

Chapter One

Anton McAllister

DAMN IT, MAN . . . ya beat me again.” McAllister threw down his cards with venom while the Indian seated opposite cackled in glee at the Scotsman’s misfortune. It was the third hand in a row, and Jacob was wild-eyed, in part due to blathering intoxication.

In general, things came easily to Jacob McAllister. He enjoyed good looks and physical stature beyond most men, and women adored him—tall, handsome, a superb athlete—his failing centered on alcohol, a lazy disposition, and a total lack of moral character.

They’d been at the cards for seven hours, drinking cheap whiskey over the game that turned heavily in favor of the Indian, and Jacob’s bile overflowed. As his left hand slammed the remainder of his stake on the table, his right reached to his side, and with purpose rose to bury the blade of his knife well into the planks serving as their gaming table. “One more hand, ya naked savage, and I slit yer blasted throat ear-t-ear.”

The Indian, eyes placid under the influence of substantial amounts of alcohol, misunderstood the action. Instead of seeing it as a threat, he viewed it as a bet. Jacob’s knife was of unusual beauty, with a keen edge that never dulled and was widely admired, and the Indian greatly desired to have it as his own. Thinking it of extreme value, he instructed his Algonquin mates, themselves weak of leg from too much drink, to retire to his lodge and fetch his most valuable possession. They soon returned, since his lodge was the closest to the emporium in which they sat, leading his reluctant daughter.

Through dull eyes, foggy mind, and heightened expectations, Jacob viewed the Indian’s wager with carelessness and accepted the ante.

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Cards were dealt and played, and Jacob stumbled from the saloon with his prize in tow while the poor Indian sat in incredulous dismay, watching his daughter dutifully exiting with the Scotsman.

Upon awakening the following afternoon, Jacob stared through painful eyes at his prize, and determining the folly of his actions, reasoned he would return her and demand restitution.

The makeshift camp in which the saloon was located was a conglomeration of diversity. This was a gathering place for immigrants with a desire for total independence and prosperity unavailable to them in their homelands. Among them were many with shady pasts, escaping to avoid prosecution for misdeeds back home. Most were French, some English, Scots, Swedes, and Irish—all there to try their hand at the fur trade and lusting for the fast track to wealth. Spread among the tents and half-built structures were pockets of Algonquin Indians seeking employment as guides to rich trapping areas known only to them.

With the woman in tow, McAllister stalked the camp looking for the man who had lost her. He found him on the backside of a wooden shed, sound asleep, leaning against the rough-cut planks that formed the shed wall. With careless ease, he placed his boot on the man's shoulder and pushed him over.

“What the hell ya mean, dumpin’ the squaw on me?” Jacob said, yanking the woman by the wrist and propelling her toward the Indian who was now awake and trying to stand. She narrowly missed plowing into him before slamming into the shed wall.

The unfortunate Indian, not understanding a word, struggled to comprehend what was happening. His head hurt, his mouth was dry, and he had to throw up, and in front of him stood a very large, red-faced white man yelling and gesturing wildly while another person lay on the ground to his left.

Using the wall for support, he straightened and did his best to stop the world from spinning. He stood in an unsteady fashion for a short time before the spinning began anew, causing him to lose his balance and stagger in the direction of the invectives being hurtled his way. With arms outstretched, he reached for the white man to avoid falling on his face.

Jacob viewed the move as a threat. Stepping to one side, he drew his knife, and as the Indian fell forward, he plunged it into his chest.

Realizing the impact of his action, McAllister immediately lit out for the wild land to the south, figuring to make the White Mountains, where he could hook up with one of the logging outfits known to operate in the area.

On his third night out, the weather turned, and high winds drove frozen pellets of snow into the open sleeves and collar of his tattered Mackinaw. With fingers unable to grasp and feet numb from the cold, McAllister squatted beneath a large cedar and hugged its trunk, reconciled to his death.

The ethereal figure drifted among the blowing snow, closing the distance between them as Jacob struggled to fully open frozen eyelids. Then he had the sensation of floating toward the unnoticed opening in the rock wall . . . before he lost consciousness.

