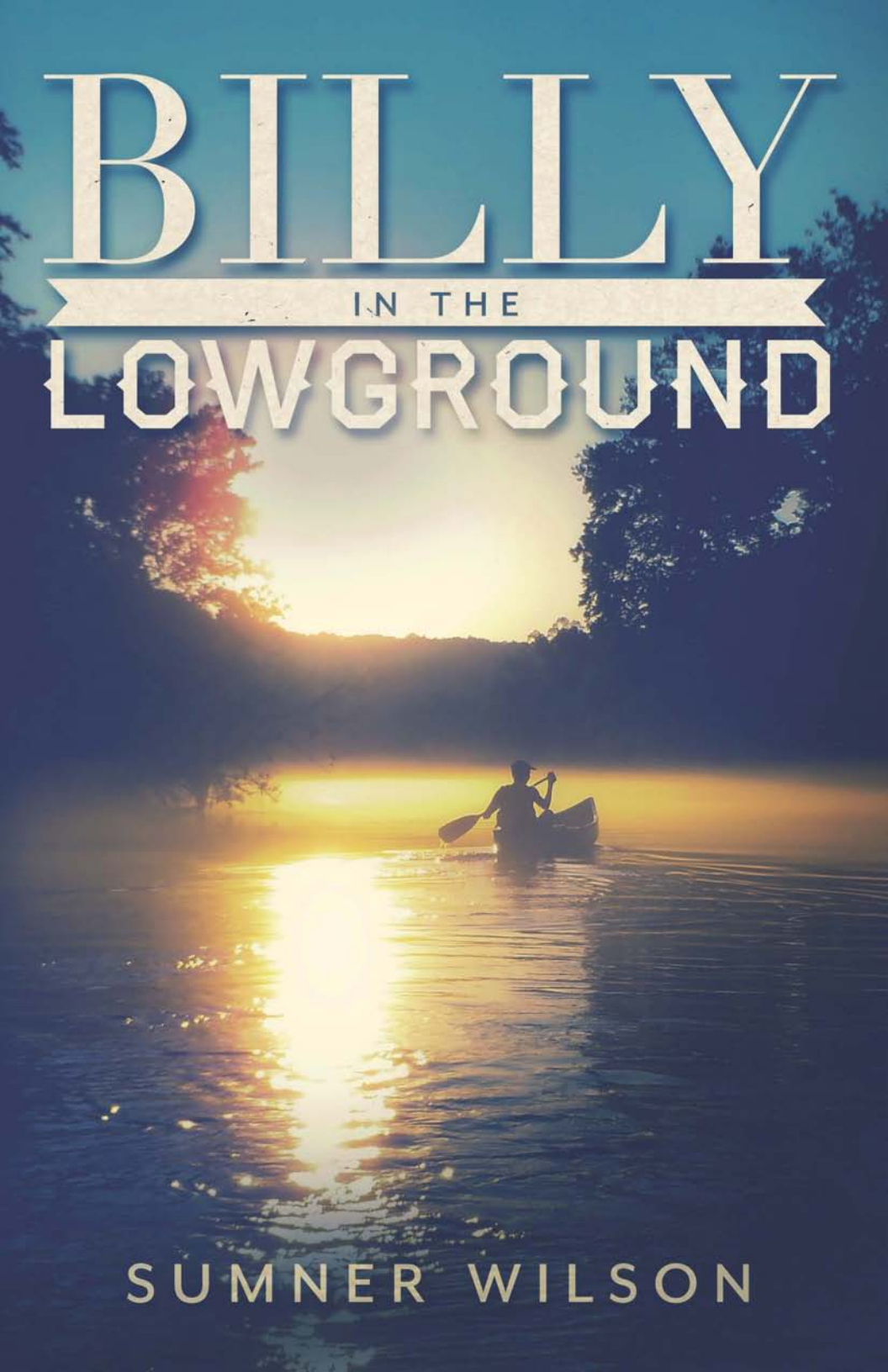
BILLY
IN THE
LOWGROUND
SUMNER WILSON

BILLY IN THE LOWGROUND

BY SUMNER WILSON

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Chapter One

I turned thirteen just as school let out for summer. My birthday, plus graduating elementary school, filled me with so much pride that I walked about daily, chest thrust forward, strutting about like a gamecock. Few were more powerful than I was—in my mind, that is—except Uncle Roz, of course, and Cal McKenzie, my best friend. God created the sky, the river, and wilderness entirely for my personal pleasure, or so I figured. The happiness and good times I wallowed in daily were all mine and would roll on forever. I lived in my own personal paradise, all right, but I did have one mighty problem. I needed to find a way for my best friend to go to high school with me before the start of school in the fall. His father, though, wanted him to stay home and help work the farm.

OZORA COUNTY, 1930

Uncle Roz and I were seining minnows. He worked the deep end of the pool, because of his greater height. But even with that, it made little difference. Hard work was just that—hard.

"Keep the lower end out ahead of you, Scotlin," said that fierce old man, my mother's brother, Roswell Tull. "That seine's hungry, make it dig into the gravel."

Every word Uncle uttered came out pushy. I figured he meant to imprint his dominance in my mind for all time. It was just his way, but it did sometimes put me off. He always sounded as if he were about ready to chew me up and spit out the parts that wouldn't properly pass through his digestive tract. My old uncle was just who he was, though. He never bruised anything except my pride, and that old man loved reminding me that if pride were a waterfall, mine would be Niagara.

I bent back to my work, ran the bottom end of the guide stick deeper into the gravel of the riverbed. It grated loudly against the gravel, and jarred my wrists and arms as it dragged heavily across the bottom. This lowered the upper part of the seine until the top of the net barely skimmed the surface of the water. It was humming along now the way Uncle wanted it to. I kept it skimming like that for a time, but it soon became harder and harder work. Sweat popped out on my forehead, even though I was wading through water up to mid-thigh.

A short time ago, the sun had fallen behind Gobbler's Roost, the tall limestone bluff on the far side of the river. The sky above the bluff was still aflame with an orange glow, but the willows on the riverbank and all the ground visible on our side of the river including the hardwood forest, plus a quarter of the river itself, lay in dark purple shadows. They forecast the approach of night. The combination of shadows and the bright, orange splashes of the sun gave everything a

Halloween glow, but it was the middle of summer, and I had no business thinking of Halloween so early in the year.

"Get back on the job," Uncle Roz said. "Quit gawking off. You're lettin' water over the top of the seine, and the minnows along with it." He called them "minners," of course.

Well, I thought I was doing a bang-up job of work. I'd been staring at the quick flow of the water, the bugs zooming around my face, and the fantasy dance of the snake doctors much longer than I'd realized. Uncle Roz sure acted disturbed.

An investigative hoot of an owl across the river struck up just then, raspy and sleepy-voiced. He'd likely been nested up all through the day, and was eager now to awaken his pals to gossip for a bit, which happened every evening about this time.

As we neared the deeper end of the pool, my arms and hands suddenly met with even more resistance. My bicep muscles swelled as full as they'd ever get, because of the extra weight. The net had snagged something it wasn't supposed to.

"Come on, and let's get 'er up and out of here. See what we got," Uncle said. "We've snagged somethin'. Don't want to rip a hole in the net. Stu McKenzie's got my spare."

We slogged through the water toward the bank. The breeze played across my exposed legs, and chilled them. The water level dropped as we stepped nearer the bank, and then fell below my knees. This was chilling and refreshing at the same time, for it was still hot even with night nearby.

I struggled out of the water, and stretched the net tight as I ran, turning it upward, which, because of the heavy object we'd snagged, became much of a chore. Uncle Roz was still in the pool as I stepped upon the gravel bar. There were dozens

of minnows in the net. Their sides flashed silver and pink in the shadowy light, leaping about like crazy in unsuccessful attempts to flip back into the safety of the river. The net, of course, prevented this. All they accomplished was high flips, and neat somersaults, before they crashed back onto the net like circus acrobats.

A stone much larger than my head lay in the net. The stone bowed the seine to the middle where everything inside eventually fell into the valley created by the heavy weight. It was smooth and perfectly round, because of ages of end-over-end tumbles on the bottom of the river, trapped in the eternal roll of the current, or so I guessed.

Studying our haul, I figured we probably had enough bait to last us at least two or three days. This was great news. The bad side of life on the river was the constant chore of collecting bait for our lines—trotlines, as well as pole lines.

We were just seconds from setting the seine down onto the gravel bar amid all the broken mussel shells the raccoons had opened to get to the goodies inside, but the stone ripped through the net as if cut by a knife blade. Most of our bait plunged through the hole. I felt miserable as the minnows disappeared back into the river. But some—those on my side of the net—fell among the gravel and broken mussel shells. Those on Uncle's side splashed back into the safety of the river in a brief downpour, and ruffled the steady flow of the water for a brief spell.

"Grab 'em, Scotlin!" Uncle said. "Don't let 'em get away."

He rushed the rest of the way ashore, dropped his end of the seine, fell to his knees, and snatched for them with shaky hands. It grew right hot there for a time, what with the two of

us clicking and clacking noisily through the gravel and empty mussel shells in pursuit of the lively minnows. Those nearest me flipped high and fell back against the gravel. On second effort, they fell back into the safety of the water where they shot off through the water, swift as bullets.

I caught a double handful, ran to the minnow bucket, dropped them safely inside and scatted back for more. But on my fifth trip, the rest of them disappeared into the swift rush of the Stream River.

Uncle Roz exhaled deeply and sat down on the bank at the edge of the water. He looked tired and just about defeated. The legs of his overalls were soaked far up past his knees.

I'd once overheard my mother and father talking. They said Uncle Roz was fixing to die of a lung disease, which caused him to tire easily, and drove him into fits of coughing from time to time.

He claimed his cough was from some sort of poisonous gas he'd breathed in while serving overseas in the world war. He told me he wasn't dying at all—at least no sooner than what God meant for him to.

His full name? Roswell Fletcher Tull. He'd been a soldier in the Great War, in France. However, he often told me there was nothing any too blamed great about the war that he'd ever witnessed. I didn't bother to tell him that *great,* in this case meant, huge. Shoot, he knew that better than I did. Mom told me the war had made him a drunkard and was what'd ruined him.

When he came home from over there, she claimed, he grew extremely moody. He just snapped at everything and everyone. He became angry and cared for nothing. All he

wanted was to lounge about on the river, hunting, drinking whiskey, running his trotlines and playing his fiddle. For my part, this didn't sound all that bad and, as matter of fact, I felt he pretty much had it made. Well, except for the whiskey part. I once sneaked a sip, and spit it out faster than it took to tell it. I figured that tiny sip was likely what it'd be like to drink fire.

I suppose Mom thought he was a failure because he never held onto any steady work. Uncle lived in a big old army tent on the banks of the Stream River. He did do some work, though. Mostly in the timber, but just long enough for him to get a grubstake to see him through the summer on one sandbar or the other. He also sold catfish to a few of the local cafés out on the highway. The cafés featured fried catfish dinners served to tourists and travelers. I thought he was quite the successful man. Uncle had few flaws, as far as I could see.

He possessed the skill of creating furniture from the native hardwood. Folks were constantly after him to build them a table, chair or something else. If he was in the right mood, he'd likely do it, but if not, they could talk in a loud voice all day long and he'd ignore them. He had better things on his mind. Uncle was some independent man. The kind of man any boy would be proud to pattern himself after, which is what I tried my best to do.

Uncle was a top hand in the woods. There was always some big lumber company boss after him. They tossed him all manner of tasty bait in an effort to hook him into hiring on as a company "buyer." Many men said he had the best eye for calculating the board feet of lumber in a live upright tree in the whole of the Ozora area. My dad said he could've made something of him-self if he'd only gone to work for one of the

big companies. My uncle, though, preferred to fish, trap a bit, and play his fiddle at social functions.

He was the finest fisherman on the Stream too. He also made johnboats that were tight, light and exceptionally sturdy. To top it all off, he'd been around the world. Uncle was a war hero, and had the medals to prove it. But I never did hear him lay claim to that title. He had wounds from battles that still bothered him a great deal. I witnessed his pain up close on a daily basis. The ones that hurt him most, though, were on the inside, according to Mom.

He had problems. At least that's what I'd always been told. So I'd assigned myself early on as his guardian, and had ridden herd on him every summer since I was eight years old. Uncle Roz needed my help simply to survive, I reckoned.

He'd taken it in his head to teach me to play the fiddle as we sat around the campfire of an evening. I'd already mastered "Sally Goodin," "Soldiers Joy" and "Leather Britches." I could even play a few of the variations of "The Devil's Dream" so that you could pretty well tell what it was.

But the tune I wanted to learn more than any other was "Billy in the Lowground." For some reason, though, I couldn't peg it down quite right. It was like trying to keep up with a runaway team on a steep downgrade. My poor attempts at the entire sorry affair gave me nightmares at times.

Uncle Roz scolded me all the time about my failure. I saw puzzlement written on his lined old face, and him asking just how I'd mastered "Devil's Dream" so easily, but was a total flop when it came to "Billy in the Lowground." I had all the notes memorized, but just couldn't make them come together as a complete song. As a result, it was like playing a whole different

tune, part "Billy," part something else. Shoot, I practiced "Billy" most every evening.

Outside of that failure, I really loved my time on the river with my uncle, and hadn't yet gotten tired of the experience. Earlier this spring, Dad dropped a few hints that he'd appreciate my help around the place. There was work for me in the fields and around the barn. I didn't want to hear it though because I was having too much fun. My older brothers, Leon and Denton had spoiled me rotten right from birth. They did my work and carried my load. As their little brother, I was sort of like their pet.

I'd heard rumors my oldest brother Leon was fixing to get married soon. I knew Dad would need me for sure then. But I didn't want to leave Uncle Roz and the good life on the river. I wouldn't trade life on the gravel bar for an airplane ride, and did I ever long to ride one of those big high hummers.

I had things more important to do. We still hadn't caught that big old blue cat—the one Uncle Roz had hooked twice before but lost. He'd been alone and had nobody to steady the boat for him while he tried to manhandle that monster fish.

Nope, I wasn't ready yet to give up my life on the river.

Uncle coughed loudly there at the edge of the water. His ragged cough jarred me out of the wild tangled forest of my thoughts.

"Well, Uncle, we still got a few left," I said. I always try to show him the good side of every situation as encouragement, and besides, I always like to be what they call an optimist.

He dried his hands on the bib of his overalls, and drew forth his tobacco can to roll up a smoke, all the while muttering something in a steady stream under his breath. I couldn't quite

decipher his words and just gave it up, which was wise on my part. Shoot, he sometimes used sticky words in my presence, when he was in a *mood*.

The owl across the river struck up again, and then broke off into demented laughter, which sounded like a howler monkey—or the way I felt one should sound. Of course, there weren't any howler monkeys in Ozora County, and I'd never even been out of the county, much less to wherever those howlers lived.

He finished rolling his smoke, stood up, and rummaged through the pockets of his faded blue work shirt and overalls for a match. He shuffled about and twisted himself into a knot, finally found a match, then straightaway popped off the head with his thumbnail.

"Be a good feller, Scotlin," he said. "Go fetch me a handful of matches."

He wobbled off to his chair in front of the tent, and fell onto it tiredly, removed his slouchy old hat, and combed his long thick fingers through his hair, cigarette dangling freely from his lips.

I ducked inside the tent. What a tent. Made of heavy tarpaulin, it was as dark inside as the innards of a cow—as folks like to say. The accumulated heat of the day popped sweat forth on my forehead before I felt my way over to the field table Uncle had built from heavy oak. I found the matchbox and dug out a handful.

The interior of the tent smelled like molded hay soaked for a long time in kerosene. We seldom spent much time inside. In fact, the only time we entered it was when it rained, or at bedtime, or like now, when Uncle sent me on an errand. It

did keep the dew off a body while sleeping. So it had its good points. For the most part, however, it was a swell place to avoid.

I ducked in a snap back outside.

"Thanks much," said Uncle, as he took the matches from my hand.

The owl across the river carried on with its laughter. Suddenly it broke off in the middle of a laugh, barked loud, and coughed like a hound in a desperate attempt to dislodge a chicken bone stuck deep in its throat. By and by, it finished this old business, and called out in full voice, as if in invitation. Occasionally, it would stop and listen for an answer from upriver or down.

Uncle lit the camp lantern hanging from a low branch of a willow tree. He adjusted the flame, and the immediate area glowed in yellow light, even though there was still fair daylight left. His unlit cigarette dangled now from his fingers while he struggled to subdue another coughing spell.

He suddenly threw his head back, yelled loudly in the direction of the bluff on the far bank. I reckoned he was letting off some of his frustration. His voice boomed off its ancient, craggy face.

"Whoo. Whoo, yourself!" He then laughed loudly in his special laughter. His mood was improving.

The owl likely figured it'd finally found someone to converse with, because it intensified its efforts.

Uncle Roz answered again. He sounded more like an owl this time than did the owl. He could imitate any animal in the woods if he felt like it. This encouraged the predator, and it seemed determined to impress my uncle. It barked and

growled deeper, then hit the highest scale it had. It put on quite an impressive display of skill.

"Now," Uncle said, "I guess that just 'bout beats all you've ever heard."

He laughed again, louder.

I could tell, though, he still hadn't completely gotten over the ruined seine in spite of his bright laughter. He poured cold coffee left over from noon into his tin cup, took a sip, and settled down to relax a bit before he stirred up supper.

From upriver, another owl—another real one—took up the noisy conversation, and Uncle answered in owl-talk, perfect down to and including vernacular. Soon, a couple more upstream owls stirred to life. A smile brightened my uncle's face, and his eyes sparkled with amusement in the glow of the lantern light.

"Watch this, Scotlin."

Again, he mimicked the owls. "Whooo! Whoooo! Whoooooo!"

Before long, dozens of owls took up the call. The racket boomed off Gobblers Roost like thunder, shot straight for the sky, and turned the whole river valley into a regular festival of owl fuss.

"Don't that just beat all?" he marveled again. "Sounds like a convention of preachers."

I had to agree. It did beat all. But I wasn't quite sure about the preacher part. I shuddered from guilt. God just might have an ear to the ground, or so I figured.

The noisy owl meeting broke up as full dark set in. I reckoned they had better things to do now, such as catching field mice. Uncle finished his coffee, got to his feet, stretched,

and started supper. By and by our campsite filled up with the wonderful odor of fish on the fry, and my stomach raised a fuss like a mule trying to kick down the wall of its stall.

"Uncle Roz," I said, "you reckon I'd better take old Brownie and go over to the McKenzie's and fetch back the extra seine?"

It'd been all of three weeks since I'd seen or talked to a living soul besides my uncle, unless you counted old man Floyd. He'd drifted down the river a few days ago guiding a couple of vacationers from the city on a float trip in his twenty-foot johnboat. I felt as if I was about to burst to see my pal, Cal McKenzie, and figured it'd be nice to see his sis, Iona, as well. For some odd reason she'd been on my mind every day all summer long. Just what lay behind that, though, I had no idea.

Uncle Roz hit me with a middling stern stare. "Why, who'd help with the last line run?""I'd be back by then, Uncle."

"You'd miss your fiddle lesson," he said.

"I can practice the fiddle extra tomorrow night," I said.

"You wouldn't stay out late playing Chinese checkers with Calvin, and be 'fraid to come home through them dark woods, would you?"

"Shoot fire no, Uncle." But he always had some mysterious way of knowing when I was trying to run a bluff by him. I was truly leery of the dark woods.

"Well, you know them old woods get mighty dark around the middle of the night." He pointed toward the shadowy woods with the long-handled fork with which he used to spear up the fish fillets. "Especially of a moonless night—and tonight'll be a dark moon, you know."

I was fully aware of the truth in those words, and well acquainted with the phases of the moon. Just the mere thought

of Uncle Roz's ancient mule, Brownie and me, all alone in the pitch dark of night, bent my toes upward in a defensive posture. I felt them lock up in that position for a brief time. But the need to visit my friends was even stronger than my fear of the nighttime woods, and by and by, my toes fell back into their normal position.

Uncle Roz started trying to frighten me just then. That old man sure loved his devilment. "These woods used to be full of panthers, you know. I've heard my share of brush apes too. Now that's a sound to chill your spine. Turn your blood to jelly."

I'd heard people claim that brush apes were real, that they ventured out at night, were a restless bunch, and didn't stay put in one place for any great length of time. I always figured they were a fiction, until I had to go out after dark, and then even small innocent sounds, as well as every skinny shadow, often turned into whatever colossal monster my poor frightened imagination managed to create of it.

Uncle stacked filets of steaming red-horse suckerfish onto a heavy, crockery platter. By the time he'd finished forking out the fish and removed the cornbread from the field oven, saliva was cascading from my mouth and down my chin like a flood.

He nodded to let me know it was all right to go on and eat. I turned loose and dove into those filets and cornbread so savage a body would've thought Uncle Roz had starved me for a week.

Uncle chuckled. "Feedin' you's like feedin' a coon-hound. How you keep from burnin' your tonsils is a considerable mystery."

The food was hot, all right. There was no mistake there. But it was so delicious, and I was so hungry, I wasn't about to let burnt tonsils stand in my way.

As he watched me gobbling down my food, he continued trying to scare me.

"I remember back when I was a lad there was no end to the hob played around here by panthers."

I concentrated fully now on filling my belly, in order to waylay his scare tactics.

"Seems ever' week somebody lost a cow or calf or both. Panthers, thicker'n possum grapes. You could step out on your porch most any night and hear their fearsome squalls all up and down these river bottoms.

"Their squallin' nearly freezes your brain. But they ain't half as fearsome as that of a full-grown brush ape screamin' at the moon. That, sir, is a sound to wish only on your worst enemy."

"Dad says there ain't no such a thing as a brush ape," I told him between bites. "What's more, he claims there ain't been a panther spotted in Ozora County since he was a young man."

I didn't want him to know his talk had disturbed me. Uncle Roz often knocked me to my knees with his tales.

He exhaled as if he bore the weight of the entire planet on his shoulders.

"Your pap is a mighty fine man. But there are things even he hasn't witnessed firsthand. Brush apes don't exist until you stand face to face with one in the cold dark of night, deep in the hardwood jungle. But if this does happen—well, that's when you have what the learned big bugs call a moment-of-epiphany, and in a brilliant flash you find yourself a true convert."

By the time I finished my fish and cornbread, that old-timer had nearly talked me out of going to the McKenzies. But just then, for some strange reason, Uncle Roz decided it'd be a good idea to have the other seine back, so he wouldn't be in a rush to mend the one we'd just ruined. Another part of his tactic to scare me, I allowed.

"Stu McKenzie's had that seine for 'bout a year. I reckon it's time we got it back. Leave the thing there much longer'n he'll start thinkin' it belongs to him. He don't use it no ways. Never does nothin' but work. I suppose it'd be proper for you to hustle over there and fetch 'er on home."

I said, "Yes sir," got up, took my empty tin plate to the river's edge, scoured it down right good with damp sand, rinsed it off with river water, and put it away on the field table. I got busy then and put on my shirt and brogans. I didn't want Iona thinking I was a shoeless hillbilly with one leg shorter than the other from walking the hillsides, even though it was the full-blown, honest truth.

I stepped behind the tent, caught up Brownie, slipped a rope bridle on his nose and over his head, led him into a little ditch the river carved out in the high water of early spring, and from the bank launched myself astride his bony, razor-sharp old back. I'd seen saddles in magazines, of course, but had never seen one in person. Nor had Brownie.

Man, oh man, did that living bag of bones ever have a rough spine. The only thing rougher than sitting on Brownie's back standing still was while he was on the move. But by now, I'd grown callused back there and was to some extent used to it. Brownie didn't move much faster than a sickly box turtle, anyway.

I'd worried all summer long about how much my folks wanted me to go to high school in the fall to further my education. Although, I wasn't much on the books and didn't want to go to school, especially since it looked as if Cal McKenzie wouldn't be able to go with me. It was sure enough odd. Cal loved school, and was as cunning as could be. His father had already set his head against it, though. I thought it weird the way the world worked—what with Cal wanting to go further in school, but not being allowed to, while I was being made to go whether I wanted to or not.

"Uncle Roz." He was right there alongside me, stroking Brownie's neck, "You think maybe Cal'll get to go to high school this fall? He wants to, but Mr. McKenzie is against it. Says he needs him on the farm."

Uncle Roz snorted through his nose.

"Stu McKenzie ain't only the richest farmer in Ozora County. He's also the tightest, which is how he acquired and kept all his dough. If he had good sense, he'd hire on a hand or two and let that lad go off to school."

"Cal's mom is working on him. You think she's got any kind of chance?"

"That good gal holds a lot of sway with that hardheaded old goat," Uncle said. "But if Stu's got his mind set, well, she'll not talk him out of it. Cal ain't goin' to high school, Scotlin. Might as well forget that."

I sort of lost hope then, because his words sounded so final.

"Now you take heed and don't wreck this good animal's health," he said. He chuckled deeply, and stepped back a pace or two. "Wouldn't do to put too much pressure on him. Don't you crowd him none, Scotlin Bright."

What a laugh. Brownie pretty well set his own pace, and I'd never found anything to make him speed up or slow down. He knew his limitations.

"No danger of that, Uncle."

I clucked the old creature into motion while my mom's brother stood there with a sly smile on his face.

"Go cautious please, sir," he said to my back. "Make sure you don't cross paths with one of them old black panthers."

Hearing him say that caused cold goose bumps to break out on me like I had the measles. I felt just about certain there were no such animals in this part of the world. Folks around here were forever seeing strange creatures, and their particular brand of *panther* wasn't your common dun-colored mountain lion, either. Nothing satisfied them like a genuine shiny black panther.

But me, I was a lad who'd been to school—eight years of it, so far. Likely, I had four more to go. A grade school graduate, I was. I knew a thing or two. Big black cats, like the ones folks in these woods always speak of, belong in Africa or someplace like that. So I grew a determined mind not to allow my uncle to throw a scare into me he could make merry with for the rest of the summer. But it was coming. I was sure of that. For, he had that wonderful talent of mimicking wild creatures. I braced myself for some fearsome screeching and caterwauling on the return trip.

I'd traveled perhaps fifty yards when he called after me. "Whatever you do, keep your good eye out for a brush ape. Thought sure I heard one last night, you a-sleep."

This chased goose bumps up and down my spine in a mad race.

Chapter Two

Stu McKenzie's farm lay three miles from our camp, two of which passed over a tiny wagon track cut through a tangled jungle of hardwood. Trees and twisted vines of various types, such as possum grape and wild passionflower, grew up on each side of the rut. Limbs and branches hovered in a low overhead arch. To venture through these dark woods at night was much like groping down a long, black tunnel.

I heard mysterious and frightening noises reverberating farther off in the brush, and whippoorwills, jar flies and other common bugs were attempting to shake the earth with their racket. My head soon got stuffed full with their commotion, and if they'd all ceased at the same time, I reckon I would've lost my balance and fallen off old Brownie.

"Sweet Lord," I whispered, "please give me safe passage." As an afterthought, I tossed in a stipulation. "But if I have to go, please make it a painless departure."

Brownie kept lifting and dropping his feet in steady, slow plops, undisturbed by the racket. If he wasn't scared, I shouldn't be either, I finally decided.

At length we left the tunnel and emerged onto cleared farmland, and I was a right happy boy. The air now flowed easily into my lungs. A cool gust of air lifted my hair. The sweet breezes caressed my entire body, and felt good. I squinted hard, lifted my hands right close to my face, and fancied I saw my fingers. But I figured this might just be wishful thinking.

I'd just passed a crucial test by conquering my fear of the dark woods. But another test loomed just ahead. This one was even more formidable, although less frightening.

Stu McKenzie's stout-built gate was one of the many difficult barriers I needed to conquer before becoming a man, for I had to drop the thing in order to ride Brownie up to the house.

Never had I crossed paths with a stouter-built gate, one so hard to drop, as this one. I'd tackled it many times, but always came out second best.

Now, at thirteen, the embarrassment I'd feel if I left Brownie on the wrong side of that infernal gate and walked the rest of the way to the house would be the worst possible humiliation I could imagine. The sound of Mr. McKenzie's cruel, scornful laughter would be a cross too great to bear, especially if Iona was standing there when I walked up defeated. Besides that, Old Brownie would likely grow so tired of waiting on me he'd light out for home, and doom me to ride shank's mare home.

I grew confident though. Tonight I'd finally win that long, hard-fought war, which is the proper way for an optimist to think.

