloody nightmare. I'm for turning back. We have to face facts. We don't know where we are or where we are going. I think Owens is lost but is too damn stupid to know it or just won't admit it."

"Like hell I am," cried Owens, jumping to his feet.

Cooper raised a hand. "Please, take a seat, Sheriff, the pastor is talking."

Melancon continued. "As I was saying, if we backtrack to Maclean's farm, we can hold up there a day or so while we make some rafts to cross the river with."

Cooper looked over at Stone. "What are your thoughts on the matter?"

Stone removed his hat and ran a hand through his matted hair. "I'm with the pastor. His plan makes the most sense to me. With Maclean on death's doorstep, I've got what I wanted. I'm for going home before we lose another person to whatever it is that stalks these woods."

"Thomas, Owens, speak up if you have something to say."

Thomas looked over at his employer. "If Mister Stone be in favor of heading back, my men and me, we done think it's the right thing to do."

"I say we wait until dawn and get our bearings," said Owens. "We could be only a couple of miles from O'Doul's place. If we turn around now, we'll be walking for days just to get back to Maclean's farm."

"They say the army isn't a democracy so I won't be putting this to a vote," said Cooper. "I'll think about what you have all said and decide in the morning what we will do next. Now I suggest we all relax while we can and eat our supper. It may yet prove to be another long night."

Cooper and Hawkins walked to the edge of the swamp to talk in private. A couple of yards away from them was a raccoon sitting on a log as it waited for a fish to swim by.

"I'd really like to know what you think we should do next, Sergeant?" asked Cooper.

"Sir, the sheriff, doesn't really know where he is and I'd rather not keep pushing deeper into the swamp if we don't have to," replied Hawkins. "In the morning, why don't Mister Owens and I poke around for an hour or so. If we don't find O'Doul's farm, then I agree with the pastor. It's high time to cut our losses."

"Sage advice, as always. We'll go with your suggestion."

They walked back and re-joined everyone standing around a roaring fire. Pastor Melancon and two of the farmhands stood sentry while everyone else ate. Thomas ladled out a soup of rice, beans, and armadillo meat. Cooper tried it and found it to be tastier than he thought it would be.

Moses sat on the ground beside Maclean, holding his hand. He rocked back and forth saying the Lord's Prayer over and over.

"He refuses to eat," said Rose, concerned for the boy's well-being.

"He probably won't eat a thing until Maclean passes on," explained Cooper. "Just leave him be. I doubt he'll leave Maclean's side."

Cooper could see Thomas standing in the field staring at the trees and walked over to him. "I know you're worried about your missing men. We all are."

"After seeing what they done did to poor Mister Eyre, I don't hold out much hope that they be still alive, Captain."

"There's always hope, Thomas."

"These woods be cursed. The devil is out there watching us as we eat. I can feel it in my bones."

Cooper pursed his lips. "Thomas, I know you believe there is something supernatural out there in the dark, but the swamp devil is just a story made up to frighten children into being good. There's no monster out there hunting us. It's just a couple of men who know these woods far better than we do, that's all it is. Hopefully, they're foolish enough to try and get at us tonight. Sergeant Hawkins has laid a few surprises for them."

Thomas turned his head and looked into Cooper's eyes. "I wish I done shared your confidence, Captain. But them traps spread out on the ground ain't gonna stop it. It's gonna come here and take more of us to eat and there's nothing you can do about it."

Cooper was about to say something more but decided to keep his mouth shut. Thomas had his beliefs as did his men and there was nothing he could say or do to change their minds. He watched Thomas walk back to the fire with his head hung low. It was as if he were already resigned to his fate.

Toward midnight, the stars disappeared behind a wall of clouds. Within minutes, a heavy sheet of rain began to fall, forcing everyone sleeping in the open onto the porch of the dead man's cabin. After what had happened to the trapper, no one was keen to spend the night indoors. Cooper rested his back against a wooden crate and let out a tired sigh. He hadn't slept more than a couple of hours in the past few days. His ability to think straight and make rational decisions was

beginning to fade. He watched as Thomas, assisted by a couple of men, carried Maclean just inside the shack to keep the rain off him. Moses and Rose moved to be near Maclean as he neared death.

Cooper stood up and walked to the wide-open front door of the cabin. He saw Rose Melancon place a hand on the youth's shoulder, trying to console him. Cooper wasn't deeply religious and had always found it odd that a man, even one as monstrous as Maclean, could have his sins forgiven as he faced death. Still, Cooper was happy Rose was there to comfort the boy as he watched the only person in the world who cared for him slowly fade away.

"It's gonna be real hard to spot anyone moving about them woods with this rain coming down," observed Owens. "I remember a time at Chickamauga when we snuck up a couple of Yankee sentries during a storm just like this one and killed 'em for their food."

Cooper couldn't decide if Owens was trying to deliberately get under his skin. "It was war. You did what you had to do to stay alive, as did Sergeant Hawkins and me."

"We were starving. Our supply chain had broken down and we hadn't eaten anything for days. Yet just a few hundred yards away, we could see the bluebellies eating and drinking. It wasn't fair."

"War isn't supposed to be fair. It's about winners and losers. It always has been and will continue to be that way until the world ends."

Owens shrugged and turned to leave.

"Tell me, Sheriff, what did you believe you were fighting for?"

"At first, I told myself it was to preserve our way of life, but after a while, I fought on because my friends and family were there fighting alongside me. Why did you, a foreigner, fight in the war?"

"It's complicated, but I guess I fought because I thought the cause of ending slavery to be the right thing to do."

Owens chuckled, "Captain, you're an educated man, even you must have noticed that this war was fought mainly by people who didn't own slaves. Sure, some of the officers on our side did, but the soldiers like me and my brothers sure as hell didn't. Many men on our side had never even seen a colored person before they joined up to fight against the Union. And let's not forget the thousands of Yankee copperhead volunteers who came south to fight on our side against President Lincoln and his heavy-handed politics."

"Sheriff, I can't decide if there's more to you hiding behind a facade of indifference or you are just another small-minded bigot."

Owens laughed to himself. "I think you'll find I'm both. My job is to keep the peace for the good people of Williamstown and I think I do my job rather well."

"Aye, unless you're a poor former slave." Cooper wasn't in the mood to listen to Owens' moralizing anymore. He turned and walked away.

Sergeant Hawkins and Stone stood by the fire as it hissed and crackled each time a raindrop fell into the bonfire. Both men were soaked to the bone as their rubber ponchos were with their horses somewhere on the other side of the Mississippi.

Thomas walked out of the dark and joined them. "I done told the remainder of the men to take a few minutes' rest by the house to warm themselves up."

"Good idea," said Hawkins. "There's no point in all of us standing around getting wet."

"I take my hat off to you, Sergeant," said Stone. "I can't imagine doing this for years as you and Captain Cooper did during the war."

"You kinda get used to the hardships and learn to adapt," responded Hawkins. "After a life of being a slave, what's a bit of rain running down your back."

"You have me there."

The faint sound of a pebble rattling around inside a tin can somewhere off to their right made the three men stop talking and turn their heads.

Hawkins raised a hand, telling everyone to remain still. A second later, they heard the noise again.

Thomas turned on his heel while he pulled back on the hammer on his shotgun. He almost jumped out of his skin when he heard a loud yelp of pain come from the woods. Someone or something had just stepped in one of the animal traps.

"Wake everyone up!" ordered Hawkins.

Thomas spun around and ran back to the hut, yelling, "Get up, they're here!"

Cooper resting against the wall, yanked his hat from his face, grabbed his carbine and jumped to his feet. He looked toward the fire and saw two men standing there with their weapons aimed out into the dark.

Thomas dashed back to the cabin. Cooper grabbed him by the arm and said, "Stay here with your men and look after Rose and the boy."

Pastor Melancon and Owens followed Cooper out into the rain.

"What did you see?" Cooper asked his sergeant.

"Nothing, sir," replied Hawkins. "We heard something moving around over to our right and then something directly in front of us stepped into one of my traps."

"Okay, everyone grab a stick from the fire and spread out in a line. If you see something, for God's sake make sure it isn't one of our missing men before opening fire."

Each man, except for Owens, picked up a piece of burning wood and stepped away from the fire.

Cooper raised his torch up high and peered out into the gloom. His heart was racing in his chest. Owens was right, the downpour made it hard to see more than a dozen yards in the dark.

Rose gently placed a hand on Moses' back. "It's all going to be okay. No one's going to hurt you."

"Mister Maclean's hand is cold," he said, between sobs. "The Lord has come and taken him to his side."

Rose bent down and placed her hand on Maclean's chest. She couldn't feel his heart beating. "I'm sorry, Moses. You're right, he's gone."

Moses let go of Maclean and turned to embrace Rose. "I'm all alone now. God has taken everything from me. I guess he'll be coming for me too."

She held the youth in her arms and began to rock back and forth. Rose opened her mouth to speak when she got a whiff of something musky smelling in the air.

She turned her head to look out the open door and froze in horror when she saw by the light of a flickering candle, a tall, dark shape standing in the doorway looking down at her.

Thomas clenched his shotgun tight in his hands as he watched Stone and the rest of the men spread out into a line. He had moved a few yards away from the cabin and wished he was out there with the other men, instead of being safe. Still, he knew Cooper was right, Mrs. Melancon and the boy needed someone with a gun to protect them.

"What done made that horrible noise?" asked Lucius, one of the surviving farmhands. "Something large be moving around in the woods," replied Thomas.

Lucius took a step back. His eyes were as large as saucers. "The Rougarou?"

"I don't know; I didn't see it."

Lucius brought up his ax. His hands trembled so bad he nearly dropped his weapon. The sound of a deep grunt from something barely a couple of yards away was all the warning the two men got before a clawed hand reached out from the dark and struck Thomas in the face, sending him tumbling to the ground. Lucius let out a yell and swung his ax at the outstretched arm. His aim was off and he struck nothing but air. Before he could bring his arm back, he was hit in the back. White-hot pain shot from the deep claw marks torn into his skin. He dropped to his knees and moaned in agony. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Thomas' shotgun lying in the mud. He scrambled on all fours, trying to reach it. A second later, Lucius' fingers grabbed a hold of the cold, wet metal of the twin barrels. He pulled it toward him and hurried to pull back the hammers on the gun when he felt something sharp strike his neck. In an instant, he realized he couldn't breathe. He dropped the shotgun to the ground and reached up for his neck. His fingers became sticky from the warm blood pumping from the hole slashed through his throat. Within seconds, his vision began to narrow. Lucius Legrand turned his head to look at what had attacked him. Just before he passed out, Lucius thought he saw a bear standing on its hind legs, staring down at him.

Rose saw the thing at the door take a step forward. She recoiled back, trying to pull Moses with her. A terrible fear gripped her heart. Rose opened her mouth and screamed as loud as she could.

Moses saw the beast, pushed Rose aside and jumped to his feet. "Keep away from her, Lucifer. If you want a soul, take mine, you vile creature!"

With a loud smack, the monster lashed out and hit Moses on the side of the head, sending him flying to the floor.

Rose remembered her shotgun and turned to reach for it on the small dining table in the middle of the room. She almost had it in her grasp when a hand reached out and grabbed her by the hair and yanked her back. Rose cried out in pain. With all of her strength, she fought to break her attacker's hold on her. A second later, she felt her body being raised up off the ground. "No!" screamed Rose as her head was bashed into the side of the table. Her world turned dark.

Cooper heard the scream and spun around to face the cabin. His gut dropped when he saw two dark shapes lying in the grass. He heard Melancon call

out Rose's name as he sprinted toward the trapper's home. Cooper ran after him. He caught up with the pastor as he dashed into the cabin.

All of the candles were out. The interior was as dark as pitch.

"Rose, where are you?" called out the distraught pastor, fumbling around in the dark.

Cooper dug into a pocket and grabbed his box of matches. With a flick of his wrist, he lit a match and placed it against the wick of a candle inside a lantern. Right away, they could see the room had been turned inside out. What little furniture there had been in the shack had been pushed aside or broken in half.

A weak moan came from underneath the dining table. Cooper and Melancon ran over and pushed the table out of the way. Rose lay facedown on the floor.

"Rose, are you alright?" asked the pastor as he dropped to his knees and took hold of his wife in his arms. Tears streamed down the man's face.

"Where's Moses and Maclean?" said Cooper as he looked around the cabin for the two men.

"Captain, where are you?" called out Hawkins.

Cooper left the pastor with his wife and ran outside. "I'm here, Sergeant."

"Sir, Lucius is dead and Thomas looks like he got hit hard on the side of his head," explained Hawkins, standing over the two bodies. "I think Thomas may have lost an eye."

Cooper grimaced at the news. "Where are Owens and Stone?"

"They're keeping guard by the fire."

Cooper didn't like the idea of those two being left alone, but he didn't have much choice in the matter. He was rapidly running out of men. "What about the three other men who were back here with Thomas, have you seen them?"

Hawkins looked around but didn't see the farmhands. He called out, "Joe, Cole, Francis, where are you?" Two men ran from the far side of the shack. Hawkins recognized the youths as Cole and Francis. "Where was Joe before the commotion began?"

"He done be standing about where you are," replied Cole. "Thomas done told him to guard the front door of the cabin."

Cooper moved the lantern around at his feet, trying to see if he could find Joe's tracks. He swore when instead of a man's footprint, he found animal tracks like the ones they had seen at Maclean's farm. Only, this time, there were at least three different sets of prints on the wet ground.

"They lead to and from the swamp," said Hawkins.

"That must be how they got in here," said Cooper. "While we were busy looking at the woods, whoever it was snuck in using the water behind the cabin and took Joe, Moses, and Maclean before we knew what the hell was going on."

"I ain't never seen a mark like that before in my life," said Cole, shivering like a leaf in the pouring rain. "Thomas be right, the swamp devil is coming to take us all to hell."

Cooper grabbed the terrified young man by the arm. "Cole, monsters don't exist. Now, I need you to look after Thomas. Have him moved inside the cabin and keep watch over him until the sun comes up, alright?"

Cole nodded and walked away.

"Captain, what if whoever did this decides to come back?" asked Hawkins.

