

Souls Entwined

A Novel
Sharon M. Haley

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By Sharon M. Haley

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The Hollow

*The sudden torrent brought,
sounds of rock grating on rock
tumbling against each other
in the raging branch.*

*Sheets of rain
dissipated into quiet drops
sliding from the cedars' lacy branches.*

*On the dark mountainside,
cottony clumps of fog rose
out of the treetops*

*Like puffs of smoke
loosed from some
hidden chimney.*

*The old man said
it was the rabbits
cooking their supper.*

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Chapter 1: The Telegram

War raged in Europe, but it was a long way off from Prater, Tennessee. Folks read about it in newspapers, and neighbors talked about it, but there was no reality to it like plowing a field or putting up jars of jams or vegetables. The understanding of it came when you gave up a son, brother, nephew or friend. With one last wave, they disappeared to some place on the other side of the world, and could no longer be seen or touched. Memory was the only proof that they ever existed except for the occasional letter or telegram.

Indian summer played tricks with the calendar, and the sudden drop in temperature caught everyone off guard, even though it was the first week of November. Shadowed clouds played hide and seek with the sun all morning. When a few warm rays managed to break through, gusts of cold wind swept them aside. Old folks huddled around their fireplaces trying to keep the chill out of their arthritic joints, but the regulars at the Prater Store wouldn't let the weather keep them from paying a visit to their favorite merchant, Cecil J. Barrett.

Franklin Henderson was a big barrel-chested man with long black hair and a bushy black beard. He was gruff looking, but the twinkle in his eyes gave away his gentle disposition. Tom Harrod, on the other hand, was hardly more than a skeleton with thin gray hair and clean-shaven, so every line in his weather-beaten face was visible. Ornery as a pent-up sow, there was

nothing he liked better than cussing, fussing and discussing the day's events with Franklin and Cecil. The men had been neighbors and friends for many years.

Cecil's head and the tops of his shoulders were the only parts of him showing from behind the counter. Thick gray hair straggled along his collar, and a biscuit-and-gravy belly lapped over his belt. A storekeeper for more than twenty years, the Prater General Store passed from his daddy to him and looked much the same as it did in 1885. Galvanized washtubs, washboards, brooms and rolls of plow lines lay in piles in the back of the store. Shelves along the sidewall behind a long counter held cans of peaches, corn, salmon, oysters, and Possum sardines for five cents a can. A good supply of chewing tobacco included Brown's Mule, Day's Work and Warren County Twist, and Stud or Granger smoking tobacco was available in small sacks with drawstrings, each with a pack of cigarette papers to roll your own. A long glass case filled with sticks of peppermint, coconut, licorice and peanut butter candy for the children perched on a wooden base on the end of the counter. Paper sacks of coffee and a tow sack of unground Peaberry coffee beans sat on the floor. On the opposite wall, shelves held bolts of cloth, sewing needles, spools of thread, racks of ribbon and lace, and a colorful tinted container with a selection of dyes. Beneath the shelves sat two long tables where piles of acrid-smelling blue Duckin overalls and jumpers lay in no particular order.

Three rocking chairs circled the pot-bellied stove sitting in the middle of the room. Tom and Franklin saddled up to the fire, letting the heat penetrate their heavy pants and push away the cold that clung to the fibers. In duet, their hands rubbed up and down their backsides, nearly reaching through to the long johns that bagged around bony knees. They loosened their coats, sank down into a chair and leaned in as close to the stove as possible to warm their hands.

"If it stays cold like this we'll be able to kill hogs in a week or two," Tom said as a spray of tobacco flew from his lips into the spittoon nearby. "I wouldn't be surprised if this rain turns to snow by evening."

"Reckon so. Say, are you taking that bay to the sale Monday?" asked Franklin. "I wouldn't mind making a trade with you on that mare. I've got a good mule broke and ready to go."

"Yeah, the last time you traded me a broke mule I spent three weeks laid up with a sprained knee when the son of a gun tried to kick me to death."

"It was just spirited, that's all," drawled Franklin as he scratched a patch of wiry black hair on the back of his neck.

The bell on the door lulled their conversation, and Miss Josie entered, dressed in black from her bonnet to her laced-up shoes, carrying a basket of eggs. Delicate as a hummingbird, the mournful look on her face masked her beauty. Her mouth hadn't curved upward in a smile for more than a year, since she followed her husband's coffin to the graveyard. She sat her basket on the counter, then stood near the stove, trying to capture some secondhand heat.

"Howdy, Miss Josie. How's Aunt Pearl today?" asked Franklin.

"She's been in a state all day, moaning and wailing about death. I'm afraid she's having one of those spells that's always followed by something bad, and it's about to give me the all-overs. It's like the time Amos Simmons' body was found twisted up in the harness of his plow when the mule got spooked and drug him to death. Aunt Pearl knew somebody had died, and her nowhere near anybody to tell her."

Franklin leaned forward, trying to catch more heat from the stove. "I heard it started with her mama in the Civil War when a company of Yankees killed some of our boys in a skirmish over towards McMinnville. Aunt Pearl was only seven when she

helped her ma pull a cart to the battlefield to look for the body of her daddy before anyone told them he was dead. That seein' power must have run in the family."

Josie rubbed her hands together, then sighed. "Well, I've got to get back. Don't want to leave her alone too long. Mr. Barrett, I need some coffee and sugar. Did you ever get any blue thread?"

"No ma'am, but my boy will be riding into Woodbury on Saturday. He'll find you some."

"These eggs is all I have to pay you. Will they be enough?"

"Yes ma'am, they'll do."

Mr. Barrett added the eggs to the pile in the box behind the counter, then put Miss Josie's packages in the basket and handed it back to her. She thanked him and hurried out of the store. Franklin wrapped his scarf around his neck and shoved his old felt hat down low around his ears.

"Tom, why don't you come by the house and take a look at that mule? She's a dandy, I mean it."

"Well, it don't look like Cecil's going to share his lunch, so I may as well. It'll give me a head start on my pigs if I don't have to go to the sale on Monday."

With their coats buttoned to the neck, the men held their hands close to the potbellied stove, trying to capture a bit of heat to carry with them.

"See ya later, Cecil. Don't get lonely without us now, you hear?"

The storekeeper grunted after them as they left and the tinkle of the doorbell faded in the dust that coated the floor. He looked around at the disarray in the store and decided to eat the leftover fried chicken he brought for lunch. If nobody came in, he might straighten up later. Pushing the unopened mail and packages to the end of the counter, he settled into the easy chair behind the stove with a chicken leg in one hand and a biscuit in the other. Sticking the chicken leg in his mouth, he reached for the newspaper lying on top of the mail and began

reading the latest war news from France. Bits of chicken crust fell on the newspaper, but he ignored them till they settled on his pants, then he brushed them away with his greasy hand. When a gust of wind whistled past the door, Cecil shivered and moved his chair closer to the stove. He didn't have nowhere to go today and he was glad. Sometimes there are advantages to being a storekeeper.

Miss Josie clutched her shawl, and with her head bent low against the wind, made her way down the dirt road to the small bridge that crossed the creek. The house she shared with her mother-in-law was on the opposite side of the river. The soles of her dusty shoes were worn thin, and she felt every pebble in the dirt road. The wind grabbed at her shawl, but Josie held tight to it. She stepped up on the porch and pushed open the door. Aunt Pearl sat in the rocker close to the fireplace where Josie had left her, but the fire had nearly burned itself out. She sat deathly still with her eyes squeezed shut, and a lonesome kind of fear ran through Josie.

“Aunt Pearl, you all right?”

The older woman's head nodded, and in a tired voice said, “It's a sad day, Josie. Death is coming down the road.”

Josie shuddered as she laid her package on the table. “Here's the coffee. Why don't you make some while I fetch some kindling? A hot drink will do us both good.”

She went outside and began chipping away at the last of the large pieces left in the woodpile. A neighbor had dropped off a load of wood to help get them through the cold spell, and promised to bring more on Saturday. That was two weeks ago, and they hadn't seen hide nor hair of him since. As her axe slammed into the stubborn log, she thought about Garrett. Her husband had been gone a year, but she still looked for him to poke his head through the door asking if dinner was ready.

The house was still as a tomb without his laughter, and she missed the feel of him next to her in bed. She rested the axe for a moment and hugged her arms tight to her body. On the coldest nights he kept her warm, but since his death, cold had become a constant companion.

It was 1897 when he carried her home in the wagon pulled by his old horse, Henry. It didn't take long for the graceful hills of Cannon County, Tennessee, to capture the sixteen-year-old's heart. They reminded her of wondrous waves splashing up against the sky, as they tucked into each other like folds of cake batter. The early morning mist hung in the treetops like a bridal veil, while families of deer tiptoed along the bottoms.

The East Fork of Stones River flowed by the front of their house, halfway between Woodbury and Short Mountain. At the headwaters, there was a narrow hollow shaped in a V with a flat bottom and sides that grew out of the ground at a sloping angle and sometimes straight up, so steep that the sun rarely peeked over the top. A thread of stream flowed out of the rocks, and marked the beginning of the Stones River. It petered down to a slow drip during a dry summer, but early spring rains would turn it into a raging torrent that could carry away a horse and its rider. The hollows that cut through the mountains often carried the names of the families who dwelled in them, while others had colorful names that described their characteristics, such as Parchcom, Rainbow Falls and Shinbone.

Prater had a post office, general store, two blacksmith shops, and a furniture shop that provided chairs and tables for the living and coffins for the dead. An old church stood in the field across the creek, not far from the general store. There was a school, two sawmills and a gristmill. In early 1900, approximately eight hundred people dwelled in the Cannon County Seventh District called Prater community. Wheat and com flourished in the rich soil of the hills and bottoms, and

most folks had cattle, goats, pigs or sheep. If a man owned a milk cow and had several children, he could be satisfied. Sure-footed mules pulled the plows for planting corn along the steep hillsides, and many years after the planting ceased cornrows would still be visible along the side of the hills. A thriving community banded together in the little church across the river each Sunday. Most were good neighbors, and if a barn needed building, it turned into a celebration with tables spread with food and everyone eager to help. When a wedding took place, the whole community participated, whether it was to offer an extra hog for the larder, or contribute a handmade quilt.

School attendance reached its highest number of seventy-two at the turn of the century. A one-room school was located about three-quarter of a mile from the Prater Store in the mouth of Wauford Hollow. Whenever the children got too rambunctious and interfered with the teacher's lessons, the promise of pinching off their heads would make them settle down and behave. If that threat didn't discourage their misbehaving, a hickory stick would certainly gain their attention. The highlight of the week was the spelling bee held on Friday afternoons when school was in session. Parents clamored to the schoolyard to listen to the spelling bee as well as their children's attempts at writing prose. Many such hamlets dotted the hills of Tennessee in 1917.

As Miss Josie carried an armload of wood into the house, a strange sound caught her attention. It was faint at first but soon more distinguishable. The blast of a bugle echoed through the hills. When she carried in the kindling, her eyes met Aunt Pearl's and she wondered at her mother-in-law's seein' powers.

Drexel Higgins shivered as his buggy turned into the Stones River Road. The chill in the air cut through his bones, and he pulled the horsehair blanket closer around him. The tassels hanging from the cover of the buggy kept knocking his black

top hat to the side, so he draped his scarf over it and tied the ends under his chin.

A blacksmith by trade, old age had stiffened his joints, preventing him from raising a hammer against an anvil with any accuracy anymore. He filled his time doing odd jobs and exchanging gossip with other old timers in Woodbury. When there was a telegram to deliver, he washed his wiry body and put on a white starched shirt. He brushed his black suit with the long-tailed coat and retrieved the string tie and black top hat from the hatbox under his bed. Drexel was seventy-one, but the job of delivering telegrams was his mission, for he was bound to serve his country in time of war. His body was flat whichever way you looked at him except for the Adam's apple that bobbed above the starched collar of his shirt. His pale, chalky face looked deathlike against his black coat, and he wore his left sleeve folded and pinned above the elbow.

Drexel bragged about being a bugler in the Civil War, but no one remembered ever hearing him play a tune. Folks wondered if the music left him when he lost his arm. He announced his arrival in each community with a blast from his bugle, but it became a death knell. There was a preacher look about him with all his formality, but he had no sermon to deliver. He never spoke to anyone except the person receiving the telegram. His elegant carriage with the oak running gear was a familiar sight in town. He made it himself with wrought iron brackets and shiny fittings bracing the polished wood. Rubber-covered wheels helped ease the brutal bouncing from the old dirt roads. His horse, cleaned and brushed, was always ready for the next telegram.

Several children ran out the door of the Prater School to watch the buggy plodding down the road until their teacher shoed them back inside. The aged preacher, Isaiah Hamilton, was writing his sermon for the following Sunday but stopped to bow his head in prayer. Franklin had been showing Tom his

young mule when they heard the bugle, and both men hurried out of the barn to follow the sound.

Lord, don't let it be one of the Donnelly boys, thought Cecil Barrett as he tossed the newspaper aside and hurried to the door. When he stepped outside, he waved at his cousin, Ronnie Barrett, who stood in the doorway of his blacksmith shop across the road. Cecil thought about the day William, Jacob, and little Sarah stopped by the store to get a cold drink after taking logs to the sawmill for their daddy. He was reading the headline aloud to Ronnie when they came in the store. "United States Declares War on Germany,"

"I figured we'd be in it sooner or later," said Ronnie as he drew another drink from his soda bottle. "I wish I were a younger man. I'd go in a minute."

"Let me look at that," said William, and hungrily read the words that would change the direction of his life forever.

Cecil could tell by the look on William's face that a fever raged in his blood, but he didn't realize that the fever would spread to his seventeen-year-old brother Jacob. As far as Jacob was concerned, being left behind was not an option.

A few women stepped out on their porches and held their arms tight across their chests trying to hold in the warmth. Others just looked out the window, their eyes following Drexel's buggy until patches of trees swallowed it. The very walls of each house seemed to heave a sigh of relief each time he passed without stopping. By the time the buggy passed the graveyard and the church, Miss Josie reached the road and began following on foot. When the buggy turned down the Gilley-Young Hollow, she knew it was one of the Donnelly boys. She never understood why Julia and James let the boys join the service. Both boys had gone and now one of them was wounded or perhaps worse,

dead. She turned around and hurried back to the house to tell Aunt Pearl the news.

The horse struggled down the rock-lined creek bed fighting to keep from slipping on loose rock and gravel. Not wanting to take the chance of tearing up his buggy or crippling his horse, Drexel stopped and tied the horse to a small tree. He would walk the last three-quarter mile to the Donnelly house.

Since he was on foot, no one heard his approach. Julia barely noticed his soft knock, but as soon as she appeared in the doorway, her face turned ashen and her hand went to her mouth, muffling a cry. He swiped his hat from his balding head, hooked it over the stump of his left arm and handed her the telegram.

“Sorry, Missus Donnelly. Hate to have to give you this, but it’s my duty.”

Staring at the envelope, she pulled away from it as though it were on fire and the devil himself was standing there. She tried to pull the door shut, but Drexel’s foot kept it from closing. His experience delivering telegrams prepared him for these reactions.

“Ma’am, you have to take it,” he said, pressing the envelope into her hands.

Normally visitors could expect food or drink, but Drexel was no ordinary visitor. Without another word he turned and retraced his steps back to the buggy, for he understood the sorrow he was delivering.

Julia clutched the envelope knowing its contents, but fear kept her from reading the words and making it real. She could not will her hand to pull the bell rope that would summon James and Sarah. A violent trembling coursed through her body, and her legs could no longer support her. She sank down on the porch step and covered her face with her apron, letting the envelope fall.

James never heard the moan of the old bugle, so he was startled when he saw Drexel walking towards the curve of the branch. His breath drew in sharply, and a heavy weight wrapped itself around his heart. He dragged himself towards the porch, looking up at Julia with dread etched on his face. Picking up the envelope, he fumbled in his pocket for his pocketknife. Carefully he slid the sharp edge of his knife along the top of the envelope and pulled the telegram out. The slowness of his actions prolonged the agony as he closed the knife, slipped it into his coat pocket and then read the words aloud:

We deeply regret to inform you that Private Jacob Earl Donnelly was killed in action October 15, 1917.

The pressure in Julia's chest made it nearly impossible to breathe, and her arms reached out for her husband. Daily they had fought to push their fears behind them, believing that their sons would return, but now reality tested their faith. They clung together trying desperately to draw strength from one another while the world crashed down around them.

James put his thick calloused hands on Julia's small shoulders and stared at her with dread in his eyes. "What about William?"

His boys had been inseparable and their spirits bonded as if they were twins, even though there was five years difference in their ages. Julia had miscarried twice before giving birth to Jacob. Little William seemed to understand the significance of the event and became a guardian to the tiny baby.

"Will he always be my baby brother?" asked the serious little boy as he cradled the baby in his arms.

"Of course," said Mama, "just like we will always be your mama and daddy."

"I'll always watch out for him. I'll never let anything happen to him."

When Jacob learned to walk, he became William's shadow and tried to do everything that his older brother did. The job of caretaker for his young brother was endless. His curly auburn hair blazed in the sun, as did his temper. Jacob towered over his peers, and his eyes spoke his moods, blue-green when happy, and ocean dark when angry. It made his mother smile as she recalled her roughhouse father, but it worried James. William was forever pulling Jacob out of scrapes. James was a firm believer in discipline and was quick to find a switch or reach for his belt. William would beg him not to whip Jacob and promise that he would see to him.

Memories tormented James as he watched the light fade from the hollow. Jacob's mind absorbed knowledge as butterflies claimed the cow piles in the field. The boy felt it a waste of time to write anything down, so he was always in trouble for not doing his homework, yet he passed every examination.

When he was supposed to be plowing or helping his father in the wood shop, he might be lying in a haystack daydreaming or reading a book. The three children clung to each other like the roots of a strawberry plant. William watched out for Jacob, and Jacob watched out for Sarah. Now the connection was broken, and their youngest son was dead.

"What about William?" James repeated.

As Sarah held one of Bitty's new kittens, she decided to carry it to the house to show Mama. She tucked it inside her sweater and started running across the creek towards the house. Then she saw her parents sitting on the porch. Mama was crying, and Daddy held her close to him. Instinctively, Sarah knew one of her brothers was dead, maybe both. She ran back to the barn to hide and knelt in the hay, clutching the little kitten to her chest. With her eyes squeezed shut she prayed.

"God, don't take both my brothers. Please send one of them home. We couldn't bear to lose both of them."

Her tears dropped down on the little kitten. She leaned over the stack of hay and returned the kitten to its mother.

“Oh, Bitty, why did there have to be a war?”

Sarah sat in the hay with her arms hugging her knees, rocking back and forth. She watched a swallow fly to the rafters, and then a little brown mouse scurried past. It stopped and looked at her for a moment, twitched its nose, then ran to a dark corner behind the mule’s stall. Sam, the biggest one, hung his head over the stall door and looked at her with sad eyes as though he knew her sorrow. Outside the clouds had regrouped and a slow cold rain was falling. Dark settled in before Daddy came looking for her. He stood in the doorway of the barn holding a lantern, and she could see rainwater dripping from his hat. She knew he couldn’t see her in the dark, and she sat very still. He called out, and in a whispered voice she said, “Is it William or Jacob?”

His voice broke as he answered, “It’s Jacob.”

The silence that followed seemed endless until finally she moved, picking her way through the dark.

“I couldn’t come to the house. I didn’t want it to be happening.”

It was still too dark to see her, so he stretched his calloused hand into the blackness until her small, cold hand slipped into his. Sarah noticed how the wet clothes clinging to his body made him look thin ... almost frail. She was sure that tears mixed with the rain that slid down his cheeks. Sarah put her arm through his as they stood in the doorway of the barn looking up at the rain-drenched night. The cattle huddled under an old oak tree, their warm breath forming steam in the night air, and the haunting cry of a large bird called out to the darkness.

Chapter 2: Letters

December 15, 1917

Dear William,

Please don't blame yourself for Jacob's death. It is just a fact of war that lives will be lost. We received a telegram saying that you were wounded and in the hospital, and we pray for your recovery. Let us hear from you, son, as we are worried and desperate for a letter from you. We pray God will return you to us soon. Write to Sarah. She needs to hear from you. The loss of Jacob has been hard on all of us, and knowing you will be home soon is our only comfort.

Love, Mama

His eyelids fluttered as though a moth had attached itself to his lids. He squeezed them shut, then opened them, trying to focus. Pale light shadowed every image. It was like being in a

deep hole, trying to pull up towards the light. His eyes followed the blank walls with only the ceiling to keep them from escaping.

William's leg throbbed inside a cast that reached from his ankle to his hip. His head ached as though a vice squeezed it, and he closed his eyes praying for the pain to stop. He wondered if it was day or night, then decided it didn't matter if only the pain would go away. From somewhere far away, a dreamlike voice called to him.

"William, can you hear me?"

As if in answer to a prayer, a cool damp rag caressed his forehead. Then a cup held to his lips dripped water into his mouth, cooling his parched tongue and throat. When it pulled away, he raised his head, reaching for more of the water. Opening his eyes, he strained to see, but all he could make out were shapes of white and gray moving in and out.

"More water. Please, I need more water."

"Take it slowly. Don't drink too fast."

As his vision cleared, he realized that the voice belonged to a nurse, and she was smiling. Her lips were full like ripe peaches. When he moved his head to get a better look at her, a pain made him grimace.

"Do you need something for pain?"

"Yes, please, I feel like my head is about to explode."

"I'll be back in a minute. Lie still."

He knew it was a hospital, but where it was and how long he'd been there was a mystery. Beds lined both sides of the long, open room, and the few windows that lined the walls let in minimal light. The other patients were very still, but sounds of moaning mixed with whispered conversation floated through the room. Someone cried out in agony and across the way, two nurses struggled to keep a patient contained. William raised his head to look, but cringed at the vacant place on the bed where

the man's legs should have been. He lay back and closed his eyes.

"You finally decided to join us, did you?"

William's eyes jerked open, and a tall man wearing a white coat with a stethoscope around his neck stood next to him. The small metal circle felt cold against his chest as the doctor listened to his heartbeat.

"You don't feel feverish anymore."

"How long have I been here?"

"You came in about a week ago. I'm Dr. Stewart. You've had us pretty worried. How's your head feel?"

"It's throbbing, and I can't seem to remember very much. Where is this place?"

"You're in a London hospital, but it's temporary. You'll be shipped home soon."

"Home?" William repeated the word as though it were foreign. All of a sudden, a feeling of dread engulfed him and in his patchy memory came the face of a young man with curly auburn hair. A sense of panic overwhelmed him and he grabbed the doctor's arm.

"Where is he? What have you done with my brother?"

"I don't know anything about your brother. When did you see him last?"

"I can't remember." Will cried as he tried desperately to sit up. The sling on his leg held him captive, so he clawed and ripped at it.

"Stop. You don't know what you're doing!"

The doctor grabbed William's arm, but fell backward when a blow to the face broke his glasses, leaving him dazed and angry.

"Nurse, come quick! I need help with this man!"

The nurse rushed over and pinned his shoulders to the bed while another nurse gave him an injection.

William's throat tightened and he gasped for breath. "I can't breathe. Let me go. Let me go!"

His mind dulled, and he couldn't keep his eyes open for the weight of his lids. He slipped into a tormented, dreamlike state, but his mind kept flashing pictures like a camera. Explosions of light appeared all around, and he was running with several other soldiers across an open field towards a hill. A German bunker concealed by trees and bushes was their target, and he wanted to kill every one of the sons of bitches. Then he heard a voice crying out, "Help me, Willie, I've been hit. Where are you?"

He reached his hand out into the black abyss, and then there was silence.

December 27, 1917

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Donnelly,

This letter is to inform you that the body of your son, Private Jacob Earl Donnelly, will arrive in Murfreesboro by train from Nashville on January 2, 1918.

Sarah couldn't contain her excitement. They were going all the way to the train station in Murfreesboro. Jacob's body would arrive on the Nashville train.

It's hard to say 'Jacob's body'. It sounds so cold.

She was sad about Jacob and knew she shouldn't feel happy, but it was her first real journey. Butterflies quivering in her stomach pulled her out of the warm bed onto the cold floor. She splashed water on her face from the pitcher on the dresser, slipped off her long, white nightgown, and pulled on her petticoat and Sunday dress. The blue plaid dress made her eyes

look like azure cut from the sky. When she looked in the mirror, a smiling face looked back.

This is wrong; it isn't a happy day. Mama and Daddy are miserable and I should be too. There must be something wrong with me, that I can feel this good after losing my dear brother. As she fixed her hair in one long braid, she tried her best to feel gloomy, but to no avail. I wish I had a ribbon to match this dress.

Daddy held the mules still as Mama and Sarah climbed into the wagon. They clutched their shawls tight around them as he covered their legs with a quilt. His coat buttoned to the neck and a hat pulled down around his ears were his only protection from the bitter cold January morning. Old Man Winter met them head on and would ride with them the whole way. They had no taste for breakfast, so Mama carried it with them to eat later. Sarah wondered what was in the package that Mama laid in the back of the wagon, but didn't ask.

A gust of wind made the mules blow through their nostrils, causing steam to rise up around their heads. Sleep hovered over the hollow. The jagged peaks of the hills wrapped themselves in fog, and the cold air was crisp enough to burn the skin. Sarah yawned and rubbed her eyes with her fists, then huddled close to Mama. Snow flurries fell all around them and icicles formed along the sides of the rocks that lined the hills. Deep grooves remained where the muddy road had frozen, jostling the wagon that groaned over them. With the hint of light coming over the hills, Sarah could see the houses spread along the River Road and watched the smoke from the chimneys rise, then disappear. She thought the hills looked like sleeping bears with huge bellies, and the naked trees formed their winter coats. Prater was the only place she knew. It was home and she loved it, but she was anxious to see Murfreesboro.

“Look, Pa, the sky’s getting pretty. Maybe it will warm up a little.”

“I reckon it might,” he said. The smell of Daddy’s pipe tobacco reached Sarah’s nose, and she breathed deeply to capture its sweet, rich scent. More than once, she begged him to let her taste it, but Daddy said she was too young and besides, girls shouldn’t smoke. She wondered about that because she knew plenty of old women whose favorite pastime was sitting on their porches puffing corncob pipes.

The rocking of the wagon made Sarah sleepy and it wasn’t long ‘til she was dreaming. Several hours passed before growling in her stomach woke her. As she rubbed the sleep from her eyes, four tall buildings on the right came into view. They were three story buildings that looked like mansions. A large sign read, “Middle Tennessee State Normal School.” She yearned to see them up close, but knew better then to ask.

When they reached the Murfreesboro city limits, Woodbury Road became Main Street and fine homes with dormers and tall columns lined the road. They had huge porches, some with many steps, and the windows appeared to be as high as the ceilings.

“Mama, is everyone in Murfreesboro rich?”

“There’s more poor folks than rich ones,” she said.

Throng of people filled the square and the wagon crept, trying to maneuver through the crowds. Sarah’s jaw dropped when she saw the stately courthouse. Four huge columns marked the entrance, reaching all the way to the roof. In the center loomed a tower with three sections that touched the sky. It looked as though the builders weren’t satisfied with the first section, so they kept adding on to it. The lower section had windows in it, each with an arched top. On top of that was a large carved clock that could be seen a long way off. The dome

looked like a round, gold hat sitting on the very top. It was much grander than the little courthouse in Woodbury.

As they circled the square, they passed Moore, Loughby & Company Correct Clothiers. Sarah giggled, wondering where they made incorrect clothes. The odor of cooked meat came from little wagons pushed by peddlers selling sausage rolls. She was sure there was popcorn somewhere for the buttery scent pulled at her nose. The corner of an old red sign advertising a circus flapped against the side of a building. It showed a young girl wearing a white blouse and red bloomers swinging on a trapeze while a crowd of people cheered. Sarah would love to see a real circus.

In front of Spain and Hudson Mitchell Wagon Store stood a stately gentleman with white hair and a wide handlebar mustache smoking a large cigar. Elegantly dressed in a striped suit and bowler hat, he carried a fancy cane with a gold handle. A sudden breeze blew the pungent cigar smell all around them, making Sarah sneeze. She blushed when he removed his hat and bowed as their wagon passed.

The conglomeration of people left her speechless, and she had to remind herself to breathe.

Sarah was surprised at all the colored people on the square, especially when their wagon turned down West Main towards the train station. Coming towards them in a small carriage was the fattest colored man she ever saw. The tall black hat perched on his big round head glistened in the sunlight. Beneath his coat, he wore a silky red plaid vest with a black cravat. His long coat was open in front, for his huge belly wouldn't allow buttons to be fastened. Strolling next to the carriage was a colored lady who held her chin high as though she were a queen. A large cluster of blue and gray feathers adorned her hat. Her long dress brushed the ground and her umbrella swayed along with her dress with every footstep. Sarah watched in amazement as their buggy

passed the wagon with half a dozen colored children dancing around it.

There seemed to be a thousand people at the train station. Just as Daddy stopped the wagon, a train came screeching into the depot, its brakes squealing so loud that people jumped, even if they weren't near the track. As it ground to a halt, steam hissed from the wheels, reminding Sarah of a long black snake that hid in the cornrows. She covered her ears, for she never heard such a racket in her whole life. People ran to get on while others struggled to get off. As she watched the activity around the depot, Sarah made up her mind that one day she would ride the train all the way to Nashville.

While Daddy and Mama went to check on Jacob's train, Sarah walked around the station, taking in all the sights. She noticed a dormer on the middle of the depot building bearing the date 1887. It must be the date they built the railroad station.

Two little girls dressed in tweed coats with matching fur-lined hats and muffs followed their mother as their father bought tickets. The girls sounded like chattering squirrels. "How long will it take to get to Nashville? Can we sit by the window? Is there food on the train?" Their feet barely touched the ground in their excitement. Sarah looked down at her plain flannel dress and drab brown coat that pulled at the shoulders. She turned away from them, her braid swinging to the front of her shoulder. She thought about the girls' shiny curls that peeked from under the beautiful hats they wore. Sarah grabbed the end of her braid and threw it behind her shoulder, and walked back to where she left Mama and Daddy. They were talking to a stranger. She noticed the sleeves on Daddy's brown jacket were ragged and his hat had a tear in the side. Mama's black cloth coat wasn't near warm enough for the winter. Sarah never paid any attention to it before because everyone in Prater dressed the same. For the first time, she wondered if they were poor.

The next building had a row of large wagons lined up along the side, and they were loaded with luggage and crates. As she approached, she saw a soldier standing by one of the wagons, but Sarah could only see his back. Suddenly, her eyes grew big as saucers, and her heart pounded in her ears.

It's Willie! I know it is. He was waiting for Jacob. That's why he didn't come home before this.

She ran towards the soldier screaming, "Willie! Willie, here I am."

As the soldier turned, she saw that one of his arms was missing, and he wore a patch over his left eye. Then she stopped running. It wasn't Willie. It was a stranger.

Lines around his eyes deepened as the startled look on his face changed to a knowing sadness. He held his hand out to her and said, "I'm sorry." She stared at him, and a deep pain filled her chest. Her shoulders trembled as she fell into uncontrollable weeping and she covered her face with her hands. Wishing the ground would open up and swallow her, she ran behind one of the large wagons and scrunched down to make herself as small as possible. She tried wiping the tears away, but they kept coming. Her breath came in gasps, and there was a hard rock pressed against her innards.

"I'm so stupid, so stupid."

When her tears finally subsided, she peeked around the wagon to see if the soldier was still there, but he had vanished. As she stood up, Daddy's wagon was coming towards her, and that's when she saw the coffin sitting in the very wagon where she had hid.

January 15, 1918

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Donnelly,

I regret to inform you that your son William Edwin Donnelly has suffered a severe mental breakdown as a result of shell shock caused from his experiences in the war. We are treating him with medication but as of this date have not seen any improvement. We understand your concern, and if there are any significant changes, we will notify you immediately. Feel free to contact me with any questions.

Sincerely, Dr. S.E. Swanson
Veterans Hospital, Perrypoint, Maryland

As the days passed, stabbing bits and pieces of pictures formed in his mind. Without warning, vivid scenes of blood and slaughter appeared which he not only saw but could smell as well. One afternoon as William rested in the day room, he dreamed of jabbing something with the butt of his rifle. He jerked awake when he realized it was human flesh, and his intent to kill was overwhelming. Suddenly it came to him why he not only wanted to kill, but also wanted to die.

His company received orders to climb a hill in search for their fallen comrades. Continuous rain left a mist that seemed like clouds that had fallen to earth to die. As they pushed through it, the hole made by their bodies closed behind them. Broken, bloody bodies began to appear over the landscape. Approaching a soldier lying face down, William noticed wavy auburn hair sticking out from the crooked helmet. A knot formed in his stomach as very gently he turned the body over, afraid

to look at the face. The matted blood had already begun to dry along the man's side that lay ripped open. William's eyes followed the row of bloody buttons hanging from the soldier's uniform until he reached the last one at the neck. A scream echoed in his brain and tears streamed down his face as the door closing out his memories suddenly burst open. It was Jacob. He had found his brother.

William became obsessed with the need to explain to Mama and Daddy. He tried writing letters, but there were no words to describe his anguish at failing to protect Jacob. His tears ran onto the paper and blurred the words into nothingness, and then he would crush the paper into an angry ball and add it to the stack on the floor. When his rage and anger subsided, the grief and guilt remained to eat away his soul. He had no right to be alive so he died a little each day, crawling inside his mind and pulling the door shut.

Severe headaches were constant and vomiting left him weak and exhausted. Darkness terrified him, and he could not sleep without a light. One afternoon he drifted off to sleep, only to jerk awake trying to knock rats off his body. He could feel them crawling over his legs and he was so sure there was one on his head that he pulled a clump of his hair out. Days and nights melded together as he sat staring with blank, empty eyes.

March 16, 1918

Dear Willie,

Why haven't you written? Mama and Daddy don't say much in front of me, but I know they are worried. Sometimes I catch Daddy in his workshop just sitting there staring off into space. When Mama is outside, she always looks towards the road, and

I know she is watching for you. I look for you too, and I don't understand why you can't come home. I'm sure you would get well faster at home. Bitty's kittens are nearly grown. The yellow one is my favorite, and her name is Goldie.

Don't you miss us? I think of you every day. It's almost spring, and I'll be out of school soon. I help Mrs. Jennings with her twins. She pays me ten cents for babysitting. I'm saving my money to go to nursing school. Daddy took Hercules and Sam out of the barn to graze in the pasture, but he hasn't planted the corn yet. I think he's waiting for you. I watched him in the field with the mules, and he looked so sad that I didn't say anything to him. Daddy stood for a long time watching them. Then he started talking to Sam, the way he does sometimes when he thinks no one is looking. It made me want to cry. He spends most of his time in the workshop by himself. I have to help Mama a lot, and she doesn't want me to miss any school, but I help Daddy whenever I can. It's hard, though, because he's so quiet. He used to talk to me all the time, but now he hardly speaks to anyone. Please write soon. I miss you so much.

Love,
Sarah

With her hands full of wet clothes, Mama stood watching the road for a long time. Finally, she began to hang them on the line, pushing each clothespin onto the rope hard as though a gale of wind might blow them away. When her arms were empty,

she walked back to collect more from the rinse water. Sarah saw new lines around her eyes and mouth that seemed to appear overnight. Gray strands invaded Mama's soft blonde hair and her body moved in slow motion.

Age had crept up on her parents, sucking the life from them like some bloodthirsty parasite. There was a slump to Daddy's broad shoulders and he walked as if his body was too heavy for him to carry. His heavy-lidded eyes, cast down, made him appear like a sleepwalker. The veins in his hands looked swollen and ready to burst any minute, and Sarah hated their dark purple color. His thinning hair hung hapless over his brow like dry tassels on a corn stalk. A lingering darkness clung to them, and it made Sarah feel as if death was their neighbor.

As Sarah scrubbed the pillowcase against the ribs of the scrub board, she thought about that day at the train station when Mama opened the package lying in the back of the wagon. She pulled out Jacob's quilt and laid it over his coffin as if she covered him in his bed. Sarah shuddered. Mama had made a quilt for each of them, and seeing his spread over the coffin made it feel as though he was there with them. Sarah still wondered if Jacob's spirit was in France or if it had followed his body home. Stupid thing to think about now.

A nagging sadness filled her when she thought about Jacob and William. She missed their boisterous laughter and teasing. There was no one to wade in the creek with her to search for frogs and fossils. No one ... to do anything. Both her brothers were gone, and the quiet of the house suffocated her.

April 12, 1918

Dear Willie,

Remember Mr. Frank who lives down the road from the store? A possum got into his chicken coop, and

when he went to fetch the eggs, he got bit. It wasn't a bad bite, but he got all excited about getting the hydrophobia, so they called the doctor. Doc Jenkins got riled up when he broke one of the wheels off his carriage crossing the stopgap at Mr. Frank's house. He couldn't understand how a man could be so stupid as to put his hand in a place where he couldn't see. The doctor said it takes four months to come down with the hydrophobia. Mr. Frank was sure he would come down with the sickness and nearly went out of his head with worry. His wife had to look for him at night because he couldn't sleep and would wander around in the dark by himself. Folks would hear him muttering, and they actually got scared of him for a while. Finally, after four months went by and he never got sick, everyone breathed a sigh of relief. The doctor told him he wouldn't get the hydrophobia. The only trouble was Mr. Frank wouldn't believe him, and we don't know if he will ever come to himself again.

That's why I want to be a nurse. I want to help people feel better and not be afraid. I'm learning a lot from reading books and I know I could help you get well. Please come home to us, Willie. It's not fair to lose both my brothers. I know Mama and Daddy would feel better if you could be with us. They are so sad and it's so lonesome here. We miss you.

Love,
Sarah

May 1, 1918

Dear William,

I don't know how many letters I've written and still no word from you. Whenever I visit your mama and Sarah, all we do is talk about you. Sarah spends more time helping your Mama and less time roaming the woods. Remember how she loved to wander through the trees searching for critters to carry home? She doesn't do that anymore. She seems older than other girls her age. Your daddy works all the time but is much quieter than he used to be. Your mama told me that he doesn't whistle anymore. Isn't that sad? I used to love hearing him whistle. I didn't always know the name of the song and sometimes I thought it was just something he made up, but the sound of his whistling always made me feel good.

I'm staying with Mrs. Adams, and I earn my board by cleaning her house and doing the ironing. She is fussy and pretty strict, but I don't mind really, because now I'll be able to graduate high school, and I never thought I would do that. She gave me some of her daughter's old clothes. They are very nice, even though they are secondhand. My old clothes look like rags next to them. Spencer is getting to be a big boy. He has light hair like Mama and is very sweet. The Odoms treat him as if he was their very own child and I get to see him often. Gosh, I miss Mama. It hurts me so much that Spencer will never know her. Maybe if I was older

it wouldn't be so bad, but I hate not being able to talk to her. I guess that's why I keep writing to you. You're still my best friend.

Mrs. Adams has a colored lady who cooks for her. Do you remember Mrs. Johnny Simpson? She has been teaching me how to cook, and I'm getting pretty good. The first time I see you I'm going to bake you the best chocolate pie you ever put in your mouth, and that's a promise.

Please write.

Your friend, Quixie

A loud noise made Quixie wake with a start. She had been dreaming of riding a horse across a field. The horse's legs were going so fast that they were barely visible, and his breath left little puff clouds behind him in the cold air.

What was all that noise? It sounded like the whole world was ringing bells, blowing whistles and beating on pots and pans. As she threw on her chenille bathrobe, she kept hearing the noises. There were all sorts of different sounds that she couldn't recognize because they melded together into one big noisy racket.

"Quixie, wake up. Come quick. The war is over," hollered Mrs. Adams from the kitchen.

Quixie's feet burned on the cold floor as she hurried down the hall to the kitchen. Mrs. Henderson from next door and Mrs. Adams huddled around the radio in their bathrobes, and Mrs. Simpson stood nearby, still in her coat, trying to hear the announcer.

"I hope the batteries don't quit before we hear all the news," said Mrs. Adams.

Quixie stood in the doorway watching them; their excitement seeped into her and rushed around her like a whirlwind.

He'll come home now. I know he will.

December 1, 1918

Dear Willie,

Isn't it wonderful that the war is over? Everyone is so happy. Mr. Travis told us that he was in McMinnville when word came. He told us that they blew every siren and horn they had, plus they rang every bell in town. He said you never heard such a racket, and you could hear the noise from twenty miles away. In Prater, we clapped pots together, rang cowbells, and hooted and hollered till the noise echoed all over the hills. Oh, Willie, does this mean that you can come home now? I'm praying real hard that it's so. Mama and Daddy are so unhappy, and this news has given them new hope. Please come home as quick as you can.

Love, Sarah.

September 15, 1922

Dear Willie,

The worse thing has happened. They had to close the school in Prater. Many people have moved away, and there aren't enough children going to the school to make it worthwhile to pay the teacher anymore. Now, I have to finish my senior year in Woodbury. This means that we have to get up at

4:00 in the morning because by the time all the kids are gathered, it takes more than two hours to ride to reach Woodbury. We have chapel every day in the auditorium, where we sing a song or two, listen to some Bible readings and a prayer, then they make announcements for the events of the day. This delays class by another hour. After school we have to wait till they round up all the kids before making the long trip back to Prater, so the best part of the day is gone by the time we get home. Mr. McGee drives the Prater kids in an old covered wagon. Thirty of us are crowded inside it with nothing but a canvas cover to keep out the weather. The horse walks so slow, it seems to take forever. Sometimes we sing to fill the time, but when the boys get bored they start yelling at people passing on the road or working in the fields. There are fights, and it gets so loud that the driver gets real mad. We've had three different drivers in the past three months. The last driver was Mr. Brown and last October he stopped the wagon at Beaver Dam Bridge and told us we could walk home. He followed us for a mile or two until Miss Maude Mitchell, a teacher from another school, came by in her buggy and stopped to see what was going on. She told Mr. Brown that he shouldn't do that. After all, he was responsible for seeing that we arrived home safely. Well, in spite of his better judgment, he picked us all up in the wagon and one by one dropped us off at our various stops. He continued as the driver until the day one of the boys laid a lighted firecracker in the rim of his hat. Lord, when that firecracker went off, the horse reared

up and Mr. Brown nearly fell off the wagon. He reported all the boys to the principal, and every one of them got a paddling. We had to break in a new driver. Thank goodness, this is my last year. I'll be so glad when I graduate in May. Maybe you'll be home in time to come to the graduation.

