

## PROLOGUE

*3 April, 1865*

For three days, Private Kurtis Williams had painstakingly made his way secretly in search of his target. Clothed in a drab walnut colored frock and pants with matching colored kepi, the Confederate sniper stealthily worked his way through the Federal lines. Thanks to the loud conversation of Federal soldiers, William's gained the directions he needed to reach his objective.

It was now dark and the seasoned marksmen waited concealed in a thicket which gave him a view of the figures sitting around a blazing campfire. The sharpshooter had already gained renown for shooting Federal General William Haines Lytle off his horse at the Battle of Chickamauga and General John Sedgwick at Spotsylvania. At Gettysburg, he patiently waited, as he did now, until General John Reynolds was a sitting duck for his rifled .45-caliber British Whitworth sniper rifle. Like then, this would be an easy shot. Williams had a perfectly clear line of sight on his present target, commanding General of the Army of the Potomac, Ulysses S. Grant.

The plan was simple. The many tentacles of the Federal army at last found a capable and formidable leader under the command of Grant. Lop off the head of the beast and its tentacles would be summarily dealt with. Williams was picked to execute that plan because of his expertise. Several hundred yards away sat Grant, wrapped in a long blue overcoat smoking his usual cigar. In the bright flicker of the firelight, the dark eyebrows and short cropped beard perfectly outlined his head in the Whitworth's telescopic sight. Williams' shielded the sound of the hammer with his hand, as he pulled it back to full-

cock. Then he cradled the barrel in his left hand as he delicately set the index finger of his right hand on the trigger.

Suddenly, the ground around Williams began to vibrate. Behind him, the hoof beat of a rapidly approaching horse prompted him to freeze. He could not see it and dared not move. His prone body felt the rippling energy from the pounding hoofs and he could now hear the snorting of the horse very close by. He closed his eyes and braced himself. The horse passed by and a thankful Williams reopened his eyes. A young colonel on horseback entered the edge of the fire-lit area and reined in his horse. Upon his arrival, several of the officers sitting there quickly rose up blocking Williams' view of Grant. "General Grant! Sheridan has taken Five Forks!" The colonels' news set off an explosion of excitement among the officers. There were congratulations exchanged as several of them shook hands, tossed hats into the air, and slapped each other on the back. Their celebration carried on until the colonel had ridden away. Then, one by one, the men blocking William's view began to sit back down. At last, he once again could see his target.

With his line of sight clear, a determined Williams took a measured breath and re-sighted on his quarry. Completely focused on his task, he was unaware of the man who, during the commotion, had quietly appeared behind him. Clothed totally in black from head- to- toe, he was nearly invisible. His gaze now settled on his own quarry. Slipping down a visor over his eyes, he now viewed the night-vision image of Williams a hundred feet in front of him lying poised with his Whitworth. A read out on the inside of the visor displayed a time signature that flashed red as the man calmly raised a sleek matte black finished semi-automatic pistol tipped with a silencer.

A slight squeeze on the trigger brought a puffing sound and an immediate jerked reaction from Williams. With a muffled gasp, he rolled over onto his back to look behind him. All he could see was the dark outline of a figure that calmly stepped up to him and was now towering above him. As Williams tried to overcome his shock and pain, the man in black lowered the muzzle of his weapon directly at his chest and sent three more shots puncturing his lungs and heart. Then there was a quick flash and Williams' assailant vanished.

As the dying Confederate sniper lay there gulping his last, Ulysses S. Grant ordered a massive Federal assault against the entire thirty-five miles of Confederate defenses between Richmond and Petersburg. In that same moment the course of history changed and with it the existence of Private Kurtis Williams.

PART ONE

1

*April 6, 2015*

At first, in his deep sleep Wiley Cox ignored the incessant ringing of the phone. The repeating ring awoke him just enough for him to realize it wasn't a dream.

"Damn," he foggily murmured, "Fell asleep on the couch again!"