“Well, they know precisely where we are, so there’s no point in pretending otherwise. Get Francis to give you a hand starting a few more fires. After that, find and light as many lanterns as you can. Let’s make it hard for the bastards to sneak up on us again.”

Cooper seethed inside at himself. He had had underestimated their opponents and it had cost them dearly. Cooper vowed he wouldn’t make the same mistakes in the future. He was about to go and check on Rose and Thomas when a shot rang out. He pivoted on his heel and ran to join Stone and Owens by the fire.

“Did you see something?” he asked.

“I thought I saw a set of eyes in the trees looking this way,” said Stone.

Cooper looked over but didn’t see a thing. “Are you sure? It could just be your nerves playing tricks on you.”

“I saw ‘em too, Captain,” said Owens. “They were golden yellow. I saw the light from the fire reflected in its eyes. It stood a good seven or eight feet tall.”

“We’ll have to wait until dawn to go and check it out. Until then, I need you two to stay alert and keep a watch on the woods for us. Whoever is out there is smart, real smart. He fooled us into thinking he was going to use the trees to get near us. Instead, he came in via the water behind the cabin. We found three different set of tracks in the mud. During the attack, Rose and Thomas were injured. We also lost a couple of men along with Moses and Maclean tonight.”

“Did any of the coloreds run off?” asked Owens.

“No.” Cooper bristled at the question. “Lucius is dead. It looks like his throat was ripped from his body. As for the other three, I have no idea, but I’m betting they didn’t go willingly with the people who attacked us.”

“Are you still sure it’s just a couple of men were facing out here?” asked Stone.

Cooper was surprised. He had thought Stone was firm in his conviction that the swamp devil was nothing more than a legend. “Right now, all I do know for sure is that we’ve got to find a way out of here before we all die.”

Chapter 18

“Anything?” Cooper asked Hawkins as he walked through the damp early morning mist back toward the cabin.

Hawkins shook his head. “Aside from more animal-like tracks in the woods, I found nothing. There was no blood in the trap that was sprung nor was there any in the spot Mister Stone said he saw something standing.”

“How many sets of prints did you find?”

“Four, possibly five. It was hard to tell.”

“Thanks. Grab yourself a cup of coffee to warm up while I check on Mrs. Melancon and Thomas.”

Inside the cabin, Cooper found Rose quietly tending to Thomas’ wounds. Rose had a bump the size of a goose egg on the side of her head hidden underneath a bandage she had made from a torn piece of her shirt. Thomas, on the other hand, lay still on the floor. His attacker had torn into the flesh around his right eye,

ripping it out. Rose had cleaned the wound and placed a clean kerchief over it as a bandage. Although she wouldn't say it, Cooper could see in her eyes that the attack had traumatized her. Only time would tell if she would ever be able to put the horror of last night behind her.

"I take it you're here to tell us we'll be heading back to Maclean's farm?" said the pastor. His voice was accusatory as if Cooper was somehow responsible for all the troubles that had befallen the group.

"Not exactly. I've asked Sergeant Hawkins and Owens to look around. If they come back and tell us we are nowhere near O'Doul's farm, then yes we will turn around and try to make it back to Maclean's cabin. But don't forget whoever these people are, they've been following ever since we stepped foot in these woods. Just turning around does not guarantee our safety."

"I'm not a superstitious man, Captain, but we aren't being stalked by a man. My wife told me she was attacked by a hairy monster, as was Thomas. They said exactly the same thing, it was a monster, not a man. This has to be the work of the devil. Perhaps the half-wit, Moses, was right. We are all being punished by God for our many sins."

Cooper ground his teeth. The last thing he needed was for someone to lose their mind while they were still days away from Mercy Plantation. "Pastor, I give you my word, we are facing a couple of renegades, not the devil."

"Only the devil could control and guide the things that are hunting us."

"You're wrong. I tell you we're being stalked by men and men can be killed." Cooper didn't want to carry on the conversation so he turned around and nipped back outside to join Hawkins, Owens, and Stone by the fire. The only consolation was the rain had let up a couple of hours ago. Steam rose from the damp clothes on the men's bodies as they stood near the heat of the fire.

"How are things?" Stone asked.

"Mrs. Melancon looks okay. Thomas has lost an eye and a lot of blood."

"Can he walk?" asked Owens.

"I think so but probably not very fast. He'll need to be helped by someone."

"Francis and Cole can see to him," said Stone. "While you were in the cabin, I spoke with Hawkins and Owens. They told me you want them to keep looking for O'Doul's farm."

"Yes, I do."

"Well, I for one think it's a waste of time. We're wasting precious daylight. We need to head back home immediately."

"Give them an hour. If they come back empty-handed, then we'll pack up and head back the way we came." Cooper could see in Stone's eyes that he wasn't comfortable sticking around a minute more than he had to. "They might stumble onto a boat we could use or find a way out of here. Think about it, we could be home by nightfall."

"Then again, we could all be dead."

Cooper was tired and in no mood to argue. "Sir, I've made up my mind. We're going nowhere until Hawkins and the sheriff return."

"If they go, we all know only Owens will return," said Melancon as he walked toward the fire. "As soon as they are out of sight, Owens or one of those creatures will come out of the swamp and kill Sergeant Hawkins."

Cooper shook his head. "That's not true and you know it, Pastor."

"Really? How do we know the sheriff isn't in league with these creatures?"

"Because that's a load of bull," protested Owens. "I ain't in league with anyone."

"I disagree. Nothing has happened to you so far, unlike my wife and Mister Stone's people. Many of whom are now dead. No, Sheriff, you are a Jonah and the devil is protecting you, isn't he?"

"Jesus, Pastor, shake yer head. I ain't no Jonah. I didn't bring the bad luck we've been having onto the party. That's God's work if any one is to blame. Besides, I got shot. I have a scar on the side of my head to prove it."

"If Maclean had wanted you dead, you wouldn't be here talking to us. You and I both know he deliberately missed."

"Now why would he do that?" asked Cooper, struggling with the desire to coldcock the pastor to shut him up.

"I don't know. Perhaps they were working together to lure us deeper into the bayou so these monsters could kill us all."

"Pastor, think about what you're saying. It's sheer nonsense," said Cooper. "The sheriff may not care too much what happens to any of us, but I for one don't believe he is working with the devil."

"Neither do I," said Hawkins, looking the pastor in the eye. "Something odd is happening out here, but Owens has nothing to do with it. I don't particularly like the man, but I'm not afraid to go with him into the woods to look for a way out of here for all of us."

"Right, that settles it," said Cooper. "We stick to my plan. End of discussion!"

"Speaking of that, sir," said Hawkins. "I don't see any reason why the sheriff and I can't head out now."

"May God watch over you and have mercy on your soul, Sergeant," said Melancon.

Hawkins smiled. "Sir, ask the Lord to make sure that I shoot straight when the time comes."

Cooper placed a hand on Melancon's shoulder. "Pastor, we're all tired and under a lot of stress. I need you to stay calm and not give in to despair. Perhaps you should check back with your wife to see how she is doing."

Melancon nodded and walked away with his head bowed.

Cooper turned and offered his hand to his comrade. "See you in one hour, Sergeant."

Hawkins shook Cooper's hand. "Hopefully, we'll be back with good news long before that."

Stone and Cooper stood by the fire and watched as Hawkins and Owens walked toward the woodline.

"Captain, I may not share Pastor Melancon's views on Sheriff Owens, but I do agree with him," said Stone. "We are up against something unnatural in this swamp and the longer we stay here, the less our chances are in getting out of here alive."

At the edge of the woods, Hawkins stopped and looked over his shoulder at Owens. "So, Sheriff, which way do you propose we go?"

Owens pointed off to their right. "I think the farm should be off in that direction."

"I'll take the lead if you don't mind."

Owens took a step to one side. "Not at all. You seem to be better at tracking and unlike myself, you have two eyes to see with."

Hawkins picked a path through the woods and began to walk. He moved slow and deliberate, trying to be as quiet as possible. After a few minutes of picking his way through the brush, he stopped and raised his hand.

"What is it?" Owens whispered.

"Up ahead, I can hear something making a noise."

Owens cocked his head and listened. "Sounds like a wild boar eating something."

Hawkins edged forward a few more yards before stopping behind a tall tree. The noise seemed to be coming from the other side. He took a deep breath to calm his nerves before poking his head around to take a look. In an instant, he wished he had not. Two wild boars were tearing at and eating the flesh from Maclean's naked corpse. The fur on their faces was covered in blood.

Owens moved around so he could see. He felt a wave of revulsion at the sight of his dead cousin. He drew his pistol to shoot the animals when he felt a hand on his arm.

"Don't do that," warned Hawkins. "If you do, you'll let whoever is out there know where we are."

"This ain't right," objected Owens. "No one, no matter who they are, should be left to be eaten by an animal."

"Maclean was dead long before his body was dumped in the woods for the pigs to feast on."

Owens hesitated for a moment before lowering his weapon.

Hawkins scoured the ground around the tree and soon found a couple sets of tracks. They were identical to the ones he had found next to the cabin. "Come on, let's see where they lead to."

Owens was steadily losing his nerve and blanched at the thought. He could taste bile in the back of his mouth and fought off being sick. With great reluctance he nodded his concurrence.

Hawkins took a couple of steps away from the tree to better see the tracks. For close to thirty minutes, they trudged through the mud until they came to a small clearing. Wisps from a fire nearing its end wafted up into the air. Hawkins' instincts, honed in battle, warned him to be wary. He motioned for Owens to stay where he was while he crept out into the open. With one eye on the surrounding woods, Hawkins walked to the fire. He poked at the charred timber with the barrel of his carbine and spotted a piece of bone. Hawkins bent down and picked it up. He examined it for a moment before dropping it to the ground. He stood up and looked all around before jogging back to Owens.

"What did you find?" asked the sheriff.

"I found a man's jawbone in the fire," replied Hawkins. "Whoever we're dealing with are eating their victims."

Owens shook his head. "That doesn't make any sense. What are you trying to say?"

"I don't think the devil or some swap monster would need a fire to eat his victims. Do you?"

"No."

"Sheriff, I don't want to believe this any more than you do. Let's get back to the captain and others before anyone else goes missing."

"God, no!" said Stone when he heard the news. He stepped back, visibly shaken and had to take a seat on the ground.

"I wish it weren't so, but I know what I saw," said Hawkins.

"Is there any hope Joe or Moses could be found alive?" asked Stone.

Hawkins shook his head. "No, sir. We found Maclean's body and the jaw bone of another man. I think it's a safe bet to assume they're all dead."

"I've heard enough," said Cooper. "If we stay out here, they'll surely come back for us. We're heading back to Maclean's farm right away. Owens and Hawkins will take the lead. Mister Stone can bring up the rear with everyone else in the middle. We stop for nothing. If we set a good pace, we can be there in a day and a half from now."

The speed with which they made their way through the forest was slower than Cooper had hoped for. It, however, couldn't be helped. Thomas put on a brave face but was suffering in agony with every step he took. Cooper looked over his shoulder, trying to find the sun, but found he was unable to see it through the tall forest canopy. He checked his watch and saw they had been walking for only two hours when Thomas dropped to his knees and asked for a short rest.

"Okay, everyone close it up," said Cooper. "We'll take a five-minute halt. Sergeant Hawkins and Mister Stone, please keep watch."

"How are you doing, Thomas?" asked Cooper as he bent down to check on the injured man.

"Sorry, but I think done broken a couple of ribs when I was knocked to the ground," explained Thomas, between pained gasps for air.

"No need to be sorry. It's not your fault."

"I'll bind his chest up as best I can," said Rose. "But he isn't going to be able to move much faster than he already is."

Cooper nodded. "Please do what you can for him."

Owens took a deep swig from his canteen. The warm, brackish water didn't really quench his thirst. He wanted a glass—no, he wanted a bottle of Scotch when he got back to his room in the back of the jailhouse. He wondered if his deputy had even noticed his absence and formed a search party to look for him. Knowing how lazy the man was, Owens doubted it. He sat down on a log and watched a gator sunning itself only a few yards away from him. The alligator didn't seem to be bothered by the presence of so many people. It lay still with its eyes closed, soaking in the heat from the sun shining down through a break in the trees. He stretched his weary arm over his head and yawned. He felt as if he could sleep for a week. Owens slowly stood and looked at Hawkins who was resting against a tree while he kept guard. Even though he was a Yankee and a former slave, Owens was beginning to warm up to him. He was about to walk over and strike up a

conversation with the sergeant when he saw something shiny, partly covered by some grass, lying on the side of the trail. Owens bent down to check it out. A smile crept across his dirt-covered face when he saw it was a gold pocket watch. Without thinking, he reached down and grabbed hold of the watch.

"No, don't!" yelled Hawkins when he saw the watch.

Owens turned his head to see why Hawkins was yelling. Less than a second later, the trap sprang. A branch with sharpened sticks tied to it shot out from behind a nearby tree and struck Owens in the stomach, impaling him.

Cooper saw the tree limb hit Owens and heard the wet thud as the spikes penetrated all the way through his body. He scrambled to his feet, pulled back the hammer on his carbine, and ran toward the doomed man. Before he could reach the sheriff, Hawkins reached out and stopped him in his tracks.

"Look down," warned Hawkins.

Cooper glanced at his feet and saw a bear trap covered with grass and leaves less than a foot from where he stood. He knew in an instant, they had walked into an ambush. Cooper pivoted around to warn the others when a dark shape rose out of the swamp, took hold of Rose, and yanked her back with it. He heard her scream in fear and brought his weapon up to fire. Just before he pulled the trigger, he was pushed to the ground by Hawkins.

"Don't move," ordered Hawkins as a thick log suspended by a rope swung down from a tree.

Had he been standing, Cooper would have been struck and killed by the force of the log crushing in his ribcage. He rolled over and crawled out of the way as the heavy piece of wood came flying back. Cooper looked back and saw the pastor jump into the water in an attempt to save his wife.

Further back, Stone cried out in pain as he fell to the ground, clutching his right wrist.

Cooper glanced over his weapon's sights and swore as Rose and her attacker disappeared from view. Melancon trudged through the thigh deep water hollering Rose's name. A second later, he vanished behind a grove of trees. There was a muffled cry and then silence.

"Sir ... sir, where's Francis?" asked Hawkins.

