

## *Chapter One*

“I don’t see any Yankees,” said little Melanie, peeking between the drapes at the front parlor window of Winterbridge Manor. “Oh, look! There’s white smoke over at McAdams Hall. Those Yankees must be there right now.” She spun to look at Allison, eyes wide with fear. “Are they coming here?”

“I hope not, honey. I hope we’re far enough off the road so they can't see us.” Allison Mosby stood behind her daughter and looked out across their cold, barren rows of what had once been cotton. “I so wish your daddy was here.”

“I miss my daddy.” Melanie hugged her mother then looked up. “He’s all I wished for for Christmas.” She looked straight up. “Santa, please bring my daddy home.”

“We won’t have much of a Christmas this year, honey.”

“If Santa brings my daddy . . .” Melany hugged her mother’s legs, eyes wide with hope.

Allison Mosby and her seven-year-old daughter, Melanie, had lost weight during this damnable war, but both had remained healthy, as had their darkies.

*What would we do without them?*

Before going up to Virginia to join his brother's regiment, her husband, Franklin, had invested nearly all of their available funds in Confederate bonds. All that remained was a small iron box of gold coins hidden under the marble hearth of their upstairs bedroom fireplace. She'd not touch that. Whichever way this war ended, they'd need something for replanting their fields, for rebuilding their lives.

All the cattle and pigs on Winterbridge Manor had been appropriated over the past three years to feed the brave men of the Confederacy.

Winterbridge slaves had remained. They seemed happy to have been owned by the Winston family, and by Franklin Mosby. Most of them lived in cottages down along the Savannah River.

With cotton exports barricaded by those damn Yankees, she'd allowed their slaves to grow crops for food and to fish and trap for game. They'd brought catfish, rabbit, or squirrel up to the house near every day last summer, along with potatoes, corn, carrots, and greens.

This winter had been leaner and meaner but they still had corn and potatoes.

On cold days, such as that day, she and Melanie spent their afternoons in the west facing bay window where late sun kept them warm. They dared not show those damn Yankees smoke from a fire.

As a precautionary measure, they'd blocked both chimneys in the cookhouse around back. Smoke from cooking filled that big room and seeped through the walls, making it very hard for Yankees to see from the road below. John Jackson Youngblood, their plantation overseer, said the slaves out there complained about smoke burning their eyes and noses, but that they understood the why of it all.

Always keeping busy with useful tasks, Allison and Melanie had been working on a patchwork quilt for Melanie's bedroom.

"Is that my daddy?"

A stocky, red bearded man in a Confederate officer's uniform stepped out of the Georgia pine forest near their lower cotton field and walked brusquely into the barn.

"No, Honey. Your daddy's a mite taller, and thinner."

Allison's right hand went to her throat, fearing this man might bring bad news about her husband. He might have been wounded or taken prisoner.

*Lord, keep my Franklin safe.*

John Jackson always left the barn door open during the day. He'd been born at Winterbridge, and he had an excellent education; better than most white folks. His skill with mathematics made him a natural for overseeing the manor house and generally running their entire plantation.

Most plantations hired white overseers, some of whom whipped their slaves for whatever reason that suited them. Franklin, and the Winstons before him, held whippings to be inhumane. If one of their slaves had turned lazy or spiteful, they'd been sold or traded, straight away. That had always been enough to keep the others thoughtful of place and time.

Allison's daddy owned only two houseslaves. They'd never been beaten but they'd never received any education either. Her daddy believed them to be inferior to white people. He treated them like he did their dogs and horses. He didn't treat them mean but neither did he respect them as human beings.

Growing up, she'd never thought about any of this.

Since marrying Franklin and living at Winterbridge, she'd grown to agree with the Winstons. Darkies were people. Like their pastor said, slavery was one of life's callings. Those who were slaves should be good slaves. Slave masters should, likewise, be good masters. These were God's creatures under less fortunate circumstance. After all, there once had been a lot of white slaves in these here American states, north and south.

Winterbridge slaves worked hard, worshiped God, held their own Christian services down by the river, and revered their masters. Nobody could ask for better.

John Jackson, with his wife and daughter, shared two rooms in the barn and stayed busy. Right then, he'd probably be in back of the barn chopping firewood, one of his daily tasks. His wife and their infant daughter would be in the cookhouse baking cornbread.