* * *

SHE WAS TALLER THAN MOST, thin and angular of body with a wide nose centered on a broad, impassive face that would have been more at home on a stodgy Indian woman. Her Algonquin name was Kanti—Woman Who Sings—and she had been on Jacob's tail the past three days, fearful of approaching him, yet unable to return to her people. The dishonor of her rejection by the white man ensured her outcast status and a life forever on the fringe of their encampment in virtual servitude. Her best chance was acceptance by the cruel Scotsman who had won her on a bet, so she dogged him, moving with the ease of a deer, following the unmistakable trail left by the man ahead of her.

The signs of a pending storm were evident, and seeing no attempt by the Scotsman to find shelter, she broke away, making a bee-line for a promontory ahead, hoping to find a place to ride it out. As if by providence, she happened upon a substantial cave. Blackened rock around the entrance told her it had been used before, and inside was a heap of dead wood, unburned, awaiting the flame. There she

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huddled by the warmth of the fire for several hours while the wind packed the hard driven snow into exposed crevasses and made huge drifts on the leeward side of trees and boulders. She thought about the man outside, fearsome in countenance yet childlike in his inability to see the signs. She knew she must try to save him.

Leaving the warmth of the cave, the fierce wind slamming ice pellets against her skin, she found it necessary to hold her hand in front of her face, peering between slightly parted fingers to protect her eyes. Struggling forward through the blinding snow she was unable to see more than a few feet through the driven whiteness. The Great Spirit interceded, and a momentary calm fell about her, lifting the veil of white and exposing the figure hunkered in the stand of cedars twenty feet to her left. Approaching without hesitation, she clamped on to the neck of his Mackinaw and dragged him toward the shelter of the cave.

* * *

Whitehall, King George County, Virginia 1804

TEN-YEAR-OLD LAWRENCE TALIAFERRO inched along the branch extending nearly the width of the river. Twenty feet below, the water flowed deep and fast through the narrow opening cut between ten-foot vertical walls. He knew from experience if he dropped as near to the far side as possible, the current would deposit him safely into the small eddy pool created downstream. If he bailed too early and fell short, he would have to swim for his life to reach the opposite shore before entering the whitewater stretch beyond.

There were four of them, and they had been playing together most of the day. The new kid, Thomas Meredith, joined Lawrence, his best friend Timothy Overton, and young Davy Burroughs. Thomas had been nothing but trouble from the outset. This was the first time they let him hang with them, and as far as Lawrence was concerned, it would be the last.

Thomas, at thirteen, was the kind of kid who was difficult to like, full of brag and always with a quick answer. To top it off he seemed intent on throwing his weight around, challenging the other three every step of the way. He was especially focused on outdoing Larry Taliaferro, and an earlier provocation is what drove the ten-year-old to his current predicament twenty feet in the air.

It started with a dare from Thomas. "You ain't got the guts to do it."

"Shoot, I done a lot more than that before." Larry's three older brothers cut him little slack, so he was nonchalant and unfazed by the challenge, a fact that irritated Thomas to no end.

"Thomas . . . you have to know . . . Larry's the best swimmer I ever saw, and he ain't afraid of nothing." Timothy Overton knew from experience that Lawrence Taliaferro had never backed away from a reasonable challenge.

"I'll tell you what," Thomas, wanting to see Larry fail, sweetened the pot, "you do it, and I'll do it too."

That's all it took. The boys watched from safety on the bank as Lawrence worked his way along the branch.

"Don't you be slipping and falling, Lawrence. That water looks pretty bad to me." Thomas posed, confident that the younger boy would chicken out.

"Don't you worry about me, Thomas. You can start climbing any time now because I'm about ready to fly."

Thomas began to feel something he'd never before encountered. Always the instigator, seldom called on his cavalier dares, he was now expected to follow up for the first time in his life. A primal fear moved through his entire body one section at a time. It started in the pit of his stomach, moving down his legs. Every pore in his body constricted as his nerve endings tingled and shuddered with his building doubt. A chill spread upward, raising the hair on the back of his neck. As the fear rose, he could carry the bluff no further.

He turned to Timothy. "I ain't going up there. You think I'm as stupid as him?"

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“Thomas . . . you have to go. You dared him to do it. Now you have to go.” Timothy was appalled.

