

CHAPTER 1

“Come in lieutenant,” Colonel Robinson called from across the room.

“It’s a real privilege having someone here from General Hershey’s office. We were kind of worried at first, because the general has not been too happy with us; but when we heard you were from the Texas National Guard, we felt a whole lot better.

“Frankly Lieutenant Oakley, we here in Mississippi feel proud to be doing our part for the war. Take Mrs. Swift there, her husband is a captain leading our brave boys against the Huns in North Africa,” the colonel continued.

Brooks was wondering if there was anything these people weren’t going to tell him about their lives before he had a chance to sit down.

“But listen to me,” the colonel said.

“I haven’t offered you coffee or found out how your trip was or anything. I’ve been bothering you with our problems before you’ve even had a chance to say hello. Would you get the lieutenant some coffee, Mrs. Swift, please dear?”

“Would you like cream or sugar, lieutenant?” Mavis Swift asked.

“Both please,” Brooks responded.

“Have a seat, lieutenant,” invited Colonel Robinson.

“I know the trains are dreadful nowadays, but I hope your trip wasn’t too bad. I wish you could have ridden the *Southern Crescent* before the war. Now, that was a train.”

Brooks’ coffee had come along with an inviting, lengthy smile from Mavis, who also managed to touch both of the young officer’s hands with her own as she bent close to his face to deliver the cup, saucer and polished silver spoon.

I had a pleasant trip, colonel, Brooks had wished to respond; but he hadn’t been quick enough. Colonel Robinson’s monologue rushed on, apparently an endless stream.

“So if I can be direct, lieutenant, it seems from his letter that the general is of the opinion that Mississippi leads the nation in draft dodgers.”

As Brooks feigned attention to the flowing combination of praise, pretense and explanation that amounted to a self deceptive lie, the young lieutenant focused on the hellish mess that was America’s North Africa Campaign. That muddle wasn’t Brooks’ problem. He only thought of it because, Brooks assumed Mavis Swift’s husband was neck deep in that disastrous mountain of muck.

As he had felt the conspicuous invitation evident in the captain’s wife’s touch and blatantly seductive smile while Mavis had served Brooks’ coffee, the new lieutenant instantly pictured a wounded Captain Swift just returned from the fighting at the Kasserine Pass to heal and rehabilitate himself at home in Biloxi. The officer Brooks was imagining supported

himself with a crutch under his left armpit and held his Army issued Colt .45 in his right hand as he stared through the threshold of his own door looking with disbelief into his bed at his wife and the hotshot lieutenant from Washington.

Brooks would pass he decided, then got to business.

“And that’s exactly the point, Colonel Robinson,” Brooks announced authoritatively.

“And for some reason I don’t understand, General Hershey believes I can help fix this problem. In fact, the general made it clear, he expects me to fix it and fix it fast.”

“I see,” the colonel said, his smile replaced by a look of concern.

“Well then lieutenant, do you have a plan to straighten us out then?”

“No colonel, I don’t have any idea what to do, but your question clearly required a straight answer,” Brooks said.

“Well, I guess that’s what I should have expected from a Texan. I suppose it could have been worse. General Hershey could have sent a Yankee down here, but I sense that you and I are headed for trouble, Oakley,” the colonel predicted, all the pleasantness now gone from the conversation.

Brooks remained silent.

“Well, let’s see if we can move things onto the right track,” Colonel Robinson offered without much conviction.

“Mrs. Robinson has arranged a small dinner in your honor. Can you join us around 7:30?” he asked, his paste on Southern charm smile back in place.

“Of course, colonel,” Brooks said politely, rising from his chair as he spoke.

As Brooks left the colonel’s office, Mavis seemed more cheerful than before.

“If you need a ride to your hotel, lieutenant, I have a car and I’ll be happy to drive you,” she offered.

Brooks looked at Mavis intently. He found her smile somewhat frightening. Brooks had learned in Washington that the war seemed to somehow be changing the relationships between men and women.

Brooks thought quickly back to the incident with Mae Rosenfeld’s husband on the train to Oklahoma. Since that experience of almost killing a man, Brooks had been extremely careful to avoid married women. He had immediately stopped drinking and never resumed. Brooks had kept his resolution to stay completely away from guns, except the ones he was required to use in the Army.

Most importantly, Brooks had come to understand that there was no such thing as an uncomplicated affair between a man and woman. In Brooks’ assessment, either Mavis did not share that belief or didn’t care about complications like those which had engulfed Brooks and Mae. In either event, she seemed dangerous.

Brooks did not want to accept the ride; but he felt that declining could be considered bad manners, a problem that Brooks sensed might mark his whole stay in Mississippi. Behind all

this eagerness from Mississippians wishing to appear gracious, Brooks detected a subtle message. Everyone expected him to do things the way they had always been done in Mississippi. Not only was that against his nature, but it would certainly mean trouble for Brooks with General Hershey.

“Actually, I’m supposed to have a car waiting for me over at the Seabee station. That’s where I need to go,” Brooks answered after what seemed to him too long of a pause.

