



## CHAPTER 1 “THE JOURNEY BEGINS”

Mobile, Alabama

April 3, 1865

Six days before the official end of the Civil War

*Sam sat down in the empty chair beside the cot and gently took hold of James's cool, lifeless hand. “I know it's not yore' nature, James --- but I'm gonna make ya' a promise right now. Some how, some way --- I'm gonna find the sum'bitch that did this to ya', if'n he's still alive. I'm gonna give him the same he gave to you. A bullet in the head.”*

Bellefontaine, Ohio

May 1868

The stranger looked out of place amongst the storeowners, clerks, and townspeople as they performed their Saturday morning rituals on the main street of Bellefontaine, Ohio. He struck an imposing figure, standing over six feet tall, wide-brimmed Stetson pulled low over his brow, a Navy Colt pistol holstered high on his hip, and the slight rattle of spurs with each step as he strode with a definite purpose. The hustle and bustle of downtown activity ceased in pockets at his passing. His eyes watched the movement of every man in his path, but in contrast, he smiled a charming grin and doffed his hat to every woman and child he encountered.

He spotted the storefront across the street. An eerie feeling crawled up his spine when he saw the name on the sign, imposing itself amongst the smaller establishments it neighbored. *Morgan's Mercantile*. The stranger crossed the width of the packed dirt avenue allowing wagons and horsemen to pass before him; on edge and alert, he approached the general store. He'd traveled hundreds of miles to find this place, and he knew it was only the beginning of an unpredictable journey. He stepped inside the store and the combined aromas of leather saddles, animal feed, new bolts of cloth, fresh fruits and vegetables in wooden baskets, and the ever-present smell of cigar smoke and tobacco that assaulted the senses reminded him of every building, in every town he'd traveled through the past three years. Another reminder of his home in the South. A home he may never see again because of a vow made on an Alabama battlefield. *A promise made, is a debt unpaid*, he remembered a friend saying. This was a debt he intended to pay in full.

The store's clerk, Mr. Newton, a longtime employee of Mr. Morgan's, fidgeted around the rows of canned goods and domestic supplies on the high-reaching shelves behind the counter. From the corner of his eye, he noticed a tall, lanky cowboy saunter cautiously through the front door, step to the side, and then survey the store before entering another foot. "Can I help you, young man? You look like a travelin' man. Need supplies?"

The cowboy politely removed his Stetson and briskly slapped it across his thigh, raising a puff of trail dust. A slight smile creased a weathered face. "I'm looking for Mr. Morgan. Mr. Horatio Morgan," he said in an amiable tone.

“Well sir, he’s in the back doin’ inventory. Can I tell him who’s calling for him?”

Asked the curious clerk.

“My name’s Sam Evans. Tell him I’m here about his son, Harry Morgan.”

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The clerk’s face turned dark at the mention of Harry’s name. He leaned on his elbows, raised his hand to cover his mouth and whispered in a low, conspirator-like tone, “I’m not sure that’s a good idea, young fella’. We ain’t even allowed to say the boy’s name in Mr. H.’s presence ‘round here. Kind of a sore subject, you might say.”

“I understand,” Sam answered, as he slowly placed his hands palm down on the store counter and leaned forward towards the old man. Their noses only inches apart. Then his sunny demeanor disappeared. “Mister, I don’t aim ta’ argue with you about this, an’ I think you can see I’m not a man to trifle with and I’m not gonna argue with you about this ... just get him *now*,” Sam growled between clinched teeth. He leaned back, straightened up, and then flashed a disarming smile as he rested his right hand on the butt of his Colt.

The clerk nodded without further delay and trotted towards the back of the barn-like establishment, shaking his head and mumbling to himself, “Mr. H. ain’t going to like this --- no sir-ree -- he ain’t going to like it one bit.”

Sam watched the comical character scurry to the rear of the building. His heart rate increased a tad as he anticipated the meeting with Harry’s father. *This is it. I’ll make him tell me where the sum’bitch is if ... I have to...* He didn’t finish the thought as he glanced to the back of the room and saw Horatio Morgan emerge from an office door. Even at a distance, Sam could tell his adversary was a big, heavysset man. He wore a dark

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suit with a heavily starched, high-collared white dress shirt, and a black tie. Very meticulous in his appearance, the silver colored hair and handlebar moustache added an air of distinguished importance to his stature. He strode with firm, clipping steps, no signs of malice or fear traced his face. Sam recognized a formidable opponent coming his way.