We reached the gate, and I slid down from Brownie's sweaty, bony back. Then, just as my feet touched the ground, the long,

low whistle of a freight train struck up. I listened to it tooting the crossing over at Miller's Switch, half a mile away.

"TOOOOOoooooot! TOOOOOoooooot! TOOT! TOOT! Tooootetttty Toot! Toot! Toot!"

The whistle wailed ghost-like across the pasture, and sounded lonesome in the night. A short time later, I heard a loud racket from over in the same direction. I figured the noise was merely an ordinary sound trains make when the hind end catches up to the front end in a "run-in" as Uncle Roz once explained. Uncle had been over a large portion of the world. If he didn't know, lord help the rest of us.

But I had better things to do than dwell on the sounds a train makes. I grabbed hold of the trigger of that awful fiendish barrier to my full freedom with both hands.

The gate was strung with four strands of barbed wire, one end of which was firmly attached to a thick railroad tie, with a great deal of dense wood still left in it. It stood there proud and fully erect. The tie was a monolith of strength to compete fairly with the Rock of Gibraltar as a symbol of stability. At the other end, which happened to be the trigger end, the barbed wire was secured to an age-toughened hickory pole with brand-new staples. The peeled wood felt as slick as an icicle to my fingers. The bark of the pole was worn smooth, and it was tough as iron. The pole itself stood five feet high, and was as round as a large man's wrist. Two loops of thick wire were affixed top and bottom to a fence post of Osage orange, into which the hickory pole stood. This then, was the gate. That devilish old pole stood before me now, rigid, straight and unyielding as the barrel of Grandpa Tull's old Hawken rifle.

I caught hold of the pole hoping to create enough pressure to create some slack in the wire loop so I could jimmy the loop just those few inches over top of the pole. The other arm I placed behind the pole itself in a bicep clutch, and with good strength.

"Dropping this old gate don't amount to much," I told myself as encouragement.

But shoot, I could vault over a barn easier. It took a world of muscle to bend that pole.

The best way to describe the entire operation might be to compare it to a giant rattrap. In this case—boy trap. And setting the thing back up was certainly no day-off.

I positioned both arms just right, drew in a deep breath of sweet nighttime Ozora County air, and cast aside all doubts and negative thoughts. I squeezed, squeezed, and squeezed even more. Then, using both arms in a mighty strain, I cheated. With both hands pulling back hard, and with my chest against the thing as well, I hauled back all at the same time.

After several seconds of intense straining, battling fiercely with the gate, and suffering blood-sweats, a bare iota of slack appeared between the wire loop and the pole—none too soon. I stretched that four-strand gate out as tight as a tick's belly on its first springtime feeding frenzy. The breeze caressed the wires. It played a weird tune there in the night. Just then, I did a trick with my wrists and thumbs—sort of twisted and turned, but in opposite directions at the same time.

"Lord," I muttered, "please give me strength."

I let go then, fell backward as if Brownie had just kicked me, and finally landed with a stout jolt. An epic flashing star

field exploded to dust in my mind, and swept far off into deep, lonesome space.

I just sat there in the thick dust and watched in triumph as that devilish contrivance of pain and humiliation sprang open in as fine a backlash as I ever witnessed.

Brownie shuffled through, muzzle close to the ground. He stopped and snorted loudly and blew a dust cloud all over me. He was none too impressed, and wanted me to know that to him, I was still a bratty kid. Old Brownie wasn't mule enough to dampen my good feelings and pride though, for I felt as proud as I'd ever been of anything I'd ever done. This for me was the equivalent of that noble run that old-timer who ran from Marathon to Athens made, far back in the dimmest history of Mankind.

I leapt to my feet, thumped my chest, and howled in conquest to the dark sky. I stopped that old business though, right away. Brownie didn't much take to a rank braggart, and well I knew it.

I tackled the gate again, and battled it for what seemed forever, but eventually, I won out. It wouldn't do for me to leave it down until I returned. The last thing I needed was to let out old man McKenzie's stock.

Chapter Three

I found the entire McKenzie family on their front porch, in the dark.

"Who comes in the night riding a mule?"

The voice belonged to Mr. McKenzie. He always sounded like a gravel plant in full rip, and I'd recognize it anywhere.

"Scotlin Bright, sir."

"Well, blame it all, bub," he said. "I didn't know you was man enough to trip my gate all by yourself."

Goose bumps of pride popped out on my skin like the hives.

"Yes sir. I sure am."

"Fall off that mule then," he commanded. "Come on up here on the porch. Help us enjoy the bug song. It ain't nothin' better to the ear than a night full of bug music.

"You did shut the gate behind you didn't you, bub?"

I slid off Brownie. "Yes sir."

Cal popped up like a mushroom beside me, followed by Iona. She lit up that yard like the bright glow of a quart jar filled with lightning bugs. That girl could really shine!

"What are you up to, Scotlin?" said Cal.

"Uncle Roz sent me for his extra seine," I reported.

I was bursting to learn what Cal had been doing since school let out. But Iona was standing there with her heavenly halo looming above her head out-shining a searchlight, so, I nearly forgot all about Cal.

"Didn't know we even had his seine, Scotlin," Cal said.

"Yep. Mr. McKenzie borrowed it a year ago."

"A year!"Cal said. His voice leapt with surprise. "I guess it's been that long since we've been fishing. I sure envy you, Scotlin, living on the river all summer with your uncle, fishing whenever you feel like it. All we get to do here is work."

"You going to high school with me this fall?" I said.

Cal hung his head at my question. "Mom's trying to persuade Dad to let me go," he told me, but he sounded sort of down and out.

Cal McKenzie was a great reader. I don't mean the Robert Louis Stevenson, Howard Pyle stories I sometimes read. He was more interested in history, math and science. Stuff that bored me stiff. Cal wasn't a bookish sissy, though. He was the swiftest runner in our entire school, including Mr. Rice, our teacher, a fine runner himself. He'd made the cross-country team in high school, or so he claimed.

Cal could knock the cover off a softball, even early in the school term when the ball was fresh out of the box and the stitching at its tightest. He was always the last man on his feet in the knock-em-down games we invented on the playground. It didn't even bother him to get the wind knocked out of him falling from a tree limb. If ever a boy deserved to go to high school, it was Calvin McKenzie.

"You lucky dog," I said. I wasn't much of a scholar, and wasn't looking forward to it, especially if Cal wasn't going to be there.

"High school will be swell, Scotlin," he said. He then changed the subject. "The circus is coming to town. Have you heard?"

The town he spoke of was Lyons Beach, ten miles away.

"The devil you say," I said.

Cal hit a brighter tone then. "Dad says if we get our hay in the barn by Friday evening he'll take us into Lyons Beach Saturday to see the elephants. We'll get to watch them feed all the animals while he and Mom are doing their trading."

I stood and thought of the circus animals, the gay colors, the noise and all the fun connected with a circus. My stomach stirred with excitement.

"Maybe I could help out with the haying," I said. I figured I could go with them to see the circus creatures.

Cal said, "Really? With your help, I'm sure we'll get the hay in the barn on time."

"What's today?" I was figuring the days until Friday.

"What's today?" Cal laughed. He wasn't aware of how time gets away from a body on the river, the way it sounded.

"Why it's Wednesday," he said. "Didn't you know that?"

I was plenty glad it was dark. My face was hot as fire. It was a relief Iona couldn't see how red it really was.

"Thought I could help out Thursday and Friday," I said. "Then maybe go along to town with you on Saturday. Is the hay down already and drying?"

"Yep. We worked late today to finish. I'm sure with your help we'll get it all in the barn on time," Cal said.

We stepped up onto the porch, and Mrs. McKenzie said, "Looking forward to high school, Scotlin?" Her voice was as soft as an angel's in comparison to Mr. McKenzie's.

"Mom say's I'd better be, ma'am," I told her.

Mr. McKenzie burst forth in a sudden volley of laughter.

"Surely Arthur Bight ain't going to put you through school, bad as he needs help on his place."

That said, that hard old man leaned forward and slapped his fly swatter against the floor.

"Missed," he grumbled. "Blamed horseflies are thicker'n fleas this time of year, and bite like copperheads."

Just how he expected to hit anything in the dark was beyond me. Directly, I heard the fly swatter slap the floor another good loud lick.

"Got you," Mr. McKenzie cried in triumph.

He must've swatted that unfortunate horsefly by sound.

"Know you come for somethin', bub," he said. "What is it?" He flipped the dead horsefly into the yard. "Roz must need somethin' really bad to send you off through them panther woods in the dark of the moon."

"Stu McKenzie!" Mrs. McKenzie scolded. "Don't you dare frighten this child with such talk. Pay him no mind, Scotlin."

Mr. McKenzie's laughter sounded like an avalanche this time.

"His seine, sir."

"His seine?" he said. "Roz wants it back already?"

"But, it's been a year, sir," I said.

"Time sure knows how to slip past a man," he said. "But Roz told me he had two seines, and wouldn't need this'n for a while. What's happened to the other'n?"

I said, "Snagged a large stone and it fell right on through. The minnows escaped as well."

"Ah-hah!" cried Mr. McKenzie. "Just as I figured. Roz let 'er rot on him. Man his age ought to know you got to stretch a seine out in the sun to let it dry good after each use. Sounds like a case of pure laziness on his part. If he'd took care of it proper, they wouldn't be no need to come so soon for this'n."

I wanted to tell him my uncle and I used a seine, instead of letting it idle about in the dry, the way he likely did. But Mom would've pulled my ear if I spoke disrespectfully. So, I didn't.

"Iona, girl," shouted the old man. He pronounced her name, Ionee. "Quick. Run fetch my lantern."

Iona stepped inside the house and returned moments later with a lit lantern held at arm's length. Her fine, sun-darkened face and rosewood-colored hair showed up right smartly in the lamplight. I felt pure joy stir my heart.

Mr. McKenzie boomed again, "Think you can find Mr. Tull's seine, Calvin? It's tied up neat just below the roofin' tin in the barn loft."

"Why yes sir," Call told his father. "I can do that."

"Well get along then, and make sure you don't disturb Mr. Leo."

Cal jerked his head toward me, and flagged me to follow.

I didn't mind that a bit, especially since Iona was holding the lantern. I went eagerly down the steps, and followed brother and sister toward the yard gate.

We pushed on through the gate, and just as we cleared it, Mr. McKenzie freed another enormous load of rock from the catch-hold of his chest. "Mr. Leo's worth his weight in gold 'round this place. Don't you dare disturb him none."

I figured Mr. Leo must be a fighting rooster. But it didn't matter, Cal and Iona knew. So I just let it all fall from my mind, and found better thoughts—Iona, to be exact, who continued to lead the way.

The barn loomed dark and huge against the sky, and grew larger as we neared it. Iona looked busy as an old mother hen with half a dozen baby chicks scatting about her feet as she shooed bugs out of her face with one hand. The bugs swarmed about her in a heavy cloud, which drifted along with the light of the lantern.

I stepped quickly to her side. "I'll carry the lantern for you, if you like. Those bugs must be pretty bad."

"No thank you," she replied. "They're really not so bad."

She was watching her manners, I figured. For, it looked as if the insects were fixing to carry her off into the sky. I could just barely make out her lovely face for their buzz and boil.

"You right sure?" I said. "They look pretty fierce to me, Iona."

This time she said, "Well, I suppose it'd be nice to draw a good breath without inhaling so many pests."

She shoved the lantern toward me, and the skin crawled all over my skeleton. It grew obvious our hands would soon touch in the transfer. Although I looked forward to it, I dreaded it as well—if such a thing were possible.

My heart pounded so loud I could hear it rush along like a creek in a spring torrent. Slowly I reached for the lantern. Time, for me, slowed down close to the speed of a hibernating bear's lethargic movements.

From someone else's body, I watched my hand. It moved of its own free will, reaching for the bail of the lantern. Her

sweet face eclipsed the light between partings and closings of the bug curtain.

I stepped even closer. Her face grew clearer and much sharper than it should've been. I figured my eyes were bugged out on stems at least an inch. Objects grew so bright I feared the brilliance might just strike me blind. My legs wobbled as if they were boneless and were weak as kittens.

I fell inside the bug cloud with her, breathing so hard—it was as if I'd just run up and down Ordnance Knob two or three times as fast as my legs would turn.

For a second or so, I thought maybe I was back on the river, on my cot, asleep and dreaming. It honestly felt like a dream. But likely, it was just the waver, and flutter of the bugs in the lantern light that was turning my true senses against me.

She smiled and revealed her teeth. The two on each side of the great upper ones were inclined slightly, and I saw she wasn't exactly perfect, but this didn't matter. Her face appeared angelic, straight off a painting hung on the wall of some great stone cathedral. Her eyes were wide and revealed glimpses of her inner beauty.

Just as our hands were fixing to touch, Cal's raw, knobby hand suddenly entered the picture. I'd forgotten there was anyone on the planet by the name of Calvin McKenzie. He snatched the lantern out of her hands, and swung out in the lead.

"I'll carry it," he said. "If something happened and the barn burned down, it wouldn't do for anyone but a McKenzie to be handling the lantern. Iona and I would never hear the end of it."

The abrupt change of events left me reeling. I recovered and walked alongside Iona. We followed Calvin, as the insect cloud surrounding the lantern grew denser with each step taken.

We passed right on up to the barn, on inside, and stopped in a long, wide breezeway with stalls running along each side. A granary stood on the south side of the breezeway. This was pretty much the standard in barns, but much larger than any I'd seen before.

Cal pointed to a ladder built into the outer wall of the granary. It passed up and through a square opening cut in the floor of the hayloft.

"Up there," Cal said.

He tackled the ladder first. I watched him scurry upward like a squirrel, lantern clutched in one hand, grabbing the rungs with the other.

"You next," I said to Iona, and spread my hands to her in invitation in a way I figured was proper.

To my surprise, she stood there and shook her head.

"Huh-uh, Scotlin," she said. "You first."

Well, I felt put out she'd refused my offered chivalry, but then the thick scales fell from my eyes in a crash, and I realized with her wearing a dress she'd have to be last up, first down, even though the barn was dark as the inside of Uncle Roz's camp tent.

My face grew so hot I could nearly smell my ears burning like bacon on the fry. I shinnied on up the ladder faster and slicker than worn sole leather atop thick pond ice. Soon I was standing alongside Cal.

"Iona always finds a way to slow things down," he said with gruff impatience.

But I thought she was conquering the ladder right quickly.

"She looks like she's doing okay," I said, unwilling to dare think she was capable of doing anything wrong.

"Hurry on, Iona," Cal said. "I want to play Scotlin a few games of Chinese checkers before he leaves for home."

In a snappy voice she replied, "Just you hold on."

I could see these two spent a good deal of time fussing.

"You're always in a great rush and whirl," she added.

"Yes," said Cal. "Well if you were a boy and had no one but a girl to talk to for days and days, you'd know what I'm talking about."

She reached the landing, stood up straight as a yardstick, blew stray hair out of her face, tossed her head spiritedly and leveled Cal with a savage stare, cold as a tombstone. She must've felt since she was older than Cal he had no right to be so bossy. I sort of felt the same way.

"Just you looky here, Calvin McKenzie," she charged. "If you were a girl and had no one to talk to except to you, you'd understand what I'm talking about too. Now you just back off a bit. Or would you rather I told Mom?"

Cal spun, and without further nastiness of word, hoisted the lantern higher, better to reveal our way of foot, then headed toward the rear of the barn loft.

Was this ever a huge barn! It looked twice the size of ours at home. So big, in fact, our entire barn would likely fit inside with ease.

"Let's get your seine," Cal said, over a shoulder.

He bobbed along up ahead, wrapped snugly inside the bugs and the light like some creature sleeping in a snug cocoon.

"Afterward, I want to check on that tiny black hen's hideout nest to see if she's hatched her chicks yet," he said.

"Yes," Iona said. "Then maybe stop by the granary too, to check on Tricksey's new kittens."

My mind crafted images of soft, tiny fuzz balls. "You have new kittens?"

"Yes," Iona said. "Seven of them. Four are solid yellow like Tricksey, and three have black splotches. I think Solomon our old gray tom with the black spots on his chest is the father."

The thin cover of loose hay strewn about on the floor was soft and slippery underfoot. Way off, at the far end of the loft, stood a medium-size pile of hay. I allowed it was leftover from last year. Pitchforks had gnawed at it until it looked humpbacked. I figured that stack alone would be enough to winter our entire herd at home, but then we didn't have half the stock as did the McKenzie's.

A sudden, dark and terrible thought blazed through my mind, blowing forth tendrils of vile smoke, and spewing out tiny bits of smoking debris.

"Do we have to fill this whole, huge loft before we get to go to town to see the elephants?"

Cal and Iona broke into peals of laughter at the same instant.

Cal tamed his laughter at length and said, "No, Scotlin. I doubt there's that much hay in Ozora County." He'd exaggerated, of course, but not by much.

"Good. Because if we did," I said, "I'm afraid the circus would come and go, Christmas would be on us and gone, and this loft still wouldn't be full."

"It's never been completely full," said Iona. "It takes a little more than twice what's in here now to winter us over."

I sighed in relief. "You going to help, Iona?"

She laughed again, a merry tune. "Most certainly. I handle the team on the hillsides, but on the flats, I jump down, and grab up a pitchfork too. Until two years ago, I was a better hand than Cal. But he won't admit it."

My stomach rolled and pitched with excitement at the thought of being close to her for two whole days, even if all we did was work. I knew there'd be times when we wouldn't be working—mealtimes and the like, evenings on the porch, enjoying the breeze and bug music. There'd be lots of time then for me to inhale as much of her as I figured I could handle.

She was a year older than I was and had already put in a full year of high school. Her help wasn't needed as much as was Cal's, so Mr. McKenzie had let her go to school. Up until last year, I'd never paid much attention to her. I thought then she was an old lady. But one day—and without warning—I caught myself thinking of her for absolutely no reason. At first, I tried to shake her out of my mind, but finally I saw there was just no use even to try. I probably should've tried to avoid her, but I'd already done that without any kind of success. Now I was sort of glad for my failure.

We reached the south side of the barn loft, where the rafters and the tin of the roof slanted down to within five feet of the floor, and there I saw Uncle Roz's seine rolled up and tied with twine beneath a rafter.

"Watch out," Iona cautioned her brother. "See you don't stir up the wasps."

"I got eyes, Iona," he said.

Then, I saw the nests. Two monstrous nests. One on each side of the seine. It looked as if they'd settled on those two spots chiefly to guard the seine. But this wasn't the case. It was only that they knew by instinct where it's safest and driest to build. Humans, too, have the same inclination. As a result, we blunder into one confrontation or another with them much too often.

I stared at those two nests, and as I stared, I wondered just how in the world Cal ever expected to remove the seine from the rafters and not disturb them. Those red, fiercely stinging creatures covered every inch of those huge, fortress-like nests.

I'd once been stung by a red wasp. It raised a knot on my arm bigger than a hen's egg. Here they were now—red wasps, the worst of the breed—in a steady stir, flicking back and forth on skinny stick legs, ready at any second—or any reason—to burst off their nests in a vicious all-out attack.

"Hold this," said Cal.

He handed Iona the lantern then stepped closer to the seine. She followed, holding the lantern as high as possible without actually touching the sloping roof. Cal moved his hand hesitantly, and this created a large shadow, bent and outsized, against the underside of the tin roof. Then with great caution, he reached for the seine. The wasps shifted about even more nervously. I expected them to swarm all over us at any second. I glanced behind me for a route of escape in case it came to that. I was going to run and dive beneath the haystack at the far end of the loft. If I could make it that far.

My eyes ached from staring so hard. I grew tense. It was an honest marvel I was still capable of breathing. But Cal's hand

grew steady, calm and self-assured as it inched relentlessly toward the seine, closer and closer.

Sweat broke out on my forehead, fixing to pour down into my eyes. I made ready to turn, run and dive.

"Hold your breath," Iona cautioned her brother in a whisper.

Cal didn't answer. I figured he was already doing so.

There's this old saying which maintains wasps can't sting you if you hold your breath. Dad, though, told me there was nothing to the old story. I hadn't tested the theory and didn't plan to any time soon, if I could help it. What Dad told me took the magic out of the act, and events of this sort always hinged on the art of magic. But that's okay. I knew the truth could never hurt me any more than I could stand.

By and by, Cal's hand brushed the seine, and using caution, he untied it. Then, an inch at a time, he lifted it from its place. At last, he held it in his hands, brought it to his chest, and backed out of there toward safety.

We backed carefully all the way out to the center of the loft. Cal let out a long sigh. Iona soon duplicated it, and then I did the same. We laughed our relief together, and just that fast, that tense spell flushed up and scattered like a covey of spooked quail.

Cal handed me the seine, and said, "Now, let's go check on that little black hen."

I set the seine on a shoulder, and followed.

The little black hen had built her nest in the hay at the far end of the loft. I saw her eyes shining bright orange in the lantern light, and if it hadn't been for the shine of those eyes, I would've missed her. She was blacker than many a dark midnight.

Iona fell to her knees like a saint at prayer. Before I knew it, she took up the hen just as easy as she pleased. She stroked its red comb, spoke to it in a velvety voice, and this charm pacified the little creature.

There on the nest, the darnedest sight met my eyes. A cozy cluster of baby chicks set there, snuggled together—each the size of a quarter. They were the most precious little animals I'd ever seen. We didn't speak for a good long time, awed by the chicks as they held perfectly still in the light.

"We'll have to move them tomorrow," Cal said after a bit. "We don't want Mr. Leo to find them."

"We'll get one of those empty five-gallon buckets from the granary, and put some hay in the bottom of it," Iona said. "That'll make a fine nest."

"I've never seen Mr. Leo up at the woodshed," Cal said. "That will be the perfect spot to hide them."

"You're right. He never goes up there," she agreed.

They'd roused my curiosity. Just who was this Mr. Leo?

"Let's not wait till tomorrow," Iona added. "Let's do it now."

She set the tiny hen back on the nest with care, rose up, and followed Cal back across the floor of the loft to the square exit hole cut in the floor.

"And we'll check on Tricksey's kittens too while we're in the granary for the empty bucket," Iona said, as I stepped onto the ground in the breezeway beside her.

Chapter Four

Granaries and tack rooms are, of course, dusty, dry and dark, but Mr. McKenzie's granary was dustier, drier and darker than any I'd ever seen. We entered the room and Cal hung the lantern on a nail that protruded from one of the big ceiling beams, right next to two sets of harness. Dust motes danced by the millions like fantasy darters, enchanted by the sudden light.

All of a sudden, I heard a harsh hissing sound behind me. I turned and spied a small yellow cat. The cat arched its back high like a Halloween cutout. It looked plenty frightened, and was spitting as if it had rabies. A sudden chill skittered madly up my spine.

"Tricksey," Iona said, and spread her hands in invitation.

Tricksey sprang gracefully out of Iona's reach atop a bundle of empty burlap sacks, and hissed and spat at every movement like a storybook dragon.

"Just what in the world's wrong with you, girl?" Iona said.

"Mr. Leo," Cal said. His muffled voice sounded wrenched all out of socket.

Iona caught her mouth with both hands, cried loudly, changed directions, and rushed to her brother.

"No. It can't be," she said.

"Yes, but it is," said Calvin. "And there he is now. Right there."

There he lay in all his smooth darkness—Mr. Leo. A sudden shock hit me. It tingled all the way to the bottoms of my feet and on through to the bones.

Mr. Leo shook his tail. It vibrated like the leaf of a willow tree in a strong wind. He raised his evil-looking head higher. Mr. Leo was a blacksnake, about eight feet long, and nearly as round as a canning jar. I saw a big lump in the middle of his body that looked like a deformity. No one had to tell me the cause of the lump, namely, Tricksey's kittens.

The bright yellow light of the lantern disturbed the old fiend. So did the frightened antics of the mother cat. Tricksey was springing about from the pile of burlap sacks to the floor and back again to the top of the sacks in an endless repetition. The poor old thing wailed away in a wild squall all the while. Likely, Cal, Iona and I, had disturbed the snake. I reckon Mr. Leo felt we'd invaded his domain. He raised his ugly, snaky old head even higher, to determine the danger that faced him. I saw absolutely no kindness in those steady evil eyes, and they drilled holes clear into the inner part of my brain where nightmares spring to life.

Cal spun, visibly shaken, took a couple of swift strides, grabbed up a grub hoe leaning against a wall. He advanced on the snake, and lifted the hoe higher with each determined step he made.

"No, Cal," Iona blurted. "You can't. You know how Dad loves Mr. Leo."

Cal said, "Mr. Leo has ruled this barn, grown fat not only off the rats and mice but on baby chicks and kittens by the dozens, for much too long. He is now going to pay up."

Iona lunged forward and grabbed him around the waist to block him.

"I won't let you," she said. Tears bloomed like pale flowers in her eyes. "Dad will beat you to pieces. You mustn't, Cal. No!"

After some time of crying and pleading, her fervent voice and strong will cooled most of his fire. Cal then beat a sluggish retreat.

He dropped the hoe, and this filled me with a sudden revulsion. I was shocked that this rank monster would get away with murder. The injustice of it almost made me ill. I had to do something about it, and do it quick.

"That old blacksnake represents the major cause of pain and misery in the whole world," I said, "all the hatred, all the evil ever devised by mankind—all the cruelty, the wars, sickness, disease, all the unemployment, and every foul thing in creation. You have to kill Mr. Leo, Cal. The sooner, the better." I paused then for air before continuing, for that had been quite some speech to make all in one breath.

"Go ahead, Cal," I said. "Kill that ugly old son-of-a-gun. Hack him into a thousand pieces."

"Just stay out of this, Scotlin Bright," Iona said.

"Go on and do it," I continued. "Kill him right now."

"It's no use, Scotlin," Cal said. He exhaled, and a sharp whistle burst past his lips. "Dad would learn of it and wear out the razor strop on me."

I locked eyes on Mr. Leo. His tail vibrated frantically like a rattlesnake's, and his fearsome head reminded me of a picture of a cobra I'd once seen in a magazine. His tongue flicked in and out in time with the beat of his tail. His eyes were blank and emotionless. Mr. Leo must've felt nothing, and had spent his life following his instincts, the base need to fill his stomach. Nothing he did was likely ever calculated or done for spite, but that didn't mean a whit to me. I hated that scaly creature as I'd never hated anything before. I just couldn't help myself. The skin crawled all over my body.

"If you won't do it," I shouted, "then I will."

"You can't Scotlin. Mr. Leo isn't yours. He belongs to Dad," Cal told me.

I dropped the seine, and scooped up the grub hoe in a blink.

Cal continued, "Dad owns everything on this farm, including Mr. Leo. He'd find out. Much as I'd like to, I can't harm him."

"Then I reckon it's up to me. I'll kill him, drag him off into the pasture, and bury him. Shoot, nobody'd ever know."

"I'd know, Scotlin," Cal said.

"Me too," Iona said. "We won't lie to Dad. We never have, and never will."

"Dad thinks Mr. Leo does a world of good in this barn," Cal explained. "He keeps down the rodent population. I was wrong even to think I should kill him."

"Don't you see," I blurted. "Someone has to kill Mr. Leo. To make the barn safe for the likes of the little black hen and her chicks. To make sure Tricksey never loses another litter of kittens to this evildoer."

Mr. Leo stood before us, reared high on his tail. It was up to me. I had to kill him, to rid the world of evil, hatred, and above all, injustice.

"Now, get out of my way, Cal," I said.

"No, I won't do it."

"I aim to take this serpent's life, or I ain't the son of a Scotsman," I told him, borrowing one of my uncle's tired old phrases.

"I won't let you. I'll knock you down, Scotlin Bright—even if you are my best friend. Now please put down that hoe."

I flashed toward the snake undaunted, lifting the hoe high overhead. Then just before I started it on its downward flight, Calvin McKenzie punched me square in the face.

Tears exploded from my eyes. I staggered backward, dropped the hoe, tripped over Uncle Roz's seine, and fell to the floor. Still undismayed, I sprang to my feet and snatched for the hoe again. Cal was much faster. He struck me again. This time I landed clear outside the granary on my rump in the breezeway. It felt as if my head had suddenly filled up with wasps from the nest in the loft. I wanted to sit there until the pain passed, but I remembered my mission, and leapt to my feet.

"There's a thing here I need to do, Cal. Stand aside," I said. Someone had poured a handful of pennies into my mouth while I'd been on the ground, at least that was how it tasted, and my nose was dribbling blood.

