

The Ghosts of January

January 8, 1815

Just outside of New Orleans, Louisiana

Chapter 1

The assault on the Chalmette Plantation was a failure; that much was evident. What was left of the infantry heard General Pakenham screaming “Onward lads, onward!” and dutifully obeyed, rushing onward into the mouth of the dragon, into the fiery breath of American rifles and cannons. As each man leapt blindly out of the fog, clumsily stumbling over the bodies of his comrades only to face an explosion of gunfire from above, the insanity of the General’s order became more apparent. The illusion of duty and the myths of glory and gallantry evaporated from their minds, and they rushed back down the embankment, back under the cover of the thick fog.

Amid the unending thunder of cannon fire, shouts could be heard from the northern attack group. “The General is dead! The General is dead! We are ordered to retreat!” The order did little more than to make official that which had already occurred; the confused and exhausted soldiers had been fleeing downriver or into the swamps to the northeast since it first became clear that this attack would be futile.

The intention had been to approach the enemy position concealed by the fog, climb up alongside their makeshift fortifications and take them by surprise. However, by the time the attack finally began, the fog on the higher ground had dissipated. With full view of everything below them the Americans sat atop the hill annihilating wave after wave of emerging British soldiers with little chance of being overtaken.

It was late afternoon by now, getting close to twilight. The attack had started too late in the day. If they’d attacked sooner, the fog may not have yet receded so far off the hill, and the advancing British may not have been so exposed as they charged unawares out from under cover.

As the desperate situation deteriorated into panic, Captain James Gouldstone tried to keep his wits about him and urged what was left of his decimated company to do the same. “Come lads,” he called. “Keep close and follow me!” And with that, musket and sword in hand, he ducked down the hill and into the misty shroud with a few nearby soldiers close behind. As cannonballs and lead shot continued to rain down upon them, they retreated a few hundred yards across the fields towards the barely-visible tree line.

The continuing roar of fighting echoed behind them as the small band withdrew from the battlefield. Stumbling blindly through the unnaturally thick fog, his eyes stinging from sweat, Gouldstone was unsure exactly how many of his own men were with him or whether the Americans were in pursuit. He pressed on towards the trees, catching shadowy glimpses of others around him: some running, some falling, all trying to avoid stepping on or tripping over the slain. In the frenzy, those who fell were trampled underfoot, and some were shot in the back by American sharpshooters who got lucky enough to score a hit despite the low visibility. Every now and then an errant cannonball would fall screeching nearby with an explosion of dirt, or a musket ball would whistle through the mist.

They were now headed away from the sun, eastward through the woods towards the marshy low-lying areas surrounding Chalmette. Gouldstone was relieved to have at least made it out of the open fields, and he stopped momentarily to look behind him. Although he could see practically nothing from this position, the sounds of warfare still resonated from the hill: gunshot after gunshot, and the sounds of men screaming. The ghostly silhouettes of running soldiers criss-crossed through the trees, obscured by haze and just barely out of clear view.

A young man came into view then, a corporal, and approached Captain Gouldstone. He was short of breath, caked in mud, and his face bloodied. “Captain,” he said.

“Corporal Wilde,” Gouldstone replied. “It is a relief to see a familiar face.”

From behind Wilde two more young soldiers emerged from the fog, one of them with a terrible gaping hole in his leg, and the other helping the wounded one limp along. The injured soldier gibbered miserably, using his rifle as a crutch and trying with all his might not to yell out in pain. It was a brave attempt to keep whatever composure he had left. The other soldier was not obviously injured, but like Gouldstone and Wilde he was in a state of dishevelment. One sleeve of his coat was torn most of the way off. The right leg of his pants was saturated with blood; presumably the blood from his companion's wound. Half of his face was hidden under a mask of mud, possibly spattered by a cannonball that fell too close. He addressed the Captain.

“Captain, Sir. Edward Watson at your command, Sir. My older brother John, Sir... he's been hit.”

Wilde paused to catch a few breaths. “Captain, what happened? It was a massacre, Sir.”

The Corporal's assessment was correct, and the Captain knew it. But Gouldstone was a clear-headed man and this was not the proper moment to be discussing the failures of the attack. He needed to keep these soldiers calm, and lead them somewhere safe. “Lads,” he began. “The American cavalry will surely be taking flight after us, and soon. Let us keep moving for now, as far from the battlefield as we can. If General Pakenham has indeed been killed, I'm sure General Lambert has assumed command of the forces and will regroup at the camp downriver. We'll make our way there and rejoin our army.” Addressing Edward Watson specifically, he added: “there we can treat your brother's wounds.”

Corporal Wilde nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Yes, Sir, Captain” echoed the younger Watson. His brother winced and moaned, but managed to answer: “Yes, Sir.”

And with that, the four continued trudging eastward through the cypress trees, as the ground grew soft and moist beneath their feet. The hanging Spanish moss waved in their faces and their boots slogged through the mud as they pushed their way through the undergrowth. Occasionally their feet found a root or a shallow pool of water that caused them to falter, but they stayed close together and kept moving. They proceeded cautiously due to the lack of visibility and also a desire to stay relatively quiet. After heading some distance, Captain Gouldstone stopped for a moment to listen.

The fracas of the battle was still audible behind them, but it seemed to be slowly waning as the remaining British stragglers were either captured or killed. Gouldstone pondered the situation for a moment.

“Corporal, we’ll head a mile or so further to the east, and then we should be able to turn south and find the river. We’ll be able to find the position that General Lambert has fallen back to.”

“Very good, Sir,” the Corporal replied.

“Now mind your step and keep your eyes peeled, though I know it’s difficult to see much of anything in this mess.”

And so, after a quick assessment and reloading of their weapons, the four red-coated soldiers trudged through the muddy forest. Dusk was now beginning to fall, and the orange light of the setting sun shone through the haze behind them. John Watson stumbled along with his brother by his side, determined to move by his own power as much as possible. “That’s the spirit, John,” his brother whispered to him. “Keep on moving and when we get to the camp the surgeons will take care of everything.”

