

Chapter 1

On the road south to Charleston

“Git off the mule.”

The grey-clad Rebel was adamant. Skeletal and scrawny, he leaned on an Enfield cavalry carbine, butt-end jammed in his armpit, gunpoint in the dirt. Sweat dripped down his face, streaking a dusty beard. He squinted at the late summer sun, hot as the devil’s anvil it was.

The young rider stopped, frowned and slowly shook his head.

“No, suh. Massa Linkum gib’ us freedom, an’ de war done de res’.”

The emaciated Confederate spit at the road. His tattered butternut uniform was soaked with sweat, too, and stank of stale urine. He swatted at the flies that buzzed his capless head.

“Git off, I said! You niggers start contradictin’, be no end to trouble down heah.”

The ex-slave swallowed, felt his heart jump. “No, suh,” he repeated. “Dis mah mule and we’s headin’ to town. Gotta git de hoe sharp for de plantin’ and no buckra gone stop me. Uh-uh, no suh.”

He held the farm implement up like a flagstaff and nudged the mule forward.

The Rebel yanked a pistol from his waist, a .36-caliber single-shot Palmetto, and fired point-blank at the black man’s left knee. The freedman screamed, grabbed his leg and fell to the ground. He felt the ball of lead burning a hole in his thigh.

The soldier tried to reload before he mounted but then realized he was out of pellets. “You damn lucky this heah gun’s empty, nigger,” he said. He limped to the mule, got on and slung the rifle over his shoulder.

The former slave gripped his leg with both hands, teeth clenched, writhing in pain.

“We be free now,” he moaned. Then he shook his head. “No goin’ back. Uh-uh, no suh, no mo’.”

The soldier laughed. “Free, boy?” he quipped, and laughed again. “You see that crow settin’ yonder in that tree?”

The ex-slave turned his head as the soldier raised his rifle, took aim and fired. The scrawny bird disappeared in a puff of feathers.

“Damn blackbird was free, too,” he said. “But you see how easy he lost his freedom. Niggers git uppity, gonna wind up like that crow you don’t watch your lip. You heah me, boy?”

“Yes, suh,” the freedman said. It pained him to say it, pained him deeply.

The soldier kicked the mule forward, laughing as the ex-slave tried to prop himself on the hoe. It would be a long gimp into town now. He hitched up his burlap trousers, gritted his teeth, leaned on the stick and took a few painful steps.

“Dey’s no end to it,” he mumbled, wincing as he hobbled ahead. “War or no war, de buckra gone keep us slaves anyways. Peck o’ trouble comin’.”

Limping on, he mouthed the comforting lyrics of a familiar song, soft and soulful at first, then louder and more triumphant and more determined with each painful step.

Walk in, sweet Jesus, no man can hinder me.

Walk in, kind Savior, no man gone hinder me.

See what wonder Jesus done, an’ I say

No man, no sub, no man gone hinder me.

Chapter 2

Washington, D.C., near the Capitol

A steady stream of orderlies, a few colored, most white, stepped smartly in and out of the general's office, opening and closing a heavy wooden door carved from thick panels of polished oak. Its hinges whined for oil.

There were maybe a dozen of them in all, Union veterans of the bloody war every one. Some wore yellow chevrons on their navy blue sleeves, one or two had a pair of gold bars stitched onto the shoulders of their woolen blouses signifying the higher rank of lieutenant or captain. They were solemn young men, engaged in solemn duty. Pimples of perspiration dotted their faces in the unventilated, muggy interior of the old wooden building that sat on Independence Avenue near the White House and not far from the Capitol.

A long banner, hand-stenciled on bleached burlap and tacked to the wall above the door, read "Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands." Congress had spent the better part of a year debating whether and how to create a Federal agency to supervise rebuilding in the South. Eleven states, devastated by war, lay flat on their backs and totally moribund – farms gone, plantations wrecked, acres of real estate abandoned and unclaimed. Four million Negro freedmen needed work to feed their families, not counting similar numbers of poor whites who weren't even convinced the war was over yet.

A visitor paced impatiently back and forth on uncarpeted floorboards that moaned beneath each step. He pulled a Wenger stainless steel pocket watch from his waistband, wound the stem and checked the time. Then he rolled a cigarette, scraped a wooden match against the door jam, and puffed it alive. He held the smoking match stub upright between two fingers until the burly desk sergeant looked up, moved a wad of spit tobacco from one side of his mouth to the other, then spewed a brown stream at the crumpled brass spittoon by his feet.

Most of it missed the target. The match followed. It sizzled in the pool of spit.

“General won’t be long,” the sergeant mumbled, working the wad with his tongue. “I told him you was here. Have a sit.” He gestured absently to a corner of his desk.

“Thanks, I’m fine,” the visitor said. He resumed pacing.

Moments later an orderly creaked the door open and waved him in.

General Oliver Otis Howard rose from behind a long library table piled high with stacks of official papers, internal memoranda and telegrams. Extending his left arm, he welcomed his guest with a wide smile that split his thick Imperial beard. Big half-moons of sweat rimmed the underarms of a crumpled uniform.

“Hello, Max. What brings you here on such short notice?”

Maxwell Hutchinson took the general’s outstretched hand and gripped it firmly, pulling him forward for a manly hug. Tall and broad-shouldered, Hutchinson was solid as steel. A dark brown shoebrush moustache covered his upper lip and tapered down both sides of his mouth.

“Uncle Ollie,” he said. “God, how long has it been? Mother told me you lost your good arm in the Peninsular Campaign. After that I thought you’d leave the Army and go back to Ohio for good.”

The man with three gold stars on his collar leaned back and let loose a hearty laugh. The door opened and another orderly entered with a sheaf of urgent papers. General Howard quickly scanned and signed them, then dispatched the aide.

“Too much damn fightin’ left, Max,” he said. He gestured to a pair of chairs by a side table. “Rebels liked to never give up. Stubborn bastards, every damn one.”

“Army’s treating you well, looks like.” Max nodded at the rainbow of ribbons on the general’s chest.

“Just decoration is all. I told Lucy not to waste any ink writin’ you about ‘em.” Glancing down, he fingered a gold medallion. “Medal of Honor, yeah, Battle of Seven Pines. Rubbed out a Reb battalion twice our size, made ‘em think our boys were sick or dyin’. That’s when I figured the end was near but I was wrong, and not for the first time either.”

The door hinges squeaked again as a black orderly entered and placed another pile of papers on the general’s desk. Howard nodded and waved him out.

“Max, you didn’t come over to talk family. The hell’s goin’ on?”

Hutchinson took a final draw on his cigarette and stubbed it out in a cluster of dead butts in a cast iron ashtray. "Sign outside says it all, Ollie. Heard about your new agency and –"

"Happy to chat, Max, but I got a shitload of work to do. How's dinner, Sunday?"

"Let me finish. I heard about the new bureau just as they fired me from the patent office."

"What, the best litigator they ever had? Why in hell'd they do that?"

"Some Illinois congressman bought my job for a constituent and sweetened the pot for the Commissioner."

"Greedy bastards. Suitcases and steamer trunks stuffed with cash or railroad stocks or Treasury bonds, all passin' through Congress like shit through a dog. They been stealin' votes and buyin' loyalty like it was cheap land or somethin'."

"Everybody worships the almighty dollar now, Ollie. After Lincoln, nobody gives a good god damn."

"Yeah, well, with the new President things are worse. Johnson's a Democrat, don't forget, took office a week after Lee surrendered at Appomattox. Lincoln always said Washington's got too many pigs and not enough tits."

"What I heard, Congress wanted to honor Lincoln's plan for reconstruction, try to help the South instead of punish 'em."

The general nodded. He unflapped a chest pocket and pulled out a pair of cigars.

"You heard right." He flicked a match, ignited the cigars and offered his nephew one. "But there's a damn crater between what the cocksuckers want and what they're cowardly enough to do. Coalitions on the hill're shiftin' faster than dance partners on a Saturday night."

Max Hutchinson puffed on his cigar and leaned forward. "So let me come work for you, Ollie. You need people you can trust."

The general choked as he exhaled a plume of smoke out his nostrils. "You, Max? I need Army for this job."

"I was one once, remember?"