"I don't want to hit you again," Cal said. I heard pure sadness in his voice.

I knew very well my only chance to beat him was to catch him off-guard. I took a quick swing and struck him square on

the chin. He wrapped me up in a bear hug, and we tumbled to the ground. A heavy boil of dust lifted upward and engulfed both of us.

Cal McKenzie was stout, no doubt about that, but because of my firm dedication to the project I'd set out to accomplish I held my own with him for a far longer time than I ever had before. We grappled from one end of that breezeway to the other. I had absolutely no idea which end was up, nor who was atop, or who was below. Tremendous dust clouds stood mightily above and around us. I searched for Iona, but couldn't see her for the clouds.

We wrestled for such a long time that after a bit I began to believe we'd both been born, and had grown to our present age in a savage wrestling match all over the McKenzie's barn. By and by, my soul grew weary of the fray, of all the dust I was eating, of all the sweat and blood I'd lost. I gave out in one big rush. My arms turned to mush, and crashed to the ground alongside me.

"Now," said Cal, atop my chest, "are you finished? If not, I'm prepared to sit here all night."

"I'm bushed, Calvin," I said. I wheezed in total defeat.

Cal blew a stream of dust from his mouth. "Good."

Suddenly, I felt completely foolish. After all my earlier noble thoughts about saving the world, banishing all evil, wars, and hatred, I had just fought savagely with my own best friend when all he wanted was to obey his father. A large wave of shame rushed over me. What a hypocrite I was.

"Sorry I sneak-punched you, Calvin," I said.

My apology struck some vital nerve in him. He flung himself off me as if springing from a hot stove. He stalked around in

three or four tight circles raking his hair with nothing better to do with his hands. I watched him struggle for the proper air to fill his lungs, and to find his place.

By and by, he sat down in the doorway of the granary, placed his head in his hands, then cried and cried for the longest time.

Cal McKenzie was no crybaby, so I knew that whatever had struck him down was powerful business.

Iona sat down alongside him. She put her arms around him, and discharged soothing sounds in the same tender voice she'd used earlier holding the little black hen. I sat back on my heels, dried my bloodied nose, and waited patiently for him to stop crying, still befuddled by whatever was tearing him apart. My word, we'd skirmished before, and he'd never reacted in this way. There was more to it than what I knew. I waited to discover just what it was.

At long last, he spoke, "Dad told me yesterday that I definitely won't be going to high school. I guess you'll be going without me, Scotlin."

"Then you were just putting on an act earlier when you said your mother was trying to get him to allow you to go?"

He muttered, "Yes."

"Maybe he'll change his mind," I told him.

Cal put a lot of value on education. He wanted to continue school even more than he'd ever admit. Down deep, I felt certain there'd be no further schooling for Cal McKenzie. I experienced a strong sense of injustice that felt as if I was attempting to lift an anvil over my head. It was too great a burden to bear. I sat there with the wish in my heart that there was some way Mr. McKenzie might see his mistake.

What could I do to change his mind? I truly wanted to shame the *old goat* as Uncle Roz had called him. This too was mere wishful thinking. There was no way I'd do that, even if I saw one, which, of course, I didn't.

Iona crooned to her brother. She ran her fingers through his hair, smoothed it then mussed it again.

"I'm going to run away from home," Cal said. His voice, usually filled with eagerness, fell flat now, doomed to failure.

"There'll never be anything for me here. Nothing but work, and Dad's abuse. I don't want to live where a tiny helpless creature is looked on as nothing more than food for a pet blacksnake, where all things of beauty and gentleness are mocked.

"I'll run off and join the army. I'm big for my age. They'll take me, I'm sure."

"It's just Dad's way," Iona said. "I don't think he really means all he says. Someday we'll find that he's not so bad."

"Well, I won't be around to wonder or to find out. Some morning you'll wake up and I'll be gone. You'll be the only ones who'll know where to—you and Scotlin.

"Please promise me you won't tell anyone where I've gone."

I knew full well his sudden decision to join the army would come to nothing. He couldn't join the army at his age. It was impossible. But I felt it important to agree with him.

"I promise, Calvin," I said in a husky voice. "Wild horses couldn't drag it out of me."

"Sis?"

"I promise. But you know it'll tear Mom's heart out."

Cal attempted to clear his throat. I watched as he tried his best to fight back more tears. "I know," he finally managed to

say. "I'll carry that guilt with me to the grave. But I have to do it. I can't stand it here on the farm any longer."

"You know there could be another big war fire up someday," Iona told him. "Just think of all the poor men who were killed in the war, and all those we see in town, with empty sleeves, and those on crutches."

"Sure," he said. "I know that. But I'm to the point where I just don't care anymore." It was now his turn to apologize. "Sorry I struck you, Scotlin."

This was now over and done with. I nodded and accepted his apology.

"Now, let's go get the little black hen," Cal said. "Hide her in the woodshed where she'll be safe from Mr. Leo."

We tucked the little black hen and her chicks safely away in the woodshed, walked to the yard, climbed the steps to the porch where Mr. and Mrs. McKenzie were still enjoying the cool of the evening and the bug music, as Mr. McKenzie had earlier joked.

I leaned the seine against a porch rail and watched as Mrs. McKenzie gently touched her son's arm.

"Why don't you youngsters go on inside," she said. "Play a few games of checkers, or something while you have the chance."

She was trying to make it up to Cal, I figured, by offering him a little tenderness to soothe his disappointment. I turned away from the scene, still ashamed for the dumb way I'd acted in the granary, and this made it even worse. Still, despite all, there was nothing I'd have loved more than to kill that dreadful Mr. Leo. Just thinking of him chased shivers up my back.

We entered the house, and passed on into the kitchen. A lamp glowed cheerfully, setting on the kitchen table. The table,

covered by a white oilcloth, had juicy-looking strawberries imprinted on it. Those red strawberries really stood out on the white oilcloth. Iona pulled out a couple of washcloths from a drawer and splashed water into the sink from a hand pump—the first sink I'd ever seen, except for pictures of them in magazines. After we washed our hands, we pulled out chairs and sat down at the table, while Iona went off into another part of the house for the Chinese checkerboard.

She returned, leaned across in front of me to set the board on the table, and I felt my heart trying to quit me.

The next hour or so passed in a blur. I tried to keep my mind on the game and on Iona at the same time. This didn't work well to my profit.

Triumphantly, Cal filled up all the slots on the board with his marbles for the second time, and leaned back in his chair. He'd beaten me two games in a row. "Shucks," he said. "Guess we might as well quit since there's no rubber match to play."

He'd always been much better at solving problems than me, but in my own defense, I honestly think if Iona hadn't put me off so much I'd have given him more of a fight. That girl had my thoughts stirred up like a whirlwind.

"I got to get along, anyway," I said. "I have to help Uncle Roz with the last line run. It sure got late in a hurry."

"It was already late when you arrived," Iona said.

We arose from the table, went back out onto the porch, and I headed straight for the steps.

"Ain't you forgettin' somethin', bub?" said Mr. McKenzie.

My mind had been so set on Iona, I'd forgotten all about the seine. I turned reluctantly. "Yessir, I guess I am." Did I ever sound sheepish!

That old man stuck the seine in my stomach so hard I had to close my arms around it in self-defense.

"Didn't know Roz was in such a hurry," he grumbled. "I wouldn't have bothered to borrow it if I'd known he'd call for it so soon."

"But Stu," Mrs. McKenzie said. "It's been a whole year."

"Don't matter. I didn't even get to use it."

"Well, that's surely not Mr. Tull's fault," she scolded. "Maybe someday you'll learn there's more to life than just hard work."

Uncle Roz once told me Mr. McKenzie was so wealthy and so tight he squeaked when he walked, and wouldn't hire on extra help unless he absolutely had to. Uncle also said the old man used to do all the work on his place by himself. Cal came along then, and he put him to work alongside him just as soon as he was big enough. All Cal had ever known was drudgery. I felt honored that my folks had given me a freer rein than that. I was rich with freedom and completely carefree, at least up until this past spring when Dad placed a demand on my future time. But I didn't want to think of that just yet. I shook the troublesome thought from my mind like a horse shooing flies with its tail.

The McKenzies had the world all rolled in a ball of their own making, with their fine rock house, all their land, stock and everything. A man with Mr. McKenzie's money should've been proud to send his son off to school, but of course, this wasn't so. I failed to see how a man could work and work and work, but never think of relaxation. Mr. McKenzie owned fine birddogs he never exercised. He had beagle dogs that had they ever heard the report of a shotgun would likely run off in a blind panic. Just how in tarnation a man with any common

sense could borrow a minnow seine, keep it for an entire year, and never think to use it? With his money, why should he even need to borrow one? It was truly too much for me. I figured someday he'd probably work himself to death—just drop over hauling stones out of a field or some other dumb chore he should've hired out. There were plenty of men out of work in these hard days. What good would his money be, his land, all his wealth, if he fell over dead?

That sorry old business of not sending Cal on to school was just too much. It felt like a slap in the face to me. No telling how it made Cal feel. This very thought filled me with a sudden, unbearable need to torment the old miser. I wanted to force him to admit he was making a mistake by keeping Cal home.

"I reckon when I finish school I'll amount to something," I spoke up brashly. "Likely I'll make a judge, or no telling what. A good education can do miracles for a person like me … like Calvin too."

Since I'd come at him so strong, right out of the darkness and all, Mr. McKenzie seemed struck downright dumb for a bit. He just sat there for the longest time, chewing on my words. Then, by and by, he tossed back his head, and roared with loud laughter. His chair danced on its spindly legs, and that cruel laughter sounded just like Gobbler's Roost had crumbled and crashed into the Stream River.

"Bub, you're Dad would be much better off puttin' you out in the fields and teachin' you the value of hard work, 'stead of spoilin' you rotten the way he already has. My word, sendin' you off to high school is an act of pure foolishness."

Was there was no way to shame him? If there was, I was surely not the person to handle the job. Besides, he might be right about me, but I was thinking of Cal's sad predicament.

"Yes sir," I mumbled.

I turned to Mrs. McKenzie. "Thanks, Mrs. McKenzie, for your hospitality."

"Why, Scotlin, you're so welcome," she said. I figured Mom would've been right pleased with my manners.

Cal accompanied me into the yard, and there, where the yard met the road, I felt the light, heavenly touch of a hand upon my back. I whirled about, and nearly knocked Iona off her feet with the seine, for her unexpected touch startled me.

She laughed at this, and it sounded like a concert of bell music.

"Bye, Scotlin," she said. She spun about then and ran for the house.

My stars, the effect those two words had on me. My poor heart melted, and ran down into my brogans.

"Bye," I answered, just as she mounted the steps. I gathered up Brownie in a fog, and left the McKenzie place.

Chapter Five

I had a million and two thoughts on my mind, crossing those cleared, but stony hills of farmland, after passing through Mr. McKezie's gate on the homebound trip.

Images of Iona's brilliant, springy curls and dark eyes filled my mind. I longed with all my heart to rescue her from some desperate situation. The more desperate the better. I wanted to carry her off to safety on the fabled white charger. Her overwhelming beauty lured me on as I drew closer and closer to the hardwood jungle and the dark tunnel I'd passed safely through on the trip over.

Mr. McKenzie had accused me of being spoiled, which likely was true. I knew very well I should give up the good life on the river, but I darn sure wasn't going to do so without kicking about it.

I took some hard mental journeys then. A mule-back ride can cause such mental trips. Something about the motion, I reckoned. I spent a good bit of time wondering who'd take care of Uncle Roz if I left him? What'd happen if he hooked that big blue cat again—all alone as he'd been before when he'd lost it? I

could see him trying to remove that monster from the trotline by himself and with that huge creature bucking and pitching wildly. In my mind, I could see the fish thrashing about in the river at the edge of the boat. The images grew so real I could almost feel river water soak me through and through as the blue cat beat it into a frothy mist. What if Uncle fell into the river? What if he got tangled in the line? Why, he'd drown, that's what. Then, doggone it, whose fault would it be? None other than yours truly—that's whose. I didn't dare to think of leaving him. I just couldn't bear such a dreadful thought.

The two of us had worked out such a wonderful routine over the past summers. How could I give up a thing I cherished so much? I loved it—all of it. I loved the rich, sweet odor of the river, daytime and nighttime. There was a world of difference between the scent and mood of the river from night to day. I loved how we spent our mornings following the first daylight trotline run. Uncle would point out a couple of young fish from those we'd caught the day before, and stored in the enormous live-box tethered to a root of a sycamore tree at water's edge. I'd clean and fillet them the way he'd taught me. Afterward, he'd fry them to a nice golden brown color.

Following breakfast, we always plopped ourselves down in the boat and paddled upstream to one of our secret holes, and there we fished for bass, usually with minnows, although sometimes we used crawfish. On rare occasions, when all else failed, we resorted to the old standby, earthworms.

Bass fishing was wonderful sport. I loved nothing more than to watch a smallmouth take the bait, and bolt up out of the river in a mighty leap, flinging its head violently, flailing about for its very life. The explosive force of the fight

constantly shredded the water into lather, and large bubbles floated atop the green surface of the river all the while. I loved to watch the fish tail-walk on the surface with nary a trace of fear in its eyes. I often fancied I saw defiance and stubborn determination, even hatred in the eyes of a fish. But I realized that a simple, primitive fish lacked the capacity for such a trait—thank God—common only in the human kind. As it was happening though, it was great fun to think this might just be true.

The weight and feel of the power and vitality of a hooked fish thrilled me to the bottoms of my bare feet. A fish fought its imprisonment in a life struggle, which was tragedy in its purest form. The water roiled up in a pale white mist in the special soft pastel light that comes with early morning, the likes of which you never see at any other time during the day. Those jewels of beaded water burst from the taut fishing line like birdshot, with the line itself nearly at the breaking point, during the barefaced heat of battle.

The color of the fish was black, sometimes green, and sometimes black and green at the same time and often mixed with white. This was a trick of the special morning light, I knew, but I wanted to believe it a swindle performed by the fish to distract me. Most of the time the magic worked, too, because with my distraction the bass often flung the hook and disappeared victoriously beneath the water, and the water itself would still be churning in heavy spume for some time afterward.

At first, after I watched the fish fade away and become a part of the river again, I felt bad I lost the battle, but then, even before the water settled down, I experienced a safe warm

sensation in my soul. The fish won its freedom because of the energy it expended. I saw then that all creatures have the same fighting spirit, and it was good to know humans have it as well.

To watch the swift, blurred shadow of the fish's escape, striking out for the safety of deeper water, seemed to release me from bondage as well,—although I wouldn't dare express it that way if Uncle Roz was in earshot.

Every time I lost a fish, Uncle just shook his head, hit me hard with a cold stare from his stern black eyes, and this bolstered my resolve to do better next time. For, the power of his eyes had a commanding influence on me. Those eyes of his were terrible in their disapproval and scorn. My skin crawled as if measuring worms were inching up my backbone, sizing me up for a new one.

I never once saw him lose a bass. Whenever he hooked one, he landed it—even the rare largemouth, which were much bigger than smallmouth and fought with even more ferocious desperation because of their extra bulk.

We returned the bass back into the water when the fun was over for the day. Uncle contended that no river man worth a red cent would ever eat a bass because they were worm-riddled. He'd say, 'God just meant these bass fish as a way for folks like you and me to have fun.'

But no matter how much fun we had catching bass, my *real* fishing lesson came when we set anchor just above or below a swift shoal. We sat and tight-line fished in the deep green water for red horse suckerfish using tiny mussels for bait. Those baby mussels were special bait that took me hours to locate and to gather in the shallow, fast-moving water every

afternoon. Uncle Roz dozed in the shade thrown by the tent while I was out harvesting mussels, for it was in the hottest part of the day, and he *was* getting old, after all. I didn't mind, and enjoyed the solitude. I felt great going off by myself and accomplishing my chore as if I were grownup.

Catching red horse was an art. Their bite was so tiny and feeble it was almost undetectable. Sometimes, unless you were especially watchful, you couldn't tell if you'd just had a bite or if a snake doctor might've flown by and gently brushed against the fishing line with its fragile, transparent wings. I had to be ready when I got a genuine hit. It did no good to set the hook hard. This always tore the hook through the fish's mouth, and off he'd scoot. The trick was to let the fish hook itself, and to know when it was hooked. The way you did so was by gently lifting the tip of the pole an inch or so. If the fish was on, you knew it then, for certain, and when you started bringing it in, the fun began in earnest.

I lost more red horse than I ever landed, but I never felt good when I lost one the way I sometimes did when a bass flung the hook. This was because that old man implanted the thought in my mind that red horse fish were food, and that bass were playthings. He took food gathering seriously, and taught me to do the same.

To know when a red horse was hooked securely was the main difference between a good fisherman and a fair one—that, and the manner in which you brought it to the boat once it hooked itself. The strain of constant vigilance—the wait for that special tiny peck, which became the signal to raise the tip of the pole—left me all a-sweat from anticipation. I knew no greater satisfaction than landing a young, scrappy red horse.

Every moment I spent on the river was special to me. But my double-favorite time was to jump in the boat while Uncle Roz was taking his nap, and paddle upstream—way on up past Tyndale's Chute to where I could make out Three Shoals farther upstream. We called them Three Shoals, but this was incorrect. It was, instead, all just one big shoal with three small eddies in between the rapids that gave the illusion that they were three separate features. By the time I reached my destination and anchored up close to those huge boulders standing in the water like elephants gone to drink, I was plenty hot. Those large boulders had fallen eons ago from the high limestone bluffs towering high above the Stream.

I stripped down, and frolicked in the water from one huge boulder to another. Then I climbed atop one of the higher monolithic stones, and from that elevation, I could easily see all three of those grand, linked shoals, farther upstream. The water up there surged, and pounded away at the ancient boulders composing the shoals. Over the years, the boulders were battered at and bashed until they were much smaller than the true monsters they'd once been. Uncle Roz told me that time and the pounding of the water someday'll reduce them to gravel then later on to tiny grains of sand. But more than any other thing, my purpose for climbing high enough to witness Three Shoals was to view the bright rainbows created by the rush and plunge of water that surged above those battered rocks, and to hear the loud explosive boom of the water. The rainbows always flashed away in the sun, pink, green, yellow and blue, as if the shoals were the birthplace of the very best diamonds ever created. They flashed and sparkled in every color the human eye creates.

Often, I climbed atop one of the elephant rocks, stood there in the sun, naked as could be, with the chilly water dripping from me, shivering in a good way from my swim, and watched the intense display of nature's creative turn. I felt the deep thunder and rush of the water through the soles of my feet making contact with the rock on which I stood. I could hear the colossal boom as the water collided with the boulders, and then with a blue sky above me, I would feel in a grand, personal way as if I were the most special creature on earth. My soul swelled with the spectacle and glory of it all, and floated toward heaven like a carnival balloon.

After I filled my senses with the spectacular scene from far upstream, I went to work, and gathered from the shallows more of the tiny mussels we used for red horse bait. I also caught a good amount of crawdads, stored them in a damp burlap sack, and took care to keep them out of the sun so they didn't perish. Even so, I never found a way to save them all. Spoiled crawdads have the rankest odor any boy can experience.

After I gathered all the bait we needed, I pushed off, and drifted in slow stages back downstream toward *home*, which is what we called our campsite. If I grew thirsty, I simply scooped up a cup of water from one of the many springs that bubbled up in the river, from aquifers deep under the limestone at river's edge. The spring water was pure, and so cold that low fog stood like knee-deep cotton above the springs, bubbling to the surface.

As I drifted along, I leaned back, relaxed, and floated untroubled through the wide, deep eddies. Then, in the faster, rushing water, I took up the paddle to guide the boat past boulders in the swift flow of the minor shoals, which I'd pulled

the boat through on the trip upstream. I knew where every danger in that old river lay. It was a pleasure simply to wend along on the river, beneath the gorgeous blue sky and the gray bluffs mottled by lichen growth—many of the bluffs several hundred feet high, and even higher.

Upon occasion, I spied a plump squirrel flattened out on a limb of a tree close by the water, and I popped him with my .22 rifle. Uncle Roz often told me that man doesn't live by fish alone, but must also have young squirrel in order to maintain a well-balanced, healthy diet. I always tried my best to please him, and harvest only the young ones. He called them "fryers" as if they were young chickens.

I once made the awful mistake of shooting an old boar squirrel that would've taken a week of boiling before it was fit to eat. He took one look at it and flung it into the slough for the gars to eat. He then gave me a fierce talking to about how not to waste the great gift of life, and of how that boar squirrel could've fathered many young fryers had I not been so greedy. After that speech blistered my ears, I grew doubly cautious not to make that mistake again.

Running the trotline late at night was another eye-opening experience. My job was to steady the boat with the paddle while Uncle Roz went hand over hand down the line, to check every hook, replace bait as needed, haul in the on-fish, and tell me a few tales of how things were overseas when he served in the war. But he never would tell me of the exciting things he'd witnessed, even though I often begged him to do so. He told me, too, of the huge old blue cat he'd hooked twice before, alone on each occasion. He lost that old big boy twice, because I hadn't been there to steady the boat for him.

My desire to catch the fabled catfish grew so strong that every time he lifted a hand to indicate he felt a fish on the line just ahead, my imagination took off on me with the expectation that this time would be the one we finally caught him. That dream stuck tight in my mind like a blackberry briar in the flesh of a finger. I felt it a fine thing to cling to though, and looked forward eagerly to the night when we really did land him.

I tortured myself with those old thoughts of past times and of what-might-have-been for so long I felt it a distinct relief to leave the cleared farmland and to enter the dark tunnel of the forest. Maybe now my fear of the hardwood jungle and the intense racket made by the jar flies and other insects of the nighttime would distract my mind from the problem of what to do with Uncle Roz.

Chapter Six

We penetrated the dark forest a short distance, and Brownie grew more alert. His ears flopped up and down, twitching nervously. I figured it likely he heard some far off sound I couldn't. He quickened his pace—strange for him. He tossed his head. I worried he might even bolt, so I closed my fists tighter around the reins.

"What's wrong with you, Brownie?"

Suddenly he stopped and stood dead still. The bugs had ceased to squall and cry out to one another. Brownie thrust his head forward like a hound searching for a scent. I'd never seen him in such a state.

"Brownie."

He dropped his head, and snorted low. The skin covering his spine slowly crawled beneath my skinny rump all the way from his ears on down to his tail.

I was a boy at night, alone in the darkness and the roar of the hardwood jungle, and I was right frightened. Brownie was usually a good stable animal. But not tonight. I sensed or maybe smelled his fear, and wasn't far from extreme agony

myself. Fear caught me around the throat and choked me so hard I could scarcely breathe.

"EEEEEEEeeeeeeeooooooooooooooOOOOOoooooo!"

A faraway and high-pitched, wavering scream broke forth over the hardwood jungle, and tore my good, commonsense to shreds. Cold chills froze me. The hair at the nape of my neck rose up on its own. This was what Brownie had been hearing all along. With such a fearsome racket there was no wonder he acted so skittish.

"Panther!" I said aloud.

My heart pounded away in my chest, and lit out in a terrifying gallop.

KERTHUMPETY-KERTHUMPETY-KERTHUMPETY-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP!

I gulped for air, but couldn't draw it down deep into my chest where I needed it most. My lungs swelled up like a pair of balloons, but wouldn't deflate to receive more air. My heart raced on and on, as if to leap deep, wide ditches. Its heavy throb and pound felt as if there were dense tangles of briar patches it needed to rip straight through full-blast.

By and by, however, I somehow mastered a bit of my fear. I reached down and patted Brownie's neck. "Brownie's a good mule," I told him, and this method worked for a while. He stepped out then with what I took to be confidence.

Soon though, those berserk screams started up again, ringing off the bluffs along the river.

"EEEEEEEeeeeeeeooooooooooooooo! EEEEEEEeeeeeeeoooooooooooooooooooo!"

Goose bumps the size of hens' eggs broke out on my arms. Shoot, the squalls of a screech owl were sissified in

comparison to these chilly hymns of death. They magnified, multiplied, and traveled farther through the jungle than could church bells. I heard them caroming off the river bluffs again, penetrating the jungle as if the trees that made it up were nothing but just plain air.

How could Dad have been so wrong? Panthers hadn't died out years ago, as he'd told me. I saw the truth now, clear as one of Mom's freshly scrubbed windowpanes.

Brownie's back muscles tightened, and he sprang forward with the strength of a much younger animal. I darn near fell overboard. Somehow, though, I managed to right myself. I yanked back on the reins, felt the muscles in my shoulders expand and shudder with the effort, and this broke his attempted blind charge into chaos.

Just then, in a sudden brilliant illumination that just about blinded me, I recalled Uncle Roz's artistry at mimicking animal voices.

"*It's him!*"

In a loud whoosh of wind, I released the trapped air from my lungs that I hadn't even realized was locked up inside. What a blessed relief! That old man was out there in the brush roaring away, squalling his head off trying to frighten me.

"Calm down, Brownie. It ain't nothing but Uncle Roz. Pay him no mind."

But blame it all anyway, those terrifying sounds continued. They crept closer, grew louder, and sounded more menacing. Uncle Roz was good at this old business. I had to admit that.

I smiled then, and felt downright smug. Uncle was going through a raft of trouble just for a few laughs. Old Brownie wasn't a bit amused, however. He did his dead level best to

strip the reins from my hands. My arms grew so tired they were fixing to fall off from holding him back.

Then, after one especially close and horrible scream, Brownie lifted his ears in front, his tail in back, and broke wind so loud it would've shattered a window if one had been present. He then lit out in headlong flight. I lost my seat, flipped high in the air, turned at least one somersault, maybe more, for I lost count in the confusion, and landed on my back in the wagon rut.

The air blasted from my lungs in a loud *KERWHOOSH* that sounded like a tornado racing across the ground. I was aware of nothing for sometime then but the cold, desperate need to put air back into the deflated sacks inside my chest I called lungs.

I lay there a bit, gasping for air. Brownie's loud, rattling hooves pounding the hard-packed earth sounded like a snare drum, as he plunged away from me as fast as he could gallop toward the safety of our river camp.

I caught my breath, got to my hands and knees and pawed around on the ground. It was much too dark to use any of my senses other than touch. I found the seine at last, and felt plenty lucky I hadn't picked up a copperhead instead. I stood up, tucked the seine under an arm and lit out for camp, still safe in the knowledge that Uncle stood behind all this diabolical, fiendish racket.

The panther noises grew louder than ever, and herded me right on up to camp. The light of our lantern, which hung from the low limb of a willow tree just outside the tent, glowed at me in a golden smile. I felt a sudden surge of relief just from seeing the light. I stopped, and turned in the road to await Uncle's appearance. I heard him loud as ever in the rough

brush, where the racket of the insects, and the whippoorwill music had long-ago fallen silent. I was fixing to have the last laugh.

The camp lantern threw its vague illumination to the fringe of the brush edging the wagon rut, creating spooky shadows. The hideous screams hadn't softened nary a bit. The "beast" in the thicket was slinking closer, hissing louder, and coughing deeper. I heard branches breaking, bushes ruffling, twigs snapping under Uncle's feet.

My old uncle was exceptionally good at this enterprise. The hairs on my arms stood up straight and waved to one another. Somehow, I held firm to my ground.

I was ready for Uncle Roz to step forward and admit he'd failed to fool me. I plastered a wide smile on my innocent mug, and fixed my mind to laugh like crazy when he stepped out of the brush, with egg yolk smeared across his whiskery old face.

After a tense wait, I watched as something slinked slowly, stealthily from the brush and into the faint light. Two huge eyes showed up first, glowing orange like coals turning the light of our campfire. They gleamed at me, hypnotically. Just then, a low, dark and glossy black form snaked one sleek leg at a time from the darkness and into sight. It stopped then and stood thirty feet from me, which was none too soon to suit me. Cold shivers and chills slithered down both my shaky legs, as if I had the flu. The monster thrust forth its red tongue. It licked its chops. Then it turned its fiery, orange eyes on me, and captured my own. I froze up tight as a rain barrel in a solid January freeze-up.

I stared back. I couldn't believe what I was looking at. Shoot, I'd been so sure the "panther" was really Uncle Roz that

when the truth at last soaked in, my mind clamped down so hard I fancied I heard it slam shut like a screen door with a brand-new spring. I simply stared back at the thing, with huge rounded, wide-open eyes. Shoot fire, right then, I couldn't have moved for the world, the gold, silver, diamonds and all the rest of the fabulous wealth hidden therein.