As they came into a small clearing, Gouldstone stopped suddenly and held up his hand to halt the others. They all crouched down, muskets at the ready, and listened. After a moment, the Captain was certain he could hear footsteps rapidly splashing through puddles somewhere off to the right, and agitated voices slipping through the trees far

ahead of where they stood. He glanced over his shoulder to where Corporal Wilde waited behind him and spoke in a hushed voice.

“There are others in these woods with us, and whether they’re friend or foe, I don’t know. You four followed me off the hill, didn’t you? Did many others?”

“Yes, Sir. I do know that a few others followed along as we left the hill, but I think we were pretty well scattered in the fog. Being unable to see very well, and with the unsure footing, it was very hard to stay in a group.”

Gouldstone nodded in understanding, and began to feel some shame in the fact that he had no idea how many of his men had followed him. He was a veteran of the Wars against Napoleon; he thought of himself as a noble soldier and a competent leader. And yet he was in such a hurry to flee the debacle at the plantation, he had gone down off the hillside and into the fog without taking full notice of those around him. The thought made him bristle a bit, but he turned back to the matter at hand.

He motioned for the four men to take cover. All four of them stooped behind trees and watched in the direction of the sounds with their rifles raised even the wounded John Watson, who grit his teeth and stared intensely, trying to ignore the pain of his wounded leg. Soon it became apparent that the footsteps and voices were growing louder with each passing minute. With their eyes and bayonets fixed to the south, they waited with tense anticipation to see who was approaching.

As the sound of the sloshing footsteps on the damp forest floor grew nearer and more hurried, the soldiers heard the rustling of shrubbery being pushed through and wet leaves being trampled. Soon they could see a pair of figures approaching through the mist. Captain Gouldstone at first was tempted to call out and demand that they identify themselves, but he thought better of it and waited silently until he had a better view. Then, as the phantoms grew closer, he was sure he could make out a distinctive shade of red.

Two British soldiers rushed into view, stumbling and out of breath, and were immediately aware of the party waiting for them behind the trees with their rifles leveled at them. The panting soldiers came to a sudden stop, slipping on the mud and almost falling backwards. Their crimson uniforms were tattered, their white pants covered in blood and filth. They were panicked and unbalanced, and they raised their bayonets defensively.

“You there, steady on!” called the Captain.

One of them, wide-eyed and exasperated, sensed that these were his countrymen but wasted no time with pleasantries. He barked “Hurry, keep moving! The Americans are behind us!”

At that moment a volley of shots came from the south. Tongues of flames from the muzzle blasts pierced the clouds of fog about fifty yards away, and a few heavy branches of nearby trees exploded into splinters. The thick smoke from the American muskets wafted towards them and obscured their vision further. There were screams and splashes, just out of sight, as some other unfortunate soldiers were cut down while they fled. Angry voices in the distance began shouting, and the pace of splashing footsteps quickened.

In a sudden panic, John Watson pointed his musket towards the sound of the shouting and fired off a shot. His brother and Corporal Wilde, both startled by the unexpected blast, instinctively followed suit, though neither was quite sure where to aim. None of them could tell if their shots had been successful in hitting their mark.

Captain Gouldstone shouted out, “Hold your fire! Hold your fire! We don’t know who we’re shooting at; fellow British are there as well!”

A second series of shots exploded through the woods in response. The Americans were closing in, and the violent sounds of men being cut down by sword and bayonet indicated that they had intercepted a group of British soldiers attempting to escape. Some

of them must have returned fire, but from the overwhelming sounds of the struggle it was apparent they were outnumbered and quickly being dispatched.

“We must retreat!” Gouldstone called to them. “Quickly, this way!”

John Watson turned to run, but keeled over in pain as he put pressure on his leg. He steadied himself with his musket as his brother rushed to his side and grabbed him by the arm, helping to lead him away from the approaching Americans. As their comrades disappeared to the north, the two Watsons floundered through the mud until John’s foot was caught by a Cypress root, and he fell forward, screaming in pain. This caused Edward to lose his balance and he collapsed alongside his brother, falling solidly against the trunk of an old cypress and knocking the wind from his lungs. He rolled to his side and tried pulling himself up, struggling to crawl back to John.

Both brothers squirmed in the mud as the band of Americans rushed into view. While John lay helpless in a fetal heap, writhing and frothing at the mouth, Edward positioned himself between his brother and the oncoming American soldiers, planted the stock of his rifle in the ground and steadied the bayonet, hoping to impale at least one enemy.

Frantically rushing into deeper swamp to escape certain death, Captain James Gouldstone heard one last volley of gunshots echo through the trees behind them.

Chapter 2

As the sun set, Captain Gouldstone, Corporal Wilde, and the two strangers marched desperately northward. They were headed deeper into the cypress swamps. Mounds of dry ground rose amid pools of algae covered pools. The fog seemed to get thicker by the moment. The four soldiers stayed close together so as not to get lost in the mist, and their feet sank into the waterlogged soil as they navigated between the low marshy areas, carefully maneuvering from dry patch to dry patch.

Gouldstone glanced over his shoulder and said in a low voice, “Hold steady for a moment, lads.”

The Captain peered into the growing darkness, but could see nothing as the last bit of light from the sun faded in the west. There was no sign of anyone chasing after them. No voices, no shots, no footsteps.

Gouldstone knew that he had lost two men; once again he had fled from battle and left his soldiers behind to die. He sighed, quietly disgusted with himself. He took a glance at the men next to him; these men he would not fail. Gouldstone didn't understand why he had been such an inadequate leader on this day. Had the utter defeat in Chalmette broken his spirit? Had the prolonged effects of the war, and all the previous wars, finally jarred his nerves beyond repair? This wasn't like him, and his heart was heavy, but for the sake of his remaining troops he would need to remain dignified.

