

THE  
LUCKY SIX 

Other works by Gordon Cooper

*Watkins Glen Tour Guide*

THE  
LUCKY SIX 

ILLUSTRATED & ANNOTATED

A NOVEL

BY  
GORDON COOPER



PRESTON WOODS PUBLISHING CO.

LOS GATOS

2025

*The Lucky Six*  
By Gordon Cooper

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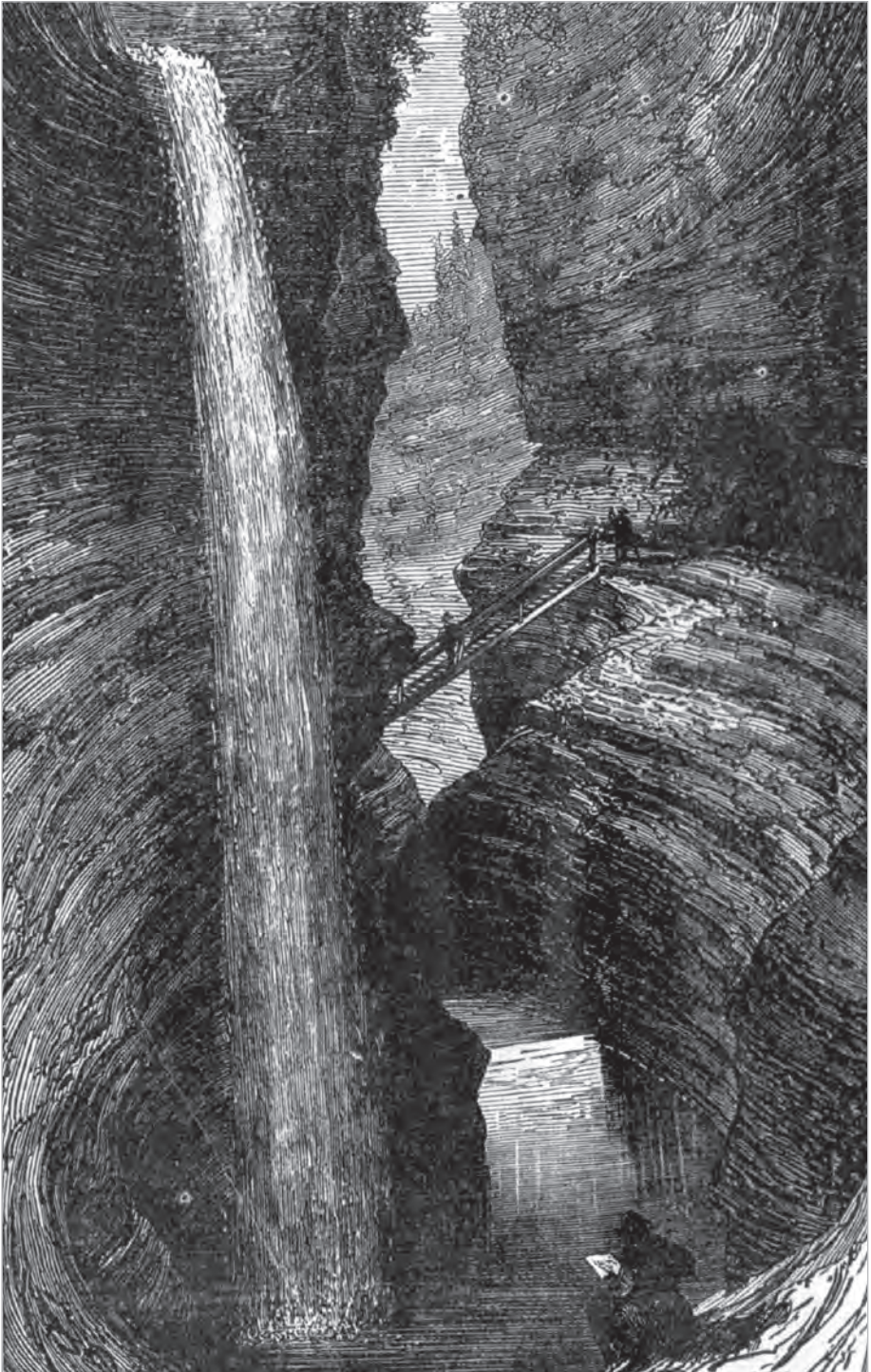
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*In memory of my father,  
John Allen "Jack" Cooper,  
who always enjoyed a good story*



WATKINS GLEN CAVERN CASCADE AND THE GROTTO

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## PREFACE

In 2009, I wrote *Watkins Glen Tour Guide*, a history and travel book for the picturesque village my family moved to when I was three years old. As I researched and wrote that book, I was fascinated at the long forgotten historical details I uncovered—many existing now only as echoes of the past reflected in repurposed buildings, historical panels in the Glen, or the monthly journals from the Schuyler County Historical Society. I wanted to explore some of those stories in more detail.

This book is a work of fiction. The main characters and plot are all fictional. However, as much as possible, the world I have placed these characters in is based on the real world of 1874. Most locations are real, and some events and supporting players are also.

Let me be clear, I did not write this book as a history lesson. My goal was to write an entertaining mystery/thriller that immerses you in a world that—as much as I can recreate—once existed. The illustrations are all original engravings from the late 1800s, although some have been modified to fit the narrative.

You should not need additional knowledge to read this book, but for those who prefer a bit of backstory, here are some nuggets of information to provide more context.

Watkins Glen today is a tourist town at the end of Seneca Lake, the largest of the Finger Lakes, in upstate New York. It is known for its famous gorge, the many vineyards and wineries along Seneca Lake, and its rich auto-racing history. The roots of its life as a tourist destination began in 1863 when Morvalden Ells saw the potential of the 1.5-mile gorge that flows into the village. He built wooden walkways and stairs, advertised like crazy, and successfully opened “Watkins Glen” as a tourist attraction.

The village at the time was named Watkins after its late founder, Samuel Watkins. The gorge was named Watkins Glen. For years, visitors confused the village’s name with the name of the gorge, so in 1927, the village of Watkins officially changed its name to Watkins Glen.