I hope so.

Love, Sarah.

Sarah stared at the gold heart and chain nested in the white gift box. Her face flushed and her first reaction was to hand it back to Brother Allen. Woodbury Church of Christ was the young preacher's first assignment after graduating from David Lipscomb University. He was intense, serious and totally smitten with Sarah.

"This is lovely, but I can't take it."

Disappointment filled his face and she wished the floor would open and swallow her. How could she accept a gift like this?

His eyes dropped, and he just stood there twisting his hat in his hands. In a near whisper he said, "It's just a token of our friendship, a graduation gift, that's all. Please take it."

Sarah liked Brother Allen and knew he cared for her, but she was never attracted to him. He wasn't homely, but he was plain with no excitement about him. His hair was dark and lay straight and smooth like a plum, and his hands were soft like a woman's hands. Everyone in town liked him because he was a good man and wanted to help whenever possible, but his gentle nature made him seem weak and unsure. This bothered Sarah for her brothers had been robust individuals who lit up every room they entered. William and Jacob loved life and knew what they wanted. Brother Allen had none of these traits.

She stepped away from Brother Allen when her daddy came out on the porch, followed by Mama carrying Sarah's purse and gloves. She was glad they came outside because Brother Allen would say nothing in front of them. Sarah hated having to tell him how she really felt.

"Here's your purse and gloves, Sarah, better hurry. You don't want to be late for your graduation. Thank you for driving us, Brother Allen. I didn't want Sarah getting dusty from riding in the wagon."

As her parents walked towards the preacher's car, she looked at the box and then at him. She tried handing it back to him, but his brown eyes pleaded like a deer facing a rifle, and she couldn't hurt him. She slipped the box into her purse and followed him to the car. Brother Allen would never see the shiny heart resting in the hollow of Sarah's slender throat.

October 15, 1923

Dear William,

There was a terrible rainstorm last Saturday night. Lightning lit up the sky like firecrackers, and thunder was so loud that it chased the children under their beds. Trees had broken branches, some carved right in half where lightening sliced them in two. The next morning a farmer in DeKalb County went looking for his cattle and found seventeen of them lying dead under a poplar tree. People from Cannon County went over there to gape at the poor dead creatures. The newspaper put their picture in the paper, and it looked like they were asleep. It was so sad, and I got to wondering if that was how war was, bodies of poor young soldiers

lying dead all over the ground. I don't know why I keep writing you since all my letters come back unopened. I don't know what to think. Are you so sick that you can't even read a letter? I hoped that they would make you feel better, but Sarah told me all their letters came back too. Someone from the hospital had mailed them in a large envelope. I felt like someone slapped me in the face when mine were returned. I just don't understand. We miss you and this is a terrible way to treat the people who care most about you.

Your friend,
Quixie

May 12, 1924

Dear William,

I've met someone. His name is Suell, and he is from Philadelphia. I know; he's a Yankee, but he is a good man. I honestly believe God sent him to me. I never met anyone that I cared for like Suell. The only person I might have loved won't even write to me. You'll always be my best friend, William, but I guess you thought of me more like a sister than anything else. Suell has asked me to marry him and really seems to love me. He said the only reason he came to Woodbury was to make sure I didn't end up an old spinster. That's what he always tells me anyway. This is foolish writing to you again, knowing you probably won't read this, but I needed

to do it. Something keeps telling me that you'll come home one day. I will pray for you always.

Your friend,
Quixie.

January 5, 1940

Dear Mrs. Donnelly,

This letter is to inform you that your son, William E. Donnelly, has been transferred to the Veterans Hospital in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. At the present time, he is located in Building 5, Ward B, which is a long-term care psychiatric unit. There has been no change in his condition. If you have any questions regarding your son, feel free to contact us at any time.

Yours truly,
Thomas Young, Social Work Service.

April 4, 1940

Dear Willie,

Daddy has passed away. Mama acts like she accepts it, but I know she is heartbroken. He was sick for over a year and suffered a great deal. During his last month, he became agitated and kept asking for you. Moments before he died, he whispered your name. Not many people came to the funeral. The last ten years or so of his life, Daddy kept to himself

most of the time. Whenever he finished a piece of furniture, customers would have to pick it up themselves. We would make the excuse that Daddy wasn't feeling well, but I think most people knew the real reason. I've been offered a position at the hospital in Murfreesboro. I begged Mama to move there with me, but she refuses to leave the farm. She still hopes that you will come home one day. I guess there's nothing else to say, except we love you.

Your sister,
Sarah.

As Sarah sealed the envelope, bitterness welled up inside her, and she nearly threw it away. For twenty-two years their letters had been returned unopened. She had been faithful and waited with her parents, but they never seemed to notice. Losing their sons had emptied them like a drained vessel, and she felt invisible. Before Daddy died, she tried to reach out to him one last time.

In his last moments, she held his hands and cried out, "Daddy, it's me, Sarah. Look at me, please look at me."

When he opened his eyes, a glimmer of recognition brought a faint smile to his lips.

Tears streamed down her cheeks and she kissed his hands. "I love you, Daddy."

He tried to raise his head and then in a raspy voice, he whispered, "William."

Chapter 3: Empty Vessels

Mama folded her handkerchief one way and then another, never satisfied with the results. Sarah stared at the handkerchief as she and Mama waited in the backseat of Brother Allen's car while he picked up flowers for an elderly neighbor. Mrs. Barrett was too feeble to come to Daddy's funeral, so she ordered flowers at the last minute. He returned carrying a large arrangement of flowers and set it in the passenger side of the front seat. The ride to the funeral home seemed to take forever, and Sarah was anxious for the day to end. The service began shortly after they arrived. Sarah stared at the coffin while the preacher delivered the eulogy. He spoke of Daddy's love and devotion to his family and his talent for woodworking. When he spoke of his personal relationship with him, Sarah could see the strain on Brother Allen's face. Sometimes she wished her feelings had been different towards the preacher, but love eluded her. She filled her life with nursing, but yearned for something more. Doubts about her feelings toward Brother Allen weighed on her mind, but she blamed it on her loneliness.

They buried Daddy at the Prater Cemetery where he would rest near Jacob. After Brother Allen finished the last prayer, everyone waited in silence as the gravediggers covered the casket with dirt. Sarah thought how different it was to have

strangers digging the grave. In times past, family and neighbors always dug them, but now the funeral home hired their own gravediggers. She watched Tom, Franklin and Cecil rock back and forth, their hands shoved in their pockets as if hiding them from the shame of strangers doing their work. When had they gotten so old?

Sarah kept hold of Mama's arm as though she might disappear into the grave with Daddy. At least he wouldn't suffer anymore. She missed him, but she had lost him a long time ago. When they finished, the gravediggers tipped their hats, threw their shovels in the back of their truck and drove away. Quixie, Suell and Spencer lingered for a while as though they didn't want to leave Mama and Sarah alone. Finally they said their goodbyes and hurried back to their own lives. Brother Allen remained at the grave, his hat in his hands, his shoulders curved forward, deep in thought. His boyish looks had faded, and his five foot eight frame had filled out, giving him a more impressive appearance. The sprinkling of gray in his dark hair gave him a softer, more handsome look. For a brief moment, Sarah wanted to reach out to him. She longed to have someone hold her, someone to love her. Instead, she focused on her mother.

Mama began arranging the flowers at the head of the grave as though she were tidying up her house. Sarah and Brother Allen offered to help, but she waved them away, saying that she needed to do it herself. She had always taken care of her family, and this would be the last physical thing she would do for her husband.

Brother Allen put his hand on Sarah's shoulder. "Isn't there something I can do to help? I keep thinking that it would be a good idea for you and your mother to move to Woodbury. I'm worried about you living in the hollow by yourselves. Sarah, is there any way you and I could ...?"

Sarah pulled away from him abruptly before he could finish and shook her head. "I hoped Mama would move to Murfreesboro with me, but she refuses to leave the farm. I can't leave her alone. This past year has been so hard on her."

"But there's too much work for two women. If you moved to Woodbury, I could watch out for you."

He stopped and looked down at his feet. Why couldn't he say what he really meant?

A knot filled Sarah's stomach. She turned and looked towards the grave where her mother stood with her head bowed.

"The garden is the only thing thriving on the farm, and that's because Mama works herself to death in it. That, and reading her books at night, seems to be her only comfort. I used to love the farm, but now it just reminds me of things I don't want to think about."

"You've been a good daughter, and I know the sacrifices you've made."

"I don't feel like a good daughter or a good sister. I feel resentment towards William, and I get angry with Mama for not accepting the fact that he's never coming home. After all these years, it isn't possible that he'll make a miraculous recovery. From my studies, I've learned that this seldom happens, and what's more, a psychiatric patient changes so drastically that his family barely recognizes him anymore. Do you know that all the letters we've written to him over the years have been returned unopened and Mama has kept every one? We have boxes of them stored away. Whenever I ask her about throwing them away, she just shakes her head no. She thinks he needs to read them when he comes home, so he'll know that his family loved him and believed in him."

"I don't have any answers, but I do know you mustn't feel guilty for being a human being. It's only natural for you to have those feelings. As far as your Mama is concerned, I admire her

faith and steadfast character. Mothers have a perseverance which is unique to them, and when I am with your mother, she makes me believe anything is possible.”

“I’ve tried believing, but sometimes it seems that William and Jacob never existed, as if they’re part of some dream I had long ago. But they’re real to Mama, and I know that as long as she lives, she will wait for William to come home.”

Sarah stopped talking and took a handkerchief from her purse. Brother Allen put his arm around her and her head rested on his chest, but the moment didn’t last. She struggled to find the courage to tell him what was on her mind.

“Brother Allen, I’m filled with shame, resentment and so much anger that sometimes I feel I’m going to burst. I have to tell you something that will probably make you hate me forever, but I have to tell someone.”

“You could never do anything to make me hate you.” He tried to take her hand, but she pulled away.

In one burst of breath, she said, “William is in the VA Hospital in Murfreesboro and has been for nearly three years.”

Of all the things she might have said, he wasn’t prepared for this.

“I didn’t know. I would have gone to visit him if I had known. Then you’ve seen him?”

Her lips barely moved as a whispered “no” fell to the ground. He looked away so she didn’t see the disapproval on his face. There was a long silence between them that screamed with disappointment.

“I can’t bring myself to go,” she continued. “If he refuses to see me, I’ll be angry, and if I do see him, he’ll be a stranger to me. I never told Mama. I knew she’d want to see him, but I was afraid it would hurt her too much. God only knows what condition he’d be in, and she’s been through so much with Daddy and all.”

“Sarah, you had no right to make a decision like that.” It was the first time he felt anger towards Sarah ... and disappointment. “I won’t say anything to her, but you need to study long and hard about this.”

She looked over at her mama and he knew she was anxious to leave. Sarah offered her hand to Brother Allen and said, “I’ll think about it, and I’ll pray about it. Thank you for being a good friend.”

He grasped her hand in his, wishing there was something he could do. Wishing, he could be more than a friend. Sadness filled him as he watched her walk back to her mother’s side. The same words kept repeating themselves in his brain. After all these years, why can’t she call me Medford?

Brother Allen did not like going to the VA Hospital. Through the years, he had visited church members or patients on behalf of his congregation, but the atmosphere always unsettled him. He sensed the loneliness that filled the crevices between the bricks of every building. Many veterans seemed to have come into this world with no father, mother, or siblings, according to their hospital chart. There were some hospitalized for years who had no record of a visitor. The men in this hospital were severely traumatized, causing mental illnesses that were devastating. Some sat like vegetables while others cursed the air. Medford found the sadness and injustice difficult to accept. These men didn’t ask for war, yet it was thrust on them. Were they being punished for surviving?

The Bible says that God is good, but sometimes Medford wondered why God allowed so much pain. This was often a topic of discussion between him and Julia. He often thanked God in his prayers for sending him to Woodbury. Since his own family was gone, Julia had become like a second mother to him. She was a kind woman, and though he was her spiritual guide, she

often helped him stay on the right path. Her love for Christ and the way she lived her life, accepting the pain of losing so much of her family, encouraged him to be a better Christian. He owed it to Julia to see if there was any way possible to help William.

His wait at the nurse's station seemed to take an hour, although it was only a few minutes. Finally, a nursing assistant came to take him to see William.

"Don't be surprised if he doesn't speak to you. We are never sure how aware he is because he never speaks or responds to anything. He has never had any visitors, and we're not sure how he will react."

He still didn't agree with Sarah's decision not to tell her mother about William. This reminder that he never had a visitor cut him deeply. Brother Allen followed the young man down a long hallway that had doors on either side. Each room was marked for its purpose and everything had a sense of sterility, in spite of the urine odor that hung in the air. They entered a large room with high windows covered with metal bars. A lone man sat in a chair facing the windows. Grey hair curled around his ears and his clean-shaven face emphasized his chalky complexion. He looked stocky, but it was hard to tell how tall he was for he appeared folded inside his own body. As they approached, Brother Allen expected him to move, but he didn't. His eyes remained closed as though asleep. The nursing assistant leaned over and spoke to him.

"Will, you have a visitor."

There was no response. The nursing assistant brought a chair so Brother Allen could sit down, and then stepped away.

"William, I'm Medford Allen from the Woodbury Church of Christ. Your mother is a dear friend of mine.

"Your sister, Sarah, wrote you about your father passing. I've known your parents for many years and conducted the funeral service for your father. He was a good man. Your mother speaks

of you often and misses you very much. I learned recently that you were in Murfreesboro, and thought I would visit to see if you needed anything. Would you like to send a message to your mother and sister?"

William made no response, and the preacher squirmed in his chair. What else could he say? I've made a mistake in coming. Sarah was right, there's nothing I can do for him. The truth was, he felt useless and he hated that feeling. He had no idea what was going on in the man's mind or whether he knew anyone was there at all.

"If you ever want to talk or need me for anything, just call or have someone contact me. I'll leave my name and phone number with the nurse before I go."

William sat rigid in his chair. He never looked at the preacher or made a sound. Medford waited, wishing for something, anything, to happen. This stranger humbled the preacher, but he remained steadfast because of Julia. Brother Allen thought of him as a strong young man in a soldier's uniform because that was the picture Julia had showed him. This was a different person. Here sat a sorrowful human ravished by mental illness and time. Had he understood anything? Did he even realize that someone was speaking to him? Was he an empty shell waiting to crumble and dissolve? God in all his mercy wouldn't allow that, would He? It was strange seeing the actual person he prayed for all these years. He laid his hand on William's and began to pray with him as he had done with so many others. Before the words ended, he felt William's hand slide out from under his.

Without thinking, he reached in his coat pocket where he kept his travel Bible. He flipped through the pages until they opened to the 23rd Psalm. His mind eased as he began to read the gentle words, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters."

Medford's eyes rested on William as he continued the reading, for he knew the Psalm by heart. "He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death ..."

As he watched, William's eyelids fluttered open for a moment and Medford wanted to believe the old man was listening to the words. When he finished they sat in silence, and Medford thought about the Donnelly family and what their friendship had meant to him. With all his heart, he wanted to help this lost soul, but by the time he left the hospital, doubt filled his mind.

This wasn't the way it was supposed to turn out. He had hoped for more, perhaps a miracle. Medford knew it was foolish feeling this way. The man was ill and had been for many years. What more could he expect?

Brother Allen visited William on two more occasions before deciding it was a waste of time. It was easier believing that Sarah had been right all along. Never had anyone affected him so deeply. He knew it was because he had failed Julia and Sarah. Soon he compensated by telling himself that his time would be better spent on other members of his congregation.

Chapter 4: Sarah Leaves

March 10, 1945 – Cannon Courier Obituaries: Gravesite services for Mrs. Julia Donnelly were held on Wednesday, March 4th, at the Prater Cemetery with Brother Medford Allen officiating. She was a member of the Woodbury Church of Christ and a homemaker. Mrs. Donnelly died Monday, February 27th, at her home in the Prater Community following a sudden illness. She was preceded in death by her husband, James, and her son, Jacob. Survivors include her daughter, Sarah Donnelly, of Cannon County and son, William Donnelly, of Rutherford County.

Brother Allen stopped in mid-sentence to wipe his eyes and gather his thoughts. Julia had been like a mother, and no words could convey his loss. Neighbors from the old Prater Community, many who now lived a good distance away, took the time to show their respect and sympathy at the loss of their old friend. When the service ended, each one thanked Brother Allen and hugged Sarah, reminding her to call if she needed anything. Finally, they were alone.

Brother Allen took Sarah's hand. "I'll never forget your mother. Her kindness and wisdom was a joy to witness. She counseled me when I should have been counseling her."

"Your friendship has been a comfort to us. If only William could have been here. That was all she dreamed about."

Sarah looked off into the distance, then back at the grave, all the time twisting the handkerchief in her hands.

“I need to tell you something. I’ve had an offer for a position at a research hospital in Ann Arbor, Michigan. I would never leave Mama alone, but now that she’s gone there’s nothing to keep me here.”

He shoved his hands in his coat pockets, struggling with the impotence that strangled his emotions.

Sarah took a deep breath. “I’m torn with guilt about deserting William.”

“Don’t feel guilty about anything. I think you were right in not telling your mother about him. The person I saw wasn’t the son your mother remembered. As far as William is concerned, after all these years nothing will change, but I do think you need to visit him before you leave. It will help ease your mind. Regret will cling to you like a scab if you don’t try to talk to him and tell him how you feel.”

“I know you’re right. Thank you for being such a good friend to Mama and me. I don’t know what we would have done without you.”

“I wish I could have done more. Take care of yourself, and if you ever need anything ...” Brother Allen choked up barely able to hold back his tears. His inability to tell her his true feelings made him curse himself. He was a great one to give advice, always knowing what to say to other people, but not able to speak for himself. He had prayed for a miracle, but that wasn’t what God wanted from him.

“I’d like to be by myself for a while. Do you mind, Brother Allen?”

“Of course, I understand.” He squeezed her arm, not wanting to let go. The Donnelly family had accepted him as one of their own. The loss of his own mother when he was twelve left an open wound inside him that finally healed when his friendship with Julia grew. Her tremendous faith and devotion seeped into him. He often wondered if it was that more than the love he felt

towards Sarah that kept him coming back. No, he loved Sarah deeply. Perhaps that was the problem. Maybe God expected more from him. He looked once more at the grave and walked away, leaving Sarah alone in the cemetery.

She would never return to Cannon County, for this place held nothing but sorrow for her. The array of beautiful flowers filled her with pride, and she began arranging them around the headstone, just like Mama had done at Daddy's grave. Sarah would keep none of the potted plants. One would go to Quixie and Suell, and the others she would take to Brother Allen for the church. She didn't want anything to remind her of this day. After moving to Michigan, she wanted to remember her parents as they were when she was a little girl.

Sarah had loved helping Daddy in his shop and learned to appreciate the care he gave to each piece of wood. His strong hands sanded and polished the wood until it felt like living flesh, soft and warm to the touch. She would walk with him along the creek bed as he picked up rocks. They had to be just right, because he would use them to sand a special cabinet, chair, or headboard. Daddy taught her that rocks have a natural energy that brings out the beauty of wood. She believed it because his pieces made from cedar, walnut and oak would literally shine with life. Memories of times he held her hand as they walked to the house while Mama waited for them on the porch pulled at her heart. The feel of Mama's hands washing her hair and her words, "It's not clean until it squeaks," made Sarah smile. She hugged herself wistfully.

Sarah thought about all there was to do before closing up the house, and then remembered the box of letters in the corner of her room. Their lives for the past thirty years existed in those letters, and she wouldn't leave them for strangers to

rifle through. Her brother would never return, so she would destroy them.

She strolled through the graveyard, noting the names on the tombstones: Cecil Barrett, the old storekeeper who used to give her peppermint candy every time she and Mama visited the General Store. Miss Josie lay next to her husband, Garrett, and nearby was the grave of his mother, Pearl Elizabeth Davis. They were good friends of her mother's. She remembered all the people who had lived and died in the Prater Community. Soon she found herself following the path leading up the hill towards the back of the cemetery. Many years had passed since the last time she was there, and this would probably be the last time. As she neared the highest point of the rise, she found Jacob's grave. Looking at the aged tombstone, she was surprised that she didn't remember the inscription. Weather, time and dirt had worn away the engraving, but she could still make out the words, Brothers by blood, Friends of the heart, Souls Entwined. She remembered that Mama had composed the inscription, yet it seemed private, like a secret between Jacob and William that no one else would understand.

Her mind wandered to the day they traveled to Murfreesboro when she was ten. She was so excited about seeing the city that it made her temporarily forget why they were there. She remembered the coffin sitting on the sawhorses in the middle of the front room. It was magical the way the house filled with people and food. Mama kept vigil in her rocker with the Bible in her hands, while Daddy kept his vigil in the workshop. He couldn't bear to look at the coffin in the front room.

She had worried after her Daddy like a little old woman. He needed to eat, so she piled food on a plate, filled his cup with hot coffee and carried them to the workshop. The frozen night sky blazed with stars, and the ground crunched with every footstep. There was no response when she knocked, but she saw smoke

coming from the flue, so she opened the door and looked inside. The only light came from the monkey heater in the corner of the room. She could see Daddy's outline as he leaned towards the heater. He sat among the piles of lumber and machinery that was his living, his craft. The place where he and his sons worked, laughed, argued and bonded.

"I brought you something to eat and some hot coffee, Daddy."

The plate of food was ignored, but he took the mug and held it with both hands cupped around it. He sipped the hot liquid, then brought the cup to his face, where he rubbed it against his cheeks.

"I can't seem to get warm. The cold has gone to my bones until I feel brittle."

"Maybe you should come to the house. They're all looking for you."

There was no reply. He kept turning the mug in his hands and then he took a drink, trying to melt the ice formed inside of him. Staring at the fire, he seemed to forget Sarah was there and she shuffled from one foot to the other. She searched her mind for the right words to say, but they locked in her throat.

Daddy bowed his head and then whispered, "I don't know if spring will ever return to this hollow."

"Daddy, please come inside where it's warmer."

"I'll come in a while."

Sarah wanted to hug him, but her body wouldn't respond. Tears stung her eyes as she slipped outside, closing the door behind her. A gust of wind caught her shawl, and she grabbed it tight around her, praying for this darkness to end. Suddenly she realized something. All the time she was in the workshop, he never once looked at her.

It was two days before they carried Jacob's coffin to the graveyard. Isaiah Hamilton, the Church of Christ preacher,

waited at the gravesite clutching a Bible to his breast. Miss Josie and Aunt Pearl stood on either side of Mama trying to absorb some of her grief, but she held tight to it. Sarah stayed close to Daddy. She was afraid if she closed her eyes he might just fade away like fog after the sun appears on a rainy day. When she squeezed his hand seeking reassurance, it stayed limp at his side.

Each shovelful of dirt echoed around them. Sarah thought it must be the emptiest sound in the world, like a tree after the leaves have fallen or a creek in which the water has ceased to flow. Sarah shook the memories away, but a nagging thought remained. If only William had come home. It would have eased so much of the sorrow for Mama and Daddy ... and her.

As she stood on the rise near Jacob's grave, the March wind blew Sarah's long hair across her face. She brushed it back and then a gust caught the hem of her dress, wrapping it around her legs. It was hard for her to realize she was nearly thirty-eight, for inside was the child who hunted frogs in the creek and brought home injured rabbits, chipmunks, and lizards. She had never experienced fear or sadness until she lost her brothers.

Sarah would miss the rolling hills, and the sweet scent of hay gathered in the summer. Her heart nearly stopped when she saw a deer running along the creek below the cemetery. She loved living here, and if things had been different ... but there was no use thinking about what might have been. Her life was set in motion now and there was no turning back.

She touched Jacob's tombstone, and a chill ran through her. Every March, Willie and Jacob made kites to fly in the open fields. Mr. Barrett saved the old newspapers for the children to make kites, and there was an endless supply of light scrap wood to use for the spines. Sarah chased after the boys, watching the kites bob up and down as they slowly let the string out until the kite looked like a dot in the clouds. Willie warned her not to let

go when he let her hold the end of the string. Then her brothers would laugh and tease her when the string of the kite crocheted its way around the branches. Sarah got upset because she wanted her kite to fly high like theirs. They had always protected her, and she knew they loved her. Funny, she hadn't thought about that in ages.

Walking back down to Mama's grave and the fresh mound of dirt, she wished for one last chance to talk to her. She wanted to say she was sorry for all the years filled with anger and resentment. Why had she felt like a deserted child instead of trying to understand her parents' grief? A nagging guilt overwhelmed her when she thought about William. It would have been easier if he had just died with Jacob. He was so near, yet she never went to him. What was the real reason she hadn't told Mama? Was she trying to protect her? She didn't want Mama to see William as he was now? As a nurse, she worked with many psychiatric patients and had seen parents agonize over their mentally ill sons. Between their illness and the medication, they became strange, sad creatures. She didn't want Mama to suffer that heartbreak. She was afraid Mama would never get over it if she saw William that way. Sarah knew she was right. She had to be to live with herself, but she would go to the VA Hospital tomorrow and see for herself.

Chapter 5: The Hospital

How long he'd been sitting in the big wooden chair on the porch was anyone's guess. He felt groggy; there was a hissing sound in his ears and his vision blurred. It seemed as though someone switched on a lamp, but it was the sun that brightened the porch. A tan blanket covered him from his waist to his ankles, and black corduroy slippers poked out from underneath. Uneven lengths of string hung in clumps along the frayed edge of the blanket. The woven pattern reminded him of a screen door, and it was threadbare from many washings. Impulsively, he began picking at the strings, trying to separate and smooth them. The blanket might come apart. Somehow, he had to keep it together. Panic seeped into him like black tar closing him inside. His fingers struggled with the loose string, but they were clumsy and felt oversized. A remote feeling made it seem as though he were viewing his hands from a long distance. The thought struck him that they must belong to someone else. He raised one hand and flexed his fingers. They were stiff, like a baseball glove. He opened and closed his hands several times before noticing a white band around his wrist. There were words printed on it, but they ran together when he tried to read them. He rubbed his eyes with his fists, and then opened and shut them until gradually his vision cleared. He recognized his name: William E. Donnelly – 411-46-6538. He didn't know what the numbers meant. His body was stiff and sore like his fingers. When he raised his legs,

a sharp pain in his left knee made him flinch. The pain was the one thing that convinced him he was awake ... and alive.

“Hey, Willie, can you help me with Mr. Ferguson?”

Will jerked his head around to see who was calling him, and that’s when he saw a colored man wearing a white uniform standing with another man about fifteen feet away. They were helping an old man with a pasty face and big ears walk painstakingly slow along the perimeter of the porch. Curses that would embarrass a sailor spit out of the old fellow’s mouth, and Will studied the colored man to see how he would react. Built like a weight lifter, he was at least six feet tall. The muscles in his neck were thick, and his white coat couldn’t conceal his bulging biceps. Most noticeable were his hands. They were big and oversized, strong enough to pick up a man and toss him like a rag doll. He looked like a man who had done some work in his time. Will watched as they coaxed the old man to put one leg in front of the other. He smirked when the old man cursed them, but the colored man laughed and joked back, saying, “Ah now, you don’t mean that.”

“To hell I don’t,” replied the old man as he spit on the floor.

The old man’s resistance to walk didn’t keep them from trying. Finally, they sat the old fellow in his chair and covered his legs. His blanket was ragged along the edges, too. The blankets were like the men, frayed and worn out. When they walked towards Will, he scrunched down in his chair trying to be invisible and then closed his eyes, hoping they would ignore him.

The colored nursing assistant, Willie Dixon, had been observing the old man for several weeks. William Donnelly’s name appeared on his list of patients a year ago, but there had been no change in his condition until he received a series of shock treatments. The patient had received a treatment every Monday, Wednesday and Friday for nearly a month. Willie had noticed subtle changes in his body movements, but no eye contact was

evident. The last few days he was sure that Donnelly was more attentive to the sounds around him. When Harry called out his name just now, Willie noticed Donnelly's head turn towards them. Willie decided to check out his patient.

"Glad to see you awake, Will. How do you feel?"

The voice was friendly, but maybe it was a trick. Perhaps they were testing him to see how he would react. But how should he act? Should he answer them or just sit quiet?

"How about taking a little walk? You haven't been up and about for a long time. I bet you're stiff as a board."

The nursing assistant squatted down and massaged Will's legs. The warmth of the man's hands resonated life into his skin, and Will opened his eyes. Then it changed and began to feel as though a thousand needles were stuck in his legs. When he moved his left knee, a groan fell from his lips, and the nursing assistant released it.

"That knee's real sore, isn't it? How about we ask the doc to come look at it?"

Will had dealt with these people before, but this one seemed different. He tried to answer, but all that came out was a guttural sound.

"Take your time. Think about your words, and just say each one very slowly."

What an odd thing to say. It's as if he's trying to teach me how to talk.

Will opened his mouth again, but the words remained frozen. Frustration turned to anger and he tried to jerk himself out of the chair.

"Slow down," said the nursing assistant. "You're all right. It's just been a while, and you'll have to work to get it right. Sit back and take deep breaths."

Will couldn't resist the calming effect of the man's soothing voice. He laid his head back, closed his eyes and began

breathing slowly and deliberately. The nursing assistant took Will's right hand and pressed it against his throat, then told him to massage it gently. "Do this when you try to talk again. It will help you feel the words." Will opened his mouth and moved his tongue across his lips. A glass of water appeared in front of him. When Will looked up, the nursing assistant smiled at him, flashing the whitest teeth he'd ever seen. He emptied half the glass before stopping to take a breath, and then he pressed his fingers to his throat and tried speaking again.

"Did ... I ... hear ... someone ... call ... you ... Willie?" he said, enunciating each word as though he were reading a spelling list.

"Yes, sir. I'm Willie Dixon. Actually, it's William Dixon, but I've always been called Willie. How about you? What do they call you?"

Will took another deep breath before answering. "They named me William, so I was always called Willie or Will."

"My mama called me William when she wasn't calling me Baby Boy. Isn't that one hell of a name for a grown man? You know how mamas are."

A hint of a grin crossed Will's face when Willie winked and rolled his deep brown eyes. When his mouth curved up at the edges, it felt strange. He liked Willie's easy manner, as though nothing was more important than what he was doing right now.

"Are you hungry? It's almost lunch time and they'll be bringing the trays around soon. You haven't been eating much lately, and I bet your big ones are starting to eat your little ones."

Will choked as one big laugh slipped from his throat. His body jerked as he coughed and laughed at the same time. It was a strange sound, one he hadn't heard for a long while, but it was hard not to laugh. Even the other nursing assistant who stood like a sphinx laughed. Will's shoulders shook, and he couldn't stop laughing. Without warning, he broke wind, and it sounded like a broken horn. It was so sudden that it startled him. The two

men roared, but Will's laughter quieted, with the jerking of his chest and shoulders its only indicator. The old man in the other chair peeked at them when he heard the laughter. Many strange things were heard on this ward, but honest-to-God laughter wasn't one of them.

Will's face grew serious and in a near whisper, he asked, "What day is it?"

"Why, it's Friday, April 15th, 1952," said Willie.

"1952?" said Will.

The nursing assistant put his hand on Will's shoulder when he saw the shock in the old man's eyes. "Yes, it really is 1952."

Tears filled the old man's eyes and his nose began running. When he wiped his nose with his shirtsleeve, Willie pulled a clean handkerchief out of his pocket and handed it to him.

"I'm going to check on those dinner trays. I'll be back in a few minutes. Harry, you coming with me?"

The other nursing assistant followed Willie through the door into the hallway, leaving Will to himself

How could it be 1952? I entered the hospital in 1917, and then went kind of crazy, but what happened to all the years in between? A feeling of desperation came over him, as though locked in a closet with no doorknob. His breathing came in short spurts, which brought back the panicky feeling.

He tried to count back in his mind. I was twenty-two in 1917, and it's 1952 now. That's ... thirty-five years. That would make me ... fifty-seven years old. He looked at his hands again, and that's when he noticed the wrinkles across the knuckles and fingers, and the dark blue veins that snaked up and down the back of his hands. He squeezed them into fists and pounded on the arms of the chair.

Then he whispered, "Dear God, what's happened to my life?"

When Willie returned a few minutes later, he found the old man staring at his hands and looking miserable.

“You okay? Can I do anything for you?”

He mumbled something, but Willie couldn’t make it out. “What did you say?”

“I said, damn it, can you give me back the years?”

Willie couldn’t answer him.

Bits and pieces of broken memory that he didn’t want to think about cluttered his mind, so Will began studying his surroundings. A railing made of metal posts surrounded the porch and a fly perched on it. He studied the fly as it rubbed its legs and danced along the edge. Beyond the railing, he could see a yard encircled by other buildings. He could hear birds chirping in the trees, but thick foliage concealed them from view. Walkways led from one building to another and he watched a nurse push a patient in a wheelchair the full length of the yard. It surprised him how clear he was seeing things, instead of the fog he usually looked through.

He wanted to stand up. The blanket fell to the side of the chair when he pulled at it, and he scooted to the edge of the seat using the arms of the chair for support. He could put weight on his right leg, but a shot of pain in his left knee forced him back down. Rubbing his knee, he reached down to retrieve the blanket. As he bent over, a picture fell out of his pocket. It landed face up, and Will could see three people in the picture, but couldn’t make out their faces. Closing his eyes, the warm sun slipped him into a sleepy dullness.

He had nearly drifted off when suddenly the story of the picture came back to him. Sarah had brought it, but he wasn’t sure when. She came to visit after Mama died. Regret rushed over him as he recalled that day. He sat by himself at a long table in a room with many windows covered with metal bars.

When she entered the room, his heart had quickened at the slender young woman who looked like she had stepped out of a magazine. What happened to the little girl with the flyaway hair that he had locked away in his memory? She held her head high, and her shoulders back as though she were trying to appear taller. Her frightened eyes betrayed her as she walked over to the table and her voice trembled when she spoke.

“Willie, it’s Sarah. Do you remember me?”

Nothing ... He wouldn’t look at her.

“Did they tell you about Mama? Her funeral was yesterday.”

Still nothing.

“We still have the farm. It’s paid for and Mama made me promise not to sell it. I wouldn’t anyway. It’s yours now, and when you come home ...” She stopped and tears slid down her cheeks. She pulled a handkerchief from her purse and wiped her eyes. He wanted to speak, but the words forming in his mind wouldn’t come out of his mouth.

Don’t cry, Sarah. I hate to see you cry.

“I’m moving to Michigan. I’ve received an offer from a hospital in Ann Arbor. It’s a research hospital and I’ll be able to continue my studies while I work. Please, Willie, won’t you look at me? Try to talk to me? If there was the slightest hope that you’d get better and come home, I wouldn’t go.”

Go, Sarah, never mind me.

Her back was straight and stiff and she sat on the edge of the seat. Once she tried to touch his hand, but he moved it away. She started fumbling in her purse, but couldn’t find what she wanted. Finally, she pulled a picture out of the side pocket of her purse and looked at it for a moment.

“I brought this for you. This was the last photograph taken of Daddy and Mama together. It was when I graduated from nursing school. I thought you’d like to have it to remember us.”

Nothing ...

Sarah laid the picture on the table in front of him. She waited, then stood up, smoothed her dress and put on her gloves.

"I have to go. We love you ... I mean, I love you," she stammered.

She came closer and kissed him on the cheek, but he remained still as death. As she walked to the door, Will heard the clicking of her high heels against the tiles. She knocked on the door with her gloved hand, which muffled the sound. She waited and then knocked again, only harder. The door opened and she turned to look at him one last time, then she was gone. The door closed and the sound of the lock echoed with the clicking of her heels against the cold, hard floor.

I love you, Sarah!

Warm tears slid down his cheeks. The memory of Sarah's visit awakened his grief for his mother and father, for Sarah, but most of all for Jacob. He kept wondering why he couldn't speak to her. Then the realization of all the years he had lost overwhelmed him, and he began to sob openly. What was wrong with him? He had never cried like this before.

As the days and weeks passed, Will found that tears became a constant with him. It was as though his emotions had been asleep a long time and suddenly woke up. Tears appeared at the drop of a hat, but he could also laugh. Will Donnelly became Willie's pet project, and he spent most of his free time with him. It seemed as though he was on a mission to get under his skin.

The doctor ordered physical therapy for Will, but it was Willie who coaxed him to go to the clinic twice a week. After several months of painstaking work, he could walk with a cane. The least bit of improvement that Will displayed encouraged the nursing assistant. Willie was hell-bent on helping his patient. He

rode him until he was forced to talk, if for nothing else than to tell Willie to go to hell and leave him alone. It wasn't long before Will could carry on a conversation without any trouble ... when he wanted to.

In the past, Will had kept himself shut away, never mingling with other patients or staff. Bound and determined to get him involved in every activity the hospital had to offer, Willie added Will's name to every activity sheet. More often than not Will declined, but that didn't discourage Willie and he kept after him every day.

It took time, but Will learned to trust the man, and they became friends. Willie had been a private in the army during World War II, but he never delved too deep into details. He grew up in Alabama, the son of a sharecropper and the youngest of eight children, which explained his nickname Baby Boy, and the only child to get a high school diploma. Will started calling him Baby Boy, and after a while, the other patients picked up on it. They argued and fussed, but it was all in fun. When Willie had a day off, Will fumbled through the day as though he didn't know his right from his left and didn't have a civil word for anyone. When Willie came back on duty, everyone on the ward waited in anticipation to see which one would start the banter going.

According to the medical journals, Willie Dixon may or may not have contributed to his patient's amazing recovery, but there was no doubt in Will's mind. Psychiatrists had treated Will for years, but Willie was the first person he confided in. Willie pushed him into the present.

One day, he showed the photograph to Willie and told him about Sarah's visit. "I swear I wanted to talk to her. I could hear the words in my head, but I couldn't get them to come out of my mouth."

“You can’t beat yourself up about it. It was beyond your control. Why don’t you contact her and ask her to visit you now? I’ll bet she’d be happy to see how well you’re doing.”

“Trouble is, no one knows where she is. The social worker tried to find her in Michigan and found out she got married and moved somewhere else. I don’t even know what her name is now. Damn, my own sister, and I don’t know anything about her. Everything’s changed. Everything.”

Willie felt lucky to have found this job at the VA Hospital. He was interested in the patients and in his spare time, he would spend hours in the library researching books about shell-shock and depression to find ways to help them. He liked working with the veterans and understood the hell many of them had experienced. Willie learned about Will’s background from the head nurse and it saddened him to know that the man spent a lifetime punishing himself for his brother’s death. He deserved to get some of that life back, and that was how Willie Dixon found himself in the Building Six Conference Room one January morning in 1954.

It was odd seeing the room nearly empty. Normally, staff would fill the room doing monthly reports on several patients, but this was a special meeting. Willie had convinced the head nurse, Miss James, that his patient might be well enough to live on his own. She requested this meeting on behalf of William Donnelly and the only ones present were the people who worked directly with him.

Willie stood in the doorway behind Miss James, shaking like a leaf. What in the world have you gotten yourself into? He watched as the social worker, Thomas Young, read the latest notes made by the nurses on the ward and Dr. Hawkins signed off on some notes made by the young intern. Willie was familiar with the five folders stacked in front of the doctor. William

Donnelly's entire adult life was contained in those folders, but they really didn't say much about the man. He had been like a puppet that walked where they told him to walk, ate what they gave him and never spoke to anyone. Staying in bed or hiding in the corner of a room were his only ambitions. He never spoke to other patients, so he had no friends. The first four files described his sleepless nights and anxiety attacks. Terrible flashbacks of the war sent him into screaming frenzies, then they would wrap him in sheets and place him inside a tank filled with cold water to calm him down. Commonly known as the pack room, it was the therapy used to control patients with violent tendencies. In time, the medical staff learned that this method of therapy severely frightened patients and often caused them to regress. In Will's case, it served as a catalyst to push him deeper into his depression. Willie read every volume when Will became one of his patients and he understood the contrast between the man he was, and the man he had become.

Miss James, the head nurse, motioned to Willie to follow her; they entered the room and stood at the long table.

"Is everyone here now?" asked the doctor.

"Dr. Hawkins, this is Willie Dixon, the nursing assistant who has worked with Mr. Donnelly for quite some time. I have learned some interesting things from him which you need to hear."

"Have a seat, Mr. Dixon."

Willie was a proud man who knew his place, but now he wondered if this was such a good idea. Miss James suggested he come here today, but who would take the word of a colored nursing assistant whose job was babysitting grown men? He made sure they were clean and dressed. Sometimes, he would have to clean up vomit and hold down patients who became violent, but he was nearly invisible to the staff of doctors, nurses and social workers. Miss James was different. She was an excellent head nurse, and a great person to work for. She

was fair and appreciated someone doing a good job. She relied on Willie and trusted his judgment and he was determined to help his patient.

