

A NOVEL

ROBIN LLOYD

*Hidden
Cargo*

Property of Lyons Press

HIDDEN CARGO

Property of Lyons Press

TOPOGRAPHICAL MAP of the Island of **KEY WEST**

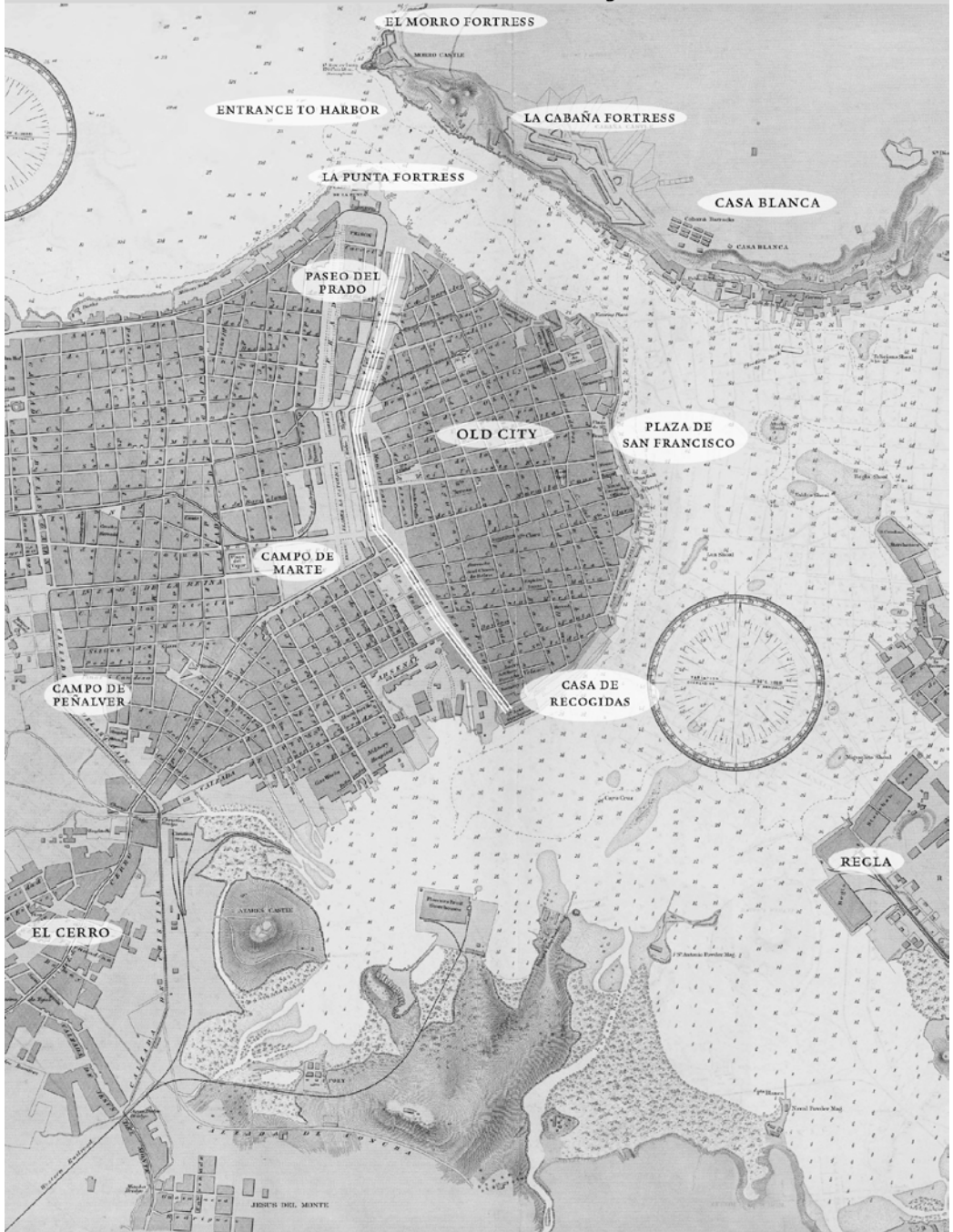
*Compiled and drawn under the
Direction of
Capt E. B. Hunt Corps of Engineers.*

*BY
James C. Clapp Draughtsman Ft. Taylor
September 1861*

Scale 6 inches to 1 Mile.



Old Havana Bay

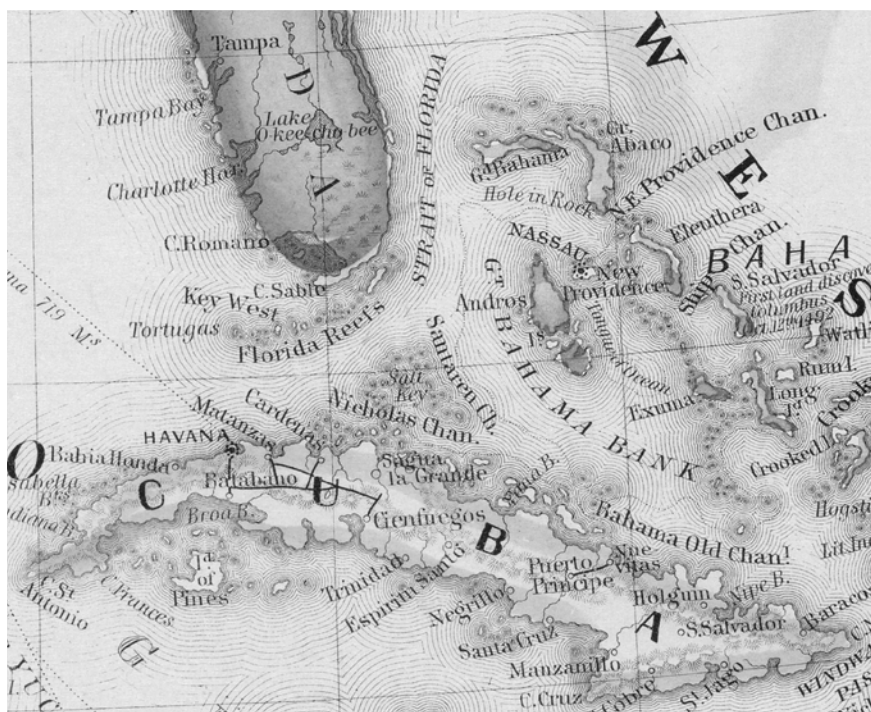


Property of Lyons Press

Also by Robin Lloyd

Rough Passage to London: A Sea Captain's Tale

Harbor of Spies: A Novel of Historic Havana



HIDDEN CARGO

A Novel

ROBIN LLOYD



Essex, Connecticut

Property of Lyons Press



An imprint of Globe Pequot, the trade division of
The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
4501 Forbes Blvd., Ste. 200
Lanham, MD 20706
www.rowman.com

Distributed by NATIONAL BOOK NETWORK

Copyright © 2023 by Robin Lloyd

Book cover: Colored lithograph by Frédéric Mialhe. Courtesy of Cuban Heritage Collection, University of Miami.