Blindly groping across the end table, he grabbed for the phone.

"Cox here," he said in a voice weary from exhaustion.

Myrna Lloyd, the Sheriff's Office dispatcher was on the line.

"Sheriff, we tried reaching you on your radio and figured you must have turned in. Did I wake you?"

"Yeah, I'm awake now." he replied sarcastically, "What is it?"

"I'm so sorry, Sheriff. We got a call from Franklin Tate off Amelia Springs Road. They need you out there right away."

"What's the problem? Can it wait?" Cox questioned as he rubbed his eyes, still not fully awake.

"They called and said they have a 10-54." The code for a dead body had Cox suddenly sitting bolt upright with both eyes wide open. He was now fully awake.

"I'm on my way. Who else have you notified?" As adrenalin kicked in his mind and body went into high gear.

"Harvey and Milton." She answered.

Harvey Spindle was one of Cox's newest deputies. The young man had shown promise in the quick and thorough way he handled his responsibilities. Cox was pleased to hear

Harvey was already on the call. Milton Fairchild was the County Coroner. In this instance, his expertise would definitely be needed.

“Good, call me on my radio with any updates.” Cox hung up, grabbed his gun belt and was out the door.

The Tate farm was just outside of Jetersville, Virginia and fifteen miles away from where Cox was in Farmville. Both were relatively small towns nestled in the Virginia heartland, sixty miles west of Richmond. Cox considered Farmville’s five thousand inhabitants a tiny population in comparison to the forty-six thousand in Richmond, where he used to work. He’d left his position in the capitol city after his marriage had broken up to become Sheriff for the Prince Edward County Sheriff’s Office. Cox was now ultimately responsible for the law enforcement of approximately five hundred square miles of territory, with over three hundred and ninety miles of roads. The task suited him well. Cox was a man who liked to be in charge.

Heading east on the divided highway, he turned on his cruisers lights and accelerated. Soon green fields and patches of scattered trees were rapidly flying by as he approached the small town of Rice Depot. Cox slowed to exit the divided roadway to continue eastward. Now on a two lane road, he was grateful no school buses appeared ahead of him as he sped up once more.

“Base to 100, are you 10-8?”

Despite the crackle of the radio, Cox recognized Myrna’s voice.

“100 to Base,” Cox clicked his mike. “10-4. Notify Spindle I’ll be at his 20 in 20.”

“10-4 100,” the radio chirped back.

Cox focused his gaze on the road ahead as both the patrol car and his thoughts raced.

“Let’s see,” he speculated aloud. “There hasn’t been anybody reported missing . . . Richmond’s not put out anything about gang activity lately . . . “. His verbal inventory ceased at the sight of a historical roadside marker.

“Lee’s Retreat,” Cox read, and then a thought flashed through his line.

*Maybe one of those missing Civil War reenactors has turned up.* Cox was recalling a report that had crossed his desk the week before. It prompted him to reach for his radio.

“100 to Base.”

“Base to 100,” Myrna responded.

“Has there been any update on the 10-57’s from last week?”

“Negative.”

“10-4,” Cox replied as he returned the mike. *Those guys couldn’t have just disappeared,* he thought. *Nine people don’t simply vanish, something here isn’t quite right, I just know it.*

His musing ceased as Cox intersected the Patrick Henry Highway. It was another divided road heading northeast. A short distance later, he reached Jetersville and exited left onto SR 642, Amelia Springs Road. The road was named for the resort that used to be at a mineral spring off the route back in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The hard paved road wound its way upward as the elevation increased. The terrain was mostly covered with forest but at times breaks in the trees gave Cox a panoramic view off to his right of a radiant sunrise. Approaching another curve, Cox slowed his vehicle when he spied the sign on the left shoulder for the turn off to the Tate Farm.