Willie took a deep breath and sat in the chair that Dr. Hawkins pointed to, right across from him. The doctor removed his glasses and laid them on the stack of folders in front of him. There were dark circles around his eyes and he appeared sleepy, but everyone who worked with the doctor knew he never let anything get by him.

“Mr. Dixon, I’ve looked at your personnel file and spoke to several people on your ward. I believe you are a reliable spokesperson for William Donnelly, and I’m interested in what you have to say. I understand you have worked miracles with this patient. I hope you will share your expertise with us.”

At first, Willie thought the doctor was being sarcastic, but the smile on Miss James’s face reassured him. He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and referred to it as he spoke to the doctor.

“I wouldn’t say there were any miracles, though I do believe his shock treatments did wonders for him. When I was first assigned to Mr. Donnelly three years ago, I would try to interact with him, but it was like talking to a stump. He was cut off from everything and everyone. He could sit in a roomful of people and be entirely alone. I noticed that Mr. Donnelly seemed to come to himself after he received a series of shock treatments. One day about two years ago, I returned after being on leave and found a different man. He was more aware of his surroundings and began talking to me. I guess I irritated him sometimes, but I noticed if I could get a rise out of him,” Willie hesitated and grinned. “What I mean is, if I could get him a little mad at me, he seemed to respond more.”

The doctor nodded with a hint of a grin on his face.

“Little by little, he opened up. After a while, he became more interested in current events and started making friends with other patients. He is a caring person and automatically helps people.”

Willie had to suppress a grin when he thought about the day he watched William helping another patient zip up his fly.

“I have observed his reactions with other patients in the dining room, on the ward and outside in the yard. Working on the garden detail brought a big improvement in his attitude. It turned out he knew more about gardening than I did. His eating habits have changed to the point he has become a little stout. He doesn’t like taking his medicines but understands that he needs them. Recently, he asked me if I thought there was any possibility that he could be released. He has a home in Cannon County, and I believe he is anxious to return there. Dr. Hawkins, after being with Mr. Donnelly all this time, I really believe he might make it outside. I’m not a professional person, and it’s just a gut feeling I have, but I hope you will consider the possibility.”

Dr. Hawkins had folded his hands at the back of his head and closed his eyes while Willie spoke. When Willie stopped talking, the doctor put his glasses back on and looked at Miss James.

“What do you think about all this, Miss James?”

“I’ve had Mr. Donnelly as a patient for twelve years and up until a year ago, I would have thought it impossible that he would ever be stable enough to go home. He is not the same man today. I have observed him closely, and I feel he would be a good candidate for discharge. I agree with everything Mr. Dixon has said.”

Then the doctor looked at the social worker. “Mr. Young, what have you to add to all this?”

“The only problem we have encountered is that we don’t know the whereabouts of his only relative. His sister moved out of state, and we have lost contact with her. If he were discharged,

we might set up a guardianship for him, but when I spoke to him about this he refused. He believes if he is well enough to be discharged, he should be well enough to take care of his own business.”

Dr. Hawkins had been looking down at the papers in front of him, but his bushy eyebrows curved upwards in interest at the social worker’s last comment. He didn’t speak for a long time, but continued to peruse the patient’s active file until finally he looked up, closed the file, and stood up.

“I’d like to see the patient in my office tomorrow afternoon at two o’clock.”

Chapter 6:

Ramsey

As Ramsey put the receiver of the telephone back in its cradle, a dubious feeling left him troubled. William Donnelly asked to see him. That's what the voice on the phone said. A social worker or doctor, he wasn't sure which. He had been his best friend when they were children, but now he was Lazarus rising from the dead. Ramsey wondered why they called him. Then he remembered they probably couldn't find Sarah. Everyone had lost track of her since she moved up North and there were no other family members in the area. They asked if Ramsey could come to the VA hospital tomorrow at 10:00 a.m. Without hesitation, he said yes, but he already regretted his hasty response.

He sat back in his easy chair and started to light a cigarette, and then quickly snapped the top of the lighter closed. No smoking in the house. Helen was outside, so the house was quiet except for the rhythmic movement of the pendulum on the grandfather clock in the corner. Damn, he was in such a hurry to answer the telephone that he forgot to take off his shoes when he came in the house. So many rules, he thought, as he slipped off his shoes and carried them to the front closet. As he retrieved his slippers, he laid the shoes in the same spot where his slippers had been. He hung the tweed sport coat on a hanger,

and grabbed the gray cardigan that hung on a hook in the back of the closet. A man of habit, he always dressed the same way. Dress pants, white shirt, no tie, and his sport coat for the store, suit and tie on Sunday for church. He owned three pairs of shoes, dress, casual, and a pair of work boots that Helen had been trying to throw away forever. His graying hair was thick, but it was so straight and coarse that he was always pushing hair away from his forehead. There was no denying a middle-age spread, but his well-fed appearance couldn't be blamed on Helen. She was extraordinarily vain about her small waistline and was constantly dieting. To Ramsey, dieting was her excuse not to cook, especially when she decided to eat nothing but raw vegetables and fruit for months at a time. It was no surprise Gunner's Diner was his favorite hangout. As he padded his way back to his chair, he wondered how he fit into this house. The rules and regulations got tangled up in his brain until his head hurt.

He always went along with Helen's whims and gave her anything she wanted. Even when she insisted on replacing his favorite chair, saying it was outdated and worn out, he didn't put up much of a fight.

"I like that chair. It's my chair and I want to keep it right where it is," said Ramsey doggedly.

"But it's so ugly," Helen pouted. "It doesn't match the rest of the room, and it's worn out. Would you at least let me get it recovered?"

Ramsey thought a minute. "No flowers," he insisted.

She sighed. "All right, no flowers. We can take it to Nashville tomorrow."

"Nashville? For Christ's sake! Why Nashville? Robert Dawson can do the job right here in Woodbury."

"There's a wonderful shop in Nashville that carries the latest fabrics, and everyone I know recommends it."

“But Robert is right here and can order any fabric you like. If we take the chair to Nashville we may never get it back.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. If you won’t let me buy a new chair, you should at least let me have my way about having it reupholstered.”

Silence inhabited all the space in the room as Helen stared at him with that pouty look on her face. Next thing he knew, she was patting the corners of her eyes with her embroidered handkerchief. Even her invisible tears could make Ramsey feel like mush in her hands.

After his chair was reupholstered, Helen ordered an extra chair pad from the same fabric. It covered the back of the chair and the seat. Then she had arm covers made too. In reality, she had two covers made for the chair, one for company and the other for Ramsey. It had never occurred to him before, but now he wondered if she would throw the extra cover away after she buried him. As he looked around the room, he realized there was nothing of him anywhere.

They were two middle-aged people, still strangers after thirty-two years of marriage—she with her Daughters of the Revolutionary War Society, the Historical Society, church activities and volunteering at the hospital, and he with the Douglas Dry Goods Store.

The first time he saw her walk into the Bible class at the Woodbury Church of Christ, he knew she was the one for him. Her slender hips swayed above long legs, and she walked like a ballet dancer. She always wore a gold “H” on a chain around her neck and the shine of the gold pulled your eyes to her full breasts. She was beautiful and every boy in town had a crush on her, but she had chosen him. He never felt worthy of her and always considered himself one lucky bastard.

Sometimes there’s a price to pay when we get what we want. Helen ruled the roost from the day they married. When

the children came, she tried to make them perfect too. It never occurred to her that they were people with their own minds. Thank God, they were wise enough to move away when they married. Ramsey loved John and Beth, and he really missed his grandchildren, but he had to wait for Christmas and Easter to see them.

Helen seemed to feel that once the children were married, her job ended and now she could get back to her life. Weeks would pass and she never thought to call about the grandchildren. Ramsey figured being a grandmother pushed her into middle age, and she wasn't ready to claim it yet. Calling the children became a Wednesday night ritual while Helen was at church. Ramsey looked forward to the calls, for that was when he could talk to the grandchildren. The sound of "Hi, Grandpa" always brought a smile to his face and without fail, tears stung his eyes when it was time to hang up.

She was fastidious about the house to the extent that Ramsey started playing little childish tricks. He would move a picture on the mantel ever so slightly, or turn one of the lamps so that the switch was towards the side. Sometimes he would move one of the statues from one side of the end table to the other, or he would turn it around so it was facing another direction. Without fail, he would find it back in its original place the next day. Funny thing, she never said anything about it. This made him feel invisible, as though he didn't exist, so in the end she still was the winner.

She even took the pleasure out of their lovemaking. The memory of last night had been eating at him all day. He ached to hold Helen in his arms and feel her soft skin against him, but she turned away from him. Helen was going through menopause and she used every excuse possible to avoid having him touch her. She was too hot, too cold, or too tired. Well, he was tired too.

Now with this phone call from the hospital, he had something else to chew on, more questions with no answers. The last he heard, Will had some kind of mental breakdown and might never leave the hospital. The gossip indicated Will was a raving maniac and had hurt someone, but no one knew for sure. Ramsey didn't know anyone who had direct contact with Will or the hospital. Well, tomorrow I'll find out first hand, he thought, as he walked out the back door looking for his wife.

"Helen, you'll never guess who just called."

"I'm nearly finished weeding the flower bed, dear. Why don't you fix us a glass of iced tea, and don't forget the lemon."

Ramsey frowned, and then went back inside to fix the tea. Perhaps he needed a little more time to think about how he would break the news to Helen. He wasn't sure what her reaction would be or perhaps he was. Talk about Will being crazy had been going around for years and Helen wouldn't want Ramsey to get involved. She would think it was beneath them to have anything to do with a crazy man, even if he did happen to be a good friend once upon a time.

He searched for the lemon and finally found one tucked between the apples and oranges. It took him a few minutes to find his favorite paring knife. Carefully, he sliced the lemon the way Helen liked it and placed the slices in a flowered saucer from the cabinet. He carried two glasses of iced tea with the lemon slices on a small tray to the back porch and set them on the little table by the steps. Then he remembered the long-handled spoons that he left lying on the counter. Finally, he had everything in place. He eased back into one of the rocking chairs and watched Helen as she bent over the flowerbed.

His wife was still a good-looking woman in spite of her age. Sometimes, Ramsey worried about her health because she was so thin, but that's what she wanted. Her closets bulged with the latest fashions, and she dyed her auburn hair every few weeks

to make sure no gray would show. Gardening gloves protected her carefully manicured fingernails, and a large sunbonnet protected her face. The sunbonnet had a turquoise ribbon around the brim that matched the turquoise sweater she wore. Their home was a carbon copy of Helen. Everything in its place and nothing mismatched, except maybe Ramsey.

The wind chimes moved gently in the breeze and the porch was tranquil. He was glad spring was around the corner, and he could spend more time out here. It was Ramsey's comfort spot. Now that he had a chance to think things out, he decided not to mention the phone call to Helen until after he went to see Will. A gust of wind made the wind chimes resonate sharply, leaving a chill on Ramsey's neck.

Helen finished weeding and carefully picked up the basket, her spade, and the little stool and carried them around to the shed. When she returned, she surveyed the flowerbed one last time before sitting on the porch.

"I'd like to get some good fertilizer this year, but I can't trust you to bring home the right kind," she said as she removed her straw hat and wiped the perspiration from her forehead with the back of her hand.

"Chicken manure is the best there is," he chuckled.

"I don't want to hear any more about chicken manure. I'm still ashamed to face our neighbors after you covered the garden with that disgusting mess last spring."

"You have to admit, we had the finest garden in town."

"You're not funny, Ramsey. How do you think I felt when the neighbors closed their windows on the hottest spring day of the year because the stink from that chicken mess was unbearable? Francis and Dorothy stopped talking to me for weeks. They gossiped about us at the church and everywhere else. They called us chicken farmers, and you thought it was funny. The very idea!"

She picked up the glass of iced tea, rolled it across her forehead and pressed it to her cheeks before taking a drink. Her hot flashes were getting worse, but she refused to admit it and wouldn't go to the doctor.

"What did you want to tell me?"

"I think I'll go to Murfreesboro tomorrow. If you like, I'll pick up some fertilizer while I'm there."

"Is that all you wanted to tell me?"

"Yeah, that's all."

Helen made that irritating tsk sound with her tongue and took another drink of tea.

"Don't forget next Saturday is the annual banquet for the historical society, and I'll need you to pick up the flowers for the tables."

"Just remind me on Friday morning. I don't want to have to run around the square on Saturday. You know how crowded it gets."

"But they'll be fresher on Saturday!"

"Now Helen, Owen will sell you the same flowers on Saturday that he has in the shop on Friday."

"Why do you always have to argue with me? Is picking up a few flowers such a big thing to ask?"

"All right then. I'll wait until Saturday, but I may have to get Lloyd to pick them up because Saturday is our busiest day at the store."

"Well, tell him to be careful. You know how clumsy he can be."

"Yes, dear." Ramsey sighed and leaned his head back in the rocker with his eyes closed.

Ramsey thought of little else for the rest of the evening, except his promise to see Will the next day. He felt guilty for not mentioning it to Helen but made up his mind to handle the matter regarding William Donnelly on his own.

The following morning, Helen's lips barely brushed his cheek as she left, dressed to the nines for her meeting with the Historical Society Committee. He watched as her black Cadillac sedan eased out of the driveway, smirking at his four-year-old blue Chevrolet pickup. He was glad Helen started taking the car to the clean-up shop in Murfreesboro instead of making him do it every week. A black car is a bitch to keep clean.

Ramsey stopped by the store to tell Lloyd he'd be gone for a few hours. He had to search around two long shelves before finding him in the toiletry aisle refilling boxes of Colgate toothpaste. He stuck his arm up in a lazy wave. Lloyd was out of the same bunch of Buchanans who raised pigs in Gassaway when they were boys. Ramsey remembered the first time he laid eyes on Lloyd sitting next to his granddaddy in an old Ford pickup loaded down with feeder pigs. It was the time of year when corn farmers from up North came to Woodbury to buy feeder pigs and carry them home. Fattening up the pigs was free, for they would let them run loose in the cornfields to eat the leftovers from the corn-picking machines.

What caught Ramsey's attention was the fact that Lloyd and his grandfather looked so much alike. Ramsey wasn't the sort to study on people or remember details that other people wouldn't, but their profiles were unique. As their truck slowly worked around the crowd in the square, Ramsey saw that their faces looked carved from the same mold, and the mold buried in a deep tar pit never to be used again. As you looked from the side, their eyes disappeared under a small forehead, but their noses protruded way out into a definite point. Their mouths were small slits tucked in between their noses and chins that also protruded out, making it look as though the tips of their noses and ends of their chins nearly met. Ramsey didn't believe

in witches or the like, but for a moment he thought that if there were such things, they would fit the description of warlocks.

Except for the gray seeping into his black hair, Lloyd hadn't changed much in thirty years. In spite of the fact that he could out-eat anyone at Gunner's Diner, he never gained an ounce of fat on his body. It looked as though he wore the same clothes every day, khaki pants, a white t-shirt, and a black windbreaker with that God-awful baseball cap with Milwaukee Braves stitched in big red letters across the front.

Lloyd and his brother Marvin saw the Braves play their first game in the brand-new Milwaukee County Stadium on April 13, 1953. The excitement of the game put a motor inside Lloyd that moved his arms and legs faster than they had ever moved before. He put on a show for the customers in the store and the diner, describing everything he saw.

"In all my days I never saw so many people in one place before, and me and Marvin were right there in the middle of it all."

He'd scrunch up his face, showing how the batter looked as the pitcher wound up to throw the ball. Then he'd jump up, hollering as though he were still in the grandstands with all the rest of the fans when they made a home run. That motor of his kept going for two or three weeks before it finally died down. When he showed everyone his new Milwaukee Braves cap, he swore to wear it every day. True to his word, he did just that, but now a dark stain permeated the inside of the hat and snaked up the bill that made it look plain disgusting, but he wouldn't part with that cap for anything.

When he was fifteen his grandfather gave Lloyd a key chain with a big gold "L" dangling from it, and he still had it. The "L" was tarnished and the gold worn off, making it look like green-stained metal, but he kept it all the same. Lloyd was a keeper

whether it was a trinket or a person. He kept them with him on his head, in his pocket, and in his heart.

Ramsey knew Lloyd would finish stocking before coming to the front so he called out, "I'm going to Murfreesboro for a couple of hours. Hold down the fort."

Lloyd's unseen reply was, "Don't soak up all that sunshine. Leave some for me." He laughed at his own corny joke as Ramsey went out the door.

The Veterans Administration Hospital was easy to find. A large sign sitting on the corner of the intersection of Highway 231 and Compton Road had the name printed in bold letters. A long, tree-lined drive led to the main entrance with a large parking lot nearby. Ramsey felt dwarfed walking up the huge stairway of the main building that resembled a museum. Several buildings comprised the makeup of the VA hospital, but up close this main building was all he could see. Ramsey had never been here before, though many folks from Woodbury worked for the VA. He was nervous about seeing Will and wasn't sure what to say or how to act. To say he was surprised when he received the phone call was an understatement. The last time he saw Will, they were boys with no knowledge of the world and its problems. Ramsey had accepted the loss of his friend many years ago.

Two sets of double doors lined the front of the building and Ramsey chose the doors on the right side to enter. There were signs that read Keep Doors Locked At All Times everywhere he looked and he wondered if they were trying to keep people in or out. Inside were two tall white columns set back about fifteen feet, and beyond was a long hallway. He started toward the hallway when a receptionist behind a glass partition spoke to him.

"May I help you?"

She glared at him through dark-rimmed glasses with a black string attached to the frames. Her brown hair was bobbed, and though she had to be at least forty, there were noticeable pockmarks on her face that looked like leftovers from childhood chicken pox or a bad case of acne.

“Good morning. I’m here to visit William Donnelly.”

“Do you know what ward he’s on?”

“No.”

“One moment, please. I’ll check for you.

“He’s in Building Six, Ward B. I’ll give you a pass so you can enter the ward and here is a map. This is where you should park your car and this is the entrance. Press the buzzer marked B, and someone will come down and let you in. Is there anything else, sir?”

“No, thank you.”

It was hard not to notice the matter-of-fact manner of the woman. She must have repeated these instructions so often she could do it in her sleep.

He retraced his steps to the parking lot, and following the directions on the map, drove slowly around the maze of buildings. Each building was clearly marked with numbers, and he was surprised at how many there were. The manicured lawns had many trees, and flowerbeds were ready for planting. There were benches scattered here and there under the trees, and men sitting alone and smoking occupied several. As he approached Building Six, he saw a man standing under a tree looking up as though he were studying the branches. Then Ramsey realized he was relieving himself on the tree trunk. He smiled. As a child, he did it all the time.

On the side of the door, he found the B button and pressed it. As he waited, a colored man, his skin like wrinkled shoe leather, sat on the top step. He nodded at Ramsey through a cloud of cigarette smoke. The door opened, and a stony-faced

fellow about thirty-five dressed in white and wearing a nametag stood at attention. He wore his black hair in a flattop, and his uniform was clean with razor sharp creases in the pants. Ramsey read Nursing Assistant on his tag but couldn't make out the name below with his bifocals.

"May I help you?"

Ramsey showed him his pass and said, "I'm here to see William Donnelly."

Looking at the other man sitting on the step, the nursing assistant shouted, "Mac, it's time for your detail. Butt that cigarette, and come in now."

"Come this way," the man said to Ramsey.

Mac slowly stood up and followed Ramsey inside. The man was restless, kept rubbing his arms and scratching his head, and Ramsey could see scabs around his neck and ears. It made him feel itchy looking at him, so he stared at the pictures on the wall of country scenes with old barns and cattle grazing. When the elevator doors opened, the aide stepped aside so the two men could enter ahead of him. As the elevator slowly lifted, Ramsey looked straight ahead so he wouldn't have to look at Mac. When the elevator doors opened, a distinct smell of disinfectant made Ramsey's nostrils burn. The aide asked him to wait in the hallway, then he steered the old man to the nurse's station. Ramsey could see the aide speak to someone inside, and then he guided the old man to a room two doors down. He continued down the hallway until it ended, then turned left and disappeared. The long, sterilized hallway was empty, but there were sounds of hollering, banging and muttering and a strong smell of urine. The foreign place would dull anybody's mind after a while.

When the aide returned, a heavysset older patient wearing dingy clothes followed him. He had thinning, wavy gray hair, dark rimmed glasses and leaned on a cane. Ramsey stared at

him. That can't be Will. His face had deep creases, and his puffy eyes were dull and sleepy looking. The colored man watched out the door as the men passed. The aide pointed to a door on the left marked "Visitors Room," and the old man opened the door and went inside, leaving the door ajar. Ramsey hoped his shock wouldn't show on his face.

The aide said, "You and Will can use this room. I'll leave the door open in case you need anything. "

Ramsey entered the room, wondering what they would need. Maybe they served coffee or something. The room was bright with sunshine, but the furniture consisted of a couch, two end tables and two chairs the color of dirty sand. He held out his hand to the old man but received a suspicious gaze.

"Don't you know me? I'm Ramsey Douglas. We grew up together. You asked me to come, and here I am."

Will's eyes opened wide and his stony face suddenly came to life, "You came. You really came, you son-of-a-gun."

Will grabbed for Ramsey's hand and shook it. "I'm glad to see you. I wasn't sure if it was really you at first. Here, sit down. How was the drive? Did you drive yourself or did you take the bus? I hope this wasn't a lot of trouble for you."

Will sat in the chair across from Ramsey. He kept running his fingers through his hair, and rubbed his left knee as though it was sore.

"It was no trouble. It isn't that far."

They grinned at each other. The old man in front of him shocked Ramsey. My God, we're the same age. Do I look that old?

"It's been a long time and I wasn't sure if you were still in Woodbury," said Will.

He twisted his head, pulled out a white handkerchief and wiped his mouth. His body seemed to be in constant motion, and it made Ramsey nervous.

“Yup, still there. I’m a shopkeeper and have a general merchandise store on Main Street where we sell clothes, household items and such. I kept a few acres of Daddy’s place to run some cattle, so we’re doing all right. He failed to mention that Helen had inherited several thousand dollars that helped their financial circumstances a great deal.

“Do you remember Helen Foster? We’re married and have two children, a boy and a girl. They’re married now and live in Nashville, and we have three grandkids.”

Ramsey automatically pulled out his wallet to show their pictures then stopped. Ramsey, you’re a fool. He shoved the wallet back in his pocket.

“I’m sorry for going on like that. How are you? What are you up to now?”

With a faint grin, Will drawled, “About five foot ten!”

Ramsey looked at him, and slowly, very slowly, he realized it was a joke. He was making a joke! Ramsey smiled. “Five foot ten? That’s a good one. You’ve still got that sense of humor, don’t you?” Both men chuckled, and Ramsey sat back in his chair and breathed a long sigh.

“Say, have you got a smoke?”

“Sure, is it okay to smoke in here? I don’t see any ashtrays.”

Will got up and walked to the door. “Hey, Ray, is it okay to smoke?”

This was the first time Ramsey noticed that Will wasn’t wearing a belt, and his shoes had no shoelaces. His clothes appeared clean but wrinkled, as though he slept in them. Uneasiness gnawed at Ramsey, and he wondered why he was here. Both men were relieved when Ray appeared in the doorway.

“Here’s an ashtray, but if you leave any cigarettes, please give them to me. Patients aren’t allowed to keep cigarettes and matches on their person.”

“Sure, okay,” said Ramsey. It would be hard getting used to this place. Ramsey handed Will a Lucky Strike, pulled out his lighter and lit Will’s cigarette and then lit his own. He started to shove the pack back in his coat pocket, then pulled it out and passed it to Will.

“I never thought to bring you extra cigarettes, Will. Is there some place around here I can buy some for you?”

“You don’t have to buy me cigarettes. I can get plenty. I didn’t ask you here to bum a damn cigarette from you. I don’t want nothing from nobody.”

Will’s face turned red and the veins in his neck stuck out. His sudden anger caught Ramsey by surprise.

“Look, I just offered you a smoke. You should know I didn’t mean anything by it. Why did you want to see me after all these years?”

Will’s anger turned to raw anguish and his whole body quivered. His breath came in short gasps as he sat on the edge of the chair, leaning heavily on his cane.

“Will, are you alright?”

“I’m sorry, Ramsey. I don’t know what came over me. Don’t leave. I need someone to talk to, someone I can trust who can help me decide what to do. I have the chance to leave this place, but I’m terrified. I’ve been locked up for so many years that I don’t know if I can handle the outside world anymore.”

“Really? They think you’re well enough to leave? That’s wonderful! Where would you go?”

“Home. Where else would I go?”

Ramsey grew quiet. Everything was happening too fast. His old friend had died many years ago, but suddenly he was alive and asking for help. Questions hammered at his brain, but where were the answers?

“Ramsey, is the old place still vacant? I haven’t heard from Sarah in a long while, but she said she wouldn’t sell it.”

"It's just been sitting there since your mama passed. I think Sarah pays the taxes every year, so no one has bothered about it. There were a few inquiries about buying the place, but that's all. About five years ago, Bunchie Henderson put out some tobacco in the field next to the barn, but he wanted to pay rent for using the land. He didn't know who to ask so he decided to find some other land to rent."

"So the place is mine?"

"As far as I know. Of course, it's run down and needs a lot of work."

"Yeah, I guess it does." Will's cigarette burned all the way down to his brown-stained fingers, and his hand shook when he put the butt in the ashtray.

"It's been so long, I don't know if I can manage it. They think I can make it, but I don't know. If I leave the hospital, it will be like another world. Everything as I remember it has changed, hasn't it? I need to do a lot of thinking about this," he said, "but thank you for coming to see me. I probably shouldn't have bothered you, but I couldn't think of anyone else."

"I'm glad you called me. I'll help anyway I can. When will they release you?"

Ramsey lit another cigarette from his and offered it to Will. The old man sat quietly with his head bowed low, taking deep drags every now and then. The cigarette burned slowly, and the ashes dropping to the floor were ignored. Out in the hallway, a group of men gathered and someone was barking orders like a sergeant. One patient started arguing with another and for a moment, it sounded as though they might exchange punches. A heavyset nursing assistant quickly stepped up and separated them.

"Johnson, get back in line. Richardson, if you want to go outside you'd better settle down. Alright now, everyone

remember to form a line when we exit the elevator and stay together.”

They could hear the vibrating sound of the elevator doors opening through the thin walls of the visitor’s room. The men slowly filed in, the doors closed, and once again, the vibrating sound could be heard. Then it was quiet again. Will butted what was left of his cigarette in the ashtray before looking up at Ramsey.

“It was the war, Ramsey. It made me crazy. I’ve lost my life, and I don’t know if I can get it back. A lot of people might not want me coming back, but I don’t want to die here. I thought if I went back to the old place and kept to myself, not bothering anyone, I could kind of disappear. I can’t blame you if you don’t want any part of this. I know it’s hard for you to understand, but this isn’t the way I want to end, you see?”

Ramsey stared at the floor, avoiding the old man’s pleading eyes. The desperation in his voice cut right through him. Will was right when he said Ramsey couldn’t understand. He never went to war, and never had to waste away in a prison-like hospital for endless years. A thought started buzzing around inside Ramsey’s head.

I could help him; I could do something for once in my life, and this would be my chance ... to do ... something.

Ramsey’s adrenaline raced through his body. “This whole thing has been a waste of human life. You shouldn’t have to live out your days in a place like this. To hell what people think. Besides, you still have friends. There are plenty of folks who haven’t forgotten you. Damn, you’re practically a war hero, but most important, you’re my friend. We’ve been friends our whole lives, and I won’t let you down. By God, you come home where you belong!”

Chapter 7:

Allies

Ramsey's father had been a farmer, but in later years opened up the Douglas Dry Goods Store in Woodbury. Working in the store since he was a boy taught Ramsey how to organize, make money and understand people. He prided himself with being a learned mediator as well as a diplomat. But Ramsey never wanted to make waves. He knew when to keep his opinion to himself. Besides, he had Helen to remind him how unimportant his opinions were.

Before Ramsey left the hospital, he had the opportunity to speak with Will's social worker who was able to answer some questions and shed some light on Will's situation. The social worker said that being in the hospital so many years would make it very difficult for him to adjust to a normal life. "Patients become institutionalized," he explained, "just as prisoners do who have been in jail for many years." Ramsey could understand that comparison. He knew a man released from prison after twenty years confinement who committed a petty crime just so they would send him back to prison. The man couldn't handle the stress of everyday living.

The social worker wasn't overly optimistic, and Ramsey knew Will was right to be concerned about the folks in town. In past years Will was a favorite topic of gossip, and some would have a difficult time accepting him. Even Ramsey wondered about it, until he read some articles about the atrocities of World War I,

and he knew several men from Woodbury who had participated in World War II. Shell shock was a foreign term to most people unless they had experienced war. Most people in town had liked and respected the Donnelly family and expressed sympathy after Jake died, but they had been skeptical about Will. It was hard to understand why he couldn't just come home and live a normal life. His mental breakdown appeared as a sign of weakness and being mentally ill or crazy was a shame to the family. Neighbors of the Donnellys watched James decline, and they were sure the apple didn't fall far from the tree. No doubt, the gossip would stir up again once he came home.

It bothered Ramsey that Helen knew Will had been his best friend, but managed to forget that when she shared in the gossip. Nevertheless, something in his heart kept saying it was the right thing to do in spite of Helen or anyone else. He used to visit the family now and again, and after Mr. Donnelly passed away, he and John would go out to the farm to do repairs for Mrs. Donnelly and Sarah. That was when Mrs. Donnelly told Ramsey about a letter she received from a soldier six months after Jacob's death. William had risked his own life trying to save his brother. Ramsey asked her if she ever heard from the soldier again. She never did and regretted not being able to thank him for writing.

Ramsey tried to think of anyone who might still have a connection to Will, and then he thought of Quixie. Of course! She had been close to the Donnelly family, and he always suspected there had been something special between her and Will. She was married now, but her husband, Suell, was a good man. Ramsey was sure they would help.

As he passed through Readyville, he remembered the fertilizer. Helen would have a hissy fit that he forgot it. Ramsey shrugged his shoulders. "I don't want the stuff and if I did, they have perfectly good fertilizer in Woodbury. She can get it

herself,” he said and pressed a little harder on the accelerator. Ramsey’s heart was light that day, lighter than it had been for some time.

As Ramsey drove through town, he spotted Suell’s truck near the garage. He parked his car nearby and went in the front door. The little bell rang as the door opened and Ramsey grinned, knowing Suell couldn’t hear the bell in the front office when he was working in the garage. He looked out back and was glad no one was there. The garage usually had someone hanging around, waiting for their vehicle or just killing time. The heat from the wood stove nearly took his breath when he entered the work area. The smell of grease and oil hung in the air. Suell’s legs were sticking out from under the Methodist preacher’s black Dodge sedan. It was an older car, but didn’t have a scratch on it.

“Hey, Suell, got a minute?”

“Who’s that hollering?” Suell answered.

It took a few seconds for his head to appear from under the car. He was holding a greasy wrench in his hand. There was a black smudge that stretched from his forehead down to his neck and then disappeared inside his t-shirt.

“I’ve been trying to loosen the cap from the oil pan and darn if it don’t keep slipping out of my grip. What can I do for you? I sure could use a cold drink. How about you?”

Suell stood up and wiped the sweat from his forehead with his shirtsleeve. It was the only clean place on his face. He walked over to the cooler where he kept cold drinks for his customers. Suell wasn’t tall, probably five foot seven with a slender build except for the little pot belly that drooped over his belt. Quixie was a good cook and Suell loved to eat.

“Pretty warm in here, isn’t it? These March mornings can be plum cold, but the woodstove gets too hot. Where have you been? We missed you at the diner this morning.”

"I had some business in Murfreesboro. I need to talk to you about something important. Can you spare a few minutes?"

"Sure, I got as much time as you need," Suell said as he opened the cloudy glass lid and grabbed two bottles of RC out of the cooler. His curiosity peaked because Ramsey had never been particularly friendly towards him. What important thing would he have to talk over with him?

As he reached for the bottle opener looped over a hook on the wall with a thin piece of leather, Ramsey said, "Do you remember hearing talk about William Donnelly? He's been in the VA hospital in Murfreesboro for several years."

A funny thud in Suell's chest made him stop suddenly and he held on to the edge of the cooler for a minute. Finally, he gripped the bottle opener and expertly popped the caps from both bottles and handed one to Ramsey. He took a long drink of soda before answering.

"Sure, I guess everyone in town has heard some talk about him."

"I spoke with him today, and there's a good chance he's going to be discharged, and he wants to come home. What do you think about that?"

"I think that's the best news I've heard in a long time, but why would you ask me a question like that?"

"I'm happy for him, but I'm afraid some folks might have a problem with it. I can't imagine how he'd react the first time someone called him crazy. Then there's the problem of him being able to adjust to all the changes. He's been locked up in hospitals for years. We were best friends growing up, and he has no family left here, so I'd like to help him. I was hoping there might be a few more people in town who felt the same way."

"I can't wait to tell Quixie the news. She'll be tickled pink. I'm not supposed to know it, but she was sweet on him once upon a time."

"Quixie and William go back a long way. That's what made me think of you."

"Yeah, Quixie told me they were good friends, and any friend of hers is a friend of mine."

"I'm going out to the Donnelly's place after I make one more stop. I figure it may take some doing to make it livable after being empty so long."

"Say, it won't take me long to finish this oil change. What say I run by the house and pick up Quixie, and we'll meet you out there?"

Ramsey shook Suell's hand. "This means a lot to me. I'll see you later."

Suell was curious about Ramsey's change in attitude. That wife of his kept him on a tight chain. It looks like the old boy found some chain cutters. Ramsey didn't seem to have any close friends, and seeking him out as a confidante was a real stretch. In all the years they had known one another, Ramsey was standoffish. He remained neutral on all subjects whether it was gossip in the diner or discussions in his dry goods store. Maybe this news about William Donnelly has set a flame under that cold pot.

After finishing the oil change, Suell called the Methodist preacher to come pick up his car. He lived two blocks away, so within twenty minutes Suell was locking up the garage to close up for the day. He washed his face and hands in the men's room and pointed his truck towards home. He wondered how Quixie would respond to the news.

Ramsey drove around the square and headed towards McCrary Street. The preacher lived in a little yellow house a half block from the Woodbury Church of Christ. Brother Allen was a good man and a friend to the Donnelly's, so Ramsey believed he might be another ally. A white German shepherd lying in the sun on the front porch slowly rose up and greeted him with a halfhearted bark and a wagging tail.

"Hey, Quest, how you doing, old boy?" Ramsey rubbed the dog's head as he climbed the stairs of the porch. The front door opened and the preacher stepped out.

"Hello, Ramsey, what brings you here on this beautiful day? I was going to fix a glass of iced tea. Would you like to join me?"

"No thanks, I just had an RC with Suell Edmonds."

Brother Allen held the door open; Ramsey stepped into the front room and sat in a high-backed chair across from the preacher. The room was plain and looked like typical bachelor living quarters. No knick-knacks or lace curtains decorated the modestly furnished room. A small bookcase overflowing with books and papers faced the couch and coffee table.

"Do you remember the Donnellys?"

"Of course," said Brother Allen. "I knew the family very well. Why do you ask?"

"I visited William Donnelly today at the VA Hospital in Murfreesboro. He's going to be discharged soon and wants to come home."

Brother Allen's face drained of color and the shocked look on his face surprised Ramsey.

"Praise be Jesus after all these years. Are you sure?"

"Yes, I spoke with him for a long time and I had a chance to speak with his social worker, too. Will doesn't want to spend his last days in the hospital, but he's worried about coming back home."

"I visited him several years ago, and I never imagined he would ever be well enough to come home." Brother Allen grew quiet and looked down at his hands, and then he spoke so softly it was more to himself than to Ramsey, "His mother always believed he would come home one day."

"It's true that he's not the same man, but he was my friend when we were youngsters and I intend to help him all I can. I'm on my way out to his house, and Suell and Quixie Edmonds are meeting me there. We're going to find out what it will take to make it livable."

Brother Allen's eyes widened and a big smile brightened his face. "I'm glad to hear that. Let me help too! I used to visit them often and I haven't been at the house since Mrs. Donnelly passed away."

"The more the merrier," said Ramsey. "The one thing that worries me is how some of the folks in town will react. They need to know William is okay; otherwise, they wouldn't release him. As it is, it's going to be a big adjustment for him, and he needs as much support as he can get. I thought hearing it from you might ease some of the tension that's bound to rise."

"There are a lot of good people in Woodbury, and I'm sure he will be welcomed. I'll do whatever I can to help. Let me know when he comes home, will you?"

"I have to tell you, his illness has changed him, and it may take a while for him to feel comfortable even in his own house. He has this idea that he will go home and hide like a hermit. That's not going to work."

"Bless his heart. The torment some men must suffer."

Ramsey stood up and offered his hand to Brother Allen. "I knew I could count on you. I need to run because Suell and Quixie will be waiting for me."

"I'll meet you up there in an hour."

Ramsey walked back to his truck and drove off in the direction of the Gilley-Young Hollow.

As Med watched Ramsey's truck pull away, he thought about the shell of a man that he visited a few years ago and distress filled his mind. That he had failed Julia and Sarah haunted him through the years.

"I should have done more. Instead of giving it time, I lost hope and gave up."

That William had recovered enough to come home seemed a miracle. A surge of humility flowed through him and he dropped to his knees and prayed.

"Dearest Father, thank you for answering Julia's prayers. Please forgive my false pride and doubt. I should have trusted your will. The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands."

As Ramsey headed north on Highway 53, he had mixed feelings. Helping William had become his new project and he was sure Brother Allen, Quixie and Suell would be good supporters, but a nagging feeling kept pulling at him. He would have to tell Helen sometime, but he dreaded it.

As Ramsey turned onto the Stones River Road, his eyes followed the narrow stream of river and memories of his childhood came rushing back. William's family lived in the old Gilley-Young Hollow where the head smacks into the side of Short Mountain. In years past, half of the hollow would be in pasture while the other half planted in corn. The fields were so tilted you could count all the rows from top to bottom. On summer days, the air would be heavy with the sweet smell of honeysuckle. He remembered the times spent with William and his family. They played out in the yard for hours catching fireflies while katydids sang their boisterous songs. Nobody in the area

had any money to speak of, but no one went hungry. Ramsey remembered it as a joyous time in spite of the hard work.

At harvest time, he was one of many boys whose job was to strip off the long blades on the standing corn stalk while it was still green and tie them into bundles for winter feed. They didn't attend school until the cold weather came because it was more important to help gather the harvest and cut wood for the winter months. The hills throughout the Prater Community were productive, with plenty of corn, millet, and fodder. Wheat flourished in its rich loamy soil and nearly everyone raised hogs, sheep or cattle. Besides growing corn and hay, William's daddy made furniture in his workshop and Ramsey often helped sand pieces or sweep the sawdust. He liked to ride with William and Mr. Donnelly when they went to the sawmill carrying a load of poplar, oak or pine logs.

He'd never forget the time a sudden thunderstorm came up, bringing a swinging curtain of rain down the hollow. It swept down the hillsides, filling the creeks so fast that he was forced to stay at the Donnelly's until the water subsided. He would have lived with them forever if he could. Ramsey was an only child and when he was around the Donnelly family, he liked to pretend he belonged with them. They treated him like one of their own. Even Sarah seemed like his little sister.

Mrs. Donnelly always had a cake or pie baked and served generous portions with big glasses of sweet milk. After dinner, the children begged Mama to read stories from one of her books. She read about soldiers and pirates, and sometimes she would read them poems. Ramsey didn't always understand them, but he liked listening to the sing-song lyrics. William loved books and considered being a schoolteacher. When Ramsey's father became a shopkeeper in Woodbury, he expected Ramsey to follow in his footsteps, but he dreamed of continuing his education, but there was never enough money for college.

When he courted Helen, he stopped dreaming all together, for she seemed to fill all his needs.

Ramsey reached the stock gap which led into the Gilley-Young Hollow and slowly eased his truck over it. He was sure this was the right thing to do and he wasn't going to give in to his nagging doubts. As he passed the Dawson's house on the left, he made a mental note to speak to Robert as soon as he could. Robert and his family would be good neighbors for William.

Quixie nearly fainted when Suell told her about William coming home. When her initial shock passed, her tears flowed like a waterfall. As she gained control of her emotions, she hugged Suell so hard he let out a yelp and teased her about the old boyfriend coming back to town.

"I'll have to watch my P's and Q's so I won't lose you."

"I can't believe you'd say such a thing," she said, and the look on her face made Suell feel like a fool for saying it.

"I've loved you a long time, Suell Edmonds, and William is nothing but a good friend. He and his family helped my baby brother and me when there was no one else. I'll never forget that and now maybe I can repay them by helping William."

"I'm sorry, Sweet Pea. It's just that I know what a prize you are, and it would kill me to lose you."

"Don't you know that you're stuck with me, and you couldn't beat me off with a stick?"

He held her in his arms and kissed her tenderly. Tears filled her eyes again. Having Suell was a blessing that overwhelmed her at times.

She gently pushed him away, "You'd do anything to get out of housework, wouldn't you?" He patted her behind, and she turned and started barking orders like an army sergeant.

"Go get that pretty blue quilt out of the chest while I find a box to carry my cleaning supplies. I was waiting for a special occasion to give it to someone, and I can't think of a better one

than this. I bet the linens left at the house have yellowed with age. I'll bring some fresh ones and take the old ones home to wash. They're liable to fall apart, though."