Cooper looked over to where the young man had been standing a few seconds ago, only he wasn't there. Cole was on all fours struggling to breathe while Thomas lay on the ground pointing toward the muddy water.

"What happened?" Cooper asked Thomas.

"Something big and hairy done appeared out of nowhere," explained Thomas. "It done struck Cole in the chest with a pole before pulling Francis into the water with it."

Cooper bent down and placed a hand on Cole's back. "How are you doing? Can you breathe?"

Cole nodded. "I just got the wind knocked out me, Captain. I'll be okay in a minute."

Cooper ran to Stone's side. A bloody arrow protruded through his wrist. "Sir, can you walk?"

"Yes," replied Stone, gritting his teeth.

Cooper helped Stone to his feet. They walked over and joined what was left of the party.

"This is going to hurt," Cooper said to Stone as he grabbed hold of the wooden shaft, snapped off the arrow head, and yanked hard.

Stone grunted through clenched teeth as the arrow was pulled free. He reached up with his good hand and wrapped a kerchief around the bloody wound.

Hawkins took cover behind a tree and looked in vain for the missing people. He glanced over at Cooper and reported, "Sir, I checked, Owens is dead."

Cooper closed his eyes for a moment. He had never liked the sheriff, but he didn't deserve to die impaled on a branch in the middle of nowhere.

"What the hell just happened?" Stone asked.

"I screwed up and led us into a bloody ambush. That's what happened," responded Cooper, angry with himself.

"It wasn't just you, Captain," said Hawkins. "I was up front, I should have seen it coming as well."

"I'm the officer. This mess is my fault."

"My God, we've lost half of our party," said Stone. "How will we ever get back home?"

"Well, that's up to you now. I want you, Thomas, and Cole to carry on without Sergeant Hawkins or me."

"We'll be sitting ducks for those things."

"Maybe ... maybe not, but you've got to take that chance. We've got three people missing and I'm not going to abandon them to their fate. None of you are in any shape to help Sergeant Hawkins and me. You've got to stick together and try to make it to safety. We'll be right behind you once we free Rose, the pastor, and Francis."

"I can help," said Cole, picking up Thomas' dropped weapon.

Cooper shook his head. "I appreciate the offer, but you're not a soldier. Besides, I need you to look after these two men. They're both hurt and won't make it back to the plantation without you."

"Yes, sir," replied the disappointed youth.

"Also, don't light any fires until you reach home. It'll only draw them to you. You've got some dried meat with you, you can eat that."

Cole helped Thomas to his feet. "Come on, we done got to get moving."

"Watch the trail for traps," said Hawkins. "Any recently disturbed dirt or grass should be treated with suspicion."

Stone looked Cooper in the eye. "Please bring my people back alive, Captain. We've already lost too many good folks. To lose anymore would be soul crushing."

Cooper nodded. "Sergeant Hawkins and I will do our best. Now, please get moving. The further away you get before the sun goes down, the safer things will be for you."

The three men hobbled down the narrow trail until they turned a slight bend and disappeared from view.

"Do you think they'll make it?" asked Hawkins.

"I'd say the odds are against them," replied Cooper. "But there was no other alternative. Not if we want to try and save the others from a horrible death."

"Sir, you do realize they could already be dead."

“Until we find their remains, I’m going to believe that they’re still alive and need our help.”

“Okay, then, which way do you want to go?”

“They took them that way,” said Cooper, pointing toward a grove of trees in the swamp.

Hawkins took a quick look around for traps before stepping off the trail and into the water. Right away, the water rose up to his waist.

With their weapons held high, the two men waded through the water trying not to make a sound. When they got to the spot where the pastor had vanished, they found his shotgun lying in the muck but nothing else.

Cooper pursed his lips and looked around trying to decide which way their attackers may have gone. Everything looked alike. Water and trees stretched out as far as the eye could see.

Hawkins tapped Cooper on the arm and pointed at a log sticking out of the water about twenty yards from them. It took Cooper a few seconds to notice there was a piece of ripped clothing hanging from it. They rushed over and saw the cloth came from Rose’s shirt.

“I guess they took them this way,” said Hawkins.

“Looks that way. Let’s get a move on. They can’t have gotten too far with three prisoners.”

Chapter 19

The thought they might be going in the wrong direction began to gnaw at Cooper. They had been walking for close to two hours through waist-deep water and hadn’t come across any signs they were heading in the right direction. In the distance was a dry patch of forest. Cooper wanted a short rest. He climbed out of the foul-smelling swamp, took a seat on the ground, and reached for his canteen. Hawkins joined him. Instead of taking a break, the sergeant dropped to one knee and picked up a twig lying on the ground.

“This has been broken recently,” said Hawkins, holding up the stick. His voice grew excited. “Captain, look on the ground, there are tracks leading away from here.”

Cooper stood up. There were several sets of prints in the dirt. It was easy to see the boot imprints left by the three hostages. Alongside them were several sets of human footprints.

“That should end any more talk about a swamp devil,” said Cooper, “Those were left by men.”

“I count five different sets of footprints,” said Hawkins.

“At least we know our people were alive when they walked out of the swamp.”

Hawkins lifted his head and took in a deep breath through his nostrils. “Do you smell that?”

Cooper shook his head. All he could smell was the fetid odor coming off the water.

"Sir, it's faint, but I can smell wood burning coming from that direction," said Hawkins, pointing at a narrow game track which led deeper into the thicket.

"Okay, let's go, but be careful. I don't want us to stumble into another ambush."

They had walked for less than a minute when Hawkins brought up his hand. Cooper moved up beside his friend and whispered, "Can you see something?"

"There's a cabin about thirty feet in front of us," replied Hawkins.

Cooper raised his head slightly. "Aye, I see it now."

From where they were standing, they could see the side of a log cabin. A door at the back of the shack opened and a man with a long, thick beard walked out. The man spat out a mouthful of tobacco juice before pulling up his baggy pants and strolling out of sight.

Cooper said, "We need to get closer."

Hawkins nodded and stepped off the trail. He picked a route through the woods which brought them to the far side of a clearing. They got on their bellies and crawled forward to the edge of the underbrush and peered out. There were two cabins built next to a river. In between the shacks was a long, metal rotisserie over a stone fire pit. On it was a piece of charred meat which looked like a human ribcage. Further back from the cabins was a pen filled with wild boars which were sleeping under the noonday sun.

Cooper counted six large dogs chained a post. With large heads and muscular necks, the animals looked like they had been bred for hunting. Most were sleeping, but two of them were chewing on bones with their large, sharp teeth. The next thing Cooper observed sent a chill down his spine. Jammed on a couple of poles were the heads of their missing men. Wide-eyed, Solomon and Nathaniel's severed heads stared blankly out over the fire pit.

"Cannibals," mouthed Hawkins when he saw the heads.

Cooper nodded. He'd suspected as much after they had found Cyrus' body with his internal organs gone. He couldn't see their missing compatriots and began to fear they had arrived too late to help them. The bearded man strolled back into view. In his right hand was a bucket of water. He walked over to a wooden tripod in the middle of the clearing and attached the bucket to a rope and lowered it down.

"Sir, look, there must be a pit dug into the ground," said Hawkins.

"And that's where we'll find our people," replied Cooper. He hoped he wasn't being too optimistic and that some of them were still alive.

"What do you want to do, Captain?"

"I doubt that man is all alone. You counted five sets of footprints so we have to assume there are at least that many people living here. Since no one seems to be in any danger right now and we don't have a lot of ammunition on us, I say we wait here for a while to study their habits and determine how many of them there really are."

For over an hour, they laid still trying to ignore the swarm of mosquitoes which mercilessly bit at their exposed flesh. They identified five different men. To help him keep track of the men, in his mind, Cooper gave them names. There was the bearded man, whom he unoriginally called the Bearded Man. There was another one who walked around in his pants without his shirt on, exposing his dirty, red underclothes. He was nicknamed Red. A man with a belly hanging over his belt

earned the name of the Fat Man. It was easy to call the fourth man Tiny as he stood well over six feet tall and must have weighed well over three hundred pounds. Lastly, he termed one of the cannibals, Blondie, for his long curly blond hair which hung down past his shoulders. Like Maclean's men, they were dressed in a mix of civilian clothes and shabby-looking Confederate uniforms.

"I think we've seen them all," said Hawkins.

"I don't know, there still could be more of them resting in those cabins," said Cooper. "I'd rather not get into a fight with them until we're positive how many of them there are."

As if hearing their conversation, the door to one of the shacks opened up and a man stepped outside. He said something which Cooper couldn't hear, but by the laughter coming from inside the cabin, there was still a handful of men they had yet to see. Right away, Cooper knew the man had to be their leader. He just under six-foot-tall and looked to be in good health. He had short black hair and a clean-shaven face. Cooper recognized the rank on the man's collar as a Confederate Army lieutenant colonel.

"Captain, look, it's Moses," said Hawkins.

Moses ran out of the cabin and walked behind the colonel as if he were his aide. Cooper hadn't expected to see the boy alive, yet there he was with a stupid grin on his face, holding Rose's Bible in his hands.

The colonel walked over to the hostage pit, rested his hands on his hips and looked down. Cooper strained to hear what the man was saying.

"Hello down there. My name is Colonel Taylor. I bet right about now, you're all wishing you had never set eyes on my men and me? Well, it's too late for that. Just so you all understand, you can't plead or bargain with me for your lives. You're going to die. Not all at once, but you will over the next couple of days. So the sooner you come to terms with that, the easier it will be for you."

Moses ran to the man's side. He held his Bible high above his head and waved it in the air. "The good book says we can eat sinners and I see four miserable sinners staring up at me. Colonel Taylor, God bless him, says I get to pick the next one of you to meet God."

Hawkins muttered, "If that man's an honest to God colonel, I'm Bobby Lee."

Cooper chuckled. The thought that his friend could be confused with the commander of the Confederate Army made him smile.

Moses continued. "We got plenty of food and whiskey for tonight but come the morning, I'll be back to see you. Yes, I will, and one of you will be chosen by me to die. You'll be strung up over by the fire and cut open like a deer so we can make some pies."

Cooper heard the pastor swear at Moses, who laughed and danced around the top of the pit tormenting the people trapped below ground.

"It sounds like they're going to be okay until the morning," said Cooper. "I say we wait until it's good and dark to deal with these degenerates before we rescue our friends and get the hell out of here."

Hawkins nudged Cooper's arm. "Sir, look, there are a couple of canoes pulled out of the water over beside the nearest cabin."

"I guess we just found our way out of here."

No sooner had the sun gone down did the clouds roll in. Toward midnight, the heavens opened, drenching Cooper and Hawkins where they lay. They waited until both cabins were silent and dark.

“What do you say, Captain, shall we get to work?” said Hawkins, pulling his knife from its sheath on his belt.

Cooper nodded. “First off, I’ll let our people know we’re here and then we’ll deal with their captors. You take the closest cabin and I’ll take the other one. If they’re as drunk as I hope they are, this shouldn’t take long.”

“Sir, I know you’ve never had to kill a man with a knife before,” said Hawkins. “It’s a lot harder to do than shooting a man in the heat of battle. A knife makes it personal. It may seem like murder to slit the throat of a sleeping man, but they’re not men, they’re animals. Just think of our people trapped in the pit and not what you’re about to do. Be quick and move to the next man before any of them wake up and realize what’s going on.”

Cooper cleared his mind and drew his blade.

Both men got up off the ground and crouched down as they ran across the open ground toward the pit. Cooper was almost there when he stepped into a noose hidden in the tall grass and pulled it with his leg. In an instant, the noose tightened around his ankle, tripping him. He landed face-first in the mud and broke out in a cold sweat when he heard the dogs staked to a pole, not more than twenty yards away, wake up and begin barking.

Hawkins ran to Cooper’s side to cut the rope.

The door to the closet shack flew open and several men ran outside. One of them brought up a shotgun and discharged both barrels in the direction of the pit without aiming. The pellets flew over Cooper’s head.

“Leave me,” said Cooper. “Get to the canoes and go for help.”

Hawkins hesitated.

Cooper pushed his colleague way from him. “Now, Sergeant!”

Hawkins swore as he jammed his knife back in its sheath, spun around, and sprinted back toward the woods.

The sound of the dogs being let free sent a shudder down Cooper’s spine. The massive beasts ran past Cooper and took off after Hawkins.

A light shone in Cooper’s face as a man walked toward him. A shot pierced the night as he reached for his carbine lying in the mud. Dirt and grass inches from his hand flew up into the air.

“Don’t go for your gun, Yankee,” warned a voice. “I think I’ve just shown you I’m a good shot.”

Cooper lifted his hands in surrender. The man stepped closer. The light in his hand blinded Cooper.

“You know I had those traps placed there to prevent anyone from escaping,” said the man. “I never thought they be useful in catching someone stupid enough to try sneaking in.”

“I know that man,” said Moses as he ran over. “He’s a blue-belly officer and a sinner. The almighty Lord has delivered him to us.”

Before Cooper could tell Moses where to go, a man stepped out of the dark and brought his shotgun butt down on the back of Cooper’s neck, knocking him out cold.

Hawkins ran for his life. He could hear the dogs charging through the woods trying to catch him. In the dark, it was hard to see anything until he almost ran into it. Hawkins held his right hand up in front of his face to protect it from the branches which seemed to have come alive and were trying to reach out and grab him. As he ran, his foot caught under a tree root. He felt himself fly through the air. A second later, he landed in the cold water of the swamp. Hawkins hurried to get to his feet. The howling and barking dogs sounded as if they were less than a few yards away when he realized he had lost his carbine when he fell into the water. Hawkins knew there was no time to look for it and ran as best he could through the thigh-deep water.

If he thought the water would deter the dogs, he was wrong. Without hesitation, they jumped in and began to swim after him.

“Keep after him!” hollered a man, following behind the dogs.

Hawkins’ heart raced in his chest. When he had run away from his master, he been pursued by hunting dogs. The memories flooded back of his friend, Adam, who couldn’t keep up and was brought down and mauled to death by the animals. He scrambled up onto a small island of dry land, unaware a swamp rabbit was resting there. It leaped up, startling Hawkins, and fell in the water. With its head held high, it swam away.

