CHAPTER ONE

St. Louis, April 1857.

ABNER Marsh rapped the head of his hickory walking stick smartly on the hotel desk to get the clerk's attention. "I'm here to see a man named York," he said. "Josh York, I believe he calls hisself You got such a man here?"

The clerk was an elderly man with spectacles. He jumped at the sound of the rap, then turned and spied Marsh and smiled. "Why, it's Cap'n Marsh," he said amiably. "Ain't seen you for half a year, Cap'n. Heard about your misfortune, though. Terrible, just terrible. I been here since '36 and I never seen no ice jam like that one."

"Never you mind about that," Abner Marsh said, annoyed. He had anticipated such comments. The Planters' House was a popular hostelry among steamboatmen. Marsh himself had dined there regularly before that cruel winter. But since the ice jam he'd been staying away, and not only because of the prices. Much as he liked Planters' House food, he was not eager for its brand of company: pilots and captains and mates, rivermen all, old friends and old rivals, and all of them knowing his misfortune. Abner Marsh wanted no man's pity. "You just say where York's room is," he told the clerk peremptorily.

The clerk bobbed his head nervously. "Mister York won't be in his room, Cap'n. You'll find him in the dining room, taking his meal."

"Now? At *this* hour?" Marsh glanced at the ornate hotel clock, then loosed the brass buttons of his coat and pulled out his own gold pocket watch. "Ten past midnight," he said, incredulous. "You say he's *eatin'*?"

"Yes sir, that he is. He chooses his own times, Mister York, and he's not the sort you say no to, Cap'n."

Abner Marsh made a rude noise deep in his throat, pocketed his watch, and turned away without a word, setting off across the richly appointed lobby with long, heavy strides. He was a big man, and not a patient one, and he was not accustomed to business meetings at midnight. He carried his walking stick with a flourish, as if he had never had a misfortune, and was still the man he had been.

The dining room was almost as grand and lavish as the main saloon on a big steamer, with cut-glass chandeliers and polished brass fixtures and tables covered with fine white linen and the best china and crystal. During normal hours, the tables would have been full of travelers and steamboatmen, but now the room was empty, most of the lights extinguished. Perhaps there was something to be said for midnight meetings after all, Marsh reflected; at least he would have to suffer no condolences. Near the kitchen door, two Negro waiters were talking softly. Marsh ignored them and walked to the far side of the room, where a well-dressed stranger was dining alone.

The man must have heard him approach, but he did not look up. He was busy spooning up mock turtle soup from a china bowl. The cut of his long

black coat made it clear he was no riverman; an Easterner then, or maybe even a foreigner. He was big, Marsh saw, though not near so big as Marsh; seated, he gave the impression of height, but he had none of Marsh's girth. At first Marsh thought him an old man, for his hair was white. Then, when he came closer, he saw that it was not white at all, but a very pale blond, and suddenly the stranger took on an almost boyish aspect. York was clean-shaven, not a mustache nor side whiskers on his long, cool face, and his skin was as fair as his hair. He had hands like a woman, Marsh thought as he stood over the table.

He tapped on the table with his stick. The cloth muffled the sound, made it a gentle summons. "You Josh York?" he said.

York looked up, and their eyes met.

Till the rest of his days were done, Abner Marsh remembered that moment, that first look into the eyes of Joshua York. Whatever thoughts he had had, whatever plans he had made, were sucked up in the maelstrom of York's eyes. Boy and old man and dandy and foreigner, all those were gone in an instant, and there was only York, the man himself, the power of him, the dream, the intensity.

York's eyes were gray, startlingly dark in such a pale face. His pupils were pinpoints, burning black, and they reached right into Marsh and weighed the soul inside him. The gray around them seemed alive, moving, like fog on the river on a dark night, when the banks vanish and the lights vanish and there is nothing in the world but your boat and the river and the fog. In those mists, Abner Marsh saw things; visions swift-glimpsed and then gone. There was a cool intelligence peering out of those mists. But there was a beast as well, dark and frightening, chained and angry, raging at the fog. Laughter and loneliness and cruel passion; York had all of that in his eyes.

But mostly there was force in those eyes, terrible force, a strength as relentless and merciless as the ice that had crushed Marsh's dreams. Somewhere in that fog, Marsh could sense the ice moving, slow, so slow, and he could hear the awful splintering of his boats and all his hopes.

Abner Marsh had stared down many a man in his day, and he held his gaze for the longest time, his hand closed so hard around his stick that he feared he would snap it in two. But at last he looked away.

The man at the table pushed away his soup, gestured, and said, "Captain Marsh. I have been expecting you. Please join me." His voice was mellow, educated, easy.

"Yes," Marsh said, too softly. He pulled out the chair across from York and eased himself into it. Marsh was a massive man, six foot tall and three hundred pounds heavy. He had a red face and a full black beard that he wore to cover up a flat, pushed-in nose and a faceful of warts, but even the whiskers didn't help much; they called him the ugliest man on the river, and he knew it. In his heavy blue captain's coat with its double row of brass buttons, he was a fierce and imposing figure. But York's eyes had drained him of his bluster. The man was a fanatic, Marsh decided. He had seen

eyes like that before, in madmen and hell-raising preachers and once in the face of the man called John Brown, down in bleeding Kansas. Marsh wanted nothing to do with fanatics, with preachers, and abolitionists and temperance people.

But when York spoke, he did not sound like a fanatic. "My name is Joshua Anton York, Captain. J. A. York in business, Joshua to my friends. I hope that we shall be both business associates and friends, in time." His tone was cordial and reasonable.

"Well see about that," Marsh said, uncertain. The gray eyes across from him seemed aloof and vaguely amused now; whatever he had seen in them was gone. He felt confused.

"I trust you received my letter?"

"I got it right here," Marsh said, pulling the folded envelope from the pocket of his coat. The offer had seemed an impossible stroke of fortune when it arrived, salvation for everything he feared lost. Now he was not so sure. "You want to go into the steamboat business, do you?" he said, leaning forward.

A waiter appeared. "Will you be dining with Mister York, Cap'n?"

"Please do," York urged.

"I believe I will," Marsh said. York might be able to outstare him, but there was no man on the river could outeat him. "I'll have some of that soup, and a dozen oysters, and a couple of roast chickens with taters and stuff. Crisp 'em up good, mind you. And something to wash it all down with. What are you drinking, York?"

"Burgundy."

"Fine, fetch me a bottle of the same."

York looked amused. "You have a formidable appetite, Captain."

"This is a for-mid-a-bul town," Marsh said carefully, "and a for-mid-a-bul river, Mister York. Man's got to keep his strength up. This ain't New York, nor London neither."

"I'm quite aware of that," York said.

