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## **Soil Cries Out**

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**Soil Cries Out**

A Novel by

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## **Soil Cries Out**

The following chapters constitute sections from a historical novel in progress. The story is that of a latter-day Cain amidst the backdrop of the Wilmington Insurrection of 1898. Asa Flynn, the protagonist, becomes enamored with the white supremacist rhetoric of the Democrats during an election year. As a child, Asa experiences the loss of a sister, witnesses the conception of a black half-brother, Solomon Lea, as well as the birth of his white brother, Josiah. Solomon Lea takes the preacher's path, and Asa joins a militant arm of the Democratic party, who eventually help in overthrowing the local government. A finished product will portray all the events in the days preceding the coup de ta and the riots, during which, between sixteen and sixty people were killed –all of whom were African-Americans. It is to them, and this forgotten piece of history that this novel will ultimately be dedicated.

## Chapter One

### The Conception of Able

**March 14<sup>th</sup>, 1861**

It was the buzzword of every conversation, echoing through every street, into every bar, and out of every alley of downtown Wilmington: Sumter. The Long anticipated first act of war had come and passed with the Confederacy taking Fort Sumter from Union control. North Carolina wouldn't secede from the North till the twentieth of May. But, in the minds of the people, their secession began when the Union flag had been drawn down over the fort.

News of the fall of Sumter came across the wire just after noon on the same day. A telegraph had been posted on boards throughout the city. News swept in and out of churches throughout Wilmington. Only preachers were out of the know, until they finished their sermons and gave quick benedictions to those that remained in the pews. Then, they, too, rushed out to read the report themselves.

Asa Flynn's family had stayed in church till the preacher said his last amen. They would have left sooner but they sat in the front row. Asa was seven years old. The month

before, his sister, Josie, had turned nine. This had been the first church service his mother had attended since recovering from her most recent miscarriage

Air outside almost felt cool compared to the heat of the church. Still, Asa's mother had sweat dripping down the side of her face as she and the kids tried to keep up with Asa's father. Outside the telegraph office, a bulletin had been posted on yellow paper. Asa's father glanced at it one and smiled. Then, he lifted Josie up to read the bulletin aloud for the family. "Confederates take Sumter. No dead. No injured."

A lady standing behind the family spoke up. "Well," she said. "I wouldn't have been sorry had a few Yankees met their maker. But that will do," she said with a laugh and smile.

Asa had always been envious of his sister's reading skills. The letters to him looked jumbled, thrown together. He could never grasp any meaning from them. For the past couple years, Josie would open a book to simple sentences, easy words, and try to help Asa learn. The last time she tried, she pointed to individual letters. "That there's a D," she had said. "This one here's an O."

"I know that," said Asa. "I ain't stupid."

Josie snapped the book shut. "Okay, then. D-U-M-B. What does that spell?"

Asa looked at the floor and chewed his lip.

"Dumb," she said, walking away.

There ain't no B in dumb, thought Asa.

About a week prior to the bloodless siege of Sumter, Lincoln was inaugurated. Asa remembered his Dad reading the quote in the papers. Lincoln had said, "In your

hands, my dissatisfied countrymen and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The government will not assail you. You can have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressors.”

Asa’s father had scoffed at the quote. ““Aggressors, he says. Trample on State’s rights and you have the audacity to call *us* the aggressors.”

On the day Sumter fell, Asa’s father smiled the whole way home. Back on the Flynn’s plantation, slaves milled about straight-faced and quiet. Ruth and David Charles sat on the porches of the slave quarters, rocking in their chairs as if it were any other Sunday afternoon. Martha, Asa’s nanny, didn’t have much to say either, even when Asa told her about it. “Well, ain’t that somethin’,” she said, going back to her chores.

After having time to change clothes, a message came, inviting the entire family to an impromptu celebration at the Prichard Hotel downtown. That afternoon was the last vivid memory Asa had of his family together.

Hordes of people roamed the streets downtown. Everybody talking and cheering about Sumter. Bands played the tune of Dixie’s Land. Their trumpets all but drowned out by the crowds gathered around them, hollering the lyrics over the music.

“Oh, I wish I was in the land of cotton,

Old times there are not forgotten.”

Flapping in the evening breeze, cresting the top of flagpoles high over public buildings, was the Confederate flag. Some draped out of open windows. In those days, the rebel flag didn’t look much different from the stars and stripes of the Union. Seven stars formed a circle in a blue corner. Three stripes, alternating red, white, red, extended out, completing

the design. Before the year was out, those seven stars would become thirteen, and eventually morph into the Stainless Banner's blue X on a bright red background.

Asa heard people in the crowd saying things like, "Whipped them damn Yankees, we did. And we'll whip 'em again when they march our way." One person said, "You just know God's a Southerner." Occasionally, someone would lean their head back and shout, "Let's hear it for Jeff Davis." Roars of cheers would follow every time.

Most in town were dressed in the nicest outfits their wardrobes had to offer. Even if their shoes were falling apart, lower class whites wore their finest suits. Silken amber vests and bright blue coats. Or clean black suits and a fine top hat. Asa's mother wore a beautiful white crinoline dress. A few women were even equipped with parasols raised high in the heat of the afternoon.

Ex-military men roamed the streets in their uniforms with any and all Union décor ripped from their jackets. Some even had grey coats draped over their shoulders, showing unity with the Confederacy. Already hundreds of volunteers sat at the station waiting on trains to take them South. They intended to meet up with the Confederate armies preparing their march North. Stores of ammunition had been saved up for weeks. Shot and shells were even piled onto ferries that would soon be carrying soldiers across the Cape Fear, making runs between forts. Schooners, Brigs, and steamboats littered the river's harbor, leaving little room for boats to maneuver.

The incessant smile his father had after church had faded. Now, he bore the look of a man strained by indecision. His eyes seemed fixed on the road before them, only cutting briefly to his family, or volunteers heading toward the station.



Like the slaves on the Plantation, the free blacks walked around town as if they were oblivious to the news. Certain whites tried to do the same. That's how you could tell who opposed secession. Silence. Turned heads. Downward staring eyes. Anybody who sympathized with or lauded the cause, let their sentiments be known. But none would be seen downtown, according to Asa's father. "Ain't no one but the right sorts gonna be down here tonight," he said.

Yet, that didn't stop men from seeking the wrong sort out. Stumbling about the streets of downtown, dipping in and out of bars, were a group of men who had taken it upon themselves to monitor and investigate any persons they suspected of disloyal sympathies. Asa and his family were passing by city hall when one of the group stopped a man not cheering at the moment, and said, "You a Lincoln-ite?"

"Come again?" said the man. "Am I a what?"

"A Lincoln-ite? An Abolitionist? You a Nigger-lover?"

"Why don't you ask my slaves?" said the man, unsmiling.

"Apologies," replied the drunk man, grinning. "Just doin' my duty," he said, walking off.

Asa's father dubbed them the Vigilance Committee. "Nothin' but a bunch of drunken fools," he said.

As they approached the Hotel, a wave of cheers erupted. A boy, no more than sixteen ran through the mass of people and yelled, "We got Fisher. We got Anderson," and continued on spreading the news. Inspired by the events in South Carolina, Fort

Anderson and Fort Fisher were both captured by Wilmington men. Neither had been difficult to seize. No blood drawn. No defense put up.

Another round of Dixie's Land went up, unaccompanied by music.

“In Dixie's Land I'll take my stand,

To live and die in Dixie.

Away, away, away down south in Dixie!

When the song had died down, and its vocalist began to disperse, that's when Asa's father announced it. “Emily,” he said, looking at Asa's mother.

“Tom,” she said. “What's wrong?”

“I'm gonna fight this war,” he said.

#

Conscription acts would force men on both sides of the war to fight. Asa's father didn't wait for that, though, volunteering later that week and leaving the next. Following General Lee throughout the duration of the war, Asa's father always told the family he was proud to have serve a man he thought great, in a cause he thought noble and worthwhile. Other locals fighting for the South were apart of local regiments. Not Tom.

Union warships soon surrounded the mouth of the Cape Fear river in an attempt to starve the Confederacy of supplies. To the contrary, blockade running became a budding industry. The city thrived. Small trade ships coming in from Nassau would navigate the shallows of Frying Pan Shoals, run between the Union Naval lines, often under cover the

cover of night, and find their way up river to the wharfs of Wilmington. Smugglers moved cotton and tobacco out to Europe and their colonies, while bringing weapons, ammunition, and supplies in. Most provisions were transported on the railway to wherever General Lee's men were stationed at the time. Though, Asa's father claimed the company rarely saw them.

Most of Wilmington's wealthy whites found the operation distasteful. Profiting from war seemed to be a mission for those of a lower social standing, and a lower morality. That didn't stop the wealthy from benefitting from it, however. While on shore leave, crews from the ships fed the community, drinking at their bars, staying in their hotels and inns. Prostitution was one trade that crossed enemy lines. "Public Women," as they were called, followed armies throughout the war. But in the cities, brothels sprung up. Poor whites, free blacks, and enslaved women alike supplied the services, and in Wilmington, blockade runners made up the clientele. Even the theaters profited.

Calling the business morally corrupt didn't stop prominent political figures around Wilmington and throughout the Confederacy from taking part in it. It had even been rumored that Jefferson Davis had a private ship running the blockades. There was profit enough to go around, for anyone ready and able. But Tom chose the army. Asa himself had been only six when fighting began, far too young to partake in the wealth being spread around.

Still, the Flynn's did fine themselves. During the war, Asa's mother took charge of the estate. She cut deals with the railroads, leasing out slaves to work on the tracks. Their job would be to wait at certain points on the tracks, so when the train stopped to

resupply their fuel source, wood, the slaves would already have stacks ready to load.

White men had either refused to do the work, or asked for wages too expensive for the railroad to pay. The Flynn's were paid well for their slaves, but Asa's mother was just as happy about having less slaves to clothe and feed. They ended up leasing half a dozen slaves to the rail companies. Only one ever returned.

Then, September of eighteen sixty-two came around. Pools of standing water were left in the streets from a season of heavy rains. Basements flooded. Water stagnated. Flies buzzed throughout the city and in the fields. And the Yellow Fever epidemic began in Wilmington. No one wanted to admit the possibility of yellow jack being found in North Carolina. That kind of disease was more common in the major ports of the south, Charleston and Mobile. Soon, however, doctors were forced to admit what they were dealing with.