“Ain’t no way I’m going up there. I ain’t scared. I can’t help it if he’s stupid enough to do it. He ain’t brave . . . he’s stupid.”

“Aw, Thomas. He’s gonna want someone to do it.”

“Then you go ahead and be as stupid as he is. Shit . . . you’re probably scared to try it.”

“Bullcrap. So, what if I am afraid? The only reason Larry did it was ’cause you said you’d do it too. Now you have to follow through and do it.”

“You go right ahead, big shot. Show me how it’s done. I ain’t going.”

Larry was as far out on the branch as he dared go. His concentration focused on the black water rushing through the cut gorge below. He shifted his weight, pulled his left leg upward and over the branch positioning for the jump, and in one smooth movement launched his body toward the exact spot he knew he must land. He entered the water feet first and began to back paddle with his arms the moment his head went under, having the effect of bobbing him to the surface. The current carried him forward, spinning his body, disorienting him, until he felt the bottom rise beneath. Crawling ashore, he flopped on his back gasping for air. As he had planned, his jump carried him into the eddy.

He lay on the sand bank, eyes closed, chest heaving, gasping for air. With his head clearing and his breathing under control, he opened his eyes, looked up to the extended branch, and was gripped with a sudden pang of apprehension.

A small figure worked his way along the branch. Timothy Overton was inching his way out over the river.

“Timmy . . . get off that tree! Go back! It’s too fast! I almost drowned . . . go back!”

Timothy, hearing Larry’s scream, stopped inching forward and locked his heels around the branch. Filled with trepidation after hearing the warning, he found himself unable to move as his body tensed.

From below Lawrence watched in horror as his friend slowly tipped to his right. Reaching forward to lock his arms around the

branch, Timmy slipped and plummeted into the fastest part of the roiling water.

* * *

THE INVESTIGATION FOLLOWING the incident was a private, messy affair. The local constable assembled the boys in the Taliaferro sitting room. Timothy's parents were there—Julie Overton, his mother, sitting to the left of Jeremiah, his father. Timmy was their only child and Julie was wracked with sadness, shoulders hunched, white lace handkerchief pressed to her face.

Opposite the Overtons were Mr. and Mrs. Taliaferro, flanking their youngest son, who stared at the floor, unable to meet the gaze of those sitting opposite.

To the Overton's right sat Thomas Meredith and his father, Thomas, Sr., both with determined, unyielding looks. They had heard gossip about the tragedy and intended to defend the Meredith honor. Mrs. Meredith had stayed home with a debilitating headache, which had plagued her since the accident.

Lastly, sitting directly behind Thomas, were Clyde and Matilda Burroughs and their son Davy. A full year younger than Lawrence, Davy was a mess. With red eyes, a testament to bouts of unrelenting crying, he fought to maintain a fragile control over his emotions.

"All right . . . boys, we just need to learn what happened out there. We aren't here to place blame. This isn't an official proceeding, however, we are going to learn exactly what happened so Mr. and Mrs. Overton can start their recovery." The constable's delivery was directed to the boys, heartfelt, almost gentle, and intended to soften the proceedings for the sake of all present.

"Let's start with Lawrence."

His head was down. He knew what was coming. He'd faced his parents with answers that were painful memories. He looked up and said in a voice that was steady and so soft the constable had to lean in to hear him, "I guess it was my idea. We were playing and just talking and stuff. We got to talking about doing stupid things, and I

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said I could climb out on the limb and jump into the water. Then Thomas dared me to do it . . . so I did.”

“Is that right? Is that what happened, boys?”

They nodded in agreement.

“Did you know that Timothy was going to do it too?”

“No. Thomas told me if I did it, he’d do it too. Thomas was supposed to do it.”

The constable turned to face the older boy. “Is that right, Thomas?”

Thomas’s eyes narrowed. In a clipped voice, he answered, “Yeah, and I’d a done it too, but Timmy told me he wanted to do it.”

Davy Burroughs, who had been crying nearly nonstop since the accident, so distraught it was thought best not to hear his story until now, snapped his bowed head upright. “That ain’t right, Thomas, and you know it.”

Lawrence stared at Davy, mouth hanging slack. This was something new.