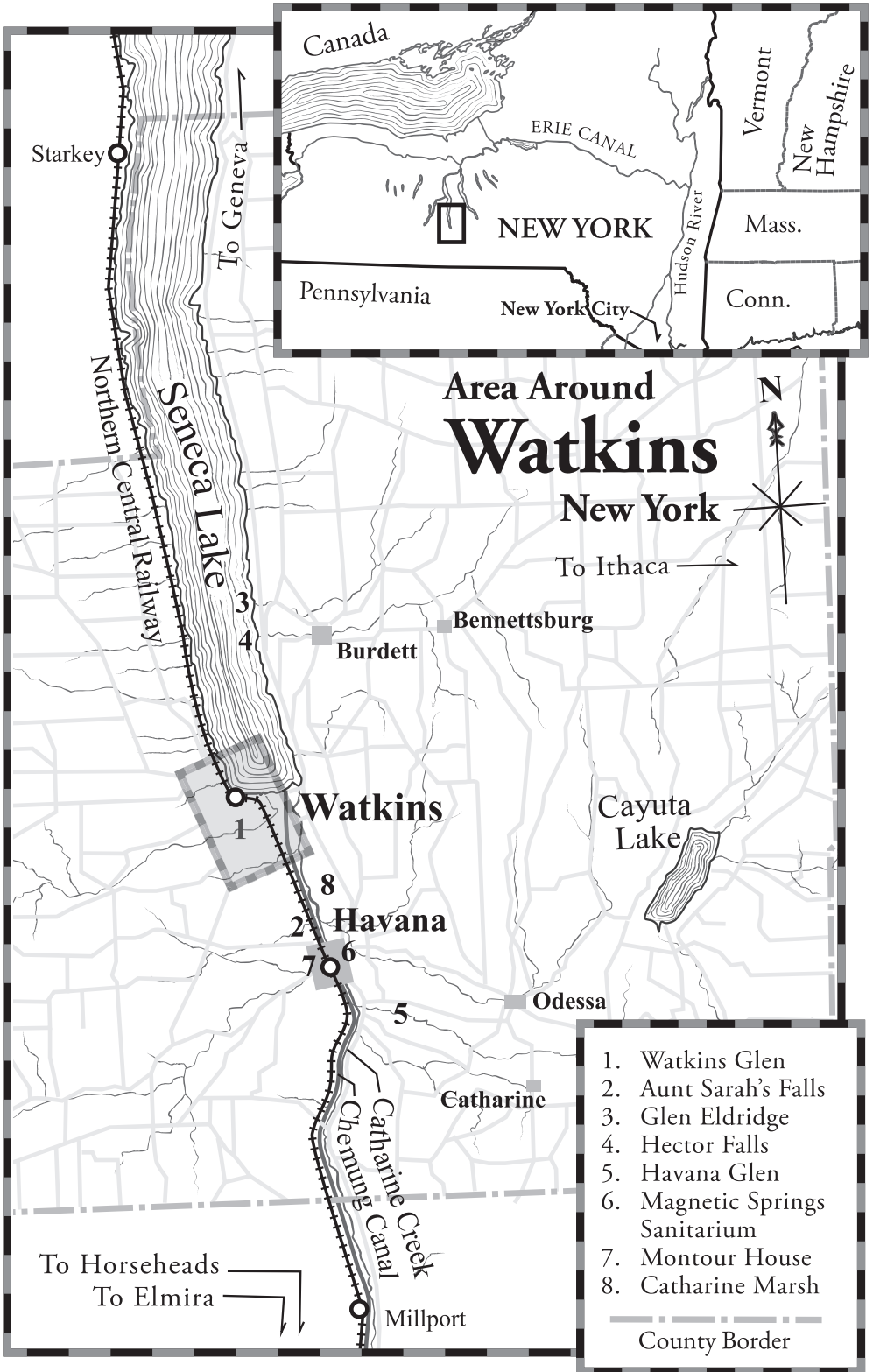
The village's neighbor to the south, Montour Falls, also had a name change. It was called Havana until 1893.

I chose 1874 because it was the peak of a tourist boom in Watkins. By the 1870s, the United States was transforming into an industrial nation. The railroads that sprang up everywhere helped rapidly move raw materials and goods across the country and created an interconnected society. People were free to travel longer distances and were in search of exciting destinations. Watkins Glen became one of those destinations, and its charms were often compared to Mammoth Cave and Niagara Falls.

The American Civil War enters the story because of the overlooked part that Elmira, New York—only thirty miles south of Watkins Glen—played with its prisoner of war (POW) camp for Confederate soldiers. Elmira rivaled its southern counterpart, Andersonville, in prisoner deaths, but northern newspaper readers heard much more about the horrors of Andersonville than Elmira. As Winston Churchill famously said, “History is written by the victors.”

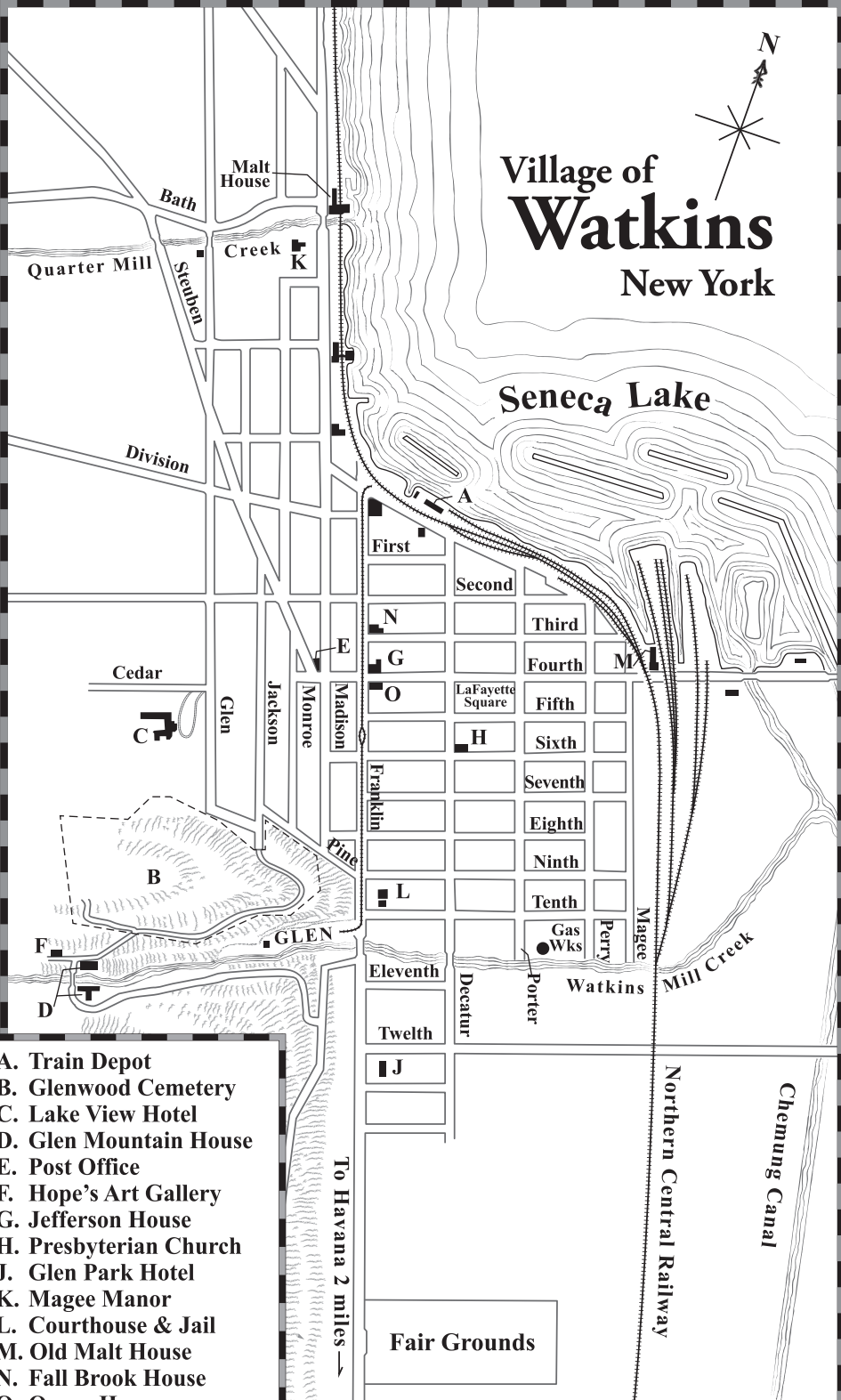
The 1870s were difficult times for women and people of color. Despite advancements in the women's rights championed in nearby Seneca Falls, N.Y., women were still discouraged from working outside the home and often limited to low-paying jobs when they did. Women would not win the right to vote until the 19th Amendment passed in 1920. At the same time, freed slaves were trying to find their footing in a world biased against them. I tried to balance historical accuracy with respect for these groups. Whether I succeeded or failed in that attempt, I defer to your judgment as a reader.