Families who could afford it left town immediately. Asa's family stayed longer than most. The Flynn's plantation was farther up river than the city, after all. Besides, though only a quarter of their acreage had been dedicated to the crop, the rice harvest was about to begin. During war time, one bad harvest could spell disaster for a family's finances. After the harvest, however, the family would pack up and head east to Fayetteville. Until then, Josie and Asa were to be confined to the house. But, in the scorching heat of summer, the only place worse than being outside, was being inside. They played near the canals where the river water flowed through the fields of rice.

Wilmington had become a ghost town. Out of the ten thousand inhabitants, less than half remained. Of those that remained, half contracted the fever. Wagon loads of

corpses were the only traffic travelling through the streets to Oakdale cemetery, to be buried in beneath a mound dubbed Yellow Fever Hill.

Fires of rosin and lightwood were lit in the streets in an attempt to drive the pestilence away. Only one pharmacy remained open. All but two pharmacists in the city had either died or fled. The armory for the Confederate States in Wilmington closed for two months. Shipyard workers abandoned their posts. One ironclad ship that been commissioned sat, unfinished. Wilmington had one telegraph office, and it, too, closed. Any ships in port during the outbreak were quarantined. Even courtesies fled the town. Everyone Asa saw refused to shake hands and always stood at least two feet away. It seems the only people who profited in any way from the outbreak were runaway slaves. There were said to have stolen away in the night, rowing paddle boats down river to the blockade line of Union gunships for asylum.

The mayor contacted Charleston's government for aid. Eventually, military workers, doctors, and sanitation crews all set up shop in Wilmington. But no one's mind would be at ease till the first frost. That's when people believed the scourge to end.

Little less than half of all who got the disease died. Unfortunately, that statistic stayed true for the Flynn family. Asa and Josie both came down with Yellow Fever in early November, just weeks before the frost. After three days of delirium, yellow skin, and black bile, Asa recovered, and Josie buried.

Asa wasn't even strong enough to attend the service, but watched from his window as David Charles, one of their slaves, lowered Josie's casket into the ground and began shoveling dirt on top of it. Slaves, and overseers alike stood around the grave,

humming hymns with their heads bowed low. While most people began returning to Wilmington dressed in black, mourning for their loved ones, Asa and his mother left for Fayetteville, wearing the same.

Most slaves afflicted during the yellow fever epidemic died. Fewer slaves meant less hands to pick the cotton, cut the tobacco, harvest the rice. To compensate, little land had been seeded, and rice farming had been stopped, which meant less supplies needed to be purchased. Money coming in from the leased slaves helped matters. The expenses were barely balancing out. Then in eighteen sixty-three, the price of cotton soared from 10 cents a pound in eighteen sixty to nearly two dollars a pound.

For nearly three years following the capture of Norfolk, Wilmington served as the main port for the South and became the last surviving Confederate port in the final months of the war. Then Fort Fisher, the largest defense near Wilmington fell. After that, most people realized the end approached. That's when Asa felt the war, even before he saw it. Most of the fighting happened away from the city itself. Over eleven days in February, almost a month after the fall of Fisher, Union gunships bombarded what defenses remained along the Cape Fear. Asa used to walk miles toward the smaller Fort Anderson, just to hear the firing down river. Confederate troops placed mines in the water but blew them on a decoy boat—at least that was the rumor afterwards.

Everyday Union troops sent Confederates back, closer to Wilmington. General Hagood even burned the only bridge across Town Creek, just three miles from the city, to slow the Union march. That fire was close enough to see over the trees, close enough to smell even. After that, General Bragg knew the fall of the city was inevitable. He burned

bridges across the Brunswick river, then set alight bales of cotton and tobacco just so it wouldn't fall into Union hands.

Other plantations had been raided by soldiers moving South. Not the Flynn's. Hundreds of slaves had fled North during the war. Few had escaped the Flynn's possession, including those already leased to the railroads. Millions of dollars' worth of cotton had been seized by the Union government at the tail end of the war. But cotton stores in Wilmington had already been burned by Confederate Generals.

Then Tom was home.

For the first few weeks, his restlessness wasn't a problem. Not one Emily didn't have a cure for, anyways. Asa had never seen his parents more affectionate. Always touching and rubbing up against each other. They would send him out to play, or to bed early so that they might have time to themselves. Soon enough, however, they slowed down. Tom's anxiousness became apparent. Sleepless nights and slow mornings became normal. As did drinking. A sleep aid, Tom called it. Nothing more. Yet it rarely did the trick. Asa listened to him through the wall, tossing and turning in bed. Every morning, Tom walked out into the kitchen, later and later, the skin beneath his eyes seeming to sag further. Breakfast would often be over before he woke up.

Asa's mother, Emily would try to rouse Tom out of bed earlier, but he'd refuse. "God dammit," he'd shout. "Let me sleep." So, she would walk back to the kitchen, and they'd let him sleep. Having cooked enough for three, Emily would save a plate for him. But often the eggs would gather a layer of film over them and spoil. When he did get out of bed, Tom would only nibble on the now cold hotcakes, and go about his day. So,

smaller portions were prepared, or simpler meals. Hotcakes, eggs, and biscuits, gave way to Grits and hard bread. No sense in wasting good food. After a while, leftovers from dinner the night before began to grace the table once more, just for Tom. He didn't complain.

Asa couldn't understand what was wrong with him. He'd move slow in the mornings. When Tom worked outside, his eyes shifted incessantly, darting back and forth, like he searched for some danger hidden in the tree line, concealed in the fields. If sitting, his knees would bob up and down. Always fidgeting. Tapping on tables, on drinking glasses. Pacing throughout their small farmhouse every evening.

Tom had been more active during the tobacco harvest, working more on less sleep. Whenever Asa's mother tried convincing his father to a day to relax, his father's face would scrunch up, twist as if he'd been insulted. "Rest?" he'd say. "Ain't no time to rest. Someone's got to keep these Niggers in line." With the thirteenth amendment set to be ratified in December, this would be the last season the Flynn's would have any slaves at all. Across the South, farmers began setting up arrangements with the soon-to-be freedmen and women, discussing employment. Yet, many slaves took the opportunity to head North a few months early. Need a strong harvest," his father would say. "We best get what use out of these Niggers we can."

By October, Emily developed a habit of holding her hand on her stomach, caressing her belly, as if to make sure something was still there. Asa had seen her do that years ago. Months prior to the war, back when secession was only a threat. Asa and Josie came in from playing one day to find their mother sitting in a chair, smiling, a sewing



needle in one hand, and the other resting atop her belly. Weeks went by, and a bump began to show. Soon, she would let Asa touch it. Feel the baby inside quickening. But he never felt it. Neither did Josie. It ended as just one of many miscarriages his mother endured before the war. Now, Asa could tell she was pregnant. Yet, his mother didn't smile this time. She never showed any worry, but Asa could feel it all the same.

Just like Emily's nerves, Asa, too, could feel his father's restlessness. Tom's unrelenting insomnia had been taking its toll. Just as Emily had the habit of feeling her stomach from time to time, Tom, also, started a new routine. After rolling around in bed, keeping his wife up, and cursing his restlessness, Tom would go for walks. A nightly practice.

Of course, Asa had his customs, too. Under his mother's direction, Asa developed the habit of praying every night during the war for his father. Josie, too. Most nights they would gather in his mother's room, and kneel to pray while their mother watched from the bed. His sister would bow her head, shut her eyes. Murmuring the words to herself quieter than a whisper, she'd move her lips as if reading a book. Asa took the silent approach. Thinking the words instead of mumbling them. Often, he'd give a quick thank you to God for whatever it is that God did, then wait till his sister said amen. "Amen," he'd repeat.

After the yellow fever epidemic, Asa added a line, and even moved his lips when he did. "Say hello to Josie for me," he'd say. Eventually, his mother stopped watching. Still, Asa found it impossible to sleep before saying at least a small orison. Praying became like a sedative. One amen and he'd rest soundly through the night. Now, it took

more than an amen for him to sleep. It took his father being in the house. So, he'd stay up, fighting his weariness, bearing the stinging of his eyes, until Tom came back, returning to his bed.

Tom's fidgeting worsened. Anxiety seemed to Tom's fingers tapped on the table until dinner was ready. Asa watched his father devour the food on his plate, then excused himself to sit by the empty hearth and drink whiskey. Drinking with the determination to be in a stupor by bedtime. His pacing wasn't unusual. Often, Tom drank heavy to sleep soundly. But he didn't pound them back quick enough. When Emily went to bed, he still sat there wide awake. Asa watched from the door of his bedroom as Tom finished one last drink and followed Emily into the bedroom. An hour later, Tom walked out of the house. And as usual, Asa waited.

Hours must have passed as Asa tossed and turned beneath the sheets. He tried praying, pacing, and even prying up nails in the floorboards with his bare hands, but he couldn't close his eyes for good until his father came back. So, he went searching. Tiptoeing out of his room, he eyed his mother's room. No light shone from underneath the door. It took a full minute to descend the stairs, Asa was being so cautious. He had never snuck out of his room before. Unsure of where his father would be, Asa made his way to the fields without stopping to even put on boots.

Fall might have been in season, but it remained stifling hot. Rain the night before left the ground soft, the air humid. Mud squeezed between his toes when he couldn't avoid it. A cacophony of frogs and insects sang beneath a crescent moon from a pond near the slave's quarters. Asa came near the shed that separated a field of cotton from the

harvested rows of tobacco. During the day, Asa's father would stand post and keep an eye on the slaves at work. At night, the shed remained vacant. But now, a dim golden light shone through a cracked window.

Asa crept forward. Grass crunched softly beneath each step. He peered through the shed's window. A lone lantern lit the room. Figures writhed in silhouette, like animals thrashing in traps. The cot raked against the floor, banging the wall. His eyes adjusted. A man straddled a woman; her head turned toward the window, shoved into the filthy mattress, held down by a forceful hand. Her eyes shut tight. Teeth clenched, grimacing. Beneath deep guttural grunting, the soft whimper like a dog dying. Light flickered. Tears glistened. Their house slave, Ruth Charles, cried out.