“Why that’s no problem at all. Just let me tell the colonel and I’ll run you right over there,” Mavis agreed, displaying a broad, satisfied smile.

Colonel Robinson lived in an imposing antebellum mansion overlooking the Mississippi Sound, a showplace that had been home to his wife’s family since Zachary Taylor was president. Dinner was prepared and served by a formally dressed black staff who, by their appearance and demeanor, might have been left over from the time when slavery was legal. Brooks had been seated next to Mavis, who talked without stopping for most of the evening.

Promptly at ten-thirty to Brooks’ total amazement, a fleet of cars appeared and all the men were driven to a casino less than ten blocks from the draft board office. The place was packed with gamblers. Brooks guessed the number in the crowd was close to a thousand by the time Colonel Robinson’s party arrived.

Most of the players seemed to be from New Orleans and the uniforms of Naval and Army Air Corps officers were quite visible throughout the huge salon. Everywhere, women in evening gowns, clung to men and bent over the gaming tables. Despite the fact alcohol was illegal in Mississippi, prestigious domestic and imported liquor flowed freely and waiters carried giant silver trays of Champagne. Scattered among the tables were enormous spreads of food, prominently featuring rationed items.

Several women quickly approached Brooks, flirting openly with him. They told him about their husbands away in the service; said they were lonely and plainly indicated they were available. Brooks quickly concluded that the war had become a cause for celebration on the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

A little more than an hour after arriving at the casino, Brooks discovered Colonel Robinson, passed out on a sofa. Escaping to his hotel, Brooks found a message from Mavis telling him to call if he needed anything and leaving her home phone number.

I should call General Hershey and tell him things are far worse than he had imagined, Brooks thought; but remembered a conversation in the general’s office just before he had left for Mississippi.

“I expect you to outsmart those idiots down in Mississippi,” General Hershey had ordered.

“If I were you, I’d start by tossing that degenerate Robinson in the stockade at Keesler Field – fill that thing up with those crackers who act like Robert E. Lee should still be running the Army,” the general had fumed.

“Anyway, how you do it is up to you. I’ll back any move you make. Just clean it up and clean it up quick. I need you back here yesterday,” General Hershey had finished, calming somewhat.

Brooks pondered who was nuttier, the general he worked for or Colonel Robinson, the degenerate. Brooks thought back to the scene of the colonel passed out drunk on the divan in the casino. How do I get into these messes, he wondered?

The next morning, Brooks was in the office at six. Before anyone else arrived, he had made a good start at a target list of draftees who had not reported. Most were poor boys from rural areas who had just ignored draft notices. Brooks decided that it would be best to start with these less important evaders, hoping that would set the tone and perhaps shame the sons of some of Mississippi’s more prominent citizens into reporting as ordered.

An hour before Colonel Robinson arrived at ten, Brooks wired the draft of an order for General Hershey to issue detailing a dozen members of the Texas National Guard to Biloxi. By the time the colonel reached his office, General Hershey had issued the requested orders and sent a copy to Colonel Robinson.

“We missed you last night,” the colonel said to Brooks, when he was seated in front of the colonel’s imposing desk.

“You left before all the fun got started.”

“I’m afraid yesterday was a bit long for me, colonel. I was tired,” Brooks explained pleasantly.

“Well, you need to rest up. Friday is stag night. We’ll be going out to Ship Island. Won’t be home until ten or so Saturday morning, so you need to store up some energy,” the colonel instructed, projecting an even, polite demeanor with his tone of voice.

“Next time you need men, Brooks, you shouldn’t trouble General Hershey. Just ask me. I’ll give you as many of our guardsmen as you want,” he said as if he were still talking about party arrangements.

“I just thought it might be easier to start with if the men on my missions didn’t have to go after family and neighbors,” Brooks responded.

“Well, you may be right at that. But keep in mind, folks around here sometimes might tend toward resenting outsiders. I wouldn’t want anything happening to your Texas boys.”

“Don’t worry colonel, the soldiers I’m bringing over will be just fine. They’re a tight unit, used to working together and well trained.”

The colonel smiled, seeming genuinely pleased Brooks was making things move so quickly.

“I’ve looked over your list,” Colonel Robinson resumed with a change of tack.

“You’re certainly going about that right. Don’t be harsh, though,” the Mississippian cautioned.

“A lot of these country people can’t read. They tend to ignore all papers from the government, guessing no good can come from what’s written inside those official looking envelopes.

“Come to think of it,” the colonel laughed.

“They probably got a point. And besides, a lot of them need their boys to help with the farm work. Most of these little farmers never knew there was a Depression here. They were so poor before it started that things didn’t change much.

“Mississippi isn’t like Oklahoma or Texas. Banks didn’t hold notes on our farms. Mostly it was the big planters keeping the paper themselves, so they didn’t put many people off their land because they couldn’t pay. Fact is farmers with forty or fifty acres never been able to keep up.”

The colonel seemed to be pausing for breath before rambling on.

“Well anyway, it looks like you’re off to a good start. But next time you need some men, just come see me,” the colonel concluded with one of his special Mississippi sincere broad smiles.