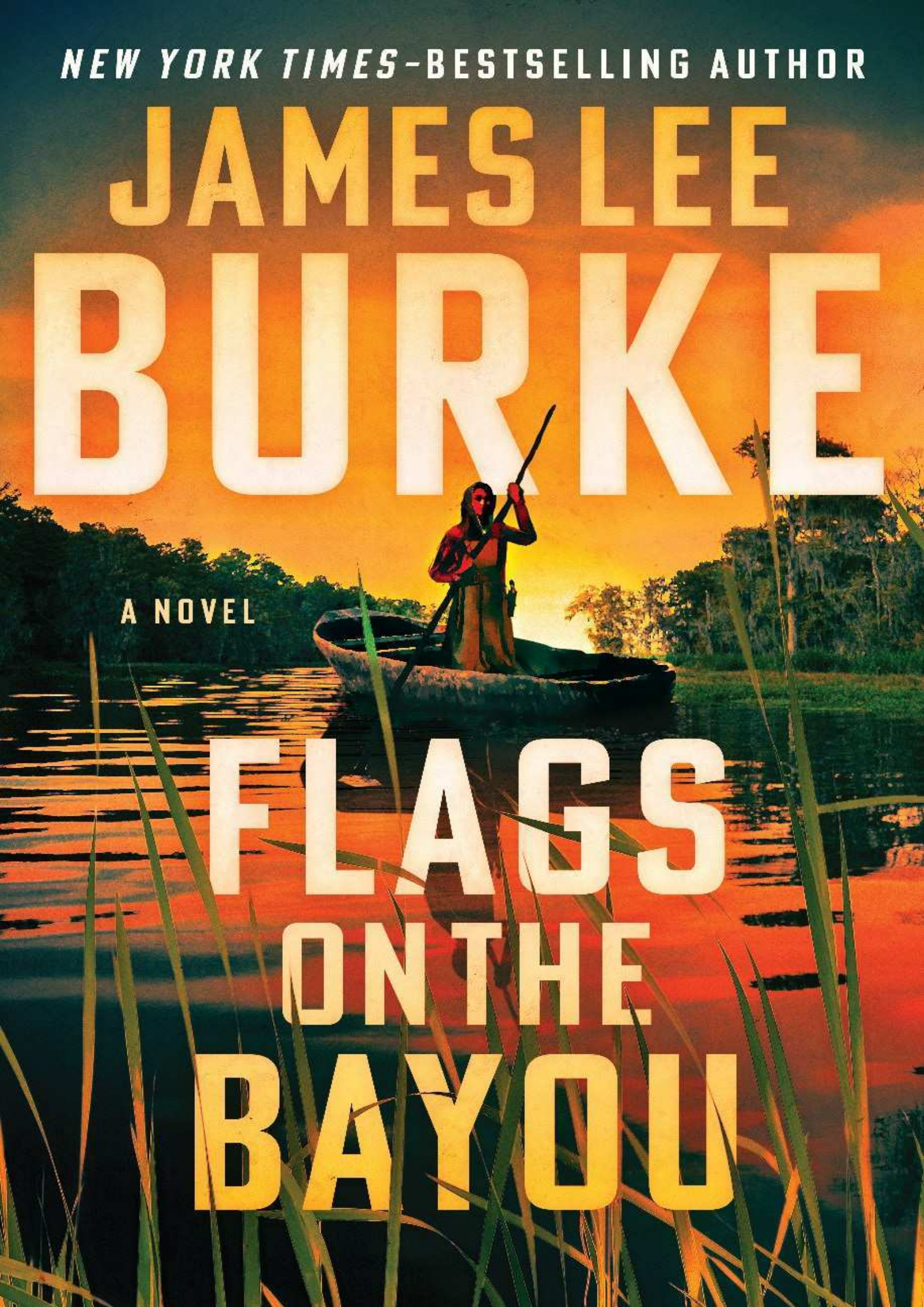


NEW YORK TIMES-BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JAMES LEE
BURKE

A NOVEL

FLAGS
ON THE
BAYOU



FLAGS ON THE BAYOU

Also by James Lee Burke

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Another Kind of Eden

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The New Iberia Blues

Robicheaux

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The Convict and Other Stories

Two for Texas

Lay Down My Sword and Shield

To the Bright and Shining Sun

Half of Paradise

**James Lee
Burke**

**FLAGS
ON THE
BAYOU**

a novel



Atlantic Monthly Press

New York

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Jacket design and artwork by James Iacobelli

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Published simultaneously in Canada

Printed in the United States of America

This book was set in 12-point Adobe Caslon by Alpha Design & Composition of Pittsfield, NH.