"Quit it," the man shouted. It was his father's voice. "Quit your God damn whining." Sobbing never stopped. He grabbed her by the hair. "Quit it," he said, thrusting into her. He let go and looked away. "Quit it," he said.

Asa couldn't watch anymore. Across the field of cotton in full bloom, he ran, through the woods lining the edge of the crops, all the while letting the tears he had been choking back flow. The insects no longer singed, but screamed, screeched. The night echoed with their tormented voices. And Asa ran from them, too. Beneath the rows of pine trees, on top of their fallen needles, Asa's legs pumped, feeling like they'd give way at any moment. He was nearing the slave quarters when a pair of hands caught him.

"No," he cried, almost involuntarily.

"Shh," the woman's voice said. "It's okay, baby. It's okay, just breathe." In the woman's arms the tears flowed faster. He closed his eyes tight trying to hold them back,

but they slipped out anyways. "It's okay, child," she said. The woman's name was Martha, another slave.

When Asa's crying slowed and he began to calm, Martha led him by the hand through the slave quarters, toward his house. "You forget what you saw," Martha said, not looking at him. "You hear me? You just forget, now." Her eyes were fixed on the house ahead in the clearing.

"What'd he see?" asked a man, his voice low and weary.

Martha jerked around, as did Asa. David Charles rose from his chair and walked toward them. A pipe in his hand. "What was he doing over there?" Mr. Charles asked. "What'd the boy see?"

"Nothin'," said Martha. "He saw nothin'. Ain't that right, Asa?"

Asa shook his head.

Mr. Charles toked on his pipe. Smoke poured from his nostrils. He pointed to the clearing in the woods. "You see the way to your house?" he asked.

Asa nodded.

"Go," Mr. Charles said. "You forget you was even out here tonight, understand? Go on, boy."

Asa did as he was told. Dry mud, caked to the bottom of his feet, broke off as he dragged his feet through the pine needles on his way home. Leaving the front door cracked by accident, he walked upstairs to his room, not caring enough to tiptoe even. The thought of waiting for his father to come back didn't pass his weary mind. He shut his eyes and slept.

The next day, Asa's mother wrestled him out of bed. It was Sunday. Time to show reverence to the Lord. Instead, Asa rolled over in bed, showing reverence to his pillow by plowing his face deep into it.

Asa threw on a brown jacket over a clean white shirt, and corduroy pants a shade darker than his coat. When he went downstairs, he saw his father sitting in the parlor, dressed in worn trousers not fit to work in much less wear to church, and a loose pullover shirt with his hair unkempt. Asa watched him from a distance.

"Come on," Asa's mother said. "We're gonna be late."

His father looked over. "Don't force the boy," he said. "If he don't wanna go, he ain't got to."

"Enough, Tom. Asa, let's go."

"Why do I have to go if he doesn't," Asa asked.

"You don't," his father said.

"Quit tellin' him that," Asa's mother said. "You both should be goin'. God blesses those who show him dedication. Tell me we couldn't use a few blessings around her. We all could do with more God in our life."

"I don't need church," said Asa's father. "I'm right with the Lord."

"I hope so," said Asa's mother. "For your sake." She looked to Asa. "Come on," she said.

"Leave the boy alone," his father said.

She stared at Tom with pursed lips, then looked back to Asa, her face insistent. When Asa made no movement but to gaze down at his feet, his mother turned and left, slamming the door on her way out.

His father whistled. “She ain’t happy,” he said. “But, fret not. She’ll get over it.”

“Hope so,” Asa said, moving toward his father. “Or we’ll be catching hell till next Sunday.”

“Don’t cuss, boy,” his father snapped. “Just ‘cause you ain’t got to go to church, don’t mean you can curse on the Lord’s day.” He looked away a moment then cut his eyes back. “You’re right, though,” he said. His laugh soft and gritty, like a muffled cough. “I ever tell you ‘bout the time I nearly deserted?”

Asa perked up. His father never told war stories.

“Guess there ain’t much to tell,” his father said. “I didn’t, after all. But, I won’t lie. I missed y’all somethin’ awful.” After taking a long sip of tea, he continued. “I had wanted to when your mother wrote me. Told me ‘bout Jo— your sister. But I thought, ‘What good will it do? She’s already gone.’ Besides, I had a duty. It’s important to serve somethin’.”

“That’s why you didn’t leave? Your duty?”

“Part of it, sure,” his father said. “That and a lack of money. But, those ain’t enough to stop a man.” His father leaned forward. “You see, we had this motto when we served under Lee. Know what a motto is? It’s a saying. Words to live by. ‘God will vindicate us.’ Those were our words. I believe it, too. Have faith in him. He’ll save you.” He laughed. “Whether you’re in the pews every Sunday or not.”

Asa smiled.

His father continued. "But that was it. God would have forgiven me if I deserted. He's forgiven me for stayin'."

Asa felt confused. "So why'd you stay?" he asked.

"If you're blessed with the Lord's forgiveness, you best keep your word in all matters. It wasn't duty. It was the Lord. And I do right by him." His father looked off in silence for a moment. "Whatever you do," he mumbled at last, nodding his head. "Ain't nothin' that ain't forgivable." He looked back to Asa. "Get on," he said. "Go sleep. Play. Do something."

Asa walked toward the door, knowing he wouldn't be able to fall back asleep. The morning was muggy. The air, thick and sticky. Feeling drawn to the slave quarters, he wandered off, staring at the empty porch where Mr. Charles sat the previous night. Through the window, he could see Ruth curled up on the bed, and Mr. Charles sitting on the floor, watching her. Creeping around the backside of the cabin, Asa sat with his back against the wood. He could hear the two slaves talking in almost a whisper, their voices muffled by the wall.

"We'll get through it," said Ruth. Hearing her voice brought a vision of her face wincing in pain to Asa. It gave him a queer feeling, restless, anxious. "We always get through it," she said, her voice monotonous.

"I'm sorry," said Mr. Charles. Why Mr. Charles apologized to her, Asa didn't know. "Soon," said Mr. Charles. "Soon, he won't be doin' that no more."

"We thought that when he went to war, too," she said.

By December, Ruth Charles had a bump in her stomach that only grew as the months went on. Asa could pretend he hadn't heard his father's grunting that night, and could block out the quite sobbing of Mrs. Charles, but he couldn't ignore how she carried the child. How she looked sick every time she felt her stomach. Yet, she never jerked her hand away, but continued to rub her belly, as if to let the child growing inside know that her sadness wasn't his to inherit.

Asa's mother carried her first baby to term, since Asa. In February of eighteen sixty-six, she gave birth to a boy. They named him, Josiah. In July, Ruth Charles, too, gave birth to a son. They named him Solomon Lea.



## Chapter Two

### Solomon's Sermon

#### **November 6<sup>th</sup> 1898**

Before the war, preaching slaves could to be dragged from their makeshift pulpits in the woods, lashed and beaten, all for presuming to repeat passages from the bible. Unless attending the church their masters approved of, where white preachers delivered the word of god that the slave owners permitted, many slaves didn't have the right to religion.

No mention of salvation ever occurred in those days. If it did, it would be said that blacks, too, may attain it, only by persisting in their servitude. For it was God's will that the 'savage' blacks remained in slavery, according to their masters. Only by adhering to God's will, by being loyal, hardworking servants to their white masters, would a black person have a hope of reaching heaven.

Then they were free. No longer restrained from learning to read by their white masters, many blacks had real access to the bible for the first time, and some looked for themselves at the word of God. But most, like Solomon's parents still relied on church for their knowledge of God. And that's where Solomon learned the foundation of faith: Absence. If you're close to Him, you *will* feel it. But, most of the time you won't.

Most of Solomon's earliest memories took place in the same church, Pine Grove Baptist Ministries. Its sanctuary had been a slave's quarters before emancipation. Bigger than most, it more closely resembled a military barracks with beds lining all three walls,

the fourth reserved for kitchen space. In the old days, the place held ten comfortably, but slaves weren't given the luxury of comfort, so it slept twenty. The cots had been removed, as had the few kitchen utilities. Only a plain platform rose inches off the ground. No lecterns. No pulpits. Long pine benches served as pews, though many preferred to stand anyways. Two pictures decorated the otherwise bare walls. The first, a cheap, standard painting of Jesus. The second, a picture of Abraham Lincoln. Supposedly, a white man had put it there as a joke. But, the congregation left it up. Honest Abe may not have been the second coming, but he was a savior nevertheless.

The Preacher of Pine Grove was a tall, skinny man who called himself John. John, the Baptist preacher. The allusion was no accident. Before being freed, he had been a backwoods preacher named Alexander. He had been whipped so many times that some slaves began to joke that if he didn't stop, he'd certainly be killed. Perhaps beheaded, like John the Baptist himself. Alexander liked that moniker. When he and the slaves gathered together in the woods, he asked to be addressed as John. Few obliged him. But after a while the name stuck.

Solomon's parents visited a number of churches before settling on Pine Grove. They had known John for years, even attending some of his porch stump sermons before emancipation. David and Ruth shook the preacher's hand. "Expectin' many folks today?" Ruth asked.

"A few," John said, nodding. "But I ain't interested in savin' souls by wholesale. I'll preach to whoever shows up." John smiled, then knelt down and asked, "Who might this young fella be?"

“Solomon Lea,” David replied on his behalf.

John smiled and sucked in air through his crooked teeth. “Solomon Lea,” the man repeated. “I like that. Could put that name to song.”

Solomon and his family took their seats in the middle of the benches. During the first couple of hymns, Solomon noticed how no one read off a sheet of paper. Everyone knew the songs by heart, singing with their eyes closed. Solomon went with his parents to different churches in the area. One or two were churches with a mixed race of congregants. Blacks always sat in the back, just as slaves did in the old days. But, white members read along in their personal bibles and hymnals. If one felt particularly moved by the spirit, a man might murmur, “Amen,” but he never shouted it. And women never spoke in the churches they attended. In Pine Grove, everyone felt the spirit. Everyone let that passion sift through their soul and cry out to the Lord.