Topographical map of Key West (1861): Courtesy of Monroe County Public Library, Florida Keys History Center, Key West, Online Photo Collection.

Nineteenth-century map of Old Havana Bay: Courtesy of Harvard Map Collection, Harvard Library.

Title page: “Map of Mexico, Central America and the West Indies” (1868) by Augustus Mitchell, cropped. Courtesy of Harvard Map Collection, Harvard Library.

Image from Part I: Lithograph courtesy of Monroe County Public Library, Florida Keys History Center, Key West, Online Photo Collection

Image from Part II: Lithograph by Frédéric Mialhe. Courtesy of Cuban Heritage Collection, University of Miami.

Image from Part III: Lithograph by Eduardo Laplante. Courtesy of Cuban Heritage Collection, University of Miami.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote passages in a review.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Lloyd, Robin, 1950- author.

Title: Hidden cargo : a novel / Robin Lloyd.


Description: Essex, Connecticut : Lyons Press, [2023] | Summary: “A new seafaring novel by the author of *Rough Passage to London and Harbor of Spies*”—Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022054489 (print) | LCCN 2022054490 (ebook) | ISBN 9781493072316 (cloth : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781493072323 (epub)

Classification: LCC PS3612.L69 H54 2023 (print) | LCC PS3612.L69 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022054489>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022054490>

 The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Property of Lyons Press

For Tamara, Marisa, and Samantha

Property of Lyons Press

“I was free; but there was no one to welcome me to the land of freedom.
I was a stranger in a strange land.”

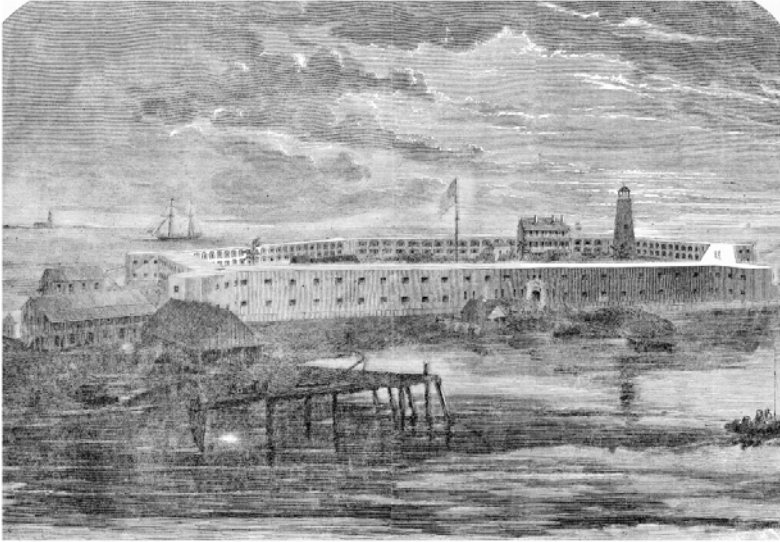
—Harriet Tubman, “Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman”
by Sarah Hopkins Bradford, 1869

Preface



This novel is a work of fiction. Most of the characters are invented, as are all of the situations. While the story is a product of my imagination, it should be noted that some historical events mentioned in the book are real, such as the hurricane that struck Key West in 1865. Some of the military officials and individuals residing in Key West in the months following the end of the Civil War are actual historical figures as is the US Consul General in Havana. Many of the details surrounding the reports of kidnappings along the Gulf Coast and Florida are based on research from US Army records, congressional records, newspaper accounts, and consular dispatches sent from Cuba to Washington. These combined sources of information helped to inspire this novel.

Property of Lyons Press



FORT JEFFERSON

Part One

"I look where the ship helplessly heads end on. I hear the burst as she strikes. I hear the howls of dismay. They grow fainter and fainter. . . . I can but rush to the surf and let it drench me and freeze upon me."

—Walt Whitman,
"The Sleepers"

Property of Lyons Press



October 22, 1865

A strange stillness hung over the calm water surrounding the walls of the sea fortress. The young Navy lieutenant breathed in deeply as he looked out at the ghostly pewter sky and the unusually flat sea. The morning air had a different feel to it, heavy and jagged like a saw's edge. Everett Townsend turned to walk down the fort's granite spiral staircase to a gun casement window. He squared his unshaven jaw and looked out at the horizon again as a touch of foreboding shivered through him. Windless weather and pungent air signaled a storm.

A sudden squeal of iron-rimmed wheels on stone broke the silence. A steady stream of military prisoners all dressed in the same drab prison clothes stumbled out from inside the walls, some of them pulling four-wheeled drays. Townsend watched the shabby patchwork of snarls and sneers, a long line of misery, suffering, and sickness. Another workday had begun at the military prison at Fort Jefferson in the Dry Tortugas.

With the war over, prisoners from both sides were being sent to the Dry Tortugas for all kinds of crimes. Desertion, murder, theft, conspiracy. The prison fortress had come to be called Devil's Island. Scores of inmates had died in these walls from breakbone fever and its more deadly companion, yellow fever. No prisoners wanted to hear that they were being sent to the Dry Tortugas.

Since the end of hostilities six months ago, Townsend's gunboat schooner, the USS *Rebecca*, had become a dispatch and supply vessel. There

were five hundred soldiers at Fort Jefferson and five hundred prisoners, all dependent on supplies from Key West. It was dull routine, but it was a better assignment than the steamboat sailors who were scrubbing decks on their ships at anchor, or the sailors assigned to replace channel buoys that the Confederate saboteurs had destroyed. Wartime danger had been replaced by peacetime boredom.

Gone were the big gunships with their smoky funnels that had defined the Navy's blockade in the Gulf of Mexico. By now, almost all of the thirty ships that made up the East Gulf Naval Squadron had been sent north to be decommissioned and sold. Townsend was one of only a handful of Naval officers still stationed in Key West. He'd served for two years, and he was restless to get on with his life.