Even during this damnable war, life at Winterbridge had been stable, largely because of John Jackson Youngblood and his wife.

The stocky, Confederate officer marched out of the barn and looked up at the manor house. He stopped and stared at Allison. She hadn't before noticed a splash of

what looked like blood across the hem of his gray coat. He adjusted his tight-fitting hat and marched toward the house.

“Maybe he knows my daddy.” Melanie dashed through the double doorway into the entry hall before Allison could stop her.

A sense of dread had momentarily cemented Allison’s feet to the floor. “No.” Allison rushed after her daughter.

Melanie yanked open the front door before Allison could stop her.

The stocky, red-bearded man filled the doorway. He did not remove his hat. The blood on his coat looked fresh. His dirty face, tight uniform, tangled beard, and large hands spoke a certain truth. This could not be a southern gentleman.

Allison stepped forward slowly and backed Melanie between her legs.

Dirty teeth showed from behind the man’s bushy, filthy red beard. “Well now . . .” He stepped toward them. The knife in his hand appeared from nowhere. “Ain’t you a pair of pretty bells?” His accent was that of a Yankee.

Allison stepped back and pulled Melanie around behind her. “What do you want?”

“I can cut a hog from belly to jaw, slow as you like. I enjoy the squealing.” He took two quick steps and snatched Allison’s arm above her elbow, pinching a painful nerve, so painful it choked her scream. He yanked her close. His stinking breath surrounded him.

“Who else is in the house?”

“Captain Franklin Adam Mosby, my husband, is serving with his regiment in Virginia.” She immediately regretted her answer.

His eyes narrowed. “You don’t want to watch me gut that little girl, you’ll show me where it’s hid.”

She glanced toward the grand staircase.

“You and me is going upstairs alone.” He looked at the coat closet. “What’s in there?”

“No.” Allison tried to pull away but he pinched her arm at the bone, more pain than she’d ever before felt. “Melanie, do you remember me telling you about your uncle?” She forced a smile and pushed Melanie back into the parlor. “We need to go talk upstairs. You go in and work on your quilt. Okay?”

“He’s my Uncle John?”

He grinned. "That's right, little one. Now, go on."

Melanie smiled, curtsied, and turned back into the parlor.

The man in the gray, Confederate uniform dragged Allison up the stairs. They stopped at the top, looking down the long hall past four open doorways. "Which is it?"

Allison led him through the last door on the right. "Promise you won't hurt us, and I'll give you what you want."

"Okay. I promise I won't hurt you. Why would I want to hurt anybody?"

She pointed at the carved marble fireplace. "Lift and slide that stone hearth aside."

He hurled her onto the floor and closed the bedroom door. He noticed the skeleton key, locked the door, and pointed the knife at her face. "Get up on that bed where I can see you. You make a sound, I'll go down and gut that pretty little daughter of yours."

"What you want is under there." She pointed at the left end of the hearth.

He aimed his knife at her face, motioned toward the bed, and waited.



She climbed onto the foot of the bed and sat, trembling from the cold and from her fear.

He looked back and forth, moved quickly to the fireplace, bent, lifted the hearth, and slid it out of the way, as if the heavy stone was a feather. Seeing the iron box brought a smile. He pointed the knife at her again. "Now, crawl back against that headboard and take them clothes off."

He pointed his knife toward the head of the bed, grabbed his uniform collar with his left hand, and swiped his knife down the front of his tunic. His brass buttons bounced and skidded across the wood-plank floor. He fanned his knife toward her face. "Sharp, ain't it?"

"What? Why? You've got what you wanted. Take it and go before my brother comes back."

He shifted and his tunic dropped off his left shoulder. He shifted again and freed his left arm. He switched the knife to his left hand, shifted, and his tunic dropped to the floor.

Allison stayed at the foot of the bed, crossed her arms, and grabbed her shoulders.

“No!”

“That’s okay. I’m happy to cut that dress off.”

Allison’s left hand shot out, blocking her view of his face.

He said, “Don’t you make a sound.” He kicked off his boots, dropped his pants, and kicked them aside. He was a powerfully built man.

Allison crawled backward and stopped against the headboard. She had nowhere to hide.