With that, you have enough information to start your journey back to the late 1800s. Enjoy the adventure!



# Village of Watkins

## New York



- A. Train Depot
- B. Glenwood Cemetery
- C. Lake View Hotel
- D. Glen Mountain House
- E. Post Office
- F. Hope's Art Gallery
- G. Jefferson House
- H. Presbyterian Church
- J. Glen Park Hotel
- K. Magee Manor
- L. Courthouse & Jail
- M. Old Malt House
- N. Fall Brook House
- O. Opera House

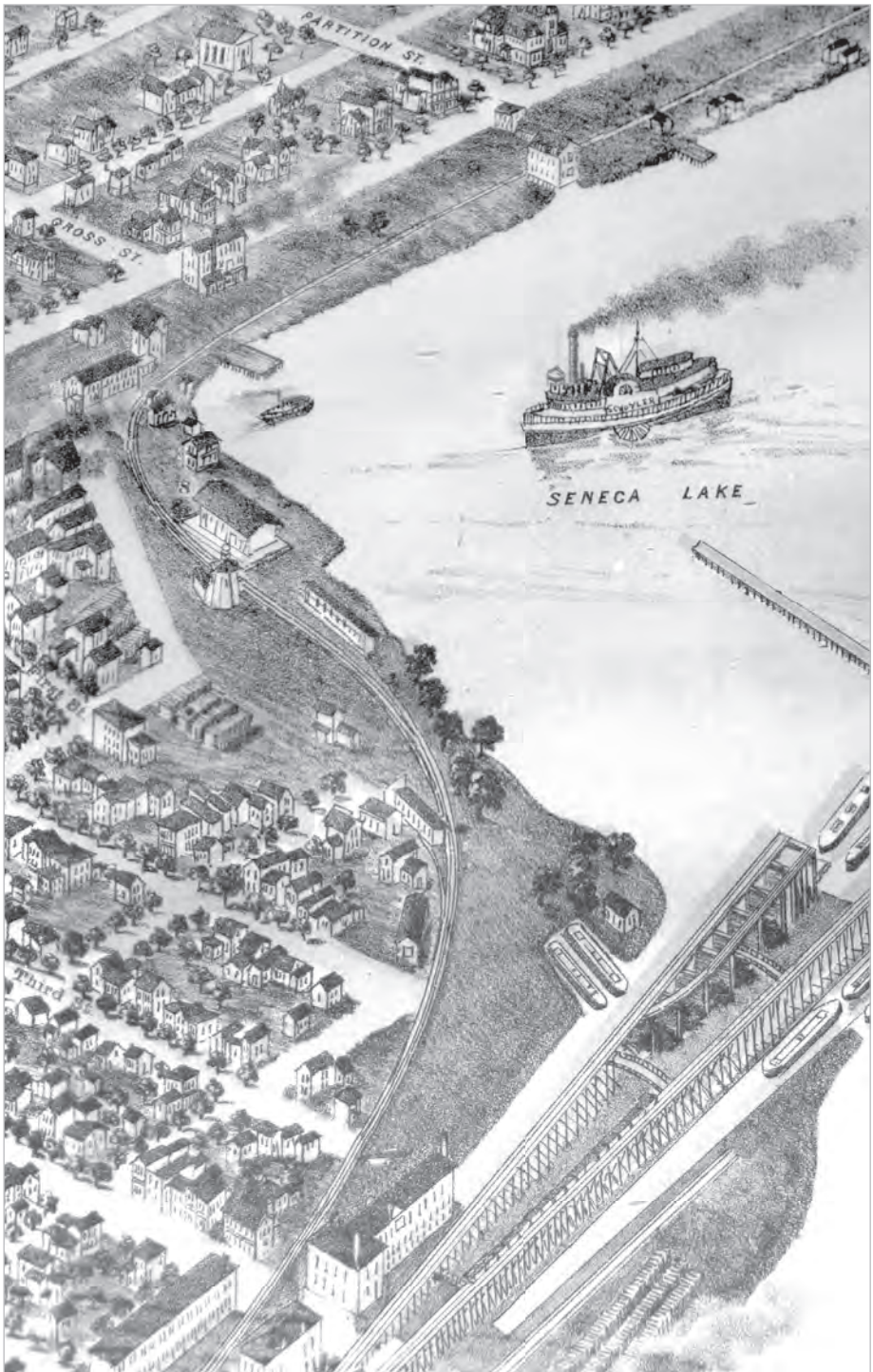
*Memories fade but ghosts reside,  
In fields of war, where hope had died.  
Lest glinting gold release its thrall,  
Amidst sylvan glens and thundering falls,  
Beware secrets held, dark and deep,  
For shadows dance where dangers creep.*





PART ONE  
GLINTING GOLD





WATKINS, NEW YORK

## CHAPTER I

### A GOLDEN DEATH

*Friday, July 10, 1874*

ON an unseasonably warm and dry summer afternoon, Lewis Crawford stepped down from the Northern Central train in the small village of Watkins, New York,<sup>1</sup> unaware that he would be dead before the next sunrise. Not yet forty, his legs cramped and his joints ached after such a long journey. Had he known his end was near, he would have reboarded the train and hurried back south to die in the land of fragrant magnolia trees, warm peach cobbler, and humid summer days surrounded by a wife who loved him and an extended family that did not. Crawford journeyed to this northern village, determined to right an old wrong and desperate to reclaim a life that had been stolen from him. But determination and desperation can blind a man and obscure the subtle warning signs that his future would follow a different trajectory.

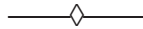
Crawford walked a few paces away from the train and stopped to orient himself. Men of various ages passed by wearing dark multipiece suits and silk top hats, felt bowlers, or straw boaters to block the summer sun. Women with long, colorful dresses and dainty hats gently herded their children ahead of them. Many passengers had arrived on holiday, choosing Watkins for its growing reputation as a summer destination.

Crawford looked north toward the shimmering blue waters of Seneca Lake, turning his back on the new arrivals crowding the depot. He grudgingly admitted the view was impressive. The smooth waters of the lake filled the valley—one to two miles wide—and stretched out to the north as far as the eye could see. Sloping hills, covered with a patchwork of distant farmland, rose hundreds of feet above the eastern

and western shores, cradling the lake. The village of Watkins sat at the head of Seneca Lake, where the flat valley met the sloping western hill.

Crawford considered his options. Several hackmen<sup>2</sup> called to offer rides to their affiliated hotels, but he ignored them. Any hotel that could afford its own carriages was too expensive for him.