Howard nodded. "Damn fine shooter in your day, too. Things'd been different with your Pa, maybe you'd be sittin' in this chair 'stead of me."

"Leave him out of it. Kansas was a long time ago."

"I know. Still, it's not every West Point man gives up the Army for the law."

“I’d of stayed in but for Kansas, you know that. Couldn’t leave Mother alone.”

The general nodded. “I love you like you were my own, Max. But let me find you something else in town, Bureau work’s not for you.”

“Yeah it is.”

“Give me one good reason.”

Max stayed silent for a second. “Because it’s the right thing to do.” He stared down his uncle. “And you know it.”

Howard rubbed his eyes with both hands. “I don’t know, Max.”

“Yeah you do.”

“What do you mean?”

Hutchinson exhaled a lungful of smoke. “You miss your Pa?”

“What kinda jackass question is that?”

“Right. Did you tell him goodbye before he died?”

The general swallowed. “I see what you mean.”

“Even if you don’t, it’s okay. But this is a job we have to do right.”

Howard looked hard at his nephew. “What is it you want, exactly?”

Hutchinson hammered the table with his fist. “I want justice, dammit!”

The commissioner leaned back and closed his eyes. Then he got up and marched to the wall, where he unrolled an oilskin map of the South. He grabbed a wooden pointer off his desk and jabbed at the map.

“Eleven states, Max. No government in place, no functioning systems of justice, no laws at all. Bureau’s got to fix that. So we start with martial law, which makes nobody happy, least of all the boys in blue who thought they’d be comin’ home and know it’s gonna be a while now before they can. I’m carvin’ five military districts out of these damn states, with a general officer commanding each one. Troops have to stay out of sight, keep a low profile. We got a pile of work to do.”

“Exactly,” Max said. He joined his uncle at the map. “One, I’m a lawyer and a damn good one. I know how to draft, negotiate and execute contracts. You’ve got a slew of ex-slaves coming off plantations who need enforceable agreements with their new employers. Two, literacy rate’s lowest in the country, black and white both, so you’ve got to set up schools like they did before in Cincinnati and Port Royal. This means Bureau contracts for land, to acquire buildings, hire teachers, buy books. Three, you’ve got to hand out surplus food, which means finding private distributors as your arms and legs, without their getting greedy and sucking too many tits back here themselves. And four, most of all the

Bureau's got to set up systems of justice, arbitrate claims, mediate disputes, act as judge and jury on civil and criminal cases alike until the states rewrite their constitutions, get 'em approved by Congress and be readmitted to the Union. It's a huge challenge, Ollie, arguably the most important job this country's got the next few years. So you're going to need some smart lawyers as well as Army officers to get it all done and, as I just said, people you can damn *trust*."

The general tossed the pointer back onto his desk. "Looks like you been doin' your homework. So what'd you have in mind exactly, headin' up my legal staff?"

"Commissioner. In South Carolina." He paused. "With the rank of Colonel."

Howard chuckled, then shook his head as he slumped back in his chair. "That place is too small for a state, too big for an insane asylum."

"And you got ten more nuthouses just like it. Charleston's where it all started and where it has to stop."

"You're a quick study."

"I need a job."

"It's more than that."

"You're goddam right it is. What kind of mandate they give you?"

"Year."

"A *year*? To do all this? Eliminate two centuries of bone-deep hatred and prejudice in twelve months?"

"Course not."

"Then what?"

"Get a good start, put down roots. Hell, it took Congress more'n a year of closed-door hearings and weak-kneed laws and a pair of Presidential vetoes 'til they scraped up enough votes to override, just to get this Bureau done."

"Have they no fucking shame?"

The general smiled.

"Of our vices we can frame a ladder, if we but tread beneath our feet each deed of shame."

Max frowned. "Emerson?"

"Longfellow."

Max sucked on his cigar and nodded. "Right. How much they fund you?"

"A million dollars."

Max laughed. "A measly million bucks for a damn year. This their idea of reconstruction?"

“Yeah, but there’s a rider in there, Max, gives us authority to extend year by year. Best they could do. It’s politics, what do you expect?”

“That serious men would rise to a serious occasion and recognize the magnitude of serious work this country has to do. But a hundred thousand dollars per state and barely enough time to put stakes in the ground? Who are they kidding?”

“No one, least of all themselves. There’s a lot of ‘em like to see us fail.”

“Damn right. They want political power to shift their way now, from the factories and slum-packed immigrants of the East to the railroads and gold speculators out West. That’s why you need me in Charleston, Ollie. You *need* a showcase somewhere and I’m the one guy you can trust enough to try to make it happen.”

Both men knew full well that the accidental president, Andrew Johnson, was a reluctant player. Poor white and half-educated, he was angry at the plantation owners when the war ended but pardoned them right and left when they poured into Washington with their ass-kissing petitions, their cases stuffed with cash and their endless booze. It was said that Abraham Lincoln would have dealt sternly with them, like an indulgent father. But Johnson treated them like a corruptible judge. So he started appointing lily-white provisional governments all over the South to help them dodge the oath of allegiance to the Union.

Never before had a conquered people treated its conquerors with such arrogance. The Southern states would have new elections after drafting new state constitutions to void the three-fifths apportionment rule for Negroes, which would then give the South twelve new Congressional seats. Then they would be asked to approve three new Federal amendments Congress was drafting. The Thirteenth, abolishing slavery for good. The Fourteenth, to guarantee freedmen their civil rights. And the Fifteenth, giving freedmen the right to vote. Southern whites wanted none of this, so Congress refused to seat the provisional state delegations. In retaliation, Andrew Johnson vetoed every Freedmen’s Bureau bill Congress drafted until they finally managed to get one passed over his last veto the very day Max Hutchinson walked into the patent office for the last time.

Max exhaled slowly and stubbed out his cigar. “I’m going to need a few people, Ollie.”

The general nodded. “All the commissioners report directly to me. Tell me what you need, I’ll see you get it. You’ll find a couple of friends on the ground down there maybe, but not many.”

The general reached into a drawer and pulled out a holstered, nickel-plated .44-caliber 6-shot Colt revolver. He slid it across the table and Max picked it up.

“What’s this for?” He unholstered it and spun the barrel, felt the smooth cold steel against his skin.

“You may need it again. Sergeant’ll give you requisition forms for shells.”

“To negotiate and execute contracts?”

“No tellin’ what you’re gonna run into, Max. Bill Sherman cut a pretty wide swath when he overran Georgia and the Carolinas. Made a lot of folks hate us for damn sure. You’re a Yankee, don’t forget. To the Southrons it was always and only the war of Northern aggression.”

Hutchinson frowned. “You think this is a fool’s errand?”

General Howard rose and walked back to his desk. He started flipping through a stack of papers. Then he shook his head. “If it was, I wouldn’t let you go.”

Max got out of his chair. “How many troops on the ground?”

The general turned to the wall and tapped the oilskin again. “About a thousand in South Carolina. I’ve named Dan Sickles the commanding general for both Carolinas. Good man, he’ll back you a hundred percent. His post is at Beaufort, here – ” he slapped the Carolina coast “ – with battalions at Georgetown, north of Charleston, and in Columbia, there, near the capital.”

“We should execute an employment contract to cover my work. Anything happens, I want Mother to be the beneficiary.”

“I’ll be glad to speak with her about that. Sergeant has some boilerplate stuff, add whatever you want, I’ll sign it. But do it in triplicate. Quartermaster needs four copies of everything, so find yourself a scribe with legible penmanship who can copy stuff when you get down there.”

Hutchinson nodded. “Where you plan to put the office?”

“I was thinkin’ the Calhoun mansion. We can get it if you like.”

“The late Senator?”

“Yeah, but it’s his daughter’s place now.”

Max shook his head. “Too incendiary. Stick a Federal agency in the Secesh house, I won’t last a week alive.”

“You got a better idea?”

Max thought a minute. “Yeah, City Hall. Right smack on the corner of Meeting and Broad.”

“Four Corners of Law.”

“Damn right.”

“Not bad. Not bad at all.”

“I need ground-floor access. And a sergeant to run it.”

The general shrugged. “Easy. Anything else?”

“Yes. What makes you think Congress won’t pull the rug out once you get started?”

“It’s the only government we got, Max. They gave us a year, remember? And they’ll extend, they got to.”