It truly was a *panther*.

By and by, the creature tossed its head, turned its gaze into the brush for a second as if it expected something else to step forward. Had that happened, I would've fallen in a dead faint. It swung its sleek bullet-shaped head back toward me, then stepped forward with natural-born stealth, one sinister step at a time, and slunk like a shadow straight toward me.

This was all that old business I could take.

I whirled about, tossed the seine overhead, flashed beneath it in a mad dash, and lit out in a frantic gallop, as if my shoes had suddenly burst aflame.

"Uncle Rozzzzzz!"

I reached the center of camp. Our old army tent had suddenly leapt to life. It towered above me now, enormous and billowy. In some mysterious, unholy manner, it'd discovered a sinister locomotion of its own. A demon of some sort, sly witch, or who knew what, had cast a spell upon it. It flapped loud with its each movement. I wouldn't have been a bit surprised had it mounted to the sky. And I prayed it would. Just fly away and never return.

I completely forgot about the panther. This was a thing to frighten a boy far greater than a mere live creature of the wild.

"Uncle Rozzzz!" I burst out again.

I ran on. Fear blinded me. I heard nothing. Not even the pounding of my heart.

I swerved to flee back into the rank, tangled jungle, to find safety under a brush pile or in a hollow tree. I was fixing to leap full force into the thorny limbs and sharp branches and briars of the hardwood forest, but just then, huge, rough paws or mitts of some kind latched onto me, and held me fast. That horrible black panther clutched me in its unbreakable grip. I could run no more. My mind turned as blank as dreamless sleep.

Warm pee gushed down my right leg, but I felt absolutely no shame.

"Scotlin," a gruff voice demanded, "have you done lost your mind?"

But, how in the world could a panther talk?

"What'n creation's wrong with you?" the voice demanded. "Didn't I tell you not to run that mule? You know good as I do he ain't young no more. Lordy, he might've had a heart attack running in here so blamed hard that away."

Upon my word! I would've fallen straight to the ground if those strong, rough hands weren't holding me erect. I exhaled, and stood in the safe harbor of my good old uncle's strong grip.

"Uncle Roz."

"Brownie come pounding in here like Dan Patch," he said. "Tore down the tent. Now it's all tangled up—him inside it. Just what'd you do with the seine? Unless, that's too much to ask."

I grabbed for air.

"Panther. Uncle Roz, panther."

"What?"

"Panther."

I tried to free a hand to point out the big black cat standing large in the middle of the cart track—except that by now, when I looked, it'd disappeared.

Uncle Roz scoffed, "Panther, my left foot."

Then WHUMP!

He boxed my ear, not too hard, but hard enough. His hands were brick-heavy and iron-hard.

"Don't you dare give me that old business," he warned. "Not after just about running my mule to death. I've half a mind to take a hickory limb to you. Don't tell me nothing about no panther. I won't hear it"

"But, it's true."

I grabbed his shirt, and shook him with all the puny strength a skinny boy my age possessed.

"It's true. There really is a panther. It scared Brownie so much he took flight. He spilled me in the road. I thought all the time it was you … trying to scare me, but …"

"Such terrible nonsense I ain't never heard," he said. "Panther my good eye."

He stalked off then to free Brownie from the tent, but I was still much too numb and bewildered to do little more than scan the brush with frightened eyes. After a time, however, I began to doubt I'd seen the panther myself.

Had I just imagined it all? Dad always said I read too much, and let my imagination run off on me and hide. He told me I should learn to control it before it controlled me. Maybe he was right. Maybe Uncle Roz was right. Maybe I didn't see

what I thought I saw. Maybe it was just the dark night, the woods, and the insect racket that stirred me up to the point where I'd just imagined the black cat-creature. And, too, I'd been worrying about what to do with Uncle Roz.

Finally, though, I exhaled, and blew away my doubts.

I'd seen what I'd seen. There was no way around it. There really had been a panther, in spite of Uncle's doubts, and mine as well.

I stepped forth to help untangle Brownie from the yards and yards of canvas, which had put a halt to his mad flight.

We freed the mule and put the tent back up where it came close to resembling our sleeping quarters once again. Uncle took to his chair with a cup of whiskey and his fiddle. Softly, he played some of those really old tunes having a strange flavor in a minor key. His grandparents had brought them along with them from the old country, he'd once explained. I liked them, even though some were a bit sad.

Brownie, though, most assuredly loved them. He shuffled up just behind Uncle's chair, and lowered his jaw onto the old man's shoulder. Before long, he nodded off, asleep on his feet. Uncle had played those tunes to calm him.

I studied Uncle's rugged face to see if he was still mad. He didn't raise his head to meet my gaze, and he didn't speak. He continued playing music, as if I weren't even there, and I figured he was still putout.

By and by, he said, "When you play "Billy in the Lowground," you've got to relax, Scotlin. You always play them notes from the wrong angle. Your fingers and bow hand know the way. Rely on 'em. Learn to play the tune, not just the simple notes. Your way lacks flavor, and that's what makes the song."

He handed me the fiddle. It was worn smooth in places, but still had the rosy sheen of newness about it, especially at the sound holes and in the center of the arched back. It'd made a lot of music in two countries. I took it and placed it on my lap, as if it in awe of it.

"Take 'er, boy," he said. "She's yours. I'm givin' 'er to you, right now."

I looked into his eyes. They glowed with warmth like a good fire on the coldest night, but then they slowly dimmed.

"Uncle Roz?"

"It's true. I ain't got no boy of my own to pass it to," he said. "I 'spect you'll do well 'nough, instead."

"But, Uncle."

"My pap gave me that fiddle one rainy morning," he continued, ignoring my attempt to protest. "Told me his own pap gave it to him one day. Then the day after that, he found him in bed, dead as could be. Then sure 'nough, the morning after Pap gave it to me, he fell over dead out there in the cool of the springhouse."

My arms tingled, as if I'd just struck my crazy bone. Had he just told me he was dying? Was his lung disease that bad? He did have some savage coughing spells.

"Uncle Roz."

He must've read my mind.

"Hush. I ain't fixin' to die. It's just my fingers. They're too blamed stiff and cramped up from joint disease to play like I used to. I figure if I can't play the thing right, I just won't play it at all."

I relaxed some then, but still I wasn't right sure there wasn't more to it than painful joints. He still played a masterful tune.

"Now, she's yours—that is, if you can play "Billy" for me," he said. "Play him right, I'm talkin' 'bout. If not, well, I 'spect I might as well fling 'er out in the slough."

"But …"

"It ain't no buts about it," he said.

Uncle Roz wrinkled his face in seriousness.

"You got to learn to trust yourself, Scotlin—on the riverbank, or in a mansion, it's all the same. Learn to trust your own abilities.

"Just forget them notes you've memorized. Play the tune you feel in your heart. That's how the *real* fiddler does it. Memorized notes are good. They put you on the right path. But there's many paths that lead to the center, which is where you want to get to. The real fun is to travel down as many paths as possible.

"A good fiddler takes the oldest, most worn-out song ever, and in his joy, he makes it a brand-new tune. A feller can play music his life through, and still know only a tiny bit of what it's all about. It ain't got no end. It just goes on and on forever. That there's the wonder, the marvel of it all. That's what causes some folks to devote their lives to it.

"Now, I know darn well you can play "Billy" for me. I have the faith in you that you lack in yourself. Just find the right path and take off. Now, get on with it."

This then, was it. I'd reached a point in my life that was a moment of letting-go, of placing faith where it belonged. Then, with great nerves and my hands fluttering, I lifted the fiddle beneath my chin, and raised the bow. I just had to play it right. But with him watching, he was forcing pressure upon me nearly beyond my puny ability. Uncle was holding me to

the task, with his critical eyes. He was watching, as well as listening, and I hated pressure above all, except, of course, injustice. I was fixing to learn what he meant when he spoke of faith, of putting trust in my own abilities. I wasn't about to let him toss this grand old fiddle away. It'd be like throwing away my birthright, to use a biblical term. I knew he'd do exactly as he promised. He'd toss it in the slough, for sure. It was now or never. I resolved to do my very best.

"Making music on fiddle strings ought to be natural as whistling." His voice sounded calm and in charge. This encouraged me, and right then, I needed all the encouragement I could find.

Chapter Seven

I stroked the strings with the bow hesitantly, and came right close to running off into the woods. I wished I were someplace else right then, anywhere but right here with this old fiddle in hand. Whatever made me think this time would be any different from all the times before? Just then, I noticed that the insects had returned to making their own music now.

I started out with too much caution. I played the first part out of touch with the instrument. I felt awkward and groping.

I hit the high part by and by, and the bow took over. My fingers found a life of their own on the fingerboard. They danced naturally to the correct pressure points upon the strings. The strings beneath my fingertips felt fully comfortable, and familiar. I'd torn myself free of the restraints that'd held me prisoner for so long in some mysterious way that even I didn't comprehend. My breathing leveled off. I relaxed. My chest rose and fell in a regular, tranquil manner. Never had simple air felt so wondrous. Every lungful filled me with pleasant warmth and security. My lungs grew taste buds. I could actually *taste* the juicy red-apple-sweetness, the fluff, the gloss of the notes with each breath I took. I

discovered a sparkling, bubbly sensation with every breath, which overwhelmed me with pleasure, and filled me with a confidence I'd never known before. I could now do whatever I set my mind to with this old instrument.

The music captured my imagination. I rode it to the sky. I soared when it soared, dipped when it dipped. I dove and rose on high, time and again, brushed the stars, turned end over end, scampering carelessly, recklessly. I grew my freedom, which filled me with a magnificence I could taste, smell and feel. I felt at peace with the world, and no longer needed to try but instead, to do.

I traveled without effort up and down great hills, as if they were mere bumps. I worried none about directions. I soared on the wind like fluff from a burst seedpod, and sailed over the hills and valleys as free as the flight of a hawk. I was playing "Billy" without reservation. All that held me down before fell away like heavy chains.

Oh, I wasn't half as good as Uncle Roz—few were—but my playing became pure and free and easy. It came as natural as whistling. I'd done it on my own. I'd finally mastered "Billy in the Lowground."

By and by, finished, I lowered the fiddle. Silence followed for a long time. The insects in the woods had even stopped their racket to listen, perhaps even to admire, and I knew them to be grand musicians themselves. I looked into my uncle's face—the one man in the world I wanted right then to please most—and saw a smile of genuine, honest pride crack his rugged old face. That old man's smile touched me like the full embrace of the rays of the sun, and Uncle Roz wasn't one to waste a smile.

"You've got 'er, Scotlin," he told me. "You've got 'er, son."

I let out a tremendous yelp of joy. Brownie stirred from his sleep. Then all of a sudden, that tired old mule skittered and skated about in a fresh case of nerves. He flung his head high, snorted loudly, and tossed his stubby tail about. Uncle Roz lunged and caught him around the neck, braced his feet beneath him, and stopped him from galloping off into the jungle. I wondered what'd frightened him this time. Soon, I heard a racket out on the wagon rut, and the light of a lantern flashed bravely against the dark night.

"Hello! Saw your fire," a man called out from the depths of the darkness. "Heard the fiddle tune. Thought we'd stop by. Is that all right by you?"

Uncle Roz kept a strong grip on Brownie. He narrowed his eyes into thin slits, and squinted intently into the darkness outside the ring of our campfire.

"Come on in. If you be friend," he warned. "If you be foe, just get along on down the track. I got me a shotgun in easy reach of my steady hand, and I'll use 'er, or I'm not the son of a Scotsman."

Two men stepped into view. One man wore cowboy duds like I'd seen in range magazines, tight-legged pants, a shiny red shirt with pearl snap buttons, and a tall crème-colored hat with a wide brim. The other man wore overalls and scuffed brogans. He led on a chain—like a dog on a leash—a big, shiny black cat.

My *panther!*

"Now, you just keep that creature away, please sir," Uncle Roz said. "He's already scared my old mule 'bout half blind."

"Take the cat over there, Jack," the cowboy said. He pointed downwind of the mule.

Jack and the panther fell deeper into the darkness, and Brownie calmed down enough for Uncle Roz to loosen his grip.

"We're friendly enough," the cowboy said. He chuckled, and stepped forward. "I'm Jim Coonrod. Perhaps you've heard of me. Own a circus of the same name." He extended his hand, and the two grownups shook.

"I reckon I've heard the name," Uncle Roz said.

But I saw Uncle still didn't trust the situation overly much. He studied the panther that now hunkered low in the dark shadows while Jack held him in check. By and by, Uncle looked at me, and I saw his eyes apologizing for not believing me. He placed a gentle hand on my shoulder, and I found a strong surge of satisfaction caress my heart as my soul filled with vindication. Uncle Roz wasn't very big on expressing apologies, but there stood that old black cat to prove I'd been right. He now saw I hadn't made the whole thing up. That feeling was worth more to me than a trip to town for a whole day. If pride were a river, right then, mine would've been the Mississippi, using another of Uncle's tired, old phrases.

"Why, yes, I'm right sure you have heard of me," Coonrod said. "After all, we play Lyons Beach every summer."

Jack, the handler, hunkered on his heels now. The panther snuggled right up next to him and licked his face like a large pet dog. Jack looked bored, and I allowed the panther had already licked him plenty enough to last him the rest of his life. He brushed away the animal's advances. It was plain the creature wouldn't hurt a fly. By now, Brownie was accustomed to his scent, and looked as if he might fall back to sleep at any second.

"Oh," Coonrod said, "he's entirely harmless, and really very old, as cats go."

Before I knew it, Uncle Roz and Coonrod were sitting around the fire, telling war tales, nipping some from a jug Uncle recovered from beneath a willow bush. Then after a time, the circus owner asked for more of the fiddle music he'd heard earlier. I took up the old Tull family fiddle then, and I played the man a few of my most spirited tunes.

Things got right festive on the riverbank for a time. Uncle Roz and Jim Coonrod joked and laughed, told tales, and relived the old days when they were in France during the war. Even though it was time I grabbed a nap before the next line run, the stories of those two men held me in a spellbound trap like a fly in a web. Shoot, I couldn't have fallen asleep right then to save the world, even though it was plenty worth saving. At length, we learned why the panther was out romping about in our forest.

As the circus-train approached Miller's Switch, it split a switch and derailed. I then remembered hearing that loud "run-in" as I wrestled with Mr. McKenzie's gate. To re-rail the cars, they'd turned out all the animals. In all the confusion, the panther had simply wandered off into the night for a jog through the jungle, and had scared one young boy and one tired old mule nigh to death. Everything grew crystal clear by the time Coonrod finished his explanation.

Much later, Mr. Coonrod stood up, stretched and said, "I suppose it's time for us to get on back. The others will have a search party out after us if we don't show our faces soon."

"Well, sir," Uncle Roz said, "I certainly enjoyed the visit."

"As did I," Coonrod said. He extended his hand to Uncle Roz. "It's always nice to talk to a man who served in the war. Won't be another one like it."

"Let's pray you're right," said Uncle Roz, and released the man's hand.

"It wasn't *all* bad times, though," Mr. Coonrod said. "We did have our good moments as well, didn't we?"

"That we did." Uncle Roz showed him a slight, but sly smile.

Mr. Coonrod turned to me. He flashed his teeth. "Keep up the good work on that fiddle, young man. I enjoyed your playing tremendously."

I was unaccustomed to any sort of praise, though, and wasn't just right sure how best to handle the matter. I dropped my eyes for a time, but by and by, I overcame my awkwardness. "Yes sir. I intend to, and thanks for the compliment." I figured mom would've been right pleased, had she been there.

Mr. Coonrod turned and walked off into the darkness, with Jack following him, leading the panther. I watched them until the dark, tangled forest swallowed them whole.

Later, I told Uncle Roz of the plan Cal and I'd cooked up of helping out with Mr. McKenzie's haying so I could go see Coonrod's *other* circus creatures, and a troubled look stole over his face. He removed his tattered old fedora, ran his fingers through his hair, and finally said, "Your brother Leon's fixin' to get married two weeks from now. Denton is taking a job at the railroad. Your pap is goin' to be left with no help."

"Who says?"

"He was here while you was gone," Uncle said. "Arthur says you need to get on home, Scotlin. He needs your help."

I couldn't have felt much worse had he kicked me in the stomach. How was I to give up this place, this river, the fun times I enjoyed every summer? I couldn't go home. Not yet. Not until school commenced. Speaking of school—how could I face it alone without Calvin?

"No, Uncle," was all I could say, and even then I knew in my soul I'd just sounded like a spoiled brat, which was exactly what Mr. McKenzie had called me. My scalp crawled about then like a snake.

Uncle Roz filled his pipe, found a twig, held it in the flames of the campfire until it flamed bright, and lit up. By and by, he had the thing squeaking like a granary full of mice. He placed his old hat upon a knee and said, "Shooey now, boy, is that anyway for a feller to talk?"

I dropped my head, shamed.

"You're nigh grown," he said. "When I was your age, I was busy cuttin' white oak stave bolts to sell to the whiskey distillers. Perhaps you consider yourself some sort of crowned head, and don't have to work."

"No sir."

"Then you just fix your mind to get on home to help your pap. While you're at it, it wouldn't hurt you a bit to sort of keep an eye on your mam. Help her out ever' time you get a chance. Those good people are your folks, after all. They don't owe you nothin', but you owe them a bunch.

"Now Arthur Bright didn't say you had to jump up right this minute and get on back home … but it's comin', so just fix your mind to do so when it gets here. Your dad says he's goin' to be forced to buy modern equipment, tractor, hay baler, rake, the whole works. All because his boys are leavin' home.

You'll be gone off to school, and Arthur can't run the farm in the old way by himself. So he's fixin' to modernize. One of the banks in town is still offerin' loans 'spite of the gloomy mess everything is in these days.

"Now sir, if you're askin' my permission to go to the McKenzie's and help out over there so you can go to town to see the elephants, you've got 'er.

"Now, let's get up and go run them trotlines. It looks like we visited away our first nap with that circus feller."

This news cheered me up—well, that and the prospect that perhaps tonight we might just catch that big old blue cat.

The next morning, I pulled on a pair of overalls that had fewer holes in them than those I wore daily, and then slipped my feet into my too tight brogans and lit out for the McKenzie's upon the same route of the previous night's journey, which had been so terrifying in the darkness. Strange, how a good hit of bright orange sunshine can turn even the darkest nightmare into a scene of cheerful light, soft shadows and pleasant breezes. The birds were twittering away and singing with such passion I figured they'd soon explode if they didn't release their cheerful load of music, and their singing sounded better than any I'd ever heard before. It was something special to hear, and sent shivers of pleasure up my backbone.

Spears of sunshine pierced the canopy of the jungle. Birdsong and the mystifying vocalization of home cicadas became the dominant daylight sounds, and the scent of sweet smelling flowers, wild roses, mallow, wild honeysuckle, of

damp earth, of nature at the peak of its growth cycle, lingered in the air like the sweet embrace of my mother's arms. Even though the awful thought that I'd soon leave the river for home became a caged beast in my mind—well, right then, I felt like the champ of the whole world. I figured I'd just keep that old beast caged up for as long as possible.

Chapter Eight

The McKenzie's big, two-story rock house stood out boldly against the hillside. It looked like a glossy picture from a magazine. I'd never seen anything to beat it.

Cal sprang barefoot down the front steps of the house as I entered the yard. He broke into a trot toward me.

"Scotlin, you did make it?" he said.

"Why, certainly," I said. "Didn't I say I would?"

He laughed, and a spark of joy fired his eyes. "You sure did, and I see you're a fellow of your word."

"Try to be." I hooked my thumbs beneath the galluses of my overalls figuring to snap them a bit, but the back elastic was long ago washed away, and they just sloshed against my chest as if they were wet.

"I just know we'll get all our hay put up with your help," Cal informed me.

"You did say it's already down and drying, didn't you?"

"Yes," he said. "It's down, dried, and already mounded. All we have to do is load it on the wagon, haul it to the barn, and pitch it in the hayloft."

I heard the gentle slap of loose floorboards, the bright rattle of chains and looked up. A large wagon banged toward us, and a cloud of dust spiraled to the air with the turn of each wheel. The noisy old wagon had racks on the sides high enough to hold plenty of hay. A pair of dark, sleek, well-tended mules pulled the driver, Iona, along at a right fair clip. The mules' feet—like the wagon—stirred the dust in large puffs that hung heavy above their heads, and lingered long in the sweet joy of the morning's early light. The morning air had about it the tang of cool dewdrops slumbering upon fat blackberries ripened to the fullest measure by the sun.

Iona stood up there in front, as if she were the ramrod of the entire show. She held the reins in hand in an expert grip. Mr. McKenzie stood balanced on a narrow plank right next to her. He held a gruff face, as per usual.

Iona's long glossy hair, with red streaks mixed in with the dominant black, was wound atop her head today, and it sort of changed her looks, but it sure didn't make her any less of a dandy-looker. It would've taken much more than a slight change of hairstyle to do that. It was odd though. She stood there proud as a jaybird, guiding those mules bare of foot. Shoot fire, I was the only youngster there who had on shoes. Aww well, there was nothing to do about that mistake now, I figured, and anyway I still felt sort of embarrassed to go barefoot in front of her.

Iona leaned back against the reins and drew the mules to a halt, then looked straight down into my eyes. She was dressed for the field, in an old gray dress with dungarees beneath it, and a shirt with long sleeves that likely belonged to Calvin,

which looked sturdy enough to protect her arms from the sun, the scratches of briars, rough grass and, of course, hay.

She smiled shyly, and I returned her smile. I longed to hear her voice, but she kept that to herself, to my misfortune.

"Well, looks as if I got myself some extra help," Mr. McKenzie declared in his big bullish voice. He sounded downright happy at the prospect of a long day of hard work. "How'd it happen you tore yourself away from the river and your uncle, bub?"

"I thought I'd come help you get your hay in," I said. "Uncle Roz knows how to handle himself alone, I suppose."

"You don't reckon he'll be lonesome down there by himself, do you?" the old man said.

"I ain't right sure Uncle Roz ever gets lonely, sir."

Mr. McKenzie laughed loudly at this. "Not likely, long as he's got his jug close by."

This drove my cheerful mood into the ground deep as a corner post. And just as I was beginning to like that noisy, pushy-voiced old-timer.

"Well, if you're going with us, hop in the back," he said. "We got a lot of hay down we need to toss in the barn loft. Feels like it might rain any second."

Rain was the traditional dread every farmer felt on setting out to put up his hay. I'd heard that beat-up, dented old complaint all my life. I looked upward. If there was a cloud in that entire full blue sky then likely, it hadn't yet crossed the county line, because it was pure blue from border to border.

I hopped in back with Cal. We dangled our feet over the edge, riding backward, and watched the McKenzie house diminish in size with every turn of the wheels. We rode along, not talking for a while, listening to the creak of the

wagon, the jangle of the chains, the snuffle of the mules, and the raucous laughter of the old man up front with Iona. Mr. McKenzie sounded much like a tribe of crows in the midst of a blood feud.

The dust rode up into the sky in thin, golden-haired luster. The morning felt special, full of freshness, new life, and originality. It had a different flavor from that of a morning on the river, but it too was velvety and good. Sweet, gentle air licked my skin like a puppy's tongue, and the promises of the new day were endless.

Cal and I hit the ground at the gate in a hard-run footrace. That cussed old gate had lost its bluff over me. I knew every time I opened it from now on it'd grow easier. I'd mastered that dread for all time.

We both reached the gate at the same time, and dropped it in a quick blink. Iona tapped the reins gently on the mules' rumps, clucked to them, and drove on through. We set the gate back up, piled onto the back of the wagon again and trundled on. The wheels lifted the heavy dust and rode it around the metal tires then dropped it back onto the ground in the same process used by waterwheels.

We reached our destination, and stopped at the edge of that monstrous field. Hay mounds by the *millions* lay strewn about out there like litter left behind by a tornado. It looked as if the field might run on forever. It didn't of course, but to me—used to seeing fields of only a few acres—it was most certainly an impressive, intimidating spectacle. I tried to count the hayricks, but it was too difficult a task. I saw no way we'd ever be able to pick up all that hay in only two days' time.

Calvin stood alongside me with his chest thrown out, hands on hips. "All we have to do, Scotlin, is toss it on the wagon, haul it to the barn, and pitch it in the hayloft."

Well sir, the sight of all that hay didn't frighten him even a little bit. A wide smile stretched his face like a jack-o-lantern with a candle someone had stuck inside and fired with a match.

I stood there, lower jaw fallen down, and felt like a puppet with a broken drawstring. Then my stomach turned over like the big bad wolf from the old storybook rolling end-over-end downhill in the butter churn. I thought for sure I'd let myself in for a mighty fall. I didn't want Calvin to see doubt and despair written all over my face, so I threw out my chest and set myself for a mighty crow like the little red rooster.

"Oh," I shouted, "is this all you got? Why Calvin, I thought sure you said you had hay to put up."

Mr. McKenzie stepped down from the wagon, and when he did so, the wagon pitched a fit. It rocked on long after his feet hit the ground. His chest stretched his overalls until I felt the bib would surely burst at the seams. His hands were even larger than Uncle Roz's, and Uncle has uncommonly large hands. He was easily the largest man I'd ever seen.

"Well, boys" he bellowed, "they ain't no whistle goin' to blow. Grab up them pitchforks. We got to beat this rain."

I glanced skyward again. I saw nary a cloud in that tearful blue sky.

I worked like a demon for the first few minutes in my best effort to impress Iona and soon covered myself in dust and hay but, before long, I slowed the pace to keep from passing out. I glanced at Mr. McKenzie and Cal. They were both still

hot after it. As far as I could tell, they hadn't even so much as thought of the water jug yet. But my mouth was already parched dry as tinder.

I gritted my teeth, forked, and tossed hay again. I sure wasn't going to be first to run for the water jug—not if I could help it. I set my mind firm about that. Then, on a level stretch of ground, if you could ever truly call any stretch of ground in Ozora County level, Iona jumped down, and pitched hay right alongside of us. Occasionally, she'd raise her head from her work to check on the progress of the mules, and if needed, she'd whistle sharply to set the brutes aright.

When I saw that girl on the ground with us, it lent me strength, and my thoughts of thirst faded fast away. Then, as soon as we hit a hilly stretch again, she ran for the wagon to keep the mules honest, even though they were good creatures and properly trained. Cal clambered onto the wagon bed before long, and dragged the hay all the way to the front to make room for more. This allowed the stack to grow higher instead of outward.

I started mooning over Iona again. Then the first thing I knew, the wagon was loaded so heavily the mules were straining hard against the harness, lifting their forefeet high, shoving with their heavily-muscled hindquarters in order to turn the wheels.

Presently, Mr. McKenzie, in his grating voice, yelled out, "Whoa back on them mule-creatures, Iona girl." The wagon creaked to a halt. "We got us a load of hay on. Now, let's get 'er to the barn."

She swung the wagon about and we rolled off toward the barn. The sounds the wagon made with a load on were entirely

different from those it made while empty. It now rubbed in a bass voice. The high voice, the squeak and jingle it'd made earlier, had disappeared. This was because the weight of the hay didn't allow any vibration or loose movement of the boards of the bed, as it had while empty.

Cal and I walked behind the wagon and watched its slow progress. It heaved heavily to one side then rolled slowly back onto center. At every little dip in the road, I expected to see the hay dump onto the road. The trip was slow and painful, but eventually, we made it to the gate. Cal and I ran on ahead and opened it in advance of the wagon, so the mules wouldn't have to stop, for they might just take a liking to the breather and settle down there for the duration.

Rabbits ran about every which way in the field, as if they were searching for the deep grass that'd been there before the old man cut it down. We chased off after a few of them for sport. They were summer rabbits, of course, and weren't fit to eat yet, awaiting the first freeze of fall to sweeten the meat and kill the wolves in their necks. We swapped tales as we scuffed through the thick dust. Cal wasn't much of a storyteller though, and this forced me to do most of that business all by my lonesome. All in all, yarning was a great way to bedevil time.

I told Cal of how Uncle Roz had caught that big blue catfish. How it'd put him in the river, of the fierce duel they'd waged there in the water with him neck deep alongside the boat, and how the fish had come close to drowning him.

"Now," I said, "had I been along, that wouldn't have happened, for Uncle Roz'd had no one to steady the boat for

him. That, of course, would've been my part to play in the fracas. I would've saved the day."

Calvin's eyes grew big. He stepped closer to hear better, but why, I couldn't really tell. Lordy, I was talking so loud it was likely the old-timers on the loafers' bench over at Hay's store in Blackeye had heard me tell the tale too.