The dogs saw something moving in the water and turned to chase the rabbit.

With seconds to go before the man with the dogs appeared, Hawkins slid back into the swamp all the way up to his neck and moved back until he was hidden behind a clump of bulrushes. He held his breath as the man moved within an arm’s reach of him. Hawkins wanted to reach out and kill the man. But his absence would surely be noticed and more men would come out into the swamp looking for him. He reasoned it was better for him to remain hidden and wait for another opportunity to strike.

“Where’d you go, you damned stupid dogs?” hollered the man.

After what seemed like an eternity, Hawkins let out his breath as the man continued to wade through the water after his dogs. He waited until the sound of the dogs faded into the distance before moving from his hiding spot. He stood up and checked his belt. Tonight his luck was all bad. Not only had he lost his carbine, but he had also lost his pistol. All he had left to fight with was his knife. He drew it from its sheath and made his way back to the woods where the cannibal’s camp was hidden. Hawkins pondered what he was going to do next. All he knew for sure was he had no intention of leaving Captain Cooper or anyone else behind.

Chapter 20

Cooper felt as though he was being dragged underwater by a cold, darkened shape and drowned. He opened his mouth and gasped for air. A second later another wave of foul smelling water hit him. He spat out the water and opened his

eyes. Instead of being far out to sea, he found himself sitting on the cold, wet ground tied to a post. He looked up. In the cold, pink light of dawn, Cooper saw the man he and nicknamed the Bearded Man standing over him with an empty bucket of water. The back of his neck ached. It hurt just to turn his head.

"Hey, Colonel, the Yankee's awake!" cried out the Bearded Man.

Cooper blinked his eyes a couple of times before looking around. Aside from the Bearded Man standing over him, he saw he was alone. He took it as an omen that Hawkins had somehow managed to elude his pursuers.

Colonel Taylor, accompanied by his ever-present shadow, Moses, walked out of a cabin and strode toward Cooper. He stopped a couple of yards from his prisoner and lit a cigar.

"Do you smoke, Captain?" asked Taylor.

"Sometimes, but it's usually with friends, family, or polite company. Somehow I think you're none of that," replied Cooper.

"A whip! Do you want me to get you a whip so you can teach this Northern sinner some manners?" asked Moses.

Taylor shook his head. "No, Moses, he's just acting brave so we won't see how afraid he truly is."

"Why isn't he in with the others?" asked Cooper, looking up at Moses.

"I couldn't bring myself to kill a man who isn't in full control of his mind," replied Taylor. "Besides, my boys seem to like him, so as long as he amuses them, I can tolerate his outbursts."

"Your men? You were never a colonel in the Confederate Army. I believe you were in the army, but there's no way in hell you were an officer."

"Blasphemy!" screeched Moses. "Watch yer tongue, Yankee, or I'll get a knife and cut it out."

Taylor placed a hand on Moses' shoulder. "Why don't you go back inside and have some breakfast? Leave me to talk to the Yankee in private."

The boy nodded and dragged his feet as he walked away.

"Now, Captain, you are right. I was only ever a corporal. When most of my regiment was captured at the Battle of Shiloh, we were loaded onto a train and shipped off to a Union prisoner of war camp in Ohio to sit out the war. When my youngest brother, Henry, got sick, I asked my commanding officer to talk with the Yankee camp commander so he could arrange for Henry to be paroled and sent home to recuperate. He refused my request saying it would mean a Yankee prisoner would have to be set free and he didn't think it was a smart thing to do. I begged on my knees for him to change his mind, but he wouldn't. So that night I snuck into his tent and strangled him to death. I took his coat to give to my brother to wear. It was too little too late. Henry died less than a week later from pneumonia. Three more of my brothers and five cousins were to die in that squalid Yankee hell hole before the war ended."

Taylor took a long drag on his cigar before exhaling through his nose like a dragon. "I took to wearing the jacket after my brother was buried. Before long even the Union guards thought it was funny and were calling me *colonel*."

"What I don't understand is why you're killing and eating people. My God, man, it's unnatural."

Taylor smile. "Captain, have you ever been faced with the prospect of starving to death?"

Cooper shook his head. "Well, I have, as have all the men here in this camp. In the winter of 1863, around Christmas time, the men in the prison were dying by the dozens. Every morning the burial detail would go around and collect the bodies and stack them like cordwood in the back of their carts and take them to the cemetery to be buried. The problem was the ground was too frozen to dig more than a couple of feet before you gave in from exhaustion. Since we were barely getting more than scraps to eat, we decided to eat what we could find and that turned out to be the bodies of the men who had died the night before. You called it unnatural, I call it survival."

"I'm sorry for how you were treated and the loss of your brothers, but the war is over. You don't have to carry on like this."

"I disagree. Who was going to welcome us home knowing what we did to live? No one, that's who. The men in this camp may not be my brothers by birth, but each and every one lived through those horrible hardships and is closer to me than my own kinfolk. Besides, I found once you get a taste for human flesh, it's something you can't let go off. We're only taking those who won't be missed. The coloreds, criminals, the poor crop farmers, you name it. My brothers and I, we're just helping to keep things neat and tidy."

Cooper shook his head. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. "You're mad."

Taylor shrugged. "Maybe. If I am, you're an officer and a gentleman, you and your kind made us into what we have become."

"Why the disguises?"

Taylor chuckled. "It's all a bit of fun. Pretending to be monsters has, until last night, kept people from nosing around out here. The best part is it scares the hell out of the Negroes. Our costumes were very simple to make. All you need is a pair of wooden shoes carved to leave behind the imprint of a beast and a coat made from a bear or a wolf skin and you have a creature of the night."

"You've missed your calling. You should have been an actor."

"I saw a play once when I was in the army. This fella came down from Richmond to take our minds off the war. I honestly can't recall anymore what the play was all about. All I know is I could never remember all those lines. No, acting isn't for me, blue-belly."

"I'm here because you murdered Andrew Legrand and his girlfriend, Willow. You must have known their deaths wouldn't have gone unnoticed."

"We were on our way to raid the colored quarters at the Mercy Plantation when we ran into them. It was an accident our paths crossed that night. That stupid love-struck boy tried to protect his colored Jezebel, so we killed him and cut him open. I took his innards to make a pie with. It was quite tasty and mighty filling. As for the girl, she was too skinny. There was hardly any meat on her bones, so I let our dogs have her."

Cooper couldn't comprehend the depravity of the man standing before him. He had long ago surrendered any claim to being human. He had become the monster he pretended to be. Cooper pulled at the rope binding his wrists behind his back. It was no good, whoever had tied the knot knew what he was doing. Cooper was going nowhere.

"Now, Captain, I had thought about slitting your throat and feeding you to my wild pigs, but I think making you watch as what's left of your party dies before your eyes will be reward enough for the loss of my kin."

Cooper yanked at his restraints. "Let me up and we'll settle this man to man. Surely you're not afraid to fight me?"

"Afraid? No. But I'm no fool either. I can see the murderous look in your eyes, Captain. No, you'll remain out of arm's reach until I have you cut open. I think we'll make a tasty stew using your kidneys and your heart."

In a rage, Cooper snarled, "You've got it wrong. I'm going to cut your heart from your chest and ram it down your throat."

"I doubt that. Your boy ran off and left you here to die. Trust me, Captain, you're going to die. Not today but soon enough."

A couple pairs of hands reached from behind Cooper and grabbed a hold of him. He felt his hands being untied. The next thing he knew he was hauled up to his feet.

"Hold him tight," ordered Taylor. He turned and called out, "It's time."

Cooper had no idea what that meant, nor did he want to find out. Desperate to escape, he tried yanking his arms free but found the men holding him were too strong.

Half-dressed men strolled out of the cabins and formed a loose circle around Cooper.

Taylor smiled. "Now, Captain, we have a little ritual here in our camp that we observe from time to time when a man with a lot of grit, like yourself, is brought in alive."

"And what might that be?"

"If you can kill my champion you get to go free." On cue, the men standing behind Taylor stepped aside and the man Cooper had called Tiny appeared. In his hand was a sharpened meat cleaver.

"What happens if I don't kill your man?"

"He'll take an arm or a leg, depending how he feels, and you'll be tossed in with the others until it's your turn to die."

Cooper's arms were released. The men holding him moved back with their friends.

Tiny grinned at Cooper. "Hey, Yankee, are you left or right handed?"

"Right."

"I guess yer gonna have to learn to use yer left hand to wipe yer ass from now on," said Tiny as he brought up the cleaver in his hand and took a step forward.

Cooper took a step back and bent his knees. He knew if he didn't take down his opponent fast, he would likely lose an arm and the fight. When Tiny was less than a couple of yards away, Cooper let out a cry and charged straight at the man. He hit his opponent hard in the stomach. Both men tumbled to the muddy ground.

"Get him!" hollered a man watching the fight. "Cut off that damned Yankee's arm!"

Cooper grabbed Tiny's right arm and bashed it on the ground trying to dislodge the knife from his hand. Try as he might, it was pointless. His adversary chuckled at Cooper's efforts, reached over and took a hold of his shirt collar, and pulled him off Tiny. The next thing Cooper knew a fist struck him hard on the side of his

head. He saw stars flash in front of his eyes. His feet buckled underneath him as Cooper struggled not to black out from the blow.

Tiny laughed before pushing Cooper facedown into the mud. He stood up, smiling. Loud cheers erupted all around him. With his left hand, Tiny reached down and grabbed Cooper's shirt and flipped him over so he could look down into the face of his beaten opponent.

Waves of nausea rippled through Cooper's stomach. He was seconds away from being sick. He opened his eyes and saw Tiny drop to one knee beside him with his cleaver held high in the air. In desperation, Cooper rolled toward his attacker and shot a fist as hard as he could into the man's groin.

Tiny let out a pained moan and dropped down on all fours. He reached back and put a hand on his bruised groin.

Cooper scrambled to his feet and before anyone could stop him, he sent his right foot into the big man's side, knocking him over. He took a step forward and shot his foot at his opponent's head, breaking his nose. Blood gushed down from Tiny's nose to his muddy face like a bright red river. Cooper saw the meat cleaver lying on the ground and made a move to grab it.

A shot rang out.

Cooper froze. He looked up to see who had fired the shot.

Taylor stood there with his pistol aimed up in the air. "Don't try for the blade, Yankee. The fight is over. I guess you're a lot tougher than I thought."

Tiny sat up, holding a hand to his nose. "I could have killed him, Colonel."

"If I hadn't ended the fight, you'd be dead with your cleaver sticking out of your head right now. Get on your feet and get cleaned up."

The man Cooper had called Red stepped forward and helped Tiny to his feet.

"Put him with the others," ordered Taylor.

A couple of men grabbed Cooper's arms and pulled them behind his back. "Come on, boy," said one of the men. His breath stank from the pieces of smoked flesh still stuck between his yellow teeth.

The man nicknamed Blondie, helped by a couple of other men, pulled back the pit's wooden cover. "See you in a few days," said Blondie, chuckling to himself as Cooper was thrown into the hole.

With a wet thud, Cooper landed on his side at the bottom of the mud-filled pit.

"Are you alright, Captain?" asked the pastor as he bent down to help Cooper sit up.

"I'm okay," replied Cooper. A disgusting odor filled the air. "My God, what's that awful stench?"

"There's nowhere to go to the bathroom down here."

"Oh." Cooper wiped the mud from his mouth, stood up, and looked at the faces of the people trapped with him. The pastor and his wife were caked in mud, as were Joe and Francis. He turned his head and saw the walls of their prison were taller than the height of two men standing on one another's shoulders. To make matters worse, there was barely enough room for the five of them to stand around in.

"Captain, is help coming?" asked Rose.

Cooper shook his head. He wished it were otherwise, but he wasn't about to lie to them. "Sergeant Hawkins and I tried to get you out of here but as you can see we failed miserably. I'm a prisoner like you and Hawkins had to run for his life."

"Did he done get away?" asked Francis.

"Yes, I think so."

Joe asked, "Did he go for help?"

"No, he'd never leave us here. He's probably hiding somewhere in the woods trying to figure a way to get us out of here."

"Captain, I want to apologize for my behavior back at the trapper's cabin," said Melancon. "I let fear take hold of my heart and my mind. I never should have said those things about Sheriff Owens, and now he's dead. I'll never forgive myself for how I behaved."

"I suggest you don't dwell on the past. There's nothing you can do to change it. The best anyone can do is learn from their mistakes and try not to repeat them."

"You're right. At least Sergeant Hawkins is safe. There's still hope for salvation."

"Our options are limited. Either Hawkins rescues us or we'll be killed one by one and eaten by these monsters."

"Captain, I thought you said there were no monsters," said Rose.

"I was wrong. There are and they're far more horrible than some child's tale. These ones are real and as Madame Toussaint pointed out, they won't stop until they are all dead."

Chapter 21

Hawkins stepped out from behind a tree he had been using for cover and slid into the muddy water. He got as low as he could until only his nose and eyes were above the water. As quietly as possible, Hawkins moved toward the back of the cannibals' camp. As he got close, he could hear a couple of men arguing with one another inside one of the cabins. Hawkins couldn't make out what was being said, but it sounded as if the men were drunk. His heart began to beat faster when he spotted what he was after: a couple of canoes, laying on their side in the mud. The water level dropped as he closed in. Like an alligator getting out of the water, Hawkins crawled forward until he was between the two boats. He took a quick look around to make sure he wasn't being watched and then crawled back into the swamp pulling the two canoes with him. Hawkins moved back to his hiding spot, dragged the boats one by one into the woods, and hid them.

Hawkins glanced up at the waning sun. It wouldn't be long before it was dark. All day long he had remained hidden while he watched the camp. He counted twelve men living in the two ramshackle shacks. They had spent most of the day drinking and eating dried meat hanging from hooks on the outside of their cabins. When Hawkins saw a fat man wearing a blood-stained apron walk over to the rotisserie and start a fire, he knew he had to act before anyone else died.