A rapid-fire drum roll echoed through the Fort's parade ground. Townsend pulled out his watch. It was eight a.m. He needed to get clearance from the post quartermaster before they could leave. They would have to weigh anchor soon if they were going to get back to Key West, some sixty-five miles away, before nightfall. But there was no wind, and the USS *Rebecca* was going nowhere without wind. He heard the familiar hum and whine in his ears, and he slapped his face. "Damn mosquitos." He shook his head. *Nothing those man-eating buggers like more than dead air.*

A line of Black soldiers with their brass-buttoned blue uniforms and shining rifles marched by to take their positions. *So much pride and hope in those faces*, he thought to himself. He knew these men were with the 82nd Colored Infantry, some of whom had run away from plantations to enlist, and who now probably wanted to be discharged just as much as he did. The Navy lieutenant had tried hard to put the war behind him, but the sight of these soldiers brought the memories back, unbidden and unwanted.

The crack of shots ringing out from the dark jungle. His friend bleeding, eyes dark with fear. Clyde Hendricks had clutched his hand. Townsend had tried to staunch the bleeding, but there were too many wounds. As his superior officer, he had put Hendricks in danger's way, and for that he would always punish himself. Townsend had even convinced him that fighting against the Southern Rebellion was his cause, a struggle for emancipation even though Hendricks was a Bahamian. And now his friend had died for that cause.

A slight breeze on his face and the scratchy wisp of rustling palm fronds pulled him back to the present. The wind was coming up, and he felt his spirits rise. Four heavily guarded prisoners, cursing and sneering, shuffled out of the sally port in leg irons and chains ahead of him. His eyes hardened. The dirty faces simmering with resentment were familiar. The four accomplices

to Lincoln's assassin, John Wilkes Booth. They had been convicted a little over three months earlier by a military court in Washington and had been sent to the Dry Tortugas in July. The infamous names of Spangler, Arnold, O'Laughlen, and Samuel Mudd, the doctor who had tended to Booth's broken ankle. All but Spangler were given life sentences.

"Don't worry Lieutenant, they won't be escaping anytime soon."

He'd been looking for the post quartermaster, but the officer had found him first.

"How did you catch him?"

Townsend had heard about Mudd's attempted escape from prison a few weeks earlier on board one of the transport ships, but he didn't know the details.

"One of the sailors recognized him and hauled him out of the cargo hold. We put him in solitary. Said he was scared of what these Black soldiers might do to him. Justice comes in many ways, don't it?"

The officer chuckled at himself, but Townsend only nodded as he watched the four men stumble off to begin another day of hard labor.

The post quartermaster handed Townsend the signed papers confirming the delivery of barreled meats, bags of flour, sacks of vegetables, and crates of canned goods.

"By the way, Lieutenant, there was one item missing."

Townsend shot the post quartermaster a worried glance.

"What would that be? I don't think . . ."

"No, not to worry Lieutenant, you delivered what was listed. But next time bring some of those *habanos* with you. I hear you can get a heavy stack of a hundred cigars for four dollars in Key West. This is a lonely place without a good Cuban cigar."

Townsend saluted. "I will be sure to do that." He handed the post quartermaster one of the cigars he routinely kept in his jacket. "Try this one. It's real Havana tobacco rolled by Cubans in Key West."

The officer wiped the sweat off his face with a crumpled bandana and nodded appreciatively.

"Good luck on the way back. You may need it. Big storm's brewing." He pointed up to the fort's flagpole where the American flag fluttered ever so slightly. Underneath a half-blue half-yellow triangular signal quivered a warning of worsening weather. "Barometer is falling like a Canada goose full of lead buckshot."

Townsend needed no warning. He'd seen the signs himself. Even the high-flying frigate birds that normally glided overhead were nowhere to be seen.

A soldier with the duty boat was ready at the pier to row Townsend out to his ship. The USS *Rebecca*, a seventy-one-foot-long centerboard schooner, with her two raked back masts and long bowsprit, had a signature profile that was easy to find in any harbor.

"Pretty ship you got there, Lieutenant. Must be one of them Confederate boats the Navy acquired during the war."

Townsend nodded.

"She was a former blockade runner. The Navy captured her coming out of the Steinhatchee River with a full load of Confederate cotton."

Townsend looked at the schooner. She was a bigger version of one of the Maryland-built schooners the watermen around the Chesapeake Bay called square-sterned bugeyes, but with higher freeboard. The bottom half was built out of roughly hewn thick logs, so with the centerboard raised, the boat could be run ashore with little damage to the hull. As a former Maryland boy, Townsend was quite familiar with the rig. His father, who owned cargo schooners in the Bay, had made sure of that.

"Almost like she was designed for carrying out raids into Florida's swampy hideaways," the private said. "I reckon you made good use of that twelve-pounder gun up there by the bow? Kill a lot of them butternut rebels, did ya?"

The Navy lieutenant didn't reply.



The small rowboat banged up against the schooner's hull with a dull thud, and Townsend grabbed hold of the outboard stays to pull himself on board. The bosun and the three other seamen in the crew had mustered into line. Townsend saw the brooms, holystones, and buckets so he knew the crew had been scrubbing the decks as requested. He acknowledged them and then waved them off to get the cleaning equipment put away, raise the sails, and haul up the anchor. Townsend hardly knew any of these men. They were all strangers to each other, sailors tossed from one Navy ship to another like flotsam in the aftermath of a storm.

Amid the clicking of mast hoops and the squealing of blocks, the crew began hauling up the sails. They were so short-handed the bosun had to join them. On the voyage over from Key West, Townsend had recognized the skills of the bosun, who was a little older than he was. Ezra Metcalf was a Penobscot River sailor from Maine, a big, square-faced hulk of a man with a thick black beard that hung down below his chin like a well-cropped hedge-

hog. Townsend thought he was about twenty-five years old, but he seemed much older.

With the sails flapping back and forth, the crew started pulling up the anchor. First the thick hemp anchor line, and then the heavy chain crept through the hawsepipe.

“Anchor’s hove short, Cap’n,” shouted the Black sailor standing in the bow. Townsend could see the near vertical anchor chain.

“Break her out then,” he yelled out. “Back the staysail. We’ll pay off on the port tack.”

“Port tack it is, Cap’n,” the Black sailor replied.

The man’s name was Josiah Tollman, but he answered to Stumpie. He was the only Black man on board. He got his nickname because he was so wide-shouldered and stocky he had to turn sideways to go down the companionway into the cabin. Townsend knew he was from northern Florida and had served as a coal heaver on a Navy gunboat, but he didn’t know much more than that. He was someone who preferred to say little, especially about his own life.

The boat fell off on the port tack, and the men eased the sails. Slowly at first and then surprisingly quickly, the schooner began to gather headway. Townsend could see the anchor emerge from the foamy white water at the bow.