A piercing whistle and a hiss of steam announced the departure of the train. The black locomotive pulled its load of passenger cars out of the station and up the lake's western shore toward distant Geneva. With the train gone, Crawford saw a water tower, a lumber yard, and the Northern Central House just across from the station. The last looked like just the cheap—if less than reputable—hotel that fit his needs and budget. He picked up his travel bag and headed for the hotel's entrance, pausing at the doorway to dust off his clothes.



A dozen hours later, after 3 a.m., Crawford tiptoed across the empty main room of the Northern Central House. He ignored a drunkard asleep at one of the tables and eased out through the front door. Moving quickly, he disappeared into the darkness of the village streets.

Franklin Street, the main road through town, had gas lighting, but the side streets were dark and deserted. Crawford moved cautiously, sticking to the shadows as much as possible. He had no desire to bump into any night patrols. He traveled south away from the lake with only the faint glow of the crescent moon to illuminate his path. The meager light helped him avoid the deeper ruts in the dirt street that could twist his ankle. He wore his darkest suite—in truth, he only had two to choose from—and carried an unlit lantern and a shovel as the mysterious note had instructed him to. Tucked into his pants pocket was a six-shot Colt “Army” Model 1860 revolver he had brought on his own initiative. After nine blocks, Crawford turned right on Ninth Street, which turned into Pine Street after crossing Franklin. Pine led him up a steep hill. After a few hundred yards of climbing and fighting to catch his breath, he turned left and found the entrance of Glenwood Cemetery.

The night was warm, and Crawford's exertion caused prickly sweat to spread under his shirt collar. Nevertheless, a chill passed through him as he stared into the dark cemetery built on a lonely, wooded hillside rising above the town. The sliver of moonlight failed to penetrate the woods that lined the road into the cemetery, and Crawford's mind conjured images of wandering souls beckoning him ahead into darkness and eternal oblivion.

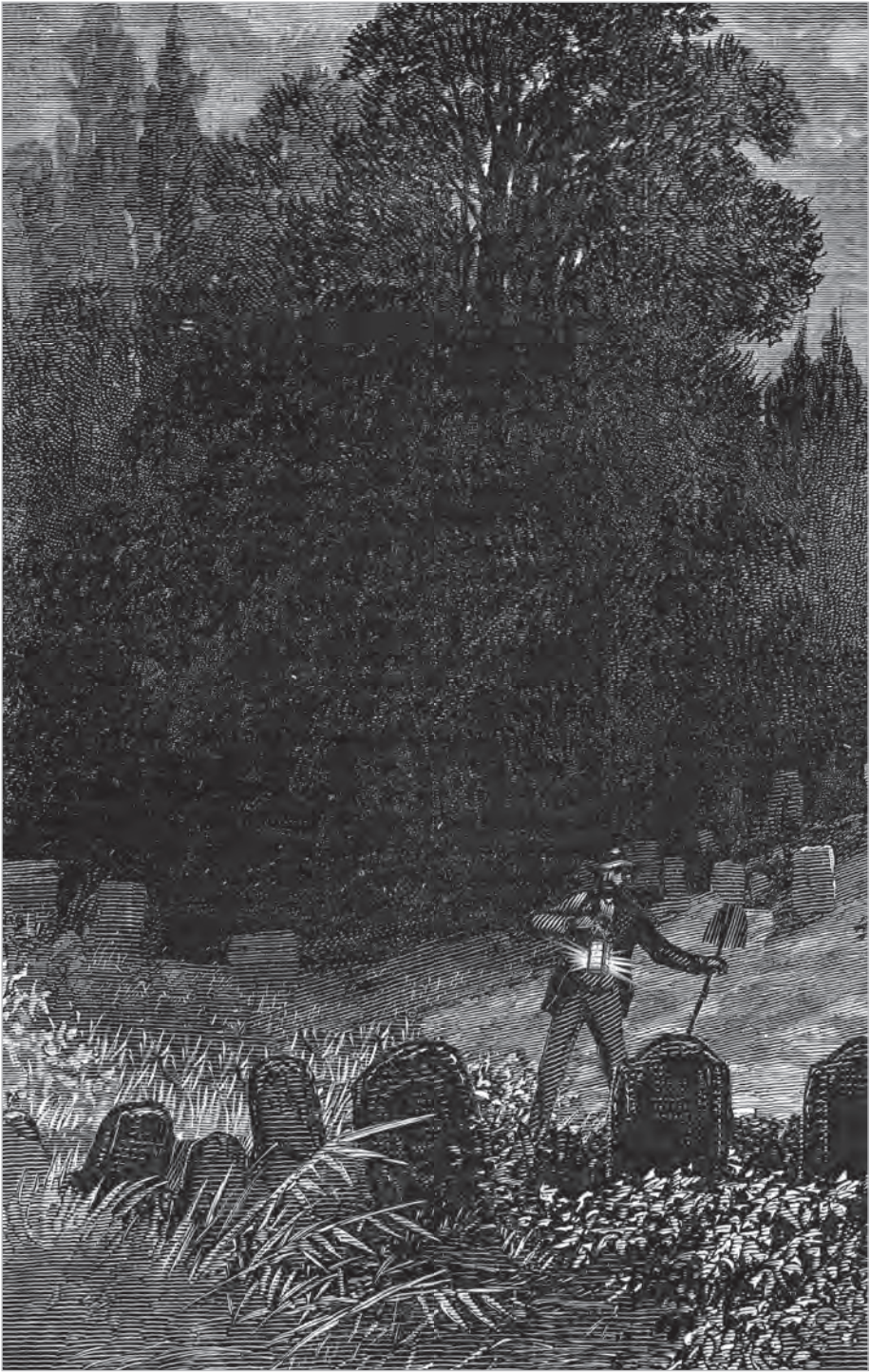
Looking back toward the village, Crawford saw a bright light in the heavens with a distinctive straight and narrow tail of light. The comet that had appeared in the sky a few nights earlier was in line with the polestar and below the Dipper. The Great Comet of 1874<sup>3</sup> the papers called it. Some saw a comet's arrival as the harbinger of misery to man.

Crawford withdrew a waterproof tin of matches from his pocket, extracted a match, and struck it. The flare of the match destroyed his night vision, but he lit and adjusted the lantern's wick until a welcomed glow enveloped him. With shovel in one hand and lantern in the other, he willed himself forward through the cemetery entrance.

The dirt road wound left, then right, then left again, but always uphill. Crawford stopped to listen now and then on the unlikely chance that anyone else was out this late. At one point, he thought he heard footfalls behind him, but the sound drifted away, leaving only crickets and the wind passing through the trees.

As the road continued uphill, Crawford's lantern lit up gravestones on either side of the path. His legs burned from the climb. He was annoyed that his lack of vigor forced him to take deep breaths to keep moving forward. He was of average height but had noticed extra weight collecting around his waist caused by too little walking, too many carriage rides, and a less-than-healthy fondness for drinking. It didn't help that his head was still a bit fuzzy from the whiskey—purchased to entertain himself until the explicitly called-out rendezvous time.

The road straightened as it crested Cemetery Hill. Crawford could hear the distant sound of water trickling through a rocky glen. Long ago, the streams flowing into the valley carved deep gorges into the hillsides. Off in the darkness to the south was the region's most famous gorge, Watkins Glen. Tourists on the train had raved about its won-



CEMETERY AT NIGHT

ders. When the road began to level out, he knew he was reaching his destination.