He finally took a moment to introduce himself to the soldiers who had joined them, and Corporal Wilde did the same. The two were Private Roger Barrett and Private William Hastings, and had been a part of the left flank attack group. Their company had been positioned closer to the Mississippi, but when the battle was lost and the ranks broke, they retreated into the forest, instead of heading downriver.

Gouldstone wasn't quite sure what to make of that: did it mean General Lambert did not make it to a rallying point downstream? Had the British forces been so thoroughly routed that they retreated in complete chaos? Was there no hope then of regrouping? It was a bleak proposition, one that the Captain had no interest in dwelling on for the time being, and he did not mention his misgivings to the others.

"It's unlikely the Americans will pursue us any further in the dark," stated the Captain. "We will have to hold here for the night, though. I don't think it prudent to try finding our way out of the swamp until daylight."

"I agree, Sir," answered Wilde. "We shouldn't stray too far from this spot. It is relatively dry here, and I know the deeper into the marsh we go, the more open water there will be."

The other soldiers murmured in agreement; they were glad to have a moment to rest, but uneasy about having to spend the night in the damp blackness of the bayou.

They all found places nearby to sit and rest. Captain Gouldstone took a seat on the trunk of a fallen cypress. They were now feeling pangs of hunger, and snacked on the unappetizingly stale biscuits they had in their packs. The chorus of frogs and insects began to grow, and shards of moonlight reached down through the trees. The whine of mosquitoes buzzed incessantly in their ears, and the younger soldiers swatted at them angrily, often pummeling themselves about the head in the process.

The captain mused to himself: "*Gnats are unnoted wheresoe'er they fly' ...* except here in this damnable place."

Wilde overheard and replied, "I hope the gnats are all we have to have to swat away, Captain. There are far more dangerous things in these swamps. We will be well off to stay far from the deeper water, lest we be devoured by the alligators."

"Very true, Corporal. Very true."

The hours that followed were unbearably slow. Aside from the cacophony of the swamp creatures, there was an occasional snap of a twig or a splash in a nearby pool that jolted the four soldiers from their tenuous sense of safety. Whenever a threatening sound was heard they would bolt upright, weapons at the ready, only to see nothing and hear nothing. Then they would assure themselves it was some creeping animal passing through, some raccoon or muskrat carrying about its nocturnal business, and settle back down on their tree limbs and stumps and wait. Occasionally, while one of them kept watch, the others were able to drift off to a shallow, restless sleep.

During the night it came to be the Captain Gouldstone's turn as lookout, and he sat perched upon the trunk of his fallen tree. He scanned the darkness for signs of danger, but saw none. Half-dreaming, his thoughts drifted back to his home in London, his family, and the holidays they took to the countryside when he was a boy. He thought about the tranquility of watching birds by the lakeside, and the exhilaration of horseback riding across the fields of England.

He was from a respected and well-to-do family, and was well-educated, often prone to quoting from Shakespeare or the Bible. Ever since he was a boy he had been of strong character, just the sort of boy who would grow into a man of strong character, a man who would become an officer in the King's army.

Strong character; or so he had thought until this wretched day. This day that twice has seen him scurry from combat; this day in which he now endured the indignity of wallowing in a festering swamp. His uniform, like those of his companions, was appallingly filthy, and a line from *The Merry Wives of Windsor* popped into his head. "*Stinking clothes that fretted in their own grease,*" he whispered to himself. The fetid mud and black sludge of the swamp; the funk of blood and sweat and decay; these things assaulted his senses.

“Are we all to die in this horrible place?” he asked idly. “Will our enemies find us and slaughter us, leaving us to sink into the mud and these putrid waters; leaving us to be torn apart by rodents and reptiles?”

There was no answer, save for the interminable, maddening din of the insects and frogs. He sighed and replied back to them, “You certainly are hell’s own Seraphim... an infernal host singing eternal praise to darkness and death!”

Staring down into the inky waters of the bayou, he considered another line from *The Merry Wives*: “*if the bottom were as deep as hell I should drown. I had been drowned but that the shore was shelvy and shallow; a death that I abhor, for the water swells a man...*”

Gouldstone was suddenly startled by a haunting image before him: a vision of his own bloated corpse floating face-down in the murky water, being chewed apart by scavenging animals. His mutilated companions lay haphazardly around him, their bodies shredded by musket shot, and their blood seeping into the swamp. He stood motionless before this vision, staring into the lifeless eyes of his slain soldiers. The chirping, whirring, buzzing sounds that surrounded him began to swell, louder and stronger. As it rose to a crescendo, he reached out his hand as though in a trance; reached out to touch the images he could see in his mind. Just as it seemed his fingers were about to brush upon his own cold and sallow flesh, the noise ceased and he heard a voice whisper sharply in his ear, “*He sent flies among them, which devoured them; and frogs, which destroyed them.*”

Captain Gouldstone was immediately shocked back to attention and he whirled around, aiming his rifle into the night. There was no one there.

His wide eyes darted in all directions as he panted, gasping for air. It took a moment, but he soon realized the vision was gone and the chatter of the swamp denizens had returned to normal. The three infantrymen remained in their resting places, each catching an elusive moment of sleep.

“My, James,” he sighed to himself as he settled back into his guard position. “You really have seen better days... Best get a hold of yourself, for your sake and the sake of these men in your charge.”

Young Roger Barrett stirred a bit, and glanced bleary-eyed at the Captain. “Captain Gouldstone, sir, is everything all right?”

“As right as it can be, I suppose,” the Captain replied.

“Would you like to try and get some rest Sir? I can relieve you of guard duty.”

“That would be fine, Barrett. Thank you.”

“Of course, Sir.”