“Anchor’s broken out, Cap’n.”

“Bear away. Ease the sheets more,” Townsend shouted to the two other men standing amidships. The young one was a Cuban from Key West named Joaquín de la Cruz, small, thin, and agile. He couldn’t have been more than seventeen years old. He’d tried to join the 47th Pennsylvania Infantry in Key West early in the war, but they wouldn’t take him because he was too young. The Navy had been his only alternative.

The other sailor was a silent, brooding man with speckled gray hair and a small beard jutting out from a narrow jaw. Townsend guessed he was about forty years old. Charles Langworth was his name. All Townsend knew about him was that early on in the war he had briefly served in the Confederate militia, but switched sides when the Confederate forces in Florida started a ruthless conscription drive. It seemed he had no love for the Confederacy, but no real loyalty to the Union either. Townsend had decided the man also had a close relationship with silence.

With the anchor now tied down to the cathead, the schooner slipped away from its anchorage and soon was out in the middle of the Northwest Channel. Townsend looked over at the endless shallows and imagined the explorer Ponce de Leon sailing through these waters in 1513 in his search for

gold and a fountain of youth, and naming this sprinkling of barren islands for the only thing of value he'd found there. *Las Tortugas*. The place of turtles.

Townsend lit a cigar, something he did routinely to clear his mind. The overcast skies made Fort Jefferson appear to rise out of the sea like some formidable citadel from a lost underwater world. He wondered what that Spanish explorer would think if he could see this fortress and the surrounding islands. Where once there were just nesting turtles, there were now massive brick walls and a lighthouse as well as an island where the dead were buried.

The wind was building in intensity, filling the schooner's sails, but it wasn't stormy yet.

"She seems to stand it very well," the bosun said.

"No need to shorten sail yet," Townsend replied.

"Aye, aye, Cap'n."

Townsend handed off the wheel to the bosun and went below to the captain's cabin set against the ship's transom where he had a small table with only an overhead hatch to provide daylight. This was his sanctuary. He pulled out the latest US Coast Survey chart that covered the Tortugas Keys and the western end of the Florida reefs.

The Navy lieutenant caught his own eyes in the small mirror by his desk. They were like dark pools staring back at him. He ran his hands through his black curly hair as he took careful measure of himself. His face was mahogany brown, dry and leathery from the sun. He thought he looked older than his twenty-two years. He knew the war had changed him. Doubts continuously swept over him like an incoming tide. The sight of those he'd seen die were always with him as were the ghostly voices in the darkness along the riverbanks and swampy inlets where he'd carried out raids. They called it the jungle coast. The west coast of Florida was wild country, an inhospitable land where it was hard to tell who was a rebel and who was a refugee—who needed saving and who needed killing.

His thoughts turned to his family. Both his parents had died during the war. His younger brother had fought for the Confederacy and been killed at Antietam. His closest remaining relative was his Spanish grandmother who lived in Cuba. She was immensely proud of her heritage and her ancestors. He shuffled through papers and looked at the last letter he had received from her. He'd responded to several of her letters over the past two years, always addressing her as *Abuela*, which she seemed happy to accept. She'd written from the family sugar plantation in Matanzas province. With her fine neat handwriting, she described the upcoming harvest, how it should be a record year, and how much she wished he could be there to see the beauty of the

lush cane fields. It was clear she wanted him to come to Cuba when he was discharged from the Navy. He was her closest living relative.

Mi querido Everett,

No te imaginas cuanto significas para mí . . .

She had written how important he was to her, and that when she thought of him, she thought of his mother, her darling Esperanza, the light of her life, who now was in the other world. Townsend put his elbows on his desk and placed his hands under his chin. He imagined his grandmother at her desk, her thin face, dark eyes, and her black hair streaked with gray.

He shook his head. He knew his grandmother was sincere, but she was living in a dream. In reality, his mother had hated his grandmother and had run away from Cuba to get away from her. He'd visited the family plantation. He could understand his mother's aversion to the place. He also felt a sense of dread at the thought of once again coming face to face with his family's close ties to slavery. He put his grandmother's letter down with a sigh.

Far more pressing to him now were thoughts of Emma. *Emma Carpenter Lozada*, the woman he had hoped he would spend his life with. He felt his stomach tighten. He had driven her away. He didn't know why he had refused to make a commitment to her. It was the war, he told himself. The long absences, the intensity of patrolling up those rivers, the trauma of the yellow fever outbreak, all had taken their toll. He picked up a piece of paper and began to write. Perhaps too late to patch things up, but he still held a faint hope. He began writing down some of his feelings for her.

Dear Emma,

I thought you should know I am still in the Navy, awaiting discharge. I wonder how you're faring now that you are back in Havana. I find myself thinking about you constantly. I see you on the terrace of your mother's boarding house painting the ships in the harbor. I hear you playing a Mozart sonata with your violin. . . . I miss you so much . . .

Townsend abruptly crumpled up the letter and threw it on the floor. The boat heeled suddenly, reminding him of why he'd come down to his cabin. He made some quick calculations at the chart table and looked around the cabin to make sure the kitchen table and chairs were all secured to the floor. If they were lucky, they could reach Key West before dark, but as he surfaced on deck, one look at the cresting whitecaps told him they might not be so fortunate.

Property of Lyons Press



By noon, sea and sky had come together, emptied of all color in an endless canvas of black and gray. This was no ordinary storm. The topmasts were soon bending like coachwhips, and Townsend ordered the men to drop the topsails, reef all sails and run lifelines from bow to stern, tie the jolly boat down, secure the water barrels, and tightly close the hatches and portholes. He looked behind him to the south. He could barely make out the lighthouse on Loggerhead Key that gave him a visual bearing.

"I reckon we're in for a real blow," Metcalf said in his distinctive lilting accent. He pointed to the waves with the cresting whitecaps. "What's our course to be?"

"We'll stand on a north, northeast course for now until we get the first bands of squally weather," Townsend replied, trying to sound assured. "Then turn southeast and try to reach the light marking the channel into Key West."

"Why not heave to?" the bosun asked. "Ride out this storm out in open water?"

"We need to make Key West by nightfall."

"Don't mean to question your thinking, Cap'n," Metcalf said, a stubborn edge in his voice. "I don't believe we can reach Key West before dark. This ain't no run-of-the-mill, mackerel sky storm we got comin'. This could be one of them hurricanes."