"Well, I hope so, if you're going into steamboatin'. It's the for-mid-a-bullest thing of all."

"Shall we go directly to business, then? You own a packet line. I wish to buy a half-interest. Since you are here, I take it you are interested in my offer."

"I'm considerable interested," Marsh agreed, "and considerable puzzled, too. You look like a smart man. I reckon you checked me out before you wrote me this here letter." He tapped it with his finger. "You ought to know that this last winter just about ruined me."

York said nothing, but something in his face bid Marsh continue.

"The Fevre River Packet Company, that's me," Marsh went on. "Called it that on account of where I was born, up on the Fevre near Galena, not 'cause I only worked that river, since I didn't. I had six boats, working mostly the upper Mississippi trade, St. Louis to St. Paul, with some trips up the Fevre and the Illinois and the Missouri. I was doing just fine, adding a new boat or two most every year, thinking of moving into the Ohio trade, or maybe even New Orleans. But last July my *Mary Clarke* blew a boiler and burned, up near to Dubuque, burned right to the water line with a hundred dead. And this winter—this was a terrible winter. I had four of my boats wintering here at St. Louis. The *Nicholas Perrot*, the *Dunleith*, the *Sweet Fevre*, and my *Elizabeth A*., brand new, only four months in service and a sweet boat too, near 300 feet long with 12 big boilers, fast as any steamboat on the river. I was real proud of my lady Liz. She cost me $200,000, but she was worth every penny of it." The soup arrived. Marsh tasted a spoonful and scowled. "Too hot," he said. "Well, anyway, St. Louis is a good place to winter. Don't freeze too bad down here, nor too long. This winter was different, though. Yes, sir. Ice jam. Damn river froze *hard*." Marsh extended a huge red hand across the table, palm up, and slowly closed his fingers into a fist. "Put an egg in there and you get the idea, York. Ice can crush a steamboat easier than I can crush an egg. When it breaks up it's even worse, big gorges sliding down the river, smashing up wharfs, levees, boats, most everything. Winter's end, I'd lost my boats, all four of 'em. The ice took 'em away from me."

"Insurance?" York asked.

Marsh set to his soup, sucking it up noisily. In between spoons, he shook his head. "I'm not a gambling man, Mister York. I never took no stock in insurance. It's gambling, all it is, 'cept you're bettin' against yourself. What money I made, I put into my boats."

York nodded. "I believe you still own one steamboat."

"That I do," Marsh said. He finished his soup and signaled for the next course. "The *Eli Reynolds*, a little 150-ton stern-wheeler. I been using her on the Illinois, 'cause she don't draw much, and she wintered in Peoria, missed the worse of the ice. That's my asset, sir, that's what I got left. Trouble is, Mister York, the *Eli Reynolds* ain't worth much. She only cost me $25,000 new, and that was back in '50."

"Seven years," York said. "Not a very long time."

Marsh shook his head. "Seven years is a powerful long time for a steamboat," he said. "Most of 'em don't last but four or five. River just eats 'em up. The *Eli Reynolds* was better built than most, but still, she ain't got that long left." Marsh started in on his oysters, scooping them up on the half shell and swallowing them whole, washing each one down with a healthy gulp of wine. "So I'm puzzled, Mister York," he continued after a half-dozen oysters had disappeared. "You want to buy a half-share in my line, which ain't got but one small, old boat. Your letter named a price. Too high a price. Maybe when I had six boats, then Fevre River Packets was worth that much. But not now." He gulped down another oyster. "You won't

earn back your investment in ten years, not with the *Reynolds*. She can't take enough freight, nor passengers neither." Marsh wiped his lips on his napkin, and regarded the stranger across the table. The food had restored him, and now he felt like his own self again, in command of the situation. York's eyes were intense, to be sure, but there was nothing there to fear.

"You need my money, Captain," York said. "Why are you telling me this? Aren't you afraid I will find another partner?"

"I don't work that way," Marsh said. "Been on the river thirty years, York. Rafted down to New Orleans when I was just a boy, and worked flatboats and keelboats both before steamers. I been a pilot and a mate and a striker, even a mud clerk. Been everything there is to be in this business, but one thing I never been, and that's a sharper."

"An honest man," York said, with just enough of an edge in his voice so Marsh could not be sure if he was being mocked. "I am glad you saw fit to tell me the condition of your company, Captain. I knew it already, to be sure. My offer stands."

"Why?" Marsh demanded gruffly. "Only a fool throws away money. You don't look like no fool."

The food arrived before York could answer. Marsh's chickens were crisped up beautifully, just the way he liked them. He sawed off a leg and started in hungrily. York was served a thick cut of roasted beef, red and rare, swimming in blood and juice. Marsh watched him attack it, deftly, easily. His knife slid through the meat as if it were butter, never pausing to hack or saw, as Marsh so often did. He handled his fork like a gentleman, shifting hands when he set down his knife. Strength and grace; York had both in those long, pale hands of his, and Marsh admired that. He wondered that he had ever thought them a woman's hands. They were white but strong, hard like the white of the keys of the grand piano in the main cabin of the *Eclipse*.

"Well?" Marsh prompted. "You ain't answered my question."

Joshua York paused for a moment. Finally he said, "You have been honest with me, Captain Marsh. I will not repay your honesty with lies, as I had intended. But I will not burden you with the truth, either. There are things I cannot tell you, things you would not care to know. Let me put my terms to you, under these conditions, and see if we can come to an agreement. If not, we shall part amiably."

Marsh hacked the breast off his second chicken. "Go on," he said. "I ain't leaving."

York put down his knife and fork and made a steeple of his fingers. "For my own reasons, I want to be master of a steamboat. I want to travel the length of this great river, in comfort and privacy, not as passenger but as captain. I have a dream, a purpose. I seek friends and allies, and I have enemies, many enemies. The details are none of your concern. If you press me about them, I will tell you lies. Do not press me." His eyes grew hard a moment, then softened as he smiled. "Your only interest need be my desire to own and command a steamboat, Captain. As you can tell, I am no

riverman. I know nothing of steamboats, or the Mississippi, beyond what I have read in a few books and learned during the weeks I have spent in St. Louis. Obviously, I need an associate, someone who is familiar with the river and river people, someone who can manage the day-to-day operations of my boat, and leave me free to pursue my own purposes.

"This associate must have other qualities as well. He must be discreet, as I do not wish to have my behavior—which I admit to be sometimes peculiar—become the talk of the levee. He must be trustworthy, since I will give all management over into his hands. He must have courage. I do not want a weakling, or a superstitious man, or one who is overly religious. Are you a religious man, Captain?"

"No," said Marsh. "Never cared for bible-thumpers, nor them for me."