Quixie was beside herself with excitement as she filled an old Borax box with cleaning articles and rags. She asked Suell to get the mop and broom and to be sure to bring extra matches for the stove. There was no electricity at the Donnelly's house so they would have to heat water on the woodstove. The Donnelly's house. It felt so strange to think of it again and it brought back good memories that had been lost for a long time.

Her mind rambled from one thing to another as they rode out to the farm. She hammered Suell with questions about the outhouse, the roof, and if the spring would still be running. It was the only source of water to the house.

"Honey, that water has been running longer than you and I have been alive. The spring may need to be cleaned out, but that's no problem. Quit worrying about everything. He won't be home for a while yet, so we have plenty of time to do what needs to be done."

"I know. I just want everything to be like it was. It was such a pretty little house."

Suell patted her knee and said, "They say you can never go back. Life is nothing but change if you think about it."

Quixie got real quiet. She wondered how much Will had changed. It had been so long he might seem like a stranger now. When he and Jacob decided to join the Army, she thought her heart would break from missing him. He always treated her like a sister, but she loved him. After he left they exchanged letters, but when Jacob died, Will stopped writing. She continued writing for several years. Even when they came back unopened, she was compelled to keep writing with the hope she would hear from him, but she never did.

“What are you thinking, little girl?” asked Suell as he took her hand and kissed it.

“I was wondering if the curtains were still any good. I’ve got those lace ones that I don’t use anymore.”

“He won’t care about lace curtains. You know how men are. As long as we got a roof over our heads and a bed to lie in and of course some good vittles, we’re satisfied.”

“Well, you know how women are. We have to fix up a house. Now that you mentioned vittles, I need to check the pantry. There’s a good stock of canned fruits and vegetables that will keep him going for a while.”

She thought of something that brought a big smile to her face. She would bake a chocolate pie.

Chapter 8: Coming Home

A fine mist covered the windshield and the overcast sky made the view appear as an aged black-and-white photograph. The truck's speed accelerated as they began their descent down Peaks Hill and Will's heart raced along with it. Under the bridge marked East Fork Stones River, the muddy water raced over the banks. A faded green sign marked the beginning of Readyville, but Will hardly recognized the place. He remembered it as an active community with a bank, blacksmith, school, church and doctor's office. A post office sitting in the curve of the road across from the old feed mill was the only reminder that a community once existed.

Ramsey pointed out a brand-new black and yellow 1954 Kaiser-Frazer that looked like a mutant bumblebee and a black 1938 Plymouth. When a pink Ford Fairlane with a cream-colored convertible top passed, Ramsey let out a "Well, I'll be," and Will stared after it until it turned off. Soon the milieu of vehicles included a Packard, a '53 Studebaker Starliner, a Nash Rambler, a two-toned Desoto, and an old Model T Ford. The different colors intrigued Will, for in his day cars were always black, but now they came in colors, even two-toned. Each time a car passed, the driver raised his hand, and Ramsey responded likewise. This familiar gesture was comforting because as far

back as Will could remember, people waved whether they were sitting on a porch, driving a car, riding a mule or just walking.

Ramsey wondered what Will was thinking. Talking to his old friend had become difficult. No matter how you cut it, he was different, a stranger. Ramsey knew he deserved a better life. Hell, he deserved to live. There wasn't much of that going on these last thirty-five years, but was time still on his side? Ramsey reached for his cigarette pack and offered it to Will.

"Smoke?"

"Thanks, I put a carton in my suitcase but haven't got used to carrying my own."

Will lit his cigarette with Ramsey's lighter and passed it back to him. Sitting back in the seat, he fumbled with the bag in his lap and pulled on the brim of his hat. Ramsey grew quiet, and the conversation flattened like a busted balloon. Will tried watching the landscape as it slipped past the window, but it was moving too fast. His mind jumped around in busted up fragments.

The hospital had given him a bag of medicine and the nurse reminded him that he should take it every day without fail, but how was he going to keep track of it? He hated the idea of going back to the hospital for refills. It was his life support, but it felt like a crutch.

Maybe he should have gone on some of the day trips with the other patients. Once a month they climbed on a bus and went for rides around the countryside. Outings sponsored by local churches, VFW groups or the Military Order of the Purple Heart offered home-cooked meals and often musicians playing banjos, guitars or fiddles. The patients loved the old familiar songs and after they returned to the hospital, it wasn't unusual to hear one of them humming one of the old tunes. It made William homesick.

Yeah, they got out often. The difference was, they knew they were coming back. Being in the hospital was like being in

prison, but it was safe. They knew what to expect. There were no decisions to make. All you had to do was follow the others like a herd of milk cattle going to the barn. As long as they followed the rules, they were okay. Institutionalized! That was what they called the old timers in the hospital, and functioning outside became a threat, an unknown danger.

Will hated being a statistic. He wanted to feel like a man, but he knew many who stopped looking for a way out because it was easier to forget about the world outside. It was as easy as closing a door. Words from a poem popped into his head. We are born, and then we die with nothing more than a whisper to show that we were here. Our whispers fade if there is no one to listen.

“Do you remember when this road was called Broadway of America?”

Ramsey’s voice interrupted Will’s thoughts, “Yeah, now that you mention it. It was the only way folks from Nashville could get to Knoxville for the football games. When did they pave this road? This was just a dirt road the last time I saw it.”

“The road from Readyville to Woodbury was the first one paved in Cannon County. Somewhere around 1923, I think. Daddy and I covered many a mile on this road, and he always complained about paying the toll fee. I think it stopped being a toll road about 1922. Sometimes we would stop to watch the men working on the road. Now, there was real labor. They hand-laid each rock for the base of the road and filled in the cracks with smaller rocks, and the only equipment they used were wheelbarrows, shovels and mules. They’d work the men as hard as they worked the mules. Do you remember Mr. Travis? Maybe you wouldn’t know him, because his farm was over in Lick’s Creek. He told me a story about watching them build the road when he was a kid. He skipped school one day with some other boys and hid in the bushes to watch the workers. They

overheard old man Leek, the straw boss in charge of the project make the comment, 'Kill a mule, buy another one. Kill a Negro, hire another.' You know how boys are. Before long, they started mocking the old man. They'd get a whipping for doing it, but it wasn't long before it would start again."

Will grinned. He knew how boys were.

Ramsey passed Will another cigarette and for a while, they rode in silence. Will stared out the window and flicked his ashes in the ashtray below the dashboard. Absence of conversation heightened the noise of the truck. The wind pushed against the windows, making a "rushhh" sound, and the muffled sound of the motor cast a constant drone. The bump-bump-bump as each tire rolled along the worn road was like an irregular heartbeat. He wished he could block out the noise and was relieved when Ramsey spoke again.

"When my boy was young, we used to go to the football games," said Ramsey. "I wanted John to go to the University of Tennessee, but he joined the Navy instead. When World War II ended, he went to work for a construction company in Nashville. He did well and became general manager of the company. After he got married, we planned to keep going to the games together, but it never happened. Helen doesn't like football."

Farmland rolled along for a long distance until hills springing up out of the earth slowed its pace. They protruded out of the ground haphazardly like huge waves in the ocean, in colors of sage green and shadowed grays. Will closed his eyes and a long forgotten memory came back to him.

On the ship sailing to England, Will was one of the few who didn't get seasick. He spent hours staring out at the massive sea, mesmerized by the waves rising and falling. As the waves crashed higher and higher against the sides of the ship, it reminded him of a symphony and the Great Conductor in the sky was preparing for the rising crescendo. All he had to do

was wait. It would come. It always came. Then the waves would crash against the sides of the ship for the finale. He wondered how the wood and metal could take such a beating and hold up to all that power.

These hills were quiet, peaceful. The gray, overcast sky was beginning to brighten, and rays of sunlight were peeking through the thinning clouds. Manicured fields stretched out as far as the eye could see and the rain had coaxed the colors out of the gray and brown trees. The breeze gave motion to the tiny leaves and the promise of new life was everywhere.

It wasn't long before they passed a sign, "Welcome to Woodbury, Established 1836," painted in large letters. The little town was nestled in the hills, and houses popped up here and there, some on high ridges while others set flat and close to the road. The old feed mill still stood near the bypass and Ramsey told him about the new shirt factory built a little ways down from it.

"Many of our young people left to find work up North, but the shirt factory gave us some industry and provided jobs to lots of people in Cannon County," he said.

They passed a large area of bottomland where Will remembered gathering hay. As boys, he and Jake would haul hay for various farmers during the summer. They always gave their pay to Mama. On the right was an old Pan Am gas station and next to that the Baptist Church.

When they came to the square, Will pulled his hat low over his eyes and slumped down in the seat. Being Sunday, the square was empty because most folks were in church. Will turned and looked towards the old livery stable on the side street behind Fuston's Five and Ten Cent Store. As they crossed McCrary Street, Ramsey pointed to his store on the right.

"There's the infamous Douglas Dry Goods Store," he announced with mock pride, "where people gather for miles

around to purchase their goods and hear the latest news from downtown Woodbury. Do you want to stop and have a look around?"

"No, not now. Have you told anyone about me?" Will asked.

"Very few. Only people who would appreciate knowing."

"I was hoping to pass through without anyone noticing."

"You can't expect to be invisible. Folks in small towns hear about everything."

They drove around the curve passing the Civil War monument at Hen Peck Hill and Will looked up towards the old house sitting at the top.

"I always thought I'd like to live in a house on top of a hill. I could sit on the porch and see for miles, with nothing to look at but mountains, trees, and sky."

"I would have liked to live on a farm, but Helen wanted to stay in town. I'm glad we kept a few acres of Daddy's land so I could keep some cattle. There's nothing like leaning against a fence watching cattle graze and nursing their calves with no care in the world."

"I thought Helen was raised on a farm."

"She was, but she hated the country and swore never to live on a farm again. At the time, if she had wanted to live on the moon I would have made it happen somehow and done it with a smile."

A heavy feeling filled his chest when he remembered that he had loved someone once. He would have wanted her to be happy too. Damn, no sense thinking about that any more.

As they turned left where Highway 53 headed north towards Gassaway, Will sat up straight and stared out the window. His heart beat faster when they turned right on the River Road. Home was only a few miles away.

Suddenly Will shouted, "Where's the General Store and the school and the church? Where's Miss Josie's house and the blacksmith's shop? Are you sure this is the right road?"

"Lord, I didn't think to mention it to you. Prater has been gone for several years. During the twenties folks started moving to town or went up North to find jobs. Public works in the cities drew people from all over the South. Prater just disappeared. It's what they call progress."

"If this is progress, they can have it. It looks as though no one ever lived here at all. Why, it's like my life and everything I remember has been erased."

Ramsey didn't say anything, but seeing it through Will's eyes, he was saddened. The changes had come gradually for him and they were easier to accept, but this had been his community, too. Will was right. It was as if the scenes of their childhood had dissolved into the earth.

Soon they made the left turn into the Gilley-Young Hollow where a brick house stood on the right side of the road. White-faced Herefords grazed in the field on the far side of the house while their calves jumped and chased each other. A brand new barn, red with a black roof, stood behind the house. The wide double doors had black painted on each side, and it looked good against the barn's red background. Firewood was stacked in neat piles next to it. A black border collie rose up from where he had been lying and wagged his tail as their truck passed.

"That's a good-looking place."

"Yes, it belongs to Buford Woodson. You might remember his daddy, Ferrell Woodson. He owns the farm across the river about a mile from here. Buford works hard and is real particular about his place. You'll like him. Ferrell is a little peculiar, but if you're honest with him, he's all right."

Will watched the water bubbling over the polished limestone rocks that lined the creek bed as the car jostled along the rutted

dirt road. Every now and then, he spotted geode rocks as big as cabbage heads. He never liked them much because they reminded him of petrified brains in an open skull. A jubilation of buttercups bloomed along the sides of the creek. His footprints traipsed many miles along this creek bed, but these signs of his childhood were gone.

They used to plant corn with a team of mules and a turning plow along the steep hills on both sides. Now it looked abandoned to hackberry, thorn trees, and a tangle of blackberry briar and buck bush vine. Along the ridges, there used to be beech trees, willows, sycamore, and chestnut. Limestone was common in the roadbeds, and widow's cross grew in abundance. He wondered if the widow's cross was still there or if progress had taken it too.

The truck groaned when it hit another hole in the road, "The rain is constantly washing this road out," said Ramsey.

A cascade of poplars, oak, beech, and locust trees on the left sheltered a clearing where several cows were grazing. About a quarter of the way up the hill where the land was level, a farmhouse stood with a porch that stretched across the front. A barn set close to the creek and another outbuilding was on the right just beyond the bridge. Two rocking chairs and a child's rocking horse sat on the porch. Sitting in one of the chairs was a calico cat who raised her head slightly when she heard the truck coming down the road.

"This is where Robert and Kathleen Dawson live with their three children. You'll like them. They'll be good neighbors."

"How long have these farms been here?"

"About twenty-five years ago your parents decided to sell some of their land, so they broke it up into three sections. This one is about eighty-six acres; the one to the right belonging to Buford is about two-hundred acres, and that leaves you with a hundred acres at the head of the hollow on both sides. Robert

bought his section about ten years ago, and Buford purchased his about five years ago.”

When they neared the head of the hollow, Ramsey slowly eased the car over the last stopgap. Many of the timbers were loose and jumped up as the tires rolled over them. He made a mental note to ask the County Roads Department about replacing them.

Will sat up straight and stared hard at the little house. The only way to get across the creek without getting your feet wet was to walk on rocks placed in a row by his daddy many years ago. He remembered how Daddy’s neck veins bulged out and his face turned beet red from carrying the heavy rocks. He wasn’t a big man, but he was strong and work was a constant for him. More buttercups had jumped out of the ground since Ramsey had been here last and they lined the path from the creek to the front porch, waving as though they were a welcoming committee.

Will looked long and hard at the house, half expecting Mama to come out the front door. He clutched his paper bag and cane like a frightened child. By the time Ramsey pulled the suitcase out of the back seat, Will had walked across the rocks and stood on the path leading up to the porch. Ramsey walked in front of him and unlocked the front door. When he tried to hand the key to Will, the old man just stared at it as if he had never seen a key before.

“I didn’t know that door had a lock on it,” said Will.

They stepped inside and Will looked all around the front room. He sniffed the air but instead of smelling fresh-baked bread, musty air burned his nostrils. Walking over to the table by the front window, he traced the edge of the ruffled doily under the oil lamp with his fingers.

“Mama liked to crochet these things in the winter while Jacob and I studied our spelling homework at her knee. She would call out the words to us without missing a stitch.”

He walked into the kitchen and began emptying the contents of his paper sack on the red-and-white oilcloth covering the kitchen table. The last thing he pulled out was a calendar. It had a picture of a Hawaiian sunset with palm trees swaying and there were footprints in the sand left by a man and woman walking towards the water.

“Nice calendar, Will.”

“A friend gave it to me as a going-away gift when I left the hospital. He said I should cross out every day that I’m out of the hospital. Each day would be a stepping stone to the next day.”

“Not a bad idea,” smiled Ramsey. “That picture alone would motivate me.”

Just then, they heard footsteps on the front porch.

“I don’t want to see anybody,” said Will, backing up as if he was looking for a corner to hide in.

“I think it’s Quixie and her husband. They helped get the house in order for your homecoming. They won’t stay long and they really want to see you.”

“Quixie? Is Quixie still here? I can’t see her. I won’t know what to say. Couldn’t you ask them to come back another time? Tell them I appreciate everything, but I just want to be left alone.”

Suddenly, the front door opened and Quixie called out, “Ramsey where are you? They must be in the kitchen. Here, Suell, carry this basket for me. I’ll be glad when it’s warm enough to open the windows so we can air out these rooms.”

Quixie appeared at the kitchen door but stopped suddenly as though she had walked into an invisible wall. Her blue sweater with little rosebuds embroidered around the yoke and sleeves brought out the blue of her eyes. A straight black skirt reached to her calves, and a white lace collar fell over the neck of the

sweater. A crooked grin covered her face as she stared at Will. For what seemed an eternity, everyone stood frozen until Suell broke the spell.

“Welcome home, William, I’m Suell Edmonds, Quixie’s husband.”

He was shorter than Will, about five feet seven, and slim except for the little belly that bunched over his belt. His work clothes showed signs of wear and grease stained his knees and cuffs. His hair was dark but thinning, and his hazel eyes smiled. He placed a heavy-looking basket on the kitchen table and went over to shake Will’s hand. His grasp was firm and honest. Will liked him right away. Quixie walked over to Will and, standing on tiptoes, gently kissed him on the cheek.

“Welcome home, William.” She slid her arm in his and pressed her cheek against it.

He was speechless and tears welled up in his eyes. He breathed in her sweet smell of lavender and wanted to wrap his arms around her, but all he could do was tilt his head so her soft hair brushed against his cheek. Time stood still as happiness, sadness, regret, and anxiety floated around the room, pushing and pulling at each of them.

Suell put his hands on Quixie’s shoulders and said, “Honey, there’s some good food getting cold. What do you say we show Will what a good cook you are? It’s been a while since breakfast, and I bet he’s hungry as a bear. I know I am.”

Soft laughter brought relief to the room and Will pulled a handkerchief out of his hip pocket to wipe his eyes and blow his nose. Quixie dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief and shoved it back inside her purse. From out of nowhere an apron appeared around her waist and dishes started pouring out of the cabinet. She barked orders at Suell to get that and move this, all the time sneaking peeks at Will. She could hardly contain herself or the deep smile that filled her.

Quixie kept Suell hopping and Ramsey noticed how content they seemed to be. If only he and Helen could be like that. He watched Will closely, wondering what he was thinking, but it was hard to tell. Quixie was right at home in the kitchen and moved around as though she lived there. Ramsey felt out of place and kept getting in the way. A sense of relief filled him when Quixie asked him to carry in the packages left in the truck. At least he would be doing something. As he laid the packages on the table, Quixie asked him to go to the spring to fetch more water. Without hesitating, he grabbed the bucket and headed out the back door. When Ramsey returned with the water, he tried making small talk and complimented Quixie on the food.

Then he turned to Will and said, "Quixie and Suell were the first ones I told about you coming home. They dropped everything to come out here and help me get the place in order. Quixie knew just what needed to be done and all we had to do was follow her orders."

Suell gave Quixie a quick hug and said, "She's great at giving orders. That's for sure."

She gave him a swat with the dishtowel and told him to bring in more wood for the woodstove.

"See what I mean?" he laughed as he ducked out of her reach.

Will sat listening but other than a small grin, he didn't respond to anything they said. Ramsey finally ran out of things to talk about and sat fidgeting with the end of the tablecloth. He wished he felt more positive about Will being home, but apprehension about tomorrow filled his mind. The one thing that bothered him most was that he never told Helen what he was doing.

Soon the smell of coffee filled the room with that special fragrance that eases the aches and pains of waking middle age. They sat around the table talking about old times, new times,

and wondering about the times ahead. Everyone bragged about Quixie's fried chicken, potato salad, coleslaw and chocolate pie. As the men filled their plates a second time, Quixie started filling the cabinets with her canned beans, beets, carrots, corn and an extra loaf of bread baked that morning. There were jars of homemade soup that wouldn't fit in the shelves so she sat them on the back of the counter. She put up a country ham, bags of flour, sugar and corn meal.

"I need to pay you for all this food," said Will, and he began searching his pockets for his wallet.

"No you don't," said Suell. "This is a homecoming gift."

"That's right," agreed Quixie. "We didn't want you coming home to an empty icebox. These are just some things to keep you, well," the words stumbled around in her mouth before she could let loose of them, "until you get on your feet."

"Will, do you know how to bake corn bread? Are you going to be able to fix yourself something to eat?"

"Mama taught us how to cook. It's been a while, but I guess I can manage all right."

"I brought you some powdered milk until you can get some ice for the icebox. Maybe it won't be too long before they get electricity hooked up in these hollows."

Will listened to Ramsey and Suell as they talked about the happenings in Woodbury, but he kept watching Quixie. She moved around the kitchen easily, nothing like the painfully shy girl he remembered. She still had those dimples and a splash of freckles across her nose, but a beautiful woman had replaced the skinny little girl. Will wondered if Suell knew how lucky he was.

Quixie worried over Will and wondered if he could cook enough to stay alive, and if he knew how to wash clothes. His slow movements concerned her and she could tell his knee was

giving him trouble. She tried to shake the worries out of her mind, for in her heart she knew this was right. Quixie tried not to fuss over him, for she could see he was uncomfortable. Happiness leaked from the twinkle in her eye and she had to keep busy to keep from laughing and crying at the same time. If only his Mama could be here, she thought. But who knows? Maybe she is.

“I’ve been worrying about you not having a telephone,” Quixie said as she settled back in a chair next to Suell.”

“That’s right,” said Suell. “You might think about getting a telephone.”

Will sulked up and then in an angry voice he blurted out, “I’m not interested in getting a telephone. I like the quiet. Besides, Mama raised us right here in this house without electricity or a telephone and we didn’t want for anything.”

His sudden outburst surprised Quixie, but later when she had time to think about it, she realized it was pride speaking and that relieved some of her worry. She remembered the pride that ran throughout the Donnelly family and it made Will seem more like the man she remembered from long ago.

“Have you thought about putting out a garden this year?” said Quixie, eager to change the subject.

“I really hadn’t thought much about it,” he said.

A tired look covered Will’s face and it was obvious he was ready for them to leave. The conversation slowed considerably and it seemed as though the gray clouds from outside had seeped into the house. The men stood up and shook Will’s hand with promises to come back soon. Quixie tried to hug him, but he moved away and went to the front door to see them out. They waved at him from their vehicles as they slowly drove down the dirt road.

Will stood watching them from the porch until they disappeared around the curve. It had been a long day

and he was aching for it to end. He was having a hard time comprehending that he was finally home. He sat on the porch rocker until the darkness began to swallow up the hollow. After he went inside, the quiet of the house pushed at him and a restless feeling took over his senses. Standing in the middle of the front room, he hugged his arms to his waist and rocked back and forth on his heels. He was alone. What was he supposed to do now?

Chapter 9: The Beginning

Will scratched the stubble of gray beard on his face. Shaving hadn't been a priority since coming home. An early morning chill wrapped itself around him, so he sought the warmth of the wood stove. Coffee boiling on the stove sounded like an old friend to his lonely ears. He found a clean cup and filled it with hot coffee then moved the pot to the back of the stove. Grabbing his sweater from the kitchen chair, he draped it around his shoulders and shoved his brown felt hat on his head. Three days of steady rain had kept him inside, but today he would drink his coffee on the front porch. He wanted to watch the new day peek over the rise of the hollow and see the sun come with it.

The first night he walked through the house listening for lost voices, but they were quiet. He found a box of pictures on the second night, but wouldn't look at them. Hours spent sitting in the overstuffed chair by the front window, marking time by the clock on the mantle, made him feel stiff and lethargic. Each day he made his mark on Willie's calendar, but it wasn't much different from being locked up in the hospital. Rain was his excuse for staying inside, and now the walls of his house kept him prisoner. Will was stuck in the past, didn't know what to do with the present and the future remained a blur.

Two rocking chairs turned inward leaned against the wall of the porch. Will swung them around and set them next to each

other. As he sat in one of them, he scraped his hand across rough wood that sent a splinter into his finger. Instinctively he reached in his pocket for a pocketknife to dig out the splinter, but there was none there. Then he remembered that he hadn't carried a pocketknife in years. When he went back inside, he would look through the drawers for one. A man couldn't make it on a farm without a pocketknife.

As he rocked, the sun peeked through the thinning clouds and he was glad the rain had stopped. Spring had finally arrived in the hollow. New leaves sprouted on the elm trees and more buttercups showed their faces. Green was beginning to color the lilac bush, but it was overgrown. It was Mama's favorite bush, and she would turn over in her grave if she could see how straggly it looked now.

Cedar trees along the side of the yard hadn't been there when he was a boy. Robins hunted twigs for their nests, despite the cold air's warning that spring hadn't officially arrived. The morning sun hitting the front of the house made Will's eyes water. He stretched, trying to work some of the stiffness out of his joints, and then decided to seek out the warmth of the wood stove. His finger was getting sore, and he needed to find a knife to cut out the splinter.

After refilling his cup, he held it with both hands to warm them. For now, he was satisfied to rock, sip, and think. As he poured his third cup of coffee, something out back caught his eye. Two rabbits sat by the woodpile. He tried easing out the back door quiet like, until one of the hinges snapped on the screen door. It swung loose, hitting the side of the house with a loud bang. Rust had eaten through the metal.

"Something else that needs fixing," he said.

Startled by the racket, the rabbits hightailed back under the woodpile.

"There's so much work that I don't know where to start."

His thoughts about coming home didn't include the loneliness. He hadn't been completely alone any time in his life. In the hospital, people were always around. Granted, some were crazy as *bessie bugs*, but they were people, some more human than the so-called sane people.

As he stood on the back porch, the abandoned garden drew his attention, "What a mess! Mama would hate it looking so sorry."

Quixie asked him something about putting out a garden. "That's what I'll do. I'll put out a garden this year. At least that's something I know I can do. It's the middle of March and not too soon to start."

He went back inside and searched out some breakfast. A can of peaches and some cornbread left over from last night's supper would do the job. Quixie was a real gem to have included jars of homemade soup with the groceries. She was a good cook; hell, she was a good woman. Will was glad she found a decent man like Suell. No one deserved happiness more than she did.

With nothing else to do, Will managed to consume most of the food except for the country ham. Facing him now was the problem of going to the store for the first time. He still wasn't ready to be around people. It was easy to imagine people staring and whispering about him. Maybe he could delay it for a couple more days.

After breakfast he went outside and crossed the creek to the barn. Swallows had built nests in the eaves of the roof, and the unexpected opening of the big door made them swoop and dive inside the barn. After they settled down, it was still except for the buzzing of some carpenter bees. The barn looked forlorn and cobwebs hung from every beam, marking the passage of time. A hazy cloud of dust lingered everywhere and worn-out ropes hanging on the wall were like tired old veterans. Dust and time

hid the memories that lingered there. It reminded him of an old poem in one of Mama's books.

Worn out ropes upon the wall, no stamping hoofs, no smell of hay
 No cats to feed at close of day
 No friendly nicker from a stall, no gentle eye, no sound at all.
 Just cobwebs hanging on the beams,
 An end to life, an end to dreams
 Time slipped away and stole all these, but
 years and years of memories - No time can steal.

He found two shovels and a grubbing hoe. As he moved around the lonely barn, he found an old canvas chair hanging on a rusty nail behind the door. It was Mama's chair. She dragged it with her and sat in it on days when the sun boiled in the sky. Going inside to rest was out of the question. The house never knew her unless it was time to cook, there was a driving rain, or the night drove her inside.

The wheelbarrow leaned next to the stall and he could almost see Sam's immense head sticking out the door. Sam was one of the largest mules in the area and stood eighteen hands tall. He was a real treasure. "Wonder what happened to Sam and Hercules."

He carried the tools and chair in the wheelbarrow. It was hard steering it across the creek, and he nearly tipped it over twice. About thirty feet from the house he stopped and pulled the grub hoe out of the wheelbarrow. Leaning on it, he surveyed the yard and all he saw was work. The fence along the creek tilted nearly to the ground, the grass was mostly clover, and everything needed trimming or pulling out. When he looked at the part that once was a garden, he groaned. Muddy water filled the uneven wedges of dirt. Once it dried, the clumps of dirt left behind would be more like rocks than soil. Turning it with a shovel would be a pain in more ways than one. The idea

of getting a mule flashed into his mind. It sure would save his back, he thought. A quick movement caught his eye as a rabbit ran underneath the front porch.

“You waiting to see what’s going to be on the menu?” laughed Will.

He stood still, thinking about a child’s game. Who could stand the longest without moving?

“I bet I can stand still longer than you,” he whispered. “I’ve had lots of experience.”

The impatient rabbit peeked out, gave his nose a twitch, and made a running dash for the fence. Without hesitating, he slipped through an open space and was gone.

“I won,” Will hollered. Then he sighed deeply and said, “Guess I’d better get back to work.”

He scooped hunks of muddy weeds that weighed a ton into his shovel. As he worked, his father’s words came to mind, “One after the other. Don’t think about how many times it has to be done. Just do it and before you know it, you’ll be on the next row. Don’t look towards where you’re going; just look at where you are.”

Will had another idea, though. “Looking back every so often lets you see your progress. That’s good, isn’t it, Daddy?”

Daddy wouldn’t smile. His mouth went in a tight line, and then he pointed to Will’s shovel. The boy knew he better get back to work. The memories were coming easier now.

Will stopped and looked towards the head of the hollow and then back at the garden. Its location on the right side of the house made the quarter acre of land a perfect garden spot. Built catty-wampus, the house didn’t shade it from the sun. From his position facing the front of the house, the outhouse was thirty feet from the back porch on the right and the spring was on the left side, forty feet from the back door. His grandfather, who built the house a hundred years ago, owned the entire Gilley-Young

Hollow. Daddy added on a kitchen and a bedroom, making it a four-room house with a loft. When Sarah got bigger, Mama and Daddy said she needed her own room, so the boys moved up to the loft. She begged them to let her sleep in the loft, but they said it wasn't ladylike for a girl to climb up and down the ladder. The front porch stretched the full width of the house. There was a small back porch with a rain barrel at the end. Beyond the spring, a mass of trees sprang out of the earth all the way to the ridge top.

"Reverie is fine, but standing here looking won't get the job done," he said. Will continued the strenuous job of breaking clumps of unkempt earth and yanking clusters of overgrown weeds. His arms ached and sweat ran down his neck and beaded up on his forehead until it dripped in his eyes. He could almost hear Willie's soft voice whispering in his ear. "Stay put, and find something to do that will make you feel productive. It will fill your days and keep you hooked to the present."

The cold air contradicted the warm sun, but it made a perfect morning to work outside in the fresh air. The garden looked sad and lost, and it missed Mama. Her long gingham dress would wrap around her legs with each gust of March wind. She wore a large white apron and always a bonnet. Her head was bent so low, you couldn't see her face for the brim of her hat.

The garden stretched out into long rows of beans, onions, lettuce, okra, tomatoes, potatoes, beets, squash and cabbage. The farthest rows were filled with corn higher than your head, with tassels holding the sunshine. He and Jake spent hours in the garden helping Mama when they weren't helping Daddy in the fields or the workshop. When Sarah came along, Mama laid her on a blanket in the shade. She tied a long sash on her ankle and attached it to anything that would keep the baby from roaming. Everyone was in charge of watching her. It wasn't long before Sarah followed along behind Mama, pulling up the new plants.

"I help too!" she hollered, then plopped down in the fresh dirt, staining her diapers so bad that Mama couldn't boil the gray out of them. When it was time to harvest they always ran out of containers, so Mama would fill her apron and give them feedbags to fill with beans or tomatoes, whatever was ready. Throughout the day, there would be a dozen trips made back and forth to the house. Every day they worked, canning the precious produce. It seemed to go on forever until finally, the last jar was full. Then everyone heaved a big sigh of relief. No one ever complained, because their stomachs would be full all winter long.

Woodworking was Daddy's passion and he built a workshop to make furniture. The boys learned the craft working by his side. They spent hours sanding, sweeping, or stacking wood. Daddy insisted on an orderly work area. He couldn't abide having to search out a tool from a pile of un-swept shavings. Cutting oak splits was Jacob's job and he had a talent for it. During the cold months, Sarah and Mama wove chair bottoms out of the oak splits, and in the spring, Daddy would have a load of ladder-back chairs ready for sale.

A milk cow named Sally kept them in milk and butter, but their favorites were Sam and Hercules. Spring arrived when the mules filed out of the stall to start plowing. Jacob and William would argue about whose turn it was to lead them. Daddy shook his head, knowing the mules were smart enough to lead the boys. All three children liked to ride Sam, but Sarah loved him best. For that matter, there wasn't an animal in the vicinity that Sarah couldn't attach herself to. She was the prettiest tomboy around and wanted to do everything the boys did.

Heavy thinking was easy when the job was done a hundred times before. Remembering got easier, too. Will longed for a cold drink and stuck his shovel in the dirt to take a break. After

walking a few yards, he looked back and discovered he had only gone about ten feet. "This may be too much work for an old man," he said, wiping the sweat from his neck and forehead. His knee was getting sore and as he entered the house, he thought about wrapping it in something for support. After drinking the last of the lemonade, he searched through the cupboards and drawers. Nothing fit his needs. Besides, there were no safety pins to hold it together. That idea fizzled out. The bucket on the dry sink was empty and he carried it outside with plans to refill it at the spring. He left it on the porch steps and ambled down to the garden to pick up where he left off.

As he worked, his mind wandered back to the hospital. Three years ago, the "miracle" happened. At least, that's what some of the hospital staff called it. "I guess it was a miracle," he mused. "Like Jesus raising Lazarus." The lost time still haunted him. It was as though he was observing someone else's life, but being home was bringing that life into focus. He thought about the young nursing assistant, Willie Dixon, who took such good care of him in the hospital. Will wanted to be left alone, but Willie wouldn't have any of that. He stayed on Will's case until he forced him to start talking. After a time, he coaxed Will to work in the garden with the other patients. Willie cut up and made them laugh all the time. They didn't mind because he worked as hard as they did.

"Now ya'll has to work. My Pappy always says, "The good Lord didn't put us on this earth to lay around, then die and lay around some more."

It was as if Will had been asleep a long time and Willie shook him awake and introduced him to the world. Willie went to the head nurse and put the bug in her ear that Will might be able to live outside the hospital.

"What a decent fellow he turned out to be and what a good friend, but my God, how could I have lost over thirty-five years

of my life?" he said to no one in particular. He'd been talking to himself a lot lately, but it seemed to put things in perspective when he heard the words out loud.

Will was an old man now and this was tedious work. "Only a fool would try to work in this muddy mess."

Yet a feeling of urgency forced him to keep going. Beads of sweat soaked his shirt collar and ran down his back. As he struck the stubborn earth, thoughts about the doctors at the hospital and their useless questions ran through his mind. Did he hear voices? What did they say? Do you think about dying? Their useless questions never ended. He hacked at the dirt harder and faster, remembering the pack room. They wrapped him in sheets like a mummy and then lowered him down in the water tank. Fear of drowning terrified him. It was a horrific punishment, but he couldn't remember what crime he committed. Screams of other patients echoed through the wards at night and he'd bury his head in a pillow to muffle out the sounds. When they started the shock treatments, he prayed for death. The memories brought his anger to the surface and he beat the ground until finally, his shovel broke.

"Damn you, sons of bitches, get away from me! Leave me alone!"

Sheer exhaustion made him stop and he walked over to the wheelbarrow and pulled out his cane. "Christ, I must be going nuts," he gasped. Pulling out the damp handkerchief, he mopped his face. Pain in his knee warned him to sit down, so he retrieved the old canvas chair. It creaked under his weight as he eased into it.

"I'm just an old man. I was young and now I'm old with nothing of life except years spent in hospitals. That damn war! We were so eager to join up. Me and Jacob were going to be heroes and end the war. Yeah, real heroes. Damn war!"

He looked up at the early spring sky, where loose clouds drifted slowly through an endless expansion of blue. The rain had finally passed for a while. Being holed-up in the house these last three days had been miserable. His happiest memories were being outside working the land, smelling the green of the earth and feeling the sun on his skin. He had missed this place of his childhood, the sloping hills along the hollow, the star-filled summer nights and the tranquility of nature. He thought about the fireflies that beckoned the children to follow them in the dark. His melancholy pulled him into a deeper state of loneliness.

Then something caught his eye. An old scarecrow hung on a pole at the back of the garden. "Wonder who put that up?" He tried to remember what Ramsey told him. "Let's see, Bunchie Henderson put out some tobacco a few years ago. Maybe he put it up. But he planted the tobacco on the other side of the barn. So who put up the scarecrow?"

Curious, he walked over to get a better look. The weather had really done its work and the scarecrow looked like a refugee with ragged clothes and a faded, stuffed head. An old straw hat clung to the head and mud daubers had built a nest inside the brim. He poked it with his cane, and then he lifted one of the arms. Every time he touched any part of the clothes, they ripped more. Laying his cane on the ground, he pulled at the stick until the whole thing came out of the dirt.

"This will be a good evening project. I may as well have a scarecrow to stand guard over my garden." Then he thought about the porch rockers and frowned. "I really need to sand those porch rockers, and I've got the garden and now this. There's no end of things to do." Now he had a decision to make. Which one should he do first? He grinned, knowing it didn't really matter. When a person is alone, he can do whatever he wants, and there doesn't have to be any logical order to it.

Carrying the scarecrow to the porch, he propped it up in one of the rockers. He looked at the bucket sitting on the step and frowned. The thought of hauling it up to the spring didn't appeal to him at all. His back ached and his knee throbbed.

"That easy chair in front of the fireplace sounds mighty good right now," he sighed as he jerked the bucket up. In his tired state, the walk seemed long, especially the return trip carrying the full bucket of water. He was unsteady with the cane and water slopped on his shoes. "This is more trouble than its worth."

For supper he put together some cornbread and heated the last jar of soup. His cornbread lacked something, but it would have to do. Dishes piled up on the dry sink, but washing them hadn't crossed his mind. As long as there were clean ones in the cabinet, it could wait.

Will walked to the barn and returned with an armful of old straw. It would make good filling for the scarecrow. Night wouldn't settle in for a while and he planned on working on his new project until dark. He went inside and heated some coffee. Looking at the counter full of dirty dishes made him grimace. "I really should wash them, but I'd have to heat water and find a clean towel." As he poured his coffee, he decided they could wait and hurried out to the porch.

Every so often, he took a long drink of coffee to chase the chill from his bones. It had become a habit to have a cup whenever he sat on the porch. It served as a companion for the lonely man. The cardigan sweater buttoned to the neck and his hat pulled down to his ears didn't keep the cool air from making him shiver, but he ignored it.

Little by little, the head took shape. Then he attached it to the shoulders with cord. One more trip to the barn provided enough straw for the trunk and legs. He used his head this time and took the wheelbarrow with him. The wheelbarrow would hold more straw than he could carry.

A long piece of wood supported the head and body. In the cedar chest, he found a red plaid flannel shirt and an old pair of Duckin britches. "I might as well have a first-class scarecrow. "

As the sun disappeared behind the hills and evening settled in, he got to studying the scarecrow. It occurred to him that it stood in the field day after day looking out at the same scene ... just watching and waiting. Will knew about waiting. He'd spent most of his adult life waiting.

"Bet you get tired hanging around all day. I bet you'd like to get down sometimes and have a good stretch."

With a sardonic grin, Will said, "You old fool, are you so lonesome you've stooped to talking to a scarecrow? Do you think it's a haint come to keep you company?"

The scarecrow grew steadily until it was close enough to life size to startle someone in the dark. The hollow's light faded fast and soon it would be dark as pitch. Tying off the sleeves and pant legs would finish the project. It didn't have a face. All the same, Will got uneasy looking at the thing. The sweat on his clothes turned cold and he trembled. "I'm going inside."

Will left the scarecrow on the front porch sitting in the rocking chair. He lit the oil lamp in the front room and looked in the bookcase for a book to read. His body trembled with cold and tiredness overcame him. The bed called to him. He looked out the window one last time. The outline of the scarecrow was barely visible in the darkness. A chill ran through him, and he turned away from the window. Instead of carrying the lamp to the bedroom he cut it off, so now he had to feel his way through the blackness. Stretching his hand out in front of him, he felt like a blind man and cursed himself for his stupidity. When his leg bumped into the side of the bed, it sent a sharp pain through his knee. "Damn."

When the pain eased, he turned and slowly sat on the edge of the bed. His feet were damp and chilled from the water spill

and he had to peel his socks off. His breathing was heavy and he cursed his weakness. How can a person get short of breath just pulling off his shoes and socks? He had been sleeping in his clothes every night and figured one more night wouldn't hurt. Lying back on the pillow, he stared at the endless blackness. Sleep would be a long time coming.

When morning came, the first thing he did was finish the scarecrow. Anxious to be done with it, he was eager to work on something else. The middle of the garden seemed like the right spot and he drove the stick deep in the ground, securing it with rocks. When he finished, satisfaction filled him as he stood back to look at the finished product. "Maybe this will keep me motivated." The scarecrow stood there expressionless, except for a slight crease in the fabric on the lower half of the face.

"Well, I hope you're satisfied. You certainly look better than you did."

He shook his head and laughed. "Here I go, talking to it again. Someone sees me talking to a scarecrow, and they'll lock me up and throw away the key."

His shovel stuck out of the ground where he had stopped the day before and the handle lay useless on the ground near it.

"That's bad," he said. "Daddy would have gotten after me for breaking that shovel and leaving it there. That's something Jake would have done."

The thought of Jake made him look at the scarecrow. The red plaid shirt was eye-catching, but it needed a hat. "I'll look in that stack of boxes in the loft."

Daddy and the boys always wore a hat outside. Mama wore a bonnet, but Sarah never liked wearing a hat. She felt tied up like a horse with blinders when she wore a hat and liked to feel the wind blow through her hair. When she turned nine, she wanted to be like her friends, so she cut her bangs. They grew

fast and she soon tired of them. Before they grew long again, it tried her patience keeping them out of her face. She tucked them into her braids and secured them with hairpins, but they always sneaked out and fell in her eyes. You never saw her when she wasn't shoving her hair back. Mama told her to find a hat, but it didn't do any good. Sarah was stubborn like Jake.

Thinking passed the time, but it didn't make the work any easier. The ground was still wet and he hadn't completed the first row.

"This is stupid," he said. "The clumps of wet dirt will dry like rocks and I'll have to rework it again. While the ground is drying out, it will give me a chance to get a new shovel. I can only pray that the rain is over for a while."

