

*Chapter 1***SKIRMISH IN THE WOODS***November 1861, Fayette County, Virginia*

Dallas and I followed Lieutenant Oldham through a thick morning fog across a field of knee-high switchgrass. The double-file of fifty Mississippi riflemen moved wordlessly, crossed a split-rail fence and headed west down a densely wooded hill. My heart beat fast and I breathed in the cold air deeply. I was determined to do my duty and be brave no matter what came. A quarter mile into the woods a small creek wound its way through a hardwood flat. The ground was covered with brown leaves, wet from recent rain. Our lieutenant positioned us fifteen paces back from the creek on a rise crowded with trees and boulders. We spread out in an arched line, a few paces between men and hid behind whatever we could find. Dallas was to my left; Will, my right. Our orders included no talking and no smoking, and we were not to shoot unless Oldham pointed his sword toward the heavens.

Our skirmish line stretched eighty yards along the edge of the creek flat and our commander hid behind a clump of swamp grass near the middle where we could see him. Amos, our shortest man, stood by a crooked ironwood tree twenty paces in front with orders to squat if he saw the enemy.

Like all soldiers in Company K, I wore the same clothes as the day I left home. We were supposed to get uniforms at training camp and coats for winter, but army promises were hollow. Oldham was easy to spot in his gray lieutenant's double-breasted frockcoat.

I settled behind twin elms in a swirl of pressed-down grass with a good view of the bottomland and rested my rifle. Two split-heart prints, fresh deer tracks, marked the mud near my boots. One boot was held together with a piece of rope, the sole and upper having separated. The woods were quiet and cold, and a light wind pushed in from the north, brushing the broken clouds along. We blended into the landscape without a trace and soon the woods came alive again. Birds fluttered about and a squirrel on the other side of the creek barked nervously. Just-fallen leaves drifted downstream and a stand of Virginia pines hugged the hillside behind me. Pines in my native Mississippi grew much taller and had longer needles. Doc Perry, our regimental surgeon, had lived in Virginia when he was a boy and he taught me the names of trees that didn't grow back home.

With one bullet in my rifle and thirty-nine in my cartridge case I waited. Except for being hungry I felt quite peaceful. My mind drifted back to deer hunting on Apookta creek with Dallas the winter before when we were both nineteen. It had been five months since we enlisted, and I figured we'd surely be home for Christmas. I thought of the folks at church and longed for Mary Ann, remembering our last time together in the woods. Now that time seemed far away.

Suddenly, loud *caw, caw, caw*, sounds surprised me from behind. A hawk flew just above the treetops chased by two angry crows. In seconds they passed out of sight, then out of hearing, taking their fight westward. I saw Amos come to a squat and hair stood up on the back of my neck. In the woods across the creek, bayonets flashed in the sunlight that knifed through the bare trees. An enemy patrol moved quickly through the creek flat, sticks snapping under their boots. The light settled on their dark blue uniforms, and they stood out against the green swamp grass. I raised my rifle and tried to steady a racing heart as four dozen enemy soldiers moved closer. I was afraid my beating heart might give away our position. Our lieutenant's sword was still at his side.

Suddenly a rifle fired to my right! *Crack!* A billow of white smoke rolled toward the creek, dispersed a bit and drifted back. Shots broke out along our line though no order to fire had been given. *Splat!* A bullet slapped a tree near my head. Blood splattered on my jacket, but I felt no pain. *Crack, crack, crack*, firing quickened on both sides, sounding like hard sleet on a tin roof. Red fire spouted from enemy guns and the drifting smoke brought the acrid smell of black powder to my nose. Never before had I seen the deadly end of a rifle fired at me. Fierce energy swelled within my chest and I felt unleashed. One enemy soldier appeared in sharp detail, so I sighted him and squeezed the trigger. The kick pushed me back, a spark burned my eye, and everything became a blur.

The woods were alive with the crack of rifles fired at close range. Bullets pulped tree trunks and ricocheted off boulders. My eyes watered and I fumbled the next cartridge, dropped my ramrod and stopped to clean off the mud. I fired through the haze of gun smoke in the direction of the enemy and reloaded. Oldham signaled our left flank to regroup near the center where the enemy was concentrated. He looked older and tired, like my father in his sweat-soaked hat at the end of a long day in our cotton field. The right side of my head felt wet and warm. I wiped blood off my neck and fired again.

In five minutes, the shooting lessened and the Yanks retreated across the creek, up the rise and disappeared. I scanned the woods for a target, but found none, and then the firing stopped completely. Oldham ordered us to be perfectly quiet and wait at the ready. My right ear was clogged with blood and my heart pounded like I'd just finished a footrace, though I'd not taken a single step. My mouth was dry, and stomach knotted. *Have they had enough?*

We surprised the Yanks, though not as completely as Oldham had planned. Daniel had taken a bullet in his thigh and Doc Perry tended to him. Our regiment, eight hundred strong, was only half an hour away. Oldham was well schooled in tactics and would send for reinforcements if needed. *Surely those Yanks won't come through here again!* My ear throbbed and I squeezed it tight with my handkerchief.