The sky was blue, the air still fresh and cool from the night, and the wagon rubbed on like a bass fiddle toward the barn. The dust was a halo in the sun above the wagon. My chest filled up with the good sweet air. I was well fed, with a belly full of fish fillets and cornbread. I walked alongside a good friend who didn't mind my rambling tales, and even acted at times as if he enjoyed them. I was filled with such terrific energy I felt I could fly. I didn't though, but only because I had no wings to flap, so I flapped my lips as much as possible, which somehow didn't provide the proper lift required to launch my weight free of the ground. Next, I told the adventure we'd had last night with the panther. I finished, and Cal took me by the crook of an arm. This stopped me, and we faced each other.

"Scotlin, are you honestly on the square? Or might you just be pulling my leg?"

"It's the honest truth, Calvin," I told him. "Why don't you believe me?"

Cal sighed then and sank back into his normal stance. "I do believe you, but if I were you I don't think I would tell that particular story to just everyone. Some folks might not know you as well as I do, and accuse you of fibbing."

Calvin had been hanging his head a lot since he learned he wasn't going to go to high school. I hated to see him in such a dark mood, which fostered a bad thought or two about

Mr. McKenzie, but I took them right back. I knew my mom definitely wouldn't like that sort of thing. For even though she wasn't there as a witness, I still felt her presence, and right heavy.

I was a boy who hated injustice, and Calvin was being done one, I figured. Not only that, but that hateful old soul just didn't want Cal to have any fun. This, too, was an act of injustice. I saw a cruel wrong I needed to right. But how could I carry off such a feat? That'd take much more than mere want-to and dedication, I decided. So I let the matter run off and hide from me for the time. For I'd noticed in the past that if I gave my mind a rest, the answer I sought often sprang up on its own.

We walked on, climbing a steep rise, but when the McKenzie's spread—the large, extravagant rock house, huge barn, all the neat outbuildings, came into sight—Cal shook off his dejection.

"Come on," he challenged. "Let's see who can reach the barn first."

I lit out for all I was worth, and made it interesting there at first, but soon it was all I could do just to keep him in a rock's throw. By the time I reached the barn, my legs were hot afire. The coolness of the night had fled. The sun looked like a hot bowl of yellow pudding, and the sky had turned from intense blue to a much paler shade, as if the heat had watered down the paint with which it'd been tinted.

Cal and I tossed the hay up from the wagon into the loft while Mr. McKenzie, above us, dragged it back against the south wall. We finished the unloading, and Cal and I climbed to the loft as well, and helped that brash old soul drag hay. It

was brutally hot up there, even though the ceiling towered high above our heads. There was a large family of pigeons living at its highest point. A few feathers drifted lazily to the floor, and the pigeons flapped about up there, creating a racket and raising a fantastic cloud of dust.

At last, we climbed to the ground, done with the dragging and stacking, which felt good. I was wet with sweat, and couldn't lay a finger on any part of my clothes that was dry. I was as soaked as if I'd been caught in a thunderstorm, or had entered a waterfall, the way those brave hearts had done in that fine old book by James Fennimore Cooper. But since I was wet, I felt somewhat cooler. My whistle, however, was as dry as a wren's nest, and I would've given about all I owned for a good cool sip of water. No one made a move for the water jug yet though, and since I didn't want to be the first to break down, I didn't make the move either.

Later, back in the hayfield, I looked at the many mounds of hay still on the ground and felt beaten. I decided that in order to survive I'd have to find a way not to look at all that hay. It was simply too much for a mortal boy to look upon such a daunting challenge and to plan ahead with anything resembling a positive result.

That tactic must've helped, because it seemed no time at all until we had the second load on the wagon and were rolling for the barn. Cal and I walked behind the wagon as we had the first time. I prayed every step of the way for Iona not to hit a large stone or a rough bump in the road and dump our load on the ground. If that happened, I figured there'd be no way to overcome such cruel adversity.

We worked away in the heat, transferred the hay from the wagon up into the loft, and it taxed my strength all the time. By and by, we emptied the wagon once more.

The patient mules remained out in the sun. I heard them stomping the earth every time a horsefly bit their legs. The harness chains jingled loud like bells with each foot stomp. We climbed to the hayloft then and helped Mr. McKenzie drag hay. None of us spoke a word in the awful heat and thick boils of dust.

I grew so parched I didn't see how in the name of sanity I could move another muscle unless I took on water. But I didn't see any, and marveled at the extraordinary human beings I'd signed on with. Cal and his father seemed to need no water. I was happy for Iona, because with every wagonload, she parked the wagon beneath the hayloft, and walked to the porch and sat in the shade until we finished.

Slowly now, we trudged back out to the field for our third load. I looked at the sky, and prayed for noon, but from the position of the sun, I knew it'd be a sizeable time yet before we hit our dinner break. The sun didn't move a lick in the sky. That vast, overheated sun swelled up and looked about to burst, which seemed biblical to me. We slaved on and on beneath the brutal white-hot glare as it baked the hayfield. Distant ghostly fingers of heat lifted from the earth in waves, and the waves swayed away like skinny, transparent saplings in a breeze. Every step I took was an enormous task. I soon suspected I'd not last until noon. Then shortly after this thought, I doubted I'd survive long enough to finish the third load. It got so bad that soon I doubted I'd be able to toss up the next forkful. I worked as slow as a marble in a feeble fall

to the bottom of a jar of molasses, and my mind was dumb as dumb ever gets.

But I did toss on the next forkful, and the one after, as well as the next one. I was unsure just how I did so, though. The thing of it was, I hated to concede in front of my good friends. I especially didn't want to show weakness in front of Iona. I managed to hang on till we finally loaded the wagon again.

Cal and I followed the wagon back to the barn. He didn't speak to me. I didn't speak to him. The freshness, charm, and youth of the new day had faded away completely. I felt as cheerless and as without hope as a convict on a work gang. We slogged on up to the barn.

Iona parked the wagon beneath the hayloft, hopped to the ground, reached out and touched my arm, which turned me iceberg-cold.

"Scotlin," she cooed, "do you want a nice cool drink of water?"

Perhaps I was delirious. Perhaps the sun had fried my brain. Perhaps it was because she'd just touched me, for with that unexpected brief sliding touch, water fell far down on the list of things most important to me. I glanced briefly at Cal. He stood there with his face a blank mask. I looked at Mr. McKenzie. He didn't look thirsty. As a matter-of-fact, the old man looked at me with scorn. He seemed to say—without a word—that I just better not be so puny, so good-for-nothing, as to touch water to my lips this early in the day.

I turned again to Iona. Her charm led me off the proper path. I shook my head, and threw out my chest.

"No," I told her. "I'm not really thirsty yet. Maybe later. Thanks."

She smiled at me like a heavenly angel. My heart soared to celestial heights. Before I realized it, new life rushed back

into my leathery, parched body, and this lightened my soul. I received a sudden shot of energy, which I felt should be impossible at this stage in my dehydration and near-death by sunstroke. She then asked her father if he wanted a drink. That old miser stared hard at me for a time, to measure me for weakness, or so it seemed.

He turned those awful eyes from me, and said, "No. Not just yet. I 'spect I can wait a spell."

"Cal?"

Well, it was easy to see Cal had a whole lot of fight left in him. He shook his head, and his mop of hair flew out of his eyes and off his forehead, spraying forth a shower of sweat all the while. Iona showed her bright teeth in a wide smile, and jogged on up toward the porch. I watched her until she reached the shade. The porch looked as cool to me and inviting as anything I'd ever witnessed in my life. I climbed on top of the load, and pitched hay. My body, however, throbbed and pulsed like a toothache, and because Iona had left us, my spirits soon flagged like a sail with no wind to fly it. When at last we'd tossed all the hay in the loft, and climbed up to help the old man drag it back, my hip pockets fairly dragged the floorboards.

Finished in the loft, we padded on back to the hayfield. Even the mules lifted and dropped their feet with diminished strength. It was mighty slow work for me to simply to set one foot before the next one.

I had no idea what the actual temperature was in the hayfield, but I knew I'd never experienced such brutal heat before, and the hayloft was that much hotter. I felt my face

drawing tighter and tighter with fresh sunburn, as I gasped fishlike for air.

All the early morning rabbits had taken to shade. They were far wiser than we were. My confidence was gone. The chatter, atmosphere and warm fellowship Cal and I'd shared earlier was also gone. All I felt now was the eternal drudgery of hard work. The sun struck my face like an angry snake from a sky that was yellow-white. I bit my lower lip, put one foot before the other one, and plodded on in a desperate attempt to survive.

Survive, I did. I looked up once and discovered we were back at the barn, ready to unload the wagon again. Mr. McKenzie stood in the skinny shade of the loaded wagon wiping his brow with a wide blue handkerchief, stopping on occasion to wring it out. Sweat fell to earth from it like rain with enough force I actually heard it splash onto the ground. Cal stood next to his father, hoping to catch a little shade the old tyrant's body was casting, the way it looked.

As for me, I'd gone far too long in the sun. I no longer felt interested in shade. What shade the wagon provided was mighty poor anyway. At this hour, the sun stood nearly overhead. Mr. McKenzie put up his handkerchief, stood, and studied me with the same look of scorn he'd earlier demonstrated.

Then, Iona stepped around the end of the wagon. Mr. McKenzie shook his head, and looked greatly puzzled.

"Fetch the water jug, Iona girl."

Well, right then, I nigh fainted.

I'd already given up on him and Cal. Iona sprang for the water jug, and returned with an earthenware jug laced tightly in thin laths of willow insulation.

The old man took it up, pried out the stopper. The wooden stopper popped loud. Shoot, even that squishy *pop* refreshed me a bit. He hefted it to his lips, flung back his head and took a drink. It was an almighty drink indeed, which reminded me of a mule attempting to drink the creek dry. I heard the jug sing and purr away for the longest time. After a bit, though, he lowered it, and handed it to Cal. Cal took it, peered at me for a split second, and commenced a drink that wasn't quite as impressive as his father's, but was a colossal chug all the same. Mr. McKenzie stared at me from quizzical eyes. He wiped his lips with the back of a hand in an unhurried manner then shook his head.

"Bub, anybody ever accuse you of being part camel?" he said.

"No sir," I said. I eyed the water jug, and looked with envy at Cal. He took another mighty draught. "Not that I can recall."

I was about to weep for need of water. If I didn't take on some right away, I'd die before noon, unless I passed out and happened to fall inside a rain barrel, which, with my luck, didn't seem at all possible.

"I ain't never seen nobody take the heat the way you do, bub," Mr. McKenzie said. "Don't know how you do it, but you're sure 'nough a mule for durable."

Well, it struck me then, and I'd have laughed, but lacked the energy. All the time I'd been waiting for these two to make a break for water, they'd been attempting to outlast me. None of us wanted to be first to break down. It's a wonder we hadn't all been struck down from the heat, and probably should've been for the lack of common sense we'd demonstrated.

Those harsh looks of scorn Mr. McKenzie had given me hadn't been scorn at all. He'd just been hoping to heaven I'd take

a drink so he could have one himself. Then, like a complete fool, I'd earlier passed on my opportunity, and naturally, he let his chance go by as well. He didn't want to lose face, either.

I realized then that chickens have it all over humans in the smarts department, and chickens are about as dumb as you'll likely ever find.

After an eternity, Cal lowered the water jug. He held tight to it, though, with one arm down alongside his body, wooden stopper in hand.

"I reckon you still aren't thirsty yet, huh, Scotlin?" he said, and I detected a trace of deviltry in his voice. I saw he wanted me to suffer. Or even more likely, beg. This old business of gross pride is an affliction only males suffer from, I allowed.

I shifted on my feet, and would've given a shiny fob if only I hadn't screwed myself down into such a tight spot. I wanted that water jug more'n anything in the world, but I hated to give up the illusion I was hickory tough. All I needed do to continue my status as a stalwart hand in the hayfield was shake my head. That'd seal it. Folks would know for all time that I was one whale of a tough hand.

The boy who could cross great deserts without water.

It wasn't true, however, and besides, going without water in this heat could kill a body, namely, me. Why, I'd craved water right from the moment my feet first hit that stubbly hayfield. I wasn't strop-leather tough. Not in the least. All I'd do now if I passed up the water jug again would prove just how truly dumb a brute I really was. I didn't want that label hung on me. In the end, I reached for the jug.

"I do suspect I might be able to force down a drop or two," I told him.

Chapter Nine

Calvin passed me the water jug. I raised it high and drank until I was in danger of drowning. But had I drowned, I doubt it would've been such a bad deal, for that water gushing down into my shrunken belly tasted sweeter than strawberries.

By and by, I lowered the jug. Cal handed over the stopper. I set it in place, and gave it a firm smack with the flat of my palm, and handed it back. He took it and put it up on the wagon.

"Tasty water," I said.

"It ain't nothin' better'n cold water from the well, bub," Mr. McKenzie told me, although I already knew that.

"I've never seen a feller go so long without water," the old man said. "Lord, I waited all morning for you to run for the jug."

Well sir, the old man hadn't yet stumbled upon the truth. If I'd really wanted to be a complete charlatan, cheat and a fake, I could've led him on awhile longer. But the truth be known, I think Cal was onto me already. I realized I was ahead of the pack, so I smiled a smile of innocence, and gave in.

"Waited on me?" I said.

"You bet. Why, I blamed near perished from thirst."

"But, sir, I was waiting for you to drink first. I was about dead from waiting myself."

Mr. McKenzie's eyes flashed and jiggled wildly in their sockets. He opened his mouth to speak, changed his mind, and stared at me till I thought I might go soft in the knees.

"Mom always tells me to watch my manners, Mr. McKenzie," I hurried to explain. "That was the reason I waited on you to drink first."

I shifted on my feet, under the dark burn of that old man's gaze.

"You near killed us all's what you did," he told me. "I 'spect I'll just have to keep my eye on you from here on out." As if he hadn't already been doing just that. He yanked his faded and worn hat down over his wide brow, turned and walked toward the barn, and as he walked off, the old ogre spoke over his shoulder, "Iona, unhitch these mules, lead these old fellers down to the creek for a drink. Now," he continued, "that we've wetted our whistles, maybe we'll be able to get something done 'round here besides dream of water. Let's get this hay in the loft, fellers."

He scurried up the ladder to the loft, stood up there in the doorway, slapping his hands together, and flexing his muscles till they bulged out like some sort of huge growth of the arms, eager now for us to toss him up some hay to drag back. The water made him a much younger man, and he wanted us to know all about it.

Iona smiled sweetly at me as she moved to lead the mules off to the creek. "Mom made a peach cobbler for dinner dessert, Scotlin."

My word, but that girl knew how to charm … and her dark eyes trapped me dead in my tracks—all this, and water too. I was truly overwhelmed with riches.

I stood there as she led the mules toward the creek, and watched her for so long Cal finally became impatient.

"Hey, Scotlin, you still plan to help us pitch this hay in the loft, or are you going to stand around daydreaming all day long?"

We made one more trip to the hayfield, unloaded the wagon, and just then Mrs. McKenzie yodeled loudly from the back porch. Mr. McKenzie announced it time to wash up for dinner.

Cal and I took turns pumping water for him at the well. He lathered up with a piece of yellow soap, which hid his face in foam. He looked like he'd swallowed the entire bar. He moaned and cooed with pleasure as he scrubbed off the dirt of the hayfield and the heat of the day. It took him forever to finish. He stood humped over at the waist, shirtless, and with the gallusses of his overalls down at his sides in a swaying dangle. Watching him, a picture of a hippopotamus in the river Nile sprang up in my mind.

At long last, he finished, toweled off, and lit out for the house. Cal and I took our turn at the well spigot, but it didn't take us anywhere near as long as it'd taken Mr. McKenzie.

Mrs. McKenzie set a table heroic in scale. She outdid herself. To describe it accurately isn't quite possible. That good, big-boned woman set out a beef roast, fried chicken, mashed

potatoes heaped high and steaming in the bowl. There was fried ham, pork chops, sausage patties, corn on the cob, a platter of sliced tomatoes so high it needed sideboards, plenty of fried okra, hominy, watercress from the springhouse, and hot grease with which to wilt it. She'd torn up lettuce into a bowl, put scraped raw carrots with pickles and radishes setting alongside them on a tray, and a huge platter of biscuits next to one of cornbread. She'd also prepared milk gravy, and fried potatoes. A large jar of pickled pigs' feet sat square in the center of the table. I swiveled my head, and saw the sweet goodies on the pie safe in the kitchen, still cooling. Country people weren't suffering as much as city folks in these hard times. This, of course, was because they raised their own food, and so, had plenty to eat.

I'd been inside the McKenzie's treasure house a few times before, but didn't want to be marked as a snoop, and, as such, I hadn't looked around much. But sitting at the table now I had plenty of time, so I did just that, and took in all the wonders that grand house provided.

The living room floor was tongue and groove hardwood. Mrs. McKenzie had put a high gloss shine on the floor that threatened to knock out my eyes. The kitchen floor was of a different material—tile, plotted out in a black and white checkerboard design. All in all, the house was downright majestic and especially grand for country folks.

The heavy porcelain kitchen sink had a hand pump to draw up the water. The sink looked so new and modern I stared at it extra long. The huge dining room table was made of oak—a great affair, with legs that ended with hand-carved lion feet with which it clung to the floor.

Uncle Roz told me he'd once made a table for Mr. McKenzie, but he'd had so much trouble collecting his money he vowed never to make another stick of furniture for anyone unless he held the cash in his paws first. This table, I allowed, was by his hand.

"Let's pray," Mr. McKenzie announced in a sober voice.

I snapped out of my eye travels, and bowed my head reverently. Mr. McKenzie mumbled a few words of thanksgiving I could barely hear—strange, because the normal voice of that old soul could shake walls. It was a quick prayer, and this suited me fine. I figured God heard the old man well enough, though, so I reckoned it was enough to turn the food to the good of the body. At prayers end, I fell to ladling, dipping and plucking at the food as it passed my way, and not just grazing either. I went after it in full sincerity.

That woman's food tasted so good I forgot all about admiring their fine house, and became deeply involved in stretching my stomach muscles. That rough hayfield had turned my every thought to food.

Mrs. McKenzie had set a table to make royalty smile. But just then, Mr. McKenzie scraped back his chair. I saw him look about the table as if things weren't quite plumb. I tried to imagine what in creation could be amiss.

"What is it?" Mrs. McKenzie finally said, in her soft voice. "Whatever is wrong, Stuart?"

"Why, woman," he roared, "where's the redeye?"

I nigh choked on my pork chop before I could swallow in self-defense. What with all the food—I mean that table was full clear to the drop-off, and wouldn't hold even one more cookie—that woman had set out, how could anyone but a

person mollycoddled to death ever gather the rudeness to find anything to fault?

This thought struck me as so amusing I'd have burst out in laughter, but for the fact Mom had cautioned me many times to be sure to watch my manners in the company of grownups.

Redeye gravy, indeed!

Mrs. McKenzie wasn't amused, however. Her face fell, and she looked as if he'd slapped her. Her distress rose from her in a heat wave. She raised her head, and I caught a quick flash of anger in her eyes.

"Must we have redeye at every meal, sir?" she said. I could see she held back a greater fury with much restraint.

"Well, you know how much I enjoy it."

"Shall I get up from my meal right now and make you some?" she said.

"No," he said, grudging his words, "I 'spect not. I reckon I can make do without."

We ate in silence for a few stiff minutes, and then Mrs. McKenzie said, "I'll fix it for supper."

"Bully," he said, and fell to eating like a pirate looting a treasure ship. "Let's eat, boys. We got all this work to do, you know, and I still feel it might rain."

After dinner, we went back to the hayfield, and it was even hotter than it'd been earlier. The sky was clear but the humidity had, by now, mixed in with it in some way that hurt the eye to look out across the field for long. There was nary a breath of air to stir the leaves of the trees.

All that heavy food slowed our pace, for we were all yawning and gaping widely like fish tossed high on the bank. I could've

taken a nap beneath a shade tree if I'd been given the chance, which I wasn't.

Then, after a bit, my food digested sufficiently, and the doldrums set me free. Old man McKenzie had revived now as well.

"Let's hit 'er boys. Before it rains like it did back in Noah's day," he roared.

We worked all the long afternoon in the blast-furnace heat. Then by way of God's great mercy, the sun finally rested atop the thin black line of the horizon. Mr. McKenzie declared we'd done enough *damage* for one day—as he put it.

As we departed the field, I looked back to see just how much we'd accomplished, and was surprised to see that more than half the crop had disappeared from the field.

"We'll get the rest in tomorrow," Cal announced in a cheerful mood. "Then Saturday we will be off for Lyons Beach to see the circus animals."

His enthusiasm rubbed off on me, and I figured I could pretty much survive another day.

I heard Mrs. McKenzie banging on her slop bucket with a stick and calling up the hogs as we finished tossing the hay in the barn loft. Cal took off in a run to assist her. He'd once told me he felt his mother's place was in the house, and hated to see her out feeding the hogs of an evening, even during haying season when the rest of the family worked late and her help with the evening chores became a necessity.

"Get them mules out of harness, Iona," Mr. McKenzie said.

He needn't have said a word. Iona was already deep into that project. She started crawling in between, under and around the mules. She talked to them as she worked as if

they were kin. Iona had a special skill with the mules I truly enjoyed witnessing.

I went to help, but one of the mules took offense. He kicked at me, but to my good fortune, he narrowly missed. I guess he figured I'd stepped my foot in where it had no business.

"Herbert," Iona scolded. "Shame on you. Scotlin's a guest of ours. That's no way to treat him.

"Watch out for Herbert, Scotlin. He likes to kick at strangers. Hoover's okay, though. He'll let you come around, but you better just stand and watch. I'll be through here in no time at all."

She stripped off the harness, but the team just stood there. I figured all along they'd toss their tails high like deer and take off for the pasture, but they didn't. They looked as if they had no better place to be than to linger in her presence. I figured they were right smart creatures, because I liked to hang around her myself, and shoot, I was a graduate of grade school, considered educated by many. They were waiting for more. She rubbed them down with an empty burlap sack, then, when finished, she flapped her hands over her head and shouted, "Hie now. Hie on out of here." They fled the barn lot to the pasture where they rolled like colts in the grass.

Iona turned and headed back inside the barn, and I helped her hang up the harness. "Help me gather the eggs, Scotlin," she said. "Before Mr. Leo sucks them all down."

I'd forgotten all about Mr. Leo.

It took us about twenty minutes to snoop out all the eggs. Iona knew all the nesting spots, even those the hens tried to hide out for hatching. Soon, we were bound for the house

lugging an egg basket between us nearly a third full with fresh, brown eggs. The McKenzies sold all their eggs at market, above what they kept for their own use, that is. They had several full cases in storage inside the creamery built onto the back porch. The cream and egg truck stopped by every other day to pick up the eggs, along with the accumulated milk cans of cream. We set the eggs inside and hustled back outdoors.

Mr. McKenzie stood at the well pump with his face, hands, arms and chest lathered up thick with foamy soap. He looked like he'd fallen into a full creamery vat. He didn't see us as we passed. I felt a great surprise to hear him singing "Farther Along" with wild enthusiastic abandonment. His voice was so vibrant and energetic it tickled the soles of my feet. He wasn't much of a singer, of course, but he certainly gave that old song a rare good try, and to me, that was a mark in his favor. "Farther along we'll know all about it…." he sang. He was really getting after it.

"Here comes Mom and Cal," Iona said. "Come on."

She set off in a run to meet them as if headed for the candy case at Hay's store, and I lit out behind her, not caring where we went. I just wanted to be with her, to see her black, red-streaked hair springing off her shoulders, to see those blazing black eyes, the dimpled cheeks that showed to her advantage when she flashed her bright teeth in a happy smile.

She was beginning to develop as a woman, but I didn't care if she was older and more mature. She was the one for me. My lungs filled with sweetness made up of much more than simple oxygen every time I stepped close to her. I felt a time or two I might have to fill my pockets with scrap iron to keep from floating off into the sky.

Cal and his mom'd just finished feeding the pigs, and were walking toward the house by the time we caught up to them.

"Cal," Mrs. McKenzie said, "run on now and fetch a couple of towels and a bar of soap. You boys'll need to go to the creek to wash off. Dirty as you two are, my sheets'd be ruined if you tried sleeping beneath them that away, and I won't have that. Now get along. There's still enough time before supper, if you hurry."

Cal rushed off to the house, but I walked along with Iona and her mom.

Then at the back porch Mrs. McKenzie said, "Get on, Iona. Fetch down the tub. You're 'bout dirty as the boys. You'll need to fill it to the rim to scrub clean."

Iona and her mom bathed in a tub, somewhere in the mysterious interior of that big rock house. Exactly where, I had no idea. Cal bounded down the steps just then, and tossed me a thick towel. I caught it out of the air, and chased after him into and out of the deep purple shadows of the fast approaching night.

"If we hurry," he shouted back, "we can swim awhile before we have to wash up."

We ran even faster, jumped ditches, and leapt bushes much like deer and other wild creatures of the forest. We had a fun time at the creek, but it ended when Mrs. McKenzie yelled down that supper was ready.

Mrs. McKenzie, set another fine table that night. Mr. McKenzie had his redeye gravy this time, although I noticed he ate but little of it, and this puzzled me.

Mrs. McKenzie had baked a type of shortcake I'd never tasted before, which set at the bottom of a deep bowl, and was

covered with sweetened blackberries topped off by fresh, thick cream. It was so delicious I figured I'd still be able to taste it the rest of my life.

Later, Iona cleared and cleaned the table. Cal took down the Chinese checkerboard. We played a few games to the rhythm of Mrs. McKenzie in the parlor ripping up rags for a quilt she planned to make in the cold winter months. Iona sat close by with a book in hand. Old man McKenzie sat in his big stuffed chair, and catnapped over a bulky edition of McInturf's World Geography that lay upon his lap.

At nine o'clock, the loud chimes of the large cleverly built freestanding clock in the hall boomed loudly like someone thumping on a gong. Mrs. McKenzie put away her work then, and took down her bible. She shook awake her husband, pointed him toward the bedroom, and sat down next to the lamp to read her bible.

"Calvin," She said, "bedtime. Iona, you too."

Chapter Ten

Off we clunked, right on up the stairs. Iona led the way, lamp in hand. Cal and I dragged along behind like cows' tails. I wondered what the sleeping arrangements were, and soon found out.

At home, the upstairs section of our house wasn't partitioned off, but was just one large room that held the boys' beds and for the storage of things that needed to be kept dry. But old man McKenzie had framed out their upstairs into separate bedrooms, and finished all the rooms. It was much like one complete house sitting atop another one.

Iona paused at the door to her room, lamp held high. She waited while Cal entered his own room, and lit his table lamp. She smiled sweetly at me, stepped inside and snapped her door shut. I stood in the hallway, and stared about at all the hardwood flooring beneath my feet, which shone like glare ice in the faint glow of lamplight from Cal's room. I marveled at the walls of dark walnut. I imagined that I was standing in the cabin section of a rich sailing ship upon the ocean.

"Come on in," Cal said. This snapped me out of my nomadic mental travels.

I stepped inside, and saw a huge bed with a feather tick and pillows, which looked fit for a prince.

We climbed into bed. I sank down into that soft mattress as if I'd fallen off a mountaintop onto a cloud. Cal had flung up the window earlier, and a cool breeze ruffled the drapes as it entered the room and chased away the heat of the day. Right off, Calvin started snoring, at peace with the world. One of my big toes started hurting. I figured it likely that a blister had popped up on it. I didn't want to disturb anyone, so I gritted my teeth and took the pain. Outside, the hardwood jungle that surrounded the house overflowed now with the sounds of whippoorwills, insects and other nighttime creatures. Way off, a cow lowed sadly. This made me feel lowdown for a moment. So I said my prayers, and fell into a deep sleep that I reckoned only the young and the unblemished enjoy.

Mere minutes later, or so it seemed, I awoke to great charging whistles like those which explode from a locomotive. Mr. McKenzie stood at the bottom of the stairs, whistling and shouting to wake the devil.

"Iona, girl," he yelled. "Get up now, and help your mam. Cal, get out of that bed. You're wastin' valuable time. We got these chores to do, you know. You too, bub. I ain't runnin' no boardin' house here. I want to hear them feet strike that floor, posthaste."