First Grove Atlantic hardcover edition: July 2023

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data is available for this title.

ISBN 978-0-8021-6169-7

eISBN 978-0-8021-6170-3

Atlantic Monthly Press

an imprint of Grove Atlantic

154 West 14th Street

New York, NY 10011

Distributed by Publishers Group West

groveatlantic.com

*To Toby Thompson,
a musician, singer, poet, and a stand-up journalist of the old
school whose work has not only captured the heart of the New
West but of America itself.
Stay on that old-time rock and roll, partner.*

WADE LUFKIN

Morning on the Lady of the Lake Plantation can be a grand experience, particularly in the late fall when the sky is a clear blue and the wind is blowing in the swamp, Spanish moss lifting in the trees, and thousands of ducks quacking as they end their long journey to the South. However, in this era of trouble and woe it is difficult to hold on to these poignant moments, as was the case last evening when our Christian invaders from the North lit up the sky with airbursts that disintegrated into curds of yellow smoke and descended on the grass and swamp in configurations that resembled spider legs.

A twisted piece of hot metal landed no more than ten feet from the chair in which I sat and the artist's easel on which I painted, but I did not go inside the house. I would like to tell you that I am brave and inured to the damage cannon fire can wreak on the bodies of both human beings and animals. But that is not the case. There's a Minie still parked in my left leg, and I need no convincing about the damage Billy Yank can do when he gets up his quills. The truth is I both fear the wrath of our enemies, as I fear the wrath of God, and at the same time wish that I could burn inside its flame and be cleansed of the guilt that I never thought would be mine.

I went to Virginia in '61, with the Eighth Louisiana Infantry and a promise from our officers that I would serve as a surgeon's assistant and never shed the blood of my fellow man.

Oh yes, in my innocence I was certain I would never bear the mark of Cain. Even if my superiors broke their pledge and ordered me to arm myself and fire into the ranks of boys against whom I bore no animus. I sawed limbs and stacked them in piles at First and Second Manassas and

especially at Sharpsburg, where the Eighth Louisiana was mowed down in a cornfield near Dunker Church. Through a window I saw these poor fellows fall, and I went into the fray and dragged them inside, North and South, the living and the dead, and prayed for all of us.

Sharpsburg told us you do not have to die in order to go to Hell.

Then winter came and we began to tire of the mud and the cold and the gray shortness of the days and the fact that the Yanks were not going to give it up and go home, as our leaders had told us. Unfortunately, an army that is not marching or fighting becomes restless and troublesome. I took a stroll along a stream in a snow-covered forest of bare trees, and saw a fellow my age sitting on top of a boulder, reading a book, a black felt hat tied down on his head, a gray blanket stiff with frost on his shoulders. A few feet away a rifle was propped against a tree, a bayonet mounted on the tip of its barrel.

The soldier on the rock was glued to his book, a collection of Robert Browning's poems. I had coffee beans in a tobacco pouch in my shirt pocket and two tin cups and a half loaf of bread and a chunk of ham in my haversack. I also carried my Bible there. It was one week from Christmas. In the dreariness of this particular day I thought how fine it would be to share my food and my Scripture with a fellow soldier, one who loved the same poems as I, one probably aching to see his family, just as I was.

"If you want to gather some twigs and get a fire started, I have the makings of a holiday treat," I said.

He didn't reply. His book was opened in front of his face, hiding his features, as though he were masked. "I hope I didn't disturb you," I said.

He lowered his book slowly. Then my gaze drifted to his rifle. It was a Springfield. In '62 Springfields were seldom seen among the boys in butternut.

"I'm unarmed, sir," I said.

