

## PROLOGUE

I'm waiting here, under guard, in the basement of the Supreme Court building for the verdict of my trial to be announced. I've been on trial for my 'life' but I'm not referring to a criminal sentence such as life-in-prison versus the death penalty. Instead, my fate depends on the Court determining whether or not I'm already 'dead'. The definition of 'death' in this case is the 'irreversible cessation of cardiovascular circulatory functions' and, truth be told, my useless heart hasn't drummed a beat in over a hundred years.

What difference does it make whether I'm legally dead or alive? Well, a dead man has no rights. He can't own property. He can't be employed. He can't vote or even possess a library card. But most importantly, he can't be killed... because he's obviously already 'dead'. Leaving the legal definition of death aside for the moment, I can assure you that I can still be *killed*. My existence on this earth can indeed be terminated, just like everyone else's.

Perhaps I should explain.

I was born over one hundred and fifty years ago in 1853 in Charleston, Virginia (before West Virginia seceded and became a separate state). My father was a blacksmith and had a small shop in what is now downtown Charleston. Our family lived in two rooms at the back.

I don't remember much from my early childhood, but what I do recall I remember fondly. My parents were both loving and kind. But as I reached the age of seven or eight, I remember sensing the tension surrounding what would become the American Civil War. The northwest portion of the population of Virginia was largely supportive of the North and thus led to a divide with the rest of the State. My father was no exception. My mother later explained to me that he supported neither the secession from Virginia nor the institution of slavery. He got involved politically and was active in the *Wheeling Conventions*, which later led to the breakaway of West Virginia. The city became divided between Northern sympathizers and Virginia loyalists, and the two groups began to clash. At first it was fistfights at the saloon, but the division soon led to rioting in the streets. By the time the war broke out, the loyalists had bolted east.

In 1861, my father left to fight for the Union Army and, even though my brothers were only twelve and fourteen, they went to fight with him. I never saw any of them again.

In September of 1862, on the eve of the Battle of Charleston, my mother took my sister and me and fled to the safety of her sister's home in the recently incorporated McDowell County. Aunt Carry's husband was a lumberjack before he went off to the war. He too never returned home, and so it was my mother, my aunt, myself, and my younger sister living together in Aunt Carry's house for the next five years. I spent those years roaming the Appalachians, exploring the numerous caves in the region, and fishing in the rivers.

My mother never remarried and neither did Aunt Carry. Although I was quite happy being the man of the house, not having a man to earn a cash wage made us very poor. And so it was in 1866, at the age of thirteen, I began working for the local coal mine. West Virginia is chock-full of coal. The soft limestone of the Appalachians is strewn with vast pockets of the bituminous black rock. Back in those days, there weren't the large coal operations which were created at the turn of the Twentieth Century.

No, when I started, our outfit consisted of a thousand men, and the only way to get the coal out was with a pick and shovel.

For the first couple of years, I pushed a wheelbarrow from the face of the mine to the horse cart and back again. There was a camp set up at the bottom of what we just called 'the hill'. It was a half-day's walk from Aunt Carry's house. I lived at the camp, working Monday through Saturday. Half my wage was garnished by the mining outfit to cover the cost of my bunk and meals. The other half I paid to my mother on Sundays when I walked home to visit.

At age fifteen I went through a growth spurt and shot up almost five inches in a year, nearly reaching my current height of six feet. By age seventeen my frame had filled out and they offered me the job of pick man.

My sister married in 1871 and died in childbirth less than a year later. Aunt Carry also died that year from tuberculosis, at which point my mother moved out of the house and back to Charleston to work as a seamstress. Charleston was more than a hundred miles from our camp, so I rarely saw my mother after that. She died four years later.

With my increase in wages, and the fact that I did not need to send money home to support my mother, I had cash to spend in the newly incorporated town of Welch, which seemed to spring up overnight.

Sadly, I admit that I spent most of my twenties drunk and fighting in the saloons. After my shift in the mine each day, this was my primary activity before staggering back to camp to pass out. Most men either got killed or grew weary of the work and moved on. I had nothing to move on to.

In 1883 the demand for coal to fuel the furnaces of industry on the East Coast increased one hundred-fold, and that summer thousands of people, mainly immigrants, moved to the area to work in the coal mines. Due to my years of experience in the industry, and despite of my dubious reputation, the owner of the newly formed mine called *Jenkinjones* offered me a job as a foreman. I am certain that my future would not have gone well, but it just so happened a new man showed up...