As he looked up, he noticed one of the galluses on the scarecrow's Duckin britches had slipped down. He walked over to fix it.

"Can't have you looking sloppy," he said.

He pulled the galluses up, straightening the bib at the same time. When he took a step back to admire his handy work, the sun blinded him for a moment and tears began stinging his eyes. The day had just begun, but sleep tugged at him. He wiped his face with his sleeve and moved so he could see the scarecrow better. Something seemed different. Not jump-in-your-face different, something you had to search for. Then he saw it. Where the scarecrow's face seemed like a washed-out rag before, it was more of a face now. The crease in the fabric looked like a mouth, and it was grinning at him.

"Damn!" he yelled, "This is crazy. You're just a scarecrow and nothing else. LEAVE ME ALONE. I'm not going back to that hospital. DO YOU HEAR ME? LEAVE ME THE HELL ALONE!"

He turned to walk back to the house, but he moved on legs of wood. He looked back one more time. It had to be his

imagination. "I've been alone too long, and it's starting to affect my mind."

But no, there it was. That smirky kind of smile, just like ... No! I don't need these crazy thoughts. That's what kept me in the hospital all those years. Thinking about Jacob and dreading the nightmares. It isn't Jake. It's just an old worn out scarecrow.

He had to get back inside the safe walls of the house. There would be no more looking back. He walked away, leaving the chair and tools behind. Never once did he look back.

Chapter 10:

Visitors

Will fought to pry his eyes open. Bad dreams filtered in and out of his sleep during the night, but vanished as soon as he woke, leaving him limp as a dead bird. The cold hardwood floor burned his bare feet as he felt around for his slippers. Sweat made his clothes cling to his skin, but his senses were numb to their rank odor. He padded across the room to the bureau, where a pitcher of stale water sat. Yanking the handkerchief from his hip pocket, he wet a corner of it and dabbed at his eyes until his lids loosened up. As his vision cleared, he noticed how the early morning light coming through the lace curtains put a soft veil over the room.

In the hospital, a cold light had come through the naked windows, but he had felt safe. Once he began to lose the memories that kept him awake nights, he burrowed into the security of hospital life. Now that he was home, memories were all around him and he couldn't push them back. The first night, a vision of Jacob haunted his sleep. Will reached for him, but he slipped away. Then he saw Mama and Daddy standing by a tombstone. They looked at him and cried, "You promised to watch out for him. You promised." He ran after them, but they kept moving away from him until they faded.

He woke from his troubled sleep, calling out to them, "Don't go. Don't leave me. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

By the third night the dreams dissipated, breaking apart like seed puffs from a dandelion, allowing him a peaceful night. Time. He just needed more time. Then last night the nightmare returned, except the scarecrow was part of it. He didn't understand why, but the scarecrow made him uneasy.

A tired old man stared back at him from the mirror over the bureau. Gray stubble had turned into a real beard and dark circles under his eyes were remnants of broken sleep. For years he had avoided mirrors and now a stranger looked back at him. In the hospital he had to shower and shave every day. Now that he was on his own and left to his own devices, he couldn't see the importance of taking a bath and shaving. His bed linen smelled like his clothes. Every dish in the house lay in dirty piles on the sink, table and counter.

When he went into the kitchen, a rank odor made him cover his nose. "Damn, I didn't take the garbage out." There was barely enough water left to fill the coffee pot halfway. The can of coffee was nearly empty. He threw the last bit of fresh coffee on top of the old grounds. Reaching behind the stove, he grabbed some kindling and shoved it inside the firebox. He found an envelope that had Veterans Administration printed in the corner and a new pad of writing paper. Before leaving the hospital, he had picked it up from the canteen. Willie reminded him to write and he thought he would, but now it didn't seem important. One at a time, he ripped each sheet out of the pad and shoved it into the stove. The sense of finality it gave him was satisfying.

He felt around the shelf over the stove and found the box of matches. He swore again when the first match broke in half and he threw it into the firebox. The second match took. A blue and yellow flame jumped up and he watched the envelope and

the writing paper curl and scorch until they were nothing but ashes. He continued to add more paper until the pad was empty and then he bent the cardboard in half and stuck it into the fire. Closing the door to the firebox, he set the coffeepot over the burner. The milk had soured, but he didn't think about the dried milk Quixie left in the cabinet. That didn't matter either. He could drink it black just as well.

The dread of going into town lay heavy on him. How the hell was he going to get all the way to Woodbury for supplies? Then he remembered that Ramsey promised to come out in a few days. With any luck, he might come today with an armful of supplies, delaying his need to go into town. The thought of town folks staring at him as if he were a freak preyed on him. Thinking about it developed into a fear that mushroomed in his brain. There was just too much to think about.

I'm going to have to get water and some kindling, and maybe I'll pick up a little around the house ... maybe.

He went back to the bedroom to get his shoes and socks and found his glasses on the table near the bed. As he put the wires over his ears, two dark objects flew by the window, breaking the steady stream of light, and he flinched. It was just birds, he reasoned, but that didn't prevent his neck hairs from standing on end. His shoes stood at attention next to each other with the stiff socks stuffed inside them. A decayed cabbage smell made him scrunch his nose and then he realized it belonged to the sock in his hand. He considered finding some clean ones, but then changed his mind. That would involve taking a bath and he didn't have the energy. He pulled one sock on his right foot, then his shoe, and tied the laces in a knot, then picked up the other sock and shoe and repeated the motion. Thinking about all the work he needed to do weighed heavy on his mind. He might have sat on the bed indefinitely if the chamber pot beneath the bed had remained silent. The smell from it screamed at him, so

he reached under the bed and pulled it out. Carrying it like a puppy that had foolishly tangled with a polecat, he set it out on the back porch, planning to dispose of it after breakfast. The screen door was still leaning from one hinge, but Will just shook his head and went back inside. There was always something to worry about or always something to do.

He liked strong coffee and let it boil for a good while. Birds chirping from the end of the eaves made him go to the front door and peer outside. He could see the wheelbarrow and that damn broken shovel, but the canvas chair had collapsed to the ground. Then he saw that familiar figure standing like a sentinel in the middle of the garden.

“Why does that scarecrow bother me so much? I’ve got a good mind to rip it out of the ground and burn the stupid thing.”

When he returned to the kitchen, thoughts of going back to the hospital churned in his mind. He didn’t need all this work. There was enough to keep three people busy, but wasn’t that the real problem? There would never be three people. He would always be alone.

“It’s no use,” he said. “I can’t do this. I’m too old, and it’s too late.”

Will dumped the coffee into the water bucket and headed for the bedroom to pack. When he pulled the suitcase out from underneath the bed, he realized it was still full. It was another sign that he wasn’t meant to be there. He knew from the beginning that it wouldn’t work, and now he was convinced.

As he carried his suitcase to the front door, wondering how he was going to get back to town, a horn blew. When he looked out, Quixie and Suell were climbing out of their old Chevy pickup. He took their arrival as another sign that it was time for him to leave. They would provide his transportation.

He had barely opened the door when Suell hollered out, “Good morning. Have you had breakfast yet?” There was a big

picnic basket slung over his arm and behind him came Quixie carrying two large sacks of groceries.

“No, I was just getting ready to leave. Thought I’d have breakfast later. Any way I could get you to drive me to town? I need a ride back to the VA hospital in Murfreesboro.”

Will’s gut twisted with shame when he saw the look on Suell’s face. He struggled to keep talking. “I’ve just decided I don’t want to stay here, that’s all. It isn’t working out.”

I wish that didn’t sound so half-assed and cowardly, he thought.

Quixie had just stepped inside when Will made his announcement.

“Back to the hospital,” she blurted out. “What’s the matter? Are you sick?”

When she saw the clutter in the front room, her mouth dropped open and a long “Oooh” rushed out with her breath.

She couldn’t believe her eyes and the mess seemed to stand up and slap her in the face. All the time and work spent to clean it, just for a tornado to move in and blow it apart.

Quixie’s arms sagged with the weight of the bags she carried. She looked at Suell to relieve her burden, but he didn’t take the hint. Instead, he took charge of the situation at hand.

“Tell you what,” he said, “we brought all the fixin’s for a good breakfast, including coffee and biscuits. We’ll be glad to take you to town, or anywhere else for that matter, but let’s have breakfast first. These vittles are too good to waste.”

Will stared at the two of them, speechless. Finally, a big growl from his stomach answered for him. With a sheepish grin on his face, he stepped back and took the bags out of Quixie’s arms.

Quixie headed for the kitchen. When she walked through the door, her breath caught in her throat. My God, it looks as

though he emptied every cabinet in the kitchen, she thought. She told William to set the bags on the floor while she started clearing the table. When he tried to help, Quixie shooed him away. Frustration and an unnatural calm silenced her tongue. Harsh words would only make the matter worse. Suell stood in the doorway, holding the basket like a child starting his first day of school and not knowing where to sit.

“Suell, don’t just stand there. Fetch some water from the spring and we’ll need more kindling, too.”

He handed the basket to Will. “OK, Sweet Pea.”

“Don’t call me that in front of people,” she yelled and swatted him with the dishrag.

Will sat silently in the farthest corner of the kitchen and Quixie wished he would go somewhere. Grabbing the bucket, Suell hurried out the back door. Suddenly he stopped to look at the screen door that hung precariously on one rusty hinge.

“I knew there was something I forgot. Will, would you get my toolbox from the truck? I have some new hinges to put on this door.”

“Don’t bother with it, Suell. I’ll probably sell this place and the new owners can worry about the damn door.”

Suell’s eyes narrowed and he jerked his cap down, nearly covering his eyes. He mumbled as he stalked towards the spring, “Damn door needs fixing, by God, and it’s going to get fixed.”

Quixie kept stacking up dishes on the end of the sink, then she looked at Will. “Suell’s a good man, but when he sets his mind to something he won’t let go of it.”

Will dropped his head, his arms folded around the heavy basket. “I guess I can be pretty hardheaded, too. I do thank you for all you’ve done. I don’t understand why you’ve gone to so much trouble.”

Quixie’s eyes blazed. “That’s the last straw! How can you say that? After all you did for me. You saved my life and I can

never do enough to make up for that. If it wasn't for you, there's no telling where I might be today. Whether you like it or not, I plan on being around and doing whatever needs to be done."

Big tears rolled down her cheeks and she hid her face in the dishtowel. She felt a rock pressing against her heart and she couldn't stop crying. Will sat in the chair, clutching the basket and looking miserable.

"I'm sorry, Quixie. It's just that I've got so much going on in my head that I can't come to terms with, and I get scared."

She looked at him, surprised by his words. Never once did she remember William Donnelly being afraid of anything. He truly was a different man from the one she knew. She came around the table, rested her arm across his shoulders, and leaned her head against his.

The turmoil in him slowed and for just a moment, all the years that had passed slipped by the wayside. It was good that he still had the basket on his lap, for it would have been so easy to wrap his arms around her. He longed to hold her, but he didn't have the right. Regret filled him like a heavy overcoat that dragged to the ground. Somewhere in the great scheme of things, he wasn't going to be allowed this gift. It was as though there was a great book somewhere with large black letters that read, "William Donnelly will never know love."

Suell watched Quixie and Will through the doorway and a splash of fear and jealousy nudged his guts. He knew Quixie cared for Will and that they went back a long way. He stepped off the back porch and stood to the side, unnoticed. Why am I afraid? I know Quixie loves me. She's just trying to help Will. The poor bastard needs all the help he can get. I'm a fool, a stupid jealous fool. He shook his head, set his shoulders straight and marched up the porch steps.

“Here’s the water and the kindling is on its way. How much longer till breakfast? My big ones are starting to eat my little ones.”

“An old friend of mine used to say that all the time,” said Will.

Quixie took the bucket from Suell, emptied part of it in the stove well and refilled the coffeepot. “I’m getting hungry too,” said Quixie. “Let me get this stove busy so we can eat.”

Will set the basket on the floor and took the bucket from Quixie. When he started pouring water in the wash pan, Quixie glared at him.

“We have to heat that water before washing the dishes, you know.”

“Sorry,” he said. “I was just trying to help.”

“When I get this water heated, you can wash the dishes so I can get to cooking,” she said, with a smidgeon of a smile across her face.

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied.

By the time the tempting aroma of cooked sausage wafted through the kitchen, Will had washed half the dishes. It felt good to be doing something as common as washing dishes. He wondered why he hadn’t done it earlier. Will dried what they needed for breakfast and set the table. Suell came in with an armload of kindling that he placed behind the stove. Soon the heavenly smell of baked biscuits, eggs and fresh coffee made Will’s stomach growl again. Just as the men’s legs slid under the table, Quixie set a pan of huge cathead biscuits on the table, making them both gape.

Grinning from ear-to-ear, Quixie said, “I brought you some of my homemade pear preserves and grape jam for the biscuits.”

She set two quart-size jars in the middle of the table, one a light golden red and the other a deep reddish-purple color. They looked better than a bouquet of spring flowers. Will ate

and ate, and was half-ashamed when he started to reach for the last biscuit.

“Have at it,” said Suell. “I’ve ate so much I’m liable to founder.”

“Lord, eat it quick, Will. It’s hard enough getting him up and going. I don’t need no foundered man around the house.”

They laughed, and Will grabbed the biscuit and cleaned the egg off his plate, not missing a crumb.

“Are you ready for more coffee?” Quixie asked Will as she poured another cup for Suell.

“Well, maybe a half cup.”

Quixie had been waiting for more water to heat so she could finish the last of the dishes. She wiped her hands on her apron and went over to Will, laying one hand on his shoulder.

“Will, I can only guess how hard this must be for you, but I really feel you were meant to come home. I believe God makes things happen for a special reason, and your getting better after so many years means that He has a plan for you. If for no other reason than curiosity, why don’t you hang around and see what He has in mind?”

“Amen,” Suell whispered.

Will was thoughtful as he sipped his coffee. “Trouble is, I don’t know if I’m going to be able to manage things like I ought to.”

Suell suddenly slapped the table, jarring all the dishes, and blurted out, “Well for gosh sakes, it’s no wonder. You’ve been holed up here with no way to get around. I’ve got just what you need ... a truck.”

Will and Quixie looked at Suell with their jaws hanging.

“Well, I don’t exactly have it, but there’s a lady in Viola whose husband passed and his truck is just sitting in the garage. Says she’ll never use it and it’s just taking up space. I think she’ll give you a good deal on it just to get rid of it.”

"A truck? Why, I haven't driven in years and that was in the army in France. Besides, I've decided to go back to the hospital ... and I don't have a driver's license. Who'd give me a driver's license? Like I told you earlier, I'm going back to the hospital. I'm too old to start over."

"Now listen," said Suell, both hands resting on the kitchen table. "Jack Odom is the highway patrolman who comes up to Woodbury once a week to renew driver's licenses and give driver's tests. He's a good man. I bet if you can pass the driver's test even a little, he'll give you a license." Suell grinned real big, his crooked front teeth just shining. "Besides he's a friend of mine, and I'll put in a good word for you."

Will never thought about driving. When he was young, there were very few automobiles in Cannon County. The only good thing about being in the service was learning to drive. He remembered driving around the barracks, kicking up so much dust that all the guys would holler at him to drive somewhere else. He'd just laugh and wave and keep going around and around until he got the knack of it. Driving that big machine made him feel powerful. He sighed. That was a long time ago and he was too old now.

"Naw, I can't drive. I forgot how."

"It's just like riding a bicycle. Once you've done it, you never forget."

"I never rode a bicycle. I rode a mule but never a bicycle."

"Well then, it's just like riding a mule. Once you've done it you never forget ... do you?" Silence sliced through the room, but only for a moment.

"Suell, cut that out," laughed Quixie as her wet dishrag cut loose, hitting him on the shoulder. Laughter filled the room. Will carried his cup to the front door and leaned against the facing. Birds were flying free in and out of the trees. The sun had chased the chill from the house, and the tension in his back and

shoulders had eased. This is a pretty place, and he had missed the graceful, sloping hills. A hawk floated over the tops of the trees and Will wanted to be up there with him. Just being lazy, not worrying about anything. God, he had missed so much.

“You know, I’d like to get a mule. It sure would make it easier putting in a garden, and I think that old plow is still useable.”

Will had his back to them, so he didn’t see the smiles that exchanged between Suell and Quixie. Suell started talking about cleaning and gapping spark plugs while Will daydreamed about a big mule. A big brown mule about seventeen hands tall with stocking feet and maybe a white blaze on his forehead.

From out of nowhere came the magic words. “Shoot why are we sitting here? Come on outside. We’ll just take a spin in my old Chevy and find out first-hand if you can drive or not.”

Will stared at him. “You’d trust me to drive your truck?”

“Why sure, come on. Let’s see what you can do.”

Suell nearly flew out the front door as Will sat his cup on the table and looked at Quixie. He had the look of a little boy who was going to ride his first bicycle. She wanted to squeeze his neck, but she just sat looking at him. A little grin edged around his lips and he shook his head. As he started after Suell, he stopped and looked back to wave at Quixie, and she saw the flush return to his cheeks.

Quixie was reminded once again how lucky she was to have married Suell Edmonds. He was the kindest, most generous man she ever knew, but it really surprised her how he took to Will. He seemed to like him immediately. She flew out of her chair and ran to the front porch.

“You two be careful now. Don’t drive too fast,” called Quixie. The grin on her face masked the worry in her heart.

“Suell, I can’t do this. I’m liable to wreck your truck.”

“Pshaw, you can’t hurt that old truck. Come on, don’t chicken out on me. It’s just like riding a mule,” he grinned. “Once you fall off, you just get up and try again.”

“Damn, you’re crazier than me.”

Will started to climb in the passenger side, but Suell stopped him.

“Hold on now. You can’t drive sitting over there.”

“I’m just going to watch you a while.”

“No, you’re not. You get on around here and quit your stalling. Why, you’re nearly as nervous as Quixie when I taught her to drive.”

“How did she do?” asked Will.

“Pretty darn good once she got the hang of the clutch. The clutch is always the hardest thing for a woman because they don’t have mechanical minds.”

“I heard that!” yelled Quixie from the front steps. She pushed back a strand of hair from her forehead and used the towel to shade her eyes. “Who is it that helps you in the garage from time to time when you need an extra pair of hands? Why, I can change a tire, check the oil and fill the gas tank as good as any man.”

“Yeah, that’s right, Sweet Pea.” Suell winked at Will. “You’re a real mechanic, all right.”

Will maneuvered around the back of the truck and slid into the driver’s seat. He couldn’t have felt more out of place if he’d been sitting in one of them trolleys they ran in the cities. He grasped the steering wheel with both hands, but wasn’t sure where to put his feet.

“All right now. This is the clutch, the brake and the gas pedal.” Suell pointed to each object like a teacher would point to a chalkboard. “You have to remember to press down on the clutch when you want to change gears. When you want to go

ease up on the clutch and give it a little gas. This is first, second and third gear.”

Suell told Will when to press on the clutch and when to let up as he went through the motions of changing gears, naming them as he went. Then he looked at Will, “You got all that now?”

Will looked at the gearshift and studied the pedals, then scratched his head.

“No ... I can’t do this. I can’t remember anything about driving. It’s been too many years.”

A rush of stubbornness flashed through Suell’s brain. “Yes, you can. Now, put your foot down on the clutch and turn the key.”

Will did what Suell said, but the old truck started lurching and bucking like a horse.

“Whoa now. That’s OK. It’s been a while. Just take a deep breath,” said Suell as he wiped the perspiration off his forehead.

Quixie watched from the porch, twisting the towel in her hand and praying. “Lord, I hope this is the right thing to do. I hope this isn’t too much for him.”

Then she heard the engine start up and this time it was idling good. The truck wasn’t moving, but it wasn’t bucking either. Very slowly, the truck started to move, but then Quixie heard the screeching of gears and saw Suell waving his arms like a banshee. The truck moved forward very slowly, then turned around in the field so the front of it aimed towards the mouth of the hollow. A brief grinding on the gears as he backed up made her cringe, and then it moved forward again. Finally just as smooth and steady as molasses on a hot biscuit, the truck eased over the stock gap and moved on down the road. It was slow but steady and Quixie waved until the truck was out of sight.

Chapter 11: Quixie

Quixie wondered if teaching William to drive was a good idea. Suell was a good man, smart too, but she had her doubts about this driving business. As the truck rattled out of sight around the curve of the creek bed, Quixie went back inside and looked around the messy house. William had been home four days and the house already looked like a tornado had passed through it. Here it was, 1954, and William was trying to live in a house built at the turn of the century with no modern conveniences.

She stripped the dirty sheets from the bed and found clean ones in the white cabinet in the kitchen. Rolling up the dirty ones, she shoved them in one of her empty bags to take home and wash. As she went through the house picking up trash and dusting the furniture, she wondered how William would be able to do his laundry. With his bad knee, she couldn't picture him using a scrub board.

As she dusted the table by the front window, she picked up the Bible and pressed her palm against the black leather cover. Sweet memories of the Donnelly family flooded her mind. She often thought about his mama and daddy and wished Sarah would write. Sarah had changed after her brothers went away. It seemed as though she was always preoccupied and didn't

have time to be with friends. It was almost as if she was afraid to leave her parents alone. Outside of school and church she never strayed. It occurred to Quixie that the war affected Sarah more than anyone she knew, besides William.

As she waited for the water to heat, the silence of the house crept up and she began singing an old hymn from her childhood.

Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.

Little ones to Him belong, they are weak but He is strong.

Yes, Jesus loves me, yes, Jesus loves me

Yes, Jesus loves me, the Bible tells me so.

Suddenly, something out back caught her eye. The woodpile was stacked along the side of the porch and there a man stood with an axe in his hands. He wore long johns under his Duckin britches and he looked dirty. His straggly black hair and beard were greasy, as though he hadn't bathed in weeks. Quixie squeezed her eyes shut, then opened them again, but he was still there.

An involuntary shiver ran through her body as an explosion of pictures tore into her brain. He raised the axe over his head and she flinched when it struck the chopping block. A burning sensation of bile filled her chest, ready to choke her. Quixie dropped the towel and ran to the front porch, seeking the solace of the rocker. She tried hugging the pounding out of her chest and then she tried to sing another hymn, but couldn't pull the words out of her head.

It had been a long time since the last one. Suell called them flashbacks and said they were just strong memories that grabbed us for a while. He would hold her until it went away. God, she wished Suell was here now. It must be the house bringing it all back. She couldn't resist its smothering hands. Laying her head back in the rocker, she closed her eyes and rode it to the end.

Quixie's earliest memory was when she was three years old and sat on the floor by her mama's feet playing with a homemade rag doll. The yarn hair was straggly and half-gone and the button eyes had long disappeared, but she loved it. It was peaceful and quiet until the front door opened and then fear ran through the house. She ran behind Mama and hid in the folds of her skirt. Daddy was home.

Quixie never knew for sure where Mama and Daddy came from or who their parents were. Mama told her that she met T.J. Harris when she was fifteen and he swept her off her feet with his sweet words. They filled a mule-drawn wagon with household items and tools and journeyed across the Cumberland Plateau and the Highland Rim. Before they reached Cannon County, they met a circuit rider who married them. There was land for sale and it included an abandoned shack once used by trappers at the base of Short Mountain. Daddy built a barn and promised to build a cabin but never did, so the shack became their home.

Quixie's memories of her mama held a vision of a quiet shadow that flickered in and out of the sun's rays coming through the broken window. She was as frugal with her words as she was with the scraps of fabric she saved to make quilts that would warm them on frigid winter nights when there was nothing to burn in the fireplace.

Her daddy was tall and handsome, but had a dark side that frightened the little girl. Quixie learned early that having a daughter didn't set well with him. As far as he was concerned, girls were worthless, just another mouth to feed. Sons were the only things of value. She was invisible most of the time unless there was work that needed doing, and then he treated her like a hired hand, except she never got anything for it but a cussing. When he was drunk, he blamed her mama for not having sons. She never complained because she thought it was her fault, too.

Mama birthed two more girls after her. One was stillborn and the other died of consumption before her first year. When Quixie was twelve, Mama got pregnant again. She was sick a lot and felt tired all the time. One Saturday night, Daddy stormed into the house, whiskey drunk and crazy as a rabid dog. Quixie's mat was in the corner of the room and she pulled the blanket over her head and lay still as a mouse. He pulled Mama out of bed, screaming at her to fix some food. He shoved her so hard she fell and hit her head against the table leg. Quixie peeked out from under the blanket and saw Mama drag herself off the floor. A trickle of blood slid down her forehead and faded into the dark rings under her eyes. Quixie started to get up to help her, but Mama put her finger to her mouth, indicating that she should stay out of Daddy's way.

Daddy slouched down in his chair and rested his head on the table, using his arms for a pillow. He closed his eyes and waited while Mama hurried to warm his supper. As she set the food on the table, his head jerked up and he grabbed her wrist. Mama pulled back and silently waited for him to finish. When he pushed the plate away, she emptied the scraps in the slop bucket and began washing it. Mama had her back to him when he shuffled up behind her and folded his arms around her shoulders. Pushing his body against hers, he whispered in her ear and a shuddered sigh fell from her lips. He carried her into the bedroom and shut the door.

For what seemed like hours, Quixie listened to him moan and groan on the other side of the wall. Finally, Mama cried out and everything got still until Daddy appeared in the doorway hitching the galluses of his britches.

He stared at Quixie, then said, "Go lay with your mama."

She jumped up and slipped inside where her mama lay with her back towards the door. Quixie whispered, "It's only me, Mama." Mama's body was trembling so Quixie snuggled up as

close as she could to warm her. For a long time Quixie lay there, listening to Mama breathe and then the quiet was broken by rattled snoring coming from the other room.

As Quixie waited for sleep, she wondered how her mama could let him touch her. How could she stand his lovemaking after hurting her so bad? Was it possible to love and hate at the same time?

Mama's foot twitched like a puppy having a dream and then her legs jumped as though she was running. The thought of her mama running away frightened Quixie, and tears filled her eyes and ran down her cheek. They were warm and salty on her lips.

Moonlight sneaked through the cracked window, casting a long, thin beam across the floor that crept up the wall. The shadowed room hid the drabness of the cabin. Quixie's arm lay across her mama's waist and she felt a movement against it. Then she remembered the little baby in Mama's stomach and it made her smile. Finally, sleep took hold of her.

In the weeks that followed, a day never passed without her daddy warning that this one better be a boy. Quixie started praying for God to make it a boy because she was afraid her daddy might kill it if it was another girl. One night during a drunken binge, he lost the mules in a card game. When he stumbled into the cabin, he pulled Mama out of bed so she could hear how he got cheated.

He hollered as though it was her fault and said, "You and that girl are useless to me. If I had sons, we'd have twice the land we got now. I was cursed the day I married you."

Then he backhanded her, staggered to the bed and passed out. Quixie got a rag, wet it from the water bucket and wiped the blood from Mama's mouth. All she could think about was how much she hated her daddy.

After breakfast the next morning, Daddy announced that he would be working in the barn for the rest of the day. When

Mama sent Quixie with his lunch, she peeked in the door and saw him standing in the middle of the barn sawing on some metal. Rays of sun sneaking through the broken planks in the wall blanched his face, making him appear distorted and strange. Looking at him made her sick to her stomach.

The next day when the sun fell behind the hills, he called them outside and began strutting like a peacock. Scratching his coarse black beard, he showed them the contraption he had made. Daddy had a push plow with double plow points on it and there was no way a person could pull it unless they were Hercules. He figured out a way to cut it down to a single plow point, put a wheel on the back, and rigged up a chain to pull it from the front. He showed them how he would guide the plow while they pulled it.

The look on Mama's face would remain etched in Quixie's mind for a long time. He got mad when they didn't brag on his invention and started kicking at the ground. Then he spit a big wad of tobacco, called them stupid bitches and stomped away.

His invention worked, but not without Quixie and her mama paying a heavy price. Every night they dragged back to the house after plowing all day and still had supper to get and chores to do. Too tired to eat, they often fell asleep at the table. They had nearly finished four acres when her mama's water broke. Starting back towards the house one evening, Quixie turned back when she heard Mama's pathetic little whimper. She leaned against the gate, holding her belly and looking down at the fluid leaking from her.

The midwife, Nell Blackstone, lived three miles from them and Quixie ran all the way. She was breathing so hard that it took the old woman a few minutes to understand what she wanted. The walk back was tortuous because the old woman was slow. Quixie had to carry her medicine bag and hold her arm so she wouldn't trip on the rocky path.

It didn't take Spencer long to get born. He came early so he was kind of skinny and wrinkled, but he had blond hair like Mama, with beautiful dark eyes. The midwife was worried because there was too much blood and said they needed to get a doctor. Daddy pushed past her and grabbed the baby out of Mama's arms. They held their breath as he raised the baby high in the air. There was no love in his actions; he was just making sure it was a boy. He never looked at Mama or said anything to her. Shoving the baby at Quixie, he pushed the old woman out the door, promising to pay her later.

Mama was awful sick and so weak it's a wonder Spencer managed to flourish. It took her a long time to get her strength back and she had to stay in bed most of the time. She would talk to Quixie whenever they were alone. Her soft voice was hard to hear, but she talked a lot, as if she was trying to make up for lost time. She told her stories about her grandma and grandpa and it was the first time she told Quixie that she loved her. It made the young girl cry.

Daddy used a feedbag to make a pouch so Mama could carry Spencer while she pulled the plow. Quixie convinced Mama to let her carry Spencer. Mama tied a blue rag around her head to keep the hair out of her eyes, a piece from an old dress, but she looked pretty. Daddy started gee-hawing like some damn fool while the women pulled and finally the plow started moving. The day was endless and Quixie kept watching her Mama and knew she was hurting. She told her to rest while she fixed supper. That's all she needed, some rest.

God must have thought so too, because the next morning her mama didn't wake up.

When Daddy found her lifeless body, he grabbed Quixie's arm so tight that she thought it would break and ranted about how he was going to feed his boy. There was no sorrow for Mama, no tears or grief. All he cared about was the prospect

of free labor. He paced back and forth for a long time. Quixie picked up the baby and slipped into the bedroom where Mama lay. Her heart felt broken in little pieces when she realized that she would never hear her mama's voice again.

Daddy stayed outside all day while Quixie tried to figure out ways to feed her baby brother. She wanted Mama to look nice when she went to Heaven, so she washed her and fixed her hair pretty. With her arms folded in front of her, Quixie thought she looked like an angel. Praying didn't come easy to the young girl, but that day she asked God to be kind to her mama and to please watch over little Spencer. Loneliness filled her until the weight of it was unbearable. The tears that should have fallen remained hidden. She knew her daddy would never change, so what would become of her and Spencer?

It was late when he came inside and told her to wrap the body in something and he would dig a hole. He stared hard at Quixie until it sent a chill through her, then he said she would join her mama if she told anyone about them pulling the plow. She believed him and swore never to tell. Quixie watched helpless as he jerked Marna's body out of bed and carried it out back. As he dug the hole, she tried not to think about what was happening. Instead, she thought about her two little sisters. She was little when they died and she couldn't remember them. There was no way to tell where their graves were and she was afraid to ask her daddy.

After they laid Mama's body in the hole, he began throwing dirt on top of her. A kind of madness filled Quixie's brain as she watched him. Every thump from each shovelful of dirt felt like a fist punching her in the stomach. She wanted to jump in the hole with Mama.

There were no flowers to put on the grave, not even a pretty weed. No one knew her mama was gone because she had no

friends. Everything about it was so wrong, but there was nothing she could do.

Early next morning, Daddy came home with a sack filled with powdered milk, corn meal and beans. What surprised Quixie most was the boney horse tied to the fence. When his back was turned, Quixie stared at him with all the hatred a thirteen-year-old could muster. Why didn't he get the horse sooner? Mama might still be alive if he had. She never found out how he got any of it.

Quixie stayed at the house caring for Spencer while her daddy plowed the remaining rows. He nearly killed the old horse in the process, but it looked as if they might have a crop after all. Daddy stayed away for days at a time and she knew he was out drunk somewhere. A man named Leon Grissy sold moonshine whiskey for next to nothing. No one with any sense would buy any because there'd been rumors about folks getting sick and even going blind from drinking it. Daddy didn't care. He would drink anything as long as it got him drunk.

It was a Friday night, too early to go to bed, but hunger chased her there. She lay with Spencer cuddled in her arms, praying for blessed sleep. Mama used to say that if you could sleep, the hunger pains wouldn't hurt so much, but the gnarls in Quixie's stomach kept her awake. Her mind wandered to Mama's things that she hid inside a hole in the wall behind her mat. She eased out of bed so as not to waken Spencer and closed the bedroom door.

She found her mama's old nightgown with the little pink ribbons around the yoke. Quixie pressed it to her face, trying to capture Mama's smell, and longing made a knot in her chest that hurt bad. Without thinking, she pulled the gown over her own. She stood in the middle of the kitchen, kind of hugging it to her body. An old mirror hung on the wall. Its gray glass had dark freckles over it and there was a big crack down the side. Quixie

stood on a stool to look and suddenly, just for an instant, she saw Mama looking back at her. It startled her, and she squeezed her eyes shut and looked again. That's when she realized that it was just her looking like Mama. She had the same blue eyes and wheat-colored hair with the widow's peak on her forehead. Quixie smiled back at the face in the mirror.

Without warning, the front door burst open and Daddy stood there glaring at her. In a fury, he grabbed Quixie's arm and yanked her off the stool. The gown was long and her bare feet caught in the hem, causing the thin fabric to tear. She screamed at him to let her go and not tear the gown, but he slapped her hard the way he used to slap Mama. The blow sent Quixie crashing to the floor in a heap.

He accused her of being a haint and kicked her hard in the side. It knocked the wind out of her and as she lay gasping for breath, the baby cried, but his voice sounded far away. Daddy slammed the door shut and leaned against the jamb for support. His body began to heave and he dropped to his knees. Quixie was terrified and wanted to run, but her body ached and she couldn't straighten up. By this time, the gown was ripped so bad that it hindered her movement, so she wrestled out of it. She hugged it to her for a moment and then Daddy moaned, "Laura, come help me, I'm real sick."

He was calling for Mama. Clutching his stomach, he bent over as though he were dying. His pathetic look brought a tender feeling to Quixie that got mixed up with her fear. She and Spencer had just lost their mama; they couldn't lose their daddy too. She crept closer, wanting to help, but too scared to know what to do.

Then in a shallow voice, he said, "Come here girl, help me up."

He said it almost gentle-like and a well of pity overcame Quixie's fear. She reached her arm out to him. Suddenly, he

turned his face towards her and his black eyes, like two deep holes, bore through her. His mouth curved in a grin like a picture of Satan in an old book Mama had. The picture was frightening, but seeing this face, breathing the same air and smelling his sour stink, brought back terror that made her sag like a rag doll.

He grabbed for her but she jerked back and threw the tom gown in his face. Wiping his mouth, he threw it back, cussing the whole time. The venomous words falling from his lips sickened Quixie and her body trembled with disgust. Using her last bit of strength, she lurched towards the door and pulled it open, but he grabbed her by the hair and kicked the door shut with his boot. He forced Quixie down, pinning her head to the floor until she thought he was going to scalp her. Straddling her body, he began pulling her gown over her head and she screamed at him.

“No, Daddy, you don’t know what you’re doing. I’m not Mama, I’m your daughter.”

As she struggled to cover her nakedness, he drew his fist back and she couldn’t move her head away. The blow sent sparkly stars twirling in her head and then everything went black.

The next thing she remembered was William cradling her in his arms on the front stoop. Wrapped in her mama’s quilt, William rocked her back and forth in his arms as if she were a baby. He had been walking home along the ridge of the hill near the cabin after hunting on Short Mountain when he heard her screams. When he broke through the door and saw what was happening, he went crazy with rage. He yanked her daddy up and busted his head against the wall, then dragged him all the way to the barn where he tied him up. She vaguely remembered holding Spencer in her arms as William carried them all the way to his house.

Mrs. Donnelly gave her milk for the baby and they slept by the fireplace in the front room. She kept Mama’s quilt wrapped

around her and Spencer and Mrs. Donnelly gave them a pillow and another quilt to cover them. Quixie had never felt so warm and comfortable in her whole life. As she drifted off to sleep, she thought of her mama and prayed that she was warm too.

Someone went to Woodbury to tell the sheriff what happened. Early the next morning, he came out to the Donnelly's house and questioned her. Quixie told him about her and Mama pulling the plow, and about the unmarked grave behind the house. When William told the sheriff how he found them, his mama cried. Everyone knew Quixie's daddy was a low-life, but his cruelty was a shock to the hardest of hearts. The sheriff and some men went out to the cabin and found Mama's grave. They took her daddy to jail, and Quixie never saw him again.

News spreads fast in a small community, but everyone was real kind to Spencer and Quixie. The Prater Community decided her mama needed a decent funeral, so they moved her body from the backyard and put her to rest in the Prater cemetery, where the preacher prayed for her soul. A kindly neighbor chiseled a stone to mark her grave. All it said was her name and the date she died. Quixie never knew her birth date.

A sort of peacefulness settled over Quixie after the funeral. Her daddy died in prison, but she never grieved for him. She didn't want to think about him at all. They stayed with the Donnellys for a while until a nice young couple offered to adopt Spencer. They lived in Woodbury and Quixie was able to see him whenever she wanted. Sometimes late at night when sleep was long coming, Quixie would talk to her mama. She'd tell her about the day and how well Spencer was doing. There were times Quixie thought she could hear her mama whisper back.

One night when Mrs. Donnelly and Quixie were sitting alone on the front porch, she started to cry. Mrs. Donnelly held her close until she cried all her tears away. It would be many years later before she would cry like that again. The next time was in

1945 when she received a telegram from the army telling about the death of Captain Spencer J. Harris of the 101st Airborne after he died a hero in the Battle of the Bulge.

William was twenty years old when he rescued Quixie. He was her hero, her knight in shining armor, and he would always have a special place in her heart. As the years passed, she knew the love she felt for him was more than gratitude. While he was away fighting for his country, she tried to tell him in her letters, but then his letters stopped coming. Time has its way and her love evolved into a lasting friendship that nothing could destroy.

Tears slid down Quixie's cheeks as she rocked back and forth in the old rocker on the Donnelly's front porch. Remembering made her feel very sad and very tired. In the silence of the hollow, she prayed for Mama, Spencer, Suell ... and for William.

Chapter 12:

Robert

Robert tried not to work in his shop on Saturdays. He liked to spend weekends at home with Kaye and the children, but he promised to deliver the antique bureau today. One of his customers had acquired it on a trip to Indiana and planned to give it to his wife for her birthday on Sunday. It took Robert three weeks to finish the project because he had to order special handles to recreate the original look.

A skilled furniture maker, his claim to fame was a special talent for restoration. He found a quiet joy in taking something scarred and broken and bringing it back to life. With his unremitting sanding, the wood turned as smooth and silky as living flesh. A carpenter in Prater let Robert help in his shop when he was a boy. The twelve-year-old would clean up scraps, sweep and sometimes sand a few pieces of wood. His natural abilities and his eagerness to learn made him the perfect apprentice and the carpenter began teaching him the craft. By the time he was fourteen, he was creating pieces that looked professional. He had worked alongside his Grandpa on the farm since he was six, but by his eighteenth birthday, everyone knew his trade was woodworking.

As he lifted the heavy bureau onto the bed of his truck, his thoughts turned to Miss Ida. Age had crept up on her in the last

year, and he worried about her. He decided to stop by her house before he left Woodbury. It wouldn't take long, and it would ease his mind. Miss Ida was his grandmother and his only living relative. He had promised his grandfather many years ago that he would always take care of her and he was true to his word.

Giving the bureau one last stroke before covering it with an old blanket, he closed the tailgate and headed for Tatum Street. Parking the truck, he stepped up on the porch and knocked on the door. He knew it would take a few minutes for her to answer. Finally, the door opened a few inches and she peered out.

"Miss Ida, it's me, Robert. Can I come in?"

"Why didn't you call first? You know I don't like unexpected visits."

His jaw tightened as the door opened wider and he stepped inside. The air in the house was thick with heat, and she wore a heavy, wine-colored cardigan buttoned up to the neck. Her hair was pulled back taut in a long thin braid twisted into a bun at the nape of her neck. It matched her stern, rigid jaw and thin lips that fused in a straight line. She hadn't changed since the first time he laid eyes on her, but age was taking its toll. Deep lines imbedded themselves in her face and a spot just below her neck looked like a deep hole in her skin. Her wrinkled hands were thin and covered with blue veins that ran in tiny rivers.

"It's beautiful outside and warm like a spring day. I have to deliver a bureau to a customer who lives in Leoni and I wondered if you'd like to ride with me. You wouldn't have to walk except to the truck and we'd be back in a jiffy."

"Cold weather aggravates my arthritis, and the wind gets right into my bones." She scrunched her nose and shook her head. "It's too cold for me to go out. I'd catch my death and be laid up for days."

Robert was fully aware that she never went out when the temperature got below sixty degrees, but her self-internment

was playing havoc on the old woman. He was determined to change her mind.

“But it’s warm, Miss Ida, I promise, and it’ll do you good to get out of the house.”

She pulled a handkerchief from the pocket of her sweater and patted her nose. Robert knew she was turning the idea over in her head. Slowly, she walked to the coat tree sitting in the corner of the front room.

“You’ll have to help me with my coat and get my purse from the bedroom.”

Robert hurried to the bedroom and returned with the purse dangling from his arm. He pulled her coat off the coat tree and held it until she slid her arms in the sleeves. All the clothes she wore made her look like a European refugee.

“Where’s my scarf?”

It hung on the back hook of the coat tree. He slid it off and handed it to her. She flipped it on her head, then crossed the ends in the front and tossed them back over her shoulder.