Cal hit the floor in a bound, grabbed up his trousers, and dressed in the blink of an eye. I was close behind. I drew on my overalls, my shirt, and stuck my foot into a sock. The sock

bit me. At least that's how it felt. I removed it and discovered a large, painful blister on my big toe from where my brogans fit too tight. It was aching, and pulsating like a pump knot on an unfortunate head. I went ahead, though, put my sock back on and drew on my shoe. I tried my best to ignore the pain, and followed Cal downstairs.

Mr. McKenzie was out feeding the "fattening pigs"—those he feed twice a day to fatten up to ship to market later on—as we rushed outside. It was nearly impossible to tell just who made the most noise, the hogs or him. I'd never heard a louder racket in my life. The old man beat on the side of the slop bucket with a stick creating a terrific drum roll, and shouting at the top of his lungs. This drove the hogs crazy with the anticipation of a fine feast of slops. They squealed their greed in a mad chase every which way up and down the fence line. Their frantic feet churned up the dirt. A thick dust cloud appeared as white as Mrs. McKenzie's clean sheets against the glow of the coal-oil lantern Mr. McKenzie carried, for it was still a right smart time yet before honest light. Oscar, their enormous Poland China boar, attempted to break down the pigs' pen, but Mr. McKenzie had built it a bear for stout, and this defeated him, but he screamed so loud it nearly burst my eardrums.

I followed Cal out to the field behind the barn, where they pastured the milk cows and segregated them from the beef cattle or the whitefaces, as we liked to call them. Cal laid down the gate, set it aside so those sleek, black-and-white cows wouldn't get tangled in it passing through on their way to the barn.

"Soo-cow. Soo-cow. Soooooo," Cal called softly, and I joined in.

They stepped out of the dark pasture into the lantern light one at a time, as if they'd just been assembled there at the outer limits of the enchanting light. They knew their parts well, and waited patiently in the barn as we followed the last animal inside.

We took down the sweet feed, and poured it into a long trough that stood perhaps two feet off the ground, which ran the length of the barn's interior. I counted an even dozen cows, all Holsteins, lined in a row just as pretty as you like. Their coats glistened in the dim lamplight. Well-mannered animals they were, and docile as pets. They stood waiting for their grain, and for the relief they'd receive from the milking, which would ease the pressure on their heavy, swollen milk bags.

Then we started milking.

Long before I'd stripped my first cow, Cal finished his. He strode across the room to the granary and emptied the milk into a shiny steel cream stand. He seated himself on the stool again, and made the milk fly on his second animal. I heard the force of the milk striking the inside of his bucket in a cross between a baritone and a bass voice. Cal made it sing a spirited tune. He was a great worker, no matter what job he took to. Little wonder his father didn't want him to go off to school. Where could he find a better hand? On top of that, he was free help.

But I still hoped Mr. McKenzie would relent and allow Calvin to go to high school. It was hard to cling to such a wish, though. Especially, since I remembered Uncle Roz telling me that when Mr. McKenzie set his mind there was nothing

that would change it. I saw little hope for success. Hope dies hard, though, and sometimes miracles do happen, as the old saying maintains.

After breakfast, Cal and I went to the woodlot, split and hauled in kindling for the cook stove. We stacked the wood box so high it wouldn't hold another stick. It was full daylight by now, and I saw Mr. McKenzie sitting upon a flat slab of limestone beneath a hickory tree in the yard. He had his shoes off, massaging his feet, smoking his pipe all the while. I'd never seen a grown man remove his shoes before bedtime. When my father removed his shoes, it was at nighttime, and never in between.

"Aww, Dad's got poor circulation," Cal said. "The doctor told him to slow down, but, of course, he won't listen. Told him to stop smoking too. He didn't take that advice either, as you can see."

"What's it mean—poor circulation?" I wondered aloud.

"It has to do with how the blood flows through the body," Cal said. "Uncle James, Dad's brother, used to have his shoes off rubbing his feet all the time when he was here on a visit. He had a stroke last summer. He's still down from it. They say he might never be the same man."

Iona whizzed off down the path just then so fast the wind she created in passing stirred my hair.

"She's going to the barn to hitch the mules to the wagon," Cal said.

"You reckon I ought to lend her a hand?"

He shook his head. "Naw, she doesn't need any help. She's the best hand on the place with horses and mules."

Cal dashed my plans for me. When she passed from sight, I said, "I don't think Mr. McKenzie will ever get sick like his brother did."

"I hope not," Cal said. "But what makes you say that?"

I wanted to tell him his father was too ornery for any puny illness to strike him down, but I didn't.

"He's too filled with life. He works like he's twenty. He's far too healthy for anything like that to creep up on him."

We finished all the chores, and stood waiting for Iona to wheel up in the wagon and pick us up for the hayfield.

"You know," Cal said, "if Dad wanted to, he could make things a whole lot easier here than they are. There are farmers in Ozora County now who use tractors instead of mules, and bale their hay instead of breaking their backs pitching it loose into the barn loft. I know for a fact he can afford modern farming equipment if he wanted it."

"That's what my dad plans to do," I said. "He figures with his sons heading for the city to find work and go to school, he better get with the times."

Cal shook his overburdened head. "Our old farm used to be one of the most productive in the county. But what with all the new farming methods in use today, folks in the area have passed us. It isn't enough to just work hard nowadays … modern equipment is the way to go. It took Dad forever just to buy a truck, and he still doesn't use it half as much as he should. He won't even allow me to learn to drive it."

Cal had put a lot of thought into this, the way it sounded.

"Just look at us, putting up hay—loose, the way it has been done since bible times. Look at all the hard work, the time that goes into the job this way. A man with a tractor and mower

could have downed all our hay in just a few hours. It took Dad and me an entire day to cut it, spread it, let it dry, and mound it. Square bales are much easier to handle, and they don't take up as much room in the loft. They are easy to arrange so you can get to them when you need to."

"You ever talk to him about all this, Cal?"

Cal nodded. "Sure I have. He tells me to work harder, and to keep my trap shut. He said when he was a young man at home his dad and brother had the best farm around, all because of their hard work.

"Dad's stuck in the old ways. He has his mind back in the old days. He's getting older, too. He can't work as hard as he once could. Even in my memory. But I see no way to convince him of this."

He paused now, and drew a deep breath. I'd never heard him string so many words together in one sitting in all the time I'd known him. His face smoothed out finally, and it seemed he'd released a lot of bitterness with this speech.

"But as hardheaded and heavy-handed as he is, I still love him for all he has accomplished with little more than his two hands. He built a fine farm here, a stout barn, solid outbuildings, a fine house, and did much of the work by himself. He was tops in his day, but we are living in a new day, a new era. Dad just can't see it."

"Time's a-wastin', boys," Mr. McKenzie bellowed, getting to his feet, finished now with his foot massage. "We got a lot of work to do, you know."

"Just look at that old man," Calvin said. "I love him so much I could just cry."

Mr. McKenzie whooped loudly again and walked off toward the road, where Iona had just wheeled up the wagon. "They ain't no whistle goin' to blow boys, and it looks much like rain. I swear it does."

"Come on, Scotlin," Cal said, mimicking his father, but laughing freely as well. "There ain't no whistle going to blow, and we got all this work to do, you know."

"And it looks much like rain," I added. Cal laughed heartily at this.

We stepped out then and jumped onto the back of the wagon.

It was plenty hot on this second day of haying, but because we weren't on a water-fast as we'd been yesterday, the work went much easier. As for me, I was getting used to all the hard work. My hands were already callused from swinging an axe for campfire wood on the river, and from paddling the boat. If not for the blister on the big toe of my right foot, I'd have felt just fine. The toe, though, hurt like fire. I tried to let on nothing was wrong. It grew tiresome though. Iona caught me a time or two as I limped along. Mr. McKenzie saw me hobbling as well, and once he even fixed his mouth to say something. I figured he probably wanted to accuse me of shirking, but finally he turned his gaze from me and went on with his work. I sure didn't feel like getting raked over the coals right then.

We worked steadily away, sweated, and got covered in the loose hay that fell from our forks as we pitched it high onto the wagon or up into the barn loft. Then, along about mid-morning, Mr. McKenzie called a break. We both had so much hay on us that Cal and I looked like the Straw Man straight off the pages our old third-grade reader.

We stood in the shade of the barn, and passed the water jug around. The tin barn roof sang a bright tune in the sun as it heated up. But it was pleasant enough since we'd decided to put water on the list of necessary things to do today, and weren't going about the place in a stagger, as we'd done yesterday.

Mr. McKenzie removed his straw hat, pulled out a wide red bandanna, exhaled tiredly, and wiped his brow. This was odd. I didn't see much sweat on his forehead. It flowed freely from Cal's forehead and from mine as well, and yesterday, the old man had wrung sweat from his handkerchief in a downpour. There wasn't a dry stitch of clothes between me and Cal. Mr. McKenzie, though, looked drier than the three-year drought everyone loves to grump about. His face had lost its usual robust color, so I figured the heat had got to him. After a time he set his hat back on his head, and meandered down the bank toward the tiny creek that trickled between the barn and the lane that led out to the hayfield.

Cal and I stood and stared at the old man. We watched, puzzled, as he sat down at the edge of the creek, and removed his shoes and socks.

"Never saw him do this before," Cal said. "Not at this time of day."

"Your dad don't look just right."

Cal didn't answer. He acted as if he hadn't even heard me.

"Mr. McKenzie looks sick, from the heat," I added. "Maybe you should call your mother."

He shook his head. If he'd been my father, I would've fled for the house to fetch Mom to take a look. But these two, I saw, had a different relationship. Mr. McKenzie had long ago beaten Calvin down to the very level of the ground. Cal's

tanned face trembled and rippled in tiny waves, as he stood there and thought things over.

By and by, he said, "No. I suspect I better not go for Mom. Dad would raise Ned if I did. I guess he knows what he needs. If he wants Mom, I suppose he will call for her himself."

"He looks pretty sick, Calvin."

"Well, if he is it's probably caused by the heat. He knows better than anyone what his problem is. It's likely he will be all right after he cools down a bit."

We waited there in the shade for a good long time. By and by, Cal got antsy. We climbed atop the wagon, and pitched the hay into the loft. When the wagon stood empty beneath our feet, we climbed up into the loft, and dragged the hay to the south end of the loft.

We finished, climbed down the ladder, and stood back on the ground, drinking water. Mr. McKenzie was sitting there on the creek bank, just as we'd left him. I put the stopper back in the neck of the water jug, set it on the wagon, and ambled across the road toward the creek.

"My toe hurts like red fire," I said. "I believe I'll go soak my foot in the creek too." I was also dying to learn what was ailing that old man.

I slid down the bank, and sat down beside Mr. McKenzie. His shoes were alongside him. His socks protruded from his shoes. Both his feet rested in the creek water. Tiny minnows swam around his toes. His feet were truly huge, and were white as a field of lime. I figured he'd kept that pair of *boat paddles* hidden from the sun since childhood.

He looked at me through bloodshot, weary eyes. "Hi there, bub."

I removed my shoe, the one hiding the sore toe. "Mind if I join you, sir?"

"Sure. Plenty 'nough water in this creek for your puny feet too, and more like 'em."

The blister on my foot stood out like a full moon. The corrupted digit looked twice as big as it had when I jumped from bed this morning. It was swollen as fat as a tree toad. I could actually see the skin of the water sack rise and fall with each beat of my heart, and it out-hurt anything in the world.

Mr. McKenzie whistled sharply. "That there's'bout as bad a blister as you're likely to ever see, bub."

"My shoes are too tight. I must've grown since school let out. I first noticed it last night."

"A boy'll outgrow his shoes," he informed me. "Just make sure you don't outgrow your cap too soon, and you'll turn out better for it. Let me see that there toe. Stick 'er up here in my lap."

I did so, and wondered just what'n the world he had in mind. I hoped with a full heart that all he wanted to do was just look at it, maybe admire it for its size. I most certainly didn't want him to try to pop the thing between his thumb and forefinger.

He reached out a big hand, latched onto my foot, and held it fast in a tight grip between his knees. He shifted his weight, reached into a pocket and pulled out a pocketknife having wooden handles. When he sprang the blade open with a dry mechanical click, it sounded as loud as the toll of the bell to announce the end of time. His heavy knees were clamping down on my foot like a vise.

I feared what he had in mind, was to cut it off, feed it to the minnows.

I wished then I hadn't had so many harsh thoughts about him. Surely he'd read my mind, and was about to take his revenge. As tough and callous an old man as was Mr. McKenzie, I figured he'd cut my poor toe off, and think it nothing amiss. They used to do things like that back when he was a lad, and called it *doctoring,* or so I allowed.

His knife blade glinted bright in the sunlight, and with one quick flash, he slit through the bloated skin of the water sack. Fluid exploded from the blister like hot water. It ran down my toe, across the sole of my foot to the heel, and then drained away. It all happened so fast I hadn't even had time to mutter a prayer. Then, just as suddenly, I felt a blessed, wondrous relief. I released the breath I'd been holding, and this calmed my mind and relaxed my body.

"Wash off that foot, bub," Mr. McKenzie rumbled low in his belly.

As I washed my foot, he dried off his own feet in brisk swipes of his huge hands. Those old biscuit-snatchers of his were so dark from the constant exposure to the sun they looked as if he'd been hulling walnuts, and were as gnarled, ridged and knotted as the head of a snapping turtle. He then slipped his socks and shoes on.

"You stay right here till I get back. Soak that foot right good. I got somethin' in the granary that'll heal up that old hoof of yours posthaste."

I sat there then, and enjoyed the great relief from the intense pain. I figured Mr. McKenzie wasn't such a dire old man as first I'd thought. In fact, he now seemed sort of kindly.

He returned, and Cal walked along with him. They sat down, one on each side of me.

"If you had said something this morning," Cal scolded, "Mom could have doctored your toe then. You didn't need to suffer all morning long."

Mr. McKenzie took my foot and slathered on a big gob of black, tarry salve that fairly covered the toe. He finally finished and tied it up with a clean washcloth which they used to cleanse the teats and milk bags of the dairy cows before each milking, then shoved my foot to the ground as if he'd just finished tying off a sack of grain.

"Keep them feet out of them shoes, bub," he said. "The soles of your feet are tougher'n saddle leather. The sides of your toes, though, are a different matter. Just why you thought to wear shoes to cripple yourself that away I'll never know. It's a wonder you didn't butcher yourself even worse'n you did. Boys wear shoes is in the winter, not'n the summer."

"Yes sir," I said. I didn't tell him I'd worn them to stave off embarrassment. Because I never dreamed in all eternity, I'd find Iona shoeless as a newborn.

When Mrs. McKenzie yelled out that dinner was on the table, we walked to the yard to wash up. I was surprised that dinnertime crept upon us already. We had most of the hay in the barn, and this felt good. Things were going much easier today. This would give me more time to yap, and to socialize.

We pumped water for the old man, and he soaped himself into a rare frenzy. He scrubbed his face and hummed an old hymn under his breath at the same time. "Farther along … wee'll know all about it … farther a-l-o-n-g … wee'll understand why."

He finished washing up, and instead of heading off for the house, he sat down there as if he had all day to waste.

By and by, he cleared his throat a time or two, and then without more warning than that, launched himself into a tale I allowed would be a long one.

Chapter Eleven

"When we was young, my brother James and me, we was big for our age. James was a year older, but I was almost as tall. He was broader built and weighed more. We were both regular bulls for stout!

"Our pap used to bet folks down at the feed store in Blackeye that me and James could pull a wagon loaded with sacks of feed 'round the barn and back to the front of the store without stoppin'. We could do it, too. Pap would be almost out of his head with pride, plus he always won a handful of silver dollars, and this made him all the prouder."

"You must've been plenty strong, sir," I said. My eyes were gaping wide.

"Yessir. We were sure 'nough bulls. When Pap first started that old business, we both kind of enjoyed showin' off our strength. After a spell, though, the whole proposal grew right tiresome. It turned from fun to downright hard work. By and by, it turned to drudgery, or maybe slavery.

"I recall one Sunday. We had a whole yard full of people visitin', which is what folks used to do a lot back then. Pap went into his brag about how he could hook me and James to

a breakin' plow, and use us to break up our garden spot … like we was mules. Now this was new.

"Of course, it wasn't nobody believed him. They all laughed and fanned their hands the way men'll do when they hear something too outlandish to believe. Well, their doubts just riled him up even more. By and by, old Ames McLeod proposed a fifty dollar bet we couldn't do 'er.

"Back then fifty dollars was a lot of money—still is, far as that goes. I looked at Mam, and I could see she didn't want us to break the Sabbath law. She was worried and all of a tangled mind. My mam'd been raised in them old-time ways, where folks weren't allowed to do any work—save for the chores—on Sundays. She was pretty much religious. They ain't too awful many 'round like her nowadays.

"I could tell she was 'fraid if we did do this chore the devil his own self might just leap straight up out of the ground and drag us all down to perdition with him. As for me, well, I wasn't just one-hundred percentile sure she mightn't be right about that. I was still young and easy to influence.

"Pap had got himself in a fix so bad with Mr. Ames McLeod by this time that it wasn't no way he could get out of that bet, even if he tried to, which, of course, he wasn't fixin' to. But when it come time for us to get hitched to the plow, James balked. He told Pap it was a Sunday and that nothin' good ever comes of workin' on the Sabbath. Pap just laughed, though. He said this here venture was play, and shouldn't in nowise be considered work.

"But James had his mind made up. He was full-grown—nineteen years old. He'd already set eyes on a woman, and was gettin' good and tired of Pap treatin' him so blamed common.

It was fearsome at times—believe me. You young lads today don't know nothin' at all about hard work, and adversity."

Mr. McKenzie continued his tale, and I cocked my ears straight up, my nose high like a rabbit tasting the air for a fox.

"Dad told James if he didn't do what he told him to do, he'd knock him down. James told him to get to knockin' if that'd suit him. But Mam shoved in between 'em, and all our guests huddled 'round. They took turns tryin' to reason with Pap. But it wasn't nobody had any good luck. Pap was set in his mind, and there wasn't nothin' else for it but James and me to mule that plow.

"By and by, old Mr. Ames McLeod came to Pap. He informed him in hushed tones he set him free of the bet, because of Mam's distress. That they should just both forget the whole sorry affair. But no sir, far as Pap saw it, he was goin' to win that fifty dollars fair and square, and wasn't about to allow Mr. McLeod to weasel out of the bet.

"The deal went 'round and 'round till I thought Mam might die from humiliation. You know, my mam was the prettiest woman. Black-eyed. Had all that glossy dark hair. Iona looks much like her now. Her and her dark hair with them reddish streaks. Mam was a Munro. Them Munro's had money. They'd been shopkeepers back in the old country before they landed over here. It'd been Mam's side put up the money for our land back then. Although, we all of us put in the labor that turned it into a moneymaker.

"As it turned out, it hadn't been nobody able to change Pap's mind. The pain and embarrassment I saw on Mam's poor old face was 'bout too much to bear. I just loved her dear old soul, and would've done most any-and-everything to keep her

from harm. So I took James off to the side, and talked him into havin' a go at the plow. I'd done so thinkin' that by gettin' it over with soon as possible might be the easiest way to go for her.

"At first, James didn't want no part of it. Then all of a sudden, his eyes lit up with the craft of the devil. He smiled—crooked like—slapped me on the shoulder, and we went and took up our burden.

"Mr. McLeod and Pap talked over the rules. Together, they stepped off the dimensions of the sod we were to turn. Everybody gathered 'round, and we both gave out a big whoop and off we started—or tried to, that is."

When Mr. McKenzie paused, I saw that he was reliving that long-ago day, and at times I saw a look of dark sorrow sully his face. The skin of his forehead lay all in ripples. His face was dark, and set for a funeral.

"I recall," the old man continued, "haulin' again' that plow. I just thought it was no way we'd ever turn over that turf. It seemed much like tryin' to move the very earth. We strained and pulled until I thought we'd bust a gut. I saw a vein on James's temple bulge and continue to bulge till I feared it'd bust on him. I could see it throb away with each heartbeat. It wasn't no way we could make it. I figured we'd surely die that afternoon, hooked to a plow like beasts of the field."

At this point, Mr. McKenzie's voice, normally loud and boisterous, became a trapped fox. I saw he was extremely distressed, by this revelation. But he rallied, and continued.

"After some time, I heard something—a sound like Mam rippin' rags to make a quilt. Only much deeper. I first though James had tore all the muscles right out of his back. But just

then, me ready to quit, I felt the earth give, and that sweet sod turned over in a rush. That'd been the rippin' sound I'd heard.

"Pap gave a loud shout of triumph. Old man McLeod got into it as well in a complaint that we were lungin'. Pap told him it wasn't nobody in 'ary lunge, and for him to step back and let his boys have at it. Well, Mr. McLeod didn't want to lose his fifty dollars—and I sure didn't blame him—but, I want to tell you boys the truth right here and now. We did 'er. Moved that plow through the earth, and there wasn't no foul committed by either of us.

"After we got the plow movin'—slow, sure enough, but movin', just the same—everybody gathered close around us and started yellin' louder'n ever to egg us on, unable to believe their own eyes, I 'spected. Old Mr. Ames McLeod was the only one again' us, and that only because he was in shape to lose fifty dollars, which is a serious matter. Let me tell you.

"We sweated and struggled at that infernal plow for what seemed like forever, and then Pap called a halt—this'd been agreed to before the start. We both of us 'bout fell down at the break, we was so tired. I looked back to see how much sod we'd turned, and I could scarce believe we'd done so much. But what remained to be turned loomed a discouragin' task, indeed. I could see little chance we'd finish.

"When we stepped back in harness, it nigh tore me apart to strain again' that pitiless hunk of iron. But after a time, we found a decent pace. We was just learnin' to do this kind of chore, you see, and all matters have to be learned. Then when you start findin' your way, things always go much easier."

He paused to stare at Cal and me with a careful eye. "You young fellers remember that, and you'll get on in life much better.

"We struggled and sweated and toiled at that work like it was the most important business in creation. It was awful important to James and me, and to Mr. McLeod and to Pap as well.

"Both Pap and old Mr. Ames McLeod stood off a ways to watch like they was judges for some kind of slow motion race. They didn't want nothin' to interfere with their chance at success.

"By and by, after a little more than a couple of hours, we found ourselves on the last round."

At this point in that old man's tale, my rabbit ears sprang up even higher and more pointed.

"I was just bustin' to finish, for I knew this'd stop all Mam's fuss. Then, all at once, we *were* finished, save for the final half round. Then, directly, it shrunk up to the last twenty-five feet. Just then, I felt that painful old plow bear down on me even more savage than before.

"I looked over at James. Watched him falter. 'bout ready to wilt. I prayed he wouldn't fall down dead. Shoot, we was both young, but there's times when a person can try too blamed hard.

"Just then, a calamity struck. James slipped and fell down. I reached for him. He looked at me, and gritted his teeth.

"'Fall down you dumb brute,' he hissed. 'This's plow ain't goin' no farther.' He dropped his face back in the sod. Then after a spell of flounderin' about, I too fell. Just then, there arose from the crowd the most awful moan you ever heard.

"Mam rushed in. She flung herself over James, and vowed aloud what'd happen to Pap if her boys died from a bet … and it a Sunday, to boot.

"Pap stepped closer, sweet-talkin' us to continue. He begged, pleaded and moaned that he surely couldn't afford to lose fifty dollars. Said if we didn't get up to finish the last few feet, matters would surely go bad for us. All this time, Mam wept loudly and wailed away like the clap of doom was fixin' to strike aloud over the hills and hollers. Old Mr. Ames McLeod leapt straight up in a manner I wouldn't have guessed he was capable of. He was in his dandy glory. He'd taken Dad in a bet, at long last. That old man was a pureblooded Mexican fightin' rooster for cocky.

"Mam caught Pap by the crook of an arm and hauled at him until they disappeared around the corner of the house. After 'bout five minutes, they returned. She'd worked some charm on him that completely subdued him. Finally, he came to us and knelt in the dirt alongside where we were still at rest. 'You boys just rest on,' he says, 'I reckon that's the best fifty dollars I ever spent.' While she had him to the side, Mam persuaded him he had two fine boys and that he should never try to exploit us again like that. He never did, neither. Those few words were the first good words either of us ever heard from that ruthless old man. Afterwards, he was our best and greatest friend.

"At this time, old Mr. Ames McLeod started to moralize all 'round the yard 'bout how wrong 'twas for a man to hook his own boys to a plow for monetary gain. Well, he was sure 'nough right 'bout that. But his words didn't sound wholly pure, not'n him just won a fifty dollar bet from the sweet sweat of our brows. When we rested up, we got to our feet. James asked that old feller to please stop his sermon long enough to allow Pap to recover some from the shock of losin' so much money.

"Mr. McLeod didn't take it kind of James to tell him to shut his mouth or leave, which is pretty much what he did tell him. He raved and fumed over it for so long that at length we caught him under the arms, and carried him out to where his horse stood still hitched to the buggy—poor old beast. We set him gently on the seat of that old rickety Studebaker hack of his, and sent him off down the road talkin' to hisself, wheels squealin' like crazy, wobblin' like they was fixin' to fall off any second."

When Mr. McKenzie paused, I butted in, "Mr. McKenzie, what happened then? Could you've finished the garden?"

"Why sure, bub," he replied. "James just wanted to pay Pap back for all the other mule work he'd made us do over the years. It worked too. So I guess it learned him a right good lesson, although it was sure a long time in comin'."

His face softened some after a time, and he said, "We moved that plow. Broke the garden spot, just like we was 'sposed to, 'cept for them last few feet."

Just then, the little black hen of Iona's came up to us, followed by her tiny, quarter sized chicks. Dust from beneath their feet flew in minor clouds from all their scratching as they followed their mom, and swerving off after every tiny insect able to fly or crawl.

The little hen walked right up to Cal. He reached out and took her up, and ran a finger up and down her neck. The feathers flashed bright in the sun like wet, black stone.

"Well, the wonder!" Mr. McKenzie said. "I never saw a thing quite like that. Where you reckon that hen come from?"

"She's ours. Mine and Iona's."

"It's a considerable mystery Mr. Leo ain't made a snack of her before now," Mr. McKenzie said. "She ain't much more'n a fair-sized bite for him."

Cal stiffened. I thought he was about to say something to get himself in trouble, but all he said was, "Yes sir, it is a wonder, all right. She's not big enough to make a meal for him, though. Just like you said."

"Them chicks is sort of cute, ain't they?"

"Yes sir," Cal said.

Then before I knew it, those two were talking away about everything in the world imaginable, farming, science, honest work and dedication, discipline, farming equipment, loyalty, gumption, education, honor, love and obedience.

I leaned back and took it all in, while those little chicks climbed up onto Mr. McKenzie's legs, walked right up onto his lap eating all the remaining seeds that'd fallen there in his work.

"All this haying we've done the past few days could have been done in a very short time," Cal said. "If only we'd had the proper equipment."

"Yes. But if that hay ain't been handled proper, how'll it benefit the animals that eat it? Part of its value, what you call nutrients, comes from us. From our sweat, from when we cut it, hand it up to the wagon, then up into the barn loft—again this winter, when the earth's sere and dried out and dead, and we pitch it out to the cows, well, that's where the honest goodness comes from. It's not because of us at all, but because of nature. The generosity of nature to the hay comes from how we handle it, and because we're part of nature's master plan, and God's great mystery of creation."

The discussion journeyed on and on. I'd heard much of what this old man had stated before. It was somewhat akin to superstitious beliefs that many old folks in the area still clung to. By and by, I seized my opportunity. I just waded right on in, and joined the conversation as though I were part of the family.

"You know Mr. McKenzie, my oldest brother Leon is getting married. He aims to go to work for the railroad in Lyons Beach. Dad'll be shorthanded then, and he plans for me to go to school. Uncle Roz tells me Dad is going to buy some new machinery to take up the slack."

Mr. McKenzie said, "I heard that 'bout Leon, but not about your pap buyin' new machinery. Why? He still has that other'n, that Denton, at home. He'll likely get by without buyin' up all them new machines."

"Denton's going to take a railroad job, too, and if Mom's cousin, Milton, hadn't been trainmaster there—why, they ain't no way my brothers would've got on as hard as things are nowadays."

He looked completely perplexed now. "But why does Denton want one of them jobs?"

"So he can earn a wage that'll allow him to raise a family. A man can't raise a family these days, not on a little scrap of land like ours. Not in the old ways. Dad's fixing to modernize."

Mr. McKenzie looked at me with frank curiosity. "Modernize?"