Then it was time for the sermon. People settled down, took their seats. Only John loomed above the crowd. What natural light there was seemed to vanish, as if God himself closed the windows. Only gas lanterns cast a light on the preacher. “Most us here been slaves,” John began. “Save some these young faces I see. God bless ‘em. But, I know we remember hearin’ this here quote from the bible,” he said. Squinting in the dim lantern light, his eyes followed his finger across the page. Slowly, he said “Ephesians 6:5-8. ‘Slaves, obey your earthly masters,’”

The congregation immediately began groaning and nodding their heads.

“Yes,” John said, laughing. “Obey them ‘with respect and fear,’ it says. ‘And with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor

when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free.’

“How many times did the old masters read that passage to us? How many sermons did white preachers give saying the same things? My mother heard it. My father heard it. I heard it.”

“Mine, too,” someone said. “Me, too,” said others.

“Then we was freed,” said John. “And I didn’t hear it no more. That’s curious, ain’t it. Our old masters still around. The old preachers still give their sermons. Yet, I can’t tell you the last time I heard that passage read out loud. Now, it took me some years but I learned how to read, because I wanted to know the Good Book for myself. And when I got my hands on the bible and found that passage we read just now, the same one they impressed on our minds like a brand on a mule, I learned how it ended.

“Ephesians 6:9: ‘And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that He who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.

“We been told for years that it was God’s will we be treated so pitifully. We been told it was God’s will, that we be slaves. But I ain’t found none of that in this here book. I’m here to tell you, what I’ve found is that God *loves* you.”

“Yes,” cried a man in the back.

“That you are worth just as much as your old masters in the eyes of the Lord.”

“Praise God,” shouted a woman in the front.

“That we may have been bought and sold like cattle at the market, but we will walk with God side by side as if we was princes on Earth.”

Then it was over. John took a step away from the crowd too begin his benediction, and light seemed to fill the room once more, as if God had parted the clouds above. Service ended with a song, but Solomon just sat, wondering how John could command the light with his voice. Solomon wanted that strength, that power. He considered that his calling, and went into the seminary. But no preacher, pastor, minister, or reverend made an impact on him like John the Baptist. “Solomon Lea, Solomon Lea,” John used to sing. “Can’t you feel them devils in me?” Because no matter the message, John taught him, it was all about feeling the Holy Spirit clashing with the demons of this world.

#

It was the Sunday before state elections. Red Shirts were patrolling the streets daily, now. Rough Riders, as they were otherwise known, were the militant arm of the Democratic party throughout the Carolinas. Solomon watched them pass each morning from his porch. Wearing their eponymous red shirts with stripes of white adorning their biceps, or running vertical up the torso, the groups of white men marched through the streets, brandishing pistols, rifles, and shotguns.

Two days before, the Red Shirts had paraded through the streets of Wilmington with every member in tote, guns strewn across their laps. Some maintained an air of solemnity as they shouted, "Don't be blind, get in line." The rhetoric Democrats used saw Republicans as nothing more than puppets for the hands of black men like Solomon, to reach out, take control of the government, and dominate the white man. And they weren't shy about their beliefs. From high on their horses they yelled sentiments such as, "Our country, our rule." A message made more clear with their follow up line, "Vote right, vote White." White Republicans standing in the crowd bore the sullen expressions of men who understood what was to come –their defeat in the election.

Leading the march was a brass band. Drums thumped beneath the blow of cornets, horns, and tubas. Steam rolled off the lips of whites who lined the streets cheering on the procession. Women wore red bands pinned to their dresses or burgundy ribbons in their hair. Grey haired veterans were speckled throughout the crowd. Some leaned on canes, others didn't have that privilege due to missing limbs, but they wore their Confederate uniforms with pride. Younger veterans even rode in the parade, wearing Confederate caps as if to remind people where they lived. As if to say, "It's not over." Whites had been warning since the surrender at Appomattox that the South would rise again. To Solomon, the message was clear. The South may not rise again, but its people were.

The parade shifted up Bladen street, before passing by Manhattan park. Here the white crowd grew sparse. Where white faces could be seen, they appeared bright. More alive than their richer counterparts, as if this was the salvation they had been waiting for.

Through windows of homes and businesses, black men and women watched the armed men walk their horses down the street with the casualness of leading their steeds to water. Black citizens had discovered that the men who rode with the Red Shirts, sought any chance to spit on the windows of black-owned shops, any excuse to throw the butt of their gun into the stomach of a black man, to express their dominance. So, when a group of Rough Riders clopped through the neighborhood on horseback, most found it safer to just stay inside, out of sight.

Crowds thinned and waned until the only people watching the parade were passersby. Still, the Red Shirts rode on down seventh street. After they had passed his house, Solomon went out to the sidewalk, followed them for a distance, and watched them continue until they stopped in front of the printing offices of the Wilmington Daily Record, the only black-run newspaper in Wilmington. The Daily Record had been relocated here at Love and Charity Hall, next to St. Luke's Methodist church, Solomon's church. *The Record* stood two stories high with wood siding. Together the Red Shirts eyed the building like starving wolves stalking their prey.

The Record wasn't the cause of the white's fury, but it certainly acted as a catalyst of sorts. Alexander Manly, owner and editor of the paper, had written a response to a speech given by a woman in Georgia to the Agricultural Society. The woman had called for the protection of white women from black males, saying that lynching may be necessary "to protect woman's dearest possession from the ravening human beast." Manly responded saying white women often wanted relationships with black men, and only when relationships were discovered would there be any accusation of rape. He

called it the failure of white men to not protect their women, and remarked how whites cry about the virtue of their women while debauching black women with immunity.

Now, the election was two days away. Still Red Shirts patrolled the streets, passing by Solomon's church, eyeing his congregation. One man he recognized. Asa Flynn. Solomon grew up with that man's shadow always hanging near. His brother Josiah was a different story. Josiah and Solomon grew up together, months apart, played together, and were even educated together –separately, but at the same time. Asa, however, always seemed to have time enough to throw a dirty look Solomon's way.

Solomon shook off Asa's stare and walked into the church. Members of the church who were milling about the pews, greeting one another, promptly found a place, but remained standing for the first hymn.

Solomon didn't sing along, but continued to walk in silence to the ornately carved pulpit, where little wooden angels fluttered around the cross. Some hate seems so strong, he reflected. It feels as if it could only have been inherent –something the person was born with. But Solomon failed to believe that. Visceral hate had to be something learned. God makes everyone pure. It's humanity that corrupts. Sometimes that's the hardest thing to believe. But that's the crux of faith, after all. Trusting something's true when the only support is one's feeling.

Everybody could feel things coming to a head, black or white. It was this election. Solomon felt it among his own congregation. They hadn't been as lively as usual. Everyone felt dejected. Solomon could sense the lack of energy. Some people tried to write the Democrat's racist rhetoric off as just words. But nothing in this world is more



powerful than words. God spoke the world into being, after all. “Let there be light,” he said. And there was. “Choke the current with Niggers’ carcasses,” the democrats said. And Solomon feared it would be so. Man has a funny way of mimicking God.

Solomon stood looking over his now sitting congregation. There was an empty space in the front row where his mother would sit every Sunday. Ruth had been growing more frail in recent years, just as her church attendance had become infrequent. Now that the cold months were approaching, Solomon wondered if his mother would ever be able to listen to his sermons again. One white face had snuck into the back pew. Josiah Flynn smiled and nodded his head. Solomon nodded right back.

“If you don’t mind,” Solomon began, “I’d like to try something different today. Typically, you’d find the sermon closer to the end of the service. But this ain’t a typical Sunday, is it?”

“Uh-uh,” some in the pews murmured. Others just shook their head, eyes on their laps.

Solomon chuckled, trying to break their solemn state. “Look at us,” Solomon said, smiling. “All sitting here, together. A freed people. What would our ancestors have said of this? What would they have thought, seeing their children free. Not just from captivity, but free to commune here, to praise the Lord in this beautiful building –no more tree stump sermons in the dark of night, for us.

“Free to work. To be paid. To own property. To vote.” Solomon’s eyes panned the room. That got some people’s attention.

“But,” he continued, “What would their ancestors have thought of them? What would they say, or rather, what *did* they say upon seeing their children stolen from their land, shackled in ships, carried across the angry sea, only to live their lives out in the suffering of servitude? He paused. “And what will we think of our children in a hundred years from now?”

“Phyllis Wheatley once wrote, ‘Twas mercy that brought me from my savage land.’ Meaning, it was mercy that brought her to God. Honestly, I cannot say beyond my own doubt that our coming to know of God was worth our peoples’ enslavement. I can’t say that. I won’t say that.” Solomon shook his head and pointed to the sky. “But, I *know* it was His mercy that free us from that enslavement.”

Murmurs of “Amen” washed over the crowd.

“Perhaps,” Solomon said. “Perhaps the white man gave us the Lord, but the Lord did not give us to them.”

“Praise the lord,” cried a woman. Some men stood up, holding hats in their grip, heads bowed down.

“Yet, for two-hundred-and-fifty-years we suffered. And we may ask ourselves, ‘Where was God, then?’ It’s an honest question. A reasonable question. Where was he? But make no mistake. When we were taken from our land, plucked from our own Garden of Eden, we landed in the devil’s land. We may have come from a land without knowledge of God, but we landed in a place *only* the devil had known.”

The faithful moaned. Some raised their hands. Those who stood swayed back and forth. Eyes tight, as if it would be a sin to open them.

“White men used to say it was God’s will that we be whipped; and beaten; or lynched; but that it was certainly his will for us to serve them. After all, the bible condoned slavery, don’t you know? People said God cared not for the plight of the Negro. People might say he forsook us. But, *no!* I say the Devil’s a mighty foe. I say, it took those two-hundred years for God’s will to penetrate *this* savage land. I say it took those hundreds of years to free us, and that He was working his will all the time. I say the Devil’s power be mighty, but ain’t a match for the strength of God.”

“Amen,” the group cried.

“But I will say this,” Solomon added in a hushed tone. “The Devil still walks *this* land.”

“Yes, sir,” said one man.