Over the last three weeks, he had received three anonymous notes in the mail—one every few days—that had cryptically implied a trip north would change his fortunes. He pulled the third note from his pocket and studied the final directions in the light of his lantern.

By now, he was in the upper part of the cemetery. The gravestones appeared more frequently, but there were no other buildings nearby. Off to his left through the woods would be the Glen Mountain House, a hotel on the gorge's edge. Somewhere ahead and far off to his right was another grand hotel, the Lake View Hotel. Raising the lantern as high overhead as possible, he moved forward slowly until he found the fork in the road. The left fork led down toward the gorge and the Glen Mountain House. He turned right and walked another twenty or thirty yards before using the lantern to scan the writing on nearby tombstones.

He searched for a specific name, but the frustratingly haphazard placement of the graves made his task more difficult. After checking multiple groups of gravestones, he became discouraged. Why set a meeting for the middle of a cemetery in the middle of the night? Why tell him to bring a shovel? Now that he was here in the dark cemetery, Crawford questioned the motivations of the mysterious note writer. He wondered—not for the first time—if he was being set up. He reached into his pocket to feel the soothing weight of his Colt pistol. He would not be someone's fool.

Crawford began scanning the next row of graves. His lantern's light fell across two midsized tombstones next to each other. The chiseled letters on the right gravestone had the name he was looking for.

*Sarah Anderson*  
*beloved wife and mother*  
*Born December 3, 1835*  
*Died May 17, 1867*

Crawford pulled out his pocket watch<sup>4</sup> and checked the time using the warm light of the lantern. It was 3:46 in the morning. Fourteen

minutes until the arranged meeting time. The lantern lit up twenty feet around him, but there was a wall of blackness just outside the lantern's reach. During the war, a good sharpshooter could kill a man holding a lantern from a hundred yards away. Crawford doused the light and put the lamp on the other side of Sarah's gravestone out of sight in the long grass. He leaned the shovel against the grave and waited in the darkness as his eyes readjusted to the starlight.

He inhaled and listened for any changes to the night sounds. He heard nothing but the murmuring of a distant waterfall and the hum of insect wings. He spun around, making sure no one might sneak up on him. He looked up at the boundless sea of glittering stars overhead and then looked away as the sight made him feel small.

Four in the morning came and went. No one appeared. Crawford lit a match to check his watch. After another five minutes, he began to fidget. After fifteen minutes, his anxiety turned into anger. He could not give up after coming this far, but it was infuriating to be made to wait. Surely, the mysterious note writer would not have brought him this far north on a lark.

Crawford noticed a light in the distance moving like a fairy floating through the woods. It came from the direction of the gorge and the Glen Mountain House. He breathed in deeply, then slowly released the air from his lungs. Finally.

The light came closer, and he could make out the outline of a man. The man's features were in shadow as the light reflected forward. Crawford tilted his body so the approaching figure would not see him remove the Colt from his pants pocket. He held it down by his side. His hand was clammy and sweaty.

The figure kept approaching, and still, the face was in shadow. When the man neared arm's distance, Crawford squinted from the light and raised his Colt, aiming for the center of the man's body. "That's far enough."

The figure stopped. The light remained in Crawford's eyes, blinding him.

"It's rude to point a gun at a man—unless you plan on shooting him."



Crawford's jaw dropped. That voice. The man raised the lantern a bit higher, illuminating his own face.

"You," Crawford said.

"Point your gun somewhere else," the man demanded, annoyed.

"Why should I trust you?" Crawford said defensively. "It has been a long time." His mind flashed back to the last time they had seen each other.

The other man sighed. He transferred the lantern to his left hand and reached slowly with his right hand into his pocket.

"Careful," said Crawford. "I'd hate for you to give me a reason to cut this reunion short."

"That would be a shame," the other man said dryly, slowing his movements even more. He drew his hand from his pocket and held his closed fist to Crawford. As he opened his hand, a shining gold nugget sat in the center of his palm.

"You found the gold?!" Crawford cringed hearing desperation creeping into his voice. He steadied himself. "Is the gold buried in this grave? Is that why you had me bring a shovel?"

The man looked at him but stayed silent.

Crawford tore his eyes away from the gold nugget and looked the man up and down. "I don't see you carrying a shovel. If digging is involved, I can hold the gun while you do the sweat work."

"Can I trust you to split whatever we find fifty-fifty?" the man asked.

Crawford hesitated. Did he trust the man to honor such an agreement? He was glad he was the one holding the gun. He licked his lips. "You can trust me. Fifty-fifty."

The other man nodded and held out the gold nugget. "For you." The man was so close that Crawford could smell the alcohol on his breath. Crawford did not lower the gun, but his full attention was on the nugget. The gold was mesmerizing. Crawford grabbed the nugget in his left hand and marveled at its weight. The other man raised the lantern and brought it closer for Crawford to examine the gold.

Years of regret and frustration faded as lantern light made the nugget glow.

“You deserve this,” the other man said, and Crawford silently agreed. Crawford’s brain was slow to realize the subtle change in the man’s tone. His mind tried to scream a warning, but his body—slowed by alcohol and poor living—did not react fast enough to the danger. With a quick motion, the other man knocked Crawford’s gun aside and then lunged forward.

Crawford registered a hard punch to his ribs. He did not realize a long, slim dagger had been plunged into his heart. Crawford stared at the gold nugget as the man whispered into his ear. The man twisted the knife for maximum damage, then jerked the blade free. A small amount of blood sprayed from Crawford’s body before his heart stopped pumping.

Crawford’s eyes widened as his knees weakened and gave way. The other man gently helped him to a sitting position and then leaned him back against the nearest gravestone. Crawford opened his mouth to protest. “This is not right,” he wanted to say, but he could not get the words out. His vision began to darken. The man stood over him, watching the light fade from his eyes.

Crawford’s last thoughts were not of his wife becoming a widow or that he would never see the glory of a Southern sunset again. His last thought before darkness claimed him was *Don’t drop the gold.*

Far above, the comet continued its journey across the night sky.

## CHAPTER II

### GLENWOOD CEMETERY

*Saturday, July 11, 1874*

ANNIE Anderson's legs propelled her through the entrance of Glenwood Cemetery above Watkins in the early morning light. The dew clung heavily to the long green grasses beside the empty road, forcing her to the center of the dirt track to avoid dampening her shoes. The ground was packed down from the passage of hundreds of wagon wheels over the years and the recent dry spell. Annie wrinkled her nose as she entered a lingering cloud of woodsmoke from breakfast cook-fires. The smoke hung in the air, resisting the light breezes that caressed the hillside. Annie increased her pace. She was eager to rise above the smoke and reach the upper portions of the cemetery and the sweet summer smells of cut grass and blooming flowers.

A wood thrush chirped from the high branches of a nearby tree as Annie stifled an involuntary yawn. She had awakened as the first rays of sunshine peeked over the eastern hillside of the valley and, after dressing quickly, slipped out the door of the house in Watkins that she shared with her grandmother and two boarders. Her destination was the graves of her mother and father—gone eight years now. Walking helped organize her thoughts, and she had a lot on her mind. She had graduated from Elmira Female College a month earlier and was now living at home with no idea what to do next with her life.

As she walked, she reached up to tame the strands of long brown hair that had come loose from the hairpins holding everything in place. Annie was convinced she had too much hair, but long hair was fashionable these days, so she knew better than to complain.