“Thomas called him a shithead.”

“Ain’t true, Davy. I done no such thing.”

“Did too.”

“Did not, you little runt.”

“Okay, boys. That’s enough.” The constable stepped in to put an end to the bickering.

“Thomas told him he wasn’t gonna do it.”

“Did not! You lie, Davy!”

Davy had stopped crying and now stood in front of his chair. “Thomas, you’re the liar. You told Timmy that Lawrence was stupid and that you weren’t stupid. You weren’t gonna do it, and Timmy said the only reason Larry did it was ’cause you said you’d do it too, and when you chickened out, Timmy said he’d do it, and you said he was too chicken to do it,” his voice caught as he fought back tears, “and he said somebody had to do it ’cause you told Larry you would,” he stood erect, knees shaking, tears beginning to stream down his face, tiny shoulders constricting as he fought for air, “and you said he was too chicken to do it . . . so he did.”

Davy Burroughs wavered and his father caught him as he collapsed in a heap.

Thomas's face turned ashen at hearing the truth pour forth. His father cuffed him on the back of the head. "Thomas . . . you lied to me!"

Although Lawrence didn't like Thomas, he never considered that the older boy imposed his will on Timothy, in effect shaming him into doing something he knew was dangerous. Thomas's deceit and selfish nature made an imprint on Lawrence that was to stay with him for the rest of his life.

Somehow, no one knows for sure how, the story got out about what really happened, and the Meredith family packed up and left within a month. Rumors circulated that the family moved to Pennsylvania where the senior Thomas could ply his trade as a tinker among the populace of Philadelphia. According to reports, the young Thomas killed a neighbor's dog and spent a week in jail while his father earned enough to pay the fine and secure his release.

* * *

Northeast Wilderness Late September 1804

THE BLIZZARD RAGED for three days, during which warm broth of juniper berries and bark brought him back from the dead. As Jacob recovered, his scurrilous nature resurfaced, and he made no attempt to conceal his distaste for the Indian woman who had saved his life. On the seventh day, with clear skies and warming temperature, he forced himself upon her with a roughness that left her bleeding and unconscious, gathered his belongings, and lit out for parts unknown.

Kanti survived, though bearing a wound on her soul that would not heal. After two weeks she left the cave, moving toward the river she knew flowed westward. Traveling slowly, she endured scattered bouts of poor weather, and in the manner of her people, built makeshift shelters for the worst of it. She came to a valley rich with game where

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she built her lodge and settled in to have the baby she knew was growing inside her womb.

On July 7, 1805, she gave birth and named the baby Annawon—Chief, in English, believing he would be a great warrior and leader of men. She fashioned a pouch from a lynx pelt and carried the child on her back whenever she left her lodge. Having killed many beavers by old methods, she ventured to the river where she bartered her skins for traps, kettles, and implements to improve her small encampment.

When Annawon was about a year old, she began carrying him in front, facing forward when she walked her trap line, and he learned the lessons of stealth and cunning required of a hunter. His father's genes were strong, and he inherited good looks and a solid frame, and was easily mistaken for one much older.

As he grew, Kanti continued to teach the ways of survival to her young son. He learned the various foods that were in abundance in the forest, learned, too, to read the signs of impending weather events and to trap, skin, and prepare hides for barter. Exhibiting a natural bent for conducting trade, he was blessed with an intuition for recognizing when to strike the deal, while in a convincing manner leaving the impression that he came out on the short end.

During his eighth year, the two of them nearly stumbled into a British patrol concealed near the mouth of a river Kanti called Rumble Creek. In actuality, it was the unofficial border between Canada and the United States, and the British were biding their time before launching an all out attack on an American outpost where Kanti and her son often traded pelts. Although the two of them knew that a state of war existed between the two countries, they had not seen a clash between them since it started the year prior, in 1812.

Sinking deeper into the woods, concealed by trees and heavy undergrowth, they worked their way to the top of a high knoll offering a view of the outpost and surrounding clearing, some 800 yards away. It was a breezy night with a full moon darting between drifting clouds, and Annawon was about to get his first lesson in battle strategy.