“Yeah, the Adversary is nothing if not persistent. People still claim that the *white* Christian way is virtuous. That it is they who should rule, and we who serve. But I say, though they may have given us the Lord, the Lord has not given us to them. No. And we will not go back to them,” Solomon shouted. Then in a lower voice, “But we should pray for them, should we not? In Mathew 43-45, Jesus teaches his disciples to ‘love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.’ He’s speaking to us, here, and now. Or, are we not the disciples of God?”

“I know it feels as though these men who would see us in chains once more were born with a hate for us, more visceral than anything we might imagine. But I say, they’ve been taught it. Tempted by a power greater than them. Even Jesus was tempted by the

Devil. Surely, it's no surprise that these men are as well. Remember, all men hear the Adversary's whisper."

"That's right," admitted the crowd.

"I know I have. And these days, his whispers echo like shouts throughout this land, do they not? Though the roar be deafening, now; though, men be stirred and shaken by the devil's shrill call; though, many may do his bidding...this, I promise, you: no matter how long his yell echoes, it too will inevitably fade. Been said that history repeats. But I say it's one long shout, crying out against the Heavens. No voice screams forever."

"Amen," shouted the congregation.

Solomon nodded. "We may still hear the hollering," he said, pausing. "But, it's getting softer, don't you know?"

#

The pews had cleared before Josiah approached Solomon. They smiled at each other and shook hands. Josiah didn't even wait till the two had exchanged pleasantries. "Seems I'm goin' to be a daddy," he said.

Solomon was taken aback. "Shoot, I didn't even know you was married."

"Well, let's just say it was quickly arranged."

Solomon laughed and directed Josiah over to a seat by the window.

"Congratulations," he said. "Be sure to name it after me."

"My brother would love that," said Josiah.

Solomon smile faded.

“Sorry,” said Josiah. I’m sure you’ve seen him roamin’ around town with his roughnecks. You know, sometimes I wonder, how can two people from the same place be so different.”

“I’ve had similar thoughts myself.

“I try to think where Asa went wrong,” said Josiah. “Was it listening too much to our daddy? Then you’d have to look at the bigger picture. Was it being raised in the South? But I was raised in the South, too, and I’m not racist. And maybe none of this, would ever have happened had it not been for God kicking us out of the damn Garden of Eden.”

Solomon grinned. “Well, your first mistake’s blaming God. I can tell you that right now. Second, don’t think you aren’t racist.

Josiah’s head jerked back. “What the hell, Solomon?”

Solomon held up his hand. “Just listen,” he said, laughing. “I’m not faulting you, and I’m not saying you *are* racist. Only suggesting that you have been, and that you could be again. Here’s what I believe, okay? There aren’t any moments one can point at and say, ‘There. That’s when I became racist.’ Just like there isn’t a moment one can look at and say, ‘There. That’s when I stopped being racist.’ It don’t work like that. The potential for prejudice is always there. There are simply moments. Each one presenting a choice, and these decisions lead us to a moment of grace, or disgrace. But grace, in this sense, is not glory. You won’t be praised for it. Nor should you. You don’t get points for doing the right thing.” He shook his head. “Not in this life.”

Josiah nodded. “So, do you think the world would have turned out different if God had gone to the children of Eve and Adam and said, ‘Come back to the garden?’”

“I don’t know,” Solomon said. “That ain’t much of a question. But, I think what you’re getting at is, are the sins of the father borne by his sons. And all I can say is, no. We may live in their wake. But we’re not destined to commit their sins.”

“And what about our influence? Where will that lead our sons?”

Solomon looked away, through the window to the street where black children played. “To peril,” he said. “If we don’t take care.”

### Chapter Three

#### Election Day

**November 8<sup>th</sup>, 1898**

Twilight on the Cape Fear used to be peaceful. One could watch the last light of day flicker, from the orange glow dying like a fire on the horizon, to a violet curtain

sweeping across the clouds, high over the calm waters of the river. In those days, no one gave much thought to what they didn't have. Blacks and whites were separate; each race living in relative harmony with the other. Then the campaign season began. Democrats called whites to evaluate their hometowns, who had what. Wilmington had the largest population in North Carolina. More than half its citizens were black, and that's all Asa saw. Successful businesses run by black men; entire fire crews without a white face on them; black police officers, with the power to arrest white men. When Asa was a child, black men and women were newly freed, nowhere to go, no opportunities. Now, some even held office. And Asa remained on his family's farm, struggling to bring in each harvest on land that seemed to shrink each year. Now, branches were bare. Even the river was restless, its waters choppy and violent. And on Sixth Street, from where Asa Flynn stood, the sky seemed one color, growing darker, almost without limit.

Asa joined a group of Red Shirts marching on the fifth precinct's ballot office. A Red Shirt's duty didn't end with parading the streets. The day before the polls opened, Alfred Waddell issued his orders. The Rough Riders met in Thalian Hall's opera house to listen to the Democratic leader speak.

"You're armed," Waddell had said. "And you're prepared, and you *will* do your duty. Be ready at a moment's notice. Go to the polls tomorrow, and if you find the Negro out voting, tell him to leave the polls. And if he refuses? Kill him. Shoot him down in his tracks. We will win this election tomorrow, even if we have to do it with guns."

And here they were, carrying out their orders, securing the Democrat's victory.

Standing beneath a streetlamp, white policemen in full dress watched the men approach, tipping their hats as the Red Shirts marched by. That's wise, Asa thought, not sending any black officers. He looked to Dale, a fellow rough rider marching beside him. "You know what Yankees call this," Asa asked, gesturing to the lamps. "You know what they call a street lit by electric light?"

"What?" said Dale.

"The White Way," said Asa.

Dale laughed. "Must be a sign," he said, slowing his pace. Dozens of other men stopped outside the ballot office, waiting near the streetlights with burlap sacks.

"Hold this for me," Asa said, handing over his shotgun.

Dale holstered his pistol, looked at Asa with a raised eyebrow then grabbed the gun.

"If I bring that," said Asa. "I'm liable to use it. No need in bein' tempted."

"Sure thing," said Dale.

Asa joined a group of thirty men filing into the building. Seemed silly to call such a place an office. It had been converted from a small stable into living space, but rot ate away at the flooring, and mildewed wallpaper sagged on the walls. Only a table sat toward the back of the room, oil lamps and ballot boxes spread across it. Behind it, two black men and two white men sat, staring at the Red Shirts. And Asa stood at the front of the room, staring back.

One of the black men rose slow from a bench and spoke slower. "Gentlemen," he said. "My name is Avery. May I ask what business you have here?"



No one answered. Most of the Rough Riders wore sullen expressions. But one man's eyes were alive, his grin sadistic. His name was Bill; a man Asa had worked with that morning at the polls. Some people, Asa thought, are just lookin' for an excuse to bust a Nigger's head open.

Avery moved with caution around the table and stood in front of the mob. "I'm afraid I must insist on knowing your reasons for being here," he said.

The man was bold, Asa had to admit. A black man could be lynched for being so daring. Avery stood on his toes, peering over the crowd, and Asa turned his head to watch the lights from the streetlamps growing dim, one by one, till the road grew dark.

Bill stepped forward and looked at one of the white ballot counters. "Who you countin'?" he asked.

"The senate race," said the man. That was what the Rough Riders were there for. "W.J Davis and—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, now," said Bill. "I don't think you countin' those ballots right."

"Sir," Avery began, "I assure you no man here has—"

"I believe I was talkin' to the white man, Nigger," said Bill, eyeing Avery up and down. "If I address you, *boy*, you'll know it." Turning his attention back to the white ballot counter, Bill spoke slow and loud. "You ain't countin' them correctly, I said."

"They're riggin' this election!" cried a Rough Rider in the back. Asa had to laugh as he and the rest of the men began shouting, "Recount, recount." Bill spoke up again, "We can't allow no Nigger-lovin' Republican to sit here and miscount this vote."

Avery opened his lips to protest but before he could say a word, Bill had grabbed him by his shirt and head butted him. When Avery's body went slack from the blow, Bill threw him backwards, knocking lanterns off the table. Asa and another man rushed to extinguish the lights hanging on the wall. When the room became black as pitch, men pushed to the front of the crowd and stuffed fake ballots into the boxes. Shouts of "Get out of here" were contradicted by others yelling, "Where're you goin'?"

After the last Rough Rider backed away from the table, the lanterns were relit. The white ballot counter remained in his seat, staring at the boxes stuffed overfull with ballots. Two of the other counters had rushed out of the building during the commotion. But creeping around the corner of the storage room, was Avery. Blood ran from his nose and lips as he inched back to the table, resting his shaking hand on the side of the wall to steady himself.

Asa stepped forward, looked between the ballot counters, and said, "How about you boys tally them ballots now."

#

Asa came out of the building and began walking down the road. Rough Riders began pulling the burlap sacks off the lamps. Dale returned the shotgun to Asa and began walking beside him. "Some of the men been talking," Dale said. "Blacks been roaming about. Think there's goin' to be an attack?"

Asa shook his head. Light illuminated the street as lamps were being uncovered.

Asa smiled.

Dale looked confused for a moment. "Are they going to retaliate," he said.

"No," said Asa. "No. You can feel it just before things go to hell. Remember when Wilmington fell to the Union?"

Dale shook his head. "Too, young," he said.

"Right," said Asa. "Well, don't worry about it, yet."

The men parted ways. Asa retrieved his horse from the stable and set his nag to a trot. Passing under trees lining the street, Asa looked up and saw high amidst leafless branches, a scarecrow dangling from a rope.

Earlier that day, he had patrolled the streets of downtown Wilmington on horseback. A shotgun rested on his lap. Behind him, slung over the horse's back, was that scarecrow splayed out, limp as a corpse. Howling wind whipped through the streets, sending gusts of fallen leaves whirling about beneath the dull gray sky. Few whites stood in line at the polls. Dressed in worn jackets and trousers thinned to the threads, these were the poor whites of Wilmington. Having already voted that morning, factory owners allowed their men to take a break from work so they may cast their ballots. Black men, too, would be out at this time, looking to exercise their right.

Asa joined his patrol group stationed beneath a tree a hundred yards from a polling center. Leaves crunched under his feet as he tied his horse to a fence post nearby.

"That what I think it is?" Bill asked, pointing at the scarecrow.

"Sure is," said Asa, smiling.