Annie passed the first set of gravestones as the road turned back on itself and continued up the hill. She had been thirteen when her

parents drowned in Seneca Lake in a boating accident. They had set out on a calm spring day when an unexpected storm blew across the lake, chasing away the sunshine and capsizing their sailboat. Neither made it to shore. Annie's last memory of her mother was watching her pack a picnic basket for the excursion while happily singing "Beautiful Dreamer"—forcing Annie forever to associate her mother with the line "Beautiful dreamer, out on the sea." Annie had been in class when her grandmother showed up to break the news. The whispers and alarmed looks her classmates cast in her direction as rumors of the tragedy spread were seared into her memory.

A part of Annie died with her parents that day. Her mother had raised her to think for herself. Her father treated her as the son he was never blessed with. By the time she was twelve, she was an expert with a rifle and a sewing machine. Her parents had convinced her that women were as smart and capable as men.

Annie's petite Scottish grandmother tried her best to raise her after the tragedy but was more traditional in her ways. Annie had always been shy, but now she withdrew into herself and became angry. Angry at God for taking her parents away. Angry at her parents for leaving her. Angry at the storm and the waves of Seneca Lake. Her grandmother withstood Annie's attitude for weeks until she had had enough. She had grabbed Annie by the shoulders and locked eyes with her. "I can't fix what angers you," she said to Annie. "Go to the cemetery and talk to your mother. Tell her how you feel. She will hear you from heaven." She spun Annie by the shoulders and pushed her toward the front door. Annie suspected her grandmother wanted a few minutes of peace away from her teenage granddaughter, but the advice changed Annie's life.

That first strenuous climb to the top of Glenwood Cemetery had drained her anger, and Annie had slumped down by her mother's gravestone and sat quietly until, slowly, she found herself pouring her heart out to the spirit of her dead mother. She left hours later feeling heard and unburdened for the first time since her parents' accident. Each Saturday since, Annie made the journey into the cemetery for one-sided conversations with her mother's spirit. The spirit of her father—a burly but quiet man in life—seemed content to listen.

The road turned back on itself again. Annie breathed deeply, happy to inhale fresher air above the persistent woodsmoke.

Even as a college graduate, there were not many options available to Annie as a woman. The obvious choice was to find a man and get married, but that wasn't as easy as it sounded if one had standards. Two years ago, she had felt differently. A lovely man, eight years her senior, noticed Annie in church and courted her. She appreciated his kind, funny, and adventurous personality. Nana appreciated that he came from a wealthy local family. Just as Annie saw the hints of a pending proposal, things had gone tragically wrong. Her grandmother wanted Annie to allow herself to see new opportunities, but Annie wasn't ready to be courted again.

Last Sunday at church, Annie overheard her grandmother describing her as "a great catch for some lucky man" to a new acquaintance after church services. Annie did not want to be someone's catch. She wanted to travel the world and have exciting adventures first. The world was large, yet Annie had never been more than fifty miles from Watkins. Society did not expect a woman to want adventures or a successful career. Society expected a woman to find a man, marry him, have children, and support "his" successful career.

Despite her reluctance, Annie was courted by the church woman's nephew, Theodore. After being formally introduced, he had escorted her two days ago to a party of amusements and games held by George and Emma Magee at their Madison Street mansion, called Glenfeld.<sup>5</sup> Theodore, call me Ted, Sharpe was handsome and easy to talk to, and for a short time, Annie thought her grandmother had done her a favor. That was until Ted started talking about his expectations for his future wife. "Of course," he had said, "I expect my future wife to keep the house clean. If dust is left too long, it will turn into fleas."

Annie had blinked in confusion. She had no problem keeping a clean house, but dust did not turn into fleas. Spontaneous generation,<sup>6</sup> a once-accepted scientific theory, claimed living creatures could spring from nonliving matter. Bread left in a dark corner for too long will turn into mice. Or mud into worms or tadpoles. In college, she had learned the theory was discredited. Annie had taken her studies seriously and

thrived in classes. Elmira Female College was much more than a glorified finishing school for women. It offered a rigorous academic curriculum as challenging as the courses at men's colleges. Her favorite subjects had been chemistry, philosophy, and literature, with studies of French and German languages.

"I'm sorry," she said, as gently as possible. "Dust doesn't turn into fleas. Louis Pasteur disproved that theory in 1859."

Ted's smile faded, and Annie saw a shift in his eyes. "You should leave the thinking to the men in your life," he said coolly. "Everyone knows dust leads to fleas." His arrogance and dismissiveness stunned her. Ted leaned closer and whispered in her ear, "Know your place," and then turned his back to her to start a conversation with Josephine Knapp, an attractive blonde Annie knew from school. The flush of embarrassment reddened her face. She had to fight to unclench her fists. Not knowing what else to do, she stood up and excused herself.

Annie did not fault a person for being uneducated. But she did find fault in a person's contentment to stay that way. She thought of her mother's advice given when Annie was much younger. "People—especially men—will tell you things they expect you to believe. You are allowed to question anything and everything they say. Seek the truth for yourself." The truth, Annie decided, was that Ted was a fatheaded buffoon.

Annie's eyes darted around the sizable parlor filled with men in their best suits and women wearing flowing dresses. Annie did not do well in crowds. She rarely laughed or expressed much emotion in public, and people found the steely, determined gaze she developed after her parents' death to be off-putting. Men often thought she was unfriendly when she was simply reserved—and often bored—in typical social situations. Annie did have a kind smile when she chose to show it, but anyone who looked close enough could see the pain lurking behind her eyes.

The arrival of one of her closest girlfriends, Jesse Hope, saved the rest of the evening. "Annie," Jesse said, "it's so nice to see you out! And that dress. It's tailored perfectly. You are the most stylish woman in the room!" Annie knew—from the way men looked at her—that she

wasn't unattractive. But a compliment on her sewing skills from a female friend had meant a lot.

The sun cleared the eastern hills as Annie continued her journey up Cemetery Hill. Its warmth created prickles of perspiration down the small of her back. She slowed her pace, still thinking about Ted and Josephine and the party. After Annie had said her goodbyes and slipped out the mansion's front door, she noticed Josephine and Ted in the shadows. As she hurried away, Josephine's voice floated out of the darkness. "I would never let dust collect in any house I lived in." Josephine was only one year behind her at Elmira Female College and was smart enough to know the theory of spontaneous generation was wrong. Did she not care?

Annie paused and turned as she reached the point in her climb that offered the best views. The village of Watkins spread out below her, and Seneca Lake shimmered just beyond. Her hometown might be small—about 3,500 people living in a village twelve blocks long and six or seven blocks wide—but it was exciting from June through September as tens of thousands of tourists flocked to the area. New hotels had sprung up over the last few years, attracting a sophisticated crowd with money to spend as they enjoyed the lake and Watkins. The big-city tourists contrasted sharply with the small-town shop owners in the village and the rugged farmers outside it.

Was there a sophisticated traveler ready to whisk her away to a life of adventure? She sighed, feeling the weight of her grandmother's expectations pressing down on her. Why couldn't she whisk herself away? Instead, here she was, a college graduate with no job prospects, no marriage proposals, no adventures to look forward to, and no idea what came next.