“Yeah, well, it wouldn’t be the first time they fucked up. They ducked the slavery issue for two generations and then totally failed to prevent war. This country lost nearly a million men who died choking on their own blood to prove a point these same politicians could have made through peaceful compromise. What’s democracy worth, otherwise? Slavery was as dead as the stagecoach a full decade before Charleston.”

“Lincoln gave blacks the sword to save the Union, Max. They deserve the ballot now to defend themselves. You plannin’ to run for Congress yourself?”

“No. Congress doesn’t really want blacks to vote because they fear the Chinese and Indians next, not to mention women. Cocksuckers fear ‘em all.”

They shook hands. “So, no second thoughts then?”

Maxwell Hutchinson stood by the big oak door, his hand on the brass knob.

“I had a stack of patent applications from a prolific young man in New Jersey named Tom Edison. And there’s a fellow from Pennsylvania, Alex Bell he’s called, thinks the Morse code’s good as dead and he’s got a new gadget to prove it.”

“Too bad. That greenhorn from Illinois can stamp ‘em now. Anything else? I got work to do, so get the hell out of here.”

“Right. I’ll need some briefings before I go. And tell Sickles not to expect anybody who salutes.”

“That it?”

“Well, maybe one last thing.”

“Be quick. I’m busy.”

“Thanks.”

General Oliver Otis Howard hunched over his desk and picked up a stack of folders. Without looking up he said, “Get your ass down to Charleston.”

Chapter 3

On the Santee River, South Carolina low country

Elizabeth Warren Butler kneeled by her father's bedside and squeezed a moist facecloth into the porcelain bowl on the night table. She unrolled the cool cloth and laid it gently across his hot forehead.

"Father," she said, her eyes darting to the bedroom window. "It won't be long now. You'll be good as ever again, really. Ready for the fall harvest. Just watch, you'll see."

The old man coughed. He gestured for another pillow behind his head. "No, Beth," he said. "It's time to stop pretending. I have nothing left. Not our land, not the slaves, not my life. It's up to you and Ben and the free colored. Cypress Corner's yours now."

"Father, don't say that. Why, last week you were shiverish and cold and just look at you now. Doc says if you keep drinking fluids and take the spiraea powders, you'll get better. Here..."

She dissolved a spoonful of crushed lobelia herbs in a tumbler of water, added a dose of colchicum and a pinch of rhubarb, then propped his head up and made him drink.

He swallowed and made a face. "Damnation!" he sputtered. "Foul-tastin', is what it is. And if it's so damn good, why does it give me gas and near-on diarrhea instead of peace of mind?"

Beth Butler smiled and lowered his head back onto the pillows. "Don't worry, Father. Doc said it would make you irritable, see? Planter's guide says so, too." She tapped the little book that the Butlers, like all plantation owners, turned to when the doctor wasn't at hand.

He coughed again, hard, and gestured for the facecloth. Shaking his head, he spit out a wad of brown phlegm. "I've always been irritable, you know. It's not the powders, it's my eight decades, every one of 'em. It's near time, sweetheart, I can feel it. Where's Ben?"

"Not back yet. Neither are the others. And stop talking like that. Stop it, I say!"

Tears welled at the corners of her emerald eyes. She brushed them away with the back of a hand. She pulled a wisp of auburn hair out of her face and tucked it behind an ear.

“Get some foolscap,” he said. “And take down what I say, word for word.”

He dictated for the better part of an hour, pausing only when Elizabeth had to fetch another bottle of ink or to replace a worn nib. She sat cross-legged with the stiff, blue-lined paper spread atop a hard wooden box, writing as fast as she could, abbreviating where necessary but she left nothing out. More than once she had to stop. Her tears smudged the ink, which she dabbed dry with a threadbare sleeve. When she was done, she handed the pen to her father, who signed the last page and scrawled his initials neatly in the lower left-hand corners of all the others. Then she carefully numbered each page in the upper right-hand corner. Her hands trembled as she folded them together.

She knew this day would come; she just wasn't ready for it. In her heart, she knew she never would be. Her mother had died when Elizabeth was a young girl, not yet ten. Then it had been just the three of them, her father and their slave master, Ben, and Beth, the tomboy, keeping 500 acres of rice paddies going through the annual harvest. It was a small plantation by Southern standards, maybe a dozen slaves at most. But without the free black labor, the spring plowing, the summer weeding, the fall harvest and the winter hoarding would have been impossible, not to mention the constant ditching and diking needed every quarter-acre first to flood the fields and then to drain them regularly with their hand-crafted trunk docks. High demand from Europe meant top prices for South Carolina's rice. It was immensely profitable, more lucrative even than indigo, which it had overtaken well before the war. Carolina Gold, they called it.

“Father?” she said.

“Yes, darlin’?”

“You know I can't manage Cypress Corner by myself. What if Ben and the others don't come back? What if I'm left all alone? What if – ?”

The old man coughed again, then steadied his breathing. He reached up with one arm and pulled her to him.

“Don't ever say you can't do something, child,” he said, his lips tight. “*Ever.*” There was no anger in his voice, just toughness and reassurance. “If there's one thing I've tried to teach you after your Mother passed, it's this. You'll find a way, you hear?”

Elizabeth Butler nodded, averting his eyes. “The fields are still fallow. Since we went inland to Flat Rock two years ago, nobody's worked them. Nobody at all. I'll have to get the field hands organized and God only knows if they'll stay. They're talking liberty and freedom,

as if they don't have to work any more. Rumor has it we have to put them under contract somehow but there's no laws about this, not one. And if Mr. Traylor doesn't come back to Charleston, who's going to approve the contracts? He's the only lawyer we know, and he's only done our wills, 'cause the bank does our commercial agreements and if the bank goes under – ”

The old man put a quivering finger to her lips and held it there. “Hush, child, that's enough. Just tell me you'll find a way, that's all what I want to hear.”

She was silent for a full minute.

“Come on, tell me now. I want to hear it from your mouth before God takes me as His own.” He stifled another cough and winced in pain.

Outwardly, she acknowledged his admonitions. Inside, she was petrified.

“I'll find a way, Father,” she said, breathing deeply. “As sure as the Butlers are five generations removed from the almighty Lord Proprietors themselves, I'll find a damn way. You can count on me, you know you can.”

“That's my girl,” he said. And with his lips stretched into a tight smile, he yielded to the spiritual power of the Universe and expired in his daughter's arms.

Chapter 4

Fifth Avenue and 23rd Street, Chelsea, New York

“There’s going to be another gold rush, Henry, I’m sure of it. Only this time it’s down south, not out west, and the profits are in rice. Carolina Gold, they’re calling it.”

The smooth, well-dressed banker paced the office in front of his partner’s polished mahogany desk. A gas lamp flickered, casting a soft glow over the stacks of papers on the desktop.

“What are you talking about, Simon? Cotton is king down there.”

“Was. Not any more. Dethroned. They’ve squeezed the last ounce out of that black soil. Meanwhile, the railroads are expanding, printing bonds like Bicycles, all backed by state guarantees. It’s an investor’s dream, I tell you. They’ve made the canals obsolete. Imagine, Henry, goods to market in a day instead of a week! And there’s a new Federal agency, too, so freedmen and refugees alike can buy land. Real estate’s a commodity now, a free-for-all everywhere, tailor-made for our high-risk, high-reward business.”

“I don’t know, Simon.” His partner was nervous. “Alston & Mallard underwrites trade from northern ports, business that brings a steady return. What we do is pretty low risk.”

Henry Hartford Mallard’s tall leather chair squeaked as he leaned back, the fingertips of one hand pushing against the other. “Neither of us knows the South and besides, you go down there now, they’ll hate you for sure. They’ve lost *everything* for God’s sake, and they blame it all on us Yankees.”

Simon Alston stopped pacing and leaned across his partner’s desk. “Exactly. But they need capital now like never before. Buckets of it. And they’ll pay whatever the market will bear. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, Henry, can’t you see?”

Henry Mallard got up and went to the window. Four floors below, a steady stream of horse-drawn carriages clopped down Fifth Avenue. Not far behind, a tag-team of Irish immigrants followed with pushcarts and brooms, shoveling clumps of horse manure off the cobblestones. Street vendors hawked newspapers and tobacco. Walking billboards touted the benefits of piano tuners, gold-nibbed ink pens, gas cooking

stoves. The humid summer air was thick and heavy under a blanket of gray.