The post was an assortment of buildings surrounded on all sides by a wall of vertical timbers. The Americans had cleared trees for at least

fifty yards on three sides of the outpost, leaving open ground and very little concealment for an adversary. The front gate to the compound faced the riverbank and lay about twenty yards from the water.

“Let us watch and see how the battle unfolds. There . . . to the right, at the tree line!” Kanti pointed to the flash of red she had seen.

Annawon carefully surveyed the area, seeing nothing unusual. Then his eyes were drawn to movement. A red uniform jacket, followed by another, and yet another passed the distant clearing. The British were positioning themselves for the fight. He shifted his vision to the walled outpost.

At each corner on the interior of the wall, a raised platform allowed anyone acting as a sentry to see all the way to the trees. Between the corners and lower than the corner platforms, a plank stretched around the inside perimeter, providing a shelf for men to stand on and shoot into the clearing. Annawon could see a man’s silhouette at each of the lookout posts, and he wondered if they could see the red coats of the British uniforms just inside the trees.

Shifting his attention back to the trees at the edge of the cleared area, he saw that the British were positioning themselves to attack from two sides simultaneously.

Although the moon was full, the drifting clouds caused shadows to roll across the surface of the clearing, and Annawon sensed an eerie unpleasantness at the scene. Looking back toward the outpost, he saw a doubling of the guard at each corner of the wall. Just as a shadow passed over the gated portion of the wall, he saw several men leaving the protection of the fort and running toward the river, away from the approaching British.

“Look!” He touched his mother’s arm and pointed to the figures. “They are running away. They are afraid to fight.”

Kanti replied. “I think they may have something else in mind . . . just watch.”

It seemed an awfully long time before anything happened and when it did, Annawon was speechless and a little afraid as the action unfolded. The British forces opened fire from the edge of the woods with a volley louder than anything he had ever heard. The firing came

from the woods on two sides of the outpost, knocking bark and wood splinters off the wall. The bedlam was continuous, lasting for several minutes with only sporadic moments of gapping silence

Kanti explained, "They are coordinating their fire so many are always shooting while the others are reloading. That's the reason for the continuous barrage we hear."

"Why are the men of the fort not shooting back? Has everyone deserted the outpost?"

"I suspect those within are waiting to show their strength after the British charge. Those inside the walls need to get them to enter the cleared land to be effective with their shots."

The fusillade continued while return fire from the wall remained irregular and primarily focused from the corners. Then the British made their move.

Annawon saw movement in the tree line. As he watched the low-growing bushes turned autumn red as line after line of British soldiers came into the open and advanced on the outpost. Spaced about ten feet apart, the waves swept across the clearing, each step bringing them closer to the battered wall that, until then, had protected those inside.

Methodical in their approach, the first line would point and fire, and stop to reload while the second line stepped to the front, advancing three or four steps before they stopped to fire. Four such lines advanced across the cleared land on two sides of the outpost, each advance bringing them closer to the wall, each volley resulting in more damage to the upright timbers.

"Mother, they have killed those inside. There is no return fire. They are all dead."

Kanti replied, "Let us watch, son. The fight is not yet finished."

The troops were now at the midway point of the open clearing, and those in command now exited the trees, strutting left and right, yelling commands to their men.

As Annawon watched, each of the red coats seemingly in command of the troops crumpled and fell. As though on signal, rifle barrels appeared at the top of the fortification and opened up on the advancing soldiers, killing about a quarter of them. The British lines stopped

moving forward, and all those with loaded muskets raised them and returned fire in the direction of the wall.

Annawon then saw something very peculiar. Without return fire from the Americans inside the fortification, British troops were falling dead on the cleared battlefield between the trees and heavy woods. It was several moments before he realized what was happening.

“There are Americans in the woods behind them!”

Mass confusion ensued as those caught in the open realized their situation. Again, rifles fired from the top of the wall, as simultaneous firing commenced from the heavy trees. The lines broke, red coats spreading in every direction trying to escape the trap.

Annawon had seen his first battle, and learned a tactical lesson. He realized the importance of ranging beyond a confined area to defeat an enemy with superior firepower. The Americans that had gotten behind the British had made the difference.