He closed his book without putting a marker between the pages, and set it beside him on the boulder, his face shadowed under the brim of his hat. He let the blanket slide from his shoulders and reached inside his coat. It was navy blue, with gold epaulets sewn on the shoulders. He pulled a small revolver from his waist and leveled it at me.

“I mean you no harm,” I said.

He cocked the hammer with his thumb.

“Please, sir,” I said, my voice breaking.

There was no anger in his eyes. But there was no mercy, either. Or anything, for that matter.

“Sir, I’ll leave. I’m a surgeon’s assistant. I’m not a combatant.”

I don’t know if his hand was shaking or if the revolver slipped, but it fired nonetheless, and I felt the ball rip through the side of my coat. The Yankee officer seemed as startled as I, but that did not stop him from continuing the accidental or wanton choice that would change both our lives forever. He aimed with both hands and pulled the trigger. The hammer snapped dryly on a dead cap.

He looked dumbfounded, or frightened, and I wondered if he had ever fired a shot in anger. I had no time, however, for analytical thoughts. My heart was thundering so loud I thought my head would come off.

Then a creature inside me I didn’t recognize took hold of both my body and my mind. “You bloody bastard,” I said, running for the rifle. “You’ll pay for that.”

He tried to cock the revolver with both thumbs. But I had his Springfield now, and I drove the bayonet into his chest, working it upward through bone and muscle and into a lung. I felt his weight curl over the blade, even as he tried to push himself off the blood groove with his bare hands, even as he slid to his knees, his eyes bulging as big and brown as polished acorns, his hands trying to clasp the rifle’s barrel.

But I wasn’t finished. I pulled the bayonet from the initial wound and aimed at his heart and plunged it into him a second time and leaned hard on the stock until the tip of the bayonet exited his back and pinned him to the snow. His mouth opened slowly and formed a cone, as though he were resting, then his arms flopped away from his body, like a crucified Christ. In his dying he never uttered a word.

I try not to revisit my war experiences and to pretend that the fighting will stay in the East and eventually go away. But I know better. And so do the Africans. In all the parishes, they have been told not to sing in the fields,

because singing is the Africans' telegraph, and often their hymns are not what they seem. But how ironic. We claim to be the superior race, yet we fear people who cannot sign their names or count past ten.

In June of 1861 the citizens of St. Martin Parish hanged six slaves and one white man who were charged with planning an insurrection. Others were "corrected." That was the word the local paper used. The article did not use the word "slave," either. We have manufactured a lexicon of hypocrisy that allows us to call slaves "servants." I feel shame when I shake hands with men who I'm sure participated in the hangings and flee their presence when I see them at my church.

I get no peace, though. I voted for Mr. Lincoln, but I do not agree with his policies. After the occupation of New Orleans, the American flag was immediately hung from the Mint, and a mob immediately ripped it down. A riverboat gambler was caught wearing a tiny piece of the flag as a boutonniere, and General Butler, a malignant pile of whale sperm if there ever was one, was allowed to hang this poor fellow from the Mint's flagstaff.

I'm afraid changing my geography will not alleviate my problem, though. I think the real enemy is the simian that still lives inside our skin. Voltaire had no answer for mankind other than the suggestion that we tend our own gardens and let the lunatics go about their way. The same with Charles Dickens. Remember Mr. Dick? He says to David Copperfield, "It's a mad world. Mad as Bedlam, boy!" Mr. Dick had been in Bedlam and wore ink quills stuck in his hair in case he needed to write down a thought or two. Read what he has to say about the mobs who attend public executions. I have the feeling Mr. Dickens was a lonely man.

Enough of this. I am a man with no country and no cause, a sojourner at my uncle's plantation, a painter of birds. But I have become intrigued by a young Creole woman named Hannah Laveau. She was purchased by my uncle one year ago at the slave market in New Orleans, just before the city surrendered, then rented out as what is called a wage slave to an acquaintance on Spanish Lake.

The rental lasted less than a month. My uncle drove his own carriage to Spanish Lake and fetched her to his home in St. Martin Parish and would

say nothing about the matter. There were many rumors about his friend, all of them bad. But my uncle would not discuss them, and he gave the young woman a cabin to herself on the edge of the swamp. My uncle is a somber, silent man I have never understood, although he has been very kind to me.