Oldham sent Amos and two others out front to search. They moved slowly through the valley, pausing at intervals. No birds flew. The woods were completely still except for our searchers. Upon return, Amos was excited and grinning.

"Three dead Yankees, Lieutenant! Left 'em where they fell, jis like ya said."

"Good work."

"I found this," Amos handed over a revolver.

Oldham sent Ray back to Captain Patterson with a written report:

Engaged enemy infantry, strength estimated at fifty, three killed, enemy withdrew west. Patrol suffered one wounded. No reinforcements needed. Will hold position and observe remainder of day. Lt. S. G. Oldham

The affair was our first close-up battle and seemed to prove we could whip the Yankees when our commanders let us get at them.

I took the handkerchief off my ear and looked over at Will.

"What's it look like?" I whispered.

"Like a bullet took the tiptop off," he grinned. "Still bleedin'."

We sat in the unnatural quiet, each soldier alone with his thoughts. Dallas was only a few yards away, but Oldham had ordered all of us not to say a word. My lifelong friend winked at me and pulled his hat low. He'd always been able to fall asleep in an instant. Six bullets were gone from my cartridge case.



An hour passed with no sign of the enemy then Oldham let one man at a time take a look at the dead. When it was my turn I went to the creek. The gurgling water ran clear and a blue cap lay on the bank. Wood thrushes flitted around feeding on the ground. Upstream I came upon the body of a blue-coated man in the water, his face submerged. Wet leaves clung to his coat and one shoe was missing. A floating stick drifted up his trouser leg. *Who is this man?* His left hand bobbed up and down in the current. His brown hair was curly and thick. Might have been in his early twenties, same as me. A cold sadness flooded my soul and I sensed someone was watching me. *Has his spirit departed?*

I couldn't take my eyes off the lifeless body. *Did a bullet from my rifle kill him? Is he the one who nipped my ear?* I looked at my hands, bloody and scratched, but still alive and useful. I pondered these things in my heart, watched the flowing water and listened to the wind passing through the valley of leafless trees.

A blue jay landed by the dead soldier's cap. *Jeer, jeer, jeer.* I tossed a stick, the jay took off, and I watched it swoop through the valley in the direction of the Yankee retreat and disappear in the gray forest. The trees looked familiar. *Have I dreamed about this?*

After filling my canteen, I returned to my position in the skirmish line and ate the last of my peanuts and a hunk of bread. We'd been on half rations for a week. Bare branches swayed in a gust of wind and I heard a voice whisper, *Thou shalt not kill.* I glanced to my left, but Dallas wasn't there. I looked across the bottomland and saw him step haltingly along the creek. Several hours passed in silence then Lieutenant Oldham gathered the patrol around. He struck a match and took five or six quick pulls on a new cigar. The smoke lingered among the men and my belly growled.

"Ya fought well today, men," Oldham said. "But we could've done better. Anybody know what went wrong?"

"We started firing 'fore ya signaled," Daniel said.

"That's right. You gotta learn to keep your britches on! This ain't no huntin' trip!"

Oldham glared at Jack but didn't call out his name. Everyone knew Jack was the most anxious to fight.

"A top notch fightin' squad obeys orders down to the last detail!"

Oldham took a deep draw on his cigar, held it a couple of seconds, and blew the smoke toward his boots. The strong burning grass smell tingled my nose.

"If we'd held our fire, we mighta captured the whole bunch!"

He turned in a circle and looked squarely at each man.

“As it stands now, we’ll likely face those boys again! And next time ... they might surprise us!”

He shuffled his feet and looked up. The clouds had cleared and the sky was deep blue. Shadows grew longer and a chill settled upon us.

“I know you’re all new to soldiering, but I expect ya to toe the mark. Mistakes have consequences. Just ask Daniel! Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” the men responded together.

He paused and looked sternly at us once again.

“Okay,” he smiled. “Let’s go!”



Back at camp everybody wanted to talk with Daniel.

“How did it feel?” Dallas asked.

“Like a sharp pinch. Didn’t know I ’as hit. When I looked down, my trousers were bloody and there ’as a hole in my leg. That’s when it started hurtin’!”

“Does it hurt now?”

“Yeah it hurts like hell! What’d ya think? Doc pulled the bullet out with long-nose pliers.”

Everyone laughed except Daniel.

“You gonna mend?” Will asked.

“Yeah. Doc says it didn’t hit bone. Wanna see the bullet?”

We passed it around and then gave it back. Daniel slipped the bullet in his pocket.

In our tent that night, Dallas and I talked about what we’d do if seriously wounded, and then we played a game of chess by candlelight. Although I had captured his queen, he managed to put me in checkmate.