Mallard turned around to face his partner, leaning against the wide windowsill, his back to the street. He crossed his arms and shook his head.

“No, Simon, it’s too risky. Masses of slaves thrown off the plantations, planters’ land confiscated, secessionists still fighting for a lost cause. No government, no laws, chaos and anarchy everywhere. That’s not good for business and you know it.”

Alston shook his head and backed away from his partner’s desk. “It’s you who’s wrong, Henry, not me. It’s *perfect* for business. You don’t want to come? Fine, stay here and run the damned trade bills. I’ll front the risks down there myself if I have to, but if I do, I want the profits, too. Every penny.”

Mallard took a few steps and stood inches from his partner’s face. “Everything we’ve ever done, Simon, we’ve always done together. You want the profits, then we’ll have to split the company in two.”

They stood eyeball to eyeball. “Every time I find a new opportunity, Henry, you find a reason to turn it down. ‘It’s not safe’ you say, like financing cotton exports against the blockade. Or ‘there’s no collateral’ you whine, when the British wanted to sell the Confederates shiploads of guns and offered us obscene rates. We lost a fortune during the war thanks to your weak knees.”

“Alston & Mallard has a reputation to protect, Simon. Sometimes I wonder if you understand that.”

Alston jabbed a finger in Mallard’s chest. “We also have a business to grow, something you don’t seem to get. The railroads are not only faster to market, they’re creating totally new markets, too. Agriculture has maybe five years left at most, when factories will replace the farms. Factories need land and the south has more land than Negroes. It’s a dollar an acre down there, Henry, a damn *dollar!* Think about that. Speculators profit only when they get in early.”

Henry Mallard shook his head. “Trade bills are steady business, Simon, solid as a rock. Trade grows as the country grows, gives us steady income. Income that will send my children to the best schools – and yours, too, if you ever find a bride.”

Alston grabbed a crystal ashtray off his desk and hurled it against the wall. It smashed into pieces.

“That’s the difference between us, dammit. Marriage has warped your mind, turned you from a risk-taking, profit-minded investment

banker into a biting little bureaucrat with your head buried in the ledger books. If this is all you ever wanted, you should have been a fucking accountant. You don't need me any more, you need a damn bookkeeper."

"It's our future."

"It's our death knoll."

"It's steady income."

"It's dribs and drabs, penny-ante stuff."

"It pays the bills."

"It's a damn masquerade."

"Fine."

"Fine."

Alston pulled back and stood by the door. "Tell the lawyers to draw up the papers. Put my half of the firm in escrow until I get back. I'm leaving for Charleston next week."

Mallard slumped back in his chair. "What about your house? The upkeep, the maintenance? Your club?"

"They'll all be here when I return. And tell your wife to stop trolling for debutantes, for Christ's sake. Marriage is the last thing on my mind."

"Molly will be hurt."

"Hell, she's got you, the house, the club, *and* the children. Not to mention a safe future, protected by your damn three percent on the ships' bottoms."

"A future you could share. A future that could bring you a wife and family, too."

Alston shook his head as he put on his coat. "No, Henry. Nothing will ever be the same again, trust me. *Nothing.*"

Chapter 5

At Easton, upriver from Charleston

Two rivers flow inland from the port of Charleston, which fronts the Atlantic Ocean and which, at the outbreak of the Civil War nearly five years earlier, was the largest and most active port in the United States. Charleston alone accounted for two-thirds of the nation's exports by value and of that, cotton took the lion's share by far. The Cooper River winds north from town through the marshy, tidal lowlands that form the basins where South Carolina's priceless rice fields were strung like pearls along inlets from the ocean, like the Santee. The Ashley River flows west, meandering lazily in an endless series of S-curves that snail through more flat marshland until it shallows out in some of the richest soil that cotton ever called home.

The rivers were named for Sir Anthony Ashley-Cooper, First Earl of Shaftesbury, a lord of the treasury and Chancellor of the Exchequer, born in 1621 at Winbourne St. Giles, Dorsetshire, son and heir of Sir John Cooper, first Baronet of Rockbourne, and Anne Ashley, the only daughter of Sir Anthony Ashley of Winbourne St. Giles, who sat in several parliaments and was a favorite of Queen Elizabeth. Because of the excellent soil and its rich potential as a Crown Colony, King Charles II granted Sir Anthony and a few select English aristocrats all the lands from Lucke Island in southern Virginia to the Saint Matthias river in Florida, embracing nearly the entire territory that would eventually become known as the Deep South. Of this immense region the King designated Sir Anthony one of his absolute Lords and Proprietors in the New World.

On a wide elbow of rich black soil that juts dangerously close to the Ashley River sits the Big House at Easton, home to a vast cotton plantation that stretches across miles of shapeless flat land to the west and south, undistinguished except for the ubiquitous cotton plants that populate it and generate its wealth. Charles Scott Dawson, one of Sir Anthony's relatives by a circuitous but well-documented genealogy, is Easton's legendary owner and proprietor, a pillar of the Charleston community and a loyal member of St. Michael's Episcopal Church, Charleston's first and oldest Protestant house of worship. Garrulous and

stout as a beer barrel with gray mutton-chop whiskers, he is married to Anne Ashley Dawson, a woman his junior by a score and a half years, herself a direct descendant of the Ashley-Coopers.

Easton is known far and wide as the largest cotton estate in South Carolina, nearly ten thousand acres worked by a slave population of some two hundred, ruled ruthlessly by a handful of black overseers who, it is well known, did not share Dawson's humane and compassionate view of life. But then, they were as far from being descendants of the Lords and Proprietors as humans could be and still inhabit the same planet.

"Come, come, now," Charlie Dawson said in his most hospitable drawl. "Y'all help yourselves. We cain't hardly celebrate a birthday heah unless y'all join in."

The Dawsons had invited their closest friends to Easton to honor Charles Scott's 68th birthday, the first real occasion for the Charleston elite to celebrate something, anything, after the long and bitter war. The Tinsdales, founders of Charleston's oldest and largest wholesale grocers, were there, and the Driscolls, too. George Driscoll built the state's first railroad west to the Georgia border, linking Charleston with Savannah.

The large crowd gathered on Easton's spacious front lawn, which was ringed by a long, circular, rutted drive that emerged from parallel rows of tall, distinguished willow oaks leading out to the main road. The late summer air was thick and hot. Swarms of jumbo mosquitoes from the marshland dive-bombed the guests without prejudice as to gender or age. The women clustered under the shade of parasols as the men huddled to talk business and politics.

"I'd be furious if I were you," Harold Tinsdale said. He took a cold mint julep from the tray of drinks being passed around by an elderly Big House freedman, outfitted in livery with white leg stockings. "I mean, look at what the god damn Yankees did to your north wing, Charlie. There was no reason for that, none at all, I tell you. Your home was no more a threat to Sherman's bastids than St. Michael's. Hell, they burned and looted practically everything down heah. I wouldn't be surprised if they pissed on your bricks, too, after knockin' 'em down."

Charlie Dawson took Harold Tinsdale's hand in his and shook it firmly. He swatted away a battalion of angry mosquitoes.

"Bygones, Harold," he said, wagging a finger at his friend. "Only way to make progress now is forgive and forget. Besides, who's to say this wasn't the work of our boys in butternut, trying to wreck the rich and powerful as they retreated from Sherman's march. Everybody knows it was po' whites made up our army. My boy Billy Ray enlisted and fought

in Mississippi, 'bout the only one from plantations around heah who did. You keep the flames of hatred burning, Harold, we'll be on bottom forever. We lost, it's over, let's move on."

"War may be over," said George Driscoll, "but that doesn't mean we give up. There's still political battles to be fought, Charlie. You know that. The war's really only just begun heah."

Dawson nodded. "Yeah, and now's our chance to show what we can do to heal the nation. We had a chance to do this five years go, but you hotheads took us out of the damn Union. Time now for cooler heads to prevail."

"You honestly think rational minds gonna prevail, Charlie?"

"I do, if I have anythin' to do with it."