"We need to get back and make a report to Naval headquarters," Townsend snapped back with a glare. "The commander will want us back in

port.” He looked away. Townsend knew the bosun was right. There was no need to be reckless. But the war had made him more willing to take a risk. It had left him skeptical and suspicious of other men’s advice, less trusting of others. It had hardened him, making him even more stubborn than he was before. But there was another reason he wanted to get back as soon as possible. He wanted to see if he could find out any news about Emma. She had left Key West months ago to sail to Havana, leaving behind many of her belongings at her sister’s house where she had lived during the war. Her sister’s husband had confided to him that Emma might be coming back to collect her possessions. He thought he could leave a letter with her sister and find out more about Emma’s plans.

They were about twenty miles out into the Gulf when the first line of sharp squalls struck them, and the unruly winds suddenly switched to the northeast. One look at Metcalf’s sullen face told him that the man was watching him. He brought the ship to windward causing the sails to crack like gunshots. He then gave the orders to drop the mainsail, leaving them with a tightly reefed foresail and a small storm trysail. For the next three hours, the winds picked up dramatically while the steadily falling barometer told Townsend there was a lot more storm coming.

Mounting waves rose along her lee quarter, leaping over the side. The strong gusts of wind and the stinging rain began to unnerve him. This storm was descending on them more quickly than he had expected. Metcalf had been right. They were being knocked down further to the southwest, away from the Key West channel buoy toward the shoaly areas. Night would soon fall, and the weather was worsening.

Before Townsend had time to think of an alternate plan, a solid black cloud rose up into the eastern sky and dropped on top of them with a sudden fury, almost instantly turning day into night. The winds burst onto the ship with a howling roar and a deluge of water, rain, and spray. The *Rebecca* went over onto her side and the crew found themselves sliding down the near-vertical deck into foaming ocean water.

Townsend clutched the wheel and tried to hold on even as he felt his feet slipping. He forced his knees between the spokes to try to control the kicking wheel. It was a constant fight for him to hold the schooner steady. Water poured over the gunwales into the cabin. He called out to Langworth to start pumping. The other two crew members were caught in a swirl of foaming water covering the deck that would have pulled them overboard if not for the lifelines. Townsend feared the masts would give way. It was Metcalf who saved the day by taking the ax from the side of the wheelhouse and cutting

away sections of the bulwarks on the lee side so that the water could more quickly drain off.

Townsend stood rigidly still. Soaked and shivering, he shielded his eyes as he looked at the bucking bow of the schooner and the lines thrashing about the deck. The ship tossed about, shaking furiously, running blindly. His mind became jumbled. He imagined Hendricks, calm as ever, looking at him in that same quiet manner with those oddly mismatched eyes, one hopeful, the other sad. Townsend looked to him for some kind of signal, but none came.

It was Metcalf who snapped him out of his paralysis. Clutching the windward stays, the bosun, his eyes large and haggard, pointed to a dark clump off to the southwest.

“Mangroves,” he cried out. “Sharp on the starboard bow. Must be Marquesas Keys.”

Townsend could just make out the low shadowy line on the starboard side. During the war, he’d once pursued a small Confederate sloop into a narrow channel on the southeast side of this circular archipelago of mangrove islands. He’d followed behind and discovered a wide shallow lagoon where you could find shelter. He’d always heard that there was no better way for a boat to ride out a hurricane than tucked inside one of these heavily forested mangrove hideaways.

Leaning back against the powerful northeast wind, Townsend grabbed the wheel with more purpose. He knew there was plenty of deep water if he stayed in the Boca Grande channel on a southerly course, keeping a mile to two miles away from the Marquesas. Over the noise of the wind, he told Metcalf his plan and had the bosun inform de la Cruz to look out for a peninsula on their starboard side.

Water and wind churned around him. Townsend wiped his face as they approached the northern edge of the Marquesas. He thought he saw a ship. He wondered if his eyes were playing tricks on him. A shiver of suspense shot down his back. He turned his head quickly toward the mangrove shoreline and caught another glimpse, but then it was gone, swallowed by the sea. Townsend looked again and this time he saw it. A big schooner had run hard aground in the Marquesas shallows, the hull leaning to one side. Townsend watched mesmerized as four small ghostly figures attempted to climb into one of the ship’s yawl boats even as white rollers swept over the deck, exploding in bursts of spray.

“Look, Metcalf. A shipwreck. Do you see it? Over there.”

The bosun turned, but at that moment a huge wave blocked his view. He shook his head.

"Did you see it? A wreck!" Townsend screamed, but his words were lost in the howl of the wind. Metcalf just kept shaking his head. When Townsend looked back, the shipwreck was lost into the spray and darkness behind them.

From the bow, de la Cruz quickly signaled that they'd passed the peninsula he'd been told to look for. Townsend began turning the helm to starboard even as he caught sight of a giant wave looming above them. Every spar and part of the rigging seemed to quiver as the boat rode up the side of this mountainous wave that seemed to grow bigger and bigger.

When they reached the crest, Townsend signaled to Metcalf to help him and together the two men pulled the spokes of the wheel hard to starboard. The schooner began hurtling down the other side of the wave. He could now just barely make out the narrow entrance framed by a low line of mangroves. He yelled to Langworth to raise the centerboard, and then turned the boat toward the break in the shadows.

Moments later, the *Rebecca* shot into an unmarked channel with extreme shallows on either side. Townsend kept the boat pointed directly at the break in the wall of mangroves ahead of him. He knew his timing had to be perfect. There was deep water right up to the mangroves, but then it shallowed out quickly. If he went too far, the schooner would go hard aground in the most exposed part of the lagoon, where the waves would swallow them.

As soon as they reached the tree line, he rounded the ship up into the wind. He heard the sails explode and the rigging shake and snap. The bosun threw out the stern anchor as a big swell hit them broadside, causing the schooner to careen over to one side, but then the anchor line drew taut, slowing the boat's forward progress. The thick hull hit the sandy bottom with a jarring thud, and then the schooner's bow shot forward with tremendous force, twisting and scraping into the noisy embrace of the mangrove forest.



In the black hole of the ship's hull, Townsend and the four others huddled together in the darkness, curled up against the bulkhead. There was no sleep to be had that night. He had no sense of what time it was. Hour after hour the storm continued to rage. He couldn't see the other men. All he heard above the howl of the wind and the creaking of the ship were occasional curses. Townsend couldn't get the sight of that shipwreck out of his mind, and the figures he'd seen struggling on deck. He wondered whether those men were dead. *They must have drowned.* Townsend placed his hands over

his head to block out the deafening noise. He wasn't even totally sure that the shipwreck was real. Maybe he imagined it?

De la Cruz crawled into one of the berths and began praying in Spanish. "*Santa María, Madre de Dios ruega por nosotros, pecadores ahora y en la hora de nuestra muerte . . .*" Townsend was fluent in Spanish, so he was well aware of the words, a prayer to the Virgin Mary.