Resuming her walk, Annie wondered if she should give up on men, embrace life as a spinster, and open a dress shop. She had learned to make her own clothes from an early age and was good at it. Her mother's Singer sewing machine became her most prized possession after her parents' death. But Watkins already had a dress and cloak maker. She could set up shop in another town, but Annie didn't think her grandmother could live without her.

Annie reached the upper portion of the cemetery and passed the turnout that led down through the trees to the Glen Mountain House, one of the newer hotels. She occasionally stopped for tea on the Glen Mountain House's wide porch overlooking the gorge. Her parents' graves were not far now.

As she neared her destination, an uneasy feeling came over her. Was it the unexpected stillness in the air? Annie stopped to glance around. No one else was in sight, but she no longer heard the sounds of birds or insects. The eerie silence unnerved her as she continued toward her parents' graves.

Annie noticed the boots first. Scuffed and worn and out of place. Then, she saw the top of a man's hat. She approached cautiously until she saw a man leaning back on her mother's gravestone. His head slumped forward, and his chin rested on his chest. His hat covered much of his face. A dragonfly, resting on her mother's gravestone, launched into the air as Annie approached. It flitted back and forth before disappearing into the nearby trees. Dragonflies always reminded Annie of her mother, who had loved them.

The man ignored her presence. Her trepidation turned to anger. Was he an inebriate sleeping off a night of hard drinking in the peaceful and quiet cemetery? Why had he chosen her mother's gravestone of all places? That made it even more insulting to Annie because her mother had been an ardent supporter of the temperance movement.<sup>7</sup>

Annie stiffened her back and was prepared to give the man a piece of her mind. "Sir! Excuse me, sir!" As she stepped closer, the righteous indignation fled her body.

The man's utter stillness and the disturbing smells wafting on the breeze caused the hairs on the back of her neck to stand up. She shivered. Looking around, Annie saw no one in sight. She forced herself—curiosity fighting her better judgment—to move closer. When she got within a few feet of the man, she saw no movement in the man's chest. His head was down, but Annie could now see his unblinking eyes staring at his left hand—a hand closed into a fist.

Annie's hand flew to her mouth. Was he dead? Had he drunk himself to death?



From his hat and the cut of his three-piece suit, she knew he wasn't from the area. His suit was of quality material but of an older style. It was fraying at the cuffs, and the areas covering the man's knees and elbows were shiny with wear. The suit had been carefully mended in places. This man's fortunes had fallen, but he still had someone willing to mend his clothes lovingly.

A portion of a tattoo on the man's wrist peeked out from under his right sleeve, pushed up as if his hand had been extended. There was an old scar on his face, only partially hidden by his beard. Many men who survived the War Between the States had scars—some more conspicuous than others.

As Annie leaned closer, she could smell alcohol, urine, excrement, and something coppery. She leaned away, trying not to gag.

"Sir?" she said. Her voice came out small. She cleared her throat and spoke louder. "Sir? Can you hear me?" No reaction. She recoiled at the thought of reaching down to touch him to check for a pulse or to feel the warmth of his skin. Perhaps she could nudge him? Annie drew back her right foot and kicked the bottom of the man's boots. In her nervousness, she kicked harder than she intended to.

The man gave no visible reaction, but Annie's kick caused his jacket to fall open and dislodged what he had been holding in his left hand. Annie's eyes widened at the sight of the gold nugget, but it was the bloody chest wound exposed by his now-open jacket that made Annie's skin crawl. This man wasn't just dead, someone killed him. Annie realized that the killer could be close and that she was in peril.

The morning light filled the cemetery with long shadows. Each tree and gravestone looked menacing, as if, at any moment, the killer would appear from his hiding place. Annie could not shake the feeling that someone was watching her. From behind her, she heard the sound of rustling branches.



WAR BETWEEN THE STATES

## CHAPTER III

### 34TH NORTH CAROLINA

*From the Journal of Private H. Thompson*

*April 16, 1862 – My father, Samuel Thompson, should be celebrating his fiftieth birthday today, but he was the least lucky man I ever knew. His wife died, giving birth to his only son. Me. At least he never held it against me and did his best to raise me. We farmed a small plot of land near Asheville, North Carolina, until a horse threw him, breaking his arm. When an infection set in, his arm required amputation. He survived the surgery but could not run a farm one-handed even after I dropped out of school at fourteen to help. We lost the farm and ended up in debt. A year later, pneumonia took him. Dead at forty-four. My father had rotten luck. I spent six years working as a farmhand for the Barnett family, trying to pay off my father's bad luck.*

*Also today, Jefferson Davis and his Confederate Conference passed the First Confederate Conscription Act. All white men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five are eligible to be drafted for three years of military service. A year into the war, and I guess our leaders have realized this conflict won't end as quickly as everyone hoped.*

*May 15, 1862 – Got my Enfield rifle today. I'm now a proud member of the 34th North Carolina Infantry Regiment. I did not volunteer. The draft passed over me, but old man Barnett's worthless son hadn't been so lucky. The Conscription Act allowed the well-to-do to hire someone to take their place, so old man Barnett offered to pay off the balance of my debt, \$300,<sup>8</sup> to let me die in battle on his son's behalf. I took his deal and joined the Army. I was tired of being an underpaid farmhand. I planned to survive the war and start my life fresh.*

*June 9, 1862 – After a few weeks of marching, drilling, and weapons training, the Army decided my Enfield rifle and I were ready for combat. I hoped the Army in its wisdom is right. Most of the soldiers I trained with were young men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one. I never thought being twenty-six would make me feel so old. We marched fifteen miles today.*

*June 11, 1862 – Made a new friend. Private Calvin Shoemaker had been with the 34th since its formation in High Point, North Carolina, last year. Tonight, he took me around to meet some of the ladies in this neighborhood. They treated us as Southern ladies know how to treat soldiers—with respect and something good to eat.*

*June 24, 1862 – Orders came down to draw two days' rations to pack in our haversacks. Private Shoemaker said we would be in a fight soon.*

*June 26, 1862 – We marched into battle at Mechanicsville with clean clothes, fresh faces, and a quick step. Our officers formed us in line of battle. When the enemy came into sight, we gave the rebel yell—a howling mix of hog calls and Indian war whoops meant to intimidate the enemy and bolster our confidence—and charged forward. I'm proud that my nerves held. I know now that I'm no coward.*

*June 30, 1862 – I survived several days of fighting for General Robert E. Lee's Army of Virginia. We pushed back McClellan and his Union Army, sparing Richmond, the capital of the Confederate States of America, but not without a cost. At Gaines' Mill, I lost my only friend. Private Shoemaker got three fingers shot off his hand and was sent to the rear. Many soldiers dropped to the ground in exhaustion as the battle ended. I found the nearest tree and slumped against it. I ignored the dirt, sweat, and blood on my hands and reached into my haversack for food. I found some hard-tack<sup>9</sup> but couldn't eat another dry cracker with an empty canteen. I pulled off my wide-brimmed slouch hat to wipe my brow. It kept the sun off my neck better than the regulation cap. When I put it back on my head, I saw a bullet hole in the cloth brim. I wiped my hand through my hair to make*

*sure I wasn't bleeding without knowing it. That bullet passed through my hat and didn't leave a mark on me. Amazing luck. I was sitting on the ground with my finger poking through the hole when a tall soldier dirtier than I was called out to me. I got to my feet when I saw the dual chevrons on his sleeves.*