While Asa took his leave to vote, Bill wrapped a noose around the scarecrow, threw the other end of the rope over a branch, and hoisted the figure high in the tree. It loomed like a shadow over the street. When Asa came back he couldn't help but watch the few people passing by stare at the body swaying in the breeze.

Then a black man with a light complexion approached Asa and his patrol. He wore the black robe of the clergy and a purple stole draped over his shoulders. "Solomon Lea," said Asa, addressing the preacher.

Solomon nodded, taking the cap off his head. "Mr. Flynn."

"What are you doin' out here?" said Asa.

"Careful," said Bill. "Them mixed boys get certain ideas. Think they're white."

"I'm a black man," said Solomon, his face stern.

"That's right," said Bill, laughing. "Finally, one who knows his place."

Asa shook his head. "But, you can't do much with a Nigger who *thinks* he's white. Where you goin'?" Asa asked the preacher.

Solomon glanced in the direction of the polls. He inhaled and tried to compose himself. His hands gripped his hat a little tighter. "I was just making my way to the polls."

"See there," said Bill. "That's what I mean. Thought you was smarter than that. But there you are getting' ideas about bein' someone you ain't."

"With all due respect," said Solomon. "I have the right to cast my vote. Same as any one of you."

“Same as me?” mocked Asa. “That’s where you’re wrong. Now, I know my brother’s fond of you. So, for his sake, go home.”

Solomon opened his mouth to protest but Asa cut him off. “Now,” said Asa, nodding in the direction of the tree. From a rope hung the scarecrow with a black sack draped over its head. A sign had been pinned across its chest reading, “This Nigger Voted.” Asa turned back to Solomon. “Now,” said Asa, shouldering his rifle for good measure.

“Would you shoot a man of God?” asked Solomon.

“An ape of God, more like.”

Solomon stepped back, chewed his lip, and walked away without a word.

“Smart boy,” said Bill. “May be hope for that Nigger, yet.”

But there ain’t, thought Asa on his ride home. There ain’t no hope for them. It would have been an hour ride home with the horse at a walking pace, but Asa chose to make haste. Mixing the pace between a canter and a trot got him back to the farm in half that time. Asa detached his saddle, fed his horse, and walked to the house. Inside, he found his wife, Ida rocking in her chair, and his daughter, Sarah, reading next to a fire blazing in the hearth.

“Thank the Lord you’re safe,” Ida said, getting up and hugging him. “Pastor Mason rode by spreading the word not to go to town. I was beginnin’ to think y’all was in trouble.”

“No,” said Asa, pouring a glass of whiskey. “Mason just needs something to preach about between now and Sunday. We have any honey? I feel a cold comin’ on.”

Ida nodded. She picked up Asa's drink and walked into the kitchen.

Sarah looked up from her book. "I doubt Mr. Mason would be spreadin' fear like that without reason."

"Of course there's reason," Asa said, moving by the fire. "But nothin's gonna happen tonight."

Ida came back with Asa's glass. They all sat, listening to the fire pop and crack. Sarah looked just like Josie used to, thought Asa. Same curly brown hair. Nose always in a book. When Sarah was little, she even had the same nasal voice that Josie did. Of course, Josie never had the chance to grow out of it.

"Hey," said Ida. "I thought I might have seen Josiah walking in with you tonight."

"Oh, he'll be fine for another night," said Asa.

"You can't let Josiah stay in that neighborhood," said Ida. "Not the way things are in this town. If things come to a head here, he'll be in the thick of it. Some black fella's going to end up shooting him for being the closest white man around."

"I'll get him out of there," Asa said. Then he turned toward his daughter. "Spell dumb," he said.

She laughed. "Why?"

"Just want to make sure you can actually read. And not just actin' like it."

"D-U-M-B. Dumb," she said smiling. "Just like you."

Asa smiled. Just like Josie, he thought.

## Chapter 4

## A Declaration of Independence

**November 9<sup>th</sup>, 1898**

Before the elections, Asa might grab a newspaper and take it home with him once a month. Not being able to read well himself, Ida would get the most use out of it and relay any interesting news she found to Asa. One day in August while Ida prepared breakfast, Asa looked over a day old copy of the *Wilmington Messenger*. The paper sat folded in a perfect square on the table. Little black characters lined the rows and columns but only a few made sense to Asa; color words mostly, black, white, red, certain names and cities. Ink had smeared from handling, causing smudges to infiltrate the clean white space between rows and columns.

“I’ll read it after breakfast,” said Ida, looking back.

Asa nodded his head. “No rush,” he said. “Just tell me about it after Sarah goes to sleep tonight.” As far as Asa was concerned, his daughter had no clue about his illiteracy. Asa aimed to keep her ignorant of that fact.

In a political cartoon at the crease of the page, a man lay face down beneath a big, black boot, polished to a shine. On the man's ass, raised in the air were written two words, both of which were of the few that Asa could make out on the entire page: White Man. On the pant leg above the boot, two more words were written that Asa understood: The Negro.

Asa flipped over the paper to see the rest of the drawing. There was a caption beneath the picture. Footsteps came down the stairs. Sarah came into the kitchen. Asa pretended to read an advertisement below the cartoon's bottom half.

"Good morning," Sarah said. "Anything interesting happening in the world?"

"Nothing," said Asa. "Just yesterday's news. Been said that history echoes itself." He motioned to the paper. "This is just its voice bouncing off the walls." Asa looked over the ad and made out the words red, shirts, white, black, and Negro. Asa looked back to his daughter. "Aren't you sitting down?"

"Breakfast is almost ready," added Ida.

"Not hungry," said Sarah. "Need to get to class earlier."

"Sarah," said Ida. "I'd prefer it if you ate."

Sarah sighed and took a biscuit off a plate on the counter. "I'll be back soon," he said, breezing out the door.

Asa's eyes ran over the paper once more. "Read this real quick," he said, pointing to the caption of the cartoon.

Ida walked over, wiping her hands on her apron. She held the paper up to the light of the window. "Says here, 'A serious question: How long will this last?'"



“And what about the advertisement beneath it? It’s talking about whites and Niggers, I know. But what specifically?”

Ida’s eyes raced from side to side scanning the lines of the paper. “It’s calling for good white Democrats who ‘want to take their beloved state back’ to join the Red Shirts.” She put the paper down and returned to counter. “Thought they only had those groups in South Carolina.”

“Yeah,” said Asa. “Well they seemed to fix their state up right. Maybe they can do the same up here.”

“Thinking about joining?” asked Ida, bringing two plates over to the table.

“Maybe,” said Asa digging his fork into his eggs. “I’m good and white, ain’t I?”

“You’re white alright.”

The next week Asa went to town and signed up with the Red Shirts. He purchased a subscription to *The Messenger* for October and November, thinking he couldn’t afford to miss any updates or announcements. Once a week, a man would ride out on his horse with papers filling his saddlebags, arriving around nine at the earliest. Today the same man arrived at eight. Asa took the paper straight to Ida. She scanned the paper, looking for anything that might be important. “It says here,” Ida began, “that every ‘Good White Citizen’ ought to show up to the Courthouse at eleven. Doesn’t say why, though.”

Asa nodded.

The bronze bell began to chime from the courthouse steeple towering over the city. A roman numeral clock face above the bell read eleven. Constructed just six years ago, its fresh brick and clean stone trim looked aged and dull beneath the overcast sky. On a pole beneath the Union flag, a confederate banner waved, rippling back and forth in the chilly breeze. Asa had tied up his horse in the stable a block away, and now joined the crowd milling about in front of the building. Black carriages had been parked across the street and lined the road for several blocks. Hundreds of white folks stood crammed beneath the arch of the entrance waiting to get inside. Many waited in the street for the assembly to begin. Most in the horde wore thick winter jackets, though the first frost had occurred just a week before.

Asa approached a man whose red shirt stuck out beneath an overcoat. “Anybody know what this is about, yet?” asked Asa.

The Red Shirt shook his head. “Word is Waddell might be speaking. Don’t know if it’s about the elections last night or not.”

“A victory speech?” asked Asa. That didn’t seem right. Democrats may have won the state, but none of the tension had dissipated. Things didn’t feel finished. Asa looked back to the Red Shirt. “No, this is something bigger. Has to be.”

The wooden courthouse doors opened and the crowd began funneling in. Rough Riders pushed their way to the front of the mob and into the main room. Asa bunched in with the crowd on the marble floored foyer, and moved to the doors of the main room. Alfred Waddell stood up and walked to the front of the room. Applause erupted in the courthouse. Many Red Shirts began shouting for the man. He had a long brown beard

mixed with grey and wore a chestnut suit with a tweed overcoat. When the cheers died down he cleared his throat and began.

“Now,” Waddell began. “I had been kept in the dark just like many of you as to the reason for this meeting. After our success at the polls last night, I’m sure we would all enjoy a most welcomed and deserved rest. The white citizens of our wonderful town have worked tirelessly, with the upmost diligence and determination in our efforts to win back our cherished state. And Gentleman, we have been successful.

“Yes, we’ve achieved much, make no mistake about it. We’ve won a major battle, in a worthwhile endeavor, without spilling blood, I might add. Wars have been fought and lost without as much progress that we’ve made in the course of a single night. But one battle, does not make the war.

“Our brothers in Raleigh and in Charlotte have been freed from this oppression, but our woes continue. Our fight is not over. Our victory is not achieved until the yoke of the oppressor has been thrown off where it affects us most. In our home.

“How many here fought in the war?”

Asa looked around and saw very few hands raised.

“How many lost loved ones in the war? Brothers, Fathers, Sons?”

More than half the crowd raised an arm.

“And afterwards, when Union troops occupied the South, how many suffered while being watched like common criminals? How many lost jobs? How many lost land under our Carpet Bagger government?”

Everybody in the main room and foyer had a hand raised or shouted Asa did both.

“Yeah, and who sat in congress, and let it happen?”

“Republicans,” a few men replied.

“Who set up new governments comprised of spineless, corrupt carpet baggers?”

“Republicans,” shouted half the room.

“And who remains in office just down the street, heading our city’s government?”

“Republicans,” yelled the entire crowd in the courthouse.

