

## PROLOGUE

New Orleans, March 1873. The Civil War is over, but the spirit of the city has been broken. New Orleans is dirty and disease-ridden, a place of political and racial violence, looting, and unsolved murders. The city is on edge, ready to explode.

The docks are still busy, loading and unloading heavy cargoes of cotton, sugar, and coffee every day. The river is crowded with steamers, its levee piled high with cotton bales. When the wind blows, pinches of cotton drift through the air like snow.

New arrivals flock to the city, hoping to make their fortune. Many end up starving and poverty-stricken. Many succumb to yellow fever, the mysterious and feared disease ravaging the city. Some are robbed — or worse — in one of the many dark alleys or hidden courtyards of the old town.

One damp spring day, as a misty evening begins to settle on the city, a teenage boy hurries away from the dock. He wends his way through the streets of the Quarter, speaking to nobody. His face is pale and sunken; his trousers — ragged at the hems — are flecked with cotton dust. More than one of the city's legions of pickpockets notice the way he pats his jacket every few steps.

With every nervous pat, he gives himself away: They can tell that he's carrying something precious, something unfamiliar in his pocket. Perhaps it's money; perhaps it's something valuable he can sell or trade. Perhaps it's something he's stolen himself.

He crosses the broad, muddy expanse of Rampart Street, dodging carts and carriages, soldiers on horseback, washer-women balancing bundles of laundry on their heads. A dark-haired, burly man follows him, taking care to keep up.

On the far side of Rampart, they both disappear into Tremé, the old neighborhood built decades earlier for New Orleans's free people of color. They'll both end up in a small house on St. Philip Street, fighting over the tiny piece of hidden treasure in the boy's pocket.

Neither will make it out alive.