Turning onto an unimproved dirt road lined with pine trees, he had to drive much slower until the pines retreated and opened to pastures and fields. Cox sped up once more

and was soon at the farm house. It was a stately old white two story home with tin roofing and twin red brick chimneys. The ground floor was skirted by an open wrap around porch.

As Cox drove up to the farmhouse he could see the cars of his deputy, Harvey Spindle and the coroner, Milton Fairchild parked at the front porch. He was glad to see that the local paper hadn't gotten a reporter there yet. Cox liked to be on top of a situation before anybody from the newspaper began to ask him questions.

*At least we have a little time to work before they get here,* he sighed thankfully as he parked along side the other cars. His deputy and Franklin Tate met him as he got out of his patrol car.

Franklin was middle-aged and portly. He and his family had worked this land for three generations. Cox could see the fields already under cultivation and the newer area that he had been working to clear to expand his crops. The older fields appeared to be planted with corn. Tate offered Cox his hand.

"Morning Sheriff. Thanks for coming." Cox firmly grasped Franklin's hand in greeting and peered into his ruddy face. He looked worried.

"Show me what you've got Franklin." Franklin guided Harvey and Cox to the partially plowed new field, about 500-yards behind the house.

Cox could see the idle tractor in the field with Milton, the coroner bending over the ground a few feet behind it.

"The body's there, behind the tractor, Sheriff." Harvey pointed out.

"Yeah, I stopped as soon as I realized that I'd hit something," Franklin added.

“I got here as quickly as I could, Sheriff.” Harvey said. “I made sure nothing was disturbed until Milton got here.”

“Nice work, Deputy Spindle.”

Cox clapped him on the back. Harvey was in his early twenties and was full of the enthusiasm Cox recalled from his own earlier days in law enforcement. He gazed out again toward the tractor and the coroner.

“Let’s take a look and hear what Milton has to say.”

Moments later they were standing over the coroner. He was squatting down beside a furrow about five feet behind the tractor. Milton had been the County Coroner for more than thirty years. He’d seen most of the folks in the County as they exited this life. He was a quiet man, tall, thin and stooped in the shoulders.

Milton didn’t notice them at first. He was poking through the soil at what looked like an assortment of old bones. Among the remains, he had found remnants of rotted clothing and metal buttons. Then, he had come across something fascinating and was now poking at it with his pen. Realizing they were standing behind him, he quickly scooped up something in one hand and pushed back his glasses on his nose with the other. Then he rose up slowly and turned to face them.

Cox was the first to speak.

“What have we got Milton? Has Franklin turned up another old soldier?”

Civil War battles had been fought all over the state. Many who died had been buried quickly, their graves sometimes never marked. Every so often, a contractor clearing land to build a shopping center or farmers, like Franklin, happened to rediscover the unmarked graves.

“Yes and no,” Milton answered quietly.

“What do you mean by that?” Cox replied.

“Did somebody get buried in my woods?” Franklin asked with concern.

Milton gazed thoughtfully and extended his arm out in front of him and turned his palm upward, opening his gloved hand. Cox, Franklin, and Harvey peered down at a couple of rusted buttons. Harvey was the first to respond.

“Must have been a Southern Soldier! See those *CSA* letters on the buttons?”

Franklin was immediately relaxed by Harvey’s revelation.

“That’s right, looks like he was a Southern soldier,” Milton confirmed.

Cox was already thinking ahead of the next steps that needed to be taken.

“I’ll contact the history folks to come get him so Franklin can finish his plowing.”

Milton raised a gloved hand to stop Cox. Cox began to feel a familiar tightening in his gut. Something here wasn’t quite right.

“What is it, Milton?”

Milton didn’t utter a word. He turned and knelt back down beside the disinterred remains to pick up a small object. Rising again, he presented a gloved hand and slowly opened it.

A chilling sensation ran down the entire length of Cox’s spine.

This time, in the palm of Milton’s hand there was another very grimy but very recognizable object. It was a cell phone.

“That changes everything,” Cox muttered.