"Yes sir. He's fixing to buy a tractor, and the plows and all the equipment that goes with it. He's losing all his help and figures if he means to farm the place the rest of his life, he might probably ought to get the tools that'll allow him to do most of the work by himself. That way we boys won't be tied

down, scratching, and just getting by. Dad ain't going to farm the old way anymore. He's going to step on out and catch up with the rest of the world."

"Takes a good deal of money to buy all that new equipment. Arthur Bright must've been doin' a whole lot better'n I thought"

"Dad told Uncle Roz he'd go to the bank if he had to. Mr. Reef at People's Bank in Lyon's Beach is still making loans, with the right collateral behind it, or so Dad told Uncle Roz."

Mr. McKenzie shook his head. "A man can take a fall if he ain't right careful. Them bankers are fiends, and live underground. They come out only at night to do their rank thievery and corruption."

I'd often heard that bankers were the lowest of all creatures in these hardscrabble days.

"Sir, if you had the proper equipment you'd likely jar the very earth—man works hard as you do. Why, Calvin would be able to go to high school, and get his higher education. And far as Dad's taking a fall, I doubt he'll fall very far."

A sad expression spread across Mr. McKenzie's face. I saw what he was fighting. Part of it, I figured, was the thought he might have to give in. This to him, a man who once turned sod—with the help of his brother—like a mule, was opposed to any such idea as *give*. He never would give up, or give in. Likely, he sat there now with much regret that time had gone off somewhere and hid on him like a thief after picking his pockets. Perhaps he was wondering what'd happened to his youth and vitality. How it'd come about he'd had to stop in the middle of his workday, go to the creek, take off his shoes and soak his feet. Maybe even recalling how it'd been when he'd had more energy than he knew what to do with and suffered

no weakness, except for what he tolerated in folks who were lesser-made than himself. How he used to work the sun down past the rim of the earth, and still feel like a world-beater when he lifted his bare feet from the floor and placed them proudly beneath the sheets of a nighttime.

"Arthur Bright won't likely fall very far, bub. You're right about that. But it's still sad when a man gives up the old ways of life."

After a time I said, "Yes sir. That is a little sad, but don't you think something good might come of it? It could be a chance to start anew. What man wouldn't like a second chance—a new start?"

Mr. McKenzie stared so long at me I grew afraid his stern eyes might just turn me to glass and shatter me into a million pieces. Then just when things hung their darkest, he flashed me a bright smile and roared with honest, sweet laughter. "Bub, I do believe you might very well be a right intelligent boy. Smart a feller as what you are already, it ain't no tellin' what you could do with a little more schoolin'."

I smiled in return, and witnessed a new expression on the old man's face. It looked to me as if he'd just made a vital decision of some sort, but if so, he kept it to himself. This left a warm glowing sensation in the core of my being.

Chapter Twelve

After we finished eating, we got up from the table, and headed back to the barn. Mr. McKenzie held a doting arm on Cal's shoulder all the way. At the barn, he stood in its wide shade for the longest time. He didn't speak his fear of rain again. It seemed he had something else on his mind.

"Calvin," he said at last, "how many loads are left out there on the ground, you reckon?"

"I don't know," Cal answered. "One. Maybe part of another one."

"Well, it 'pears you boys have done right fancy by yourselves unloadin' that last load." He turned to Iona. "Iona, take this wagon, drive these chaps out to the field, and fetch in the rest of that hay. I do believe I'll just sit in the shade and relax. I just appointed myself supervisor of this hay crew. Now, if you fellers need any kind of worthy advice, please don't dawdle, but just ask for it out loud. I'll just sit right here holdin' up this here barn till the rest of the hay is laid-by." He sat down then on a thick, flat rock upon which the east side of the barn rested.

"Yes sir," Iona said.

She sprang for the wagon, wheeled it about in the barn lot and headed up the lane before a body could even shout aloud.

Cal shook his head. We ran after her, and just managed to grab onto the back of the wagon. Iona seemed to be in a devilish rush. We settled down, dragged our feet in the dust, bounced up and down with every bump she managed to hit, and kept our eyes on the house, shaded now by the hickory trees in the yard, against the bulk of the hillside. Mr. McKenzie sat in the shade, and of all things curious, the little black hen and her chicks were scurrying all over him.

Cal made the decision at the hayfield that there wasn't enough hay left to make two trips. So he decided we'd do our best to get it all on in one gigantic load and be done with it.

We loaded that old wagon down so heavy I was afraid the whole affair might topple over on the rough terrain as we headed to the barn , but I hoped for the best.

"Go easy now," Cal cautioned her. "Don't want to pick this hay up a second time."

She gave him a stern look to put him in his place. She knew her business, and didn't need advice from her younger brother.

Off we trundled, toward the barn. The wagon croaked as loud as a full-grown bullfrog, and swayed away for all it was worth. We had the hay up off the ground now, and as soon as it was in the loft, the process wouldn't need to be repeated till next year.

Tomorrow? Well, tomorrow would be a day to outdo all the days I'd ever known. *Tomorrow was Saturday, and circus day in Lyons Beach.*

Iona parked the wagon beneath the loft. Mr. McKenzie sat on the barn's east side cornerstone with his back against the

wall soaking up the shade. The little hen and the chicks ran all about him, in their quest for bugs. He spoke to us, and we returned his greeting. Cal and I turned and jumped up to unload the wagon.

Iona asked her dad if he wanted a drink of water. He refused, and she then ran off to the shade of the porch.

By and by, with no keeping track of the times I'd swiped sweat from my brow, we had all the hay stored away in the loft. I felt good that we'd worked hard, and that the job was finished. Cal and I slugged down water until we slaked our thirst. We then walked around the corner of the barn to share the shade with Mr. McKenzie.

The old man sat there all slumped over as if his neck was broken. Had it not been for his back resting against the wall, he'd have toppled all the way off his stone seat. I saw right off something was dreadfully wrong with him. I feared he might even be dead.

"Dad?" Cal said.

I stepped closer, and my fears of his death subsided. I heard him breathing roughly through his open mouth, starting and stopping time and again. Thick foamy spittle dribbled from the corners of his mouth. He was slobbering, as they say, like a mad dog.

"Dad?" Cal said again. The fear in his voice struck me cold.

"Run, Cal," I said. "Fetch your mom. Hurry. You're dad's sick … bad sick."

Calvin set fly for the house. I stood there with the old man, scared to the soles of my feet. This old man had always been so hale, so hearty, so filled with his noisy self and with life, that I found it difficult to imagine anything capable of striking

him down. If this could happen to him—strong as he was—I figured no one was safe, including me. This frightened me, and revealed to me the cold, dark side of life.

I touched his shoulder.

"Sir?"

He didn't move, but continued his ragged breathing. Foamy spittle ran down both sides of his mouth. I ran and fetched the water jug, poured some in my hand, knelt beside him, and bathed his forehead. Even though I guided my cool, dampened hand across his face, over his knotty old forehead, down his neck, my ministrations had no good result. He just sat there slumped over, lodged against the bulge of the weatherboards of the barn, just as we'd found him. He showed no signs of fear, pain, anxiety, relief, or any other human sensation.

The McKenzies came running in a swift stream down the porch steps, in a panic, shouting their fear as they ran. Cal darted forward, far in the lead. Mrs. McKenzie called her husband's name to the skies, again and again, as she plunged toward the barn. "Stu. Stu. Stuart!"

They soon arrived and Mrs. McKenzie threw herself across him, and continued to wail and moan. Iona, Cal and I just stood around, and watched. I felt as helpless as a blind-eyed puppy.

By and by, I realized nothing good would come from this condition. I stepped up and touched Mrs. McKenzie on the shoulder. Her shoulder rippled in a nervous quiver beneath my hand as if a spook had just touched her.

"Ma'am," I said, as kindly as I could, "don't you think we should carry him to the house?"

She peered up at me with such pitiful eyes that my heart lurched in pain at the grief I saw on her face. Her poor old heart looked truly overloaded.

"Cal and I might be able to carry him, with your help," I said. "We should get him up off the ground."

Her eyes widened further in fright, then locked onto Calvin.

"The doctor, Calvin. Run to the Pecks. Have them call Dr. Wallace. Tell him to come … quick. Oh, but I wish you could drive the truck."

"Ma'am," I interrupted. "Maybe it's best to send Iona. Cal'll need to help us get Mr. McKenzie into the house. He's very heavy, ma'am."

"Oh, Stu!" she wailed.

"I'll go, Mom," Iona said. She was ready to tear out down the road to the Pecks, their nearest neighbor with a phone, and she was hiking and dropping her legs, waiting for the command to fly.

"Well, hie on then, girl. Tell the doctor I think he's suffered a stroke."

Iona tore out, and in four steps hit full gallop. I watched her flash off down the dusty road, her hair, dark and long, trailing behind her, free in the breeze.

After she passed out of sight, I took Cal by the arm.

"We got to carry your dad up to the house, Calvin."

His face was the color of wax with which Mom sometimes used to seal canning jars. His eyes floated in heavy tears. A tragic look of helplessness drew his usual soft features up so tight I scarcely recognized my best friend.

"Yes," he agreed, and touched his mother's shoulder. "We have to move him now, Mom."

"Just be careful with him," she said. "Just you be careful."

Calvin took his father under the armpits from behind. I caught up his legs. We hefted him off the ground, but he was way too heavy and ungainly. His bottom dragged the ground. After a short struggle, I saw this wouldn't work. We had to find a different way.

"Hold up," I said. "We got to think of something else. He's too heavy, and so limp we won't ever get him to the house like this."

"Let me help," Mrs. McKenzie said.

She attempted to hold his bottom up, but in the end, his rear sagged back to the ground. This method didn't work either, but she insisted we try on. I couldn't deny her, and there was no way Calvin could. Calvin was fully dedicated to his mother. He would've leapt the barn flatfooted had she asked.

We slipped and slid about for a while, fell a few times, and then Cal stopped cold in his tracks.

"Set him down," he said.

We placed him back on the ground as gently as possible.

"This will never work," he said.

He lit out, back toward the barn.

"Calvin?" Mrs. McKenzie called after him.

"Be right back," he cried out over a shoulder.

Shortly, he returned, on the run, pushing before him a big wooden wheelbarrow that looked to be nigh a hundred years old, but solid as a living oak tree.

We tried our best to heft Mr. McKenzie up and into the barrow a section at a time. We strained. We sweated. We tugged. But after a bit, we set him back down. Even with Mrs. McKenzie's help, we couldn't load him. He was too heavy for

us to lift high enough to set him in the barrow. We took a brief rest to refresh our lungs.

The answer hit me in a flash. I grabbed up the wheelbarrow, and wheeled it right up to the old man. I raised it all the way up by the handles until the nose of the thing rested flush upon the ground with the handles aimed at the sky.

"Now, Mrs. McKenzie, if you'd hold this thing steady, Cal and I should be able to load him."

She leapt to the wheelbarrow as if it was the last lifeboat on a ship fixing to go to the seafloor.

Cal and I went to Mr. McKenzie, one on a side. Mrs. McKenzie set the nose of the barrow beneath the old man's bottom. When we finally managed to load him, and with his weight evenly distributed so as not to cause the thing to tip over, she lowered it to the ground. Mrs. McKenzie's veined hands and bare forearms stood out boldly as she strained at her work.

Mr. McKenzie looked pathetic, sprawled upon the wheelbarrow that way—and he the man and master of the farm and of the household. A man known never to yield to a thing, and there he lay, helpless and drooling.

Cal's mom cried as if her heart would break. Cal walked along with her, and held her hand, while I struggled to wheel Mr. McKenzie toward the house. I bowed my back, arched my neck, dug tight into the earth with my toes and the balls of my feet, and directly I set out toward the house at a right fairish clip, pushing mainly with the muscles of my thighs. That old fellow made a cumbersome, heavy load for a thirteen year old, even though we'd positioned him just right and balanced him perfectly in the wheelbarrow.

"The back porch," Cal directed.

I headed around to the back, but when we arrived, I saw another difficulty—and a major one at that. How could we transport him up the steps and on into the house? I stopped in puzzlement to ponder the problem as we stood in the shade of the big hickory trees in the backyard. The front steps were even steeper, so that wasn't the answer. Then Cal got into the act.

"I got it, Scotlin. I got it." He shot out back across the yard in full stride. "Come on. We'll get one of the concrete forms Dad used last fall when we poured the foundation for the new shed."

We raced back to the barn and up to the heavy wooden concrete forms, stacked out of the way against the back wall in one of the seldom-used stalls.

I'm certain Mr. McKenzie didn't intend for his forms to be used in the way we were fixing to use them. But they were plenty wide and long enough to make a bridge up the steps, with which we could wheel the barrow right up and onto the back porch, and into the kitchen just as slick as a fresh-peeled peach. That Calvin McKenzie had a head for solving difficulties. If I hadn't been so busy, I'd have tipped my flimsy, worn-out old cap to him.

We lifted up one of the heavy forms, and Mr. Leo slithered out. He looked up at us with his cold eyes. A shiver crawled in snaky undulations up my spine.

"Pay him no mind," Cal said. "Let's get on back, quick."

"What about the little black hen, and her chicks?"

"I have worse worries on my mind right now," Cal said.

We struggled back toward the house, bending, but not giving under the weight of the concrete form. That thing was savage for heavy. That old man had built those forms stout to last a full century and longer.

I wheeled Mr. McKenzie into the kitchen. I looked out across that vast space of black and white tile, followed soon by the glossy hardwood flooring, which ran all the way from the dining room clear across the living room and on into the bedroom, and stopped dead cold.

"Hurry, boys," Mrs. McKenzie commanded.

"But, ma'am," I said. "What about your nice floors?"

"*Drat* the floors," she said, and with such force, it shocked me. But I figured she was under much strain, and much too aggrieved to worry about anything, especially that she might use a questionable word in front of her son and the neighbor boy.

I just couldn't bring myself to mar the tiles, though, and the wood of that artful, gleaming floor. I turned to Cal. "These metal cleats on the wheels, Calvin …"

"Mom, find some throw rugs, make a path for the wheelbarrow. Dad wouldn't appreciate it at all if we ruined his floors."

She rushed out of the room, returned all in a tizzy, and set down a path of rugs. I followed as she spread them, wheeling the old man across the floor, going as silent upon those rugs as one of Mr. Cooper's storybook Indians on a stealthy sneak through a forest. I rolled him right on into the bedroom.

We tugged. We struggled. We lifted and hefted, huffed and puffed and sweated. Finally, as we were nearing the end of our resistance, we landed him in his bed.

"You boys get on outside," Mrs. McKenzie said. She was huffing and puffing like a locomotive, and sweat rolled heavily down her face. "I need to bathe him before Dr. Wallace gets here. Stuart would never forgive me if the doctor saw him in this shape."

We stepped outside and sat upon the front porch steps to watch and wait for sight of a plume of dust that'd foretell the approach of the doctor's automobile. Calvin would sit for a short time, jump up, pace a few circles, sit back down again, and then leap to his feet once more to start it all afresh. It seemed as if there was a demon eating him up from inside out.

Presently, he exhaled with great force. He settled down to rest upon the bottom step, dropped his face into his hands, elbows at rest upon his knees. "Oh Scotlin, it's my fault—all of it. I pestered Dad so much about high school. That's what caused him to get sick."

Well, there it was. Guilt over his desire to go to high school had turned against him. He was suffering from wrongly placed guilt. Perhaps if he got it all out, sort of like emptying a sour stomach, it might make him feel better, I figured. So I clamped tight to my tongue, and listened, for a change, which was truly hard for me to do.

"I shouldn't have deviled him so much about school, and about new farm equipment. Now look what I've done."

He raised his head, looked me straight in the face the way a true friend'll sometimes do. Tears poured down his sun-browned cheeks, and I could tell he cared none at all that I saw them.

He said, "I would never do anything against him again, if only I had it to do over. I'd work hard and help him, the way

I'm supposed to do—and most of all I would keep my mouth shut about going to school.

"You heard the tale he told us of how his own father treated him and Uncle James. What I go through here on the farm is nothing compared to that. He worked hard all his life for what we enjoy. But what's he got for his efforts? Me! An ingrate for a son. A whiner. A crybaby."

Cal continued beating himself up for a considerable time, but finally he ran out of ways to berate himself. He sat there and just stared off across the creek.

By and by, I needed to break the trap silence held us in. I reached out and touched his shoulder. I was dying to say my piece.

"You're a good son to your dad, Calvin. I've watched you work. There's no man's son in Ozora County works harder than you. Feeling bad for him is okay. I know he had it hard in his day. All the old folks did. Maybe they weren't all hitched and worked to a plow the way he was, but just to survive in these rocky, hilly old woods was all hard work back then.

"You ain't got no business thinking you're no good just because you want to go to school, and it ain't your fault your dad got sick. Life don't hinge on the wants and desires of a boy, nor if he's ungrateful to his dad. It's way more complicated than that Calvin, and you know that better'n I do."

I stopped then before I started preaching, and I had no license.

After a while, he looked at me then ducked his head again, but I'd seen that the real Calvin McKenzie was still at home in there. I felt some better.

A bit later, he said, "One thing's for sure, Scotlin. I'll try my best never to pester my dad again."

"That's good," I said. "It ain't nobody wants to be pestered."

After that, we sat, and waited.

Chapter Thirteen

My head slumped nearly to the drop-off point into that restful valley of sleep that Uncle Roz so often demonstrated was how a satisfied mind worked best, but then Cal shook me out of it. He leapt to his feet, raising a great clamor.

"Here they come, Scotlin. They're coming."

Mrs. McKenzie must've been standing in the doorway watching too, for she stepped out onto the porch.

"Thank God!" She fluffed and primped her hair, and then said to Cal, "Stay here in case your dad needs you."

She hurried down the steps, rushed past us, up the path, crossed the plank footbridge that spanned the creek, and stood in the road in the sun, bare of head, to await the arrival of the doctor.

Dr. Wallace's big black Buick automobile lurched and shuddered to a stop just outside the barn lot. Dust an inch deep lay upon it. I stood at the foot of the steps and watched.

Dr. Wallace, a big, heavy-set man, wore a rumpled suit of light gray linen. His black hair had a thin gray stripe that ran the entire length of his part. His hair lifted and fell with the slight breeze as he rushed toward the house alongside Mrs.

McKenzie. Both of them were in a near bound. Iona followed right behind them.

When he passed me, I saw sweat run off his forehead and down onto his face. They hustled up the front porch steps and banged on inside, Cal and Iona with them. I sat on the steps and waited. After thirty minutes, or more, Cal and Iona stepped from the house onto the porch, and took to the swing. I got to my feet.

"It's cooler up here, Scotlin," Cal said.

"Come on up, and sit with us," Iona offered.

I climbed the steps, and sat with them on the swing. "How's your Dad?"

"Not so good," Cal said.

"But he did open his eyes," Iona said. "So maybe that's a good sign."

"That might be a good sign, sure enough," I said.

We sat on the porch, swinging slowly. The home-cicadas were screeching away in the trees like machinery someone had forgotten to cut off. Their music put me in mind of a tune, so I set to work, mentally composing for the fiddle, and used for the core of the tune the constant squall of those weird, mystifying insects.

A half hour later, the doctor stepped outside. He stood under the roof of the porch in the shade, removed his suit coat placed it over the railing, loosened his tie, and rolled up his sleeves. He wasn't sweating as much now, and looked somewhat relieved.

"How's my dad?" Cal said, and stood up.

Dr. Wallace smiled a pallid smile, pulled out a cigarette, and fit it into an ivory cigarette holder yellowed from the stain of nicotine. He lit up and blew smoke toward the yard.

"I think he'll be fine, son," he said. "That is, if he doesn't have a follow-up stroke."

"What if he does?"

Dr. Wallace's face twitched briefly. He puffed again at his cigarette, and said, "That would be bad. But," and here he sighed, "for now—well, I think he will be fine. He gained consciousness a short time ago, and asked to see your mother in private."

"Yes sir," Cal said. "Thank you for the good news."

"You're welcome. It's not every day I have the opportunity to deliver good news. That's a commodity hard to come by."

Mrs. McKenzie appeared in the doorway at length. "Iona, Cal," she said, just above a whisper, beckoning to them. "Your father wants to see you."

They filed quickly inside, passed their mother who stood to the side holding the screen door open. "Dr. Wallace," she said. "Please come in. Maybe it'd be more comfortable for you to sit inside."

"No thank you, Mrs. McKenzie. I'll stand here if you don't mind, and smoke until I'm needed."

"Yes sir," she said, stepped back inside and shut the screen door.

Dr. Wallace plucked out his cigarette stub, cast it into the yard, fitted another tube of tobacco into the holder right away, and lit up.

"Takes a lot of schooling to be a doctor, I reckon, don't it, sir?" I wondered how he'd come to make one, and exactly what route he'd taken.

He looked at me as if he'd just discovered my presence. I'd sparked his interest. He clamped his cigarette holder between stained teeth in a broad smile. "You're a curious boy, I see."

"Yes sir, I am. Folks often call me a pest."

He chuckled then, shook his head and said. "Curiosity is a good trait, son. Yes, as a matter of fact it does take a lot of schooling."

"Had to finish college, I guess."

He chuckled again, and this time at something I reckoned was apparent to him, but not to me. "Yes, indeed. Then on to medical school."

The cicadas droned on, and I just about found that fiddle tune I was in search of in their long, quavering, alien sounds, but lost it right away. "Were you called to doctoring, sir?"

"Was I *called*?" he said, and I saw I'd puzzled him.

"Yes sir … *called*. Like being called to preach."

He laughed, and his chest rattled like gravel in an empty pail. It had the unique sound heavy smokers make from the build-up of phlegm in their lungs and airways.

"It would be nice to think I had been called, but no, I wasn't."

"Then how was it you made one?"

"My father was a doctor," he said.

"Oh."

He came and stood above me. "Mind if I sit with you?"

"Oh, no sir," I cried, and jumped to my feet. "Please do. I'm sorry."

"Sit back down, son," he said, and patted the seat beside him. "I think we might just have an interesting conversation—the two of us."

I managed to get comfortable again just as he said, "My father was a country doctor for many years, and he sent me to school. I finished school, and practiced for some time in the city. Then, my father retired, I took over his practice,

and here I am now, sitting alongside you on this good, sturdy porch swing.

"Most men follow the path set down for them by their fathers."

"Then that means I'll be a farmer?"

"Is that what you want to be?"

"No sir, I don't really think so. I probably want to be a fisherman."

This amused him. He humored me by smiling, but it didn't bother me the way it sometimes did.

"Well, I doubt there's much money to be made fishing in this country. Do you intend to go to high school?"

I explained how Dad and Mom were forcing me to, that I wasn't half the student Calvin was, and he was being made to stay home and work the farm. High school held no interest for me, I told him, and of how strange providence sometimes can be.

"Well, your father and mother are making a big sacrifice by sending you to school. I don't think it right for you to duck your responsibilities. Which is exactly what it would be if you didn't make the most of your opportunity."

"My uncle's a fisherman," I said. "But that ain't all. He's also a hero of the war, a fine maker of furniture—when the notion takes him, that is—an adventurer, as well as the grandest fiddler in Ozora County. He has the world on a string with a downhill tug. I want to be just like him, and would, too, if my folks weren't so bent on sending me off to school."

He peered at me through a cloud of greenish-gray cigarette smoke. "You know, young man, all the things that sound so good to you right now just might turn on you later in life. Now this notion you have about living on the river, living life

the way your uncle does, might sound good, but you know, later on, you'll likely want to get married, raise a family. How will you rear a family on a riverbank? Will you all live in a tent? Will your wife consent to that? Will she stay with it when the going gets tough?

"There's more to life than play, you know. But you're young, I'm sure in time you'll grow out of this romantic notion you now have. When you accept your responsibilities in life, you'll discover you have just taken one great step on the path to growing up."

Well, shoot, and all this time I thought the night I'd dropped Mr. McKenzie's stout gate I'd already crossed that threshold. Now Dr. Wallace was telling me there was more to it, perhaps much more.

Mrs. McKenzie appeared at the door as I sat and mulled over what he'd just said.

"Dr. Wallace." she called out.

He got up and made to go inside. Mrs. McKenzie stood to the side and held the screen door open for him. "Enjoyed talking to you, son," he told me, and pushed on inside the house.

I conceded then that he'd made several good points, but I was still not convinced it'd be better to get my education than to live free on the river.

Chapter Fourteen

In time, Iona came out and sat with me on the swing. Big fat tears sat in her eyes, and I saw she had that same gift for weeping in silence my mom possessed. Likely, all women weep that same way, I allowed, and suddenly I recognized the tremendous strength women have.

She reached out her hand. I took it, and she squeezed back, hard. Her hand felt firm and strong from rough work. I patted the top of it, but this fetched a small sob from her throat. So I quit that old business posthaste.

"Dad's going to be all right, Scotlin," she said.

Her tears were those of relief.

"That's great news, Iona."

"He might walk with a limp, talk with a slight slur, but other than that Dr. Wallace says he'll be fine. He says that many stroke victims die, or become bedfast—sometimes for years and years. Dad is very strong, though. He's going to make it. I just know it."

"He is very strong," I agreed.

Her eyes brightened and sparkled with enthusiasm. "And, Scotlin, Dad's decided to buy new farm equipment. Just like your father. Tractor. All the implements. Hay bale. Everything."

"He's modernizing then?" Now this was something I could really get behind and push.

"Yes, modernizing. That's exactly what he called it. But that isn't even the best part. He's going to hire on a couple of hands to run the place while he's down. He'll need them bad when the corn crop is ready to be harvested. Because, Scotlin …"

She broke off then, and left me dangling over a bottomless chasm in total suspense as if it were Christmas Eve.

"Because what?" I said, by and by.

"Dad's decided to allow Cal go to high school this fall." She spoke this in a near whisper, but not so low, I couldn't hear it. I heard it, all right—every word, and became thrilled beyond speech, which didn't often occur to me.

A few moments of silence passed, and then she said, "Scotlin. I thought you would be happy."

By and by, when able, I said, "I am happy, Iona. You can't see it but I'm turning cartwheels in my mind."

"Can you believe it? I scarcely can."

It *was* hard to believe. I'd given up on this ever happening. Cal had tried everything to persuade his dad to let him go to school. Nothing had worked. Then his stroke. Just like that, everything changed. But, truth be known, I think he might've made his decision right after we'd had our three-way talk just before dinnertime, so perhaps the stroke had little to do with it, if anything at all.

She got to her feet and tugged me up with her. "Come on. Dad has taken a liking to the little black hen and her chicks. He asked me to move them closer to the house before Mr. Leo gets them. Dad's changing so fast . . . and all for the better."

We skipped off down the steps. I floated a foot or so off the ground from the privilege of holding Iona's hand. My cheeks

burned hot from embarrassment. What if someday we married each other? I wondered. An even greater rush of blood heated my face. Would she be content to live in a tent on the banks of the Stream River? As Dr. Wallace had asked, how could I provide for her, for a family? I carried that thought with me all the way to the barn.

We searched every stall in the barn for the little black hen, then searched the henhouse. By and by, Dr. Wallace waved to us, got in his big, dusty automobile and drove off. We watched a broad tail of dust sailing along behind it. Mainly we'd seen trucks, few cars—so we watched it out of sight, and then continued our search. We searched the shed and other outbuildings on the farm, but failed to locate the little hen and her chicks.

"Well," she said, "lots of time they go out in the pasture and chase bugs."

"You don't reckon Mr. Leo got 'em, do you?"

"Scotlin Bright, don't you even think that." She punched my shoulder, but not too hard.

"Sorry," I said.

We walked out in the pasture, and cast about among those glossy black and white dairy cows, but the hen and her chicks weren't there.

We returned to the barn to retrace our footsteps, in hopes we'd simply missed them the first time. We stepped into the barn, and Mr. Leo lay there all stretched out in the breezeway with just his head out of sight, entering the granary through a large crack in the wall. Then he entered the granary a slow inch at a time. By and by, he slithered out of sight, as if the hole in the wall was a mouth that'd swallowed him right on down.

Iona looked at me. A pale white ring encircled her mouth, and her lower lip trembled in a way that made me turn my head from her. She looked deprived of all hope of ever seeing the hen and her chicks again.

I could nearly read her mind.

"He just better not have."

"Maybe he didn't." But I doubted my own words. I'd said them for her benefit. That snake had the hen and her chicks for dinner. I just knew it.