“I’m afraid you’re going to be too hot with all those clothes.”

“You don’t know what it’s like being old. I’m cold all the time. I hate being cold.”

Robert held her arm as they walked down the porch steps and opened the truck door for her. He put his hands on her hips to support her as she lifted one foot into the truck and then gently boosted her up until her backside found the seat. He closed the door and went around to the driver’s side. It was obvious that her sweater was bunched up inside her coat, and she tried pulling the sleeves down, but her fingers couldn’t grasp the ends.

“Miss Ida, do you want me to stop so you can fix your coat?”

“There’s nothing wrong with my coat.”

He knew she needed to take the coat off and start over. That would be the logical thing to do, but there was nothing logical

about Miss Ida. She squirmed in the front seat, but Robert decided to keep driving and not worry about her coat.

“Did you tell that preacher to come out to the house yesterday?”

“No. I haven’t seen him since Sunday, and I didn’t say anything to him about you.”

“I wish he’d stop bothering me. Seeing him on Sundays is more than enough.”

Robert had to turn away from her to hide the grin on his face. “He visits everyone in his congregation. It’s part of his job.”

She replied with a “tsk” that always irritated Robert, and then went about rummaging through her purse, seeking something she’d probably already forgotten.

Robert looked over at her. “Are you comfortable, Miss. Ida?”

“No, but you can’t do anything about it.”

Her black wool scarf wrapped around her head made it look as if she had pending knowledge of a blizzard. Her hand kept touching the circle of braid at the nape of her neck, while straggles of gray wiry hair stuck out around her face. As Robert drove slowly past the square and headed east on Highway 70, he began to think that asking Miss Ida to come with him might not have been such a good idea.

Miss Ida was quiet and Robert couldn’t think of anything to say that wouldn’t rile her, so he satisfied himself looking out at the peaceful countryside. The hills surrounding the area never ceased to bring him pleasure, especially now that an early spring had begun changing the area from dull gray to vibrant green. Buttercups showed their eager faces and yellow forsythias were starting to show their color. He traveled some in his lifetime, and during World War II saw much of Europe, but returning to Tennessee brought him the contented feeling of coming home.

Unhappiness clouded much of his childhood. The loss of his mother had been devastating, but the added hurt of

rejection by his grandmother cut the young boy deeply. His grandfather, Hershel Hayes, became his only source of love and companionship.

Thinking about Grandpa made Robert smile as he remembered their unspoken alliance concerning Miss Ida. The first time he called her Grandma, a scowl filled her face. It confused and frightened the six-year-old. She insisted he call her Miss Ida and never Grandma. Grandpa concocted some obscure excuse for her reaction, but Robert never felt welcome in her house.

As time passed, he came to understand that Grandpa suffered a similar coldness. She complained about every blade of grass or grain of dirt that entered her house. The old woman rejected every demonstration of affection from Grandpa or Robert. Her meals were adequate and timely, the chores always done, but she moved about in a dull haze. She seldom spoke except to complain and any spark of life in her had seeped out a long time ago.

Grandpa's only vice, if it could be called that, was his love for chewing tobacco, but Miss Ida wouldn't allow any kind of tobacco in the house. Not wanting to anger Miss Ida, Robert never tried it, but he liked to study Grandpa's chewing. He would chew and spit so routinely that he never seemed to think about it, but every spit met its target. Robert's favorite memory was the time Grandpa took him to the County Fall Festival in Braxton. Miss Ida had no interest in going, so Grandpa decided he and Robert would make a day of it.

Robert coaxed Grandpa to enter the tobacco-spitting contest. He had no doubt Grandpa would win. Sure enough, they came home dragging a twenty-pound bag of flour. It was first prize. When they told Grandma how Grandpa won, Robert swore he saw a faint grin on her face.

Seeing the hayfields come to life made Robert remember the summer of 1930 when the temperature slid up to one hundred degrees and remained there for what seemed an eternity. It had been time to take up hay, and Oscar Campbell came by on Monday with his horse-drawn hay cutter to work in Grandpa's field. Grandpa and Robert leaned against the wood fence watching the hay cutter move slowly along, chopping down the high stand of hay. It fascinated young Robert and he could have watched for hours. It was just a five acre field, so one day of cutting was all it took. Three days later Mr. Campbell returned to rake the hay into rows, turning it so the bottom side could dry. Usually, it would take several days for the hay to dry enough to gather, but two days later he returned and sure enough, the intense heat had done its job. By ten o'clock Saturday morning, Mr. Campbell was back in the field turning the rows for the last time.

Grandpa's closest neighbor was Forrest Green, who had three sons, and they had helped him in the hayfield for the past thirteen years. They were good neighbors and the two families helped each other with everything, whether it was racing rain to get hay in a loft, finding a lost calf or building a barn. Jeremiah Green was nineteen, six foot two and weighed two hundred pounds. At the county fairs, he always won the strong man contest by hitting a weight with a mallet and making the bell ring at the top. Joshua was seventeen and more willowy, but was almost as strong as his brother. Folks in the area were always glad when they showed up to work for they would work themselves to death trying to outdo the other. The youngest boy, Tad, was near Robert's age, and they copied the older boys' attitude, but they weren't near as serious. Everyone knew to keep them apart when there was work to do, for they would inevitably end up in a wrestling match.

The young boys wore thin shirts under their Duckin britches, but the older men wore undershirts plus long-sleeved shirts buttoned to the collar. They learned from their elders that men's sweat was nature's coolant. Grandpa hooked the mules to the wagon while Robert filled the water bucket from the spring. They climbed into the wagon and started down the road towards the hayfield. The sun burned in the sky and left the air thick as mud. The Greens were waiting when they arrived, leaning against their wagon, chewing sprigs of straw.

"Howdy Hershel," drawled Forrest, "hot today."

"That's so," agreed Grandpa.

"I heard tell the temperature climbed to 113 degrees in Perryville last weekend."

"It's only 98 today. Guess we're having a cool spell."

Grandpa never cracked a smile, but everyone else chuckled. The boys climbed in the wagons and Tad let Robert go ahead with his team so he could stay on the inside. The inside wagon always had the advantage of finishing first.

With a sprig of straw between his teeth, Tad sat in the seat, his freckles flaring in the sunlight. "Wanna bet which wagon finishes first?"

"What do you wanna bet?" asked Robert.

"What say, the first wagon done gets to carry Rebecca's books home from school."

Robert's sunburned face hid the flush rising in his cheeks. Tad knew Robert had a crush on Rebecca but was too shy to do anything about it.

"Nah, that ain't no kind of bet."

Tad cackled and moved his wagon forward. As the wagons moved down the rows, the men walked along pitching hay with a hayfork. The boys walked on the hay, mashing it down to make room for each batch, and guided the mules. They held the reins, guided the mules and yelled "Yea or Haw" as needed to keep an

even flow. Shiny drips of perspiration clung to their skin, but they never stopped to drink until Grandpa or Mr. Green said it was time. As each wagon filled, the boys would drive it to the barn. The men had worked together in Grandpa's field several years and always shared the hay. The steamy day seemed never to end. By 6:00 p.m., everyone was soaked with sweat and water buckets were empty. After the Greens headed home, Robert and Grandpa finished putting up the last of the hay.

Throughout the day Robert had to stop to pull his britches down, away from his private parts. The combination of heat, sweat and constant rubbing from his outgrown Duckin britches chaffed him and he was in agony. He had a sudden growth spurt that summer, but didn't dare ask Miss Ida for new britches. Her complaints about Robert being a burden would swell again and he longed to keep peace with her. When the hayloft was full, Robert piled the rest around a pole stuck in the ground not far from the barn. Grandpa added the last of the hay on top and Robert walked it down. His misery from the tight britches gave him the courage to ask Grandpa the one question that had bothered him since he was little.

"Grandpa, why doesn't Miss Ida like me?"

The hurt look on Grandpa's face made Robert wish he could shove his words back in his mouth. Grandpa never spoke the whole time he watered and fed the mules or when they stood side by side washing up from the pan on the back porch. Robert felt bad enough from the heat and his burning crotch, but having Grandpa mad at him was more than he could bear. His silence screamed at the boy. By the time Miss Ida called them in to eat, his appetite had waned.

His grandma wasn't a talker, so the silence continued until supper was done. Then Grandpa told her that he and Robert had to go on an errand. Grandpa headed out the door and Robert followed fast on his heels. He wanted to ask him where

they were going, but kept silent. Despair covered him like a thorny blanket as thoughts of going to an orphanage ran through his mind. He was terrified of losing Grandpa and wanted to beg him for another chance, but the words wouldn't come out of his mouth.

Their farm in Shinbone Hollow was about a mile's walk from the Stones River Road. It was getting late and the sun was sinking behind the hills, but dark wouldn't come for another hour. The air was muggy and the approaching night gave no promise of relief from the heat. Grandpa's long strides were usually hard to run to keep up with, but Robert's legs pushed higher off the ground this summer. He followed him across the rickety bridge that crossed the thin stream of riverbed and the sound of their boots hitting the rough, sawed boards echoed in the muggy air. Grandpa walked towards the old Prater church that stood in the middle of the field. The eave of the roof protruded out and leaned dangerously low, ready to fall with the next gust of wind. The dilapidated building looked like an old man sitting in a chair with his head bent low in prayer. Grandpa passed the church and headed towards the cemetery. The boy was more puzzled than ever and ran to catch up with him. The cemetery appeared small and confined, but it spread up a small hill and over a rise. People in the community usually came out with push mowers or sling blades to clear it, but no one had been there in a long while and ragged trees and weeds closed in the fencerow. It looked ominous especially with the onset of night.

Grandpa struggled to open the rusty iron gate at the entrance, but finally it creaked open enough for them to slip inside. Robert knew there had to be copperheads and rattlers around, for the overgrowth would provide a perfect hiding place. His eyes froze to the ground, fearful of every broken stick strewn around the tombstones. He followed close, stepping in Grandpa's footsteps as much as possible. Robert's pant legs

barely covered his ankles so the picker-weeds grabbed at his skin, making blood marks on his legs. Finally, Grandpa stopped, bent down and began pulling weeds from between some flat, rectangular stones. Without hesitating Robert copied Grandpa and before long, they uncovered six stones laying in a row about three feet apart. The words on the stones weren't legible, for weather and time had all but erased them.

"You asked me why Miss Ida doesn't like you. I figured showing you this might help you understand and keep you from being so hard on her. These graves hold six of our babies. Miss Ida always wanted a houseful of children but could never carry one long enough to survive until your mama came along. When your mama went away, it nearly killed Miss Ida. The loss of her children has left a mark on her. She's mad at God and afraid to love anymore. It's like the part of her that feels anything is broken and she doesn't know how to be happy anymore. Try to overlook her ways. I know it's hard sometimes, but we're family and need to look out for one another."

The words "we're family" entered Robert's ears, seeped down his throat and pushed out the fear and dread that had filled him. There was a mixture of gladness in with the sad when he heard Grandpa say it. He stared down at the stones and a deep sorrow made his chest hurt. The last time he felt this bad was when Mama and Daddy died. Grandpa laid his hand on Robert's shoulder as they slowly walked back across the tilted bridge. Robert was twelve years old, and they never spoke of it again, but in his own mind, the young boy made a promise to his grandpa. He would be nice to Miss Ida no matter what.

Robert jerked back to the present when Miss. Ida yelled in his ear.

"Who's that driving Suell's truck?"

She pointed at the gray Chevrolet truck with Suell in the passenger side and a stranger driving it. As the truck slowly passed, Robert waved as Miss Ida strained to see the driver. Robert didn't recognize the man, but he felt the old woman's anger as she stared at him.

"It's William Donnelly. That evil devil has come back. Take me home!" she screamed. "Take me home now!"

Robert didn't know what to say. Miss Ida was hysterical and acted as if she'd have a stroke right there in his truck.

"Calm down, Miss Ida. Let me deliver this bureau and then I'll take you home."

She grabbed his arm and glared at him. The strength from her spindly fingers surprised him.

"Didn't you hear me? Take me home now, I said!"

Robert had to drive a ways to find a turn-around place. He worried that they might catch up to Suell's truck, but luckily it was nowhere in sight.

Turmoil brewed inside the old woman, dredging up ancient wounds and sorrows. She had heard the rumors about his release from the mental institution, but hoped they were just rumors. Why did he have to come back after all these years? In spite of his gray hair and paunchy face, she recognized him. Her hate clung to her as a bloodsucker clings to its victim and time couldn't disguise the man. Fate brought her to this spot today, not some stupid idea of Robert's. As frail as she was, the appearance of this old nemesis raised her blood and gave her new energy. She attempted to stay calm, but the constant twisting of the purse straps betrayed her.

She stared at Robert and in a cold dry voice asked, "Why didn't you tell me that Donnelly man was back?"

"Ramsey told me that he was coming home, but I haven't had a chance to meet him yet. Besides, why would I mention it?"

What does that man have to do with you? He's been away as long as I can remember."

"The whole Donnelly family was a curse to me. You never mind. Keep away from him, you hear me? He's evil and crazy and if you or anyone in your family befriends that man, I'll never have anything to do with you again!"

Robert was shocked at the hatred that exuded from her. How could he avoid the man? Mr. Donnelly's place was just up the road from his, and he would have to pass Robert's house to get to the main road. Suddenly he realized that Miss Ida's crazy notions had gone too far.

"I'm not going to avoid my neighbor on some whim of yours. That would be the worse lesson I could teach my children. They're not going to be exposed to that sad way of thinking. I wish you'd tell me what's going on."

"You stay away from him and keep the children away from him too. He's evil and crazy, nothing but trouble. If you have anything to do with that man ..."

She stopped talking suddenly, and Robert wondered if she was going to say that she would disown him. It struck him funny in a sad kind of way. She stoved up and leaned against the door, as far away from Robert as she could get. Robert stared a hole through the windshield, gripping the steering wheel until his hands hurt. Why did I bother with her today? Damned if I'll teach my children to hate and mistrust people.

When he pulled up in front of her house, she wouldn't let him help her out of the truck. Neither of them spoke another word as she went inside the house, slamming the door behind her.

Chapter 13:

Driving

Suell's hand clutched the side of the seat, but he would stay calm if it killed him. Maybe Quixie was right. Maybe he was expecting too much from the old man. The knuckles on Will's hands were deathly white from squeezing the steering wheel so tight. His eyes grabbed at the road ahead of him. When they came to the end of the hollow and the Stones River Road, Suell told Will to turn left. The old man hesitated as he tried to remember what Suell had said about changing gears to slow down and start back up. This time he got it right the first time and made the turn without any complaints from the truck. Suell let out a sigh of relief when he realized that the Stone's River Road was somewhat wider. Then he remembered that the road would change. In a few minutes, it would be narrower than the other hollow. Even worse, it was full of sharp curves that climbed a hill and then there was a blind spot where it ended on Highway 146.

Ah be Jesus, stay with us a little longer.

A few houses clung to the side of the hill but soon disappeared. The walls of the hollow closed in on both sides and were nearly straight up and down. The recent rains had left deep pockets of mud in the ditch along the shoulder. Suell tried making small talk with Will and everything was going fine until an old 1940 Ford truck appeared in front of them. It was coming straight at them and it was obvious the driver was going too fast. Will panicked, jerked the wheel to the right and the next thing

they knew, the front tire was mired in the muddy ditch. He tried to back up, but the combination of grinding gears and Suell hollering, "Ah be Jesus" made him freeze. Suell tried to slip out the passenger side, but there was nowhere to go but into the mud. It oozed over the top of his boots and seeped down his socks. The other truck stopped and a young man barely twenty with curly red hair stuck his head out the window.

"Gosh, I'm sorry. Guess I was over too far. Can I help you get out?"

A spark of hope struck Suell. "That would be real neighborly. If you'll help push, we should be able to back out easy-like." Remaining as calm as possible, he looked at Will and said, "How about letting me take over behind the wheel? Maybe you can lend your shoulder to the fender."

Will grabbed his cane and ambled around to the front of the truck. Suell noticed the young man was only about five foot six, but had shoulders like a linebacker. This shouldn't take long, he thought.

As the young man shook Will's hand, he said, "I'm Jesse Miller from Smithville. Someone told me this was a shortcut to Woodbury."

"I'm Will Donnelly and the owner of this vehicle is Suell Edmonds. He's trying to teach me how to drive and it looks like I've flunked my first lesson."

They laughed and Suell flashed a grin as he jumped into the driver's side. He put the truck in reverse, gave it a little gas, and then hollered to the men to push. It turned out Jesse didn't know his own strength and before you could say Jack Rabbit, the truck's right rear tire had joined the other in the muddy ditch.

"Ah be Jesus!" said Suell, and this time no one laughed. Suell piled out of the truck and all three men stood in the middle of the road with their arms crossed, studying their predicament.

As if thinking aloud Jesse said, "I'll hook a chain to the back of your truck and the back of mine and pull you. You're going uphill, so it should be fairly easy to pull you back downhill and out of the ditch."

"That should work," said Suell, and headed back inside the cab of the truck. Suell watched from his rearview mirror as Jesse retrieved his chain and hooked it up to both trucks. Then he climbed into his cab and waited for Suell's signal. Automatically, Will braced himself against the fender. When everyone was ready, Suell put the truck in reverse and waved his arm out the window. As Jesse's truck drew the chain taut and Suell's truck began to move backwards, the spinning wheels threw mud everywhere. By the time all four wheels of Suell's truck met the dirt road, there were splotches of mud dripping off Will's clothes. Suell put the truck in park, grabbed a rag out of the glove box and jumped out of the truck. Suell pointed to a hat half buried in the mud and without thinking, Will raised his hands to his head. Before he could stop himself, mud from his hands leaked down over his head and glasses. Suell howled and reached down to retrieve Will's hat and handed it to him. By this time, the hilarity of it all captured Will and he hooked the hat with one finger and twirled it around like a lasso, causing mud to fly in every direction. Suell and Jesse howled again as they jumped back.

"I hope its Saturday, 'cause we're going to need a bath," bawled Suell. "Come on and get in. We've got roads to ride."

"Lord, you two are something else," laughed Jesse. "Say, this is the shortcut to Woodbury isn't it?"

"Yeah," said Suell. "Keep following this road and make a left when it ends. Thanks for your help."

Jesse removed the chain and climbed back into his pickup. He stuck his arm out the window and waved, then honked the horn.

“Now there’s a nice young man,” sighed Suell as he knocked some mud from his pants. He looked at Will, then climbed into the passenger side of the truck. Will stood in the road, knocking the mud from his clothes, and didn’t seem to be in a hurry to get back inside the truck. He wiped his glasses with his handkerchief and then he leaned on his cane, just staring at the mud in the ditch.

“You may as well get in,” drawled Suell. “I’m sitting right here until you move this truck.”

Will climbed into the truck, laying his hat and cane next to him. Both men sat there staring at the road ahead of them. Finally, Will broke the silence.

With a sheepish look on his mud-stained face, he snickered, “Sure had you going for a while!”

Suell slapped his leg with his hand and threw his head back. “You old bastard, I knew you were a good one. Come on, let’s ride. When we get to the top of the hill, you’ll have to stop. It’s hard to see the traffic coming because there’s a curve both ways. Turn left. I’ve had a mind to drive up Short Mountain for some time. This is as good a time as any.”

When they came to Short Mountain Road, Will’s heart skipped a beat. “I remember when I was a tall gangly boy wandering all around this area. It was rich in possums and red fox, and I managed to catch quite a few. Do you like to hunt?”

“No, fishing is my sport.”

The truck chugged along, hugging the road. It would have been easy to get lost in the tangle of ridges, hills and hollows eroded by ancient winds, with waters that dipped 300 to 400 feet to the branches and creeks below. Suell had never seen it up close, and he gave a long whistle as he stared down into the deep ravines. It was a deep valley bottled in on both sides by steep hills. Tall trees grew so thick that it was impossible to see the bottom, giving the feeling of an abyss that might swallow

a person. At one point Will drove a little too close to the edge and Suell's body tensed and leaned inwards until their shoulders met. He shuddered and breathed a sigh of relief when the road widened a bit, but still clung to the dashboard.

"If you can drive these roads, you can drive anywhere," Suell said as he leaned his head against the window. The dirt road leading to the top of Short Mountain was potholed and the recent rain had washed part of it away. The ride was tenuous, to say the least, but when they finally reached the fire tower at the top, Will grinned all over himself. Suell decided to climb the tower, but Will declined because of his bad knee. Halfway up, Suell's legs grew heavy and strained. His spirits deflated when he looked up and saw that he still had a long way to go. Climbing back down was a strong temptation, but since he had come this far he decided not to quit. He paused for a minute and took some deep breaths, and then continued the steep climb. Reaching the top made it well worth the long climb. The beauty that lay before him took his breath, and he marveled at the distance that was visible. He could actually make out the Gilley-Young Hollow.

"I can practically see your house from here," Suell hollered.

Will waved and said something, but Suell couldn't understand him. Climbing back down the steep steps was precarious, to say the least. Suell kept visualizing himself losing his hold and tumbling down to his death. When his feet finally touched solid earth, he felt like kissing the ground. Will laughed at his red face.

"You've just been to the highest point in Cannon County, over 2,000 feet high."

"How did you know that?" gasped Suell.

"This is my territory you're in now," answered Will.

"I'm not as young as I used to be," said Suell as he straightened and looked out at the massive trees that adorned the top of Short Mountain.

"I know what you mean," said Will.

Going back down the road was just as difficult. Both men gave a deep sigh when they finally reached the bottom and were back out on Highway 146. "I don't think I'll be going back up there any time soon," said Will.

"See that log house back there?" Suell pointed to a run-down shack buried in a growth of bushes and overgrown poplar trees. "Several years ago, a young fellow told me that he was working with a crew paving this road when he met up with the owner of that house. He came up to the boy and said, "'See that broom sage growing in the fields next to my house?'

"'Yes sir,' said the boy.

"'Those are my fields and that's my broom sage, and I like it. I don't want anything to happen to it.'

"'Yes, sir. I mean, no, sir,' stammered the boy.

"The man went back in his house, and the boy went on with his work. Rain hadn't been plentiful that year, and we were in the middle of a drought. It might have been a thrown cigarette, or it might have been a spark from a fire under one of the barrels. It didn't really matter how it happened, but the sage caught fire. Next thing you know the man came flying out of his house cursing up a storm, and close behind him were his two sons. One grabbed a wheelbarrow and they all scurried into the fields like a pack of mice. The young fellow came to realize that the man was a moonshiner, and he hid his stash of whiskey in the tall sage grass. They went to jumping and hooting, grabbing up jugs of whiskey before the fire got to them."

"That must have been a funny sight," said Will "What happened to the boy?"

"He took off running back to where his crew parked their vehicles and hid until the moonshiner loaded up his truck and left before the law came. When he told me the story, he added that he still looks over his shoulder after the sun sets. They call

this Shotgun County, but I always thought Moonshine County was more fitting. Say, are you hungry?" asked Suell.

"I shouldn't be after that big breakfast, but I could eat a little something."

"Straight ahead on the left is a little store, and there, my friend, is where they make the best bologna sandwiches in Tennessee."

Will sat in the truck while Suell went inside. It wasn't long before they were smacking their lips over thick bologna sandwiches and cold bottles of RC Cola. When they finished, Suell stashed the empty bottles and wax paper under the seat and then they continued to ride the roads.

For several miles, the terrain expanded into level fields that spread for acres with only a ripple breaking the smooth, even land. When they passed through the Center Hill Community, acres of cornfields stretched out as far as the eye could see. Soon they reached Highway 70 and Will knew exactly where they were. As they drove towards Woodbury, deep valleys appeared on both sides of the road. A barn or two wedged between trees and sloping hills looked like a country picture. There didn't seem to be any roads connecting them to the rest of the county, so it appeared like another world down there.

As they drove down Highway 70, Suell stuck his hand up, "There's your neighbor, Robert Dawson. Would you look at that? His grandmother is in the truck with him. You don't see that very often."

Will kept his eyes on the road ahead, and never saw the people in the truck that passed.

"Sometimes, I forget that you're a native, and probably know more about this area than I do. I'm sure Miss Hayes lived in the Prater Community about the same time as you. Do you remember her?"

“Hayes,” murmured Will. “I remember a Hershel Hayes. He lived in Shinbone Hollow a couple of miles from us. We worked in his hay field a couple of summers. I don’t recall his wife.”

Both men were enjoying the ride and when they passed through Woodbury, they agreed to keep going as far as Peak’s Hill. When they made the sharp curve around it, Will looked for a turnaround place. It was a little tricky making the turn, but he was getting the hang of this driving business. Suell sat back, satisfied as an old cat curled up in front of a fire on a cold night.

When they came back around the curve, Will pointed to the top of the peak and said, “I think the real name for this hill is Pete’s Hill.”

“Pete’s Hill? I never heard that before,” said Suell.

“A man named Pete lived in a cabin on the ridge of that hill,” continued Will. “When he turned seventy-five, he came to town to find a lawyer to help him write his last will and testament. After he told the lawyer who was to get what, he then said that when he passed, he wanted his grave to rest close to the road.

“‘Why would you want to be buried close to a road?’ asked the lawyer. ‘Wouldn’t you rather rest at the top of the hill under a nice tree so you’d be closer to heaven?’

“‘No sir,’ said the old man. ‘It’s too blazed quiet. I want to lie as close to the road as possible so I can hear the traffic.’”

“I never heard that story before,” said Suell. When he saw the sheepish grin stretching across Will’s face, he threw his head back and rolled his eyes. “Well damn, you got me again.”

When they came to the Braxton community, Will looked toward the large house that was once the Culpepper School. “What happened to the grocery store and the bank? Were they eliminated for the sake of progress?”

“They would probably still be here if a tornado hadn’t come through and blew the buildings away,” said Suell. “All that was

left of the bank was the big steel safe, and it sat on the side of the road for a long time before they finally moved it.”

They stopped talking for a few minutes until Will finally asked, “What brought you to Cannon County?”

“I was bumming around the country and when I saw Tennessee, I fell in love with the hills and the people.”

Will gave him a knowing look and said, “You’ve got good taste, anyway. Say, do they still have Sweet Potato Day the first Monday in April?”

“Sure do. They’ve had Sweet Potato Day as long as I can remember.”

“Yeah, as long as I remember, too,” mused Will.

“I noticed you had a shovel and hoe sitting inside the wheelbarrow. Were you thinking about making a garden?”

“I used to help Mama work in the garden when I was a boy, and before I left the hospital I was assigned to the garden detail. I started turning the dirt with a shovel, but it’s too wet to do much now. Ever since yesterday, I’ve been thinking about a mule. Do you know anyone who might have one for sale?”

“There’s a man on the Auburntown Road named Johnson who raises mules. He has a good reputation and the mules he sells are broke and ready to work. He’ll ask a fair price. I don’t mean to butt into your business, but do you have any money?”

“Good question. I think I do, but I’m not sure how much. I’d like to look at that truck in Viola, too.”

“Sounds like you have some business to take care of before you can think about going back to the hospital,” said Suell, looking at Will out of the corner of his eye.

“Yeah, I reckon. How about handing me one of those cigarettes?”

Chapter 14:

Kaye

The boys' shoulders bore into the side of the house, one on either side of the opened door, straining to hear every word. They were eavesdropping on Mama and Daddy.

"I don't know what to do about Miss Ida," said Robert. The craziest ideas come to her, and now she's developed a hatred for our neighbor, Mr. Donnelly. There was a moment when she started to say that she would disown me if I had anything to do with the man. Can you imagine that? As if she'd ever laid claim to me in the first place."

"Her attitude about Mr. Donnelly is strange," said Kaye. "He's been away since World War I. Whatever happened must have taken place before then, that is, if anything did happen. I remember the Donnelly family being good hard-working people."

"I tell you, Kaye, I don't know how much more of this I can take. I'm bound to look after her, but she tries a person's patience."

"But you've got big broad shoulders," soothed Kaye as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

The boys rolled their eyes when they heard their mother's soothing tone. Their parents were getting mushy again. When their daddy came out the front door unexpectedly, they closed

their eyes tight and prayed. Please don't let him turn around. Luck was with them and he walked straight to the barn without ever noticing them.

They breathed a sigh of relief. Daddy was very upset and it wouldn't be a good time to get caught being nosey. They rushed inside and bombarded their mother with questions.

"What's the matter with Daddy?" asked Chris. "Why doesn't Miss Ida like Mr. Donnelly? Is he really crazy?"

"The kids at school have been talking about him, and they say he's crazy and real dangerous. Why would they let him come home if he's dangerous?" asked Bobby.

"That's the point," said Mama. "They wouldn't have. Now we know nothing about him and shouldn't make hasty judgments because of foolish gossip. When you see him, I want you to be polite and friendly."

The boys scrunched up their faces. Mama was always telling them to be polite and friendly.

"He's probably having a difficult time," continued Mama as she picked up the Coke bottle she used for sprinkling her starched clothes when she ironed. "I'm sure he could use some friends. We need to go down there and introduce ourselves and see if there's anything we can do for him." She stopped pulling clothes from her laundry basket and smiled at her sons. "You're good boys and I want you to think about what I've said. I know you'll make the right decision."

The boys rolled their eyes. Mama always wanted them to think about things. Then Bobby spoke up, "But what about Miss Ida? She knew him when he was young and says he's evil, and that we shouldn't have anything to do with him."

Anger flashed in Mama's eyes and Bobby knew he had gone too far. She didn't respond at first, but put both hands flat on the ironing board as though she was getting ready to pick it up and throw it. Then she took a deep breath and said, "Miss

Ida is very old and sometimes old people get peculiar ideas. We want you to love Miss Ida and always be kind to her, but you must ignore some of the things she says. If she ever says anything that you don't understand, please come to Daddy or me and ask us about it first. And, for heavens sakes, quit listening to those foolish children at school. Now that's enough on the subject. Right now you need to finish your chores and do your homework."

The boys ran to the barn to help their father with hopes of hearing more about Mr. Donnelly and Miss Ida.

As Kaye watched them run down the hill, she said a silent prayer of thanks for her two fine sons. Bobby was eleven and the spitting image of his daddy. He grew so fast this past year, she wondered if he would be taller than his father one day. The firstborn is always special, but eight-year-old Christopher was close to her heart. A gentle boy with an inquiring mind is hard to beat. Only six when Isabel came along, he took an immediate liking to his baby sister. He watched for her to wake from a nap and then he would talk to her while Mama held her. It wasn't long before he was holding the baby and giving her a bottle. Bobby loved his little sister, but Chris was a hands-on type of fellow, much like his daddy.

"This daydreaming isn't getting the ironing done."

She went back to the kitchen and refilled her sprinkling bottle. Kaye pressed the iron hard against the pillowcase as thoughts of Miss Ida burned in her mind. She must be the one spreading the rumors about Mr. Donnelly. The women at the grocery store acted as if he were a murderer just let out of prison. Could he be dangerous? Surely they wouldn't release a man from a mental hospital if he might be a danger to his neighbors. Her only recourse was to wait until Robert calmed down, and then they could go talk to Brother Allen. The minister had been close to the Donnellys, and he would tell them the truth.

Quixie was a good friend and had assured her that Mr. Donnelly was a good person and would be a good neighbor. She had known him from childhood, before he joined the service. War can do things to a man. Robert had some problems after he came home from Europe. She remembered his nightmares and the way he would cry out in the middle of the night. Their children had been the answer to her prayers. Playing with Bobby always seemed to calm him. On sleepless nights he would go into Bobby's bedroom and watch him sleep. Soon Robert's nightmares became less frequent. By the time Christopher was born, they had ceased all together.

The last few pieces she pressed seemed to take the longest. The iron felt as though it weighed twenty pounds and Kaye struggled to finish. After putting the ironing board away, she peeked in on the baby. Isabel was sleeping peacefully in her crib. The big four-poster bed looked inviting, but she didn't dare lie down. It was time to start supper and she hadn't decided what to have. It was a little early for potato salad, but the warm day had put her in a summer mood. The boys loved fried chicken and biscuits were good with anything. That would have to do. There might be some pickled beets left in the pantry, too.

Busying herself in the kitchen, Kaye kept thinking about Mr. Donnelly and Miss Ida. Robert's grandmother never spoke about the past and when Kaye asked her about Robert's mother Lucy, the old woman yelled at her and said to mind her own business. Robert was her business, but Miss Ida's attitude made her quit asking questions. For a while, Kaye thought that Lucy must have done something that the old woman couldn't forgive. Then she recalled the story Robert told her about Miss Ida losing all her babies. Lucy was the only child that lived, so Miss Ida must have been very protective of her.

Kaye didn't think she could live if something happened to one of her children. It must have killed the old woman when Lucy

left home so young, but Kaye could understand why she did. She wanted to get away from her crazy mother. Nevertheless, Miss Ida's biting tongue still hurt, but she wouldn't complain. For Robert's sake, she would try to keep peace with the woman.

The apple pie was baked and cooling on the counter. She felt proud at how pretty it looked. Kaye remembered when she could barely boil water. Robert was patient with her and only laughed when her meals didn't turn out quite right. She'd never forget the Thanksgiving she baked her first turkey. She had no idea that the butcher stuck the gizzards in the neck cavity. They wondered why it didn't have any, and she nearly died when the little bag fell out while Robert was carving it. The worse time was when she tried to bake homemade biscuits. Her mother made them all the time, but Kaye liked to play outside more than help in the kitchen, so she missed the biscuit lesson. The first few times she tried, they were so hard she threw them out for the birds. The birds didn't like them either and Robert found them laying in the yard. Humiliated when he found her out, she cried like a baby. He just laughed and held her tight.

She thanked God every day for giving her such a wonderful husband. It puzzled her how such a good man could be related to a witch like Miss Ida. God forgive me. She promised herself not to think such thoughts, but on days like this, it was hard.

She had already chopped the potatoes and eggs. All she had left to do was chop up the celery and onion and mix it together with sweet pickle, vinegar, mustard and mayonnaise. She washed the chicken pieces, dipped them in egg and flour and put them in the frying pan to brown.

"I can make the biscuit dough in a jiffy and bake them while the chicken is cooling. Tomatoes would be nice, but there's none to be had this time of year."

She felt drained and everything seemed to take more time. When she went to the bathroom to splash water on her face,

she noticed dark circles under her eyes and her face was pale. “Lord, I look like death warmed over.” She opened the drawer of the little cabinet next to the sink that Robert had made for her, searching for some makeup. It was oak with a scalloped apron along the front. The little drawer was just right to keep her makeup and personal items. The cabinet below had double doors and each one had a daisy carved on it. Daisies were her favorite flower. Spacious shelves inside held extra towels and toilet paper. Robert had either made or refurbished all the furniture in their house. A lovely cedar chest sat at the foot of their bed, with a matching one in the boy’s room. He built wardrobes for each bedroom and planned to add a room for Isabel later this year.

Kaye smiled to herself. Since the day she met Robert, smiling came easy to her. If anyone had told her twenty years before that a girl from Michigan would end up living on a farm in Tennessee, she would have laughed at them. She was a schoolteacher who always lived in the city, but even as a child had been fascinated with country living. Her love for animals started when she was three, and she always had a cat or dog. One day she came home from school and begged her parents to let her plant something in the yard. Dad helped her turn the dirt and showed her how to plant the seeds in neat rows. More often than not, she watered it too often and the seeds washed away, but finally her little garden began to grow. That was all it took for her to get completely submerged in her farming business. At first, the earthworms were icky, but when she learned how important they were, she became very protective, and was careful when she was digging. The feel of rich dirt sifting through her fingers was gratifying, and she experienced a spiritual closeness to the earth at a young age. New sprouts poking through the dirt reminded her of little babies growing and flourishing.

From watching her parents, she grew to believe that God chose people for each other. When she met Robert, she believed immediately that he was her chosen person. She was comfortable with him right from the beginning and felt as if they had known each other all their lives. They liked the same things, including children. When he brought her to Tennessee, it was like stepping into a little piece of heaven. Robert teased her about being such an idealist, but he appreciated her positive outlook. They got through the war, worked through his recovery and finally their dream of a family became a reality. First Bobby was born. When he was four years old, Christopher came along. Isabel had been a surprise six years later, but she was like a special gift.

Miss Ida was the only shadow in their lives. For the life of her, Kaye would never understand why she treated Robert so badly. Thinking of Miss Ida brought Kaye out of her daydreams, and she said a quiet prayer asking forgiveness for her harsh thoughts. As an afterthought, she added, "And please give me patience."

No more was said that evening about Mr. Donnelly or Miss Ida in front of the children. Later that night as Robert held Kaye in his arms, she asked him about visiting Brother Allen.

He was thoughtful a moment, then said, "You know what? I've got a pretty smart wife. I should have thought of that myself. I couldn't get along without you, Mrs. Dawson. I hope you know that."

"I'd be lost without you, Mr. Dawson."

At the head of the hollow, Will sat in his easy chair thinking about what he had to do tomorrow. Suell promised to take him to the bank and now it pressed on him like a heavy weight. Since he'd been home, each day brought a new hurdle for him to climb, but going to the bank was the biggest one yet. He hadn't

been responsible for anything and now he needed to be able to take care of his own business affairs. Would he know the right questions to ask? Would the banker think he was too loony to handle his own money?

The word loony lingered in his brain, and he thought about the scarecrow standing in the yard. The thing still haunted him, but there was a need that burned deep inside him. Now and again as he worked in the garden, he would talk to the scarecrow. It didn't hurt anything and he'd never do it in front of anyone ... if there ever was someone ... but it filled his emptiness. Memories were puffs of air that never solidified, but the scarecrow was real. He could see it and touch it. It was better than nothing.

Looking out the window, the moon was barely visible through the trees and a splash of stars twinkled at him. Shrouded in blackness, the scarecrow wasn't visible, but knowing it was there appeased him.

He walked to the kitchen and set the coffeepot over the low flame. That coffeepot had become a good friend. Whenever he was troubled or just plain tired, he sought its comfort. Returning to the front room, he sat his cup on the table and pulled the afghan over his legs as he sat down. March evenings could be very cool. He lit a cigarette, and watched the smoke curl and rise slowly towards the ceiling and then disappear.

Memories were all he had. Suddenly a memory of the hospital jumped at him and he pictured himself sitting in a chair with the blanket over his legs. Will jumped up, threw the afghan on the chair and stood in front of the fireplace. He never wanted

to be that man again. No matter what happened, he would fight before going back to that hospital.

His thoughts turned once again to the bank. Worrying about tomorrow would keep him awake all night. He didn't know how much power the bank held over his funds. Damn, he wished the years could be erased and he was normal like everyone else. What if they wouldn't give him what he wanted? What if there wasn't any money?

"To hell with it," he muttered.

Suell tried to tell him not to worry about it and here he was losing sleep over worrying about strangers. The cigarette in his fingers had burned down to a nub, and he pressed it out in the saucer he had been using for an ashtray.

"If I do get some money, I'm going to buy an ashtray for every room in the house," he told himself, but apprehension lingered in the corner of his mind.

Bobby and Chris were helping Daddy fix the fence the next day when Suell's truck came down the road. Robert waved at him to stop and Suell pulled his truck into the yard.

"Howdy, folks. Looks like you're hard at it."

Robert walked over to him with the boys following close behind, glad to get a break from their work.

"I need to ask you about something. Do you know much about our new neighbor?"

Suell butted his cigarette in the ashtray and looked at Robert. "Have you had a chance to meet him yet?"

"No, we haven't."

"Quixie and Will have been good friends since they were children and we've been helping him along till he gets on his feet. I like him and I think you will too once you get to know him."

"There's been talk about him and some people have been concerned about his past."

“He’s had a rough way to go, but believe me, he’s a good man and I really don’t think you have anything to worry about. I’ve gotten to know him pretty good and I’d say he’ll be a good neighbor.”

“Boys, go get some water from the spring,” ordered Robert.

The boys knew it was Daddy’s way of getting rid of them so the men could talk. They were reluctant to leave and miss their chance to learn more about Mr. Donnelly.

“I hate to say this, but Miss Ida’s got it in her head that he’s some evil monster. I’m afraid she’s spreading it all over town and as good as people are, it’s only natural for some to wonder how much truth there is to it. I don’t understand why she’s acting this way, but she’s determined to hurt him and I don’t know how to stop her. The boys have been asking me questions because they’ve heard it from their friends at school. Does Quixie know anything that might have happened between Miss Ida and the Donnellys?”

Suell shook his head. “Quixie never mentioned anything. After the two boys went into the military, the family pretty much kept to themselves. All he wants is some peace and to live out his life in his own home. I’d hate to think that people would be so narrow-minded as to listen to the ravings of ... I’m sorry, Robert. I know she’s your grandmother.”

Robert looked down and kicked at the dirt with the toe of his boot, then said, “I told her that I wouldn’t teach my children to hate anyone and every man deserves a chance before being labeled unjustly.”

“Amen, brother. I’m taking him to town on some business today. He hasn’t had any transportation so were going to see about finding him a truck.”

“My God, we live so close and I didn’t realize he didn’t have a vehicle.” Robert pulled off his cap and ran his fingers through his hair.

“We stay so busy, but that’s no excuse. We’ll get up there to see him real soon.”

“I think he’d get a kick out of meeting the children. Don’t worry about your neighbor. He can be a little cantankerous, but he’s a good old man and don’t worry about the gossip. Things always have a way of working themselves out.”

The boys came running full steam with a bucket of water, splashing half of it out before they reached the men.

“Hey, boys, it’s almost fishing time,” said Suell as he started his truck. “We’ll get together soon.”

They waved as he pulled out of the yard.

“What did he say about Mr. Donnelly?” asked Bobby.