And with that, Roger Barrett yawned and stretched, then stood up and took the guard position. Gouldstone settled down into a dry spot beneath a tree and rested his eyes. He was still a bit shaken by the horrible things he thought he'd seen, but dismissed them as products of an exhausted, half-dreaming state of mind. “As much rest as I can manage, it will do me well,” he thought. Though his head was racing, his body was utterly spent, and it wasn't long before he was drowsily drifting in and out of sleep.

He began dreaming of England, and of the countryside. He was a boy again, on holiday by the lake where his family would go in the summer. He felt the warm breeze and the sunshine, and stepped slowly into the serene waters. He stood silently and gazed out over the glassy lake, when there was a tiny splash as a small frog leapt out onto a nearby lily pad.

The frog seemed to stare knowingly at the young James Gouldstone, and it was soon joined by a second frog. Then a third, and a fourth. Then frog after frog sprang

forth, until he was surrounded by an army on lily pads. The dumbfounded boy was took an apprehensive step backwards.

Directly in front of him, small bubbles began to break the surface. He watched aghast as a body floated to the top; it was his body, face down, the same one he had seen in his prior vision. Swollen, discolored, and stinking, it bobbed and drifted towards him, polluting the water with blood.

The young boy, with his audience of frogs looking on, slowly reached out to touch the matted hair on the back of the dead man's head.

“Captain!”

Roger Barrett nudged Gouldstone, whispering forcefully. “Captain, someone is coming!”

Gouldstone awoke with a start, and quickly came to his senses. Barrett repeated, “someone is coming, Sir!”

“Rouse the others, quickly but quietly!”

One by one the men were shaken from their unquiet slumber. They held their weapons at the ready and listened intently. Shuffling footsteps could be heard approaching through the forest.

As the soldiers stared into the fog, the moonlight trickling through the trees revealed at least three silhouettes creeping towards them, about ten yards away. The figures advanced slowly, ducking behind the trees as they went along.

“Whoever it is, they must know we're here,” whispered Wilde.

The Captain kept his eyes peeled for movement, and when he saw the shadows move again, he caught a glimpse of tartan in the moonlight. “They're Scots,” he said.

“Hello there,” he called out, clearly but not too loudly. “We’re soldiers from the 60th Infantry... are you from the Scottish Battalion?”

There was a moment of silence, then a gruff brogue called back, “Aye, the three of us...”

Three men then emerged from behind the trees and cautiously closed the gap with the Captain and his group. The Scots were just as disheveled as the rest of the men, their red coats torn and muddy, their dark plaid trousers soaked up to the knees from marching through the swamp. Gouldstone’s uniform may have been appallingly soiled, but in the fleeting moonlight, the ragged crimson sash and sleeve insignia gave away his rank.

“Oh,” said one of the Scots, a bit facetiously. “It’s a Captain, then. How do you do, sir? I am William MacGregor, and these are Kenneth Stewart and Douglas MacMillan, of the 93rd Regiment of Sutherland Highlanders. As far as I know, we may be the very last of the Sutherland Highlanders.”

“I’m sorry to hear it,” replied Gouldstone. “We know the battle was a disaster, and we’ve all been scattered from our companies. I’m Captain James Gouldstone. This is Corporal Wilde, and Privates Hastings and Barrett.”

“We had seen you earlier on, Captain, but we held back until we were sure of your identity. Do you know the pirate Lafitte? His men dress in red jackets and had infiltrated some of the ranks. I heard of soldiers being attacked by what they thought was their own men! Did you know of that, Captain?”

“I did not know of that. It is indeed unfortunate.”

“Well,” said MacGregor, pausing for a moment to size up the soldiers before him, “now that the introductions are complete, can you tell me what your plan is, Captain? Are you going to lead us out of this bloody place?”

“My plan is to wait the night and then attempt to lead these men downriver to our encampment,” Gouldstone answered sharply. “With General Pakenham killed, surely General Lambert –“

MacGregor interrupted. “Ah, General Pakenham. When our commander was killed before the charge against the parapet, he rode by us. ‘Have a little patience,’ he said. ‘You shall have your revenge,’ he said. Bah! Then we were left standing there, like scarecrows for American target practice!”

“Private MacGregor, this is not the time!” Gouldstone barked. “You are a soldier in the King’s army and you will remember your place!”

The three Scots grumbled, and MacGregor huffed. “Aye, Sir. Very sorry, Sir.”

The captain looked each of them in the eye, then said, “You’re welcome to join the four of us. We will begin heading back to the south, towards the river, at daybreak. Until then we will rest as much as we can.”

And with that, the party of seven settled into positions on whatever dry spots they could find and waited for the dawn to break.

Chapter 3

The rest of the night passed with no incident. The Scots sat and talked amongst themselves while the others tried to catch a little more sleep on their makeshift beds of logs and boulders. Captain Gouldstone eyed the newcomers warily and his thoughts turned back to the battle. These Highlanders were well within their rights to be disillusioned; they had been sent on a fool's mission. All of them had. Gouldstone's loyalty to King and Country held strong, but at the same time he felt forsaken and betrayed. He had devoted his life to being a soldier, and whether through negligence or incompetence, in the end it led him to a suicidal charge against an insurmountable position.

"O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me," he sighed. "What right do I have to question the wisdom of the Generals? Who am I, to be so presumptuous? It is not for leading me upon a hill of certain death that I should take umbrage, but for the bitter lesson that followed: revealing to me the true weakness of my character."

The first light of the new day broke through the trees, and the fog was not quite as thick as it had been the day before. The Captain called the men together and they began their trek towards the Mississippi. By Gouldstone's rough estimation they were three miles or so north of the river, and as long as they didn't encounter any American patrols it shouldn't take them too long to find the British camp.

Moss-covered cypress grew in the shallow, murky waters. They followed the strips of dry land, overgrown with roots and vines, snaking between the stagnant, muddy pools. They used their muskets as walking sticks, probing the boggy ground to test for snakes and quicksand, both of which posed a danger. The biting flies and mosquitoes continued to harass them as they waded through puddles of mud; turtles and egrets gave them quizzical looks as they went by. The morning sun cast the swamp in a new light, and but to the bone-weary group of seven it was just as miserable as always.