* * *

TWO MONTHS BEFORE HIS FOURTEENTH BIRTHDAY, Annawon and Kanti were mistaken for hostiles while flagging a steamboat. A shot was fired, hitting Kanti in the forehead and killing her instantly. For the first time in his life, Annawon was alone.

Grabbing their bundle of pelts, he vanished into the woods where he mourned and contemplated his future. With a strong distrust for the encroaching white population, he decided his best bet was to head for the wilderness to the west. Gathering his large store of beaver, wolf, and fox pelts, he made for the settlement he knew lay twenty miles to the south, where he sold the entire lot for cash and began his journey into parts unknown.

Witnesses to the exchange were Billy Bolden and Francis Glover, both of nefarious reputation and dangerous ways. Trailing the young man for the better part of two days, they made their move on the second night, intending to make his sleep one of eternity. Tying their horses, they crawled toward the encampment where Annawon, aware of their presence, lay in wait.

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Billy was the first to die, catching a tomahawk full in the face. With the strike, Francis lunged toward the ghost that had delivered the blow, and with a single knife stroke lost his right ear. Screaming in agony, he ran from the scene in sheer panic while Annawon watched with satisfaction. The young man was now the owner of two stout horses and a Kentucky long rifle sporting gold inlay and a silver set-trigger.

Upon reaching the Ohio River, Annawon signed on with the American Fur Company as a hunter and scout for their expedition into the Northwest Frontier. Although only fourteen, his size and demeanor reflected one much older, and he quickly proved invaluable for his knowledge of the wilderness, earning the prestige of primary scout during the trek. During this time the other men, apparently unable to cope with his three-syllable name, simply began calling him Anton.

Impressed from the first day by the forthcoming nature of the young man, John Drury, a scientist traveling with the party, began counsel on rudiments of the English language, which were continuous during the journey. In the course of the next year, Anton proved to be a quick study, learning to read and write, as well as to speak as one with considerable schooling.

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Whitehall, King George County, Virginia 1812

AFTER THE INCIDENT AT THE RIVER, Lawrence Taliaferro, never a great student, became a problem for his teachers, disrupting the class and often skipping classes altogether. His mother couldn't bear to see his keen intellect going to waste, so she hired the best tutors money could buy. The young man realized he actually liked learning, so he applied himself and began to blossom as a student, showing unusual insight in the areas of leadership and problem solving. In August of 1812, at the age of eighteen, his mother, the ultimate patriot, signed for him to join the fight for his country in what became known as the War of 1812.

“Lawrence, I want you and your brothers to do what this family has done for as long as anyone can remember. You fight for your country and show that the Taliaferro family supports this nation.”

“Yes, Mother. Although, I’m not entirely sure I hate the British enough to enjoy killing them, I’m sure they’re responsible for many American deaths.”

“Lawrence, you don’t have to hate them. We must fight for what’s right and for what’s best for the country without hate entering the picture.”

With his mother’s remarks etched firmly into his mind, he joined Captain Meriwether Taliaferro’s volunteer company of light infantry. He was shortly appointed to the Thirty-Fifth Regular Infantry. During his subsequent three months of service, his animosity toward the British grew to the point that friends and superiors alike noticed it. After being told he needed to further his education to qualify for a commission, he jumped at the chance for more schooling. Eight months later he was appointed an ensign in the First Regiment United States Infantry and ordered to report to Belle Fontaine, Missouri.

“All I know, Mother, is that they ordered me to report to a fort in Missouri. I have no idea what my job will be.”

“Remember this Lawrence . . . the nation needs people with a conscience. No matter the job, if you do the best you can, and you do it for the right reasons, you can make a difference. The Taliaferro name has a great history with great men in this nation since the settlement of Jamestown. They are big shoes to fill. I have no doubt you’ll make your mark.”

* * *

SHORTLY AFTER REPORTING TO HIS POST in Missouri, Lawrence was witness to the cold-blooded killing of an officer by a sergeant and three men in the company he had joined.

He was awakened by the sounds of a scuffle just outside the barracks. Rising off the military cot they called a bed, he walked out-

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side to find the source of the noise. The terrible commotion came from someplace to his left.