With his knife clenched tight in his hand, Hawkins crept through the brush until he was behind a foul-smelling outhouse. He needed to get his hands on a

weapon if he was going to rescue his compatriots. After a couple of minutes wait, a man with a long, scraggly beard staggered out of the closest cabin and made his way to the outhouse. Hawkins waited until the man had finished his business and stepped outside to pull up his suspenders. Without hesitation or mercy, he struck. He wrapped his left arm around the man's neck and squeezed tight while he thrust his knife repeatedly into the hapless man's side. In seconds, his victim's feet gave way beneath him. Hawkins dragged the man back into the woods to finish him off.

When the man let out his dying gasp, Hawkins let go of him and laid his body down. He grinned when he pulled a pistol from a holster on the man's leg and saw it was fully loaded. He rummaged through the man's pockets until he found a box of matches. Hawkins took the box and placed it in a shirt pocket. He left the body where it lay and crept forward until he could see the fat man by the fire. A chill went down Hawkins' spine when he heard the man singing to himself while he sharpened a long curved knife in his hands. If he were going to get to the pit unobserved, Hawkins knew he would need a distraction. He looked around and spotted a lantern sitting on a stool at the side of the nearest cabin. A plan quickly formed in his mind.

"Hey, Yankee, move back," said a voice from above.

Cooper looked up and saw a bald man he didn't recognize. He was about to ask why he should move when his ear caught the sound of a pistol's hammer being cocked.

"I'm gonna pull back the cover and then lower down a ladder for you and the boy standing next to you to climb out with."

Cooper saw the fear in Francis' eyes when he realized he was going to be the next one eaten. "What if we don't want to climb out?" asked Cooper.

"If you don't, I'll have the woman shot followed by her husband," said Taylor as he stepped forward into view.

"Don't you kill Mrs. Melancon," said Francis. "I be coming up."

Rose grabbed him by the arm. "No! Don't go, they're going to kill you."

"Everyone done got to go meet his maker," replied Francis. "You done said so yourself, ma'am."

A rickety ladder dropped into the hole.

Cooper leaned forward and whispered into Francis' ear. "Don't move when we get up top. I'm going for one of their guns."

Francis nodded and climbed up followed by Cooper.

The bald man pointed his pistol at Francis. "Step aside, boy."

The young man stood his ground and shook his head.

"I said move, boy," said bald man, raising his voice.

"Tell him to walk or I'll kill the woman," said Taylor to Cooper.

Cooper held his breath. Taylor's outstretched hand was only a few feet away from him. He felt the familiar mix of adrenaline and fear building up in his body. He knew in the next few seconds he would either be dead or a free man.

Hawkins unscrewed a metal cap on the lantern and smelled the kerosene in its tank. He turned it over and poured the oil on a woodpile at the back of the

cabin. Next, Hawkins dug out his matchbox and struck a match. As soon as it lit, he dropped the burning match onto the kerosene. With a loud whoosh, the oil caught on fire and spread quickly onto the side of the old wooden cabin. Hawkins had his distraction. He turned and sprinted back into the woods. Through the thicket, he rushed to help his friends trapped in the pit.

Cooper could see the anger building up behind Taylor's eyes. It was clear the man wasn't used to people defying him. Cooper's heart began to beat faster as he readied himself to go for the pistol in Taylor's hand.

"Fire!" bellowed a man.

Taylor and the bald man turned their heads to see what was going on. Like a cobra striking, Cooper shot his right hand over and grabbed ahold of Taylor's arm and pulled him toward him. At the same time, he turned on his heel, brought up his left elbow, smashing it into Taylor's face. Knocked senseless, Taylor's knees buckled and he fell to the ground.

Cooper pulled his adversary's pistol from his hand, cocked the hammer with his thumb, and aimed it at the bald man's head. At less than a yard away, he couldn't miss. He pulled the trigger, blasting a bloody hole through the side of the cannibal's head.

"Quick, get the others out of the pit," said Cooper to Francis.

The loud blast of a weapon firing made Cooper duck. He dropped to one knee as a man ran out of the burning cabin firing his pistol while he ran toward Cooper. The man's shots went wild. Cooper waited a couple of seconds before calmly pulling back the hammer of his pistol and firing it at his assailant. With a shocked look on his face, the man dropped his gun and collapsed onto the ground. Cooper saw another man turn to face him. Just as he brought his weapon up to fire, Hawkins rushed out of the woods and shot the man dead before he could react.

Cooper swung his pistol down to kill Taylor.

Moses cried out and ran from behind a woodpile. He threw his body on top of Taylor's. "Please don't kill him," begged Moses. Tears filled the young boy's eyes. "He's not a monster, he's really a good God-fearing man."

Hesitation took hold of Cooper. He couldn't bring himself to shoot Moses just so he could kill Taylor.

Confusion gripped the camp. Without their leader, some men took cover behind the burning cabin while others dropped to the ground and took ineffectual potshots at Cooper and Hawkins.

"This way," yelled Hawkins as Francis helped Rose climb out of the pit.

Cooper decided it was time to leave. He stood and began to walk backward toward his compatriots' side, firing his pistol every time someone foolishly stuck their head out to see what was going on. When Joe ran past him, Cooper knew everyone was safely out of the hole.

"Hurry up, Captain," said Hawkins as he fired the last bullet in his pistol.

Cooper turned and began to run. He soon caught up with Hawkins, who was running down a narrow game trail. A couple of seconds later, they came out at the water's edge. Rose and Joe were hurrying to help the pastor into one of the canoes.

"What happened?" asked Cooper when he saw a stream of blood dripping from Melancon's right arm.

"A stray bullet hit him under the arm," replied Rose. Fear filled her voice. "I need to bind his wound or he'll bleed out."

"Damn it all to hell." Cooper clenched his jaw in frustration.

"Captain, we don't have time to treat him," said Hawkins. "You go with Mrs. Melancon and I'll go with Francis in the other canoe. We'll paddle for a while until it's safe to stop."

"Please! I need to help him now," pleaded Rose.

"Joe, get this canoe in the water," ordered Cooper. He looked into Rose's worried eyes. "Sergeant Hawkins is right. We have to get away from here. It won't take them long to figure out where we've gone. We'll stop as soon as I think it's safe to. Now please get in the canoe."

Rose wiped the tears from her eyes and climbed into the middle of the boat. Cooper bent down and helped push the canoe out into the swamp. He jumped in the back, picked up a paddle, and began to row as fast as he could. Within seconds, the two boats were moving away from the woods. Not knowing where they were going, they soon found themselves in the middle of a large lake. A wave of relief washed over Cooper. They had gotten away. For now, they were safe. Cooper knew as soon as Taylor figured out what had happened, he and his men would come after them. They were days away from civilization and plenty could still go wrong.

"Colonel, are you alive?" asked Moses, squatting next to Taylor's body. When the man didn't answer, Moses prodded him with a stick. "Time to wake up, Colonel."

With a weak moan on his lips, Taylor opened his eyes and looked up.

"Glory be," said Moses. "I knew them Yankees hadn't killed you."

A dull throbbing ache filled Taylor's head as he sat up. He grimaced when he saw the bald man's corpse lying only a couple of yards away with part of its skull missing. "Help me to my feet, boy."

A tall black plume of smoke rose skyward from the burning cabin. Red walked toward Taylor with a sad look on his soot-covered face.

"What's wrong?" asked Taylor.

"We lost four good men to them Yankees," replied Red, shaking his head.

Taylor looked around, expecting to see their prisoners laying on the ground, dead. "Where are they?"

"They all got away."

Taylor pushed Moses from his side and clenched his fists in anger. "What do you mean they got away?"

"They stole two of our canoes and used them to get away."

"God damn it. Round everyone up. We're going after them."

"What about our men? We can't leave their bodies out here for the pigs to eat."

Taylor ground his teeth. He couldn't care less right now what happened to their remains, he wanted revenge.

"Colonel, we can't leave until we bury our own," insisted Red.

"Very well. Bury them, but be quick. The longer we wait, the further away those bastards will get."

"Colonel, they don't know the swamp like we do. They won't get far."

Taylor hadn't thought about that. His colleague was right. They knew the bayou like the back of their hands. It was only a matter of time before they picked up their trail and found them. This time, there wouldn't be any hesitation on his part. Taylor intended to kill them all and feed what they didn't eat to the pigs.

Chapter 22

With sore and aching muscles, the men rowed the canoes across the black water of the lake. No one voiced it but they all were growing tired and in need of a short rest. Not a one of them had slept in days.

"Captain, over there," said Hawkins, pointing with his paddle at a dry patch of land.

Cooper waved back and steered his canoe toward the shoreline. He and Joe jumped from their boat at the same time. In seconds, their boat was high and dry on the shore. While Joe helped Rose lift the pastor from the bottom of their canoe, Cooper turned to pull Hawkins' craft up onto the beach.

"You and Francis can take first watch while we give Mrs. Melancon a chance to see to her husband," said Cooper to Hawkins.

"Captain, do you have any bullets left in your pistol?" asked Hawkins. "Mine's empty."

Cooper handed over his weapon. "I've got three rounds left. After that, I guess we're out of bullets."

"We'd best make them count, then."

"Let's hope we won't have to use them." Cooper left his friend and walked over to Rose, who was trying her best in the dark to see how badly hurt her husband was.

"What's the word?" he asked her.

"I think he'll live, but I'd like to cauterize the wound so he doesn't lose any more blood."

"Is there any other way to staunch his bleeding?"

"Sure, but he may die before we get him to a doctor. He's my husband and I don't want to lose him. Cauterizing is the best way to keep him from dying."

Cooper looked over at Joe. "Make a small fire in a hollow in the ground and keep it hidden as best you can."

"Yes, sir," Joe replied. Right away, the young man started to gather up kindling and twigs for the fire.

"Thank you," said Rose, her voice cracked with emotion.

"As soon as you've sealed his wound, douse the fire and get the pastor ready to leave. I want to get as far away as possible from those animals before the sun comes up."

At the water's edge, Hawkins sat on a log and stared out into the night. Cooper took a seat beside him. "Where's Francis?"

"I got him hiding in the bushes behind us in case someone tries to sneak around and attack us from the woods. What's going on with the pastor, Captain?"

"Mrs. Melancon is going to cauterize his wound before he bleeds to death," explained Cooper.

"Even if she does, we both know there's no guarantee his wound won't get infected. We both know that our regiment lost more men to disease than reb bullets during the war."

"Aye, you're right, but I'd rather give him a fighting chance than none at all. After everything we've been through it's the right thing to do."

Out on the lake, moving silently across the water were several darkened shapes. As the clouds parted, the silvery light of the moon shone down briefly on three canoes packed with men and dogs.

"There it is again," whispered the Bearded Man over his shoulder.

For a brief second, a light flickered in the woods. Taylor smiled. The Yankees had been careless and lit a fire. He had them.

Behind him one of his dogs whined. Taylor reached back and ran a hand over the animal's muzzled snout. "Easy does it, boy. We'll soon be ashore and you can fill yer empty belly with whatever you can catch."

The dog seemed to understand what it was told and sat back on its hind legs with its nose in the air, smelling the breeze coming from the shore.

Taylor placed his hand on the cold metal of his pistol and clenched it tight. His head still hurt as if there was a swarm of bees flying inside his skull stinging him every time he moved his head. He was looking forward to personally killing Cooper and eating his liver raw.

"I've heated up Sergeant Hawkins' knife," announced Rose, "but I'm going to need both of you to hold him still while I cauterize his wound."

Cooper and Hawkins nodded and walked over beside Pastor Melancon.

"You hold his shoulders," said Rose to Cooper. "And you his arms," she told Hawkins.

The pastor lay on his side with his blood-soaked shirt ripped open so Rose could close the hole under his armpit with the white-hot knife. She picked up a stick and placed it between her husband's teeth. With her hand, she delicately ran her fingers through his greasy hair. "This is going to hurt, my love, bite down and it'll all be over soon."

Rose reached behind her and pulled the knife from the fire. She looked at the men helping her and said, "Now!"

Cooper and Hawkins grabbed hold of the pastor and held him tight. A second later, Rose placed the blade on the wound. The sound of sizzling flesh was drowned out by Melancon's muffled cry.

"It's done. You can let him go," said Rose as she jammed the knife into the ground to cool the steel.

Cooper and Hawkins released the pastor while Rose bent down and gently removed the stick from her husband's mouth.

"How long before he can be moved?" Cooper asked.

"Can we please give him a couple of minutes to gain some strength before we move him?" replied Rose.

"Okay, five minutes and then we're back in the canoes."

"Thank you," said Rose as she bent down and kissed Melancon on his sweat-covered forehead.

Francis sat on the ground, resting his back against the bark of a tall tree. He had sharpened a stick and held it in his hand under his chin to stop himself from falling asleep. Francis had never been so tired in his life. Not even before the abolition of slavery had he felt as if he were going to nod off at any second. He shook his head and took a deep breath to clear his cloudy mind. The sound of a twig snapping behind him made him forget his fatigue. He looked over his shoulder and peered into the dark. Francis couldn't see a thing. His heart began to race. He stood up and held his sharpened stick in his hand, ready to strike should anyone suddenly appear.

"God damn it, Francis, where you be hiding?" said a voice.

"Lower your voice, Joe, do want them cannibals to know where we are?" replied Francis in a hushed tone.

The bushes parted. Joe, lost in the dark, almost walked into his friend. "Sorry about all the noise. I just wanted to let you know the captain said we be leaving in a few minutes."

"That's fine with me. I can't wait to get back home. We done lost far too many good friends out here in this cursed swamp."

"Come on, let's join the others."

Francis opened his mouth to say something when he heard the sound of something in the woods moving closer. His stomach knotted when he heard an animal growl. He knew they were in trouble. Francis pushed Joe away. "Run back to the captain and tell him to leave now."

"Why?"

A split second later the underbrush opened and two huge dogs charged out straight at Francis. He brought his hand up to slash at them with his stick. It was a futile move. The dogs, trained to hunt, leaped into the air and clamped their jaws on his arms, pulling him down with them. The coup de grace came from a third animal which burst from the woods, sank its teeth into Cole's throat and thrashed its head back and forth. Mercifully, the young man passed out and died within seconds.

Joe saw there was nothing he could do to help his friend. He turned and fled.

"What was that?" Rose asked as she kicked dirt on the fire to put it out.

Hawkins didn't have to be told. "Dogs! Damn it, they've found us."

Cooper hurried to push their canoe back out onto the lake.