One of the Scots, Douglas MacMillan, spoke: “what’s that up ahead, lads?”

Sure enough, they could see that they were approaching a clearing, and in the middle of the clearing stood a cabin of some sort. They slowly crept to the edge of the tree line and investigated while staying hidden.

The clearing was a roughly circular area approximately 100 yards across, and the ground here was remarkably dry and solid. The cabin was situated about three-quarters of the way to the other edge and slightly off-center to the right. It was somewhat dilapidated, but intact. The windows were cloudy, the wooden walls were moldy, and the tin roof was covered in rust. In front of it stood a lonely oak tree, its branches bent and gnarled and laden with Spanish moss. A rickety outhouse sat decaying behind and to the left.

They could see what appeared to be two separate paths or trails leading out of the clearing, one directly across from where they stood, and the other to the right side of the shack. They all carefully watched and listened, but there was no sign of any activity.

“Well, this is an odd place to put a house,” said MacGregor. “Do you suppose anyone’s at home?”

MacMillan replied, “I guess we’ll have to investigate, eh? What do you say, Captain? Maybe they’ve got some food. The soggy biscuits we’ve been carrying aren’t helping my appetite much.”

Gouldstone scanned the area once more. “All right, we’ll have to check it out.” He motioned towards the Scots. “You lads circle around to the right, and we’ll circle around to the left. Stay close to the tree line so you can hide if necessary.”

“Aye, Sir,” answered the three Scots, and they were off, prowling towards the ramshackle little house.

They moved in total silence, swiftly but stealthily heading in their appointed direction. A cool breeze rustled the leaves of the great oak, and birds sang softly from the trees. Each of the soldiers kept a close watch on the windows, cracked and dirty though they were, but none saw any movement from inside. Both teams circled around their respective sides of the cabin, and as they rounded the building, Captain Gouldstone waved for the Scots to move in. They approached the front door with their guns aimed and ready.

Gouldstone and his group stepped quickly towards the house and joined the Scots.

Corporal Wilde inquired: “Should we go in, Captain?”

The Captain nodded and gestured towards the door. With the others covering him, Wilde stepped up three rotting wood steps, gripped the latch, and slowly pushed the door open.

There was a meek female voice from inside, with a thick Caribbean accent: “Oh my, who’s there?”

“Go!” Gouldstone ordered, and they barged into the cabin, quickly assessed the situation, and pointed their weapons at the only person in the room, a diminutive black woman, approximately 70 years old. Their bayonets thrust menacingly mere inches from her throat.

“Just a slave woman,” quipped MacGregor.

“Begging your pardon, sir,” she said, cowering before them, “but I am a free woman. I have papers, I have them there on the desk, they say I’m a free woman.”

“I’m not interested in your papers,” he snarled.

The interior of the cabin was spacious and open. It was a single large room, with a wood stove, cistern and washbasin in the far corner, and a dining table with three unsteady looking chairs nearby. A fourth chair sat off in the opposite corner in front of an old desk. On top of the desk were stacks of books and papers. Shelves and cabinets lined the walls, cluttered with books and knick-knacks. There were candles just about everywhere one could be placed. A modest bed lay beneath the window to their right.

The most unusual item in the room, and the one that startled the soldiers to see, was what appeared to be an alligator skull resting on one of the shelves, a melted candle securely stuck to the crown.

“Do you live alone here?” Gouldstone inquired of the woman.

“Oh yes, sir. Quite alone here.”

“We need some food. Have you any?”

“Of course, sir,” she said, trying not to upset anyone. “I have some salted pork I can give you, I’ll just get it.”

As she scurried over to the kitchen area, the soldiers investigated the collection of books that littered the shelves. There were books about history and religion, and many books that looked as though they were written by hand in an indecipherable language. Scattered on the shelves alongside the books were all manner of charms and talismans, and small jars filled with unidentified powders and herbs.

The old woman produced a large burlap sack from a cabinet and cut it open, revealing a chunk of dried and salted pork. The men, seeing the meat, abandoned their investigations and immediately pulled out their knives, cutting off pieces and eating them greedily. They gave suspicious glances at the woman, who stood back and let them feast, staying well out of their way.

“We need water,” grunted MacGragor. “Fresh water. Fill our canteens.” And with that he tossed his canteen into the woman’s chest. She fumbled with it but did not let it drop.

“Yes, of course, sir.” She collected the canteens from the seven men and filled them from the cistern as they finished the large portion of pork.

“Where,” she stuttered, “where are you men headed?”

Gouldstone eyed her sternly, and Wilde said “We shouldn’t say, Captain. If anyone comes looking for us she’ll tell them.”

“Aye,” agreed MacGregor. “It’s none of your business where we’re going!” he grinned maliciously, gobs of chewed pork stuck in his teeth. “Maybe we’ll just stay here then, and let you bring us some more food!”

The other Scots laughed. Gouldstone remained stern, and ordered them to stay quiet.

The old woman’s voice suddenly became very calm, but cold. She stared intently at the men, and MacGregor in particular, and said “Yes, maybe you’ll stay here. Maybe you’ll never leave.”

Agitated, MacGregor stepped towards her and raised his fist. “Hold your tongue, you savage, or I’ll tear it out of you!”

“MacGregor, stand down!” shouted Gouldstone. The two men locked eyes intensely until MacGregor snorted and turned away. Captain Gouldstone turned to the old woman. “We will stay until we’re ready, and then we will leave,” he said tersely. She stared back at him with an icy cold gaze that made his flesh tingle with goose bumps.

In an emotionless drone, she responded, “You do as you will, Captain Gouldstone.”

A look of shock crossed his face as she called him by name.

“How did- ” he began, but was interrupted by Kenneth Stewart.

“Someone’s coming!”