It was a new moon, totally dark and so still a candle flame wouldn't waver, in spite of which he could make out three men beating on another. As he watched, a fourth ran into the melee swinging an ax handle and caught the unfortunate victim square in the face. He went down, and the three ran away while the fourth continued to hammer the prone body.

Lawrence, wearing nothing but his long-handles, charged the assailant.

"Hey, you there! Hey, stop that. You're going to kill him!"

The assailant looked up, making eye contact with Lawrence before dropping the weapon and fleeing in the direction the others had taken.

Lawrence raised half the post with his yells for help. Even the commander came to the scene in his bedclothes. That was when the dead body was identified as Ensign Carver.

"What did you see here, young man? What the hell happened?"

"I heard a ruckus. When I investigated, I saw three men beating this poor man. Then a fourth, a big man, charged in with that ax handle," he pointed to the weapon that lay a few feet away, "and finished the killing."

"Damn it! This marks the third officer I've lost in as many weeks. The first two deserted, this one got himself killed." His eyes moved over the scene, as though he were expecting an answer to his thought. *I wish I knew what was going on here.* Then he turned back to the matter at hand.

"Are you that new man . . . Taliaferro?"

"Yes, sir!"

"I want to see you in my quarters first thing in the morning."

"Yes, sir!"

Men were assigned to carry the body to another building and everyone left the scene. Lawrence headed back to his uncomfortable cot, his mind full of thoughts. He slipped under the single blanket, thankful for its warmth. It was a chilly night, cooler than most in Missouri during the month of June.

Just as his mind settled and sleep was about to overcome him, a calloused hand slapped over his mouth, and he felt cold steel against his throat.

“You keep quiet or you’ll join him.” The muffled voice was inches from his ear. “Take this towel off your eyes inside of a minute and you’re a dead man.”

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LAWRENCE WAS AWAKE when the first man climbed from his cot. Feigning sleep, he peeked through shuttered eyes, watching every soldier as they prepared for the day. He was looking for the big man who did the killing, and he reasoned he came from within that barracks.

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THE MEN WERE ASSEMBLED at the base of the flagpole on one end of the open parade ground inside the fort. Mid-morning, the commander was implementing the plan devised by the young ensign during their hour-long meeting. If successful, it would draw out the men who had a hand in killing Ensign Carver. The man who delivered the killing blows had been identified.

The commander stood twenty feet in front of the row of troopers.

“Attention!”

The command was delivered. The men, slow to react, eventually straightened to the posture required of the order.

“By now I know you’ve all heard about the murder committed last night.”

A general murmur started among the ranks.

“I intend to get to the bottom of this. I’ll only say this once . . . if you know anything about it, it will go easier for you if you come forward.” He looked left and right along the ranks. “Think about it. This is the only chance you’ll get to set yourself straight.” As he talked, he clasped his hands behind his back and slowly advanced on the men. In the still-

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ness that followed, he walked along the row of troopers, looking each man square in the eyes as he passed, then continued to walk behind them, passing silently.

The men were becoming increasingly uncomfortable, this being observed by the man in the commander's quarters.

The commander completed his circle and came to a stop in the same position he'd begun.

"Does anyone wish to come forward and tell me what you know?" There was only silence and determined looks.

"All right . . . suit yourself."

Turning to his quarters, which lay directly in front of the assembly he called out, "Ensign Taliaferro, front and center!"

The door opened to reveal the tall officer impeccably resplendent in his dress uniform. As he crossed the distance to the commander with brisk, measured steps, his brass reflected the morning sunlight, and his boots glinted with unblemished polish. Every eye was on the young ensign.

When he reached the commander, he came to an abrupt halt, slammed his heels together, and executed a perfect salute. The commander returned the gesture and pivoted to face the men.

"Men, I give you Ensign Lawrence Taliaferro. May the good Lord deliver the souls of the guilty from the perdition so richly deserved."

Lawrence stepped forward.

"At ease, men." Claspng his hands behind him, he began moving slowly to his right as he addressed the troopers.

"I can tell you with certainty that one man will die for this crime. Whether he is joined on the gallows is up to his three accomplices. You three will be given the opportunity to admit your involvement and have a chance to live beyond tomorrow."

