

**REVENGE CAN BE DEADLY**



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## Chapter One: Homeward Bound

The early spring night air was crisp and damp and illuminated by a moon, half smiling down on the ashen-colored field. The remnants of Sherman's army plowing through Georgia were everywhere. There was so much gone it was hard to tell where the raping of the farmland and the fields that lay fallow from lack of farming began. Yes, there was still the stipple of charcoal lying over the mostly barren red Georgia clay, yet colorless from the moonlight, like volcanic dust. Even steady rains could not wash clean the smell of burning destruction from the cool breath of the night air. It had been nearly eight months since the march of the Yankees from Atlanta to Savannah. Riches turned to ruin and all the promises of a new South could not erase the singular hatred that was etched like the scorched earth into the hearts of those who called this land home. Not much but old men and young boys had been left to fend off the Union Army while most of the Confederates were in Tennessee. The futility of the fight was punctuated by the overwhelming force of two columns of over 60,000 men in dark blue like a deep azure cloud of locusts descending on the defenseless, cutting a path of annihilation and death from the farmland to the sea. Nothing was beyond the Union Army's grasp. Even Sherman's written orders not to engage those who were docile and non-combative were enough to save those who were deemed by Union foraging parties

to be hostile.<sup>1</sup> The written word went unheard signaled by a wink as if it was penned in disappearing ink. But now, there was almost nothing but silence, not even the sound of birds, and the quiet subtlety of a chilled breeze or a memory of what it once was could bring back the homeland that young men had left behind to defend with a type of honor only one living in it could understand.

A lone figure meandered on horseback, slow and steady. There was no telling which was more tired, the former Confederate soldier, Bill Cooper, a tall, muscularly stout and prematurely gray-haired man in his late twenties, or the brown Morgan he was riding which seemed to stumble just a bit when it crossed the rocks in a dry riverbed to continue onto a desolate dirt road. For a moment, the horse stopped. "Ain't no water here," the man said softly. He patted the neck of the horse and they continued on. In a nearby tree, a large owl was echoing a two-note harmony through the darkness. The mare fluttered her lips in what seemed like disapproval. "Y'know, leatherlips, my granddaddy always told me that when you hear an owl hoot, it means somebody's gonna die." His horse prodded on with no care of Bill's one-way conversation. "Don't worry. As many of them ugly bug-eyed birds as there are, ain't no one would be alive if that were a fact." The man reached into a vest pocket and

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<sup>1</sup> Sherman gave explicit field orders to not destroy property in neighborhoods "where the army is unmolested" and cautioned to refrain from "abusive or threatening language" but further orders were to "enforce a devastation more or less relentless" when met with any resistance.

retrieved a harmonica. Maybe it was boredom or that he just wanted to remember his humanity in such desolate surroundings. Maybe it was something as simple as that he just wanted to hear some music. With both hands off the reins and the horse free to walk on, he played "Jeanie With The Light Brown Hair." On finishing his short rendition he began talking to the horse again. "That's your name, 'Jeanie.' And that song- can't remember all the words- was written by none other than Stephen Foster Collins. A Yankee, of all people! He wrote that doggone song for his wife! And after the witch left him! Wonder if she'd approve of a horse with her name? Well, anyway, she was kind of a nag, or so I heard." Jeanie seemed to utter disapproval with a nicker.

The man puffed on the harmonica for a few minutes, became tired of it, and placed it back in his vest. "Right here'd be a good place to settle for the night. I figure we're about at least a good day's ride to Albany." The man climbed down from his horse and began to unpack a few things from a sack tied to the side of his horse. Looking up at the moon, now rising above the trees, he stopped for a moment. It could have been a prayer or it could have been awe but either way he was in meditative thought. A few minutes and he would be building a fire and fetching water from a nearby creek. "Don't worry, Jeanie, I ain't gonna let you go to bed thirsty or hungry."

It was somewhat difficult to find some dry tender because

of the recent rainfall, but find it he did. He built a nice fire pit that he hoped he could stoke enough to keep him warm until morning. Bill led Jeanie to the shallow creek, which bubbled water from an underground spring. "Drink up girl," he whispered. Jeanie seemed happy to quench her thirst and the cold water felt good to her large mouth, parched from the long day's travel. "Hey, don't drink it all," he scolded, "the creek's not gonna dry up!" In a small burlap sack he scooped a handful of corn and fed it to the horse. "I know this ain't much, but I'll feed you more in the morning. You'll have nightmares if you eat too much, which is kind of funny since it is night and you are a mare!" The man rubbed his horse-lip wetted hands on his pants and stumbled back to the fire pit, Jeanie in tow.

An itch on his chest prompted a scratch or two and he passed his hands over several day's beard growth thinking it might be time for a shave.

Gathering up some dry leaves, he fashioned a makeshift bed and threw a thick wool blanket over them. He removed his holster and gun and prepared to bunk down for the night. The gun belt was placed on the wool blanket next to the saddle where he would lay his head, close at hand, if he should need it for snakes or other wild animals, including the human kind. He kneeled down and stretched out with his left hand and positioned himself flat on his back, which was aching from the constant strain of keeping upright for so many long hours perched upon his equine

friend. A canopy of stars straight up in front of his eyes were like a speckled blue-black ceiling in a dark room. The cool night breeze washed over him and he pulled another woolen blanket over himself to keep warm. "You have a nice night... and I'll see you in the morning, Jeanie." Almost instinctively, even as his mind drifted toward slumber he pulled his Remington revolver out of the holster and laid it on his chest under the blankets. "A good night's sleep in the wilderness is often best accompanied by the warm feeling of cold steel," he thought.

His tired eyes closed and he began to dream. His mind, numb from weary travel, flashed back to only weeks before.

In his dream, he first saw himself sitting under a tree, rifle leaning against it, while cleaning his revolver. He remembered being separated from his unit and joining in with Company C, The Cherokee Dragoons, at Bentonville, North Carolina and took up the flag of honor and the motto, "Either With It Or Upon It." He knew what that meant<sup>2</sup>. He had been in for the duration to do what his daddy always told him, "There's things in this world worth dying for and, if you die doing what's right, well, when you go to your heavenly reward there'll be streets of gold waitin' for what you did for all the people you left behind." His father, dead for many years, made many points of good intention and his words had always been a voice in his

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<sup>2</sup> In ancient Sparta, the mothers of warriors were said to have ordered their sons to either return with their shields or their bodies carried back home on them. Because of the weight of the shields, deserters would toss them and run. The shield and the mantra "with it or upon it" was a reminder of the soldier's duty to fight to the death, if necessary.

head to do the right thing. Still, it was difficult to think about all the people he saw die in the most miserable of circumstances. Even though the wispy memory gave comfort of his beloved daddy working by an open barn door as the warm sun cast shattered beams of light through planked walls, there was no good memory that could obscure the evil and suffering he had seen.