*The corporal asked me about my hat. "That your hat, private?" I told him it was. "And that bullet hole? Did that happen while you were wearing it?"*

*I smiled at him. "Damnedest thing, isn't it?" He nodded as if I'd answered correctly and asked me if I was any good with my rifle. I was very good with my rifle and did not mind saying so. "I can hit an Appalachian cottontail mid-hop at six hundred yards."*

*I thought I was in trouble when he said, "Come with me, Private."*

*July 1, 1862 – Our division was held in reserve today. We could hear the sounds of battle, and for several hours, we came under artillery fire. Several men were killed, but I came through unhurt, as did my four new friends. Corporal Taylor was in charge of a small team of sharpshooters. He had three privates—Frank, Buck, and Ace—who, like me, are in their mid-twenties. Frank had black hair and a bushy black beard. He looked like a cross between a man and a bear. He's taller than Taylor and twice as wide. Buck and Ace were about my size and could be twins except for their facial hair. Ace had a bushy beard, while Buck kept his mustache neatly trimmed.*

*Each member of Taylor's team had a story similar to my "bullet hole in the hat that I was wearing" story. A few weeks ago, Ace stepped on a diamondback rattlesnake, which immediately bit the soldier standing next to him. Buck had his hat shot off his head in battle. While on picket, Frank had just finished reloading his Enfield rifle when a Yankee soldier popped up twenty feet away and had him dead to rights—only to suffer a misfire. Frank shot the Yankee dead. Taylor had run out on the battlefield to retrieve a fallen battle flag and returned to find three bullet holes through his clothes but not a mark on him.*

*Luck may seem an odd thing to bond over, but soldiers needed faith in God or an ironclad belief in their own good fortune to run toward the bul-*

lets and cannonballs fired in their direction. Taylor and his men counted on luck to survive and were happy to surround themselves with others who possessed it.

Taylor promised to get me assigned to his sharpshooter team as long as I passed the shooting test. I knew I would pass. For the first time since my father died, I belonged somewhere.

July 4, 1862 – We did not celebrate the country's Independence Day. We mourned our dead, readied our equipment for the next march, and did our best to distract ourselves from the horrors of war. We spent a lot of time cleaning our rifles. It is good to be lucky, but it is better to be lucky and prepared.

July 15, 1862 – I returned from washing my clothes in the creek and joined Taylor, Ace, Buck, and Frank around the fire. We ate a meal of salt pork, hard bread, and dried vegetables. Frank poured a hot cup of coffee into my tin mug. He did not talk much, but he sure could make a good cup of coffee. Union soldiers received regular coffee rations, but us Rebels usually made do with boiled hickory root. I asked Frank where they got coffee. Buck, answering for Frank, told me I should thank the Yankee bastards willing to die on the battlefield so we could drink their coffee.

After the five of us settled into a comfortable silence around the fire embers, Ace asked Taylor to tell the new guy his story about the hidden gold waiting to be found in North Carolina. The other men smiled. They had heard Taylor's Lost Gold story multiple times but didn't mind a retelling. I had learned quickly that soldiering consisted of moments of sheer terror on the battlefield, surrounded by long stretches of boredom. Anything that helped pass the time was appreciated. Besides, listening to stories in the dark was better than fighting off memories of dead friends.

Ace whispered to me that Taylor's family was obsessed with finding gold. Taylor had descended from Cornish miners who brought their expertise from England to find their fortune in the Carolina gold rush. Years later, when news came of gold being found at Sutter's Mill in 1849, Taylor's father struck out alone for California to make his fortune—never to return. Taylor waited until we quieted down, then looked me in the eye

*and told me there was hidden gold east of Asheville near Hickory Nut Gap.*

*I knew about North Carolina's gold rush in the early 1800s<sup>10</sup> and had grown up in western North Carolina, so was familiar with the Hickory Nut Gap. It was a fourteen-mile pass through the mountains about half-way between Asheville and Rutherfordton. Taylor had my attention. Who doesn't dream of finding buried treasure? Here's the story he told me that night:*

*According to legend, a group of five or six Englishmen owned a gold mine in western Carolina and were traveling with a mule train laden with gold heading east to the port in Charleston, where they would sail back to England with the gold. But things did not go as planned when the Englishmen tried to pass through the Hickory Nut Gap.*

*Back then, there were few, if any, settlers in the area. The Indian tribes used the Gap to travel from the mountains to the flatlands. The Cherokee and the Catawba tribes claimed the gorge as sacred ground—neutral land between the tribes. On the day the Englishmen reached the Gap, they must've been dreaming about how rich the gold would make them because they weren't vigilant. They drove their mules through the Gap and right into the path of a surprised tribe of Indians.*

*The Englishmen were on sacred Indian ground, so the tribe attacked. The Englishmen defended themselves, but they had been unprepared for battle and were getting the worst of things. They couldn't escape, so they searched for shelter and found a cave near Round Top Mountain. Even with the relative safety of the cave, the Englishmen died one by one until only one was left alive. That last man knew he was going to die unless he found a way to escape. Against all odds, he was still alive come sundown, when the Indians stopped their attack. This last Englishman left the gold behind to save his life and snuck out alone in the dead of night. A week later, exhausted and starving, he stumbled into Charleston, where he boarded the first ship back to England.<sup>11</sup>*

*When he reached England, he organized a search party to re-*



MULE TRAIN



*turn to America and recover the gold. But fate intervened. On the night before his return voyage, he mysteriously lost his eyesight. Just went blind.<sup>12</sup> Instead of making the trip himself, he dictated a map—as best as he could recall—to a member of the return party to show where the gold was hidden. But even though the search party scoured the mountains near the Gap, they found no gold.*

*Taylor sat back to let his tale sink in. Then he smiled. He had been saving the best for last. He withdrew an oilskin pouch from his haversack and extracted a small piece of parchment. “I have a copy of the Englishman’s map,” he said. Taylor’s father made a duplicate from a man who claimed to have inherited the original map the Englishmen dictated. Taylor was proud of the map. To me it looked like a series of arbitrary lines, so it did not give me confidence it could be used to find the gold—if it really existed. But the story of the missing gold—waiting for us to find—became one of our favorite ways to pass the time as the months of military service dragged on. We speculated on where to look. We boasted about how we would have been able to beat back the Indians and not have to hide in a cave. We imagined what each of us would do with our share of the gold. I knew exactly what I would do.*

*August 5, 1862 – We had marched to Gordonsville where our regiment was placed under the command of Major General “Stonewall” Jackson. Rumors had come and gone all month, but this time Taylor cautioned us to be ready for battle. We checked our equipment, cleaned our rifles, and ensured our powder was dry. When I had a few minutes alone with Taylor, I asked him a question that had been nagging at me. “If gold was hidden in Hickory Nut Gap,” I asked, “wouldn’t someone have found it by now?”*

*Taylor paused and looked into the evening sky as the blues turned yellow and orange. “Men have searched for years,” he said. “But no one has ever claimed they found it. That doesn’t mean it is still there, but I feel it’s waiting for us to find it.” I asked him how we could succeed where others had failed. He shrugged and smiled. “Who knows,” he said. “Maybe all we need is a bit of luck.”*