He had walked to the end of the line of troopers and turned to begin his stroll toward the other end of the line.

"One of you threatened me last night after the affair," Ensign Taliaferro said. "You said if I didn't keep my mouth shut, I would join Carver in death." There was a murmur from the men. It was obvious they had not known of the threat.

Reaching the midpoint of the assembly, Lawrence pivoted away from the line of men, took the three paces that brought him to the commander's side, did an about face, and issued a command.

"Attention!"

Heads snapped up, eyes forward, and bodies straightened at the sound of the order.

Lawrence raised his right arm to shoulder height, pointed his forefinger, and moved his arm along the line, halting when it pointed directly at one man.

"Sergeant Pitt, you are under arrest for the murder of Ensign James Carver." As prearranged, troopers on either side grabbed Pitt's arms as another stepped behind and latched on to the collar of his jacket.

The sergeant's face showed no emotion, but his eyes blazed with a powerful hatred.

"Your first mistake was being seen, your second was to threaten me . . . take this man to the guardhouse."

Lawrence turned his attention to the rest of the troopers.

"That man will feel the noose. As for you other three, there's a faint hope you may escape the rope. I was there. I saw you kicking and punching Carver into submission. There's a slight chance a tribunal could find you innocent of murder." *This is it. It either works, or the three walk away scot-free.* "If you don't step forward now, before I call you out, that possibility vanishes. Take a couple of minutes to decide."

Lawrence turned to the commander and the two engaged in a brief conversation, and then he again faced the troops.

"Does anyone wish to step forward?" There was a barely perceptible movement as two men strained their peripheral vision trying to make eye contact. "Very well, as you wish."

He began to raise his arm as before, when a trooper stepped from the line and approached him. The two talked in hushed tones before being joined by the commander. Within minutes, all three accomplices had stepped forward and were placed under arrest.

"Bring these three to the guardhouse and place them as far away from Sergeant Pitt as possible."

The Thirty-Ninth Man

Subsequent interrogation revealed that the sergeant had been stealing supplies from the storeroom, mainly tapping the supply of whiskey and selling it for his own profit, which he shared with his accomplices. They knew nothing of the earlier murders, intending only to scare Ensign Carver into silence after he learned of the misdeed.

By August, Lawrence Taliaferro had been promoted to lieutenant. Progressing ranks followed in rapid succession as he served in Ohio and Illinois. He was involved in the siege of Fort Erie during August and September 1814. In the spring of 1817, he led 130 recruits to Fort Howard, Green Bay, Wisconsin Territory, to fill the depleted Third Regiment. Then on to Detroit all the while earning notice for his intelligence and consistent devotion to fairness.

While on furlough in 1818, Lawrence was invited to visit President James Monroe, his patron friend, connection, and fellow Virginian.

* * *

Presidential Study, The Executive Mansion 1818

PRESIDENT MONROE WAS SEATED opposite Lawrence. On the small table between them was an open bottle of French wine. Monroe poured three fingers into a wine glass and placed it in front of his guest.

“Lawrence, I would like you to resign your position in the army.”

Lawrence sat in stunned silence, finally finding his voice. “Mr. President, I have no idea what you may have heard about my service to the country. I can assure you it has been given with honor and a full commitment to the nation.”

“Yes, yes. I’m sorry to have caused you concern. In fact . . . it is your exemplary service and considerable skills that I wish to put to use in a civil capacity.”

“Sir, I’m at your disposal. May I ask what you have in mind?”

Monroe answered, “There’s a new frontier, wild and untamed. A new frontier that must be settled. You undoubtedly caught a glimpse

of it when you were at Fort Howard, in the Wisconsin Territory. Places there are without civil authority of any kind. We have military posts in various locations to protect our people and provide a presence. We need someone who can regulate the fur trade and maintain peaceful coexistence with, and between, the indigenous people.”

Lawrence listened with a building excitement as the president continued.

“Colonel Leavenworth is in the process of constructing a fort at the junction of the St. Peter and Mississippi rivers. There is need for an agent representing the U.S. Government to regulate matters.”

Monroe continued, “Take your furlough. Go home to your mother. Wait until I contact you. Our expanding nation has a need for men of your caliber.”