Until last evening I had only a few encounters with the young slave woman, all in passing. Supposedly she spoke Spanish and French and had been a slave in the West Indies, where every kind of cruelty and hardship seemed to have been visited upon the Africans who were brought there. Some of my uncle's Africans say she has magical powers. However, they tend to witness magical events with regularity in order to survive the world the Middle Passage has fashioned for them. Yesterday evening, when the Yankees started bursting cannonballs above our heads, I learned that she was of a strange mix, the kind an authoritarian society does not countenance for very long.

When the first shell exploded, my uncle and his family went into the cellar, and the Africans huddled in their cabins by the swamp's edge. The sun was red, the shadows of the slash pines as sharp as razor cuts. But one shadow that fell across me and my easel was certainly not that of a tree.

"Ain't Master afraid of cannon?" a voice with a French accent said.

I twisted my head around and looked up at her face. She had a shawl over her head, like a cowl. But I could see her features. Her skin was a dark, golden color, her eyes the greenish blue you see in coral pools in the Caribbean.

"I am not a 'master,'" I said.

"Then what are you?"

A slave, or a "servant," in our culture does not speak in the second person to white people. A shell burst above the swamp, and a second later shrapnel struck the water and made a sound like a child throwing gravel. "I'm an unemployed soldier," I said. "Can you read?"

"Yes, suh."

"I've misplaced my eyeglasses and my leg hurts. Can you fetch Mr. Audubon's book *Birds of America* from the table behind the front door? Please bring a chair for yourself."

"I need to start the fires in the hearths, suh. That's part of my job."

“We don’t need to notify the Yankees of our presence, Miss Hannah.”

“You should not call me ‘Miss,’ suh.”

“I can call people what I wish.”

The light was drawing down in the sky, but I could see her eyes inside the cowl she had made of her shawl. They were looking straight into mine.

“Your uncle can sometimes be strict,” she said.

“Do I have to yell at you, Miss Hannah?” I replied. But I smiled when I said it. “Bring a lamp with the book and the chair. Make two trips if you have to.”

“No, suh, I cain’t do that.”

She began to walk away. Her dress was to her ankles, her dark overcoat belted tightly around her waist, her leather shoes old and probably as hard as iron. The sun had set the western sky aflame. I thought I heard the ripple of small-arms fire, like the popping of Chinese firecrackers. She stopped and turned around, as though finally aware that the weapons of liberators kill the innocent as well as those who serve the Prince of Darkness. But I was wrong.

“Your uncle took me away from the bad man on Spanish Lake,” she said. “I was a cook with Southern soldiers at Shiloh Church. My li’l boy was with me there.” Her voice was cracking.

“Pardon?”

“I lost him in the smoke and the shooting and the tents burning.” Her eyes were wet. The booming of cannon and the explosion of shells had increased, and someone was moaning in one of the cabins. “I don’t know where my li’l Samuel is, suh.”

“I’m sorry, Hannah.”

She walked toward me, as though I were the source of her unhappiness, the redness in the sky mirrored in her eyes. “I’ll get him back. My life is not important. I’m not afraid of Yankees or Rebels. I’ll die for my li’l Samuel.”

“Don’t say these things to others. You understand me?”

“I’ll get your book, suh.”

“Please answer me, Hannah. I’m your friend.”

She walked away. The cannon had stopped, and the mallards resumed their quacking in the shelter of the swamp. The sun was an ember on the horizon, the air damp and as dark as a bruise. I blinked and rubbed my eyes. She seemed to have vanished into the gloom.

PIERRE CAUCHON

Imposing the law on both the paddy rollers and the darkies in three parishes isn't easy. The former sometimes get carried away and the latter just don't seem to learn, *unless*—

Don't know what "unless" means? It's better you don't.

It's not quite sunrise, the fog rolling out of the swamp, glistening like a rainbow, but up ahead I can hear the darkies already in the cane at Lady of the Lake Plantation, chopping and stacking, with no singing in the background, which means Mr. Lufkin's darkies have got the word and will not be confusing themselves with jackrabbits itching to get a lot of gone between here and the Atchafalaya Basin.