A rolling wave smashed against the ship's hull. Townsend could now feel the boat being rocked back and forth and then the jarring thump and the thud of the thick hull hitting the sandy bottom. Townsend braced himself for the moment when the wood below his feet would finally surrender to the battering of the waves.

Sometime in the middle of the night, the winds died down. Townsend guessed it must have been around midnight. He allowed himself to think that perhaps the worst was over, and he prepared himself to go outside. But then the fury of the storm began all over again.

Townsend heard a voice in the dark.

"Tide's rising, Captain. Winds have changed direction. Storm surge coming in from the west."

"I know Metcalf . . . I know . . ."

The flood of water now rushing in was inundating the low-lying land and the mangroves of the Marquesas, raising the boat higher and higher. The spiderweb of lines they'd run through the mangroves and secured to the stilted roots could soon give way due to the tremendous force being exerted on them by the wind and the sea. Townsend imagined the boat being carried away by the wind and the current, hijacked by the storm surge onto the first rocks or sandbars they ran into.

"Grab that line, Bosun."

Townsend was already tying one end of a thick half-inch line around his waist, securing it with a bowline.

"Are we going outside, Cap'n?"

"I am. You're staying, Metcalf. Just secure your end of the line to the base of the main mast and slacken ever so slowly. Tollman, you help him. Feed the line to me and take up slack as needed."

Townsend crawled his way in the dark to the companionway and climbed up the steps. Slowly, he opened the hatch and immediately wished he hadn't. A sudden blast of wind filled with rain and sea spray burst into the enclosed cabin.

"Keep that rope tight, Metcalf," Townsend yelled as he wiggled outside onto the deck. The wind immediately stung and burned his face. Its unrelenting howl was more intense and louder than he had imagined. He had

been under fire during the war and had heard cannonballs flying at close range. The only way he could describe the sound he heard now was imagining hundreds of cannonballs roaring by.

The Navy lieutenant put his hands over his ears and covered his face with his arm. It was dark, but his eyes had grown used to the blackness. He clung to the slippery deck like a lizard on a wall, crawling and clawing his way over to the windward side of the boat where he grabbed the lifeline with one hand. There at the rail he could see the cresting waves steadily rolling in and then bursting onto the deck, exploding on top of him in a deluge of foam and spray.

He was alone now, alone with the storm. He conjured up the image of a crouching cat, the storm stalking its prey, looking out over the horizon. He saw a body lying in repose, and realized he was looking at himself. Townsend shook his head to try to regain his focus. He felt the extreme strain and pressure on the hemp lines holding the boat. There was no way he could loosen or slack them. A voice inside his head spoke to him, a calm and resonant voice, with a soft Bahamian lilt. It was Hendricks. They'd been through so much danger together. He knew he could trust this voice.

"You ain' got no choice. Cut de lines," the voice said.

Clinging to the shrouds to brace himself, he got up on his knees and pulled out his ship's knife. He began slicing the lines from the cleats and bitts. One by one he cut them. The boat sprang upwards, tasting freedom like a captive bird, and then groaned as a separate set of lines restrained it. When they'd run the schooner into the dense foliage in the lagoon and tied it down to the mangroves, he had insisted that the crew set up a separate protective set of lines with more slack, just in case something like this storm surge happened.

Once safely back inside the dark cabin, Townsend threw himself down on the cabin sole shivering with exhaustion. All he could do was pray that the second set of lines would hold. Only Metcalf and Tollman seemed to understand what he'd done. The two others were either asleep or lost in another world. Townsend closed his eyes. He was cold and wet. His mouth was salty, giving him a sudden thirst. He wrapped his arms protectively around his body as he listened to the gale outside, allowing himself to fall into his own dark thoughts.

Strangely, he kept thinking about writing a letter home, but then he realized there was no home. He thought of his father's last letter. His familiar scrawling handwriting was shaky, the lettering faint and wobbly. He knew something was wrong, but he never thought it was a farewell letter. He never thought he was dying. He'd written the Admiral requesting an emergency forty-day leave to see his father, but the fighting in Florida was intense then,

and his request had been denied. He should have tried harder, but he hadn't. With his father, mother, and brother all dead now, he was alone. At least his poor father had died knowing that his only remaining son had managed to become a Navy lieutenant even after suffering the disgrace of being kicked out of the Naval Academy for unruly behavior two years earlier.

His troubled mind wandered back to the ambush on the Suwannee River. He remembered rowing down river after attacking a band of Confederates herding cattle north for the rebel armies, and then hearing the cry of a panther. The rustling of leaves had whispered the only warning. Then the scream of bullets. Cries everywhere. Through the smoke from the ship's howitzer, he could see the shadowy gray figures on the banks firing at the boat through the black stands of trees. The sound of Confederate cavalry thundering down toward them. A man in a dark gray cavalry greatcoat shouted. "Show them no quarter!" They were aiming at the Black seaman in Navy blue, the man he'd ordered to climb to the top of the mast to pilot them down the river.

The waves pounding against the hull now seemed to him like sea creatures gnawing at the sides of the boat, demanding to be let in. He imagined the seawater creeping in through the planking, rising steadily, dark and salty. The overhanging mangrove branches scraped against the hull, snapping and cracking in the air, whipping the sides of the ship like a cat-o'-nine-tails. *Death comes to us all.* He tried to imagine what was waiting for him on the other side. The fates would decide. He accepted that. He bowed his head and readied himself for whatever lay ahead.

Townsend must have dropped off to sleep because the next thing he heard was a man's voice telling him to wake up. It was dawn, and the winds had died down considerably. Townsend opened his eyes to the faint light and the sound of the halyards slapping against the mast. *Whop. Whop.* He shook himself awake. A shadowy, bearded figure with a heavy neck and broad shoulders was talking to him. It was Metcalf.

"I'm guessin' the better part of last night's mischief be over now, Cap'n," the bosun said to him.

Townsend jumped up, telling Metcalf to wake the others as he staggered toward the companionway.

Property of Lyons Press

3



Filled with trepidation, and uncertain at what he would find, Townsend slid open the hatch. As his head emerged from the companionway, his lungs filled with a warm blast of tangy salt air mixed with the earthy ripeness of the mangroves. He looked around at a scene of complete destruction. The once lush Marquesas looked like a place that nature had decided to abandon. Miraculously, the hull was intact, and they hadn't lost the jolly boat overboard as he had feared they might. Piles of twisted rigging were strewn around the deck along with broken branches, sand, and mud.