They all stopped and listened. Voices were coming from outside the cabin, approaching from one of the trails that led back into the swamp. The old woman began to chuckle faintly, and Roger Barrett quickly clapped his hand over her mouth and held his knife to her throat.

They backed themselves against the walls near the cloudy, cracked windows and peeked outside. A group of black men hiked out of the woods and into the clearing. They stopped and appeared to examine the outside of the cabin, but did not see the British soldiers looking out at them.

There were five in total, some with brown jackets and some with dark blue. They all wore white pants that were stained with dirt, grass and blood. Some of them had brown hats on their heads, and they were all carrying long rifles with bayonets.

“Bloody hell, who is this then?” asked MacGregor incredulously.

“They’re Haitian slaves,” answered Gouldstone. “They’ve been freed to fight for the Americans.”

MacGregor growled and glared at the woman being held by Barrett. “That witch knew they would come here. She’s gotten us trapped.”

The old woman made no sound and did not move, but her eyes stared through MacGregor.

Gouldstone quietly issued orders. “Barrett, hold her still until we’re clear. The rest of you, get into firing position. As soon as they open the door, we’ll shoot.”

They lined up in formation: MacGregor, MacMillan, and Hastings took one knee in the front row; Gouldstone, Wilde, and Stewart stood behind them; Barrett stayed in the rear keeping a grasp on the old woman, who made no attempt to struggle.

The Haitians could be heard nearing the front door. There was the sound of footsteps climbing the three stairs outside, then the latch began to turn and the door swung open.

The front three soldiers fired. There was a deafening explosion and a huge cloud of smoke, and at least one or two of the Haitians flopped backwards off the front stoop. Those that remained began shouting amongst themselves, and there was one shot fired into the house that sailed off-target, passing by the heads of the British soldiers and shattering the back window.

The smoke had not yet cleared completely from the first blast when two Haitians rushed through the front door, charging with their bayonets. The second line of troops fired. One shot passed through the head of the first Haitian, and two shots exploded the chest of the second one. They collapsed lifeless on the floor.

“Go, there’s at least one left,” ordered Gouldstone. “Possibly two.”

They charged out of the door and out into the clearing. One Haitian lay dead at the foot of the stairs, and another was crawling towards the trail, bloody but still alive. Hastings chased after that one, sticking him several times in the back with the bayonet.

Kenneth Stewart rounded the corner of the cabin searching for the last Haitian when a glancing blow from a bayonet blade sliced into his bicep. He grimaced and cried out.

Douglas MacMillan was close behind him and thrust his own weapon at the enemy, but it was parried.

As MacMillan traded blows with the enemy and Stewart staggered backwards, gripping his wound, Captain Gouldstone came up from behind and ran the Haitian through with his saber. The Haitian soldier made a croaking sound and staggered forward before collapsing.

The Captain examined the wounded Scot's arm. "Take Stewart inside and see if there are any medical supplies at all," he said. "I will take a quick look around and make sure that was the last of them."

He summoned Wilde to come with him and they made a circle around the house, checking the clearing and looking into the trees. They saw no one else, so they went back inside.

As they walked back inside, the others were tending to Stewart's arm. It was bleeding profusely, and he scowled in pain. The soldiers rummaged through the cabinets looking for something to wrap the wound while MacMillan washed it with water. Barrett still held the old woman, who still made no attempt to break free from his grasp.

They wrapped Stewart's arm with a towel and put it in a makeshift sling. "Don't worry lad," MacGregor said to him. "You'll be all right. We'll get back to camp and get some whiskey for you; you'll be good as new!"

He then turned his attention to the old woman. "You knew they were coming. You let us wait here knowing all along we'd be attacked!"

“Your filthy spirits brought them here,” she hissed. “You will draw trouble to you wherever you go! You will draw evil!”

MacGregor did not say another word, but drew his knife and plunged it into her stomach as Barrett held her. She choked, a look of shock crossing her face.

“MacGregor!” shouted the Captain. “Stand down immediately!”

“Aye, Captain,” the Scot huffed, as he withdrew the knife slowly from the woman and took a step back. “What’s done is done anyway. I did not suffer this witch to live.”

Exasperated, Gouldstone pushed MacGregor aside. Barrett released his grip and the old woman fell to her knees, clutching her abdomen. She looked up at the soldiers standing around her, and with a gurgling, stuttering voice said to them: “You will all die here in this swamp. None of you will ever leave it again.”

She then began coughing up blood and fell face-down onto the cabin floor.

Gouldstone was nonplussed. “This is a fine mess now, MacGregor. That was uncalled for!”

MacGregor was unimpressed. “A bloody fine job you’ve been doing as well, Captain! You’re the one who’s supposed to be leading us out of this god-forsaken place, not having us wade through muck for days on end, leading us nowhere but into traps for us to be ambushed by slaves!”

“Hold your tongue, Private!” Gouldstone shot back.

MacGregor growled and shoved the Captain. Corporal Wilde jumped between them and the others grabbed MacGregor from behind to hold him back.

“Come on, lads!” pleaded Wilde. “Let’s not fight amongst ourselves! We will never make it back alive if we do.”

MacGregor and Gouldstone took a few deep breaths and each regained their composure.

“He’s right,” said the Captain. “Let’s just calm down and figure out what to do next.”

“Aye,” huffed MacGregor. He prodded the still body of the old woman with his toe. “I guess I’ll clean up this rubbish.”

Chapter 4

They decided to stay and rest at the house a bit before attempting the trip back to the river. They moved the bodies of the woman and the Haitians to a pile below the oak tree out back, being sure to loot them for any essential supplies. They then went back inside.

“She had a lot of books,” Wilde remarked. “I wonder if she could even read them.”

“See if she has a map of this area anywhere among her books,” suggested Hastings. “Maybe it will help us find our way back to the river.”

They pulled everything off the shelves and onto the floors, but did not locate any maps or other useful information.