"Follow me," said Hawkins to Rose as he scooped up the pastor in his arms and ran for the boats.

Cooper waved at Rose to get her attention. "Get in," he said.

Hawkins laid the pastor on the bottom of the canoe, drew his pistol and turned to face the thicket.

"God save us all," yelled Joe as he ran out of the woods. The terrified young man tripped over his own feet and landed facedown on the ground at Hawkins' feet.

Hawkins hauled the youth to his feet. "Where's Francis?"

"Dogs as big as bears done attacked us. They got Francis," stammered Joe.

Hawkins pushed Joe toward the lake. "Get in our canoe." He pulled back on the hammer of his pistol. "Sir, you and Mrs. Melancon had best leave right away. Joe and I will be along shortly."

Cooper placed his paddle in the water and pulled back. Their boat began to move away from shore.

With his back to the lake, Hawkins walked backward. His eyes were fixed on the darkened woods.

"Sergeant, I'm ready," said Joe, sitting in the front of the canoe. His voice betrayed his fear.

A deep growl from the underbrush heralded the next attack. A dog charged out of the dark and ran straight at Hawkins. He calmly brought up his pistol and fired into the animal's head, killing it. Less than a second later, another dog charged the sergeant only to receive a bullet in its ribcage. With a loud yelp, the animal fell to the ground and writhed in pain. The last dog to attack came at Hawkins from his right side. It leaped up into the air with its wet blood-covered mouth wide open. Hawkins pivoted on his heel and fired his pistol at point-blank range into the beast's mouth, blasting the top of its skull off. The animal fell into the water at the sergeant's feet. With his bullets gone, Hawkins rushed to get into his canoe. He picked up his paddle and together with Joe, he rowed as if the devil himself were right behind them.

Taylor stood on the edge of the lake and stared into the blackness. His right eye twitched as he ground his teeth in anger.

"It looks like they got all three dogs," reported Red, holding a torch in his hands. The light lit up the ground where the dogs lay.

"Yeah, but at least they got one of the darkies before they were killed," said Blondie.

"That means there's still five of 'em on their feet," said the Fat Man.

The Bearded Man walked out of the brush and joined his comrades. "They had a fire going back in the woods. There's a lot of blood on the ground. Looks like we hit one of them back at the camp."

"Praise the Lord," said Moses, patting his stolen Bible in his hands. "God must have directed your bullets to smite the wicked. We can only hope it was that evil Yankee officer who was hit."

Red shook his head. "Doesn't look that way." An accomplished tracker, he pointed at the four different sets of footprints in the mud. "Looks like the two Yankee soldiers are still on their feet as is the woman and one of the coloreds."

"That would mean we hit the pastor," said Blondie.

"A sinner is a sinner," said Moses.

"If he's hurt bad, it'll slow them down," mused Red.

"Enough talking," said Taylor, bringing up a hand to silence his colleagues. "Get the canoes and bring them here right away. I want to get after those Yankee bastards before they get too far away."

Blondie, Red, and the Bearded man left to fetch the boats.

Taylor looked over his shoulder at Tiny. "Did you remember to bring your meat cleaver with you?"

The man smiled and pulled a blade covered in dried blood from his belt. "I surely did, Colonel. That Yankee officer is going to be cut into dozens of little pieces before he dies."

Chapter 23

"I can't go on," stammered Rose. She brought her paddle inside the canoe and wearily looked back at Cooper. "We've been going for hours. I can barely move my arms anymore."

"Just a little longer," said Cooper, trying to encourage her to keep going.

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, Captain, I can't. I need to rest. Besides, I have to check on my husband's wounds."

Cooper could see she was exhausted. He looked along the riverbank, trying to find a secluded spot. When he eyed a willow tree with its long branches hanging low into the water, he paddled toward it. Like a thick green blanket, the branches of the tree hid them from view. "We'll put in there and rest for an hour."

"Thanks," said Rose.

Hawkins' canoe joined them under the curtain of branches. "What's going on, sir?" asked Hawkins.

"Mrs. Melancon needs to check on her husband and I thought we could all use a short break," replied Cooper as he helped carry the pastor out of the canoe and onto the dry ground.

Hawkins jumped out of his boat and pulled the front end up onto the shoreline. He said to Joe, "I'll take first watch. Put your head down. You look like you could use a nap."

Joe nodded and climbed out of the canoe to find a spot to sleep on.

Cooper took a step back to let Rose examine her husband. "How's it look?" he asked.

"Not too bad," she replied. "The cauterizing worked. I don't see any fresh bleeding. But he needs clean water to wash out his wound and a warm bed to rest in."

"Soon enough," Cooper said, patting Rose on the shoulder.

With their companions occupied, Cooper and Hawkins took a seat. Both men were tired and sore but would never say so in earshot of the others in the group.

"All of these little rivers look alike to me," said Cooper. "We could be going in circles for all I know."

"We're not," said Hawkins.

"I like your optimism. Care to tell me how you know we're not going in circles?"

Hawkins smiled. "The North Star. It's been on our left for the past few hours. We're heading due east. Hopefully toward the Mississippi."

"I hadn't thought of that."

"When I was young I was taught how to find the North Star in the night sky. My father told me if I followed the North Star it would lead me to freedom. When I ran

away from my master, that's how I made it to all the way to Kansas. That and a hell of a lot of luck."

"One day, when this is all over, you'll have to tell me all about your days on the run. I've only heard snippets of your story, I want to hear the whole thing."

Behind them, Joe began to snore loud enough to startle a passing possum carrying her children on her back.

"How long before dawn?" asked Cooper.

"I'd say an hour, maybe less."

"When the sun comes up, we're going to be sitting ducks for Taylor and his bandits. They outnumber us and they're fresh. Once they spot us, it won't take them long to catch up with us."

"I know. Without Francis to help out, we're really in a bind."

Cooper turned his head and looked up at the slender branches of the tree. An idea flashed in his mind. "Sergeant, do you still have your knife?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, with things the way they are, we may not be able to outrun them, but I'm fairly sure we can slow them down."

Hawkins grinned. "What are you thinking, Captain?"

"Let's get to work. It's time to repay Taylor and his thugs in spades for what he's done to us."

Cooper stood up. "We don't have much in the way of building materials, so we'll have to use the branches and the bark of this tree to make our traps with."

Hawkins got the idea and nodded. Both men knew it would be a race to do what they wanted to before Taylor and his men found them.

The gurgling noise coming from Taylor's stomach reminded him he hadn't eaten in hours. They had brought some dried meat with them, but his mouth salivated for the taste of fresh flesh. In the cold light of a new day, he found himself growing anxious. If the two soldiers got away, he knew they would send for reinforcements from New Orleans and he would become a wanted man. The Yankees would flush him from his lair and hunt him down until they had killed or captured him, which meant the same thing to him. Death by a bullet or the hangman's rope was his future if he didn't stop his escaped prisoners.

"Colonel, over there," called out Red in the lead boat, pointing at long streaks of disturbed dirt on the riverbank with his paddle.

Taylor spotted the telltale signs of canoes which had been dragged out of the water next to a tall willow tree. His heart began to race. Perhaps they had caught them sleeping. In less than a minute, all of his troubles could be behind him. He drew his pistol and pulled back on the hammer.

Moses, who had been sleeping on the bottom of the canoe, sat up and rubbed the sleep from his tired eyes. "What's going on, Colonel?"

"We're gonna kill some Yankee sons of bitches, that's what," replied Taylor, with an evil glint in his eyes.

With his Bible in his hand, Moses smiled. "Lord, watch over us while we smite the wicked sinners you have led us to."

Red slid his paddle into the water and pulled back. He was less than a couple of strokes from shore but failed to see a slender rope made from woven bark an inch above the waterline. In the blink of an eye, the front of his canoe hit the line and

triggered a concealed booby trap hidden in the mist coming off the river. Before Red could duck, a branch of the willow tree, pulled taut, was released. It swung out and struck Red in the chest sending him flying out of his boat. Tiny, the other man in the canoe with him, lost his balance and spilled out into the cold, murky water.

Taylor watched in anger as the men on the first boat tumbled into the water. "For God's sake, steer us away from that tree," he yelled at Blondie, who was sitting at the front of their canoe. No sooner had Taylor spoken when he heard Red cry out in pain. He looked over and saw his compatriot holding his hand. There was a sharpened stick halfway through his hand. Blood from the wound ran down the injured man's arm. Not only had Red set off a trap but had the misfortune to stumble onto a row of sticks buried in the sand.

"Watch out!" screamed Blondie as a small wooden log covered in spikes flew out of the dark, missing Tiny's head by inches. Tied to a rope, the ball swung back toward the willow tree before getting caught up in its branches.

"Where the hell did that come from?" asked Moses, cowering at the bottom of the boat with his Bible over his head.

"There must have been another wire somewhere in the water which was set off by those two idiots thrashing about," said Taylor. He clenched his jaw until it hurt. Taylor was furious at his companions' stupidity. He shook his head when he saw Red and Tiny standing in the water, afraid to move a muscle. "You two get back in your canoe and paddle to the far shore. We'll stop there to eat and see to your injuries. For God's sake, you two, keep a sharp eye out for any more traps."

Taylor was the first man onshore. He barked at his comrades to get out of the water before any more bad luck struck them. Taylor noticed Red was favoring his right side. He put a hand on his friend's shoulder. "How are you feeling?"

"Sorry, Colonel, but I think I broke a couple of ribs when that tree branch hit me."

"How's your hand?"

Red held up his bloody hand. "Them damned Yankees left some sharpened spikes in the water. I didn't see 'em until I placed my hand over one."

With a wave of his hand, Taylor called the Fat Man, who had been a veterinary sergeant during the war, to his side. "Look after him."

"Will do, Colonel," responded the Fat Man as he led Red over to a stump so he could clean and dress the injured man's wounds.

"Take a seat, Colonel, and have some breakfast," said Blondie, handing Taylor a piece of smoked meat. It was the only food they had with them. Once they caught and butchered the five people they were chasing, their stock of prepared food would be more than sufficient to last them until the end of the month.

"Thanks," said Taylor as he took a big bite of meat before sitting down on the ground.

"I can see in your eyes that you're worried we won't catch 'em. I'm right, aren't I?"

Taylor nodded. His mouth was too full to answer the question.

"Don't fret. We'll catch up with them later today."

"How can you be so sure?" Taylor asked between chews.

"You forget, I lived out here as a child. I know this bayou better than anyone I know. The river we're following comes out into the Mississippi. Those people are still a long way from home. They're tired and we're not. With the current behind us, we'll make up any time lost sitting here on our backsides. Trust me, Colonel, we'll be home for supper and I'm looking forward to a pie made from that preacher's wife's innards."

Right away, Taylor's mouth watered at the thought of eating her kidneys and her heart in a pie with gravy and biscuits. He closed his eyes and smiled. Supper couldn't come quick enough for him.

Chapter 24

Cooper could have leaped for joy when his canoe left the small tributary they had been navigating and sailed out onto the brown waters of the Mississippi River. He looked left and right, hoping to see another boat. His hopes were dashed when he realized they were all alone.

"God be praised, we've made it," said Rose, turning her head to look up at the clear blue sky.

"Any idea where we are?" asked Cooper.

Rose shook her head. "No, sorry."

Hawkins hurried to catch up to his compatriots. "Captain, Joe says he thinks he knows where we are."

"And where might that be?" said Cooper.

"I done sailed up and down the river for years with my father and Master Legrand," explained Joe. "He called the river the big muddy."

Cooper raised a hand. "Joe, please, I'm tired. Can you tell me where we are?"

"I think we be about five miles north of our old warehouse. You done been there, Captain. That be where we found the bodies of Master Andrew and Miss Willow."

"Thanks, Joe. Any idea how long it'll take us to reach the warehouse?"

"It shouldn't take us more than two hours."

Rose reached back and placed a hand on her sleeping husband. "Did you hear that, Louis? Just two more hours and this nightmare will be over."

"Until we reach Mercy Plantation we're still in danger," said Cooper. "So, let's keep moving. Our traps may or may not have slowed Taylor down. Either way, we can't let our guard down."

"Captain, since Joe knows his way down the river, why don't we take the lead," suggested Hawkins.

"By all means, lead on." Cooper waited for the other boat to get a few lengths in front of them before placing his paddle in the water. With an end to their struggle only a matter of hours away, all of the aches and pains he felt throughout his body didn't seem to bother him as much anymore.

"There, do you see 'em?" said Blondie, ducking down so Taylor could see past him.

Taylor leaned to one side and peered into the distance. To him, they looked like a pair of logs floating downstream with the current. But the one thing he had learned over the years was to trust his younger comrade's eyesight. If he said he saw them, that was more than good enough for him.

"How far ahead do you reckon they are?" asked Taylor.

"Four, maybe five hundred yards."

"Then we've got 'em," said Moses, sounding excited. He brought his Bible to his chest. "In the good book it says *and there came a voice to him, Peter, rise; kill and eat.*"

"Eat we shall," said Taylor. "Come on, my brothers, let's pick up the pace and catch them bastards before they run into some Yankees and spoil our day."

Blondie thrust his paddle into the water and pulled back hard. The canoe surged ahead.

The men in the other boats let out a loud yell and raced after their fleeing prey.

Rose took her paddle out of the water for a moment to rest her weary arms. She wiped the sweat from her brow and looked back at Cooper. Her eyes widened the instant she saw their pursuers, paddling as fast as they could to catch them.

"Captain, look!" said Rose, pointing behind them.

Cooper turned his head and swore. He could see the three canoes closing in on them. They were no more than three hundred yards away and getting closer by the second. Cooper got up on one knee, thrust his paddle into the water, and pulled back as hard as he could. He gritted his teeth and willed his boat to move faster.

A shot rang out.

"They're shooting at us," cried Rose as she ducked down.

"They're wasting bullets. They won't hit a thing from that distance," replied Cooper.

Hawkins alerted by the gunfire saw the cannibals approaching and rowed as fast as he could. Ahead, the river turned to the left. In seconds, all four people rowing were covered in sweat as their muscles strained with each pull on their paddles.

Another shot cut through the air. The bullet landed harmlessly behind Cooper's canoe. He knew it was just a matter of time before Taylor's people got within rifle range. Once that happened, they were finished. For a few seconds, when they sailed around the curve in the river, the trees lining the riverbank provided them with some protection.