It was early afternoon when they finished making essential repairs—replacing and tightening the stays for the two masts, and jury rigging a new headsail. Fortunately, the mainsail that had remained furled during the storm and had been tightly secured was undamaged. They used a kedge anchor to pull themselves out of the snarl and tangle of the mangrove forest and then with the winds now switching more southerly, sailed out of the channel away from the Marquesas lagoon. The sky and the ocean were still a ghostly gray. The winds had died down considerably, but the swells were still huge.

Townsend handed the helm to Metcalf while he continued to survey the damage to the boat. Down below, he could see that water was coming in through the centerboard trunk, so he ordered Langworth to take the first turn at manning the hand pumps. Then he told Tollman to use the draw bucket to scoop up seawater and clean away the mud and debris still on the decks.

Townsend gave out these orders even though he was in a trance. The constant battering flashed before him in a jumble of images. He was still not

certain how they had survived. He couldn't get the haunting sight of that wreck out of his mind. At first, he didn't want to say anything. He thought no one would believe him, but then he decided to tell the crew what he'd seen. They looked back at him, their eyes large and haggard.

"Was I the only one who saw it?" he asked.

No one spoke. Finally, Metcalf asked each sailor. They all shook their heads. No one else had spotted anything like that, but they all agreed it was their duty to investigate it.

As they approached the northern edge of the Marquesas, the scars from the storm were everywhere. Leafless trees, stumped and bent over, twisted and broken branches. The bosun pointed out several bales of cotton mysteriously floating in the shallows near the channel. An eerie sight, as there was no sign of where they'd come from. Both men knew what the other was thinking. A long line of white-headed pelicans crossed in front of them, flying through the pewter sky like a wobbling kite's tail.

De la Cruz from up in the crosstrees, shouted, "*Los mástiles de una goleta. Allá.*"

He pointed off to the north and said he could see a ship's spars jutting out of the water not far from where the pelicans were flying.

Carefully and slowly, Townsend climbed the shaky ratlines and with his telescope caught a glimpse of a lead-gray hull with broken topmasts. It was the ship he'd seen—a large schooner, nearly twice the size of the *Rebecca*. It was canted off to one side in a dangerous area of shoals surrounded by outlying clumps of mangroves. The westerly waves had moved it into slightly deeper water, where the incoming breakers kept up a continual assault on the hull.

Once back on deck, Townsend took the helm and steered as close as he dared to get a better look, remaining about a mile away in the deeper water of the channel. He guessed that the ship might have been coming from New Orleans, perhaps headed for New York or Boston. There was no sign of any movement. He scanned the horizon looking for survivors, but there was nothing to see. No sign of life.

"We'll have to file a report," Townsend said to Metcalf. "We need to search that boat, check for survivors."

"Aye, aye, Cap'n."

"Heave to!" Metcalf shouted to the foredeck sailors.

The crew backed the storm jib to windward while keeping the reefed mainsail loosely trimmed on the other side. With these swells, Townsend calculated that the *Rebecca* would stay in place with little to no motion, forward or backward.

Townsend decided to go himself to inspect the ship, and he chose Tollman to go with him. He'd seen that Langworth and the Black sailor had not worked well together and he wanted no trouble. They lowered the jolly boat and began rowing toward the wreck. The big schooner was in four to five feet of water, solidly aground on grassy sand. The ship's rigging was twisted and shredded like a tangle of forest vines. The cargo was strewn all around, caught in clumps of mangroves along the shoreline. Dozens of cotton bales and rough-hewn sections of lumber were being tossed around in the shallows like bobbing pelicans.

The schooner's lead-gray color made Townsend curious about whether it was a former Confederate blockade runner. One of the two yawl boats was still on board. Not a good omen. He could read the ship's name on the stern. *Hard Times*, out of New Orleans. With the ship's sharp bow, raking transom, and flat bottom, Townsend's skilled eye told him the ship was probably a Gulf Coast schooner built in Biloxi or Appalachicola.

The southerly waves were battering one side of the ship, so they rowed around to the protected side, where they tied a painter to the shrouds. They'd brought along a flask of water and a canvas bag with a coil of rope, a knife, a hammer, and an ax in case they needed to open any doors or cut any ropes. Townsend knew the ship would break apart soon. With each incoming swell, the ship's wooden beams groaned in agony. They climbed aboard and carefully pulled themselves from one part of the slanted deck to the next, grabbing onto whatever they could to keep their balance. The planking cracked and creaked with each step they made.

Townsend opened the hatchway that led to the cabin and began to walk down the companionway steps. He could see there was at least three feet of seawater inside. A large skylight overhead provided enough light to make out shapes of objects. Just below the water level, he could make out the black outline of the wood-burning stove and the kitchen table where the crew had sat. A salted fish of some kind hung from a nail behind the stove. There were several berths made of rough-hewn oak planks and gimbaled turpentine lanterns attached to the bulkheads. It was clear the crew had left in a hurry. Tar-stained ditty bags stuffed with sailors' clothes and sewing kits were still hanging on hooks.

Townsend spotted a bookshelf above one of the berths, and he stepped down into the water to reach it. There was a navigation book on Florida and Cuba with a secession insignia on it. He waded as far as he could go, but then swam back to the stern of the ship. In the captain's cabin, where there was a lingering scent of tobacco smoke, he found a collection of pipes and packages of Virginia Belle chewing tobacco perched on a small cabinet. He smiled

when he read the label on the matches: "Lucifers. To Be Kept Dry." What surprised him was a package of Cuban cigars, *Flor de Tabacos de Partagás*. He knew the brand. It was some of the finest tobacco grown on the island of Cuba, all from the *Vuelta Abajo* region. There were bottles of opium powder and jimsonweed. Townsend wondered what these men wanted jimsonweed for. It was a poison—at least that's what he'd been told.

Toward the bow, the two men heard thuds. Something was crashing against the bulkhead that divided the cabin from the cargo hold. Tollman, who had followed cautiously behind Townsend, looked over at him with alarm.

"What dah be, Cap'n?"

"I reckon we'll find out, Tollman," Townsend replied tersely.

"Sounds like someone bangin' on de wall," the sailor said. "Could be evil spirits. Haints, we call 'em. Tryin' to escape."

Townsend ignored that remark. He took one last look around. He noticed that the navigation book had a heavily worn Spanish nautical chart of Cuba folded inside and a small sketch book. He opened the notebook and was surprised at some of the detailed pencil drawings of islands and one river that had more twists and unusual bends than he'd ever seen before. It looked like a long rawhide whip whistling through the air. On a whim, he threw all the charts, the navigation book, and the sketch book in his canvas bag. The two men climbed out of the cabin and crawled underneath some of the fallen wreckage to get to the center of the ship. They reached the cargo hold hatch on hands and knees.