George Driscoll raised his eyebrows. "Careful, Charlie. That attitude could get you in a peck o' trouble. Next thing you know, you'll be talkin' 'bout givin' the niggers the vote."

"Comin' soon, George. Point is, why stand in the way of the inevitable again?"

Harold Tinsdale buttonholed his host. "Stop talkin' nonsense, Charlie, y'heah? There's no way this or any other Southron state kin tolerate givin' African savages any damn right to vote. So hush that talk and hush it right now. South Carolina was created by white men for white men and so shall it ever be."

"Heah, heah," George Driscoll chimed in.

Dawson shrugged. "You boys drinkin' already? You cain't be serious, Harold."

"Damn serious, my friend, just as sure's our new President's made me provisional governor 'til the constitutional convention convenes. You want a piece of the action, Charlie, change your tune. Lotta money to be made from all this uncertainty."

The shrill blast of a trumpet interrupted them as gates to the nearby stables swung open. A half-dozen riders sprinted out on Dawson thoroughbreds and disappeared down the broad, sandy lane that split the oaks. Then a string quartet of guitar, a banjo and two violins quickly struck up the spirited melody of "Dixie" and the crowd roared.

Charlie Dawson thought back to the time, just a few short years before, when Easton was the pride of Charleston. Today, it was a far cry from its heyday. The split rail fence that used to surround the estate was in disrepair. Wild dogs, their stomachs empty with hunger, roamed the property at night; they got shot if they did it in daylight. Deep ruts

marred the drive that badly needed regravelling. All in good time, he thought. All in good time.

Dawson led his friends across the rough and uncut lawn to the heap of charred bricks near the house, overgrown with broadleaf weeds and home to multiple puddles of stale water that bred yet more mosquitoes. He stopped and gazed at a cluster of old sheep, shaggy and in need of shearing, that nibbled long grass and weeds near the solitary smokestack. It could have been different, he thought. If he'd had time to persuade more of his friends, he wouldn't have been the only delegate to vote against the Articles of Secession and they'd have had more time to delay the war, maybe even prevent it.

"I've been up north, boys," Dawson said as they stood near the blackened bricks. "Which is more than I can say for all of you. We lost not because they had a better idea or because the folklore of the Union beat the legends of our Southron tradition. They won because of superior resources and the world's most advanced production techniques that turned those resources into products. That's what we need down heah now. What's past is past, I tell you. We got to move on."

George Driscoll chuckled as he drained his glass. "Take those ideas to Columbia, Charlie, and they'll laugh you out of the statehouse. Watch yourself now, talkin' like that outside the privacy of your own home."

Harold Tinsdale stepped in close. "I'm warnin' you, Charlie. Folks are still plenty mad. Same damn stubbornness that ripped this state out of the Union can keep it from gittin' back in. Congress itself has to approve my provisional government before our boys can take their seats in Washington again."

"Exactly my point, Harold. Washington cocksuckers'll ostracize us for good unless, or until, we show a little humility."

"Even if the Yankees make the niggers citizens and give 'em the right to vote?"

"Even then."

"They do that, they'll do it for the whole country, by Constitutional amendment."

"So?"

Tinsdale shook his head. "So there's no way the literate, land-ownin', law-abidin' white citizens of this or any other Southron state will ever agree."

Dawson smiled. "I say it's up to us, Harold. The more we can show how generous, benevolent and forbearin' we are toward the

freedmen, the less Washington will harass and punish us. I'm talkin' 'bout leadership and vision heah boys, forgin' a new path in the South for the next generation."

They talked as they walked back to the center of the lawn where a huge pig turned on a spit over a hardwood fire tended by a half-dozen blacks. Yams and Idaho potatoes and ears of corn ringed the coals.

"Yeah, you better watch your damn mouth, Pappy. I heard what you was sayin' jus' now."

William Raymond Dawson hobbled toward them, leaning on a wooden pole-crutch jammed under his right armpit and holding a glass of bourbon unsteadily in his left hand. His black ribbon tie was loose at the neck, the white silk shirt half unbuttoned like the gray waistcoat that covered it. Wisps of blond hair dangled down his forehead like Spanish moss. His riding boots were muddy, a trouser leg torn.

"Well, well, the prodigal son himself. You know our friends heah, Billy Ray."

Billy Ray took a long swallow of mash. "Pappy givin' you boys that crappy vision o' his?" He laughed. "I told him he's gonna get us kicked right out o' heah, he keeps that shit up."

"That's enough, Billy Ray," the father hissed. "You know not to dishonor your family in public. You apologize right now, y'heah?"

"Apologize for what?" he slurred. "For standin' up for what any good Southron believes? For what you used to believe yourself?"

The guests looked on in embarrassed silence.

"I may be a minority of one heah, son, but our future depends on the ability of your generation to be magnanimous and tolerant, to lay a foundation of racial harmony. Otherwise, mutual suspicion and hatred between North and South will go on and on, crippin' our economy, scarin' away investors and keepin' us inferior forever."

Billy Ray laughed out loud again. "My generation ain't never gone yield to an oppressive North, Pappy, you kin mark my damn words. We do our state a greater service by keeping the colored in a condition as close to slavery as we kin under a system of white domination and control. We'll never accept a loyalty oath to the union, *never* I say! If those bastids in Washington try to force some god damn Constitutional amendments down our throats, we'll water their language down to horse piss before we ever put it to our legislature for approval. Ain't that right, Governor Tinsdale?"

Harold Tinsdale nodded. He eyed the young Dawson with pride. "You got that right, son."

Charlie Dawson stiffened. "That's enough, I said."

"Uh-uh, Pappy, it's not. Next thing you'll be sayin' is that next year we're gonna celebrate Independence Day again, first time in five years. Dammit, I fought at Vicksburg with the South Carolina infantry and we god damn surrendered to Grant on the god damn fourth of July. Mississippi swore never to celebrate ever again and I'm tellin' you right heah and right now, there's no way in hell we'll ever celebrate at Easton again, either! Am I right, boys?"

Billy Ray smashed the glass tumbler against the cast iron pit.

Charlie Dawson lashed out with his right hand and slapped his son across the face.

Billy Ray never hesitated. Leaning on his pole crutch, he smacked his father right back.

The music suddenly stopped.

Anne Ashley Dawson emerged from the crowd and pulled her son away. "Billy Ray, you are excused. Go on up to the house this instant."

Rubbing his face, he glared at his father as he backed away. "We ain't finished, you and me," he hissed, jabbing a forefinger in the air.

"We are today, boy." Dawson turned to his guests with a big smile. "Friends, don't let a little family squabble stop the goin's on. Joe Bob?"

He motioned to the quartet, which struck up the familiar refrain of "The Bonnie Blue Flag." The crowd quickly became festive again, an intergenerational battle momentarily forgotten as they sang the popular chorus in unison.

*Here's to our Confederacy, strong we are and brave,
Like patriots we'll fight, our heritage to save;
Rather than submit to shame, to die we would prefer,
We'll cheer for the Bonnie Blue Flag that bears a single star.*

"Let's eat!"

Harold Tinsdale rejoined his host as they walked toward the smoking spit. "Billy Ray's gone be a big problem for you, Charlie."

"I know he is, dammit."

"'Cause what he's sayin', most folks in these parts believe, y'heah?"

"Tell me somethin' I don't know for a change, Harold."

Chapter 6

Beacon Street, Back Bay, Boston

Thomas Alexander Edwards sat at the head of a large oakwood Hepplewhite table in his spacious dining room. He skillfully carved finger-width slices of moist white meat from a roast chicken that rested comfortably on a bed of broiled potatoes, baked carrots and baby peas on a Ceralene serving plate. A round sideboard of polished cherry sat to one side; a tall mahogany Chippendale chinaware chest graced the corner closest to the kitchen. Above the table in the center of the eleven-foot contoured plaster ceiling a multicolored Tiffany lamp glowed softly. Its radiant gas flames stood like silent sentries over the family debate.

“If our youngest daughter wants to go South,” the patriarch said as he sliced, “she should make that decision herself, my dear. She’s an adult now and far be it from us to stand in the way of her future.”

“Thank you, Father.”

Susannah Bethune Edwards sat upright in the stiff-backed Windsor chair, infused with a sudden burst of self-confidence at the oblique but unmistakable paternal approval.