York smiled. "Pragmatic. I want a pragmatic man. I want a man who will concentrate on his own part of the business, and not ask too many questions of me. I value my privacy, and if sometimes my actions seem strange or arbitrary or capricious, I do not want them challenged. Do you understand my requirements?"

Marsh tugged thoughtfully on his beard. "And if I do?"

"We will become partners," York said. "Let your lawyers and your clerks run your line. You will travel with me on the river. I will serve as captain. You can call yourself pilot, mate, co-captain, whatever you choose. The actual running of the boat I will leave to you. My orders will be infrequent, but when I do command, you will see to it that I am obeyed without question. I have friends who will travel with us, cabin passage, at no cost. I may see fit to give them positions on the boat, with such duties as I may deem fitting. You will not question these decisions. I may acquire other friends along the river, and bring them aboard as well. You will welcome them. If you can abide by such terms, Captain Marsh, we shall grow rich together and travel your river in ease and luxury."

Abner Marsh laughed. "Well, maybe. But it ain't my river, Mister York, and if you think we're going to travel in luxury on the old *Eli Reynolds*, you're going to be awful sore when you come on board. She's a rackety old tub with some pretty poor accommodations, and most times she's full of foreigners taking deck passage to one unlikely place or the other. I ain't been on her in two years—old Cap'n Yoerger runs her for me now—but last time I rode her, she smelled pretty bad. You want luxury, you ought to see about buying into the *Eclipse* or the *John Simonds*."

Joshua York sipped at his wine, and smiled. "I did not have the *Eli Reynolds* in mind, Captain Marsh."

"She's the only boat I got."

York set down his wine. "Come," he said, "let us settle up here. We can proceed up to my room, and discuss matters further."

Marsh made a weak protest—the Planters' House offered an excellent dessert menu, and he hated to pass it up. York insisted, however.

York's room was a large, well-appointed suite, the best the hotel had to offer, and usually reserved for rich planters up from New Orleans. "Sit," York said commandingly, gesturing Marsh to a large, comfortable chair in the sitting room. Marsh sat, while his host went into an inner chamber and returned a moment later, bearing a small iron-bound chest. He set it on a table and began to work the lock. "Come here," he said, but Marsh had already risen to stand behind him. York threw back the lid.

"Gold," Marsh said softly. He reached out and touched the coins, running them through his fingers, savoring the feel of the soft yellow metal, the gleam and the clatter of it. One coin he brought to his mouth and tasted. "Real enough," he said, spitting. He chunked the coin back in the chest.

"Ten thousand dollars in twenty-dollar gold coins," York said. "I have two other chests just like it, and letters of credit from banks in London, Philadelphia, and Rome for sums considerably larger. Accept my offer, Captain Marsh, and you shall have a second boat, one far grander than your *Eli Reynolds*. Or perhaps I should say that we shall have a second boat." He smiled.

Abner Marsh had meant to turn down York's offer. He needed the money bad enough, but he was a suspicious man with no use for mysteries, and York asked him to take too much on faith. The offer had sounded too good; Marsh was certain that danger lay hidden somewhere, and he would be the worse for it if he accepted. But now, staring at the color of York's wealth, he felt his resolve weakening. "A new boat, you say?" he said weakly.

"Yes," York replied, "and that is over and above the price I would pay you for a half-interest in your packet line."

"How much..." Marsh began. His lips were dry. He licked them nervously. "How much are you willin' to spend to build this new boat, Mister York?"

"How much is required?" York asked quietly.

Marsh took up a handful of gold coins, then let them rattle through his fingers back into the chest. The gleam of them, he thought, but all he said was, "You oughtn't carry this much about with you, York. There's scoundrels would kill you for *one* of them coins."

"I can protect myself, Captain," York said. Marsh saw the look in his eyes and felt cold. He pitied the robber who tried to take Joshua York's gold.

"Will you take a walk with me? On the levee?"

"You haven't given me my answer, Captain."

"You'll get your answer. Come first. Got something I want you to see."

"Very well," York said. He closed the lid of the chest, and the soft yellow gleam faded from the room, which suddenly seemed close and dim.

The night air was cool and moist. Their boots sent up echoes as they walked the dark, deserted streets, York with a limber grace and Marsh with heavy authority. York wore a loose pilot's coat cut like a cape, and a tall old beaver hat that cast long shadows in the light of the half-moon. Marsh

glared at the dark alleys between the bleak brick warehouses, and tried to present an aspect of solid, scowling strength sufficient to scare off ruffians,

The levee was crowded with steamboats, at least forty of them tied up to landing posts and wharfboats. Even at this hour all was not quiet. Huge stacks of freight threw black shadows in the moonlight, and they passed roustabouts lounging against crates and bales of hay, passing a bottle from hand to hand or smoking their cob pipes. Lights still burned in the cabin windows of a dozen or more boats. The Missouri packet *Wyandotte* was lit and building steam. They spied a man standing high up on the texas deck of one big side-wheel packet, looking down at them curiously. Abner Marsh led York past him, past the procession of darkened, silent steamers, their tall chimneys etched against the stars like a row of blackened trees with strange flowers on their tops.

Finally he stopped before a great ornate side-wheeler, freight piled high on her main deck, her stage raised against unwanted intruders as she nuzzled against her weathered old wharfboat Even in the dimness of the half-moon the splendor of her was clear. No steamer on the levee was quite so big and proud.

"Yes?" Joshua York said quietly, respectfully. That might have decided it right there, Marsh thought later—the respect in his voice.

"That's the *Eclipse"* Marsh said. "See, her name is on the wheel-house, there." He jabbed with his stick. "Can you read it?"

"Quite well. I have excellent night vision. This is a special boat, then?"

"Hell yes, she's special. She's the *Eclipse*. Every goddamned man and boy on this river knows her. Old now—she was built back in '52, five years ago. But she's still grand. Cost $375,000, so they say, and worth all of it. There ain't never been a bigger, fancier, more for-mid-a-bul boat than this one right here. I've studied her, taken passage on her. I know." Marsh pointed. "She measures 365 feet by 40, and her grand saloon is 330 feet long, and you never seen nothin' like it. Got a gold statue of Henry Clay at one end, and Andy Jackson at the other, the two of 'em glaring at each other the whole damn way. More crystal and silver and colored glass than the Planters' House ever dreamed of, oil paintings, food like you ain't never tasted, and mirrors—*such* mirrors. And all that's nothin' to her speed.