Robert bent down so he would be face-to-face with his sons. “It doesn’t really matter what he said, boys. You have to learn not to judge people so quickly and not to listen to rumors and gossip. I expect you to be good neighbors and give people a fair chance. Will you promise to do that?”

“Yes, Daddy,” Chris answered without hesitation.

“But Daddy, aren’t you worried about Mama and Isabel when we’re not here?” asked Bobby.

“I’m more worried about teaching you right and wrong. Quit worrying about Mr. Donnelly. You don’t know how hard life can be for some people, and you don’t understand what hardships and sorrows Mr. Donnelly has experienced. People are supposed to help one another and be good neighbors and for now, that’s what you need to be thinking about.”

Chris readily agreed to do as his Daddy asked, but Bobby wasn’t so sure. The kids at school were pressuring him. Being teased all the time and having no way to retaliate was more

than Bobby could handle. His schoolmates talked a lot about the old man and Bobby hated living right down the road from him. His friends figured he knew all about him and kept asking him questions that he couldn't answer. Daddy didn't understand how hard it was. Guess he didn't care, either.

Chapter 15: The Bank

“Looks like the Dawsons are home,” said Suell. “Why don’t we stop by so you can get acquainted?”

“Not today,” said Will as he fished through his wallet. “This isn’t a good day.”

He had cleaned up a little and changed his clothes. After all, first impressions were important. If only he could settle his queasy stomach.

“I’m dreading this,” said Will. “I’ve been a certifiable crazy for more years than some people have been alive and now I’m supposed to deal with a banker. What if he says I can’t buy the truck or that he can only give me a little money at a time? For all I know, there may not be enough money to buy much of anything, let alone a truck.”

As he tossed his cigarette out the window, Suell said, “You’re not in the hospital anymore because you’re well and able to handle your own affairs. Just talk to him man to man. The bank has no right to turn you down. You don’t have a guardian, so it shouldn’t be a problem.” He was quiet for a moment and then asked, “You don’t have any idea how much money you have?”

“Not really. Up until now, my money has been doled out in small sums. Damn, I’ll be glad when this is over.”

Suell let out a deep sigh. “Me too!”

Wills nervousness was beginning to spill out over Suell and the closer they got to town, the worse it got. Since it was Tuesday, not many people were on the square, so they were able to find a parking place close to the bank. It was located in the center of the west side of the square, right across from the courthouse.

“I’m going to run into Gunner’s Diner for some coffee, then I’ll be waiting in the truck when you come out,” said Suell.

Will nodded as he climbed out of the truck and headed for the front door of the bank. He gripped the handle of his cane firmly as if he was going to battle. Having control of his finances would give him a boost of confidence he sorely needed, but going through the process was worse than trying to climb a steep mountain.

The heavy glass door of the bank looked ominous and Will had to lean his shoulder firmly against it in order to open it. A high partition with glass along the top enclosed the long counter, except for two openings in the front where the tellers stood. In the first window stood a young woman with brown eyes and chestnut hair who looked out of place. She looked like an angel in a cage and the gray appearance of the building didn’t match her pretty smile. Two people stood in line, a woman clutching a black purse and a man in a one-piece uniform holding a zippered bag. On the left side of the room, a man sat at a desk looking down at some papers inside a folder. Rugs hanging on the wall behind the tellers’ desks were the only decorations. Designed to look like patchwork quilts, they were eye-catching and the only bit of warmth present in the austere atmosphere.

In the second window, an older woman nodded at him as she counted out money for a man dressed in Duckin britches and a cap with Farmers Co-op on the front. Will wasn’t sure whom he should see. Suddenly, the man sitting at the desk appeared in front of him and offered his hand.

“I’m John Sullivan. May I help you?”

His slicked-back hair, dark blue suit and maroon tie made Will feel ragged in his stained work pants and flannel shirt.

He snatched off his old felt hat and tried to remember the words he had rehearsed with Suell, but his mind went blank. His mouth wouldn’t move and he had no control of his hands as his hat turned round and round. He swallowed hard, and in one gust of breath, said, “I need to talk to someone about my money.” The heat crept up his neck to his cheeks as he inhaled deeply and little trickles of sweat beaded up on his forehead.

“What is your name?”

This time his words came out slow and deliberate, “I’m William Donnelly and I live in the Prater Community.”

The hairs on the back of his neck bristled as a slow anger began to rise in his chest.

They’d better not give me any trouble. It’s my money. Hell, I’m going to take whatever I have out of this damn bank. I don’t need to go through this bullshit.

“How interesting. I haven’t heard anyone mention the Prater Community for some time. Please have a seat while I see if Mr. Odom is available.”

The friendliness of the fellow gave Will a bit of relief and he said, “I’d rather stand,” and then he gestured with his cane.

“That will be fine,” smiled the man. “I’ll only be a moment.”

Maybe this won’t be so tough after all, but there was a big dent in his hat where he had been squeezing it. It took only a moment for Mr. Sullivan to return and then he escorted Will to the first office on the left in the back of the building. The door stood open and the words “Vice-President,” etched in large letters on the glass, showed on the outside of the door. Sitting behind an oversized mahogany desk was a short, well-fed man wearing a thick mustache and smoking a cigar, with a telephone receiver stuck to his ear. He motioned for Will to sit down.

Will noticed the office next to this one had "President" written on the closed door and the sound of muffled voices came from the other side. He studied the wooden nameplate sitting on the desk: George S. Odom, Vice-President. That bald, pudgy man sucking on the smelly cigar was in control of an important part of his life, but he wasn't impressed with him. Sticky residue stuck to the edge of his mustache and Will figured it was leftovers from breakfast.

The telephone conversation finally ended. "We can take care of that for you. If you send in the application today, we should have it completed by Friday. Talk to you later."

After Mr. Odom hung up the phone, he squeezed around the front of the desk and stretched a soft, fat hand out to Will.

"Hello, Mr. Donnelly. Please have a seat. What can we do for you today?"

Will sat in a stiff leather chair with his cane propped between his knees. All this formality reminded him of the visits with the doctor at the hospital and frankly, it was getting on his nerves.

"I understand you're holding my money and I want to know what I have to do to get some of it."

"Well, I'll have to pull your file and it will take time to check everything. Leave your telephone number with my secretary and after I get a chance to review it, I'll get back to you."

Will realized what was happening. The banker fellow knew he'd recently been discharged from a mental institution and he didn't want to waste his time on a crazy loon. A slow fuse ignited itself inside Will.

"I don't have a telephone, and I'm in a hurry," growled Will. "You pompous jerk" ran through his mind, but then he asked, "Isn't there some way I can get the information today?"

"I'm rather busy, but if you'll come back in about three hours, I should have the information for you."

Will spit his next words out like bullets from a gun. "All I need to know is how much money I have and how I can get to it."

His eyes grew dark and the creases in his face deepened as he gripped tightly to the handle of his cane and slowly stood up. Mr. Odom's cigar drooped as he backed away and squeezed into the high-backed chair behind his desk. He placed the cigar in a large black ashtray with Bank of Commerce printed in gold lettering around the rim.

"Well, maybe I could have the information ready in an hour. Would that be acceptable?"

Will grunted and slammed his hat on his head, all the time staring down at the annoying man. "I'll be back in an hour."

He didn't look to the right or left as he stormed out the front door.

I don't want to have to beg for my own money. Damn, why does this have to be so hard? Is this what it's going to be like from now on? Every time I want something, I'll have to ask some stranger for it.

Will stood outside the bank glaring, but not really seeing anything. He never noticed Suell sitting in the truck, watching him with an urgent look on his face. Will's brain was going a mile a minute remembering the scared look on that banker's face.

He was actually scared of me. That stupid, fat son of a bitch thinks he has me by the balls, but he's wrong. It'll take more than the likes of him to ...

Suddenly, a firm hand gripped his shoulder. "Mr. Donnelly, I'm Fred Jackson. I have to apologize for my nephew, George. You know how these young fellows get full of themselves. They see the word Vice-President on their door and forget who they are and where they came from."

When the warm voice made him turn around, he was eye-to-eye with a tall, slender man with thick gray hair. His distinguished-looking face looked sculptured with a prominent

nose and high cheekbones. Underneath arched, bushy eyebrows were bright gray eyes that twinkled and he grasped Will's hand firmly without squeezing it.

"Please come back inside and I'll be happy to handle your business personally."

Putting his arm on Will's shoulder, he gently steered him back inside the bank. The young woman behind the teller's desk looked up and smiled, but Mr. Sullivan was nowhere in sight. The door of the vice-president's office was closed as they walked past it. Entering the president's office, Will found comfortable looking chairs conveniently located around a large mahogany desk. Strategically placed on the right side of the room, the president was able to see and hear most anything that was going on in the bank.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?"

Will didn't have a chance to respond before Mr. Jackson handed him a steaming cup of black coffee.

"Do you take cream and sugar?"

"No, this is fine, uh ... Mr. Jackson."

"Mr. Jackson was my father. Please call me Fred."

Will sat back in the chair and took a long sip of coffee. Just then Mr. Sullivan appeared at the door holding a file in his hand.

"Here's Mr. Donnelly's file, sir."

"Thank you, John. Please close the door behind you."

He flipped open the file and browsed through its contents.

"There's quite a bit of money in your account. Your pension has added up and there is still a healthy balance left from your estate."

He showed Will the paper that listed his balance. The only withdrawals made were for taxes on the property. Will couldn't believe his eyes.

"How could there be so much? What estate are you talking about?"

“Your family owned at least four hundred acres in the Gilley-Young Hollow and your father sold off all but about ninety acres which contains your home, barn and out-buildings. Before Mrs. Donnelly passed away, she instructed us to continue paying the taxes on your property and make sure the ninety acres never sold until your death. You’re not a rich man, but if you’re careful, you can live comfortably and debt-free.”

“How did she know I was coming home? What about Sarah? Did she get anything?”

“Mrs. Donnelly and your sister were regular customers and I came to know them very well. Your sister was able to go to college and she had a nice savings that she withdrew when she moved away. Sarah knew her mother’s wishes and agreed with her decision to make you the beneficiary of her estate. Your mother was sure you would return and wanted you to have a home when you did. You can withdraw your money anytime. How much do you need today?”

Learning all this in one gulp left Will speechless. How could she have known?

He fought tears that gathered behind his eyes and closed them for a moment. Then in a voice barely audible he said, “I was thinking of buying a truck. Did you say Sarah is doing well?”

“She graduated with honors from the nursing school in Murfreesboro and got a job at a research hospital somewhere. Later she wrote to say she married and wouldn’t be returning to Woodbury.”

“So you don’t know where she is now?”

“No, it’s been years since we’ve heard anything from her.”

Will looked down at his hands, remembering the last time he saw Sarah. The banker interrupted his thoughts. “Tell me about the truck you want to buy.”

“Suell Edmonds is the one who found it. There’s a widow lady in Viola who has a Ford truck that’s only a few years old.”

“Suell’s a good mechanic. If he says it’s good you can’t go wrong, but don’t feel like you have to buy the cheapest one around. You can afford a good vehicle. If I can be of any service, I’ll be glad to help anyway I can. How much money do you think you’ll need today?”

The tension in Will’s shoulders faded like fog in the hollow after the sun rises. Sitting back in the chair, he began telling Mr. Jackson his plans for buying a mule and putting out a garden. It turned out the banker was a mule man from way back.

“My Daddy bought and sold mules and horses, and there’s nothing I like better than putting out a field of corn using a team of mules. I don’t do it much anymore, but I like to keep three or four mules just in case I might go back to being a farmer one day.” He grinned wide, deepening the creases in his face. “I guess you can understand why I can’t part with them.”

“I reckon I do,” said Will, and he looked the banker in the eye and smiled back.

“There’s a Johnson man on the Auburntown Road who has the finest mules in the county. I think he would have just what you want. I’ll give him a call and tell him to look for you in a few days. He’s fair and won’t do you wrong.”

“I’d like that.” He grew quiet and rubbed his fingers across the brim of his hat. “I was dreading today and didn’t know what to expect. You’ve made things a lot easier for me and I won’t forget it.”

“I guess you’ve had to feel your way around everything lately and I’m sure it’s been hard, but it will get easier as time passes. If ever you need anything or just want to talk, I’ll be here.”

He still couldn’t understand how his mother knew he would come home. He would think about this a lot in the days to come. They spoke a while longer and Fred arranged for the money without Will having to stand in line at the teller’s desk. They shook hands and Will walked out of the bank a little taller than

he had entered. A gentle breeze met him as he stepped outside. He took a deep breath and began walking towards Suell's truck.

"Hey, Suell, do you mind if I walk around the square for a few minutes?"

"Good idea. I'll come with you. My legs need a good stretch."

Suell climbed out of the truck and followed his friend back to the sidewalk, busting with curiosity.

"How did you like Fred Jackson?" inquired Suell.

"He's a good man to do business with," replied Will.

Suell led Will to his garage on the corner of Water Street, just down from the bank. He offered him a cold drink from the cooler, but Will just wanted to look around at all the lifts and tools. As they walked around the garage, Suell picked up a gas can and a few tools that he stuck in his coat pocket. He put the "Closed Today" sign in the window and locked the front door. Then they walked past Gunner's Diner until they reached Gaines Hardware store on the corner. A hardware store to a man is like a candy store to a child and Will enjoyed looking at all the tools on display in the window. He studied a set of come-a-longs and then walked the length of the store window, looking at screwdrivers, hammers, pliers and wrenches. They were all shiny and clean. He had always pictured tools being dirty and worn with use. He couldn't remember seeing a new anything when he worked with his daddy on the farm.

"Wanna go in?" coaxed Suell.

"No, I just wanted to look in the window."

Next, they headed for Tenpenny's Clothing store on the southeast corner of the square. A mannequin standing in the corner wore a striped suit and there was a collection of shirts, ties, and two pairs of shiny black dress shoes lying on the floor at the mannequin's feet. Will grinned when he thought about the

dummy trying to decide what to wear. There wasn't anything in the window that appealed to the old man.

As he looked around the square, Will's memory drifted back to Woodbury when he was a young boy. The courthouse was a much smaller building, there was no iron fence around it and few vehicles. Droppings from horses and mules littered the unpaved streets, but no one complained. There were few businesses on the square but on Mondays, it filled with people coming to trade pigs, goats, horses and mules. Women wore their finery to town in spite of the dirt roads. Dust clung to their skirts and coated their shiny boots. Gaggles of children clustered together to play while their mothers searched out bits of fabric for a new dress or shirt in the W.R. Department Store on East Main or gathered at Oliver and Bragg Groceries and Restaurant. A barber pole at the foot of a stairway indicated an upstairs barbershop, but most of the customers were bachelors or businessmen traveling through town.

Paved streets had replaced the dusty roads, and trucks and automobiles replaced the horses and mules. Where there were once empty lots and modest homes, there were now grocery stores, hardware, restaurants, dress shops and a poolroom. Sadness lingered in Will's mind as he remembered how things used to be. Change is hard when it comes at you all at once.

As they passed the Grey Eagle Poolroom, a man in his mid-thirties wearing run-down cowboy boots stepped outside. He leaned against the building and began cleaning his nails with his pocketknife. The two men passed, giving no notice to the younger man.

When they reached the Woodbury Drug Store, Suell suggested they get an ice cream cone. Will reached in his pocket and pulled out a roll of bills. Suell, noticing the man standing in the doorway of the poolroom behind Will, quickly pushed the old man's hand down.

“Don’t be flashing all that money out in public,” Suell whispered. “You don’t know who might be watching.”

“Guess you’re right,” said Will. He handed Suell five dollars and jammed the rest in his pocket. “Here, my treat. You buy ’em, and we’ll eat them on the way home.”

“Don’t you want to come inside and sit at the soda fountain?”

“No. I’ll just wait here.”

“Okay, I’ll be out in a minute.”

An elderly man sitting at the counter drinking coffee waved at Suell as he entered the store. “How you doing, Suell? Who’s your friend?”

“I heard you were in the hospital again, Bert,” said Suell, sidestepping the man’s question. “Are you doing all right now?”

“I’m doing okay, but I still got that ache in my gut. All they want to do is stick me with needles and do tests that cost a bundle. I’m not having any part of that mess. Who’s your friend? I don’t remember seeing him around before.”

Suell saw the freckled-faced boy who worked behind the fountain staring at Will through the front window.

“Hey, Junior, how about fixing two double-dip ice cream cones while you’re standing around doing nothing? I want a dip of vanilla and a dip of chocolate on each one.”

The boy jerked his head around and said, “Coming right up.”

Junior wore a white cap and apron, which he wiped his hands on before reaching for the dipper. The boy was probably all of seventeen and was very curious about Will. He had trouble prying up the scoops of ice cream with his long scrawny arms and he broke two cones before he finally managed to fill two.

“Having a little trouble there, Junior?” asked Suell.

His face was red as his hair and perspiration slid down his cheeks. “No, sir. I’ve got it now.”

"I avoid them hospitals as much as possible. A rich man would get poor fast if he started going to them," said Suell, looking at Bert as though their conversation never stopped.

"I hate them hospitals," said Bert. "Once they put you in, they don't want to let you out. I got things to do. I ain't got time for no hospital. Say, who's your friend outside?"

"Yeah, you're probably right," said Suell, ignoring the man's question again. He handed Junior the money and the loud bell of the cash register slowed Bert's next question. Suell took the change and hollered, "See ya'll later," and hurried out the door.

"Here," laughed Suell as he handed the change and one of the cones to Will. "You'll have to lick fast 'cause all that hot air in the drug store started them melting like a snowman in July."

Will laughed as they walked back to the truck. They were both down to the end of the cones before they reached the outskirts of town.

"Did you get enough money for your truck?"

"Sure did and then some. The banker mentioned that Johnson fellow on the Auburntown Road and said he would call him for me about getting a mule. That Fred's a nice guy."

"Well, let's see about getting you a truck first," laughed Suell. "If you got nothing better to do, why don't we head for Viola?"

"It isn't a piece of junk, is it?"

"Wait till you see her," said Suell, grinning from ear-to-ear. "She's as pretty a truck as any I've ever seen. I understand the old man bought it new two years before he passed. It hasn't any miles on it to speak of and it's kept in a garage. Course we may have to prime the engine, because it sat so long without being driven, but that's no problem."

"Do you know how to prime an engine?"

"Do I know how to prime an engine? Ah be Jesus, son, do you know who you're talking to? I've been working on automobiles

since the first one rolled off the assembly line. Why, I know more about engines than there are blades of grass in the county. Do I know how to prime an engine?"

"All right, all right. I stand corrected. I didn't know I was in the company of such a great motorized mind. How does Quixie put up with you?"

"I don't know, but I'm sure glad she does."

Quixie pulled the tiny needle through the quilt, but her mind wasn't on her stitches. It was eight-thirty when Suell went to pick up William, and they still weren't back. She worried something happened and he couldn't get his money. William had been doing so well and she didn't want him to be disappointed. The day he made up his mind to return to the hospital still haunted her. Quixie worried about their intercession. After all, there was no way to measure his wellness. She still wondered if driving was a good idea, but Suell seemed certain that it was just what Will needed to feel independent.

He said it repeatedly, "Will needs to feel like a man, and it's liable to take him a while to do that."

The clock on the mantle chimed one o'clock. She tried to convince herself that no news was good news, but somehow it didn't help. Tossing the quilt on a chair, she went to the kitchen to fix some iced tea. Too nervous to sit in the house, she went out to the front porch and her favorite rocker.

She liked the little house she shared with Suell. They had rented two rooms in the back of a house on Main Street when they first married. The landlady was always kind to them and often Suell worked out the rent by doing repair work for her. With both of them working, they were able to save up a good down payment for a new home. In time, Suell was able to buy the building on the corner of the square for his garage. He was a good mechanic and everyone liked him. The only sadness in

their lives was never having children. Both of them had longed for a family. Suell was an orphan with no siblings, and Quixie wanted to give him children more than anything in the world.

They tried for a long time and finally after five years she got pregnant. They were as happy as two people could be. Her only disappointment was not having her mother to share her happiness. They couldn't wait to turn the spare bedroom into a nursery. Quixie sewed curtains and made a quilt covered with appliqued ducks, bears, and kittens in soft colors. Suell surprised her with an oak rocking chair that had delicate carving on the back and arms. She looked forward to rocking the baby while she nursed. Then he found a child's rocker that he sat next to hers, and it made her cry for an hour.

In her fourth month, she visited the doctor's office complaining of severe pain when she stood too long. When the doctor advised her to spend the rest of her pregnancy in bed, she panicked. She could remember her mother working hard right up till the time she gave birth. Quixie knew many women who had done the same thing. Why should she be different? Something was terribly wrong, and she was afraid. Suell waited on her hand and foot and wouldn't let her do a thing. He worried about Quixie, but he hid his fear until the terrible night she woke in pain with her gown soaked in blood. Suell rushed her to the hospital but it was no use. She lost the baby.

The doctor warned her not to have another, but she wouldn't listen. Two years later, she got pregnant again, but this time she was sick every day and miscarried in her third month. She came close to dying and the doctor warned her never to get pregnant again.

Quixie stayed in the hospital three days, and then she begged the doctor to release her. She wanted to go home. The next day, the doctor discharged her from the hospital. When the nurse got a wheelchair to take her to the lobby, Suell told her

they wouldn't need it. He picked her up in his arms like a little baby and carried her to his truck. He had brought her pink and blue afghan and covered her legs with it. They started down the street, not noticing the mailman delivering letters or the children walking home from school. They rode in silence until Suell pulled into the driveway next to the house and then he pulled Quixie into his arms.

"I'm so sorry, Sweet Pea," he whispered.

"It's not your fault," said Quixie, avoiding his eyes. "It's my fault. I've let you down."

"No, no, you could never let me down. You're my life. Without you I wouldn't be anything. Please say that this won't change anything between us. I can't lose you now."

"Suell, I believe God sent you to me and every day with you has been like a precious gift. You'll have to run me off before I'll ever leave you."

They smiled through their tears, and he kissed her on the forehead, the nose, and finally on the lips.

"Let's go inside," Suell said.

Quixie and Suell had been so content in their lives that she had almost forgotten how hard life could be. When they went into the house, neither one looked in the nursery. A short time later they repainted the room light blue. Quixie made blue and white gingham curtains and they bought a three-quarter antique bed for the room. Eventually, it became her sewing room as well as the spare bedroom. They covered the crib with an old quilt and set it in the back of the garage with the little rocker. They had a good life together, and Quixie never regretted marrying Suell. She truly believed he was her special gift from God.

Suddenly, Quixie jumped out of her chair. "As good as I know Suell, he's probably taken Will up to Viola to see about the truck. Why am I just sitting here like I have nothing to do?"

She carried her glass into the kitchen and hurried into the bedroom. Rummaging through some boxes on a shelf in the closet, she finally found what she was looking for, her Brownie camera. She would take a picture of Will and his new truck. Heck, she would take a picture of Suell, Will and the truck. This would be a celebration. After all, it was his first truck. She found a roll of film and put it in the camera.

“Shoot, I’m going to bake a cake and I’ll fix a nice pot roast for dinner. They’ll be hungry when they get back. We’re going to have us a party.”

Nervous and excited at the same time, Will drove the truck back to Woodbury. It handled easier than Suell’s and that pleased him. Suell drove slower than he usually did so Will could follow him without any trouble. As they went down Highway 108, Will felt like a kid in his new truck. She was a beauty. The gray cloth seats didn’t have a mark on them and he knew a good washing would make the black paint shine like new. Suell planned the whole thing, and now Will understood why he brought the gas can and tools. It didn’t take Suell any time to start it, and he promised to tune it up when they got back to town.

There wasn’t much traffic on the road, but he got antsy whenever someone passed him. A couple of times, drivers would honk at them for going slow, but Suell just waved them around. Will dreaded the drive through McMinnville and was relieved when Suell decided to bypass the town and go back a different way.

At times, he gripped the steering wheel so tight his knuckles turned white. Then he would scold himself, saying, “This is silly. Everyone drives these days. I’m not stupid. Maybe a little crazy, but I’m not stupid. Imagine, Will Donnelly, owner of a 1951 Ford

pickup truck. Who'd have thought?" He grinned so hard that his face began to hurt.

Will thought back to the day Ramsey drove him home from the hospital. It seemed a long time ago. It's funny how things change. This time he was driving.

"Yes sir, Will Donnelly was driving his own truck. Hot Damn!"

The curves on the Woodbury highway made him nervous, but then he thought about their ride up Short Mountain and laughed at himself. A couple of times Suell honked his horn and waved with a big grin on his face and Will waved back. A comfortable ease settled over him and he started humming to himself. God, he felt good! He almost passed Suell a couple of times, but then thought better of it. He started thinking about what he would like to do now that he had his own truck. The first things that came to mind were picking up supplies for the garden and going to the grocery store. At least he wouldn't have to ask anyone for help anymore. What else would he do? Nothing came to mind ... except ... he had no one to take for a ride in his new truck. A gloomy feeling started closing in on him and it wasn't long before the kid inside him slipped away.

It was after 3:00 o'clock when they pulled up in front of Suell and Quixie's little white house. Will wanted to go home, but Suell convinced him that Quixie would burn his hide if they didn't show her the truck. He thought the house looked like Quixie, small and dainty with a white picket fence around the yard. It looked neat with small shrubs growing along the foundation of the porch. He had never been there before and for some reason, he felt like an intruder.

Quixie came out the front door holding a camera in her hands.

"Now, boys, both of you stand in front of the truck. Not there, Suell, stand towards the back so the windshield and

bumper show. All right now, smile. Will, for heaven's sakes, smile. That's right. Ready now?"

The flash went off, blurring their vision. Suell laughed and ran up to the porch.

"OK, it's your turn now. Stand down there next to Will."

That warm feeling rushed up his neck and Will could feel the heat in his face. When Quixie came close, his arm automatically went around her shoulders. The fragrance of lilac water mixed with fresh baked bread made his head dizzy and he had to resist the urge to hold her close. A terrible yearning flooded his brain, reminding him once again how much he had lost.

Chapter 16:

The Preacher

Will made his first trip to the grocery store on McCrary Street in Woodbury the day after he bought the truck. It took him a while to look through the aisles of the store and decide what he wanted. With the help of the owner, Mr. Smith, a man near eighty-two years old, he filled two boxes with supplies. A warm feeling filled him when the old man told him that his mama and sister used to shop there. He thought about stopping by Ramsey's store, but then decided against it. He hadn't seen his old friend since they drove home from the VA.

As the check marks on the calendar grew, he worked through his loneliness by staying busy from sunup till sunset. The remarkable improvements around the farm were satisfying and at the end of the day when he sat on the porch drinking his coffee, he often thought about his mama. Maybe she could see the old place from heaven, and maybe she was smiling.

His housekeeping improved and he bathed more often, but he missed the comforts of a bathroom. In the hospital there were plenty of toilets and showers and he never looked forward to dragging out the old metal tub and heating the water for a bath. He tried not to think about the outhouse.

He helped Suell fix the back door and bought a mop to scrub the floors. He wanted to trade in the washtub for a

washing machine. This thought had been buzzing around in his brain ever since the day Quixie took his sheets home to wash. He tried giving her some money for doing it, but she acted insulted by it. He washed them by hand ever since so the idea of a washing machine sounded better all the time. His neighbors had electricity, so it wouldn't take much to extend the line down to his house. Maybe the next time he drove to town he would go by the electric company and ask about it.

The other thought that burned in his mind was a mule. Every shovelful of dirt he turned made him long for his own mule. Will kept picturing himself holding the reins as a big tan mule turned the rows with ease. It would be so much ... well, it would be fun. That was a foreign word in his vocabulary. Fun is a wonderful word.

It was nearing the end of April, and the garden was calling for seeds to grow and nourish. The scarecrow seemed to stand straighter since he cleaned up the garden. As he walked up and down the rows, he tried ignoring the scarecrow and still considered destroying it. But as time passed, he got accustomed to it looming over him and he couldn't keep from talking to it now and then. Talking aloud had become a habit since he was alone so much, but talking to the scarecrow, even if it was inanimate, seemed easier. Besides, it never argued and it was a good listener.

When Will cleaned out the barn, he found an old push mower. After sharpening the blades and cleaning it with oil, the mower worked fine. The lilac bush in the front yard was full of blooms, so he would wait until later to trim it. The yard was coming along, and he thought he might pick up some marigolds from Rigsby's Feed and Seed Store to plant along the edge of the garden. They'll help keep the bugs from eating the plants.

One Monday morning a noise from outside drew Will's attention away from the leather harness he was oiling. There

was a blue car parked in the road. The thought that someone from the VA might come out to check on him worried him sometimes. As he peeked through the curtains, a stranger got out of the car and eased over the rocks crossing the creek as if he'd done it many times. Dressed in a dark suit that accentuated the strands of gray along his temple, the man looked all around before stepping up on the porch and then he called out.

"Mr. Donnelly, I'm Medford Allen from the Woodbury Church of Christ."

Just what I need, a preacher. "What do you want?" said Will, standing in the doorway.

"I've been meaning to visit you, but I've been out of town. May I come in?"

Will wanted to say no and shut the door, but his mama's raising stopped him, though it didn't curb his rudeness. "I suppose." He turned and walked into the front room, leaving the preacher to open the door.

Med wondered if Will remembered his visits to the hospital. He offered his hand, but the old man just sank into a big easy chair in front of the fireplace, barely acknowledging him. His apprehension began to fade as the familiar room washed over him. It still held the charm of the early 1900s, from the Last Supper over the sofa to the aged clock on the mantle. Intricate carvings embraced the top and sides of the clock and the pendulum swung so smooth you could barely hear it. An oil lamp sat on the table next to Will's chair and starched lace doilies covered the side table as well as the one by the front window where the family Bible lay near another lamp. A bookmark sticking out of the Bible made the preacher wonder if Will was reading it or if his mother had left it. The room had the touch of a woman's hand, and Med smiled, thinking about Quixie. The

wallpaper was faded, but it only softened the pattern of flower sprays along the wall.

A handsome walnut bookcase along the side of the room overflowed with books, and the preacher perused the collection that included *Pilgrim's Progress*, *History of George Washington*, *Dr. Gunn's Medical Book*, *The Little Lame Prince*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a set of four books by Charles Dickens and many more. He remembered borrowing books from Mrs. Donnelly as an excuse to see Sarah. It would be no surprise to him to know that she had seen through his charade, but she never mentioned it.

Med sat in the rocker near the fireplace. The fresh smell of burnt wood, oil and cigarette smoke wafted through the room. He grinned when he noticed Will's worn-out house shoes with his big toe sticking out the top like a little flag. There were mud stains on the old man's pant legs, a two days' growth of beard, plus food stains on his shirt that emphasized his bachelor status. The old man silently stared at the cold fireplace, so the preacher decided to take the horse by the reins.

Clearing his throat he said, "I'll tell you straight out that Ramsey Douglas is a friend of mine. He thought I needed to come see you, but I had already planned to do that anyway. I meant to come sooner, but I've been out of town. I'm not here to talk you into coming to church, but I do want you to know you're welcome."

"Well, you're straight-forward, Preacher, I'll say that for you, so I will be too. I'm a certified crazy and have been for thirty-five years. I guess getting old slowed me down so they figured I was fairly harmless and cut me loose."

Will picked up the harness and continued working the oil into the leather with a rag as if he'd never been interrupted, "I like being alone and don't cotton to being around people. As it is the folks in town aren't real excited about my being here, so you probably won't catch me in one of your pews any time soon."

It wasn't often that the preacher was at a loss for words, but he recovered quickly, "Is there any way you could call me Med? And would you happen to have any iced tea made?"

The lines in Will's face softened when a half grin turned up the edges of his mouth. "I reckon," he said.

Will's indifference didn't keep him from noticing the preacher's interest in the house. It wasn't as if he was the nosy sort, but the preacher acted as though he'd just returned home after being on a long journey.

He started to offer the preacher a cigarette, then stopped. "Sorry, guess you don't smoke,"

With a sheepish grin, Med said, "Well, I don't smoke in public, but I do enjoy one every now and then," and he reached for the cigarette.

The old man listened attentively as the preacher talked of his time spent with Will's parents and Sarah, and then he talked of his own childhood in Kentucky.

"We lived in Eastern Kentucky, and coon hunting was a favorite past time. Mama could whip up the best coon you ever put in your mouth. Everyone would brag on how good it was, but she'd never eat a bite. One evening as I sopped up my gravy with the last biscuit, I asked Mama why she never ate any. She hemmed and hawed a bit, and then she told me that she had a pet raccoon when she was a little girl. Her face turned dreamy-looking when she talked about how pretty it was with its long, fluffy fur. She found it in the woods near her house and being only ten, she fell in love with it immediately. Her daddy warned her that it wasn't wise to try to keep a wild raccoon, but she was determined. Since she loved it so much, she was sure it would love her back. One day she had it nuzzled up to her cheek like girls will do, and the thing took a plug out of her ear. Mama said it hurt and showed me the part of her ear lobe that had a little

chunk missing. She cried all night, not because it hurt her ear, but because it hurt her feelings. That little coon was the reason she'd never eat one. It'd be like eating an old friend."

Will shook his head. "Sounds like Sarah. She was always bringing wild things home from the woods. Once when she was five, a lizard crawled out of the creek bed and she thought it would grow up to be an alligator. When Mama explained the difference between a lizard and an alligator, Sarah was very disappointed. She named it Hannibal and set it free, hoping it would stay close. It stayed around for a while and then finally disappeared."

The preacher got a serious look on his face when Will mentioned Sarah. Then he stared at the floor for a minute and said, "She was a good friend. I miss her."

It was plain as day by the look on his face and the sadness in his voice that he felt more than friendship for Sarah.

"Did you ever tell her how you felt?" asked Will.

The preacher looked surprised and embarrassed by the question. "I tried, but I think she was uncomfortable because I was her preacher. At least that's what I told myself."

Will thought about this for a while. It never occurred to him that even people who aren't locked up put in an awful lot of time waiting for things they can't have. Time gets away and then it's too late.

When he stood up to carry the ice tea pitcher into the kitchen, Med followed with the empty glasses.

Noticing the dishes piled in the sink the preacher said, "You keep house about the same way I do."

"When you're alone, you're not so particular."

"I know what you mean."

They walked back to the living room and claimed their chairs. As they sat listening to the pendulum on the clock gently sway back and forth, the preacher recited a poem.

“The clock of life is wound but once, and no man has the power — To tell just where the hands will stop, at late or early hour. To lose one’s wealth is sad indeed, to lose one’s health is more. To lose one’s soul is such a loss as no man can restore. The present is our own, live, love, toil with a will, place no faith in tomorrow, for the clock may then be still.”

“That sounds like something Mama would read when we were children,” Will said.

“I had to memorize it. Whenever I see a clock, it brings it back to me.”

Will laid the harness on the footstool and offered the preacher another cigarette. “Trapping was real popular when I was a boy. That’s how that clock came to be sitting there,” he nodded his head towards the mantle. “Mama saw it on a peddler’s wagon and I watched her stroke it like it was real special. She loved pretty things and the fancy carvings were hard to resist. She never said a word, but I knew she wanted it so I aimed to buy it for her birthday. I was only twelve and the only way to make money fast was by trapping. It wasn’t no time before I had me the prettiest red fox you ever laid eyes on.”

“You hit the jackpot,” said Med. “It must have brought you five or six dollars.”

“Nope, seven-fifty. I had enough for the clock and a lace handkerchief from the general store and still had change in my pocket.” Will hesitated, and then continued telling the story, “My brother was only seven, but he came with me and helped me carry the traps so I let him pick out the handkerchief. We wrapped everything in brown paper and twine. Mama acted as if we gave her the moon wrapped in gold ribbon. I’m kind of surprised that it still works. It always was smooth-running.”

Will grew quiet again as he stared at the clock on the mantle. It was odd how he could talk so easily to this man about his brother. He wondered about that.

“Do you ever hear from Sarah?” asked Med.

He was slow to answer and took a long drag from his cigarette before he did.

“She’s up North somewhere. They tried finding her before I got discharged from the VA, but didn’t have any luck.”

Med heard the false apathy in Will’s voice and said, “Sometimes I get lonely too.”

Will stood up and walked to the door. “Like I said before, I want to be left alone. I don’t bother anybody and nobody bothers me.”

The preacher knew it was his cue to leave. “I enjoyed talking to you and I hope we can be friends. If there’s ever anything you need or if you just want to talk, I’m not far away.”

“Thanks, but reckon I’m doing okay,” said Will, and opened the front door.

As they stepped out on the porch, a breeze blew the new leaves on the elm tree until they fluttered like miniature fans. The fresh spring air instinctively made both men inhale deeply. Sunlight sprayed all around the porch and a robin struggled with a worm in the middle of the yard, not paying the least bit of attention to the two men. Med turned and rested his hand on Will’s shoulder.

“I haven’t been completely honest with you. Ramsey wasn’t the only person who sent me to see you. When I moved to Woodbury some twenty years ago and met your mother, father and Sarah, they became like family to me. My mother passed away when I was very young. Guess I adopted your family. When Mr. Donnelly passed away, your mother asked me to do the funeral service. I made it a point to come out and visit her as often as I could. We spent a lot of time on this porch rocking and talking. One day she asked me for a favor. Later, I realized she must have known she wouldn’t be around much longer. She

made me promise that when I saw you—and she was insistent on repeating not if I saw you, but when I saw you—I should give you this.”

Med reached inside his coat and pulled out a white envelope, which he handed to him. On it was written, “To my son, William E. Donnelly,” in small neat letters that Will recognized instantly.

He looked as though a tornado sucked the air out of his body. He held the envelope in his hand and just stared at it with a deep, hurtful look on his face.

Med wasn’t sure what to expect, but the sight of the old man leaning on the railing, holding the envelope in his trembling hand, made him wonder at the love of a mother. He was still her child, and she knew he needed something to ease his soul. Med looked out at the yard for a moment, thinking of Sarah and wishing she were here.

He cleared his throat and said, “She never lost faith that you would come home someday. She loved you and was very proud of you.”

Med patted Will’s shoulder, stepped off the porch and walked towards his car. He laid his hat on the seat next to him and started the engine. Then he looked up at the porch where Will sat in the rocker, staring at the envelope in his hand.

The preacher recognized Will’s vulnerability and knew that he was a man who needed prayers. Med waved, but the old man never looked at him.

Will sat motionless in the chair as the preacher’s car disappeared around the curve of the road. He sat there for a long time looking at the envelope, but didn’t open it. He wouldn’t open it. Holding it was enough. As the noon sun reached over the hollow, it warmed him and he fell into a peaceful sleep, like a small boy in his mother’s arms.

A squirrel chattering in the elm tree woke him, and he noticed a yellow cat prowling around the base of the tree.

“Where did you come from?”

The cat looked up at him, then sat licking her paws and washing her face. She was so fat her belly nearly touched the ground and Will knew there were kittens on the way.

“Are you hungry?” he asked. “Wait right there and I’ll get you something.”

He eased out of the rocker, but when he opened the door, the cat scurried in between his feet. She high-stepped into the living room and rubbed up against his chair, then went to the fireplace. A large rag rug lay in front of the hearth. She stood in the middle of it and turned around several times. When everything was right, she lay down and curled her tail around her body.

“Hmm, you act like you’ve been here before.”

Will found an old bowl in the back of the cupboard and filled it with bits of stew meat left over from supper. He carried the bowl into the living room and set it on the rug. The cat sniffed once or twice, rose up and stretched, then proceeded to empty the bowl.

“Just make yourself at home,” Will chuckled as he sat in his chair. She purred and rubbed herself around his legs.

“Well, if you don’t beat all. I wonder if you can catch mice. If you plan to stay around here, you’ll have to earn your keep. We don’t take to freeloaders.”

The cat looked up at Will as though she understood what he said, then jumped in his lap. She made a couple of rounds, kneading her claws into his legs, then settled down for a nap. As Will sat there in the quiet room, he realized that he hadn’t felt so easy in a long time.

“Guess you’ll need a name if you’re going to hang around here. How does Esther sound? She’s a lady from the Bible and

I always liked that name. You're going to need a place to bunk down. There's some straw in the barn."

He set the cat down and reached for his cane. When he opened the door, the cat scooted out in front of him, but instead of going to the barn, Will made a detour towards the workshop. Memories were hard on him, but the workshop was full of them and they were calling to him. The cat seemed to know where they were going and waded through the clover next to Will's feet. Weeds grew in clumps all around the building, and the old man almost tripped over the ancient kerosene engine with its cracked hood sitting on rotted timbers just outside the shop. The black and red paint had all but peeled off, but the date, 1913, still showed on a bracket near the top. The engine ran on kerosene so his daddy set it outside the workshop to keep the odor at bay and to prevent a fire. Then he ran a pipe through the wall to let in the heat. Daddy was real smart about things. Guess he could do anything he set his mind to.

Weather and time had warped the wood door and it stuck when Will tried to open it. He shoved his shoulder hard against it before it gave up its vigil.

The sun tried to push through the windows, but the stains of weather and dust on them made the room dim and dreamlike. The vibration of the door opening made dust jump around the air, and it reminded him of a story his mother read to them about a fairy place where everyone carried magic dust in a pouch around their necks. A scent of wax, old wood and kerosene hung in the air. His eyes followed the row of dust-covered tools hanging along the wall. A turning lathe sat in the middle of the large room and next to it on a rusted metal stand lay wood chisels long forgotten. A large table saw covered by an old feed sack stood near the back, and different sized turning belts hung on pegs along the wall. His daddy always kept a good supply of belts. The steel shaft fastened to the ceiling held various wheels

allowing several machines to run on it. It was a well-equipped shop in its day.