*I knew this day would come sooner or later,* Horatio thought as he evaluated the young cowboy waiting for him at the counter. Normally, he was a good judge of character and could pick out a troublemaker or somebody looking for a handout at a glance. He also considered himself a master at the art of recognizing an honest man when he saw one, but he couldn't get an exact handle on the young stranger leaning against the counter. There was nothing threatening about him, but his eyes held a dark, vengeful passion that made Horatio feel uncomfortable. Anything concerning Harry was bad news, and Horatio knew that his resolve as a father was about to be tested. For the first time in many years, Horatio was unsure of himself.

Sam straightened up as the well-dressed store owner approached him. Secretly, he took a deep breath. *Finally.* Horatio Morgan stopped within arms length in front of him. Too close for Sam's comfort. Their eyes met for three long seconds. Each measuring the other. An awkward moment filled the general store.

"My name is Horatio Morgan, Mr. Evans. I understand you wish to speak to me about my son, Harry." He made no attempt to shake hands with the young cowboy.

Sam met his gaze full on. "Yes sir, I do. I'd be obliged if we could meet in private. What I have to talk about isn't exactly for public knowledge," Sam said, his eyes shifting to the clerk. Mr. Newton had trotted behind Horatio like a young boy in tow as

he peered around his boss's bulky frame. Sam continued, "Mr. Morgan, I'm gonna to take this hog-leg from my holster and give it to your man there," Sam said, nodding at the clerk. "I don't want you to have any misgivings about my intentions. Your son's name don't exactly conjure up feelings of brotherhood, and I don't mean you no harm, but you know --- this ain't no social visit."

"No, if it concerns Harry, I'm sure it's not social, but Mr. Evans, don't let the suit fool you." Horatio unbuttoned his jacket and pulled it back, resting a fist on a large hip, exposing a pistol tucked in his own belt. "Keep your gun, son. I assume we're both gentlemen here."

A slight grin came to Sam's lips. "Yes sir, I hope so, Mr. Morgan. I'm not looking for trouble, just information."

"Then follow me, Mr. Evans. We'll have privacy in my office." Horatio turned to the clerk. "Mr. Newton, would you make sure we're not disturbed." A stern look shadowed over Horatio's face. "Under *no* circumstances, Mr. Newton. You understand? You stay here at the counter."

Sam stared down the little man. "This is a private conversation, Mr. Newton. I want it to stay that way." He held the clerk's gaze until the elder could stand it no more.

Newton's eyes darted between his boss and the cowboy. Nervous energy and excitement surged through his body. This was news! Something was afoot, but he wasn't about to cross the young cowboy. Something in his eyes warned him to stay quiet. He turned away from Sam and spoke directly to Horatio. "Yes sir, Mr. Morgan. I understand. You know you can trust me to keep my mouth shut." He immediately made an exit to safety behind the counter and started rearranging rows of canned food, all the

while his ear cocked to pick up any morsel of information he could gather from the retreating pair.

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Horatio settled in behind a large oak desk and leaned back in his leather bound chair. Papers were stacked in neat piles, no pictures or mementos graced its surface. Sam noticed that the office was one of business, not for show to demonstrate the owner's importance or wealth.

"Mr. Newton's a good man," Horatio said with a small smile, "he's just a bit of a town gossip. He likes to linger around closed doors, if you know what I mean. Half the town probably knows we're having this conversation by now."

"Probably," Sam agreed.

Horatio's mind raced with thoughts of what to do. *I might as well meet this young man head-on. I know why he's here.* The smile vanished. "Why do you want Harry, Mr. Evans? You want to kill him, don't you?"

Such a leading, straight forward question might have unnerved most men, but Sam held Horatio's gaze with a steady eye. "Yes sir --- I do. I intend to kill him as soon as I lay eyes on him."

"And why is that, Mr. Evans?"

"Your son is a cold-blooded killer, Mr. Morgan. He leaves a trail of widows and orphans wherever he goes. But mostly..." Sam hesitated, not from discomfort, but because his friend's death still raised strong emotions down to the marrow of his bones, "... he murdered my best friend three years ago, an' I made a vow to him whilst he laid on his death bed that I'd kill the sum'bitch that killed him."

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Horatio's eyes didn't falter from Sam's intense glare. He unfolded his arms from across his chest and placed both meaty, manicured hands flat on the desk. This young cowboy wasn't telling him anything he didn't already know. He knew his son was a killer. But Harry was his son, his only living blood. "If my math is correct Mr. Evans, that would have been around the end of the war. Was your friend killed in a battle?"

"Yes he was. Spanish Fort, near Mobile, Alabama. Six days before Lee and Grant signed the Treaty at Appomattox ... your son shot him dead." Sam knew what was coming next. It didn't matter to him, though.

"Then it wasn't murder, Mr. Evans. We all lost friends in that senseless war, but men dying and getting maimed for life is an unfortunate fact of war. It's still not murder."