"Down below on the main deck she carries 15 boilers. Got an 11-foot stroke, I tell you, and there ain't a boat on any river can run with her when Cap'n Sturgeon gets up her steam. She's done eighteen miles an hour upstream, easy. Back in '53, she set the record from New Orleans to Louisville. I know her time by heart. Four days, nine hours, thirty minutes, and she beat the goddamned *A. L. Shotwell* by fifty minutes, fast as the *Shotwell* is." Marsh rounded to face York. "I hoped my Lady Liz would take the *Eclipse* some day, beat her time or race her head to head, but she never could of done it, I know that now. I was just foolin' myself. I didn't have the money it takes to build a boat that can take the *Eclipse*.

"You give me that money, Mister York, and you've got yourself a partner. There's your answer, sir. You want half of Fevre River Packets, and a

partner who runs things quiet and don't ask you no questions 'bout your business? Fine. Then you give me the money to build a steamboat like that."

Joshua York stared at the big side-wheeler, serene and silent in the darkness, floating easily on the water, ready for all challengers. He turned to Abner Marsh with a smile on his lips and a dim flame in his dark eyes. "Done," was all he said. And he extended his hand.

Marsh broke into a crooked, snaggle-toothed grin, wrapped York's slim white hand within his own meaty paw, and squeezed. "Done, then," he said loudly, and he brought all his massive strength to bear, squeezing and crushing, as he always did in business, to test the will and the courage of the men he dealt with. He squeezed until he saw the pain in their eyes.

But York's eyes stayed clear, and his own hand clenched hard around Marsh's with a strength that was surprising. Tighter and tighter it squeezed, and the muscles beneath that pale flesh coiled and corded like springs of iron, and Marsh swallowed hard and tried not to cry out.

York released his hand. "Come," he said, clapping Marsh solidly across the shoulders and staggering him a bit. "We have plans to make."

CHAPTER TWO

New Orleans, May 1857

SOUR Billy Tipton arrived at the French Exchange just after ten, and watched them auction four casks of wine, seven crates of dry goods, and a shipment of furniture before they brought in the slaves. He stood silently, elbows up against the long marble bar that extended halfway around the rotunda, sipping an absinthe while he observed the *encanteurs* hawk their wares in two languages. Sour Billy was a dark, cadaverous man, his long horseface scarred by the pox he'd had as a boy, his hair thin and brown and flaky. He seldom smiled, and he had frightening ice-colored eyes.

Those eyes, those cold and dangerous eyes, were Sour Billy's protection. The French Exchange was a grand place, altogether too grand for his tastes, and for.a fact he did not like to come there. It was in the rotunda of the St. Louis Hotel, beneath a towering dome from which daylight cascaded down onto auction block and bidders. The dome was eighty feet across, easily. Tall pillars circled the room, galleries ran round the inside of the dome, the ceiling was elaborate and ornamental, the walls were covered with odd paintings, the bar was solid marble, the floor was marble, the desks of the *encanteurs* were marble. The patrons were as fine as the decor; rich planters from upriver, and young Creole dandies from the old city. Sour Billy loathed the Creoles, them with their rich clothes and haughty ways and dark, contemptuous eyes. He did not like to go among them. They were hot-blooded and quarrelsome, much given to dueling, and sometimes one of the young ones would take offense at Sour Billy, at the way he mangled their language and looked at their women, at the disreputable, scruffy, presumptuous *American*ness of him. But then they would catch sight of his eyes, pale and staring and edged with malice—and, often as not, they would turn away.

Still, left to his own devices, he'd do his nigger-buying over at the American Exchange in the St. Charles, where manners were less refined, English was spoken in place of French, and he felt less out of place. The grandeur of the rotunda in the St. Louis did not impress him, except for the quality of the drinks they served.

He came there once a month, nonetheless, and had no choice about it. The American Exchange was a good place to buy a field hand or a cook, dark-skinned as you please, but for a fancy girl, one of the young dusky octaroon beauties that Julian preferred, you had to come to the French Exchange. Julian wanted beauty, insisted on beauty.

Sour Billy did as Damon Julian told him.

It was about eleven when the last of the wine was cleared away, and the traders began to bring in their merchandise from the slave pens on Moreau and Esplanade and Common Streets; men and women, old and young, and children too, a disproportionate number of them light of skin and fair of face. Intelligent as well, Sour Billy knew, probably French-speaking. They were lined up along one side of the room for inspection, and several of the young Creole men walked along the row jauntily, making light comments to one another and viewing today's stock at close hand. Sour Billy stayed by the bar and ordered another absinthe. He had visited most of the yards yesterday, looked over what there was to offer. He knew what he wanted.

One of the auctioneers brought down a mallet on his marble desk, and at once the patrons ceased their conversation and turned to give him their attention. He gestured, and a young woman of about twenty climbed unsteadily to the top of a nearby crate. She was a slight quadroon with wide eyes, pretty in her way. She wore a calico dress and had green ribbons in her hair, and the auctioneer began singing her praises effusively. Sour Billy watched with disinterest while two young Creoles bid her up. She was finally sold for some $1400.

Next an older woman, said to be a fine cook, was auctioned off, and then a young mother with two children, all sold together. Sour Billy waited through several other sales. It was a quarter past noon and the French Exchange was jammed with bidders and spectators when the item he had chosen came up.

Her name was Emily, the *encanteur* told them. "Look at her, sirs," he babbled in French, "just look at her. Such perfection! It has been years since such a lot has been sold here, years, and it will be years before we see another like her." Sour Billy was inclined to agree. Emily was sixteen or seventeen, he judged, but already very much a woman. She looked a little frightened up on the auction block, but the dark simplicity of her dress set off her figure to good advantage, and she had a beautiful face—big soft eyes and fine café-au-lait skin. Julian will like this one.

The bidding was spirited. The planters had no use for such a fancy girl, but six or seven of the Creoles were hot after her. No doubt the other slaves had given Emily some idea what might be in store for her. She was pretty enough to get her freedom, in time, and to be kept by one of those fine Creole dandies in a little house on Ramparts Street, at least until he

married. She'd go to the Quadroon Balls in the Orleans Ballroom, wear silk gowns and ribbons, be the cause of more than one duel. Her daughters would have skin even lighter, and grow into the same fine life. Maybe when she got old she'd learn to dress hair or run a boarding house. Sour Billy sipped at his drink, cold-faced.

The bids rose. By $2,000 all but three of the bidders had fallen out. At that point one of them, a swarthy bald-headed man, demanded that she be stripped. The *encanteur* snapped a curt command, and Emily gingerly undid her dress and stepped out of it. Someone shouted up a lewd compliment that drew a round of laughter from the audience. The girl smiled weakly while the auctioneer grinned and added a comment of his own. Then the bidding resumed.

At $2,500 the bald-headed man dropped out, having gotten his look. That left two bidders, both Creoles, They topped one another three times in succession, forcing the price up to $3,200. Then came the hesitation. The auctioneer coaxed a final bid from the younger of the two men: $3,300.