They stayed at the cabin until afternoon, when the quiet sounds of birds were interrupted by the thunder of gunfire in the distance.

Gouldstone went to the window and peered out. He could see a flock of birds that had been disturbed by the noise taking flight in the direction of the western trail; the same trail the Haitians had come from. Soon, there erupted another burst of shooting.

“The Americans are coming from the west, still following after those who retreated from the battle. We should leave before they find us here. We can take the other trail; it leads south, back in the direction of the river. It can’t be more than a few miles to our camp.”

They hurriedly stuffed any food they could find into their packs, ransacking the place in the process. They took a few more portions of salted pork and biscuits, some dried fish, and a few jars of pickled vegetables. When they had all they could carry, they

quickly marched out the front door and towards the southern path, making their way back into the forest.

The ground was drier here, and it made traveling much easier. That was good, especially since Kenneth Stewart was injured. He kept up as best he could, gritting his teeth and steadfastly marching forward with his arm in a sling.

Before long the trail became patchy and eventually vanished beneath the vegetation. Captain Gouldstone slashed away with his sword at some of the thick vines and moss that strangled the trees. They passed by scattered green pools, stagnant and swarming with flies. The men cursed the endless drone of the insects, swatting the pests away as they bit into exposed skin.

Lizards scuttled from beneath their boots. Croaking frogs splashed in the water, and more than once their croaks and grunts reminded the Captain of the guttural wheeze of the old woman in the cabin, as she was stabbed by MacGregor.

They trudged onward. An hour or two passed, and they saw no sign of the swamp ending. The men began to get irritable, and Captain Gouldstone felt their blameful eyes. But he was still going south, he was sure of it. They hadn't been so far away; where was the river? He peeked up through the trees, trying to use the position of the sun to get his bearings. It was three or four o'clock by now, and he was sure he was leading their party the right way. And yet, their journey never seemed to end.

"Ach!" MacGregor spit. "Are you sure we're still going south? We'll find ourselves swimming in the Gulf of Mexico before we reach the river."

"I'm sure of it," Gouldstone replied curtly, although he seemed not completely convinced. Maybe his judgment was askew; maybe he was leading them east, or north, deeper and deeper into the uninhabited swamplands. Should they turn around?

“No,” he told himself. “I’m certain we’re still going south. We were going south when we reached that hovel, and we continued south on the trail.”

And so they kept walking. The Scots grumbled amongst themselves and kept their distance, bringing up the rear. Barrett and Hastings were in front of them, and Wilde kept close to the Captain. He trusted his commanding officer, and his fealty to his country demanded that he follow.

“I’m sure this is the right way, Sir,” he reassured the Captain. “Perhaps we had gone further from the river than we realized. It would have been easy to get lost in all the confusion.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right,” Gouldstone replied. “Let’s stop and rest a moment.”

They stopped and ate a bit of their ill-gotten food, and Gouldstone anxiously searched for any sign of direction. The chatter of the swamp frogs and the buzzing of flies were the only signals he got. “Keep your secrets then, you wretched swamp,” he snarled.

The once proud James Gouldstone sat quietly on the forest floor, broken and defeated. “Well,” he sighed. “We’ll have to find someone or something, somewhere out there... we’ll just keep going the way we’re going until we chance upon a destination. Any destination.”

After taking a moment, they continued on their endless hike. Then soldiers were growing more and more uneasy, but had little choice but to stay together and keep moving. They agreed with Gouldstone’s basic premise: if they kept walking in one direction, they would be bound to encounter something sooner or later.

The light grew dim and the fog began to roll in as evening settled on the bayou. Their pace had been slowing as the terrain grew wetter, and they now decided they could

go no further. Still hopelessly lost, they resigned themselves to another night in the swamp.

Captain Gouldstone did not fall asleep for some time. While the others took rotations on watch duty as they'd done before, he sat a bit away on a large stone, alone with his thoughts. He sat there the whole night, nearly catatonic. He whispered to himself, almost singing: "*Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, creeps in this petty pace from day to day...*" and watched the moonlight struggle to reach the ground through the canopy above and the blanket of fog below.

"James, James, James. You're coming apart, my good fellow," he said to himself. He tried to console himself with thoughts of home, thoughts of London or the English countryside, but it was to no avail. His mood grew dour as his hope of ever leaving this place or finding his army dwindled.

He wiled away the night there on his rock, eventually drifting off to sleep while still sitting up. This night, at least, he was tormented by neither visions nor nightmares. Before he knew it, the sun was peeking through the trees. He opened his eyes and lifted his head. Early morning birds began to sing, and the restlessly sleeping soldiers began to stir. They noticed immediately that something was wrong.

"Where's Kenny?" asked MacGregor.

Kenneth Stewart was gone.

They began looking in the immediate area, calling his name, but there was no response. His rifle and pack lay on the ground near the spot he had been resting the night before. William Hastings had been the last one keeping watch, but he never saw Stewart leave, and didn't see anyone else approach. They spread out and searched, beating back the bushes and weeds. They peered intently into the water; perhaps he had fallen in?

They found nothing nearby; no signs, no trails, no trace that anyone had recently come or gone from the area. They gathered together, frustrated and bewildered.

“Where did he bugger off to?” yelled MacGregor. “He couldn’t have gotten far, he’s got his arm in a bloody sling!”

Wilde struggled to think of a rational answer. “He can’t have been attacked, not by man or beast, or we would have surely heard it. If he wandered off, he did so without leaving so much as a footprint, and he left his gear behind.”

“Men don’t just vanish off the face of the Earth!” exclaimed MacMillan.

“Maybe they do if they’re cursed...” Barrett interjected.

“Nonsense,” sneered MacGregor. “Don’t let that old woman and her voodoo get into your head.”

Gouldstone gathered up his belongings. “Come on then,” he said nervously. “Wherever he’s gone, he’s gone. We need to get moving.”