"Captain, the GENERAL BRAGG," hollered Hawkins as the beached paddlewheel boat came into view.

"Row for the BRAGG," replied Cooper. Without any weapons and with the severely injured pastor to slow them down, even if they made it shore, they wouldn't make it more than one hundred yards before they were gunned down. He resolved to fight Taylor and his murderous gang to the death while everyone else got away.

The whip-like crack of a bullet flying over his head made Cooper duck. As they got closer to the boat, Cooper saw it was, at least, two hundred feet long and had twin paddlewheels, one on either side of the ship. It had two tall black funnels and consisted of two decks above the waterline. Metal plates covered the front of the

riverboat. A gun mount sat silently on the foredeck. Its gun, years ago, had been confiscated by the Union Army. They rowed down the length of the ship and came to a sudden stop at the back of the vessel.

"We have seconds before they're on us," said Cooper. "Joe, you have to take Mrs. Melancon and the pastor ashore. Sergeant Hawkins and I will stay here to buy you time to escape." As soon as he finished speaking, Cooper reached up and pulled himself onto the aft deck of the ship.

"Hurry up, Joe," ordered Hawkins, holding the side of Rose's canoe with his hands so the young man could crawl over into the other boat. The instant Joe was in the canoe, Hawkins pushed it away from him and toward shore.

"Here," said Cooper, offering Hawkins his outstretched arm. He took it and joined his comrade on the tilted deck of the GENERAL BRAGG.

"We've got seconds, so what's the plan, sir?"

"How would you board this ship?"

"From both ends at once."

"Okay then, you take the aft section of the BRAGG and I'll take the stern. Let's see how many of these sons of bitches we can kill while the others get away."

At the riverbank, Rose and Joe helped carry the pastor ashore. As fast as their legs would carry them, they dragged Melancon up the steep bank and into the woods. In seconds, they were gone from sight.

"So, Captain, how do suggest we get our friends' attention?" said Hawkins.

"Like this." Cooper bent down and picked up a piece of scrap metal off the deck and edged to the side of the ship. The lead canoe with the Bearded Man sitting up front was barely a few yards away. Cooper hauled back his right arm and threw the metal as straight as he could. With a wet thud, the projectile hit the Bearded Man on the side of the head, cutting a deep gash from the top of his scalp to his left ear. Cooper jumped back out of sight just as a pistol fired in his direction.

"I think that should do it," said Cooper, holding out his hand for his comrade to shake.

Hawkins grinned and shook his colleague's hand. "Give 'em hell, sir."

"You too." Neither man expected to come out of the fight alive. They were outnumbered and other than Hawkins' knife, they did not have any weapons. The odds stacked against them were long indeed.

Chapter 25

"Stop yer damned shooting," yelled, Taylor at his men. "You ain't gonna hit a thing firing blindly at the side of the boat."

"That Yankee Captain done split my skull open," whined the Bearded Man, holding a hand to his bloody scalp.

"Well boys, if they want a fight, we'll give it to them. Leave none of 'em alive."

Taylor, Moses, Blondie, and Red climbed out of their canoes and crawled up onto the metal-plated foredeck while Tiny, the Bearded Man, and the Fat Man made their way to the aft section of the General Bragg.

Taylor put his hand on Moses' shoulder. "Boy, you'd best stay here until we've got 'em all."

"I ain't afraid to fight, Colonel," protested Moses. He drew a sharp knife from his belt and held it next to his Bible.

"Moses, listen to me. You have to stay here in case any of them Yankee sons of bitches tries to make a run for it. If that happens holler as loud as you can and we'll come a running. Okay?"

"Can I stab 'em in the guts if they try to get past me?"

"Okay, but make sure you holler out for help first."

Moses smiled. "I can do that, Colonel."

Taylor looked around and spotted the empty gun mount. "Okay, boy, take a seat over there and guard our boats."

With a mock salute, Moses ambled off and sat down.

With Moses out of the way, Taylor turned to face his kinfolk. "Okay, I'll make my way to the top deck and see if anyone is hiding up there while you two check out the lower decks. Watch what you're doing, and for God's sake make sure you don't shoot each other by mistake."

Red and Tiny nodded, drew their pistols, and crept toward an open door leading into the darkened interior of the boat.

Sergeant Hawkins crouched down behind an empty barrel with his knife tight in his hand. He could hear men talking and moving about on the other side of the door. Hawkins could only catch a few words, but they seemed to be arguing over how to search the ship. After a few seconds, Hawkins heard footsteps as a man took the stairs to the salon deck directly above him. Another man cursed up a blue streak as he walked away to check the lower deck where the engine was housed. Hawkins fought to control his fear. He let out his breath and was about to stand up when he heard someone turn the door knob and push the closed door wide open. Light flooded into the darkened storage room. Dust hung like a fine mist in the air.

"If yer in here, stand up and I'll make this quick," said the Fat Man as he stepped into the room with his pistol held out in front of him. "I mean it, show yourself and I'll go easy on you."

Hawkins remained as still as a statue. He held his breath as his opponent took a step forward and stopped. The man was barely more than a couple of yards away. Tension filled Hawkins' chest as he waited for his chance to strike.

"Okay, have it your way," said the Fat Man as he brought up his pistol and fired it into a barrel on the far side of the room. The sound of the gun firing inside the room was deafening. When no one cried out in pain or surrendered, the man moved to one side and targeted the next barrel.

"*Now*," thought Hawkins. Like a tiger leaping at its prey, Hawkins jumped up and thrust his knife into the unsuspecting man's throat and twisted it. Blood gushed like a geyser from the wound. With his free hand, he grabbed a hold of the Fat Man's pistol and pulled it from his hand. Hawkins yanked his knife out watched his quarry fall to his knees. The man held both hands to his throat in a vain attempt to stop himself from bleeding to death. Hawkins placed a boot on the Fat Man's back and pushed him face-first onto the wooden floor.

"Thanks for the pistol," said Hawkins as he crept out of the room, leaving the man to gasp his last wet breath before dying.

In the dark, Cooper felt his way around the half-flooded boiler room. The only weapon he had been able to find was a piece of metal piping. Cooper would rather have found a knife or something else sharp to use, but as his mother was fond of saying to him as a child, beggars can't be choosers. He regretted his choice of hiding place the moment he stepped into the cold, debris-filled water.

A door opened at the other end of the engine room, letting in some light. Cooper ducked down and took refuge behind an empty coal bin, just as someone entered the room.

"God damn it," said Red when water flowed over the top of his boot, soaking his feet. "I was angry before, now I'm pissed. If there's anyone in here, I'm gonna find you and then I'm gonna gut you like a fish."

Once again Cooper felt the adrenaline surge through his body. He heard the sound of someone growing closer as they walked through the water. Cooper saw a hand holding a gun appear right in front of him. Just like a trap being sprung, he brought his metal bar down on the outstretched arm, shattering the bones and knocking the gun into the water.

Red cried out in pain and reached for his broken left arm with his already injured right hand. He turned to see where the attack had come from. His heart jumped when a darkened shape seemed to appear out of nowhere and reach out for him. With two injured arms and several broken ribs, Red was no match for Cooper, who wrapped an arm around the man's throat and dragged him down into the water to drown him.

Cooper held Red tight in his arms as the man thrashed and fought to live. In under a minute, it was over. He pushed Red's body aside and crawled about on the floor looking for the dropped pistol. After almost a minute searching, he felt something and picked it up. He cursed when he saw it was nothing more than a piece of discarded machinery. Cooper grew desperate; he needed to find the weapon before someone came looking for the dead man. Close to giving up, his fingers ran over the top of something metal. He grabbed it and held it up to see. He smiled when he saw the revolver in his hand.

Cooper stood up and looked toward the open door. With one man down and a pistol in his hand, the odds had increased somewhat in Cooper's favor. He moved to the opening and looked at the stairs leading up to the next deck. As quiet as he could, Cooper crept up the stairs in search of his next quarry.

Hawkins cringed each time the stairs creaked under foot. At any moment, he expected one of Taylor's men to appear at the top of the narrow staircase and gun him down. When Hawkins reached the top, he took in a deep breath to calm his racing heart. A quick glance around told him he was on the salon deck of the ship. There were several empty bedrooms on either side of a corridor which led toward an open dining room. Anything of value, not bolted to the floor, had been stolen by Union soldiers when the ship had run aground.

The sound of a man coughing in one of the rooms on the right-hand side of the passageway startled Hawkins. He brought up his pistol just as the Bearded Man stepped out of the room.

Hawkins fired.

The round struck the man in his chest. He staggered back a step before turning to fire his pistol.

As fast as he could, Hawkins pulled back on the hammer cocking his weapon and loading a fresh bullet.

The wounded man pulled back on his pistol's trigger.

Hawkins heard the gun go off. A split second later, he felt a searing hot pain on the side of his head. He gritted his teeth and fired his weapon at point-blank range at his opponent's head. The Bearded Man's fell back and hit the wall with a hole between his eyes. His body slid down to the floor and tumbled over. Blood poured from a gaping wound in the back of his skull.

Hawkins brought his hand up and placed it on his left ear. He winced in pain when he felt warm, sticky blood. It took a second for Hawkins to realize his earlobe had been shot off. With another man still on the prowl, Hawkins did his best to ignore his wound. He bent down and picked up the dead man's pistol, reasoning two weapons were better than one. With both pistols held out in front of him, Hawkins retraced his steps and looked down the staircase. His adversary had gone to the lower deck to try and find him. He grinned. Things had turned around and now he was the hunter, not the prey.

Blondie swung around and brought up his pistol. The sound of guns firing somewhere at the back of the ship made him break out in a cold sweat. He moved to an open door leading to the kitchen and poked his head inside. When he saw it was empty, he stepped inside and moved to one side of the room and took cover next to a cast iron stove covered in an inch of dust. Blondie was a coward who had been captured hiding in a tree by Union soldiers. He only acted tough when his friends were there to back him up. With his hand shaking, he aimed his pistol at the doorway and prayed that no one would find him.

Cooper stopped and looked down at a long line of footsteps in the dust which led from the captain's personal quarters back toward an open door. As the tracks only went in, not out of the room, Cooper knew someone was in there, possibly waiting to ambush him. He snuck toward the entrance and stopped with his back to the wall. Blindly stepping into the room was suicide, Cooper needed some way to get the man inside to show himself. He looked around for something to use and nodded when he spotted a lantern lying on the floor. Cooper moved away from the door and tiptoed over to the lamp. He bent down and picked it up. The glass was shattered, but he didn't care, Cooper wanted what was inside it. He unscrewed the cap and smelled kerosene. There wasn't much left in the lantern tank, but it would have to do. Cooper ripped a piece of fabric from a soiled tablecloth he found bundled up against the wall. He took the fabric and jammed into the opening. Next he dug out his matches from a shirt pocket and tried to light a match. The first two failed to ignite. He silently cursed his luck. With only one match left, he crossed his fingers and struck it. With a flash of light, it caught

fire. He held the match under the kerosene-soaked piece of his shirt and waited for it to begin burning before turning on his heel and tossing the lamp into the kitchen.

The lantern rolled along the floor before coming to a halt next to a table laying on its side. With a loud whoosh, the kerosene inside the lantern caught fire. In seconds, the table began to burn. The fire rapidly spread throughout the room.

Cooper heard a cry followed by the sound of feet scampering to escape the growing inferno. He raised up his pistol and waited. A second later, a man ran out of the room and stopped wide-eyed when he saw Cooper standing there with a weapon in his hand.

Cooper pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

Blondie smiled, brought up his pistol and depressed the trigger. Instead of a loud bang, the hammer struck the back of the bullet with only a metallic click.

Both weapons had misfired.

Cooper reacted first and threw his gun at his opponent's head, hitting him square between the eyes. Blondie's head snapped back. Cooper saw his opening, charged forward, and tackled his opponent, taking him to the floor. Before the stunned man could recover, Cooper smashed his right fist into Blondie's chin knocking him senseless. With the fire beginning to spread out of the kitchen, Cooper wanted to deal with the murderer quickly and get away from the flames. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a knife on Blondie's belt and yanked it free.

"No!" pleaded Blondie just before Cooper thrust the blade into his heart.

Cooper placed a hand over his opponent's mouth to silence him while he waited for his heart to stop beating. In seconds, it was over. Cooper stood up. He could feel the heat from the flames on his face. The dry wooden interior of the ship fueled the growing conflagration. Cooper turned around and ran for the stairs.

Hawkins was about to take the stairs leading down to the lower deck when he heard a voice holler out, "Hey, boy, why don't you step out here and let's finish this like men?"

He turned and looked out onto the aft deck and shook his head. Tiny stood there with a meat cleaver in his hand, waving for Hawkins to join him.

Hawkins stepped out onto the deck and aimed his pistols at the mountain of a man. "You know I could kill you where you stand."

"But you won't, will you, boy? You want to kill me with your bare hands?"

"Not today," said Hawkins as he fired both pistols.

The bullets struck Tiny in his enormous stomach. They might as well have missed him. He smiled and threw his cleaver at Hawkins, forcing him to duck. With blood on his lips, Tiny let out a war cry and ran straight for Hawkins.

Hawkins saw his adversary coming for him. He dropped to one knee and fired his pistols again. One of the rounds struck Tiny on his left shoulder, the other went over his head. Before he could cock his weapons, Hawkins was hit and sent flying across the deck. The instant he landed, he knew he was in trouble. Pain shot from his collarbone and down the left side of his body. He grimaced and let go of the pistol in his left hand. Hawkins rolled over and tried to get back to his feet when Tiny lashed out and walloped him across the face, splitting open his lip.

Hawkins tumbled backward and came to a sudden stop against a metal pole protruding out of the deck. His mouth was filled with the coppery taste of blood.

Tiny stopped and got down to pick up his knife. His breathing was labored and slow. Every time he exhaled, blood seeped from his lips. With his meat cleaver in his hands, he staggered toward Hawkins.