“That’s right. But that’s not all they did was it? No. They treated us as low as Niggers, lower, in fact. They gave the Niggers power over the white man. First, the vote. Then, office. Tell me, who relies on the vote of the black man?”

“Republicans,” the room repeated as if a mantra.

“And who bends to the will of the black man?”

“Republicans,” the chant continued.

“And now who sits in our government alongside the black man?”

“Republicans!”

“And the black man has run wild hasn’t he? Taking over businesses that should by rights be ours. Joining the police force, equipped with the power to arrest us. And look what they have done time and time again to our women.”

Asa’s voice was drowned out as roars ripped across the room.

“Yes, let’s not forget what opened our eyes to the travesty of our situation. They savagely abuse white women and then blame us for it. That’s what that Nigger Manly wrote, is it not? How it’s the failure of white men, the failure of farmers to not protect our women, instead of it being the fault of the degenerate, savage, Negro? And this man not

only still walks the streets of our city, but continues to write. If it weren't for the domination of the Negro, never could a man get away with such sickening claims. If it weren't for the Republican who gave him power, if it weren't for the Republican, controlled by black hands like puppets by their masters, never could a Nigger say such vile, vicious lies with impunity.

“Gentlemen, we have been living under the oppression and domination of the Negro for far too long. Will we continue to suffer this tyranny?”

“No!”

“Yesterday, we took back our State. Today, we take back our liberty. Let us declare our freedom. Let us declare our sovereignty. Gentleman, allow me to present to you the Declaration of White Independence.”

A final wave of cheers went around the courtroom. Waddell held his hands high to silence the crowd and began reading the amendments aloud:

“Believing that the Constitution of the United States contemplated a government to be carried on by an enlightened people; Believing that its framers did not anticipate the enfranchisement of an ignorant population of African origin, and believing that those men of the State of North Carolina, who joined in forming the Union, did not contemplate for their descendants' subjection to an inferior race: — We, the undersigned citizens of the City of Wilmington and County of New Hanover, do hereby declare that we will no longer be ruled, and will never again be ruled by men of African origin. This condition we have in part endured because we felt that the consequences of the War of Secession were such as to deprive us of the fair consideration of many of our

countrymen. We believe that, after more than thirty years, this is no longer the case. The stand we now pledge ourselves to is forced upon us suddenly by a crisis and our eyes are open to the fact that we must act now or leave our descendants to a fate too gloomy to submit. We therefore, believing that we represent unequivocally the sentiment of the White People of the County and City, hereby for ourselves, and as representing them, proclaim:

‘That the time has passed for the intelligent citizens of the community owning 90% of the property and paying taxes in like proportions, to be ruled by negroes.

‘That we will not tolerate the action of unscrupulous white men in affiliating with the negroes so that means of their votes they can dominate the intelligent and thrifty element in the community, thus causing business to stagnate and progress to be out of the question.

‘That the negro has demonstrated by antagonizing our interest in every way, and especially by his ballot, that he is incapable of realizing that his interests are and should be identical with those of the community.

‘That the progressive element in any community is the white population and that the giving of nearly all the employment to negro laborers has been against the best interests of this County and City and is a sufficient reason why the City of Wilmington, with its natural advantages has not become a city of at least fifty thousand inhabitants.

‘That we propose in future to give to white men a large part of the employment heretofore given to negroes because we realize that white families cannot thrive here

unless there are more opportunities for the employment of the different members of said families.

‘That the white men expect to live in this community peaceably; to have and provide absolute protection for their families, who shall be safe from insult or injury from all persons, whomsoever. We are prepared to treat the negroes with justice and consideration in all matters which do not involve sacrifices of the interest of the intelligent and progressive portion of the community. But are equally prepared now and immediately to enforce what we know to be our rights.

‘That we have been, in our desire for harmony and peace, blinded both to our best interests and our rights. A climax was reached when the negro paper of this city published an article so vile and slanderous that it would in most communities have resulted in the lynching of the editor. We deprecate lynching and yet there is no punishment, provided by the courts, adequate for this offense. We therefore owe it to the people of this community and of this city, as a protection against such license in the future, that the paper known as the “Record” cease to be published and that its editor be banished from this community.

‘We demand that he leave this City forever within twenty-four hours after the issuance of this proclamation. Second, that the printing press from which the “Record” has been issued be packed and shipped from the City without delay, that we be notified within twelve hours of the acceptance or rejection of this demand. If the demand is agreed to, within twelve hours we counsel forbearance on the part of all white men. If the

demand is refused or if no answer within the time mentioned, then the editor, Manly, will be expelled by force.’

“Gentlemen,” Waddell said. “I give you the Declaration of White Independence.”

Every man sitting shot up. Those who whistled were drowned out by the shouts, which were muffled by the thunderous applause echoing throughout the room. In the foyer where Asa stood, people were so smashed together that those who could raise their arms to clap, did so right into the ears of the men in front of them. Asa smacked his hands together till they were numb and roared till his throat was hoarse. Even after he stopped from his arms growing tired, the cheers continued for minutes.

When the crowd finally quieted down, S. H. Fishblate, the former mayor of Wilmington made his way to the aisle. “Excuse me,” he said. “Forgive me for saying so, but I don’t believe this doctrine goes quite far enough.”

Waddell replied. “What would you add to satisfy your grievance, Mr. Fishblate?”

“In your speech, you pointed to all the damage Republicans have caused. That they’re to blame for the problem of the Negro. Seems to me, that this declaration you read only wraps a wound that requires surgery, so to speak. We have a liberal sitting in the mayor’s office and heading the police force, and a board of Alderman filled with Niggers. What good does this document serve if we remain underfoot of an inept, corrupt regime right here in our great city of Wilmington? And how can we claim to purge ourselves from the abuse of the Negro if he remains in office alongside the Republicans who put him there?”



Another roar rang throughout the courthouse. People shouted their support at Fishblate. George Roundtree, a prominent Democrat, stood up and yelled over the crowd. "I suggest a council be formed to review the proposition."

Waddell nodded assent. It was soon announced that five men would retire to the court chambers and review the declaration and proposed amendment. Roundtree and Fishblate were among the five men who joined the council. They left the main room. After a few minutes passed, people began calling for a speech to be made. Waddell answered.

"We have come far," he began. "You great men of Wilmington have accomplished so much in so little of time. We're aware how we have ignored a great problem in this city. We have not avenged *The Record's* vile slander. We simply have not had the time. The cause of our great campaign has overshadowed this serious problem. But Gentlemen, I must confess, these resolutions *will* satisfy our desire for revenge. I must advocate peace for the time being."

Asa felt taken aback by Waddell's call for peace. He remembered how he felt the day Ida read to him Manly's article.

Here stood Waddell, the man who rallied white man to the cause, arguing against the same measures that convinced most men to join.

"No," shouted one man.

"Lynch the Nigger," yelled another.

"Men," said Waddell. "It is unnecessary to engage in violence against Manly. The issue will be dealt with through the resolutions we adopted."

A Red Shirt near Asa cupped his hands in front of his mouth and shouted, “Burn *The Record* down.”

Another called out, “Fumigate the city with *The Record*. Burn it to ashes.”

Asa watched Waddell step back, a frown drawn across his face. Asa sensed Waddell’s grasp on this crowd slipping. If he’s not careful, Asa thought, he’s going to start a war in our city.

The door behind Waddell opened and the council of five walked in. One of the members handed Waddell a sheet of paper, and Waddell moved forward and held his hands high once more, calling for silence. When order had been established, he began.

“It is the conclusion of the council,” Waddell said, “that Mr. Fishblate’s suggestion be approved. They have worded it thus, ‘It is the sense of this meeting that Mayor S. P. Wright and Chief of Police Melton, having demonstrated their utter incapacity to give the city a decent government and keep order therein, their continuance in office being a constant menace to the peace and welfare of this community, they ought forthwith to resign.’”

Roundtree spoke up declaring that a committee of twenty-five was to be created, tasked with carrying out the amendments. Waddell would be appointed as the head of the twenty-five. They made a call for all who desired to do so, to file up and sign the Declaration of White Independence. Asa began backing out of the foyer as hordes of men lined up down the aisle to attach their name to a piece of history.

Chapter 5  
Hell Jolted Loose

**November 10<sup>th</sup> 1898**

Three thick stripes of white marble slabs ran down the side of the armory, cutting the red brick into sections. The top, bottom, and façade of the building was encased in marble. On top of the two-story building, men of the Naval Reserves kept watch over the city. From the second floor veranda, Alfred Waddell loomed over the massive mob gathered in front of the armory. Asa stood in the middle of the street and could barely hear Waddell as he shouted to the crowd. “Our little committee tasked the Coloreds with getting Manly out of this town by seven-thirty this morning. We have *not* received any response.”

The crowd roared for blood. Yells of, “Burn *The Record*,” and “Lynch the Nigger,” erupted. Fists, hats, and guns were raised into the air. Chants began to call for someone to lead the group in the eviction of Manly and the destruction of his paper. That man should have been Roger Moore, leader of the Red Shirts. Moore had taken up his post at the jail house, with intention of being available to aid in the wreck of *The Record*. Instead, Waddell stood tall in front of the men, and began shouting orders for the crowd to gather.

Members of the Wilmington Light Infantry and Naval Reserves were also gathered at the armory, but were forced to stay out of line. Since the Infantry were members of the Armed forces, white leaders made sure that they didn’t participate in the destruction of *The Record*, or have anything do with the overthrow of the government. Unless an event necessitated their move to action, the Infantry and Reserves would remain at the armory. However, they were well prepared. Several horses were tied up to

as many wagons with rapid fire machine guns mounted in them. One or two carts remained empty for quick troop transport. Another, pulled by two horses, carried a Colt rapid fire gun, purchased by the wealthier white business men, in case of danger.

Waddell had been a military man, and he assembled the crowd in like-wise fashion. Columns of four formed with the Committee of Twenty-five, and the Red Shirts up front, with Waddell himself leading the pack. Asa positioned himself on the outside, where the Rough Riders and the unaffiliated men mixed together. The mob's lines stretched two city blocks. Certain groups of the Red Shirts had specific directions from Waddell to patrol ahead and guard the streets south of their target. After all, the crowd's destination was located in the black section of town, hostile territory. Months before, when Alexander Manly's article first came out, black men protected the press' building night after night after Whites first made threats on Manly's life. Despite near a thousand men descending on *The Record*, the patrols meant to ensure no resistance would be met.