There were some murmurs of protest, but in the end they all knew they couldn’t stay forever and ponder Stewart’s fate. Gear in hand, and guided by the light of the morning sun, they headed back along their path, continuing southward.

After a considerable distance, they still had not come to the river or to any obvious end of the swamp. Just when they thought they were truly doomed to march in the mud forever, they saw a clearing up ahead. Captain Gouldstone stopped dead in his tracks and dropped his musket in disbelief. As the others approached from behind, they also abruptly stopped and stared, eyes wide and jaws dropped. It was the same clearing, with the same cabin and the same lonesome oak.

“That’s not possible...” protested Gouldstone, but there was no denying it. They stepped out into the clearing at exactly the same spot they had the previous day. The cabin, the tree, the trails; they were all in the same position the soldiers had first encountered them.

There was something amiss though, and it took them a moment to notice what it was. Then, Wilde said: “the bodies...”

The bodies of the woman and the Haitian troops which had been piled under the oak tree were no longer there. This sobering realization had them immediately ready their weapons and crouch defensively. Their eyes scanned the area, but they saw nothing else out of place, and they heard no other souls. They slowly inched towards the house, keeping a careful watch out for anything or anyone.

The grounds around the cabin looked completely undisturbed. There was no blood, no torn uniforms, no disturbed ground; no signs at all of yesterday’s skirmish. They reached the front door and they all covered William Hastings as he slowly pushed it open. It swung forward with a slow creak, but there was no one there.

One by one they entered, and took in their surroundings. Everything was eerily in place. Each cabinet, each shelf, each sheet of paper on the desk; they were untouched, as if the plundering of the day before had never occurred.

“Captain,” Wilde said hesitantly, “this is not right.”

Gouldstone had no answer.

Chapter 5

They sat inside silently for a while. Stewart's disappearance unsettled them, and now finding themselves back in the very place they'd left; it was all very heavy on their confused minds.

A cursory look around the room had produced no answers. Not only was the room not ransacked, but the food they'd taken had miraculously reappeared in its cabinets. The window that had been shot out was completely intact. The floors had no stains from the blood that had been spilled, and the towels used as Stewart's sling were back in their place.

Each one of them was at a loss for what to do. They spoke very little. Captain Gouldstone brooded. "So this is to be the end of Captain James Gouldstone. Lost in a swamp, cursed by a witch."

He jumped to his feet and strolled nonchalantly over to the kitchen area cabinets. "Well lads, at least we know there's some salted pork here to eat," he announced, and began helping himself.

Wilde attempted to think the situation through. He needed a plausible explanation for what was happening. "Someone must have come by, buried the bodies, and cleaned up the cabin. Maybe the old woman didn't live alone after all?"

"Aye," added MacGregor. "And I'm sure we must have gotten turned around and circled back to where we'd already been. No wonder the walking never ended!"

"Good points, yes. Good points!" exclaimed the Captain. "It's true, I have likely been a poor navigator. Had I been Moses leading the people out of Egypt, forty years would have been four hundred, and the people of Israel would have ended up in India."

“Captain, Sir, don’t blame yourself,” said Wilde. “None of us could be expected to find our way through the swamp and the forest in the thickest of fogs. You led us as best you could.”

Gouldstone chuckled, a mad sort of chuckle. “Thank you for your support, Corporal! You’re a credit to Britannia. But alas, my days as a glorious leader seem to be at an end.”

“Resign your commission later, Sir” said Hastings gruffly. “We’ve still got to find our way out of here.”

"Oh villain," answered Gouldstone. *"Thou art condemned into everlasting redemption.* Yes, good Private Hastings. Perhaps I can yet redeem myself and not die a disgrace. We can try the other trail. The one to the west; maybe we will find it easier to follow than the one that lead us south.”

MacGregor huffed contemptuously. “You can do as you please, *Captain*. I for one am not going back into that bloody swamp!”

“Aye,” agreed MacMillan. “I’d rather live out the rest of my days in this shanty.”

“Use your heads,” chided Wilde. “The Haitians and the Americans alike were traveling along the western trail. We’ll have to be careful to avoid a confrontation, but at least we know it must lead somewhere!”

After some moments of bickering, and the Scots steadfastly refusing to risk heading back into the swamp, Gouldstone indicated that he saw no harm in staying at the cabin until the next day. “Should anyone return here, we’ll make short work of them like we did the others,” he announced. “In the meantime, it is nice to have some shelter. We’ll decide what to do come tomorrow.”

And so it was decided. They made themselves at home in the seemingly abandoned house, sitting in the chairs or laying about on the floor. Gouldstone, by virtue of his rank, took the humble bed for his own. As the day passed, not once did they see or hear anyone approaching. If someone else indeed lived here, they must have stayed away even as the night began to fall and the familiar thick fog began to cover the ground.

They lit some candles and perused the books on the shelves to pass the time. The flickering candlelight cast odd shadows which danced upon the walls. The alligator skull, cast in an eerie orange hue, seemed to stare at them with its vacant eyes, its toothy maw grinning at them knowingly.

The comfort of being indoors somewhat mitigated their jangled nerves. Though they were still lost and trapped, they much preferred the cabin to another night in the wilderness, beset by insects and driven insane by the croaking of frogs. They never let their guard down, however. They still weren't quite sure if someone had come back to the cabin after they'd fled, and if so whether those people would return.

As the night went on, the men dozed off, leaving Barrett first up for guard duty. He sat cross-legged on the floor near the front door, a single candle glowing softly by his side. He stood, stepped softly over to one grimy window and peered outside. He closed his eyes and listened for any sounds, but hearing nothing he turned and went back to his spot.

As he was about to sit back down, a small frog sprang from the shadows in front of him. Its slimy green skin and bulbous eyes shimmered in the dim candlelight. He extended the toe of his boot and gently nudged the frog, which hopped away, back into the darkness.

There was a thud against the door.

