

Chapter One — *Killer Debt*

THE FILMY, GRAY quality of the smoke column rising to the southwest told Captain Michael Stoddard that they were too late. The residence was gutted. He and his patrol of six redcoats from the Eighty-Second Regiment could render no aid.

He'd seen far too much of arson's smudge upon the sky during his six months in North Carolina. Nevertheless, he pressed his mare toward the smoke through summer's swelter. A loyalist financier named Jasper Bellington owned the house and surrounding land. Bellington's business partner hadn't seen him since Friday, July twentieth, four days earlier. Tension knotted Michael's stomach. Had the loyalist and his three slaves perished in the inferno of his house?

Clear sky arced above the soldiers, a hot, hard awning of lapis. The road ribboned south through stands of long-leaf pines and live oaks, sand and shells sighing and crunching beneath horse hooves. Aside from the squawks of crows, the only other sounds keeping Michael and his men company were the ebb and swell of cicada-song in the brush, and the occasional dull clack of a leather-and-wood canteen lifted to the lips of a thirsty soldier.

A breeze blew the smell of sweaty horses away for a second. Michael, riding in front, got his first whiff of burned wood. He sat taller in the saddle, blinked sweat from his eyes, and spotted the entrance to Bellington's drive an eighth mile ahead. "There it is, lads. Come along." He urged his mare forward.

On the drive, trees shaded the men, and the sharp stench of charred wood blanketed them. Michael's gaze raked over the surrounding foliage for anything suspicious or dangerous. Rainwater from a thunderstorm two nights earlier had evaporated, and he spotted recent wheel ruts and hoof prints leading up the sandy track—potential evidence being obliterated by the passage of his patrol. He ordered his men off the drive, single-file behind him in the grass and low brush.

The smoking, blackened skeleton of Bellington's two-story house awaited them at the top of the drive, in a clearing ringed by singed trees. Heat oozed off the devastation. Whenever the breeze died, Michael heard the creak and shift of burned timber. Anyone trapped in the house after it was ablaze was surely dead.

Sweat dribbled from his scalp through his dark hair, down the sides of his face and into his neck stock. He removed his hat long enough to blot his forehead with a handkerchief, then signaled his men to dismount. For several seconds, everyone studied the ruin, and Michael sensed the men's apprehension over what they'd find.

Private Henshaw's voice was subdued. "Looks like the Reverend's work again, sir."

It did indeed. At the helm of a band of slippery, self-appointed dispensers of rebel "justice" was the Reverend Paul Greene, weapons smuggler and thorn in the Eighty-Second's side since January. In late May, he and his band began roaming the Cape Fear area, terrorizing the King's Friends, burning homes, and stealing slaves and other property.

Private Jackson cocked a fist on his hip. "Poor losers, every one of Greene's band."

Michael grunted and fanned away a cloud of gnats. "Desperate losers. All right, men, let's check those outbuildings and the stable over there for survivors."

With Henshaw watching the horses, Michael and the remaining soldiers fanned out, firearms loaded. By his order, the men avoided tromping through the crisscross of wheel ruts and hoof prints in the clearing. As he approached the stable, a horse from his party snorted. From the stable came a nervous whicker in response.

Michael and the two men nearest him, Ferguson and Wigglesworth, froze and studied each other. The same logic must be going through all their heads. Why would rebel arsonists leave a horse behind?

Was this some sort of trap?

Memory provided him with ghastly examples of the traps that rebels set and affirmed his caution. He motioned Ferguson and Wigglesworth forward with him and signed for the others to hold position. Heart thudding against his ribcage, he stepped to the hinge side of the right stable door and pressed his back to the outer wall. Ferguson sneaked to the hinges of the left door, with Wigglesworth just beyond him. All three held their firearms at half-cock and ready.

Michael rapped the door with his knuckles. "Hullo! Anyone in there?"

No human answered, but the horse rustled about and snorted once. "Hullo, we're from the Eighty-Second Regiment, here to help." No response. Seconds ticked by in Michael's waistcoat watch, in the creep of sweat down his back. "We're opening the door now." With the end of his fusil, he unlatched the right side of the door. It swayed ajar an inch or two with a soft squeak of hinges.

The wind shifted and blew the bitter, charred-wood stink over them, along with some ash. Wigglesworth and Ferguson fanned away the smoke, and Wigglesworth coughed. Michael motioned for Ferguson to push the door open with his musket, and the door yawned wide on its hinges. "No need to be alarmed. We're coming in now to help you." Before he could lose his nerve, Michael darted through the opening, fusil raised.

He expelled a pent-up breath and lowered his weapon. The only occupant of the stable was one nervous horse, a gelding tucked into a stall, his water pail empty. Wigglesworth entered behind him. He soothed the horse, backed him from the stall, and checked him over, then shrugged at Michael and shook his head. No sign of injury on the animal, but he looked thirsty.

From the droppings in the adjacent empty stall, another horse had been housed there as recently as a day ago. Why would rebels steal one horse and leave the other healthy beast behind?

He sent Ferguson to check the kitchen building for survivors and assigned Wigglesworth to water the gelding and ready him for transport back to Wilmington. Then he examined Bellington's two-wheeled gig. Sand clung to both wheels but crumbled off when he flicked it with a forefinger. The gig hadn't been driven in at least a day.

Was this the only vehicle to make those wheel tracks in the clearing and on the drive? Curious, Michael used the length of his booted foot to measure the distance between the gig's wheels. Outside the stable, two of his men held position across from

him, awaiting his orders. "Search around the house," he called out before giving attention to the maze of wheel ruts, hoof prints, and shoe prints before him.