A rippling effect set into motion the forward march of the slow procession. Footsteps rung out like axes incessantly beating trees in unison. Echoing between the buildings, like gunfire from ships carrying across the water. It was like listening to the Union's descent on Wilmington from the Cape Fear all over again, except this time the South would prevail.

The armed mob turned off Market and onto Seventh street, home to more well-off citizens. Wealthy whites sat on their porches or stood on the sidewalk. Although one little girl wiggled through the bystanders on the side of the road, seeming to join the procession, most of the Adults appeared grim. Some crossed their arms. Others hung their

heads low. As if these same people didn't cheer on the Red Shirt parades, applaud Waddell's speeches, or scream for a lynching when Manly's article came out. Now they stared at the machine set in motion by their complicity, looking almost ashamed. Others seemed satisfied with seeing men marching down the street.

After Orange street, the neighborhood's houses went from fresh painted brick to chipped wood siding. White faces on the porch changed to black ones looking through windows panes. *The Record's* offices were located in Love and Charity Hall. The center of the black part of town. The two-story building stood across from St. Luke's, a brick chapel with a steeple rising high above the neighborhood.

The mob stopped just outside *The Record's* offices. Asa stood close enough to watch Alfred Waddell continue marching up to Love and Charity Hall, and with the butt of his Winchester rifle, knock on the door twice. Waddell looked back and motioned some Red Shirts over.

Bill gestured to Asa. Asa joined the group in front of the building. He looked down the street at the columns of men lining the blocks. Their military discipline dissipated when Bill began thrusting against the door. Cheers erupted. Lines broke as men pushed their way toward the building. Asa rushed through the door. Men littered the floor with journals, stationary, pen holders, and inkwells that had once rested upon desks, now swiped clean. Chairs smashed against walls and slammed on the floor till its legs broke off. Desks were overturned. Drawers ransacked. Files flung across the room. Paper fell like leaves to the floor. Asa helped men throw broken pieces of furniture out into the road to the delight of the mob waiting outside, unable to join in the destruction. Beaver

hats that had been left on clothing racks, as well as the racks themselves were tossed onto Seventh street. Wooden signs with the words “*The Record Publishing Co.*,” were piled onto the rubbish. Pictures and drawings of Manly himself were smashed, ripped, and decorated the debris like tinsel. Men broke windows with the butts of their guns. Asa ventured back into the building to investigate upstairs but someone began yelling, “Fire, fire.” As men filed out, shouts of, “Let it burn,” came from the streets. Smoke poured out of the broken windows on the top floor, and flames soon followed.

Asa looked over to Bill, who stood beside him and asked, “How did it start?”

“Someone knocked over a few lamps,” said Bill. “We found a few cans of kerosene in the closet, to help spread it around a little bit.” He grinned, watching the flames funnel out of the windows, whipping at the sides of the building. Cinders flew out as the fire escalated, landing on roofs of nearby homes. A few members of the armed men jumped to action, running toward the houses. They climbed out onto the roofs, passed buckets of water, and smothered any spot that began to burn, even dousing rooflines that had not yet any cinders on them, for protection.

Someone had run down to the corner of the street and sounded the alarm from the firebox. Only minutes passed before the all-black fire crew arrived. They were prevented from attending to the blaze until the roof of *The Record* caved in. “Can’t save it now, Nigger,” men shouted at the firefighters. “Better off lettin’ it burn.” Asa watched as the crew tried to extinguish the flames as if hope remained for saving the building. Members of the fire brigade flinched every time a gun went off in celebration, yet their work seemed undaunted as they continued wrestling the flames.

“Fittin’ isn’t it?” said Asa.

“How do you mean?” asked Bill.

“That Nigger Manly played with fire. Now his paper’s burnin’.”

One look down the street saw little black children running from their schools nearby to home. Once the flames died down a bit, Waddell led many in the mob back to the armory. Asa remained watching the fire till only smoke remained. A photographer arrived on the scene with his camera equipped. Men who stayed behind posed in front of the destroyed building with their rifles by their hip, or their pistol in hand. Some men smiled, prideful of their achievement. Others appeared more solemn, as if their duty had been done, nothing more. Asa smiled, certain that this was justice.

Bill called for Asa to follow him and some other men. They walked a block down Church street, onto Sixth where a streetcar waited. Bill turned to Asa and said, “Word is, things are gettin’ hostile over on Fourth and Harnett.”

“No violence, yet?” asked Asa.

“Not sure,” said Bill. “A group of our men are already down there, though.”

The men boarded the streetcar and took off down Castle street, turning onto Second. By the time they came to a stop on Harnett, Bill and another man were passing a flask back and forth.

Asa’s group hustled down the sidewalk, single file, keeping low. Blocks ahead, gunfire erupted. Asa saw black figures running out of the street. Smoke from pistol fire hung in the air. Bodies stumbled, limped away, or doubled over and fell. “He’s shot,” someone cried out. “They shot him.” Another volley of shots rang out. Several bodies



collapsed in the street. People began fleeing in Asa's direction down Harnett street. Their black faces were distinct only a moment before turning away onto Third street.

Bill turned. Fired. Asa yanked his barrel around, shooting. One body lay stiff in the street. The Red Shirts ran forward. Another crack echoed in the streets. Something whirled by like the whistle of a train derailing. Bill turned and fired another shot in the direction it came from, but whoever had been had vanished.

"Somebody go for a doctor," shouted a man further up the street.

Asa's group quickly marched on. Six black bodies lay stretched out, motionless in the street. Blood seeped out onto the streets. Only one had a gun beside him. A small pistol. Ahead, a white man writhed on the ground, guarded by a few armed men, tended to by others.

"They shot him," a man said pressing hard on a stomach wound. "Some Nigger shot Mayo."

"He the only man down?" asked Asa.

"Two others wounded," said a Red Shirt pointing his gun down the street.

"They're held up in the drugstore. Think we should do the same."

"Yeah, let's get him inside," said the makeshift medic. "Mayo?" he said to the victim. "Keep the pressure here, you understand? Keep it tight."

Asa and Bill handed off their rifles to other men, bent down and grabbed Mayo by the legs and arms. Blood dripped from the wound, falling to the ground, leaving a trail behind the group as they move across the street and into the drugstore. A man in casual dress opened the door for them. He had a stain seeping through a handkerchief wrapped

around his arm. "Put him on the counter," he said. "We already sent for Dr. Schonwald." He introduced himself briefly as Chadwick, then used his good arm to apply pressure to Mayo's wound.

Outside a riot alarm wailed in the distance. That was the cue for the Wilmington Light Infantry to join the fight, at last. "That'll put an end to this madness," said Asa.

"Not good enough," said Bill. "We need to find the Nigger who shot Mayo and put him down."

"Or hang him up," suggested another Red Shirt.

"Hell," said Asa. "He's probably lying dead in the street over there."

"No," said Chadwick. "I saw him running off down toward Third street.

"Had to be the Nigger that shot at us," said Bill. "I guarantee it was him."

"I'd wager he ain't too far gone," said Asa.

"Go on and get 'em," said Chadwick. "We'll take care of Mayo."

Asa grabbed his rifle from his fellow Red Shirt, and followed a group leaving the injured men in the drugstore behind. Asa turned to a one of the Red Shirts. "Go gather some men," Asa said. "Tell them to gather here. We'll send for you when the time comes."

"And bring supplies for a god damn fire," Bill added. The Red Shirt skirted off down the street, sprinting toward the armory. He'd tell every White man and Red Shirt patrol he saw where to go and why. The remaining men retraced their steps to Third street. The first person they came across was a black woman standing in the threshold of

a doorway, on a porch. In seconds, she had six guns pointed in her face. The men called for to come into the street. She did so, hesitantly.

“We don’t want to hurt you,” said Asa.

“How long you been standing there?” asked Bill.

“Not long,” she said, in a Caribbean accent. “When the shooting started, I stayed inside and watched through a window. Thought the shooting might be done.”

Bill smiled and shook his head. “We’re looking for a Nigger that ran this way.”

“I’ve not seen him,” said the woman.

“If you been watchin’ the street like you say, you have.”

“I haven’t,” she repeated.

“Don’t be lying to us,” said Bill, pointing the barrel of his gun in her face.

The woman looked at the rifle like a snake rising from its coil. “I’m not lying,” she said.

Bill put the butt of his gun in her stomach. The woman fell to her knees, gasping for breath. She clutched at the pavement, hands grasping dead leaves and dirt resting on the surface of the road. Bill kneeled down to her. “A woman who lies,” he said. “You see, nothing can be done with a girl like that. Save for one thing.”

The woman still had her head to the ground. Asa stepped forward and rested his hand on Bill’s shoulder. Bill waved a hand as if to say he wasn’t serious.

Asa called to the woman, “Just tell him who came running down the street a few minutes ago. Just a name, and we’ll leave.”

Tears raced down the woman's face. She began to sob when she regained her breath. Bill stood up and pressed the butt of his gun to the woman's cheek, nudging her head in the direction of *The Record*. "You see the smoke in the distance?"

She nodded.

"I started that," Bill said. "If you don't tell me where this Nigger went. I'm gonna start another fire with you and your kin inside. You understand?" Bill stepped on her hand that still rested on the ground and grabbed her by the throat.

"Wright," murmured the woman. Bill stepped off her hand, released his chokehold. She coughed and rubbed her hand. "Wright had a pistol in his hand."

"And where does this boy live?" Bill asked the woman. Weeping, she pointed to a house down the street. Bill stood up, began walking.

"Stay inside," Asa said to the woman. "Don't open the door again." Turning to another Red Shirt in the patrol, Asa said, "Go grab the men." Asa followed Bill down the street where the two of them posted up on the side walk across from a small, one story house with wood siding. The few other Red Shirts that remained in their company milled about in the street. Asa looked to Bill. "What are you going to do?" he asked. "Lynch him? Shoot him? What?"

"We, Asa. What are *we* going to do."

"Well, that's what I mean," said Asa.

"No it isn't," said Bill shaking his head, looking straight away.