"Thirty-four hundred," his opponent said quietly. Sour Billy recognized him. He was a lean young Creole named Montreuil, a notorious gambler and duelist.

The other man shook his head; the auction was over. Montreuil was smirking at Emily with anticipation. Sour Billy waited three heartbeats, until the mallet was about to fall. Then he set aside his absinthe glass and said, "Thirty-seven hundred," in a loud clear voice.

Encanteur and girl both looked up in surprise. Montreuil and several of his friends gave Billy dark, threatening looks. "Thirty-eight hundred," Montreuil said.

"Four thousand," said Sour Billy.

It was a high price, even for such a beauty. Montreuil said something to two men standing near him, and the three of them suddenly spun on their heels and strode from the rotunda without another word, their footsteps ringing angrily on the marble.

"It seems like I won the auction," Sour Billy said. "Get her dressed and ready to go." The others were all staring at him.

"But of course!" the *encanteur* said. Another auctioneer rose at his desk, and with his mallet summoned yet another fancy girl to the attention of the crowd, and the French Exchange began to buzz again.

Sour Billy Tipton led Emily down the long arcade from the rotunda to St. Louis Street, past all the fashionable shops where idlers and wealthy travelers gave them curious looks. As he stepped out into daylight, blinking at the glare, Montreuil came up beside him. "*Monsieur*," he began.

"Talk English if you want to talk to me," Sour Billy said sharply. "It's Mister Tipton out here, Montreuil." His long fingers twitched, and he fixed the other with his cold ice eyes.

"Mister Tipton," Montreuil said in a flat, unaccented English. His face was vaguely flushed. Behind him, his two companions stood stiffly. "I have lost girls before," the Creole said. "She is striking, but it is nothing, losing her. But I take offense at the way you bid. Mister Tipton. You made a mockery of me in there, taunting me with victory and playing me for a fool."

"Well, well," Sour Billy said. "Well, well."

"You play a dangerous game," Montreuil warned. "Do you know who I am? If you were a gentleman, I would call you out, sir."

"Dueling's illegal, Montreuil," Sour Billy said. "Hadn't you heard? And I'm no gentleman." He turned back to the quadroon girl, who was standing up near the wall of the hotel, watching them. "Come," he said. He walked off down the sidewalk, and she followed.

"You shall be paid in kind for this, *monsieur*," Montreuil called after him.

Sour Billy paid him no mind and turned a corner. He walked briskly, a swagger in his step that had been absent inside the French Exchange. The streets were where Sour Billy felt at home; there he had grown up, there he had learned to survive. The slave girl Emily scurried after him as best she could, her bare feet pounding on the brick sidewalks. The streets of the Vieux Carre were lined with brick and plaster houses, each with its graceful wrought-iron balcony overhanging the narrow walk, fancy as you please. But the roads themselves were unpaved, and the recent rains had turned them into a sea of mud. Along the walks were open gutters, deep ditches of cypress full of standing water, fragrant with filth and raw sewage.

They passed neat little shops and slave pens with heavily barred windows, passed elegant hotels and smoky grog shops full of surly free niggers, passed close, humid alleys and airy courtyards each with its well or fountain, passed haughty Creole ladies with their escorts and chaperones and a gang of runaway slaves in iron collars and chains cleaning the gutters under the careful watch of a hard-eyed white man with a whip. Shortly they passed out of the French Quarter entirely, into the rawer, newer American section of New Orleans. Sour Billy had left his horse tied up outside a grog shop. He mounted it, and told the girl to walk along beside him. They struck out south from the city, and soon left the main roads, stopping only once, briefly, so Sour Billy could rest his horse and eat some of the dry, hard bread and cheese in Ins saddlebag. He let Emily suck up some water from a stream.

"Are you my new massa, sir?" she asked him then, in remarkably good English.

"Overseer," said Sour Billy. "You'll meet Julian tonight, girl. After dark." He smiled. "He'll *like* you." Then he told her to shut up.

Since the girl was afoot their pace was laggardly, and it was near dusk when they reached the Julian plantation. The road ran along the bayou and wound through a thick stand of trees, limbs heavy with Spanish moss. They rounded a large, barren oak and came out into the fields, red-tinged in the somber light of the setting sun. They lay fallow and overgrown from the water's edge to the house. There was an old, rotting wharf and a woodyard

along the bayou for passing steamers, and behind the great house a row of slave shanties. But there were no slaves, and the fields had not been worked in some years. The house was not large as plantation houses go, nor particularly grand; it was a stolid, square structure of graying wood, paint flaking from its sides, its only striking aspect a high tower with a widow's walk around it.

"Home," said Sour Billy.

The girl asked if the plantation had a name.

"Used to," Sour Billy said, "years ago, when Garoux owned it. But he took sick and died, him and all his fine sons, and it don't got no name now. Now shut your mouth and hurry."

He led her around back, to his own entrance, and opened the padlock with a key he wore on a chain around his neck. He had three rooms of his own, in the servants' portion of the house. He pulled Emily into the bedroom. "Get out of them clothes," Sour Billy snapped.

The girl fumbled to obey, but looked at him with fear in her eyes.

"Don't look like that," he said. "You're Julian's, I ain't going to mess with you. I'll be heatin' some water. There's a tub in the kitchen. You'll wash the filth off you, and dress." He threw open a wardrobe of intricately carved wood, pulled out a dark brocade gown. "Here, this'll fit."

She gasped. "I can't wear nothin' like that. That's a white lady's dress."

"You shut your mouth and do like I tell you," Sour Billy said. "Julian wants you pretty, girl." Then he left her and went through into the main part of the house.

He found Julian in the library, sitting quietly in darkness in a great leather chair, a brandy snifter in his hand. All around him, covered with dust, were the books that had belonged to old Rene Garoux and his sons. None of them had been touched in years. Damon Julian was not a reader.

Sour Billy entered and stood a respectful distance away, silent until Julian spoke.

"Well?" the voice from the darkness asked at last.

"Four thousand," Sour Billy said, "but you'll like her. A young one, nice and tender, beautiful, real beautiful."

"The others will be here soon. Alain and Jean are here already, the fools. The thirst is on them. Bring her to the ballroom when she is ready."

"Yes," Sour Billy said quickly. "There was trouble at the auction, Mister Julian."

"Trouble?"

"A Creole sharper, name of Montreuil. He wanted her too, didn't like being outbid. Think he might get curious. He's a gambler, seen a lot around the

gaming rooms. Want me to take care of him some night?"

"Tell me about him," Julian commanded. His voice was liquid, soft and deep and sensuous, rich as a fine cognac.

"Young, dark. Black eyes, black hair. Tall. A duelist, they say. Hard man. Strong and lean, but he's got a pretty face, like so many of them do."

