BILLY IN THE LOWGROUND

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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.