Last week three of them in New Iberia stole a jug of syrup and a bag of corn and a cane knife and took off, but the dogs and paddy rollers pulled them down from a tree deep in the swamp and subjugated them to a correctional understanding or two. I don't like working through the right words on this subject. The kind that are acceptable. Put it this way. The correctional understanding changed the runaways' perspective.

I'm here about only one darky. Hannah Laveau is her name. I had trouble with her two or three times, particularly when she got rented out for wages to Mr. Minos Suarez on Spanish Lake outside New Iberia. He told me she was crazy and stirring up the other darkies and would I have a talk with her. The truth be known, Old Man Suarez can't keep his member buttoned up and everybody knows it. I was just about to hint that to him and probably get myself in trouble, when he told me she was an insurrectionist. If you want to light a fire around here, that word will do it.

Ask the ones who got dropped from a rope in St. Martinville two years back.

It pains me to be used like this. Truth be known, I'm fond of her. She cooked for our boys at Shiloh. That's right. Louisiana units took colored servants with them when they got blown apart at Owl Creek. She's pretty, too. No question about that.

I get off my horse and lead it into the cane. Not one darky looks up from his work. The overseer, known as Biscuits-and-Gravy Comeaux, is a man who never missed a meal. He always has tobacco in his mouth and spits a stream every sixty seconds. I've timed it. Scattered on the ground with the cane leaves are half-moon slivers of iron that look like the parings from a horse's hoof. They are the remnants of exploded cannonballs.

"Good morning, Biscuits," I say.

"Good morning to you, sir," he answers.

I glance at the slivers of metal on the ground. "It looks like the bluebellies kept y'all occupied last night."

Biscuits beams. "I ain't sure they're blue-bellies. I hear Jayhawkers or Red Legs or whatever they call themselves captured a cannon or two. What brings you out?"

"Is Mr. Lufkin up?"

"Better question is did he ever go to bed," he says, then laughs at his own joke.

Mr. Lufkin is known for his long work hours. Both for him and everybody on his plantation. Supposedly, at age nineteen he came to Louisiana from Pennsylvania and fought at the side of Andrew Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans. He also started buying everything he could get his hands on, particularly slaves, no matter the gender or the age, as long as they were capable of reproduction. As an investment, they're a sure bet, unless they get themselves killed or commit suicide. An adult sells for anywhere between eight hundred and twelve hundred dollars. That's in gold.

"Know a darky named Hannah Laveau?"

"Oh, yes," Biscuits says.

"Has she been any trouble to you?"

“No, not with me,” he replies, then lets his eyes wander. There are rings of fat on his neck; his skin is pink, his whiskers white under his chin.

“But the story is a little larger?” I say.

He spits a stream of tobacco juice on the ground. “She’s a gris-gris woman.”

“So?”

“The other niggers listen to her.”

A wind begins blowing out of the swamp, and I can see the moss straightening on hundreds of tupelo trees all the way to the Gulf and the southern horizon.

“It looks like it might be whipping up a storm, huh?” Biscuits says.

“Could be,” I reply.

He spits again, this time hitting the ankle of a big-breasted black woman hefting a bundle of cane onto the wagon. Her face turns to stone; her eyes are already dead. I wouldn’t try to guess what’s in her head.

I swing up on my mare and ride up the lane to the main house of Lady of the Lake Plantation. My horse is a Missouri Fox Trotter; they were bred for planters that spend long days in the saddle and need a horse that knows how to step through the rows without wearing out the planter’s butt. Mine is a sorrel, fifteen hands high, and a mighty handsome horse who I admit I dearly love. I named her Varina. That’s the name of Jefferson Davis’s wife.

The main house is on a knoll, with a fine view of the wetlands and the electric storms over the Gulf. The house is exceptional in another way, too. It’s the kind you see in the West Indies, with a wrap-around verandah and ceiling-high windows and ventilated shutters on the second story and chimneys on each side, smoke stringing from both of them. It’s a house that was made to breathe.

I get down and tether my horse to an iron hitching post and go to the front door and knock. The porch and the columns that support the verandah are brick, not concrete, and in deep shadow, even though the sun is above the trees now. No one comes to the door. I take out my watch and wait one minute, then knock again.