"I will see to him," Damon Julian said.

"Yes, sir," said Sour Billy Tipton. He turned and went back to his rooms.

Emily was transformed when she slipped into the brocade gown. Slave and child alike vanished; washed and dressed properly, she was a woman of dark, almost ethereal beauty. Sour Billy inspected her carefully. "You'll do," he said. "Come, you're goin' to a ball."

The ballroom was the largest and grandest chamber in the house, lit by three huge cut-glass chandeliers burning with a hundred tiny candles. Bayou landscapes done in rich oils hung on the walls, and the floors were beautifully polished wood. At one end of the room wide double doors opened out onto a foyer; at the other, a great staircase rose and branched off to either side, its banisters gleaming.

They were waiting when Sour Billy led her in.

Nine of them were on hand, including Julian himself; six men, three women, the men in dark suits of European cut, the women in pale silken gowns. Except for Julian, they waited on the staircase, still and silent, respectful. Sour Billy knew them all: the pale women who called themselves Adrienne and Cynthia and Valerie, dark handsome Raymond with the boy's face, Kurt whose eyes burned like hot coals, all the others. One of them, Jean, trembled slightly as he waited, his lips pulled back from long white teeth, his hand moving in small spasms. The thirst was on him badly, but he did not act. He waited for Damon Julian. All of them waited for Damon Julian.

Julian walked across the ballroom to the slave girl Emily. He moved with the stately grace of a cat. He moved like a lord, like a king. He moved like darkness flowing, liquid and inevitable. He was a dark man, somehow, though his skin was very pale; his hair was black and curling, his clothing somber, his eyes glittering flint.

He stopped before her and smiled. Julian had a charming, sophisticated smile. "Exquisite," he said simply.

Emily blushed and stammered. "Shut up," Sour Billy told her sharply. "Don't you talk unless Mister Julian tells you to."

Julian ran his finger along one soft, dark cheek, and the girl trembled and tried to stand still. He stroked her hair languidly, then raised her face toward his and let his eyes drink from her own. At that Emily shied and cried out with alarm, but Julian placed his hands on either side of her face, and would not let her look away. "Lovely," he said. "You are beautiful, child. We appreciate beauty here, all of us." He released her face, took one of her small hands in his own, raised it, and turned it over and bowed to

plant a soft kiss on the inside of her wrist.

The slave girl was still shaking, but she did not resist. Julian turned her slightly, and gave her arm to Sour Billy Tipton. "Will you do the honors, Billy?"

Sour Billy reached behind him, and pulled the knife from the sheath in the small of his back. Emily's dark eyes bulged wide and frightened and she tried to pull away, but he had a firm grip on her and he was fast, very fast. The blade had scarcely come into view and suddenly it was wet; a single swift slash across the inside of her wrist, where Julian had planted his lips. Blood welled from the wound and began to drip onto the floor, the patters loud in the stillness of the ballroom.

Briefly the girl whimpered, but before she quite knew what was happening Sour Billy had sheathed his knife and stepped away and Julian had taken her hand again. He raised her slim arm up once more, and bent his lips to her wrist, and began to suck.

Sour Billy retreated to the door. The others left the stair and came closer, the women's gowns whispering softly. They stood in a hungry circle about Julian and his prey, their eyes dark and hot. When Emily lost consciousness, Sour Billy sprang forward and caught her beneath the arms, supporting her. She weighed almost nothing at all.

"Such beauty," Julian muttered when he broke free of her, lips moist, eyes heavy and sated. He smiled.

"*Please*, Damon," implored the one called Jean, shaking like a man with the fever.

Blood ran slowly, darkly down Emily's arm as Julian gave Jean a cold, malignant stare. "Valerie," he said, "you are next." The pale young woman with the violet eyes and yellow gown came forward, knelt daintily, and began to lick at the terrible flow. Not until she had licked the arm clean did she press her mouth to the open wound.

Raymond went next, by Julian's leave, then Adrienne, then Jorge. Finally, when the others were done, Julian turned to Jean with a smile and a gesture. He fell on her with a stifled sob, wrenching her from Sour Billy's embrace, and began to tear at the soft flesh of her throat. Damon Julian grimaced with distaste. "When he is done," he told Sour Billy, "clean it up."

CHAPTER THREE

New Albany, Indiana, June 1857

THE mists were thick on the river and the air damp and chilly. It was just after midnight when Joshua York, finally arrived from St. Louis, met Abner Marsh in the deserted boatyards of New Albany. Marsh had been waiting for almost half an hour when York appeared, striding out of the fog like some pale apparition. Behind him, silent as shadows, came four others.

Marsh grinned toothily. "Joshua," he said. He nodded curtly to the others. He had met them briefly back in April, in St. Louis, before he had taken

passage to New Albany to supervise the building of his dream. They were York's friends and traveling companions, but an odder bunch Marsh had never met. Two of them were men of indeterminate age with foreign names that he could neither remember nor pronounce; he called 'em Smith and Brown, to York's amusement. They were always yapping at each other in some outlandish gibble-gabble. The third man, a hollow-cheeked Easterner who dressed like a mortician, was called Simon and never spoke at all. The woman, Katherine, was said to be a Britisher. She was tall and kind of stooped, with a sickly, decaying look to her. She reminded Marsh of a great white vulture. But she was York's friend, all of them were, and York had warned him that he might have peculiar friends, so Abner Marsh held his tongue.

"Good evening, Abner," York said. He stopped and glanced around the yards, where the half-built steamers lay like so many skeletons amid the gray flowing mists. "Cold night, isn't it? For June?"

"That it is. You come far?"

"I've taken a suite at the Galt House over in Louisville. We hired a boat to take us across the river." His cool gray eyes studied the nearest steamboat with interest. "Is this one ours?"

Marsh snorted. "This little thing? Hell no, that's just some cheap stern-wheeler they're building for the Cincinnati trade. You don't think I'd put no damned stern-wheel on our boat, do you?"

York smiled. "Forgive my ignorance. Where is our boat, then?"

"Come this way," Marsh said, gesturing broadly with his walking stick. He led them half across the boatyard. "There," he said, pointing.

The mists gave way for them, and there she stood, high and proud, dwarfing all the other boats around her. Her cabins and rails gleamed with fresh paint pale as snow, bright even in the gray shroud of fog. Way up on her texas roof, halfway to the stars, her pilot house seemed to glitter; a glass temple, its ornate cupola decorated all around with fancy woodwork as intricate as Irish lace. Her chimneys, twin pillars that stood just forward of the texas deck, rose up a hundred feet, black and straight and haughty. Their feathered tops bloomed like two dark metal flowers. Her hull was slender and seemed to go on forever, with her stern obscured by the fog. Like all the first-class boats, she was a side-wheeler. Set amidship, the huge curved wheelhouses loomed gigantic, hinting at the vast power of the paddle wheels concealed within them. They seemed all the larger for want of the name that would soon be emblazoned across them.