She sprang forward, tore open the granary door, and leaped inside. I followed a close second. It took a couple of moments for my eyes to get used to the gloom of the small room, but finally everything burst into focus, and there he lay. He must've known instinctively he'd crossed a barrier this time that wasn't his to cross. He quickly coiled up in a couple of quick loops, and reared up in the air. He stood on his tail, and watched our every move.

"He did," she whispered. "Oh, he did it, Scotlin. Just look at him. I can feel it in my soul."

I felt it as well.

His sour-milk odor filled the room. I sensed a turbulent sea of downright wickedness in that old granary. That scaly serpent was evil in all its parts.

Iona took a step toward him. He reared even higher, laid back his head, opened his jaws wide, and displayed the white insides of his mouth in an attempt to pass himself off as a cottonmouth, or so I imagined. Iona stopped. Mr. Leo did sort of a tiny dance then. He swayed as if a breeze was pushing him. With his head reared up that way, white mouth exposed, he looked most impressive.

Iona wasn't put off at all by his bluff. She whirled around, caught up the grub hoe—the same hoe with which I'd tried to take his head off just a few nights ago. She wheeled quickly back around to face him.

"You've just swallowed your last chick, Mr. Leo—kitten too, for that matter." Her voice grew husky and determined.

It's a mistake to think blacksnakes don't bite. It's true they lack fangs and have no poison to inject into the blood system of their victims, but, they become quite vicious when cornered—especially one as large as Mr. Leo. They do have teeth, and bite savagely if forced to.

Mr. Leo laid back his head even more now in a defensive posture. It seemed he sensed he was in supreme danger as he faced this incensed female human.

"Be careful, Iona," I whispered. "He's so big … he's really dangerous."

But she ignored me, and advanced with the hoe held in the same grip I always used on a baseball bat. In a blink, that infernal snake flung itself forward like an arrow aimed at her legs.

She jumped to the side barely in time.

He struck the air close to her shinbone, turned then and like a black bolt of lightning cut out for a couple of bales of empty burlap sacks stacked in one corner of the granary. Iona sprang forward. I detected her rage rising like steam.

Mr. Leo sensed her approach before she even moved a toe. He struck at her again, and this time hit the side of her left shoe, the sole, where the leather is toughest and most resistant.

"Iona."

"I'm all right." She sounded increasingly angry. "Mr. Leo needs to be worried. He's the one in danger, not me."

The snake reached one of the bundles of burlap sacks, and slipped quickly beneath it.

"Help me, Scotlin."

I stepped forward.

"Move that bundle, and I'll crunch him right good."

She looked plenty ready now to set things right in the world.

I latched onto one of the bundles, and flung it aside. I had my eyes fixed to see Mr. Leo ready to strike again. The sacks bounced off the floor, created a muffled thud, and raised a large cloud of dust for me to try to stare through, but Mr. Leo wasn't there. So I gripped another bundle.

"Ready?"

She nodded, and squeezed the handle of the hoe in such a tight grip I figured it a miracle sawdust wasn't dribbling to the floor from the end of the thing.

I shoved the bundle to the side, and jumped away at the same instant. Iona launched the hoe forward with all her strength. She struck the boards of the wall with a loud thump a bare inch above Mr. Leo's head. Her aim was off a grain, perhaps two.

He streaked out of the corner, a long black shadow, and raced to the opposite wall. Iona sprang forward, hot in pursuit. She was unshakable now, as if the only thing of importance in her world was to claim vengeance for the deaths of the little black hen and her chicks. That girl had blood in both eyes.

Mr. Leo reached the base of the wall, and started a slow glide along the length of it, in a careful search for a hole large enough through which he might escape.

Iona lashed out again. This time the blade of the hoe struck the floor barely in front of Mr. Leo's head, and in fact, I first thought she'd hit him. But I saw my mistake when he reversed his field, and fled back along the wall the way he'd just come.

"Don't let him get away, Scotlin," she shouted, tugging at her hoe stuck in the floor.

I grabbed up an axe handle from a pile of five or six propped against the wall. I took a quick swipe at his head, but missed. This, though, was plenty enough to halt his retreat.

Iona freed the hoe at last, and charged up to help me. With Iona on his left and me on his right, Mr. Leo was one trapped blacksnake.

We brought him to a stand.

"Now's the time, Mr. Leo," she said. "Those chicks weren't just a meal, or the little black hen. They were innocent, beautiful and good. They were free of sin and guilt—as free as butterflies. You ate them as if they were nothing but mere food. You made a grave mistake this time, mister.

"Dad's fond of the hen and those little chicks. He won't protect you now."

Just then, Mr. Leo started thrashing about on the floor. Another huge boil of dust arose in the small room. Mr. Leo whipped his long, thick body around wildly in the dirt as if he'd just been struck by a sudden jolt of electricity.

This mystified Iona, and she stood back and stared at him in awe.

"What is it? What's he doing, Scotlin?"

I was as perplexed as Iona.

"Who knows? I've never seen anything like this before."

I then recalled a tale told me by a friend at school. It had to do with how certain snakes can shake themselves to pieces, and later on put themselves back together. The boy's grandpa had claimed they were "glass snakes." But Dad said that this too, like the brush ape, was just an old man's fable to tell to children. But all this shaking and undulating, sure looked genuine to me.

That old reptile kept at it. He thrashed and snapped about like a whip. This weird, unexpected display startled Iona—and to tell the truth, me as well. Mr. Leo took full advantage of the diversion he'd created.

He lashed himself to our right. In a black blur of acceleration, he reached the wall, and soared upward faster than lightning. His outlandish display of trickery caught us so off-guard all we could do was watch him shoot up the wall, squirt through a hole that I'd have sworn was far too small to allow him passage, and disappear into the loft.

Iona jumped from her trance, sprinted out of the granary toward the loft ladder, with me close at heel. She forgot all modesty in her haste, and climbed the ladder with a one-handed grip on the hoe, clutching the rungs of the ladder with her free hand. But this was all right. She still had on denim trousers beneath the dress she'd worn to the hayfield this morning.

By the time I stood erect in the hayloft, she was racing ahead in a quick charge across the floor, hot after the hateful, slithering blacksnake. Her feet pounded loud upon the wooden planking.

Mr. Leo was about to reach the safety of the enormous hay mound, and if he did so—well, he'd escape his just punishment.

There was no way on God's green earth we could ever move all that hay. In pure desperation, I flung my axe handle at him. I felt the muscles of my throwing arm stretch to the maximum, for I put all my strength into the throw. I then stood helplessly by to watch in fearful captivation as the handle soared high in the air and tumbled end over end, dreamlike.

I held my breath, waited and watched.

I had a dreadful feeling I'd misjudged his pace. At the last second, though, Mr. Leo jetted forward, and raced directly beneath the handle. In sheer astonishment, I watched it tumbling, tumbling, tumbling, down and down and down, and strike him square, mid-way of his incredibly long body. The handle then skittered noisily off across the wide oak planks.

Mr. Leo then put on the brakes to stare about him, all at sea, I allowed, as to what had just struck him. He then slowly coiled up as if to take his last stand there, a few yards from the safety of the hay mound.

"Got you now," Iona cried out. She moved behind him, to block his access to the hay.

She stopped a few yards short of the serpent. Mr. Leo peered at her from his insensible eyes—eyes that were blank, as if nothing in his world mattered. But I'd dealt him a critical blow, and his show of stoicism hid his true injury. Bright red blood dripped down his side, and pooled up on the floor beneath him.

I studied him then, and realized he was truly a grand animal. I wondered how old he honestly was. How long had it taken him to grow so large?

"Mercy me," I said.

His magnificence didn't fool Iona, though. As far as she was concerned, he was a monster, a force of no-good she needed to eliminate. Slowly she raised her hoe, ready now to strike. She hauled back, and without hesitation swung it downward—a robust swing, that'd surely take the creature's head off.

To my sad dismay, however, she missed again, as she'd done all through this long and heated battle. He oozed forward, and sliced straight for her, dripping blood. She struggled to free her hoe but it was stuck fast once more.

I sprinted forward to recover my axe handle, and by the time I had it in hand and turned around, I saw him pass between Iona's feet. He flashed off toward the upper entryway used to pitch the hay up into the loft. He was much too near safety now for me to even attempt to strike again with the axe handle. By the time I flashed past Iona, I saw her yank the hoe from the clutches of the wood. Then, I heard her feet pounding across the floorboards behind me in hot pursuit.

I beat her to the ladder, tossed down the handle, took hold of the first rung, slipped, then fell the rest of the way to the ground. Luckily, I landed on my feet. I grabbed up the handle, and continued the chase. Mr. Leo was striking out far ahead, in the open now, flashing streak-like toward the woods just beyond the hog pen, about a hundred yards away.

The milk cows had grazed the grass close to the ground hereabouts, so there was no high grass or weeds in which for him to hide. Besides, he was smearing a bloody track upon the ground. It'd be impossible to lose his trail now.

Iona's labored breathing close behind me gushed loud in my ear. She needed to see justice done, and soon, I felt.

"Quick, Scotlin, he's bound for the woods. If he reaches them he'll take to a hole and we'll never find him."

"But he's leaving a bloody trail, Iona."

"Hurry, Scotlin. Hurry!"

I ran faster. My feet were spinning as rapidly as they'd spin. A weathered tree stump loomed dead ahead. Mr. Leo took to it, and disappeared beneath it, and we stopped all in a huff and a puff in front of it. I walked twice around the thing to see if there was another exit, from which he could escape. I saw soon enough there wasn't. We stared long and hard. My chest rose and fell as fast as a forge billows. A huge stone stood just before the stump that'd somehow missed Mr. McKenzie's vigilant eyes.

"It isn't fair," Iona said.

After we regained our wind, I cast about to see if there was anything nearby to use as a lever to uproot the stump. I shoved against the stump with both hands, and felt it give. It felt much like a loose tooth in need of a good yank. A long piece of wood would do the job.

I spied a dead tree limb not far from the hog pen, which looked strong enough to use as the very tool we needed. I cut out in a quick dash, and caught up the heavy, lengthy and ungainly limb in both arms and attempted to haul it back to the stump. It was much too blamed heavy, though. Iona saw what I had in mind, rushed up to help, and we lugged it back to the stump.

I fitted the end of it into the hole at the base of the stump down which Mr. Leo had escaped. I then set the limb across the stone, and with Iona's help, we both levered down on the extreme end of it.

That cussed old stump groaned and protested powerfully in a grumpy voice. By and by, we worked up a sweat. Finally, however, it moved by bare inches, but didn't topple over as I'd planned. So we kept getting after it. Sweat streamed down my brow, into my eyes. I shook my head to free my vision, and just then felt the stump give way with such speed, force and surprise that both of us fell onto our cans. I watched from my rump as the stump tumbled out of the hole it'd occupied since it'd been a tiny acorn. Then there we sat.

From this position, we both watched breathlessly as Mr.Leo oozed out of his refuge and spurted forward in his stunning black and rapid sleekness. Iona jumped to her feet, and I did too.

"Looky," Iona said, as we lit out after him. "He's going to cut through the hog pen. He'll reach the woods."

When he reached the hog pen, I saw him race full out, zip beneath the hog wire, and cut straight through the pen. By now, he'd raced halfway across the pen, nearly to the safety of the woods that loomed dark and tall on the far side. I saw no way we'd ever catch him now. My hopes of sweet victory turned to sour defeat.

"It just isn't fair," Iona repeated herself.

I agreed with her with a whole and a sinking spirit with every heartbeat, with every sigh.

Cal called for us from the yard. I started to turn to go to him, but just then, from the corner of an eye, I caught a glimpse of a large black and white streak rumbling across the hog pen. I stopped in my tracks. Mr. McKenzie's huge, rhino-sized Poland China boar that'd been happily crunching hickory nuts at the far end of the pen as we'd raced toward the

stump was now galloping full out across the hog pen. His hoof beats shook the ground beneath him, loud as thunder. Dust clouds lifted from his churning feet.

"Looky, Iona. That boar's going to catch Mr. Leo. Just look at him."

"It's Oscar. Oh, I can't look, Scotlin."

She hid her face against my shoulder, and I didn't mind that a bit.

Oscar thundered forth in pursuit of the snake. His pounding hoofs vibrated the soles of my bare feet, hammering loudly upon the hard-packed earth. I watched, unable to turn my eyes from the awful scene I knew was fixing to take place. Finally, Oscar caught Mr. Leo. He clamped down on him with his fearsome teeth, shook him like a dog shakes a bone, and squeezed the life from him. He turned then and walked back across the pen toward the hickory trees. Mr. Leo dangled lifelessly, each half to a side, from Oscar's jaws, and that old snake's head and tail dragged the ground from opposite sides of Oscar's mouth. It looked as if he'd suddenly grown a tremendously long black mustache.

It was the blood, I figured. Oscar had scented the blood. Mr. Leo simply had no chance.

Oscar just stood there when he reached the shade, and bolted him right on down. I knew all along that hogs often make meals of snakes. Shoot fire, all country boys knew that. But we'd pressured Mr. Leo, and forced him to cut straight through the hog pen. His luck ran out—that's all.

For some reason, however, this disturbed Iona.

Chapter Fifteen

By and by, we ambled back to the yard to meet Cal. Iona walked with reluctant steps.

"What was all the fuss in the hog pen about? I heard Oscar screaming as if it were feeding time," Cal said.

Iona burst into tears. "Oh, Calvin," she said. "We killed Mr. Leo."

"Why?"

"He ate the little black hen and all her chicks," I said, and then explained it all.

Astonishment, and then disbelief, crossed Cal's face. He raised a hand, and motioned for us to follow.

We scampered off to the back yard.

There in the backyard, I received the biggest surprise imaginable. The little black hen and her chicks were scatting about in all their beauty, eating bugs on the fly, off the leaves of the tinier bushes, and raising tiny clouds of dust.

Iona and I stared wide of eye. It seemed too good to be true, and all this time we'd allowed they'd gone down the belly of that gross monster.

Iona looked at me, and her face darkened from guilt.

"Forget it," I told her. "He'd have eaten them, sooner or later. It just made up for all the kittens, and the other helpless creatures he feasted on over the years. It was his time is all."

"Cal," Iona said. "What will I tell Dad?"

I saw evidence then of just how a person sometimes allows emotions to run amok. Earlier, she'd been bent on destroying the reptile, and I believe if she'd accomplished her mission, she would've experienced a great relief and satisfaction. But when Oscar killed Mr. Leo instead, her emotions rebelled. Why? Likely, I'll never learn the answer to that one. I chalked it all up to the mystery of the female mind to feel hatred and love at the same instant. But who knows? It was a considerable mystery, as the old folks say. I set the mystery up on a shelf in the storehouse of my mind. I'd study it later on.

"I doubt he will even ask," Cal replied. "But if he does, just tell him the truth. Oscar ate him. He would find out anyway. We can't hide the truth from him. Just be thankful the chicks are safe."

She took up the little black hen, stroked its neck, and cooed softly to it.

Once again, that longhaired, dark-eyed Iona McKenzie looked like the sweetest angel ever, even though she did manage to hide her wings pretty well.

"Dad will recover, Scotlin," Cal said. "But I suppose Iona's told you already."

"Yes, she did. It was a miracle."

"Yes. It was a miracle. Did she tell you the rest?"

I smiled. Calvin was fixing to die from wanting to tell me his good news.

"Yes, she did. But I wouldn't be against hearing it again."

His face flamed bright and alive when he spoke of the gift his father had given him. It was a wondrous thing to witness.

"I'll work especially hard, Scotlin. I want to get all I can from this opportunity. I intend to study as if my life hinged on it. You would be smart to do the same. Your own dad and mom have made a big sacrifice—"

"Well, I'm not the student you are," I said. I was still fighting for some way to stay with Uncle Roz. But my conversation with Dr. Wallace was fairly beating me to a pulp.

Country children rarely went past the eighth grade, and I was well aware of this. That was it mainly, and many weren't even allowed to graduate grade school. Their folks needed them on the farm. I just happened to be one of the lucky few. Shoot, I had a lot to kick around in my mind.

The circus would be three spectators shy, because of Mr. McKenzie's unfortunate stroke. Although missing it dealt me a mean lick, I knew I was a right lucky chap. Which was better, a visit to the circus, or to witness a miracle? In my heart, I knew the answer to that one. Besides, the circus would return next year.

I bade them all so-long, and set off down that dusty old road toward the river in a trot. There were only three means of transportation available to me, walking, trotting and, running. If I was in a hurry, I ran. If not, I walked. If I was in between, I trotted. I was in between this evening. So I trotted.

My bare feet stirred clouds of dust. I draped my too-small shoes over a shoulder. A younger cousin of mine would soon have himself a passable pair of shoes to wear.

I tried to fashion a fiddle tune from the song of the cicadas, doing so to bedevil time on the way. But that old tune, "Billy

in the Lowground" kept intruding upon my mind all the way to our river camp.

"Your dad came again while you were gone, Scotlin," Uncle Roz told me, as we ate supper—fried channel cat and cornbread, of course. Full darkness lay over the woods and river.

I was shocked. "He did? I thought you said he wouldn't need me for a while yet?"

"Your brother already got his job at the railroad, and is in town working right now. As a result, him and his woman decided to move up their wedding date. Arthur's new equipment won't arrive for a spell yet. He needs you to help put up the hay. Your dad felt rain in his bones. I do too, to tell the truth. You're going home this evening. So gather your traps and plunder."

This old man needed me. I couldn't leave him. He had no one else. I decided then to hide out, if that's what it took for me to stay.

"I've decided to stay here with you, Uncle Roz," I told him. "You make out pretty slick. Besides, you need me."

When he finished eating, he rolled up a smoke, and lit up. He blew smoke skyward, and hit me hard with his determined, relentless eyes. I tried my best to maintain eye contact, but his stern gaze burned through my defenses, and I ducked my head.

"You think I've got 'er pretty swell here, don't you?" Uncle said. "You think this river life is some kind of paradise, don't you?"

In self-defense, I said, "I love it here on the river. Living the way I really enjoy, instead of having someone forever at my elbow looking to me to do something for them. If the Stream River's good enough for you—why, it's plenty good enough for me too."

Uncle Roz narrowed his eyes even tighter. Finally, he stared at me through tiny slits, the way Zane Grey always describes the mean eyes of a desperado. I looked into them. But I didn't look long. I couldn't. It would've been easier to fly than to hold fast to those eyes. I wilted beneath them like a corn stalk in the dead of winter.

"Scotlin Earl Lee Bright," he announced to me, to the river, the jungle and to all the saints in heaven, "you're going to listen up, and listen up good. When I returned from the war, I should've grabbed up a right good girl and married 'er. If I had 'er to do over I certainly wouldn't have come to this old dank river. I should've raised me a family like your dad did. The way all responsible men do. All I've done is malinger and waste away down here ever since then.

"Perhaps I'd have 'mounted to somethin', instead of becomin' a low river rat, in love with the jug." Uncle's voice grew in pitch, and rode higher with every new word.

"You ain't no river rat! And you don't drink all that much." I saw his revelation was hurting him, perhaps even more than it was hurting me.

"I've wasted my life, mister. You just don't know how terrible it was for me with no son to pass my family fiddle on to. Even though you're like a son to me, 'twasn't the same. It ain't all fun and games down here." He ran out of air at this point, and grabbed for it as if it were just out of his reach.

Finally, he continued. "It's far from the paradise you make it out to be. The woods and river both have ghosts that come creepin' in the night, and sorrow that at times tries to choke me to death. I'm an old man, and you probably think I ain't got no feelin's, sorrow or anything of the sort, but I feel pain the same way you do, the way all folks do. It ain't a bit of it good, I'll tell you.

"Now you just gather up all your booty and head on home. Help Arthur Bright on the farm until he sees fit to set you free, or until you're full grown, one or the other. This fall, you're goin' to school. I mean for you to get some knowledge into that thick coconut you got sittin' between those shoulders of yours. Because, if anybody ever needed an education, my fine lad, you are the very one."

"Schooling ain't everything," I said. "I've decided not to even go. Who needs it?"

He slashed me again and right neatly with his eyes.

"You ain't decided nothin', boy. It ain't up to you to decide nothin' of the kind. That's a right better left to your pap and mam.

"Now, you can't stay any longer with me. I'm runnin' you off right now. You hear me, Scotlin Bright? I'm good and tired of babysittin' you.

"It was plenty all right when you was just a pup, but you're just 'bout grown now. You got to pretend you're a man, until you truly are one. You'll not malinger here with me. Them old days and foolery are over. I wasted my life, all right, but I'll play hob if I let you do the same.

"Now, you just get them old foolish thoughts out of your skull, and make up your mind to act responsibly. You're goin'

to do the right thing in life—and do it proper, startin' right now, or else I'll yank a limb off a tree and use it on you till you do manage to find a way to set your mind straight."

He tossed away his cigarette and sat in silence awhile. He was trembling so much I thought he might fall off his seat. But shoot, I was beat up even worse than he was. I shook from head to foot, ready to cry at any moment.

Just then, another wayward thought thundered down the tunnels and chambers of my tormented brain.

"But, Uncle Roz, what happens if you hook that old blue cat again? Who'll steady the boat? Who'll help you seine for minnows?"

He twisted up another cigarette, stuck it in his mouth then lit up. By and by, he said, "Ain't you never heard of minnow traps, boy?"

Well, of course, I had.

"Come with me, feller," he commanded. "I got somethin' to show you."

At water's edge, Uncle held the lantern out over the river, and this lured to the flame millions of flying insects. They swarmed in the light like a moving blanket, and were falling dead to the ground and into the water from the lantern's heat. I spat many of the fluttery winged creatures from my mouth, though, so the fire sure didn't get them all.

I gasped. My eyes bugged out on stems. Uncle Roz's huge, wooden live-box floated there, filled completely with what looked to be a dark log, except it moved lazily about in the limited space of the box.

The log slowly turned into our *catfish*—the very one Uncle Roz had caught twice before. The eyes were wide set. Lethal-

looking horns the size of a billy goat's were set behind its enormous jaws, and moss clung to its fins like a brush pile. It looked as timeless as Gobbler's Roost. I allowed it'd already been ancient when the earth and all the heavens had been balled up and strewn out across the vast spaces of existence.

"There he is, Scotlin," he said, "I finally got that old feller."

"But, how … all by yourself?"

"I cut off all the hooks, so I wouldn't get hooked up. I jawed him right good with one side of the ice hook. Then right off, he yanked me into the river with him. He nearly killed us both the same way he'd done the other two times, but I had him hooked good and fair. He came close to horning me right good a couple of times, but somehow, I managed to keep my head above water. I decided then I'd die before I lost him again.

"Then after a good long spell, I was nearin' the end of my will—I'd long since run out of strength— and he just came up to the top of the water, rolled onto his back like a beat down pup, presented me with his belly, croaked aloud, and gave out."

"Wow!" I said. "He'll make a fish fry for all of Lyons Beach. Maybe for all of Ozora County. He's that big."

He didn't even bother to reply, but handed me the lantern. He took up the ice hook, opened the lid of the live-box, hooked the fish in the lower jaw, and hauled him up and out of its prison in a two-handed grip. Then there that old boy lay, in the shallow water right up next to the bank. I couldn't help but feel that here was a thing, a creature far out of its natural environment.

"It ain't nobody ever going to taste this old feller's flesh, if I got any say in it," Uncle said. Slowly he twisted his wrist to the point where the barbed end of the ice hook slid free of

the thick-boned cartilage in the fish's jaw. He lifted the hook above it, and we both watched, until it finally realized it was no longer a captive. I watched, breath held tight in my lungs. It rolled over twice, swam farther out, and slowly sank into the black depths of the Stream River. Uncle turned and walked up the bank toward camp without another word. The swarm of insects left with him in pursuit of the lantern light. I inhaled the cool air off the water, caught that special sharp, sweet flavor bearing a slight tang of fish and of trees heated all day by the good orange sunshine. The stars stood bright in the sky. They flickered with their special enchanting reflection in the slow, steady flow of the water. The wind kicked up. It whipped the dark, feathery limbs of the cedars atop Gobbler's Roost about, and created a sad low moan as it romped through the trees in the same manner it'd likely done through other cedars from a time far-gone. Bullfrogs were competing for dominance in the weeds growing along the bank on each side to the river. Their deep honks, burps and squawks sounded grand to me. I hated to, but I just had to leave the river and go home.

Chapter Sixteen

I gathered up all my plunder, ready to head home, loaded down like an Ozora County mule. Mostly junk, it was, except for the Tull family fiddle. Uncle Roz handed my own lantern to me, and when I took it, he reached out and latched onto me. He held me close for a time. There was no way to tell what thoughts crowded his mind but it felt plenty sad to me. A deep pain lashed my brain, squeezing and wringing it, until it felt like a shirt Mom had wrung out and was fixing to hang on the line. My body shook so much I feared I'd fly apart at the weaker spots, and right then, all the spots were weak.

By and by, he freed me of his rough, raspy hands. I could feel them though, as if they still held me. I caught the rich scent of tobacco from his pipe and cigarettes, with a tad of whiskey tossed in, the sweat of his work and of the fertile river where he found his subsistence, the old mule, as well as the hardwood jungle. Looming above all else was the wondrous scent of hickory smoke from untold campfires. This was my uncle Roz, his very essence. I'd hated it when he released me, but I knew it'd been unavoidable.

He said, "I reckon, Scotlin, that if you'd asked me why I turned that old feller loose, I would've known I hadn't taught you a darned thing in all these years. I'm right proud of you, son."

He pushed me then as if he were tired of me.

But shoot, I knew better.

Before I'd taken three steps with the lantern held out on the end of a long stick in order to see what was ahead of me, as well as to keep the huge tribe of flying bugs out of my face, he said to my back, "Tell Arthur to send you over this fall when it cools off. We'll gig us a mess of redhorse. Tell your mam I'll not be there for the weddin'. Ain't got no sharp duds to wear."

I walked on, unable to face him, nor to answer.

"You keep up them fiddle lessons now, Scotlin Earl Lee Bright."

Well I had to answer this. For I knew, had I not answered that life-abused old man, I would've regretted it for the remainder of my time on earth.

"Yes sir. I certainly mean to, and every time I play, I'll be thinking of you." My voice held strong, which was strange, for I sure didn't feel strong inside.

I felt much like Benedict Arnold likely felt when he turned his coat on George Washington those long-ago days when our country was in its early stages.

Just before I passed around a bend in the wagon rut, I stopped. I turned to look back at camp and at that extraordinary old man. He was sitting in his chair beneath the willows in the gloom and the half-light. The lantern hung from its low branch in the willow tree. I knew Uncle had coarse ways. I knew he loved the jug, as he admitted, but I also knew down deep he was just a man, like all men, even though I'd made

him into something much greater. I knew as well that Uncle Roz didn't need any help from a pup like yours truly and never had. It was a complete waste of time for me to worry about him—I had more important matters to take care of. This fall, it'd be high school for me, and I felt proud that I'd been some help in Cal's getting to go to high school.

I decided then that no matter what happened to Uncle Roz, he'd always be with me. I'd carry him forever in my memory. He'd always be there on the banks of the Stream River, across the water from that noisy old owl.

It came to me that this day was the very last day in the last summer of my youth. I had to get along home, and as Uncle Roz had said, it was high time I quit playing the notes alone. I had to get down to the real business at hand. I had to play the entire tune. The one all must learn to play.

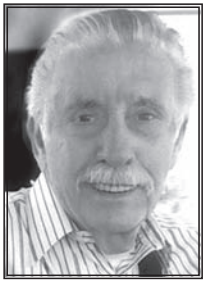
I strode off quickly with the pitiful sound of Uncle Roz caught up in a coughing spell.

As I pressed on, I kept my ear cocked toward the river in an effort to hear that old owl, but it was far too late for him to start his evening jabber.

Finally, I turned to making fiddle music mentally. Then, for a good long time, the wonderful echo of "Billy in the Lowground" played on and on in my mind.

THE END

About Sumner Wilson



Sumner Wilson is a retired railroad trainman, switchman, and brakeman. He took up writing in motel rooms to bedevil time while waiting to "get out" on home-bound trips. He is the author of the novel *The Hellbringer*.

Wilson's short stories have appeared in *Cappers*, published in Big Muddy, a journal of Southeast Missouri State University and sold two dozen stories to Sterling/Mcfadden Publishing, Inc. He has been published multiple times in *Frontier Tales*, an online magazine. He and his wife reside in Rolla, Missouri, where many of his stories take place.

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