His filthy chest peeked from behind curly red hair. His dirty teeth sneered from behind his matted red beard. He kned his way onto the bed, grabbed the hem of her dress, and dragged her close. His breath smelled of rotting teeth.

He cut the hem of her dress and slowly cut the fabric away from her legs. He dropped his knife to the floor and stared at her open-crotch knickers. “Oh, I like that.”

He flipped her onto her stomach and tore off her clothing until she lay naked. He bent down, found his knife, and pressed the cold flat of it against the inside of her thighs,

slowly spreading her legs. “Lady, you got real pretty skin. Real blonde hair, too.” His husky voice barely whispered.

*Franklin* . . . Warm tears slid down her nose onto the pillow.

“You make a sound, I’ll do bad things to that little girly downstairs.”

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All night rain hadn’t driven off the smell of charred wood from up river, where Yankee soldiers had left a wide path of destruction.

These vindictive Yankees held Savannah intact, too valuable a port to destroy. Savannah had also become world famous for her beauty. Yankees, under Generals Sherman and Geary, had struck a deal with Savanna’s mayor, Dr. Richard Arnold. If the Yankees met with no resistance, the city would not be destroyed. Near everything had been destroyed upriver. According to rumors, the Yankees hoped to break Georgia’s fighting spirit.

Maybe they had.

Georgia’s wonderful rail system had been completely destroyed. Steel rails had been raised, heated, and bent beyond any possible use.

Samuel Greenwood, the long-time manager of Winston Dry Goods & Mercantile, a large warehouse and store near the Savannah River docks, appreciated the mayor's surrender. Beautiful Savannah, the city of his birth, would not be raised to the ground as Atlanta had been.

Rumors abounded. Sherman would deliver the city to Abe Lincoln as a Christmas gift. It would still be Savannah, still in the great State of Georgia, but Lincoln's Union Army had taken her.

So be it.

Moses Broadback walked up from the shadows of the warehouse where he'd been sleeping on baled cotton since boyhood.

"Moses, why are you still here?" Samuel pulled open the shade on one of the storefront windows, lighting empty shelves once jammed with trade goods. "Don't you know the Yankee general set all you Nigras free?"

"I don't belong to no Yankees. I'm Winterbridge property." Moses, and others, somehow took pride in being Mosby slaves. And why not? The Winston family of Winterbridge Manor had been educating their slaves for two or more generations, kept

them well housed, well fed, and properly clothed. They lived much better than most hired factory workers in northern states. Samuel had read all about it in a Savannah newspaper.

The slaves of Winterbridge Manor had a reputation of being the best kept property in all of Georgia. After the Winston family died off, their relative from Virginia, young Franklin Mosby, had inherited Winterbridge and all that went with it; including Winston Dry Goods & Mercantile, Winston Hotel, money in the bank, and loyal, hard working slaves like Moses.

Out on Fahm Street, a burly man with snarled red hair and beard drove a familiar looking wagon into early morning sun, heading down toward the river. His well tailored suit looked two sizes too small, and, like the wagon, looked familiar. A little girl sat next to him, clutching her coat tight, shivering from the cold of morning.

“Mr. Greenwood, isn’t that wagon from Winterbridge Manor?” Moses leaned closer to the window for a better look.

The burly man driving the wagon turned sharply. His angry eyes immediately focused on Samuel.

A cold chill rushed up Samuel's back. "Isn't that little Melanie seated next to him?"

"Yes, sir. I reckon it is."

"Moses, follow that wagon with charcoal and your sketchpad. Be sure not to let him see you."

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Donald Thorne climbed down from the wagon slowly, being careful not to tear the double-breasted jacket, too tight for his heavy arms and shoulders. Suspenders held up the pants, too tight to button at the top. "You wait here." He left the girl on the wagon bench and stepped into the shadows of an open livery.

A Yankee corporal strolled from darkness into shaded daylight. Long yellow hair framed his clean-shaved face. Thorne had never seen him before.

Thorne poked a thumb over his shoulder toward the horse and wagon. "How much for the horse and wagon?"

The yellow-haired corporal leaned around Thorne to look at the horse and wagon. "You selling?"

“That’s what I said.” Thorne stepped out of his way.