In the night and the fog, amid all those smaller, plainer boats, she seemed a vision, a white phantom from some riverman's dream. She took the breath away, Marsh thought as they stood there.

Smith was gibbling and Brown was gabbling back at him, but Joshua York just looked. For the longest time he looked, and then he nodded. "We have created something beautiful, Abner," he said.

Marsh smiled.

"I had not expected to find her so close to finished," York said.

"This is New Albany," said Marsh. "That's why I came here, instead of one of the boatyards in St. Louis. They been buildin' steamboats here since I was a boy, built twenty-two of 'em just last year, probably have almost that many this year. I knew they could do the job for us. You should have been here. I came in with one of those little chests of gold, and I dumped it all over the superintendent's desk, and I says to him, I says, 'I want a steamer built, and I want it built *quick*, and I want it to be the fastest and prettiest and best damn heller of a boat that you ever damn built, you hear? Now you get me some engineers, your best, I don't care if you got to drag 'em out of some cathouse over to Louisville, you get 'em to me tonight, so we can begin. And you get me the best damn carpenters and painters and boilermakers and all the damn rest, cause if I get anything *but* the best, you're goin' to be a mighty sorry man.' " Marsh laughed. "You should of seen him, didn't know whether to look at that gold or lissen to me, both scared him half to death. But he did us right, that he did." He nodded toward the boat. "Course, she's not finished. Trim needs to be painted, goin' do it up mostly in blue and silver, to go with all that silver you wanted in the saloon. And we're still waitin' on some of the fancy furniture and mirrors you ordered from Philadelphia, and such things. But mostly she's done, Joshua, mostly she's ready. Come, I'll show you."

Workmen had abandoned a lantern atop a pile of lumber near the stern of the boat. Marsh struck a match on his leg, lit the lantern, and thrust it imperiously at Brown. "Here, you, carry this," he said brusquely. He went clomping heavily up a long board onto the main deck, the others trailing behind. "Careful what you touch," he said, "some of the paint's still wet."

The lowest, or main, deck was full of machinery. The lantern burned with a clear, steady light, but Brown kept moving it around, so the shadows of the hulking machines seemed to shift and jump ominously, as if they were things alive. "Here, hold that still," Marsh commanded. He turned to York and began to point, his stick jabbing like a long hickory finger toward the boilers, great metal cylinders that ran along either side of the forepart of the deck. "Eighteen boilers," Marsh said proudly, "three more than the *Eclipse*. Thirty-eight-inch diameters, twenty-eight-foot long, each of 'em." His stick waggled. "Furnaces are all done up with firebrick and sheet iron, got 'em up on brackets clear of the deck, cuts down on the chance of fires." He traced the path of the steam lines overhead, running from the boilers back to the engines, and they all turned toward the stern. "We got thirty-six-inch cylinders, high pressure, and we got ourselves an eleven-foot stroke, same as the *Eclipse*. This boat is goin' chew up that old river something terrible, I tell you."

Brown gabbled, Smith gibbled, and Joshua York smiled.

"Come on up," Marsh said. "Your friends don't seem too interested in the engines, but they ought to like it just fine upstairs."

The staircase was wide and ornate, polished oak with graceful fluted banisters. It began up near the bow, its width hiding the boilers and engines from those boarding, then broke in two and curled gracefully to either side to open on the second, or boiler, deck. They walked along the

starboard side, with Marsh and his stick and Brown and the lantern leading the way, their boots clacking on the hardwood deck of the promenade as they marveled at the fine gothic detail of the pillars and the guard rails, all the painstakingly shaped wood, carved with flowers and curlicues and acorns. Stateroom doors and windows ran fore and aft in a long, long row; the doors were dark walnut, the windows stained glass. "Staterooms aren't furnished yet," Marsh said, opening a door and leading them into one, "but we're getting nothing but the best, featherbeds and feather pillows, a mirror and an oil lamp for each room. Our cabins are larger than usual, too—won't be able to take quite as many passengers as some other boat our size, but they'll have more room." He smiled. "We can charge 'em more too."

Each cabin had two doors; one leading out onto the deck, the other inward, to the grand saloon, the main cabin of the steamer. "Main cabin isn't near finished," Marsh said, "but come look at it anyway."

They entered and stopped, while Brown raised the lantern to cast light all up and down the vast, echoing length of it. The grand saloon extended the length of the boiler deck, continuous and unobstructed except by a midship gangway. "Fore portion is the gents' cabin, aft for the ladies," Marsh explained. "Take a look. Ain't done yet, but she'll be something. That marble bar there is forty foot long, and we're going to put a mirror behind it just as big. Got it on order now. Well have mirrors on every stateroom door too, with silver frames around 'em, and a twelve-foot-high mirror there, at the aft end of the ladies' cabin." He pointed upward with his stick. "Can't see nothing now, with it being dark and all, but the skylights are stained glass, run the whole length of the cabin. We're going to put down one of them Brussels carpets, and carpets in all the staterooms too. We got a silver water cooler with silver cups that's going to stand on a fancy wooden table, and we got a grand piano, and brand new velvet chairs, and real linen tablecloths. None of it is here yet, though."

Even empty of carpeting, mirrors, and furniture, the long cabin had a splendor to it. They walked down it slowly, in silence, and in the moving light of the lantern bits of its stately beauty suddenly took form from the darkness, only to vanish again behind them: The high arched ceiling with its curving beams, carved and painted with detail as fine as fairy lace. Long rows of slim columns flanking the stateroom doors, trimmed with delicate fluting. The black marble bar with its thick veins of color. The oily sheen of dark wood. The double row of chandeliers, each with four great crystal globes hanging from a spiderweb of wrought iron, wanting only oil and a flame and all those mirrors to wake the whole saloon to glorious, glittering light.

"I thought the cabins too small," Katherine said suddenly, "but this room will be grand."

Marsh frowned at her. "The cabins are big, ma'am. Eight foot square. Six is usual. This is a steamer, you know." He turned away from her, pointed with his walking stick. "Clerk's office will be all the way forward there, the kitchen and the washrooms are by the wheelhouses. I know just the cook I want to get, too. Used to work on my Lady Liz."

The roof of the boiler deck was the hurricane deck. They walked up a narrow stair and emerged forward of the great black iron smokestacks, then up a shorter stair to the texas deck, which ran back from the stacks to the wheelhouses. "Crew's cabins," Marsh said, not bothering with a tour. The pilot house stood atop the texas. He led them up and in.