He walked out into the clearing, even though doing so muddled evidence. In addition to tracks from Bellington's gig, he recognized those of a four-wheeled vehicle. Not a wagon: the wheel ruts weren't thick enough. A passenger vehicle, then, perhaps a small chaise. The distance between the back wheels of the vehicle was almost a foot wider than the wheels of Bellington's gig. With a swirl of ruts, the chaise had halted before the house within the past two days. A man had exited on the left side and walked toward what had been the front door.

Michael cocked his head, gaze sweeping the trail of shoe prints up to the house. There was a round indentation in the sand to the outside of every right shoe print. Whoever Bellington's visitor had been, he walked with a slight limp in his left leg and used a cane but didn't lean heavily on it. From the length of his stride, Michael judged him of medium height, like himself.

"Mr. Stoddard—sir!" That was Jackson, at the rear of the house. The short soldier's voice quavered. "There's—there's someone inside!"

Michael's pulse kicked. He sprinted across the clearing for the back of the house. Rounding the corner, he huffed up to the soldier, who stood near a singed bench and several potted banana and citrus trees in the dirt behind the house. "Someone alive?"

"N-no, sir, it—it—" Jackson pointed into the charred timbers, his complexion greenish.

Michael faced the house. Over the stink of blistered beams, he got his first deep whiff of burned flesh. He coughed, grimaced, and swung his gaze back and forth before it probed deep into the tumble of timber and the wreck of books and furniture, into what had been the study. It lodged on the blackened, standing figure of a man.

No, not standing. The corpse was hanging—arms overhead, wrists apparently strapped together—from a beam. His shoes were flat on the burned floor. His head and crispy wig lolled forward, and to one side.

It was Bellington. Good gods. The clothing on his upper body was gone, and his chest—

Eyes bulging, Michael recoiled one step from the house. Horror and revulsion ground through him with a queasy grab at his gut. He closed his mouth on the smell, the taste, of violent death and incineration. The private staggered into the brush behind him and retched. Michael couldn't blame him.

Bellington's ribs protruded starkly, like some sort of roast. Before the house was set afire, and the man's body had burned, long slabs of flesh had been skinned off his torso. They'd since baked against his breeches. His murderer must have counted on arson obscuring how the victim had been tortured beforehand, flayed—

Flayed. His breathing shallow, Michael backed another step. Incredulous, he glared eastward, as if he could see across the Cape Fear River to Wilmington and the regiment. Outrage swelled in him and chased away his queasiness. Ye gods, this could not be so! But moments before in the clearing, he'd seen with his own eyes the evidence that a man with a left-leg limp and a cane had visited Bellington in the past day or so.

Maybe rebels hadn't murdered the financier and set his house ablaze. Maybe the true criminal was an officer and wore His Majesty's scarlet. Michael felt a sneer of determination peel his lip off his teeth. His breath hissed out, and he whispered, "Damn

you, Fairfax!" It was long past time that Michael saw that devil hanged for indulging in his depravity, his *sport*.

Leaves and twigs exploded behind him with the discharge of a firearm, followed by Jackson's scream. From the front of the house, Henshaw hollered through the firearm's echoing report. With nowhere else to hide, Michael dove behind the potted orange trees, then sought better cover from the big-leafed banana trees beside them. The rotten-egg stink of black powder smoke rolled over him. Debris rained on the foliage not far away.

He could hear Jackson's ragged breathing somewhere out in the brush plus the running approach of soldiers through dead leaves. He turned his head and jutted his chin. "Stay back, men!" His own fear and hammering heartbeat hiked the pitch of his voice. "Take cover!" They fell back, around the side of the ruin.

Clearly this was an undesirable situation. Potted trees as a shield, heat from the house slowly simmering Michael's arse. Plus the color of his coat made a rebel marksman's job easy. Michael worked on calming the rabbit in his pulse and hoped his clothing wouldn't ignite. Fusil gripped in both hands, he peered between banana leaves. His gaze scoured the ground and lower trunks of trees. He spotted Jackson's musket lying on the ground.

Seconds thudded by. No more shots were fired. Where was the marksman? Where, for that matter, was Jackson? It sounded like the private had been hit. Had he lost consciousness?

"Mr. Stoddard, sir. Can you hear me?" Jackson's voice still quavered.

Michael squinted. "Yes, I can hear you, lad. Stay down. Are you hurt bad?"

"I—I think the ball skimmed my scalp, sir. Top of my head's bleeding. Hurts like the devil. A-and I think I'd be dead if I were a taller fellow."

Why hadn't the marksman fired again? Michael wasn't that difficult a target, and it sounded like Jackson wasn't, either. He stuck his hat on the end of his fusil's barrel and jiggled it to the side, beyond the banana leaves. Nobody shot at him.

Jackson's voice firmed. "While I was puking, sir, I tripped some kind of trap with a loaded pistol and a snare. Might you please help me down?"

Loaded pistol? Snare? "Help you *down*?" Fusil in hand, Michael rose, planted his hat on his head, and walked away from the potted trees and overly warm house.

From a sturdy sapling, Jackson hung upside down about five feet off the ground, one lower leg tangled in the rope of a snare. Blond hair on the top of his head was matted with blood. Nearby, a spring-gun—a lock, stock, and shortened barrel with a post—was mounted on a stump. Rope from both gun and snare lay mostly hidden in dead leaves.

The private made eye contact with Michael and wobbled out a salute. Michael propped his fist on his hip and heaved a sigh. "Ah, bloody hell."

End of Chapter One