Esther Lawrence Edwards inhaled deeply, her face etched with the solemn severity of unambiguous disdain. She took a plate from her husband and set it quietly in front of her, staring as if it were the object of attention and not their daughter.

“I simply do not understand,” the mother said, shaking her head at the plateful of food. “Susannah’s responsibility is to marry and procreate, to extend the pedigree of this family as I have done, and as her three sisters before her, to our eternal gratitude, may I say, and to the benefit of subsequent Edwards offspring. It is our selfless obligation as women to deny pleasure, to do a husband’s bidding and only that, to be their master’s slave.”

“My – ”

“Let me finish,” mother Edwards continued without so much as a sideways glance at her youngest daughter. “We do not tolerate interruptions in this family, so you will wait until you are asked to speak.” Her eyes flicked angrily at her husband. “Your father is the most respected publisher in this city, with his family roots – mine too, lest we

forget – irrevocably linked to the founders of this colony more than two centuries ago, a family history that is practically without parallel now that waves of – heavens, it pains me even to mention the vile word – immigrants, filthy foreigners invading our city with their alien religion and unwashed culture, breeding like rabbits until they threaten the very existence of our superior Anglo-Saxon Protestant society, a society, need I remind you, that has created the finest way of life in the world since its founding by our ancestors. Furthermore – ”

“Esther, you know I never tolerate roundabout circumlocution in the pressroom,” father Edwards interrupted, passing a plate to his daughter with one hand as he halted his wife with the other. “And not in the dining room either, where our children have learned the art of reasonable and rational discourse. Susan will be given an opportunity to defend her decision once we have blessed this food while it is still fresh and hot. Nothing displeases me more than cold food, unless of course it is irrelevant and immaterial argumentation. Susannah? Say grace, please, so we can proceed.”

As soon as she mouthed the words of a stock blessing, she took a forkful of food and swallowed quickly so she could command the next word.

“Notwithstanding Mother’s tired soliloquy,” she said, still chewing, “I believe it is important for women of my generation, at this critical time in our nation’s history, to contribute in a long and lasting way to its future. Not by marrying society’s most eligible bachelors just to procreate out of blind loyalty to family or to some infernal Biblical indoctrination that treats women like mindless slaves, chains them to the hearth and snuffs out their creative talent like some dead candle.”

“Susannah! How dare you – ”

“Esther, please. We’ll be here until midnight otherwise.”

Susannah Edwards managed another bite during this brief exchange. The meat was moist and warm and tender, a blessing in its own right, salvaging her hunger.

“You are both aware of my extensive community work in Boston, work that has brought me into close and frequent contact with the children of newcomers to America, people who sacrificed everything to come here from the poverty pits of starving Ireland. Despite the ravages of our own horrible war, which pitted brother against brother and family against family in a fight whose outcome was a foregone conclusion long before the first shot was ever fired at Manassas, this country is still blessed with abundance of the spiritual as of the material. Freedom of

opportunity draws like a powerful magnet many from outside our shores who feel themselves politically or economically repressed.”

She paused long enough for a sip of water from an elegant glass of Baccarat crystal and continued.

“But the outcome of this terrible war has been decided in favor of freedom for four million former slaves. There is a new opportunity gnawing now at the souls of so many who have toiled on behalf of these new arrivals in the classroom: a chance to bring literacy and numeracy to the freedmen, so few of whom can read or write. I have, therefore, signed a formal agreement with the American Missionary Association to teach in the new schools down South, and hereby announce to you my intention to depart for Charleston next week.”

There was nothing but silence at the table now, buttressed by a look of fierce pride on the face of Thomas Edwards. Susannah’s mother, however, was in a state of shock. For what seemed a timeless interval, she could manage neither food nor spoken word. The only sounds came from the plates of father and daughter, whose cutlery continued their work.

“Is there anything else then?” Esther asked coldly. She replaced her knife and fork quietly at the sides of her plate and folded the stiff linen napkin in her lap. “Any other insult you would like to convey to your family before you so independently, so selfishly, and so wantonly take leave of this house, a house that has given you *everything* you could have wanted in your short and sheltered life?”

“Esther, please. This is neither the time nor the place.”

“I don’t see why not,” she said, in a voice now as cold as the food before her.

She turned to face her daughter. “Well?”

Susannah Edwards quietly finished her plate, then set her knife and fork down, sipped another mouthful of water and dabbed her lips with the napkin.

“Very well,” she said. “It is my intention to teach for the AMA, that much is certain. The needs of the freed slaves go without saying, we read about them virtually every day in Father’s paper and in the others, too, though less colorfully and for sure less accurately. But there is an entire population of poor white children in the South who have never been to school either, Mother, and they too need book learning. This is a totally unimaginable predicament for those of us who, from birth and by privilege, have been exposed to the best teachers at the most exclusive private schools in the North. Yet there is still another and far greater

challenge ahead for women my age, beyond bringing literacy to the illiterate and numeracy to the innumerate. And that is to educate outside the schoolroom by working on behalf of voting rights for that half of the adult population in America that remains disenfranchised today.”

“Surely you’re not saying – ”

“Yes. I mean nothing other than bringing the right to vote to women, literate and unpropertied and of age regardless of race, creed, or color. Slavery was doomed a decade ago, even before this stupid war. Like sailing ships, it was already a dying tradition. The only way our democracy can stay healthy and strong, to keep power out of the hands of industrial monopolists like the railroads and the mines and the banks, is to embrace universal suffrage. Otherwise we have a plutocracy that can do whatever it pleases. The North is as guilty as the South in this regard. We may not have had slaves up here, but by God we have a dangerous concentration of capital in a very few hands.”

“Susannah!” Esther screamed. “Thomas, you will not allow our daughter to preach such heresy in the name of this family!”

Susannah shoved her chair back and stood up. “Mother, please! If your fourth child had been a boy as you so often said your heart desired, you wouldn’t be making such a fuss. Let the men do what their hearts desire, even if their complete and total dedication to profits and debauchery means treating their children as if they were idle pieces of furniture, to be stuck in a corner and publicly admired when guests arrive but otherwise to sit silently and be put to their intended use, like chairs for sitting or chests for storing. Our society grants the male gender every right and privilege of participation and the female none. This makes as much sense as excluding slaves from citizenship under our Constitution, in that hypocritically white male preamble, ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident...’ The time is coming, Mother, and will be here sooner than you think, when the right to vote will be given to every woman of age regardless of color. It is our *destiny*.”

“Why, I never! This is an abomination. What did we do to deserve it? Thomas, you will not permit our youngest daughter to engage in such scandalous activity and I demand that you put a stop to it this instant!”

“No, Esther, let her be. Susannah and I have discussed her proposed activity with the family attorneys. They have agreed that, while exceptional and certainly not without controversy, she is well within her rights as an adult woman to argue her position. Whether she and those of like mind can persuade our lawmakers to accept that position is another matter altogether. They face far more formidable obstacles than

they can ever imagine but we should not in good conscience prevent them from trying.”

“Thomas, I don’t think you quite understand the seriousness of this situation. I – ”

“Mother, why don’t you just come out and say it?” Susannah was as blunt as she was disrespectful.

“You’re interrupting again. Say what, my dear?”

“That you always wanted a son instead of another damn daughter!”

“Every mother hopes for a son, dear. It’s a universal wish, shared by all mothers everywhere.”

Susannah Edwards leaned into the table. “But not at the cost of smothering your youngest daughter’s hopes and dreams. You were never good at hiding your feelings. You’ve ignored me ever since I can remember. Always busy with the Big Three, never time for little Susan. My sisters will never leave Boston, that’s for sure, so you’ll have all of them – and their damned offspring – to keep you fully occupied. As for me, I have already booked passage to Charleston by steamship. When I arrive, I shall send word to you and Father by telegram as to my place of residence.”

Thomas Edwards could not suppress a smile. “Keep us informed of your work, darling. You know my readers are interested in everything new and different. In fact, I may even send a reporter from the Mercury down to cover events, which I’m sure will be exciting.”

“Thomas, please. Must you encourage her? I mean, really.”

“Like it or not, Esther, it’s what distinguishes the Mercury from all the rest and always has. Our unwavering editorial opposition to slavery was one thing. Now it may be time to broaden the debate on voting rights for blacks and with them, women.”