Mr. Lufkin opens the door slowly, as though it's an unpleasant task. He's dressed in a black suit and a gray vest and slippers without socks and a gold watch that hangs from his neck. His face could have been carved from balsa wood; his hair is uncut and dirty blond, the color of rope, and hangs in his face; the irritability in his eyes is daunting. "What is it?" he says.

I remove my hat. "I'm Constable Pierre Cauchon, Mr. Lufkin. I have a report from Mr. Suarez of New Iberia. He owns a plantation on Spanish Lake."

"I know who Mr. Suarez is and where he lives. What do you want?"

"To discuss any knowledge you may have about a servant named Hannah Laveau. The issue is talk about insurrection."

"I see. Go around to the back."

"Sir?"

"Are you deaf?"

He closes the door in my face. I put on my hat and walk around the side of the house. Two black women are washing clothes in a tub. They're both giggling. I give them one look and their faces drain. Mr. Lufkin opens the back door. I want him to explain what has just happened, to say, *You'll have to pardon me, Mr. Cauchon, we're cleaning the house right now, or We're repairing some damage done by Yankee cannon, or Mrs. Lufkin is ill and not dressed now*, anything that would undo the insult that he has just delivered me.

"Are you going to come in or not?" he says from the open door.

"Thank you," I say as I remove my hat again and step into the kitchen. I pull the door shut behind me.

"What's this about insurrection?" he asks.

"It's simply a charge that has been made, Mr. Lufkin. Maybe it's not valid. I know the servant involved. She seems like a good—"

I don't get to finish my sentence. "Come in here, Hannah," he calls out, his eyes on me.

Hannah appears in the doorway, holding a broom, a yellow kerchief with red dots on it tied around her head.

"Have you been talking about rebellion and such?" Mr. Lufkin says.

“No, suh, I ain’t.”

“You’ve got your answer,” Mr. Lufkin says. “Now be on your way.”

My face is hot, my mouth dry. I grew up in a shack with a dirt floor by a turpentine mill, and we ate greens and fatback when we could get them. My daddy died of yellow fever and my mother was blind, but she taught me how to read, by God. I know if I leave this room without making this old man take back his contempt, I’ll never be the same, like an arm or leg was sawed off me and I was left to flop around on the side of the road.

Here goes, I tell myself. “Mr. Suarez gave me information I am quoting to you. I would hate to return to his home and call him a liar.”

“I said no such thing.”

“He’s either telling the truth or he’s not.”

“You listen. Mr. Suarez is a business acquaintance, not a friend. Regardless, I do not discuss acquaintances or friends with strangers. This discussion is over.”

“I am giving you my word, sir,” I say. “I don’t like to see it treated in such a casual way.”

“Sir, you do not have a *word*. You are white trash. Please leave.”

Hannah Laveau’s eyes are lowered, her shoulders rounded, her hands resting on the staff of the broom. Then, for just a few seconds, she looks at me. I do not know what she’s thinking. Does she want me to sass him? Or is she enjoying my humiliation? Why are her hands curved tight on the broom? Why do the light in her greenish-blue eyes and the shine on the tops of her breasts make me ashamed and aching inside in a way I have never experienced? Why should I care about a darky?

I stare at Mr. Lufkin. It’s obvious I disgust him. For no reason. Just because I am who I am.

“I didn’t mean to offend you, Mr. Lufkin,” I say.

He opens the door for me, breathing through his mouth, a cloth in his hand, protecting himself from the place where I touched the door.

I feel small and my head is dizzy, as though I’m walking on the deck of a boat, as I descend the back steps, even though I am six feet one in height. I would prefer to be disemboweled and have my entrails set afire, as was done to felons in ancient times, rather than re-live the last ten minutes of

my life. Fool that I am, I still hope Old Man Lufkin will call me back and say he was in a bad mood and smile and wave goodbye. But when I turn around he looks straight at me, his eyes as hard as marbles, then pulls the curtain across the glass, like a headsman done for the day.

I mount Varina and jerk the bit in her mouth, and needlessly hit her with the quirt, shameful and cruel man that I am.