"Dis ain' just toggl'd down—it nailed shut," said Tollman.

The two men began to pry open the hatch with the knife and the hammer. They pulled out nail after nail until they could lift the large cover and look down inside. The smell of turpentine and moldy, wet wood assaulted their noses. Townsend could just barely make out the barrels of turpentine and the shadowy stacks of bales of cotton on one end. Some pieces of lumber had come loose in the water and were banging against the other side of the hold.

"Looks like your haints are carved out of wood, Tollman," Townsend said. He reached down into the water and grabbed something. He pulled up a man's floppy hat. The Black sailor recoiled. With fresh urgency, Townsend handed Tollman one end of the rope they'd brought and lowered himself inside the hold. He splashed around inside the dark space, listening to the echoes, trying to get used to the darkness. His feet touched something heavy but soft. He thought it moved, and he wondered if it could be a fish. He

jerked away, but then something else pushed up from underneath him, causing him to swim away.

“What in tarnation?”

Townsend felt a shirt and pulled on it. A large object bumped up against him. He reached down and grabbed it, gasping as he realized what it was. He surfaced in an explosion of splashing, yelling to Tollman.

“Wha’ happen? What you see, Cap’n?”

“A hand! A man’s hand!”

“Oh, Moses! Sweet heavenly Moses!” cried Tollman.

Then something else floated to the surface. Townsend turned to look at what it was and found himself staring at a man’s grayish black face. The mouth was wide open, and the sightless, dulled eyes stared up at him.

“There’s a dead man. Right here!” Townsend yelled as he splashed about in the water.

“Oh Lawd! Sweet land of love and mercy!” Tollman cried out as he jumped back.

“Throw me a line, damn it to hell!” Townsend shouted. He now knew what was bumping up against him. He shivered. There were bodies of dead men floating all around him. He felt nauseous. All he wanted to do was get out of there. Trembling from head to toe, he grabbed the line that Tollman threw him and took deep breaths to calm himself. It was then that he heard a faint noise from one corner of the cargo hold. Something was moving. His heart felt like it had climbed into his throat.

“Somebody here? Who’s that?” Townsend cried out. He heard a groan. Some rustling. Townsend was too shocked to say anything. The noise came from the top of the cotton bales which were above the water level. Then he heard a weak voice stammer.

“Help me. . . . I need help.”

“Tarnation to hell! There’s someone alive down here, Tollman,” Townsend shouted. “A survivor. He’s injured.”

Townsend grabbed one of the floating pieces of lumber inside the hold and began swimming with it over to where the voice came from. He could now see the shape of a man looking down at him.

“Hold on. I’m coming. We’ll get you out of there.”

“*Ma tête*. My head,” the faltering voice cracked. “Hurt bad.”

“We will get you help,” Townsend replied, but the man just groaned. “Who are you?” Townsend asked. He noticed the mixture of French and English.

The figure in the shadows didn’t respond, and Townsend knew he had to get the man out into the open air quickly. Slowly, he tied the rope around

the man's waist and lowered him gingerly onto the board. He took care to keep his head above water as he pushed the rough-hewn log over toward the cargo hold entrance. He could now see the man was a young Black man, dressed in simple homespun clothes. He'd been hit on the head by some blunt object and had lost a lot of blood.

Tollman made good use of his broad shoulders and grabbed the man's collar, giving one tremendous yank and pulling the injured man up through the hole, all the time talking to himself about Moses and Abraham and sweet salvation. Once Townsend got out of the hold and looked down at the man lying face up on the deck, he knew there wasn't much they could do for him. He was struggling for breath.

"We're losing him, Tollman," Townsend said as he nudged the man's shoulders. "Give me the flask."

Townsend tried to get the man to take a drink, opening his lips to let the water trickle into his mouth. He sputtered and then swallowed. Townsend loosened the man's shirt. In the bright sun, his dark skin shone like polished mahogany, revealing the raised welts from previous whippings. The man's eyes seemed to be looking past Townsend into the sky above.

"Help me raise his head, Tollman. We need to give him more water."

Tollman cradled the man's head while Townsend held the flask to his lips.

"Your name . . . What's your name?" Townsend asked, leaning close to hear if the man replied.

"Thaddeus. Thaddeus Burrell," the man breathed out, struggling to speak.

"Where did you come from?"

The man's eyes blinked and then closed. His lips moved, but no sound came out.

"What happened?"

The dying man reached to grab Townsend's shirt.

"Buckra man," he whispered. "Take us from Fannie Place plantation near New Orleans to the ship on de river. Dey lock us up. Ten of us."

"Where?" Townsend asked as he leaned in closer. "Where were you being taken?"

The man didn't reply. His hand fell to the side. Townsend repeated the question.

All he heard was the man say, "Thaddeus free now. A free man. *Libéré*."

Townsend shook the man, but to no avail.

"Taint no use, Cap'n. He deh in the hands of the Lawd now."

Townsend sat back trying to catch his breath and absorb what had just happened. The man had said there were nine others with him. The hatch had been nailed tightly shut. They had been left to die there. He didn't know

how, but he knew the guilty ones were most likely those four men he'd seen escaping from the ship in the storm.

Tollman was the one who broke the silence. "Looks lak Lucifer himself bin heah. Brought in a whole mess of hell and evil with dat storm."

The dead man's face stared up at Townsend. The eyes were no longer moist, but dry and flat like sunbaked mud.

"I don't know, Tollman. I'm not sure about Lucifer, but I think you're right about hell and evil."



Once they returned to the deck of the *USS Rebecca*, Townsend and the other members of the crew watched the water sweep over the wreck, the waves and current slowly dragging the wooden hull through the sandy shallows into deeper water. Townsend stood there, silent and awestruck, listening to the ship's timbers groan like a dying sea creature in agony. He felt guilty that they were unable to recover the bodies, but it was too dangerous. He and Tollman had been forced to leave quickly. He thought about the war and the cause he had fought for—the freedom of the enslaved. Was it coming undone already?

He heard the harsh squawk of a great heron and spotted the tall, white bird partially hidden inside a large clump of mangroves next to a few snowy white egrets. Then there was a frenzy of splashing from a school of fish. Dozens of dark cormorants swooped by the schooner and began diving into the water for their morning meal. The silhouette of an osprey looked down at this drama from a leafless tree like an expectant vulture. He thought to himself with sadness that this spot next to the mangroves was the only marker these men would have.