There wasn't a spot on Hawkins' body that didn't hurt. He sat up and looked up at Tiny as he chuckled to himself while he staggered like a drunk toward him. Instead of one man, Hawkins saw two through the haze in his mind. He had one chance if he wanted to live. He closed his left eye and brought up his pistol. When Tiny was right above him, Hawkins fired his weapon. The bullet struck his opponent under the chin and exited through the top of his skull.

Tiny dropped to his knees and then fell onto his face, spilling his brains at Hawkins' feet.

"Thank God that's over," said Hawkins to himself. He grabbed ahold of the metal bar behind his back and used it to help stand up. Hawkins looked up and saw a thick cloud of black smoke swirling up into the sky. He undid a button on his shirt and placed his injured left arm in the opening. Hawkins had no idea if Cooper was still alive. There was only one way to find out. Hawkins began to walk as best he could along a slender wooden platform which ran down the side of the ship.

Chapter 26

Cooper stuck his head around the corner and peered out at the armored foredeck. He spotted Moses sitting in silence on the gun mount staring at the fire as it consumed the ship. He was about to step back when he heard the distinct clicking sound of a pistol's hammer being pulled back.

"You should have looked behind you before taking a look at Moses," taunted Taylor, jamming the barrel of his pistol against the back of Cooper's head. "I guess you didn't hear me coming up behind you over the noise of the fire?"

Cooper raised his hands. "No, I most certainly did not."

"Move outside, and no sudden moves or I'll blow your brains out."

Cooper walked out until he was standing in the center of the deck.

Moses jumped up and ran toward him waving his Bible in the air. "I knew the colonel would get you. Sinners like you always get what's coming to them."

"Be a good Yankee and hold still while I shoot you," taunted Taylor.

"That's not very sporting of you," said Cooper, playing for time. "Say, Colonel, where is the rest of your gang?"

"Since I ain't heard from or seen any of my people, I'll have to assume you're to blame."

"I can't lie, I got two. Whoever you sent aft is most likely dead as well. Sergeant Hawkins probably ripped them from limb to limb before they peed their pants and begged him to finish them."

Taylor's right eye began to twitch. "I've heard enough. I'm gonna enjoy eating your liver later tonight."

A shot from behind Taylor rang out. Both men instinctively ducked and turned their head to see who had fired the shot.

Cooper saw Hawkins drop his smoking pistol before falling to the deck, unconscious. With anger burning in his heart. Cooper dropped his hands and grabbed hold of Taylor's extended hand. He dug his fingers into the man's arm and twisted as hard as he could.

Taylor cried out in pain and released the pistol from his hand.

Cooper reached for the dropped gun only to see Moses run over and kick it over the side of the ship.

"The wicked shall not be given an advantage over the righteous," said Moses.

Cooper ignored the boy and yanked Taylor closer to him. He let go of him with his right hand, balled it up his fist, and sent it flying into his opponent's face. His blow knocked out a tooth, which flew across the deck.

Taylor may have been hurt but was far from a spent man. He lashed out with his right foot and struck Cooper in the knee, dislocating it.

Blinding pain shot through Cooper's left leg. He moaned in agony as he tumbled onto the metal plating. Cooper still held Taylor's arm firm in his left hand. He gritted his teeth and pulled hard on his enemy's arm, trying to pull him off his feet.

"Your knife, give it to me!" screamed Taylor at Moses.

The boy nodded, drew his blade, and ran to Taylor's side. He bent down to hand over the knife.

With his one good leg, Cooper swept Moses' feet out from underneath him. The youth cried out in surprise and fell back onto the deck, hitting his head on the metal plating. He was knocked out cold; the knife still lay in his hand.

Both men saw the blade and struggled to escape the other's grasp so they could reach the knife. Exhausted and hurt the two men knew the coming few seconds would seal their fate. Cooper being slightly taller than his opponent stuck his arm out and felt his fingers run over the metal blade. With what little strength he had left, he pushed Taylor back with his left hand and took hold of the knife. Cooper swung about at the hips and brought himself face-to-face with Taylor. Without hesitation, he jammed the knife deep into his adversary's stomach and twisted the blade around.

Taylor let out a grunt as the knife cut deep inside him. He let go of Cooper and wrapped his hands around the bloody blade stuck in his guts.

"No, you're not going to die that easy," said Cooper as he grabbed ahold of Taylor's shirt collar and started to drag him back to the open door leading to the ship's interior. Cooper was in agony. Every step he took sent flashes of pain through his body.

The searing heat from the fire radiated out through the entrance. With his last bit of energy, Cooper threw Taylor inside the smoke-filled stairway. His body landed in a heap.

Taylor looked up at Cooper. "For the love of God. Show some mercy. Please don't leave me here to die like this."

“Don’t talk to me about mercy,” replied Cooper. “Roast in hell, you son of a bitch.” With that, Cooper turned around and hobbled over to Moses. He thought about leaving him to the same fate as Taylor, but couldn’t bring himself to do it. Cooper bent down, took hold of an outstretched arm, and dragged Moses to the side of the ship. He looked down and saw three canoes tied together. Cooper rolled Moses over the side. His unconscious body fell into one of the boats.

“Did I miss something?” said Hawkins as he opened his eyes and tried to sit up.

“Hold on,” said Cooper. He walked to his friend’s side, dragging his left leg behind him.

“You look like crap, Captain.”

Cooper chuckled. “You don’t look much better.”

“I think my collarbone is broken and one of them bastards shot off my earlobe,” said Hawkins.

“I think my left knee has been dislocated and I ache everywhere,” replied Cooper.

“When you consider the alternative, we ain’t that badly off, sir.”

“Come on, Sergeant, there are three canoes tied to the side of the ship. Before the flames reach us, let’s use them and get ourselves to shore.”

With their arms wrapped around the other for support, the two battered soldiers limped off the side of the General Bragg and lowered themselves into the nearest canoe. With smoke covering the ship, they pushed off and rowed toward shore, pulling the boat with Moses in it with them.

“Hello, Captain Cooper, over here,” yelled out someone on the riverbank.

Cooper lifted his aching head and smiled when he spotted Joe standing there with a group of riders. He felt the fear ebb from his body. It was over. The monsters were dead and for the first time in days they were safe.

Chapter 27

The sound of children laughing and playing outside woke Cooper. He opened his tired eyes and went to stretch his hands over his head. Cooper stopped halfway. It had been two days since they had returned to Mercy Plantation, but his muscles and joints still hurt. He swung his bad leg out of bed and reached for his crutches. Cooper dug out his pocket watch and saw he had been asleep for two hours. The mouthwatering aroma of freshly baked biscuits wafted up from the kitchen. He hobbled to his bedroom door and opened it. As best he could, Cooper limped downstairs.

In the kitchen, he found Thomas and Stone sitting at the table with Hawkins. They all looked beaten up and in need of a long rest. Thomas wore an eyepatch over his missing eye while Stone sat there with a bandaged arm. Hawkins sat there sipping a cup of coffee with a bandage around his head. His left arm was in a splint to give his collarbone the time to heal properly.

“Let me,” said Stone, pulling out a chair for Cooper to sit on.

“Thanks,” said Cooper as he took his seat.

"Cup of coffee, sir?" asked Mrs. Jackson.

"Yes, please, ma'am."

A fresh cup of coffee was placed on the table. Cooper smiled and picked it up. He took a quick sip before leaving it to cool. He smiled when he looked over at his sorry-looking comrades. Cooper had slept so much that he hadn't had much of an opportunity to speak with his colleagues since the fight on the boat.

He looked over at Stone. "Sir, how on earth did you manage to make it back to Mercy Plantation ahead of us? When we parted ways, you and Thomas were so badly injured I was sure we'd never set eyes on one another again."

"When we didn't return two days after we left to arrest Maclean, Horace, God bless him, formed a search party to try and find out what had happened to us," responded Stone. "They found our horses wandering the woods. After that, it didn't take them long to find the heads of the men we left behind."

"May God have mercy on George and Vincent's souls," said Thomas.

Stone continued. "Once Horace knew we were in trouble, he sent riders to the nearest crossing. They discovered Cole, Thomas, and me on a trail a mile or so from O'Doul's farm nearly dead from dehydration."

"I guess the sheriff was right," said Hawkins.

"Yes. The trapper's cabin was only a couple of miles from O'Doul's farm," said Stone. "From us, Horace learned the fate of the rest of the group. No matter how bleak it may have seemed, Horace refused to give in and rode the riverbank daily looking for survivors. When the Bragg caught fire, he took that as a sign and raced there. He found Joe, Mrs. Melancon, and the pastor a few hundred yards inland, exhausted and unable to take another step."

"I'll have to thank Horace for saving my life when I see him again," said Cooper.

"I've asked him to join us for supper. You can thank him then."

Cooper asked, "Has anyone heard how the pastor is doing?"

"Yes, the doctor was here this morning and said he'll make a full recovery. All he has to do is keep off his feet for few more days and he'll be his old self again."

"That's good news. What bout Moses? Is his father coming to pick him up and take him home?"

Stone shook his head. "I sent him a note, but the man wrote back that he wants nothing to do with his son. The Melancons, however, have taken him under their wing. They have forgiven him for his past behavior and are trying to turn the youth's life around."

"I have no doubt those two can give him the proper attention and support he's been lacking his entire life."

"You should see the boy," said Thomas. "They scrubbed him clean from the bottom of his toes to the top of his head and gave him a new set of clothes to wear. He follows Mrs. Melancon around like a puppy dog, but he acts more civil and friendly toward people now."

"Perhaps some good can come from this horrible affair," said Cooper.

Hawkins nodded and said, "Amen to that, Captain."

"How are the families of the dead farmhands taking things?" asked Cooper.

"It has been a terrible blow to them, and there's nothing I can do or say that will change that," replied Stone. "However, I have made a few changes which have been received positively by all of the people working here at the plantation."

Thomas is now my head overseer and at his suggestion, I burned all the old contracts and drew up new ones which didn't unfairly tie anyone to the plantation for a set number of years. I also increased the wages paid to them. It's not a huge increase, but it's a far sight better than anyone else is willing to pay in this parish."

"We done got people looking to come here," said Thomas with a proud look on his face. "I'm gonna be talking with some young couples tomorrow morning."

"I'm sure the pastor and his wife will be pleased to hear that," mused Cooper. "The more, the merrier in their line of work."

"Speaking of work, I received a telegram from New Orleans while you were sleeping," said Stone as he reached into his pocket and brought out a piece of paper. He handed the note over to Cooper and sat back in his chair.

Cooper read over the message before giving it to Hawkins.

"What's the word, Captain?" asked Stone.

"As far as my boss is concerned, our work here is done. We're to report back to New Orleans as soon as we are well enough to ride."

"Have you given any thought about what you're going to say when you get back there?"

Cooper took a sip of coffee before answering. "Sir, I'm going to tell the truth. The people living in and around Williamstown were preyed upon by a gang of outlaws pretending to be animals to frighten and scare the local populace."

"People will never believe there are cannibals in the United States in 1865. Some country in Africa maybe, but not here. They'll call the story preposterous nonsense and bury it along with you two gentlemen's careers."

"So be it. We're both just biding our time until our terms of service with the army expire. If they let us go a few months early, I won't be too upset."

"What will you do if they do let you go?"

"I don't know," replied Cooper. "Head back east, I guess."

Mrs. Jackson coughed to get everyone's attention. "I'll have to ask you gentlemen to step out of the kitchen if want me to make you your dinner."

"What's for dinner?" asked Hawkins.

"Beef stew and dumplings. But there won't be any unless you all clear out of here."

The four men stood up slowly and hobbled out. Cooper and Hawkins walked outside and took a seat on a wooden bench.

"Sergeant, you never said what you would do if we suddenly found ourselves out of a job," said Cooper.

"I don't rightly know what I would do. The only two things I've ever done were being a slave and a soldier," replied Hawkins.

"Why don't you come to Washington with me? If it gets a little too dull for us, we can always take a ship across the Atlantic. I can show you where I was born in Scotland."

Hawkins smiled and nodded. "I guess I could give that a try."

"Please don't take this the wrong way since you grew up on a plantation like this one. I have to ask, at any time in the past few days, did you buy into the legend of the Rougarou?"

Hawkins sat there for a few seconds staring out at the empty cotton fields. He turned his head and looked Cooper in the eyes. "Captain, I didn't have Thomas and Cyrus' conviction, but some things happen out in the bayou that you can't explain from time to time. Until I found that bone in the ashes of a fire, I had my doubts if it was a man or something else we were up against. I should have trusted your assumption that it was men behind these killings."

"When it's all said and done, I'd rather it had been a monster and not a gang of crazed killers behind all of the troubles."

"Why would you say that?"

"Because, an animal kills to eat and survive. It acts on instinct. It doesn't do it for fun or to terrorize the innocent. Those deranged souls did what they did for fun and sport. They convinced themselves it was right to eat the flesh from another person's body. Their behavior was far more terrifying to me than any legendary beast ever could have been."

"Captain, do you think there could be more of them out there in the swamp?"

"God, I hope not. I don't think I could go through this again."

"Afternoon, gentlemen," said Joe as he walked toward them. A pretty young lady in a gray dress was on his arm.

"Afternoon, Joe," said Cooper. "Are you going to introduce us to your friend?"

"Sorry, I done forgot my manners. Captain Cooper and Sergeant Hawkins, please meet Miss Rebecca Legrand."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, gentlemen," said Rebecca. "Joe has told me all about you and the tribulations you all faced in the swamp together." It was obvious by the way she spoke and carried herself that the girl had been educated and was probably a house servant, not a farm worker.

"Joe's the real hero," said Cooper, winking at Joe. "Without him helping Mrs. Melancon escape we would have all been captured and killed."

Rebecca's eyes lit up. "Joe, is that true?"

The young man, not expecting praise, was flustered. Finally, he said, "I done some to help out."

"Well, wait until I tell Father all about you," said Rebecca, smiling at her beau.

Joe turned to leave. "Before I go, Mister Thomas he done told me to pass on to you there be a full moon tonight."

Cooper felt his stomach turn. He let out a tired sigh and sat back on the bench and looked beyond the fields out toward the trees. Cooper closed his eyes and prayed for a quiet night. In his battered state, Cooper knew there was nothing he or Hawkins could do if something were to happen. Only when the light of a new dawn arrived to chase away the night would they find out if they were truly safe.