Sam wanted to bolt from his chair and snatch this pristine, emotionless excuse of a man from his fine leather chair and scream, *I don't care you son of a bitch! He killed the best friend I ever had!* Instead, he matched the cool demeanor of the man across from him. "I understand that, Mr. Morgan ... I fought for four years with the Confederacy --- an' believe me ... I saw things I'll never forget and a nature of man that I wish I didn't know existed. But your son..." Sam took a breath. "Like I said, your boy has a way of leaving innocent bodies behind in his trail and then he slithers out of town like the coward he is --- an' I aim to put a stop to him. With or without your help." Sam felt the fever inside him rising. *Stay calm. Don't break!*

Horatio leaned back, closely studying the intense young man across the desk. "So-o-o, what you're asking me to do, Mr. Evans, is to betray my own son because you

say he's a killer and based upon the fact that he killed your best friend in the heat of battle in the middle of a war. Is that right? Rather flimsy evidence, wouldn't you say?"

Sam drilled his eyes into Horatio's. His patience was wearing thin, but he also knew he was rambling and not building a good case for this father to betray his own blood. "I'm gonna lay it out for you, Mr. Morgan. It's time we quit dancin' around each other an' put our cards on the table. I'm not stupid and I'm not going to be treated as such. I've asked around. Ever'body in town, including you, knows what Harry is. He's a hired gun. Kills people for money. Highest bidder gets the contract. Nobody's gonna cry over Harry's death, an' you know it. I'm askin' you to help me find him. I think you know where he is, or close to it. Askin' a father to give up his son so's somebody can kill him is about the worst thing a man can do --- but that's what I'm doin'."

Horatio's brain screamed for him to do the right thing, but he couldn't be responsible for his own son's death. Even though he knew that Harry's removal from the face of the earth would be for the better and nobody's loss but his own. With all his willpower, the unsure father responded in a calmness that betrayed his true desire.

"Young man, I'm afraid you've misjudged me, and I'm going to have to ask you to leave. I believe you've worn out your welcome." He stood and pulled back the front of his coat, revealing the belted pistol. "The front door is that way," he said pointing to the outside.

"I feel sorry for you, Mr. Morgan," Sam said, remaining calm, still seated and not stirring a muscle. "I really do. It must be a powerful, deep hurt for a respected man like you to have a mad-dog killer for a son. I have to believe it ain't your fault, though. I'm

sure you did the best you could. You didn't raise him that way, but I'd be willing to bet that ...”

“That's enough, Mr. Evans!” Horatio blurted out, jumping to his feet. He didn't want to hear another blasphemous word from a man that appeared to be cut from the same cloth as Harry. Calming himself before he spoke, Horatio forced himself to continue. “You'll take your leave now, Mr. Evans, before things get out of hand.”

“You gonna shoot me, Mr. Morgan? Maybe the apple *don't* fall too far from the tree after all. But if you try to go down on me with that little pop gun you've got tucked your belt there, your Mr. Newton out there will be runnin' this fine establishment alone.” Sam resisted the urge to get up and kept his seat. “I'm leaving Mr. Morgan, an' when I catch up with Harry --- and I will --- I'll send you a telegram an' let you know when it happens. It'll be three words and three words only, Mr. Morgan. *Vengeance is mine.*” Sam slowly lifted himself up from the chair, keeping his eyes steady on Horatio. He knew the sad, confused figure before him wouldn't go for the gun. He knew it when the old man pulled back his coat. It was his own way of defending an unwanted son, trying to save face and an ounce of dignity for himself.

“And by the way,” Sam casually mentioned, “I understand you used ta' run the Underground Railroad in this part of the country. I've heard stories 'bout how Harry brags that his first kill was a negro that worked for you. Killed him just to see what it was like. That true?” Sam had never seen a man turn so pale, so fast. Horatio's face drained of color, almost matching the silver mustache and pork chop sideburns that decorated his face. He watched as the stricken man steadied himself against the desk.

“What d-do you k-know of Walter Jefferson?” He stammered. “You know nothing! Now get out of here before I fetch the sheriff and have you run out of town! Do you hear me? Leave!”

“I’m leaving, Mr. Morgan,” Sam said, “but I’ll be in town until dark. Shouldn’t be too hard to find, if you change your mind.” Sam left the office and walked down the long, narrow aisle leading to the front of the store. He felt Horatio’s eyes burning into his back as he made his exit.

Mr. Newton heard all the clamour coming from his boss’s office and quickly pretended to be busy, glancing in Sam’s direction as though he’d just noticed him for the first time. “Come back to see us, young man. Did you need any supplies before you leave?” He said, hoping the cowboy would stop and talk.

“Nah, but thanks. I believe I’ll have ever’thing I need when I leave town tonight.” Sam doffed his hat to one of the town’s ladies as she came through the front door. “Morning, m’am. Have a nice day.”