“This is Boston, Thomas, not Birmingham. It will take another century to civilize the godforsaken South.”

“Maybe so. But it’s my mission to keep the paper ahead of the curve. We should be proud of what Susannah is about to do, Esther. Perhaps you’ll join me when I visit Charleston later in the fall.”

“Nonsense. My place is here and Susannah’s, too, if she ever gets these harebrained schemes out of her mind.”

She sighed as she leaned back in her chair, quietly folding her napkin. Suddenly, she changed course, as mothers often do. “You will write, won’t you dear? I have the perfect notepaper for you to take. And a new gold pen, too, with a fresh supply of indelible ink from France.”

Without another word, she left the room.

Thomas Edwards rose, approached his youngest daughter and took her in his arms. "God, Susannah, why couldn't you have been a boy?"

"Father," she whispered, "I will make you prouder than a son ever could."

Chapter 7

At Cypress Corner, on the Santee

Elizabeth Butler was in the yard at the side of her white frame house throwing a final spade of dirt on her father's still-unmarked grave, when she stopped and looked at the cloud of dust that swept her way. Not a squall, she thought, there's no wind. Had to be someone coming down the road.

She took a few steps forward and squinted. Then she saw him, his head towering above the cloud. She set the shovel down, wiped her hands on the worn muslin apron and broke out in a broad grin. She walked quickly in his direction.

"Well, I swear," she said. "Benjamin Braxton, as I live and breathe, what in the world took you so long?"

The tall, lanky black foreman dried his sweaty palms on the thighs of his burlap trousers and extended a hand. He was an inch or two shy of seven feet and thin as a rail.

"How do, Miss Liza," he said. A Cheshire smile covered his face, revealing a row of snow-white teeth, evenly spaced. "Like t' never make it t'rough dem woods souf o' Flat Rock, ma'am. You know how dey's allus t'ick an' bram'ly."

She took his hand and shook it firmly. "But where are the others?" She gazed past him at the dissipating cloud, seeing no one.

"Dey stayin' wif fambly up t' de high groun' 'til we knows it be safe back heah."

"Come up to the terrace," she said. "You must be hungry and thirsty."

"I's mighty bof," he said.

She led him to the house and brought out a pitcher of lemonade and a platter of fresh corncakes. He sat on the edge of a wicker chair next to her and waited for her to speak.

"I don't know where to start, Ben," she said. "The rice fields are fallow, same as we left them two years ago. Need a lot of hard work to get them back in shape."

"Yes'm," he said. "But before we kin start wuk ag'in, I heah we gone need a contrack or somethin'. You know anythin' 'bout dat?"

“I hear the same gossip you do, I guess. Rumor has it there’s a man coming from Washington to write labor contracts and resolve land disputes and all.”

“Uh-huh, we be hearin’ dat, too. We don’ know nothin’ ‘bout no contracts, so we be askin’ you to put somethin’ on paper fer us. Kin you do dat?”

She thought back to what her father told her. She swallowed hard and nodded. “I can try, sure, but I have no idea what’s a fair wage. From what I hear, the contracts have to be approved by the new bureau.”

Benjamin Braxton nodded somberly. Then he smiled that big white smile again. “Think we kin git us one o’ dem buros, too?”

“It’s not for getting, Ben. It’s an office of the government.”

“Dat’s okay. De gummint gone he’p us, I b’lieve. But Miss Liza, you know we gone be needin’ some land too, not jus’ contracts, so we kin be on our own. Thing is, some folks gittin’ forty acres an’ a mule. Me, I don’t need no more ‘n mebbe a acre or two at mos’.”

She leaned forward in her chair. “But my family has title to it. The bureau is supposed to deal with abandoned land”

“What you mean, ‘bandoned?”

“Deserted, neglected, vacant.”

He glanced across the barren fields. “Well, y’all’s land looks mighty vacant to me, Miss Liza. You know, you bein’ gone an’ all, folks been sayin’ mebbe your land be ‘bandoned. Belong to nobody, les’n somebody heah to wuk it.”

“But it’s not abandoned, Ben, the title is still valid. Besides, I’m here to claim it and work it, too.”

“When Gen’ral Sherman come through heah, we-all met wif him an’ his staff. He be talkin’ for a while, then listenin’ to what de black folks say. Listenin’ to de preachers, listenin’ to de common folk, listenin’ to de shopkeepers, too. Then he made some kinda order – in writin’, too, which one o’ de preachers read to us. Said we kin git forty acres an’ a mule jus’ by askin’.”

“Forty acres? And a plow animal? How?”

Ben shrugged. “I dunno. ‘Bandoned land, the gen’ral said. Mor’n two years unclaimed, up fer grabs. But you be sayin’ y’all’s land not ‘bandoned.”

“No, it’s not. It’s still legally titled.”

“So you be thinkin’ no chance fer us to git some. Jus’ a coupla acres, I mean.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Mind you, I ain’t arguin’, jus’ tellin’ what he done said. But de gen’ral, he ‘specks de land be contested, so his order give us a opshun to buy. What’s a opshun, Miss Liza?”

“A choice. A chance.”

“Uh-huh. Well, like I say, I don’t need no forty acres. All’s I wants is a little to grow some food, mebbe build a li’l house. You think we kin fix somethin’ like dat?”

Beth Butler saw the earnestness in her foreman’s eyes. “I need your help, Ben. And the others, too. I can’t possibly handle all this by myself now. So let me get some foolscap and we’ll try to write something down.”

He frowned. “Fool’s whut?”

“Paper. And a pen. We’ll start, and soon’s we can we’ll go to Charleston to get the contract approved by the Bureau. But Ben?”

“Yes’m?”

“It’s going to be the hardest work we’ve ever done before.”

He leaned forward in his chair. “Miss Liza, it gone be de hardest wuk *you* ever done, I’m sho’. But for us? I ain’t so worried ‘bout de wuk’s I am ‘bout what comes after.”

Elizabeth Warren Butler frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I’m talkin’ ‘bout de buckra and de votin’. ‘Cause les’n we kin vote, we might jus’ as well be slaves ag’in, ma’am, livin’ under de whip o’ de white man. Ain’t no way we kin accept dat.”

She took his big, calloused hand in hers. “Ben, you don’t have anything to worry about with me. We’ll reach a fair agreement, you and I.”

He plopped his other outsized hand over hers. “Ain’t you I’s worried ‘bout, Miss Liza.”

She was silent for a second. “I know. I’ll get that paper so we can start.”

Chapter 8

Philadelphia, near Rittenhouse Square

Jeremiah Emmett Dawes walked down the steps of a modest frame townhouse with his wife, Jennifer. They strolled down Delancey Street toward the square.

“Shouldn’t be long now, Jed,” she said. Her voice was soft, almost a whisper, muffled by the sound of hooves on the big cobblestones. The carriages ferried late-night passengers home from long dinner parties at which the city’s aristocrats had been splitting hairs of politics and debating national policy.

A frown etched itself deeply into his forehead as he quickened his pace. “I’m sorry,” he said. “What was that, my dear?”

She raised her voice a notch and linked her arm in his. “I was just saying, the states down South have to accept the amendment abolishing slavery, don’t they? Or Congress won’t let them rejoin the Union, right?”

He shook his head as they turned the corner into the elegant square, once a pasture for local livestock and dumping ground for night soil, now a hub for the city’s social elite. It was named for David Rittenhouse, brilliant astronomer, maker of scientific instruments, patriot of the Revolution.

“It’s more complicated than that, Jennifer. I know these people, they’re tyrants. They suffocated my family and me and they won’t give up just because they lost the war.”

Jed Dawes was an octoroon, one-eighth black. Jennifer Perry Dawes was white.

“That’s not your battle to fight, Jed. Your work is here now. For the immigrants, paid a pittance for their labor in the new factories.”

“I know, I know.”

They waited for a carriage to clear, then sidestepped a fresh clump of manure and entered one of the four stone walkways leading diagonally to the center of the square.

“Damn Irish do for a nickel what niggers do for a dime and the big corporations rob them all.”

Jennifer Dawes squeezed her husband's arm. "They're lucky to have the first black graduate of Harvard Law fighting for them." She squeezed his arm tighter. "You're a born mediator."