The corporal walked outside to examine the horse’s legs, hooves, eyes, and teeth.

He checked the wagon, racked all four steel-rimmed wheels, and turned back inside.

“Give twenty Yankee dollars for the horse and thirty-five for the wagon.”

Thorn’s eyes narrowed. “What you trying?”

“Yeah. I know. Both the horse and wagon are in top condition. I’m not authorized to pay more.” He squared up to Thorne. “Why are you selling, anyway?”

“I never favored this damn war. I grew up in New York. My father died and my mother married a southerner with a small farm. I was twelve when we moved down here to Georgia. We never owned slaves, but you Yanks burned the place down anyway. They clubbed me unconscious, then raped and murdered my wife.” He stared hard into the corporal. “I got no reasons to stay. We’re headed to California.”

“Did we catch the deserters who did such a thing?”

“Not so’s I’ve heard.” He poked a thumb toward the wagon. “Thank God, my little girl’s okay.”

“If they find the ones who did such a thing, they’ll shoot ‘em on the spot, or hang ‘em. You mark my words.” The corporal looked again at the wagon and horse. “Well, like I said, I ain’t authorized to pay more. Wish I could”

Thorne nodded, went out, grabbed the heavy canvas satchel from under the wagon seat, and dragged the child off the bench. He settled her onto his right hip, stiff as a wooden doll, and carried her inside.

The corporal smiled and walked back into the shadows.

Thorne followed him to a small, lamp-lit office in a stable filled with too many horses and very few wagons.

He stood the kid on the floor and bent close. “Stand right here and don’t you move. Keep both them eyes on this here.” He set the heavy canvas bag at her feet.

“Guard it real close.” He turned back into the office doorway.

The corporal opened a drawer, pulled out a metal cashbox, and set it on the desk. He fingered into a hip pocket for the key and turned it into the lock.

Thorne reached to the small of his back and pulled his knife, hiding it while the corporal pulled a wad of Yankee folding money from the box. Seeing the money, Thorne



stepped close, grabbed the corporal's long yellow hair, yanked his head back, and stabbed the side of his neck.

He pushed hard and shoved the sharp blade forward, cutting through the corporal's windpipe. Bright red blood shot from both sides of his severed throat. None of it hit Thorne's new, tight-fitting suit.

The corporal jerked, sucked air through the open hole in his neck, and his knees buckled.

Thorne flung the corporal sideways, being careful not to bloody the money. He stepped on the corporal's twitching arm, reflexively moving toward his blood spurting throat, and carefully slid the money from his twitching grip.

He cleaned his knife with the corporal's yellow hair, pulled the rest of the folded money from the cashbox, and organized it with what he already held. He stuffed the money into his breast pocket, picked up the cashbox, and dumped the coins into his hand. No need counting it, heavy as it was; mostly gold and silver.

He pulled the corporal's new Navy Colt and slid the weapon into the suspender loop of his unbuttoned trousers. He turned, stepped out of the office, and found the kid backing toward the wagon.

He carefully returned his knife to the small of his back, adjusted his coat sleeves, dropped the coins into the canvas bag, and picked it up. He grabbed the kid's arm, yanked her up on his way out, and set her on the wagon bench. He set the bag under the seat, climbed up, released the foot brake, and slapped the reins. He guided the horse toward the river, toward the boats, toward his preplanned escape route.

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Nearing dark, far down river, speaking to boat people all along the way about buying passage south, he'd finally found a small, sloop rigged fishing boat with a two-man crew. They were loading nets onto the boat, preparing to set sail. Thorne reined in, set the brake, glanced at the kid, climbed down, and strolled toward the sloop.

One of the men turned his way. "Help you mister?"

“Me and my kid need to get on a southbound ship. The Yankees burned our home, raped and killed my wife, clubbed me, and left me for dead.” He rubbed the back of his head and winced.

“We don’t take no government paper. You got silver or gold?”

“I do.” He turned back, reached under the wagon seat, and dragged out the heavy canvas satchel. He set it on the ground, opened it, and pulled out a leather purse, leaving the loose coin from the livery at the bottom of the bag. “How much?”

“Gold or silver?”

“Gold coin from the Georgia Railroad and Banking Company.”

“Take you to Key West for three hundred dollars.”