From here, the whole yards were visible; all the lesser boats wrapped in mist, the black waters of the Ohio River beyond, and even the distant lights of Louisville, ghostly flickers in the fog. The interior of the pilot house was large and plush. The windows were of the best and clearest glass, with stained glass trim around them. Everywhere shone dark wood, and polished silver pale and cold in the lantern light.

And there was the wheel. Only the top half of it was visible, so huge was it, and even that stood as high as Marsh himself, while the bottom half was set in a slot in the floorboards. It was fashioned of soft black teak, cool and smooth to the touch, and the spokes wore ornamental silver bands like a dancehall girl wears garters. The wheel seemed to cry out for a pilot's hands.

Joshua York came up to the wheel and touched it, running a pale hand over the black wood and silver. Then he took hold of it, as if he were a pilot himself, and for a long moment he stood like that, the wheel in his hands and his gray eyes brooding as they stared out into the night and the unseasonable June fog. The others all fell silent, and for a brief moment Abner Marsh could almost feel the steamboat move, over some dark river of the mind, on a voyage strange and endless.

Joshua York turned then, and broke the spell. "Abner," he said, "I would like to learn to steer this boat. Can you teach me to pilot?"

"Pilot, eh?" Marsh said, surprised. He had no difficulty imagining York as a master and a captain, but piloting was something else—yet somehow the very asking made him warm to his partner, made him understandable after all. Abner Marsh knew what it was to want to pilot. "Well, Joshua," he said, "I've done my share of piloting, and it's the grandest feeling in the world. Being a captain, that ain't nothin' to piloting. But it ain't something you just pick up, if you know what I'm saying."

"The wheel looks simple enough to master," York said.

Marsh laughed. "Hell yes, but it's not the wheel you got to learn. It's the river, York, the river. The old Mississippi hisself. I was a pilot for eight years, before I got my own boats, licensed for the upper Mississippi and the Illinois. Never for the Ohio, though, or the lower Mississippi, and for all I knew about steamboatin' I couldn't have piloted no boat on those rivers to save my life—didn't know 'em. Those I did know, it took me years to learn 'em, and the learnin' never stopped. By now I been out of the pilot house for so long that I'd have to learn 'em all over again. The river changes, Joshua, that it does. Ain't never the same twice in a row, and you got to know every inch of it." Marsh strolled to the wheel and put one of his own hands on it, fondly. "Now, I plan to pilot this boat, at least once. I dreamed about her too long not to want to take her in my hands. When we go against the *Eclipse*, I mean to stand a spell in the pilot house, that I do.

But she's too grand a boat for anything but the New Orleans trade, and that means the lower river, so I'm going to have to start learnin' myself, learn every damn foot. Takes time, takes work." He looked at York. "You still want to pilot, now that you know what it means?"

"We can learn together, Abner," York replied.

York's companions were growing restless. They wandered from window to window, Brown shifting the lantern from one hand to another, Simon as grim as a cadaver. Smith said something to York in their foreign tongue. York nodded. "We must be going back," he said.

Marsh glanced around one final time, reluctant to leave even now, and led them from the pilot house.

When they had trudged partway through the boatyards, York turned and looked back toward their steamboat where she sat on her pilings, pale against the darkness. The others stopped as well, and waited silently.

"Do you know Byron?" York asked Marsh.

Marsh thought a minute. "Know a fellow named Blackjack Pete used to pilot on the *Grand Turk*. I think his last name was Brian."

York smiled. "Not Brian, Byron. Lord Byron, the English poet."

"Oh," said Marsh. "Him. I'm not much a one for poems. I think I heard of him, though. Gimp, wasn't he? And quite a one for the ladies."

"The very one, Abner. An astounding man. I had the good fortune to meet him once. Our steamboat put me in mind of a poem he once wrote." He began to recite.

She walks in Beauty, like the night

Of cloudless climes and starry skies;

And all that's best of dark and bright

Meet in her aspect and her eyes:

Thus mellowed to that tender light

Which Heaven to gaudy day denies.

"Byron wrote of a woman, of course, but the words seem to fit our boat as well, do they not? Look at her, Abner! What do you think?"

Abner Marsh didn't quite know what to think; your average steamboatman didn't go around spouting poetry, and he didn't know what to say to one that did. "Very interesting, Joshua," was all he managed.

"What shall we name her?" York asked, his eyes still fixed on the boat, and a slight smile on his face. "Does the poem suggest anything?"

Marsh frowned. "We're not going to name her after any gimp Britisher, if that's what you're thinking," he said gruffly.

"No," said York, "I wasn't suggesting that. I had in mind something like *Dark Lady*, or—"

"I had somethin' in mind myself," Marsh said. "We're Fevre River Packets, after all, and this boat is all I ever dreamed come true." He lifted his hickory stick and pointed at the wheelhouse. "We'll put it right there, big blue and silver letters, real fancy. *Fevre Dream*." He smiled. "*Fevre Dream* against the *Eclipse*, they'll talk about that race till all of us are dead."

For a moment, something strange and haunted moved in Joshua York's gray eyes. Then it was gone as swiftly as it had come. "*Fevre Dream*," he said. "Don't you think that choice a bit... oh, ominous? It suggests sickness to me, fever and death and twisted visions. Dreams that... dreams that should not be dreamed, Abner."

Marsh frowned. "I don't know about that. I like it."

"Will people ride in a boat with such a name? Steamboats have been known to carry typhoid and yellow fever. Do we wish to remind them of such things?"

"They rode my *Sweet Fevre*," Marsh said. "They ride the *War Eagle*, and the *Ghost*, even boats named after Red Indians. They'd ride her."

The gaunt, pale one named Simon said something then, in a voice that rasped like a rusty saw and a language strange to Marsh, though it was not the one Smith and Brown babbled in. York heard him and his face took on a thoughtful cast, though it still seemed troubled. "*Fevre Dream*," he said again. "I had hoped for a—a healthier name, but Simon has made a point to me. Have your way then, Abner. The *Fevre Dream* she is."

"Good," Marsh said.

York nodded absently. "Let us meet tomorrow for dinner at the Galt House. At eight. We can make plans for our voyage to St. Louis, discuss crew and provisioning, if that is agreeable to you."

Marsh voiced a gruff assent, and York and his companions went off toward their boat, vanishing into the mists. Long after they had gone Marsh stood in the boatyards, staring at the still, silent steamer. "*Fevre Dream*," he said loudly, just to test the taste of the words on his tongue. But oddly, for the first time, the name seemed wrong in his ears, fraught with connotations he did not like. He shivered, unaccountably cold for a moment, then snorted and set off for bed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Aboard the Steamer FEVRE DREAM, Ohio River, July