He stopped as they drew near a pair of classical urns carved from russet New Hampshire marble that showcased Plato and Socrates in bas-relief.

"I didn't go to law school to mediate labor contracts," he said, the frown on his face more deeply etched now, as if from the same marble. "The war had just begun. I had to fight to get out of Charleston, fight to get here and fight even harder to get into Harvard. My future is in politics, not labor law." He drew away. "Think about it, Jen. The war may be over, but not the battles. This country is heading into uncharted waters, led by the same corrupt politicians that took us to war in the first place. But there's no Lincoln now, no one to bridge the creative tension."

She looked left and right to make sure they were alone, then wrapped her arms around his neck. "Pennsylvania will be proud to have you represent it, Senator. If Thad Stevens is serious about retiring, you're the ideal choice to carry on his work as a radical Republican."

He withdrew from her again and led them past the rows of ornamental lampposts, past the tall trees that paralleled the flagstone walk – oak, maple, and black locust broadleaf hardwoods – past the wilting azaleas into the broad oval at the center of the square.

"Senate's the right forum," he said quietly. "Help Congress forge a national policy for reconstruction. They've got their white masters and their Irish niggers both, but they don't have a real nigger there yet."

"Don't say that. Pennsylvania's more than ready for a black politician."

He paced back and forth in the central oval, faster now. His mind raced ahead. "To hell with this state," he said. "I'm talking about down there."

Her heart leapt into her throat. "Surely you don't mean –"

"Yes, I do. Charleston. Back home, where they need real fighters."

"My God, Jeremiah. You worked so hard and so long to get *out* of that state. People laid down their lives for you, took you underground, smuggled you up here and then to Boston and now you want to go *back*?"

"That's right," he said, "They laid down their lives for me and now it's my turn to lay down my life for them. I have to do this."

She backed away from him and bumped into the massive stone sculpture of Barye's allegory of the French revolution, groping for balance. Tears welled in her eyes. "They'll crucify you," she said breathlessly. "Kill you like the lion crushed this snake."

He walked quietly over to her and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Not anymore," he said. "Those days are gone. They'll take their battles into the courtrooms and the legislatures now and that's where I have to fight them."

She collapsed on his chest, sobbing. "I'm terrified," she cried. "Please stay. I don't want to lose you."

"You stay. The orphanage needs you. The war took their fathers and their mothers gave up hope. Hope is the one thing we can't afford to sacrifice."

She closed her eyes and shuddered. "I'm losing you, Jed. You're married to politics now, not me."

He lifted her chin. "Nothing is what it seems anymore, Jen. Nothing."

Chapter 9

At Easton, near Charleston

Jasper Johnson staggered into the primitive shack he called home and collapsed on the dirt floor.

“Mama!” he cried. “I cain’t hardly walk no mo’. Git a doctor, fast.”

Jaliya Johnson rose from the bedding on the floor and propped herself on an elbow, rubbing sleep from her eyes. “Chile, what you doin’ comin’ home so late? Where you been, anyhow? We was worried sick, your Pa and me.”

“Mama, look. My leg’s near busted and it hurts real bad.”

Jaliya wrapped a length of rough homespun around her torso and knelt down to inspect him.

“Lotta blood, chile,” she said, shaking her head. “Lawd, cain’t see nothin’ dey’s so much blood. Does it hurt heah?”

When she pressed a finger against his inner thigh, he screamed.

A frown creased her face. “What happened?”

“Buckra shot me, Mama,” he said, wincing. “Took out his gun and plum shot me.”

“Who? Who shot you?”

“Soldier boy. Comin’ home from de war, he was. Stole our mule too. Hurts bad, Momma. We got to git a doctor *now*.”

Jaliya Johnson wrapped a strip of burlap around his knee and tied it into a makeshift tourniquet. Then she ran out the door. “Jake! Jake, git in heah, quick. It’s J. J.!”

Jake Johnson, a seasoned blacksmith, was hammering at his forge nearby. Sweat poured down his face, ran down his muscled arms and washboard stomach, drenched the waist of his burlap pants. When he heard his wife’s scream, he dropped the hammer and tongs and sprinted toward the shack.

“Jake, hurry! Jasper’s hurt bad.”

The big man pushed past her inside and knelt on the floor by his son. Writhing in pain, the young man curled both knees toward his stomach in a fetal position. As soon as his Pa saw the blood, he knew it was serious.

“We need de doctor right away,” he said.

Jaliya clenched and unclenched her fists. “How we gone do dat? Onliest doctor can fix him is de buckra and we ain’t got no money to pay.”

“I’m talkin’ ‘bout de big house, Mama, so git out de saucer, we gone need a big collection for J. J.”

“Onliest way to git de buckra doctor is if Massa Dawson bring him here.”

Without saying another word, Jake Johnson sprinted toward the Big House, cap in hand. Moments later, he was back, Charlie Dawson by his side. Without hesitating, Dawson went straight to the boy.

“Let me have a look.” When he unknotted the burlap, blood pulsed from the wound. “I’ll go for Doc Cochran right away. Meantime, keep the burlap tight.” He pulled a clean handkerchief out of his pocket. “Soak this in cold water and keep his face cool. And give him plenty of water.”

Dawson stood to leave but Jake stopped him at the door. “Massa Dawson, suh, you know we ain’t got nothin’ for de doctor. How we gonna do right by dis?”

“Don’t worry, Jake. Let’s get J. J. fixed up first. We’ve always found a way in the past and we’ll find a way now.”

“Much obliged, Massa Dawson. No way kin de nigra doctor he’p.”

“I know. I’ll take the river boat and be right back.”

Easton was among a number of plantations served by the same physician, Dr. Edward Halstead Cochran, who lived downriver from Easton. It would take an hour on horseback to fetch him, assuming the roads were dry, a distance that the slim-hulled Sawyer boat could cut easily.

When Charlie Dawson returned, Doc Cochran followed him to the slave cabin. He quickly opened his black case, pulled out a stethoscope and listened for a pulse.

“Heart’s steady,” he said without looking up. “But I can’t dig out the slug here. We got to get him up to the house. Good news is, looks like a 10-bore ball.” He turned to J.J. “Pistol, boy?”

J. J. nodded.

Jake disappeared momentarily and returned with a makeshift gurney patched together from a pair of hoes and some interwoven horse bridles. When they lifted him onto the straps, he groaned.

At the Big House, domestics quickly covered a day bed in the sitting room with clean homespun and set an oil lamp on the side table.

Billy Ray stuck his head in the room. "What's all the ruckus?"

"Not now, son," Dawson said. He helped the doctor lay the patient down.

Billy Ray arched his neck to see. "The hell's a nigger doin' in heah? Git him back to the shack."

"I said *not now*."

J. J.'s eyes widened when he saw who was at the door.

Doc Cochran opened his bag and went right to work. He gave his patient the end of a leather bridle to bite on, to ease the pain. It took him an hour to remove the slug.

When he extracted the minié ball, his eyebrows shot up.

"What is it?" Dawson asked.

"Rebel pistol," Cochran said, frowning. "Haven't seen one in a while." Turning back to Jasper, he asked, "Soldier do this to you, boy?"

He nodded.

"Name's J. J.," Jake said.

"Johnny Reb, comin' home drunk I suppose," Doc said. He washed and disinfected the wound and dressed it with a silk swatch. "You're lucky, J. J. Pellet lodged in the muscle. Missed the femoral artery, or you'd be dead. It's contused and torn but it'll heal pretty fast, healthy young man like you. You'll have to use a crutch a while, you understand?"

J. J. nodded again.

When they got back to the shack, Dawson helped Jaliya set her son to rest on a clean blanket on the dirt. Her face was etched with a mother's pain.

"Massa," Jake said. "How we - ?"

"Don't you worry none, Jake. He's gonna be fine."

Charlie Dawson went back to the Big House. Doc Cochran was waiting for him at the boathouse.

Jake knelt down and saw tears in his son's eyes.

"Stop it, J. J. Stop it right now. Doc said you gone be okay."

J. J. shook his head. "It ain't de pain, Pa. I jus' seen who done it."

Jake frowned. "What you sayin', boy?"

"It was Billy Ray shot me wif his gun."