Will went over to the workbench and picked up a hammer. The wooden handle felt warm, as though someone had just laid it down. Wood shavings were everywhere, and they would scatter each time a breeze came through the cracks in the windows. He inhaled deeply to smell the musky scents of wood and time. A pile of scrap wood neatly stacked in the corner made him smile. After Daddy finished a job, the boys had to clean up the mess.

Once they turned six, they went to work. Their first job was sanding the wood, and when Daddy cut trees, it was their job to pick up the limbs. By the time they turned eight, they would be on the end of a crosscut saw with Daddy on the other end. Every year they hunted hickory and ash trees to make rounds, posts and ladder-backs. Daddy would cut the boards and let them season before using them. They had to go all the way to McMinnville to find white oak for the splits to weave bottoms for the chairs.

Jim Stewart was the only man in the area who knew how to make a good splitter and Daddy purchased one from him when Will was small. Will and Jake spent hours making white oak splits for the chairs. They would cut them in three quarter inch widths on the split maker by pressing the paddle with their foot and pulling down from the top on a drawknife. A memory of young Jacob sitting in the corner, his long slender arms posed like a conductor, and his gaze focused on the drawknife as he cut each split was etched in Will's mind.

It wasn't unusual for them to carry chairs to the house at night if there was an order to get out. Both Mama and Sarah knew how to weave a variety of patterns for the seats and many winter days and nights passed with everyone working on the chairs.

An unfinished child's rocker sat on the end of the workbench. Will walked over to it and automatically picked up a scrap of sandpaper and began sanding the arms. Old habits are hard to break. He spent many hours in this workshop as a boy and a young man. He learned how to use the tools and machines working alongside his daddy. Working with his hands gave him a sense of tranquility. It always did. The same kind of peacefulness one got watching cows graze in a field or sitting beside a stream with a fishing pole dangling over the water, not caring if the fish bit or not.

On mild days, Mama and Sarah did the caning outside, while the boys turned the posts in the lathe. It was tedious work because they would have to turn the wood, sand it, then turn the wood again. They would keep doing this until it was smooth all the way around. Daddy was particular about everything that came out of his shop and never let the boys get sloppy about their work. The children acquired their own sense of pride from doing a good job.

Esther followed Will inside, and was poking in the corners when suddenly she crouched and listened, studying something only she could see. She lay very still, then—Wham! She leaped forward and he heard a loud squeak. When she turned around, a mouse hung from her mouth by the tail. Esther looked at Will as if to say, "Where shall I put it?"

"Well, looks like you're going to earn your keep just fine. Why don't you take him outside?" As if she understood, the cat pranced out the open door, but Will didn't look to see what she did with the mouse.

He carried the small chair and sandpaper to the front porch, forgetting all about the straw for Esther. It wouldn't take long

to sand it, and maybe he would put a finish on it too. What he would do with it then never crossed his mind.

One morning as he followed Esther across the yard, a movement in the woods caught his eye. A small boy hid behind a tree watching him. Will pretended not to notice, figuring it was his neighbor's son. The boy watched for a long time, then suddenly disappeared. He grinned to himself, knowing little boys are curious, and then he remembered that he had stopped to straighten the scarecrow's hat. The boy probably saw him talking to it, got frightened and ran away. Damn!

Later that evening as he finished eating, Esther meandered into the kitchen looking for supper.

"Well, Miss Highfalutin, you finally decide to eat?" He cut some scraps from the ham bone and laid them on the floor, where she gobbled them in an instant.

"Cats only think they're independent. Good thing you're such good company," he said.

Stacking the dishes in the sink, he heard a strange noise. A light tap on the front door sounded foreign to his ear. When he peeked around the doorway, a pair of eyes peered back at him. A handsome boy with pale blond hair that curled around his ears and big blue eyes had his nose pressed against the screen. When their eyes met, they both grinned.

"Mr. Donnelly, are you busy? I'm Chris Dawson from down the road, and I thought I'd come by and say hello."

Will recognized him as the boy hiding in the trees that morning. He was probably just curious, maybe plain nosy, but the boy's smile made him melt and he was happy to see him.

As he stepped out onto the porch, Will said, "I just finished my supper. Would you like a cookie or something?"

"No, sir, I had supper already. I didn't have homework today so Mama said I could come visit ... if it's alright with you."

“Well, I guess I could use the company. Have a seat.”

They rocked side by side on the porch, looking up towards the top of the hill where a hawk glided over some trees.

An awkward silence fell around them until Will cleared his throat. “Do you like mules?”

“Yes, sir,” grinned Chris. “Daddy used to work with mules when he was a boy and his granddaddy had two. He told me all about them.”

“Is that a fact? Well, lately I’ve been giving some thought to buying me one. It might come in handy to work my garden. What do you think?”

Chris stopped rocking and looked at Will, his eyes shining, “I think that’s a great idea. If you need any help with him, just let me know.”

“As a matter of fact, I could use some help. I’ve got a bum knee and won’t be able to exercise her much. I sure could use someone to walk her around the yard every now and then. Do you think you could handle her?”

Will could hardly keep from laughing when he saw the enthusiasm in the boy’s face.

“Yes, sir. I’m sure I could.”

“Maybe I’ll try to find me one.”

The boy was quiet for a few minutes and then he looked up at the old man and asked, “Mr. Donnelly, when do you think you’ll be getting that mule?”

“Real soon, maybe this week, but you’d better ask your mama if it’s okay for you to help me with the mule.”

Chris jumped out of his chair, flew down the steps before he looked back, and hollered, “I’ll go ask her right now.”

In a flash, the boy jumped across the creek, his bare feet hardly touching the rocks, and then he disappeared around the curve of the road.

Will laughed so hard that Esther pawed at the screen door, wanting to know what the noise was about. When he opened the door, the cat scurried out and began sniffing around Chris's chair.

"Looks like we may have made a friend, Esther."

The cat jumped in the old man's lap, did her usual kneading and turning, then settled down for a nap.

"I think I'll go have a talk with Mr. Johnson on the Auburntown Road."

Saturday came, and Will got to thinking about going to church. He thought about it all day as he worked in the garden, and fought to brush aside the doubts that filled his brain.

As he fed Esther he spoke to her. "What do you think about going to church, Miss Esther? Mama always said it did a body good to spend some time with the Lord. I think I'm more like Daddy, though. He thought standing out in the middle of a field with nature surrounding him was as close to the Lord as he could get. It might be nice to see some people for a change. It gets hard talking with no one to answer back at you."

Will looked over at the scarecrow and then he looked down the road, wishing Chris would come along. He was a nice boy and good company. Maybe by the time Chris came back, he would have the mule. Mr. Johnson promised to deliver it any day. Will was hungry for someone to talk to and he was anxious to see the boy again. Thinking about Chris kept his thoughts from straying to that gray place where the scarecrow lingered and sadness held him captive.

Will fried country ham and potatoes for supper. He never thought about lunchtime or suppertime because the time of day only declared whether it was light or dark. His paunch had disappeared because food wasn't a priority anymore and the desire to eat became secondary to the work around the farm.

Exposure from working outside was giving him a weathered, healthy look. Physically he felt better than he had in a long time.

Willie, the nursing assistant from the hospital, often crossed his mind. "Go easy," he would say. "Keep busy, and one day will tumble after another, and you'll be living your life again."

It looked like he was right after all and he wished his old friend could see how well he was doing. Then the scarecrow jumped up in his mind and he had second thoughts.

"Well, I'm doing pretty good. Maybe I'll write him a letter. I could mail it to the hospital. Maybe I will ... sometime."

The big yellow cat rubbed against Will's pant leg. She could smell food and began meowing for her dinner.

"What do you think, Esther? Shall I check out that church tomorrow? I don't think they'll shut the door on me. Why am I so worried? There's no sense being holed up here like a hermit. Med seems like a good man, and I think Chris's family goes to that church so it's not like I wouldn't know anyone."

He sighed deeply. "Why is everything so hard?"

Will dropped bits of meat to Esther and the cat grabbed them up in a hurry. After cleaning up the dishes, he poured another cup of coffee and headed for the porch. Esther squeezed out the screen door with him and jumped in his lap as he settled back to rock a while. Will was beginning to find comfort in the stillness of the hollow. Tonight the moon was bright and the sky was dotted with stars. He could hear a hoot owl somewhere in the distance and the tapping of a woodpecker on a tree searching for food. This had been another good week. The visit from the preacher started it out, and then along came Esther and best of all, Chris. He was a great kid and made him feel kind of like a grandfather. The Dawsons must be good people and he was glad they lived nearby.

He rocked and smoked a few cigarettes. Then he made up his mind. He would go to church in the morning. All he had to do was find that white shirt he bought from the canteen at the VA.

“There’s an iron around here somewhere.”

Chapter 17:

The Church

Sunday morning brought dark clouds, which moved slowly across the sky, promising rain, but they didn't hamper the spirits of the many churchgoers. Women and young girls wearing hats and carrying Bibles greeted each other as they hurried inside. The men stood outside a while longer, gathered in various groups, talking about the weather, crops or the latest town gossip. Loud, rambunctious boys chased each other around the yard until the last minute before the service began. Their fathers herded them into church, hushing them and pulling off their caps.

Ramsey and Helen arrived late, so he let her out at the door of the church and then went to park the car. As he pulled into the parking lot, he saw Will's truck move slowly down Water Street.

"Jesus, is Will coming to church?"

He never expected him to attend church services. He had been so adamant about keeping to himself. Ramsey regretted not going out to see his old friend, but the store had kept him busy. Who was he kidding? Ever since Helen found out about Ramsey bringing Will home, his life had been miserable. He felt good about helping Will, but all his bravado disappeared with the rest of his plans made throughout the years.

Ramsey pretended not to see him and hurried inside the church. It wasn't hard to find Helen, as they sat in the same pew for more than twenty years. Ramsey kept looking back, wondering if Will would really walk through the doors and side-glancing at Helen, prayed he wouldn't. The song leader started the worship service with Amazing Grace. Ramsey felt sick to his stomach as they sang.

Amazing Grace how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.

He felt like a wretch for ignoring his friend, but he dreaded Helen's reaction when she saw him. Maybe she wouldn't notice him. Fat chance, he thought, and gave a long sigh.

Will saw Ramsey hurry inside the church and wished he hadn't taken so long getting ready. It was always noticeable when someone came in late. The closer he got to the door, the more he wanted to turn around and leave. He hadn't expected to see so many cars and wondered at the size of the congregation.

His clothes hung loose on him and he was wearing a belt and suspenders to hold up his pants. He knew his windbreaker looked out of place among all the suits. Will had shaved and appeared clean, but there was still an unkempt look about him. A young man held the door open for him and offered his hand.

"Good morning."

"Morning," mumbled Will.

As he looked over the packed pews, he shriveled. I've made a mistake. He started to turn around when an usher waved at him and pointed to an empty seat at the end of the pew. Thank God, he wouldn't have to crawl over anybody. Will sat down, removed his hat and tucked his cane between his knees.

When the hymn ended, the song leader stepped down and another man stepped up to the pulpit to make the announcements.

“We welcome all our visitors this morning. You are invited to join us for services every Sunday and Wednesday evenings at 7:00 p.m. and for Bible School at 9:00 a.m. on Sunday. Brother Allen has just returned from a revival at the Leoni Church of Christ, where he was the guest speaker.”

After reading funeral announcements, he continued with a list of names of members who were sick or in the hospital. Some of the names sounded familiar, but Will couldn't put a face to any of them.

Ramsey wasn't listening to the announcements. For God's sake, he thought, I'm a grown man and here I am acting like a guilty child. His eyes scanned the crowd and there were no unusual reactions, so he began to relax a little. Helen picked up a copy of the church bulletin and used it as a fan. She must be having another hot flash. The fan's movement increased to a fast, furious pace. Suddenly, she poked his arm and when he saw the icy glare in her eyes, his heart sank.

After the announcements, the song leader returned to the podium to lead the congregation in another hymn.

“Please open your song book to Number 56, Does Jesus Care? His strong tenor voice led the congregation and soon the church was filled with the beauty of the sweet words.

Does Jesus care when my way is dark with a nameless dread and fear?

As the daylight fades into deep night shades does He care enough to be near?

A tiny old woman sitting at the end of the pew across the aisle leaned over so she could get a good look at Will and the look of malice on her wrinkled face startled him. Her gnarled fingers clutched a black purse as though it held all her secrets. The old woman's piercing look made him turn away.

Does Jesus care when I've said goodbye to the dearest on earth to me

And my sad heart aches till it nearly breaks. Is it ought to Him, does He see?

Fans donated by the Woodbury Funeral Home fluttered all around him like distracted butterflies and beads of sweat formed on his forehead. He was so hot and the old woman was still staring at him. Who was she? Will tried to ignore her, but he could almost feel her eyes cutting into his skin. The words of the hymn seemed to be speaking to him.

Does Jesus care when my heart is pained too deeply for mirth and song?

As the burdens press, and the cares distress, and the way grows weary and long?

The words touched Will's heart, but he couldn't get the old woman out of his mind. He couldn't remember ever seeing her before, so why was she so interested in him?

Oh yes, He cares, I know He cares. His heart is touched with my grief.

Where days are weary, the long nights dreary, I know my Savior cares.

After the hymn ended, the preacher stepped up to the podium. He was dressed the same as when Will saw him last, but something about him seemed different. It must be the podium that gave him a look of authority. Brother Allen held the Bible in his left hand in such a way that it seemed molded to his palm. As he looked over the audience and smiled, Will thought he looked directly at him. Then the Bible opened seemingly by itself and without looking at the page, Brother Allen began to speak.

"Does Jesus care?" he began, "We ask that question when we are filled with doubt and loneliness. We wonder if Jesus hears our prayers when we are grieved or worried without any relief

in sight. But my dear friends, He does care and He reminds us every day ...”

It didn't seem possible that the man standing at the podium was the same person with whom Will had spent several hours. He thought he would feel comfortable because he liked the preacher, but it was different here. With so many strange faces, how could he fit in? The only place he felt comfortable was in the little house tucked away in the hollow. The preacher's voice faded with the sway of flowered hats rocking back and forth and the sound of old men coughing and babies crying. The cacophony of sounds, like hundreds of birds rose, to a deafening roar in Will's ears. Does Jesus care? He kept repeating these words over and over in his mind. If He cares, why did he feel so alone in a building full of people?

He couldn't stay there any longer. He felt as though the walls were shrinking and closing in on him. Every fiber of his body wanted to run out of that church. He slowly rose out of his seat, but his hands were so shaky the cane fell to the floor. The high ceiling of the church made it sound like a gun went off and the man sitting next to him jumped. Will felt a million eyes focus on him and he thought he might faint. The man in the pew behind him stepped out and grabbed his arm so he wouldn't fall, then he retrieved the cane. Without saying a word, Will took the cane from the man and walked as quickly as he could out the door. The tap-tap of the cane echoed as Helen's fan fluttered back and forth.

A slow drizzle was falling and the wet coolness felt good on Will's hot face. He took a deep breath and began walking towards his truck. When he got about twenty feet from the church, the door opened and the old woman hobbled out and hollered at him.

“You're William Donnelly, aren't you?” she hissed and pointed her purse towards him like a weapon. “Did you come

back to torment me? Why didn't you stay away? You're not wanted here."

The color drained from Will's face. Just as he feared, the guilt and accusations were all around him. A man came out the door and said something to the woman, but she just pushed him away. He looked towards Will as though he were going to speak, then shook his head and led the old woman back inside the church.

Tears stung the corners of Will's eyes as he groped for the handle of his truck. He drove without seeing anything around him.

"I shouldn't have come. I should have followed my first instincts and stayed home. The past is the past, and you can never go back."

He weaved over the center line as he went around a curve, and a car coming towards him had to swerve to miss hitting him. Will never saw the car, nor did he see the cows grazing along the sloping hills or smell the wet grass. Raindrops covered the windshield, but he couldn't think to turn on the windshield wipers. The rain on the windows matched the tears on his cheeks as though they were one and the same.

He slowed down when he came to the Stones River Road. After turning, he pressed hard on the accelerator and the truck began to slide on the gravel until it finally slid into the ditch. He banged on the steering wheel and stared through the windshield. Water in the creek gushed over the rocks and he thought about the many footsteps that had tramped this way. He remembered all the times Mama, Daddy, Jacob, Sarah and he had walked this path together on their way to school, church or the general store. Now the footsteps were gone, and it was as though they had never passed this way at all.

Putting the truck in reverse, he backed out of the ditch and continued down the River Road. When he reached the hollow,

the trees leaned over the creek bed, and no imprints of life were visible there either. Only the rocks remained and they were cold. The house waited for his return, but he was weary and laid his head on the steering wheel, trembling in frustration. The contented feeling he had felt the night before was gone and in its wake was anxiety and fear. What a fool he was to think he might find peace and maybe a little happiness in his life before it was over. He should have died on that battlefield with Jacob.

Robert led Miss Ida back inside the church but waited in the vestibule to give her a chance to calm down before returning to their seats.

“I don’t know what’s going on in your mind, but this has got to stop. What in the world would make you attack someone like that?” He looked around, hoping no one could hear him.

She pulled away from him in disgust. “Leave me alone. You don’t know anything.”

Robert looked at Miss Ida and wondered if she was losing her sanity. Perhaps she needed to be committed for her own safety as well as others. That would end all of this once and for all. Then he thought about his grandfather and knew he couldn’t do it. He turned his back on her in frustration and ran his fingers through his hair. The old woman made him furious.

A few minutes later, they walked through the double doors and returned to their pew. The minister was speaking, but his words sounded like the hum of bees in Robert’s ears. Instinctively, he reached for Kaye’s hand, and the warmth of it resonated through him. Isabel slept in her lap, and Kaye looked at him and smiled. He looked at his sons sitting next to their mother and the pride he felt made him forget about Miss Ida.

Bobby was nearly as tall as he was, with the same eyes and chin. He wasn’t shy like Robert was at his age, but he had a serious nature that pleased his father and worried his mother.

On the other hand, Chris was just like Kaye. He was sweet-natured, very gentle, and he never found fault with anyone. Dressed in their Sunday best, they looked handsome. Chris wore the sweater that Quixie knitted for his birthday, and Bobby wore a jacket and tie. Kaye was a good mother and took care of all of them. He was a lucky man.

Wrapped up in his own thoughts, Robert barely noticed when they passed communion. When the offering basket passed down the pew, he watched Miss Ida fumble in her handbag for her little beaded change purse. She picked out two quarters, tossed them in the basket and shoved it at him. He always folded his bill in thirds before placing it into the basket and then he shoved it under another one. Everyone filed out of the pews when worship was over, some going to Bible class while others headed home.

Brother Allen stood at the front door greeting all the members. He shook Helen's hand and as she passed, held tight to Ramsey's arm so he would stop a moment.

"Is William ill?"

"I don't know," mumbled Ramsey. "I haven't seen him for a while."

Ramsey pressed forward, leaving the preacher staring after him with a puzzled look on his face.

Kaye paused inside the door to speak to a few people and several elderly ladies patted the boys' heads and remarked how tall they were getting. The boys slipped out of their reach and hurried outside to find their friends.

Chris turned around and ran back to where his mother was standing and asked her to bend down so he could whisper in her ear.

"Are we having dinner with Miss Ida today?"

"No," she whispered back.

Chris' face gleamed with joy, for he dreaded Sunday dinner at Miss Ida's. It was bad enough having breakfast with her. She yelled and made them go outside even when the weather was bad. Luckily, Isabel seldom cried, but their mother would have to hold her constantly so she wouldn't touch any of Miss Ida's things. The boys had a reprieve, and the rain was the only thing that might prevent them from playing ball with their Dad this afternoon.

Bobby was standing with a group of his friends when Turney Gibbs, a boy from the eighth grade, rode up on his bike. He had on old clothes and dirty tennis shoes and everyone knew he never went to church. Petey Youngblood whispered something in Turney's ear and the two boys started laughing. Then Petey started in on Bobby.

"Can't you keep your crazy neighbor home where he belongs? Did you see how everyone jumped when he dropped his cane? I thought I would bust a gut. It sounded like a gun going off. BAAM! He flew out of the church like a ghost was after him."

Bobby's face got hot, and he shuffled from one foot to the other. The boys wouldn't stop teasing him about his "loony neighbor."

"He's not crazy anymore. Otherwise they wouldn't have let him out of the hospital."

"My old man says that he went crazy in the war, and he'll never be sane again," taunted Turney. "He says that some soldiers get so scared they actually wet their pants on the battlefield and they're afraid of everything. I bet you can hear him in the middle of the night screaming in his sleep. They never get over it and they have to lock them up in padded cells and put straitjackets on them. You'd better watch out. If you see him

walking around with a gun, he might think you're the enemy and start shooting."

All the boys started talking at once. "Is that really true? Bobby, have you seen him do strange things? Is he really scary?" Turney was eating up all the attention he was getting from the younger boys.

Just then, Chris walked up to tell Bobby they had to leave. "My brother knows him. Tell them, Chris. Mr. Donnelly isn't scary, is he?"

"No, he's real nice."

"Well I wouldn't hang around him," jeered Turney. "He's liable to go nuts anytime and start killing people."

"That's stupid," said Chris, "He wouldn't do anything like that. Come on, Bobby, we have to go." They could hear the boys laughing as they walked to the car.

"Bobby, you should go with me when I visit Mr. Donnelly. You'd see how nice he is."

He just shrugged his shoulders. Bobby knew Turney's daddy was a drunk, but it still bothered him when the boys laughed. He wished the old man had never come back to the hollow.

Kaye passed Isabel to Robert as they left the church and Bobby and Chris trailed behind him. She held Miss Ida's arm as they crossed the street to the parking lot. Kaye sat in the back seat holding Isabel, with Chris and Bobby squeezed in next to her. Ida sat in the front seat with Robert.

"Did you put the food in the ice box? It'll be spoiled if you left it out."

"Yes, Kaye put it away for you," said Robert.

"Well, I hope it's wrapped good."

Robert didn't respond.

"I wish you would come to our house for dinner, Miss Ida," Kaye said.

"I don't like driving by the old place anymore. It's not like I remember it."

"Robert's done a lot of work on the house. He's added another bedroom and built a roof over the porch so we can sit outside even when it's raining."

"I don't sit outside anymore. I get too cold. I'm old, you know, and need my rest."

"I just thought you'd like to see how nice it looks." Kaye's voice faded to a whisper and then she sat in silence looking out the window. Bobby and Chris glared at their grandmother.

When they got to Miss Ida's house, Kaye helped her inside and hung up her coat. She showed Ida the food neatly wrapped in the refrigerator and tried to coax her into eating, but she refused.

"I'll eat later. I want to take a nap now."

She went to her bedroom and closed the door, leaving Kaye standing in the kitchen alone.

"Call us if you need anything, Miss Ida." No response came from the bedroom. Kaye stood for a moment, wanting to leave but wondering if she should. As she look around the silent room, the lack of pictures on the wall bothered her. Her eyes searched every wall, but they were blank. Shrugging her shoulders, she picked up her handbag and gloves and opened the door.

"I'm leaving now, Miss Ida," she called, but still there was no response. She set the lock on the door and pulled it shut behind her.

Bobby was in the front seat when Kaye returned to the car, so she climbed in the back seat with Isabel and Chris. The boys started talking at once, as though they had been holding their breath and suddenly exhaled.

"Daddy can we play ball today?" asked Chris.

"If this rain lets up we can. I need to check the fence on top of the hill. I'm a little worried that bull might tear a hole in it trying to get to those young heifers."

"Why did Mr. Donnelly leave the service early?" asked Bobby.

"Maybe he was ill," his mama answered. "I hope he comes back to church. I feel terrible that we haven't gone to see him."

"I've gone to see him and he's really nice," said Chris. "He tells funny stories about when he was a little boy."

Bobby frowned at Chris. "The kids at school keep asking me questions about him," he said, "and I don't know what to tell them."

"I think you should tell them it's none of their business," said Daddy. "This is something you should be able to take care of yourself, Bobby. I don't want to hear any more about it."

Will felt numb when he raised his head from the steering wheel. How long had he been sitting in the truck? The rain had nearly stopped and the clouds were breaking up. Conscious of a presence, he looked up and saw the scarecrow standing in the middle of the garden. Fear gripped him and his heart pounded in his chest. He nearly fell, struggling with his cane to get out of the truck. The rocks in the creek were slippery and he cursed every one of them as he fought to stay on his feet. He pulled himself up the little rise to the house and hurried inside the front door, slamming it shut. As he fell back into his chair, Will closed his eyes, listening to his heartbeat and the whoosh of each breath. Time ceased to exist, and he felt as though the walls were breathing with him. For a long time, it was quiet except for the soft swaying of the clock's pendulum. He looked towards the clock and noticed the white envelope leaning against it. It seemed to call to him in a gentle, sweet voice. He took out his

handkerchief and wiped his glasses, then carefully opened the envelope and read the letter.

My Dearest William,

If you are reading this letter, my prayers have been answered, and you are finally home. I hope you are well and will try to make a good life for yourself in the time that is left. Through the years, my faith has often weakened and bitterness filled me when I thought about the time we have lost. Then I remember our Lord's love and mercy and I have to believe He had a good reason for taking my sons from me. My love and faith in you has not wavered and I have prayed for a way to help you ease your mind and soften the sorrow in your heart. Know my son that you are blameless for Jacob's death. War took him from us, and nothing you could have done would have changed the outcome. Never could I imagine the tragic results that would occur because of your love and devotion towards your brother. Your father and I and Sarah prayed for you and sometimes it seemed that no one was listening. It is hard to believe in God when you are in such pain. When you were a child, I spent many evenings reading to you. I wanted you to understand the power of words and I hoped you would find solace and contentment in books as I have. I found a poem which fate seems to have dropped into my hands. When I read it I thought of you and Jacob and it brought me a sense of peace that I have not felt in a long time. A German soldier who lost his brother in the War wrote it.

I know there is irony in this, but remember, we are all brothers. Please read it, my son, and I pray it helps give you the strength to live the best you can and release the guilt and sorrow that has been locked up in your mind and heart all these years.

Your loving Mother

He reread the letter, trying to absorb all the words and feel her presence. Bringing it to his face, he thought there was a faint smell of lilacs. Daddy had taught him how to work, how to live and how to be a man, but Mama had instilled in him a deep abiding love and compassion. She understood him better than he did. He laid the letter on the table then went to the kitchen to heat some coffee. After adding a few sticks of wood to the stove, he lit a piece of paper with a match and stuck it in the firebox. The dry kindling sparked and the flames leaped up. He kept adding bits of newspaper just to see the blue and orange colors flare up, then disappear. The fires of hell are calling for me. Out of habit, he reached in his pocket for a cigarette and lit it from the flame in the firebox. Then he sat at the kitchen table listening to the raindrops hit the tin roof in a steady rhythm. It sounded like music at first, then it began to sound like a beating heart, and the rhythm became uneven and frightening. The warmth of the stove hovered through the kitchen and he removed his damp jacket and laid it across the back of the kitchen chair. He poured a cup of coffee, then carried it to the living room where he settled back in his chair. The letter waited for his return. He hesitated before picking it up, then read the last page.

To My Brother Killed in Battle

What are you now? A pear tree or a beech tree,
a birch grove or a little ivy leaf!

My brother, I am looking for you, looking
 for what it is that God has changed you to.
 Is your spirit present in some form?
 Is it a living form or inanimate?
 I will love it in whatever form I find it.
 Even in stone, it will seem familiar to me.
 Perhaps a blade of grass, some lilac blossom.
 Whatever you are now, I'll ask the sun
 to make completely golden with his fire
 You, through every being which resembles you.
 I'll have compassion on the little beetle
 that struggles upwards out of your grave.
 I'll embrace the wooden cross and the sand on it,
 and bless the birds that sing above it.
 But if you're now a thought, and if in thinking it,
 I could transcend the limits of the earth,
 then I would want to immerse myself in it so deeply
 that I would find you once again in God's presence.

He closed his eyes and clutched the paper to his chest. An old fear lurked nearby, yet at the same time he let himself be drawn into a gray quiet place in his mind. He remembered a spring morning when water trickled off the side of the sloping hill and birds sang in the branches of the hickory tree. He could see Jacob a long way off, walking in the creek bed coming closer and closer, and then he stopped and waved.

“Hey, Willie.”

Was his salvation standing outside in the middle of the field? That was crazy thinking. It was that bizarre old woman in church this morning that got him going. She's the one that started it all. He was doing fine 'til then, but what if she wasn't the only one who thought that way? Blame and guilt were like vultures that lingered in the shadows of his life. He was a sorry weakling for

not coming home after the war to help Mama and Daddy. They went through hell, and poor Sarah, poor little Sarah, had to do it all. His tortured mind kept spitting out all the guilt he had carried inside all these years. Finally, sheer exhaustion made him sleep.

It was after four o'clock before rays of sun peeked out between breaks in the clouds. Bobby and Chris clutched their baseball, bat and mitts as they hurried outside, followed by their sleepy-headed daddy. Kaye finished the supper dishes when a dizzy feeling came over her. She picked up Isabel and sat in a kitchen chair, rocking back and forth until the feeling passed. It was beginning to happen more often and she wondered about it. I'm just tired, she thought, and shrugged it off.

"Why don't we sit on the porch and watch the boys for a while, Isabel?"

They stayed outside until it grew late, and Isabel nearly fell asleep on her rocking horse. Robert gently picked her up and she cuddled to his neck. Kaye gave the boys a piece of pie and glass of milk, then shooed them off to bed.

Bobby lay on his bed with his arms behind his head, staring out the window. He dreaded going to school in the morning because he knew the kids would be after him again. What if Turney is right and Mr. Donnelly is still crazy? I should go down there and check him out. He might be able to fool a little kid like Chris, but he can't fool me. Maybe he would find out something that would put a rest to all this commotion about the old man in the hollow.

Later that night, Robert and Kaye spoke quietly as they lay in their bed.

“Robert, I still can’t understand why Miss Ida is so cold towards the children. If she always wanted to have her own, you’d think she’d be pleased to have grandchildren.”

“She’s always been hard as nails. Grandpa was always good to me, but she acted as though she hated me. I never knew why and when I tried to ask questions, she would throw a fit so I finally stopped asking.”

“That’s pretty much what she did to me when I asked her questions about your mother.”

Kaye put her head on Robert’s chest and stroked his cheek. “Poor little boy, I wish I had known you when you were little.”

“I’m sorry Miss Ida treats you and the children like she does. She doesn’t appreciate anything you do for her and it makes me sick. Guess I shouldn’t have dragged you all the way to Tennessee to be a farmer’s wife.”

Kaye squeezed him. “When I was a child, I daydreamed about being a farmer’s wife. You make me completely happy, but I feel sorry for her because she can’t be happy. I wish I could think of something to make her final days peaceful, but she rejects everything.”

“Try not to let it worry you. I learned a long time ago that you can’t change people. If they can’t see the error in their ways, there’s nothing we can do about it.”

All of a sudden, Isabel’s cry broke the stillness. Kaye started to get up, but Robert held her back. “Let me take care of her. You lie down and try to go to sleep. I know you’re tired.”

“You know, Mr. Dawson, I think I’ll keep you.”

Robert gently brushed her hair aside and kissed her on the forehead. She snuggled under the quilt and closed her eyes. Robert watched her for a moment and then Isabel cried again, so he hurried to the crib and picked up the little girl.

“What’s the matter with Daddy’s girl? Do you have to go potty?”

“Ah hah,” she whispered, then hugged his neck.

After taking care of Isabel and getting her a drink, Robert sat in the chair near the crib and rocked the sleepy child in his arms. He seldom had the opportunity to do this since he was always working or spending time with the boys. Besides, Kaye always wanted to take care of her since she would probably be the last baby.

It was a cloudy night and darkness enveloped the house, but Robert didn't mind. Having Isabel in his arms and knowing Kaye and the boys were close satisfied him completely. He couldn't remember the last time he felt lonely. If it wasn't for his grandfather he didn't know what might have happened to him and after he found Kaye, his whole world changed. Dear God, please take care of my family. I don't know what I would do if I lost them. Then his thoughts turned to Mr. Donnelly. He had meant to go down and apologize for the way his grandmother acted. Maybe he'll have time tomorrow.

Chapter 18: The Scarecrow

Darkness enveloped the house like a shroud by the time Will stirred from his troubled sleep. A grinding sound from his stomach was a reminder that he hadn't eaten since breakfast. His damp clothes made him shiver and cold followed him as he searched out the matches over the stove. Feeling his way into the front room, a shock of pain stung his knee when he bumped it against the chair. Finally, his hand found the oil lamp in the darkness and he lit it, bringing a warm glow over the room. He began filling the fireplace with kindling. A week-old newspaper lay folded under the table and he used it to light the fire. Will hovered close to the hearth, rubbing his hands together, and then spreading them open, trying to catch the heat as the warm air curled around the room. He carried the oil lamp into the dark kitchen and set it on the table. Cold ashes in the wood stove were the only remnants from breakfast. Lighting a fire under the coffee pot brought him a feeling of relief as though opening a door to a friend. Uncovering some cold cuts in the icebox, he made a sandwich. Darkness indicated it was night, but he had no thought about the time. He hoped it was Monday, for Sunday needed to be forgotten.

After eating, he went back to the front room. The afghan on the sofa looked inviting, and he threw it over his legs and settled back in his easy chair. After a long trying day, he longed for peace and quiet, and sat there watching the fire jump and crackle over the kindling. He couldn't stop wondering about the old woman in the church. For the life of him, he had no memory of her. Her attack was so personal, it still stung to think about it. There probably were many people in town wishing he hadn't returned. Will knew that mental illness carried the stigma of weakness. He remembered hearing stories of people with family members who were crazy and whispered warnings made people avoid them. Some said it ran in the blood, while others believed it was a punishment from God for some terrible sin.

The constant guilt of Jacob's death as well as the shame of not coming home to help his family weighed heavy on his mind. These thoughts haunted him for many years, but he didn't feel like he was crazy. It felt more like a terrible regret that he couldn't get over.

He looked at the ashtray sitting on the table next to him and thought how proud he felt when he purchased it from Fuston's Five and Ten Cent Store. Going to the store for the first time was another hurdle, but he had passed the test. He enjoyed walking through the store, looking at all the shiny gadgets and touching the soft fabric of the kitchen towels. It didn't take long to fill a box with all the things he wanted to buy. The clerk bent over backwards suggesting things he might need.

A spurt of anger rose up in him and he jammed his cigarette into the ashtray, twisting it sharply. Shit, I'm tired of worrying. I don't need anyone. Then he thought about Quixie, Suell and Ramsey and knew if it hadn't been for them, he would still be in the hospital.

He reached for the letter on the table next to him and read it once more. The words were comforting, but the poem left him uneasy. He couldn't get the lines out of his mind:

What are you now, a pear tree or a beech tree?
 a birch grove or a little ivy leaf?
 My brother I am looking for you,
 looking for what it is that God has changed you to.

Not wanting to think about it anymore, he folded the letter and shoved it back into the envelope. Closing his eyes, he fell asleep in the chair with the envelope clutched in his hands. There were no dreams to shake him awake.

Rays of sunshine coming through the window woke him. His legs were stiff and sore from sitting in the same position all night. The letter dropped to the floor, and he picked it up and placed it back on the mantle. He had to pee so bad his eyeteeth were floating. As he hurried out the back door, the outhouse seemed a long way off "What the hell," he said and, standing on the edge of the porch, let a long stream cut loose on the grass. There were some advantages to living in the country.

The morning air felt good and the sun promised a pleasant day. Then his eyes fixed on the scarecrow and a cold fear returned. This is foolish, he thought. It's not a boogeyman or ... a ghost.

"I need to get rid of that thing. I'll do it right after breakfast."

After tidying the kitchen, he changed into his old work shirt and britches and went outside. The straw figure stood in the middle of the garden mocking him. Even from the porch, he could see that hint of a grin on its face. He would burn it. He'd destroy that thing once and for all. As he walked towards it, doubt and anxiety filled his mind. He had to explain. He would talk to it. That's what he would do. He would ... "My God, that thing must be making me crazy."

Will was angry, but why? It wasn't alive. It was just a thing hanging in the yard. Looking hard at it, he hollered, "I don't need you. Do you hear me?"

A soft breeze fluttered the straw sticking out of the sleeves and a fly perched on the peak of the hat. Will's hand balled up in a fist, and he shook it at the scarecrow.

"I don't need you or anybody."

He reached for the scarecrow, but the grinning face made his hands freeze in mid-air. He wanted to yank it down, but something stopped him. His mind searched for answers.

"It's the medicine. I forgot to take my medicine today. Hell, I don't think I took any yesterday either."

He turned and started walking back to the house, but couldn't help looking back. There it was. That smirk of a smile, just like ... He walked faster now, but his knee began to ache. Then a sharp pain made him buckle. "Damn it," he cried, and dropped to the ground. All he could do was hug his knee and wait for the pain to pass. "I'm not going back to that damn hospital," he cursed.

His eyes caught sight of that face again. It was staring right at him and it was him. It was Jacob looking at him and laughing. The taut muscles in Will's shoulders began to loosen and the deep creases in his forehead softened as a slow smile crossed his lips. The scarecrow's face was dull and drab, but Will saw something different. The raging ocean inside of him calmed as he recognized his brother.

"I must look like a fool. A big, sweaty old man flopped on the ground hugging his knee and cursing the world. You always were a smart aleck," said Will. "You could make a joke out of anything. You wore Mama and Daddy out with your jokes. They tried to get me to make you do right, but nobody could do that little job. No sir! You just did whatever popped into your brain at the time with no thought of anything or anyone."

He closed his eyes, fighting back the tears. "God, you were filled with the joy of life ... I've missed you so much."

Will sat with his head in his hands and wept. Fatigue overcame the old man and he lay on the ground with his arm covering his eyes. He lay there for a long time without moving and then he propped his arm under his head while his eyes followed the drifting clouds across the sky. He thought of a time long ago when he and Jacob showed Sarah how to find pictures in the clouds. An ache filled him when he thought of Sarah.

The tree line came into view and a gentle wind made the leaves tremble. Will kept watching them until a sudden gust pushed the branches into a wild frenzy. They bent towards him as though they were reaching for him. He panicked and struggled to get up, but he felt dizzy and nauseous.

"What's happening?" he screamed, and without realizing that he did so, he stretched his arms towards the scarecrow and cried out, "Jacob, Jacob, help me!"

I'm here, Willie, don't be afraid anymore.

That was Jacob's voice. He rolled to his side and struggled to his feet. He dragged one foot after the other, no longer feeling the pain in his knee. Will had to look one more time. Did he just imagine hearing his voice? He stared at the face partially covered by the old straw hat, but this time the scarecrow looked back and grinned.

"Is it really you, Jacob?"

I'm here, Willie, for as long as you need me.

Will didn't understand how or why, but a feeling of serenity settled over him in the days that followed. Jacob was there, a tangible being that he could see and touch. It occurred to him that it was his illness playing tricks on him, but he didn't care. It was worth the tranquility that enveloped him. Whether he was in the house, working in the garden or just sitting on the porch, he was no longer alone. The scarecrow and Jacob were one and

he had come back to help Will remember the good times of their past, and to cope with the living that had to be done in the present. The deep-seated guilt of Jacob's death that had troubled him for so long loosened, much like the dried clumps of dirt that break and scatter into the soil to bring forth new life. His brother had come back.

Nightmares no longer plagued him and he was grateful for blessed sleep. Physically, he became stronger, leaner and the pain in his knee became tolerable, allowing him to depend less on the cane. He put his medicine in the back of a drawer.

One Sunday morning, Suell came by to see if Mr. Johnson had delivered the mule. Will sensed a change in Suell's attitude. It was as though he had never been in the hospital and they had been friends for years. They were equals and he was no longer the sick guy who needed everyone's help.

Suell was timid around the mule and he was afraid to touch the huge animal. Will smiled all over as he tried to convince his friend that the mule wouldn't take a nip out of him. He remembered Suell coaxing him to drive the truck. This was his territory and now he was doing the coaxing.

"Going out to the Johnson's place was an experience," said Will as he rested his arm around the mule's neck. "I expected Mr. Johnson to show me around, but instead it was his wife who knew all about the animals."

"I went out there to fix his tractor a few times, but I never met his wife," said Suell.

"She's a little bitty woman with sun-dried lines on her face that makes her look older than she is. From a distance, she looks like a man in her britches and boots, but there's a gentle look in her eyes that's hard to miss. Her husband stood back with his arms folded while she showed me around. Every one of the mules looked healthy and content. From the way she talked

and acted, I could tell she knew a lot about animals. I asked her how she learned so much and she said she wanted to be a veterinarian, but couldn't find a school that would accept her. She's self-taught and can do pretty much anything a licensed veterinarian can do. She walked among the animals as if they were her children and called each one by name. It was obvious they trusted her. Talking to them and rubbing on them was as natural as breathing for her."

He patted the mule's muzzle as he continued his story. "This big guy stood away from the others, chewing on clumps of grass. Her soft whistle turned his head and his steady gaze followed her as she approached him. She opened his mouth so I could see his teeth, and then stroked his mane while he nuzzled her shoulder. Mrs. Johnson said he was gentle and I liked the look in his eyes. He was a carbon copy of the mule we used to have, or at least the way I remembered him as a boy."

"He's a big one, that's for sure," replied Suell.

"The day they delivered him was like Christmas," said Will as Suell walked around the animal.

"I felt like a kid with a toy I'd been aching to receive."

"What'd you name him?" asked Suell.

"Sam. It was the only name that would do. Wanna ride her?" asked Will with a big grin on his face.

"I think I'll pass on that. I rode a bike, but I never rode a mule."

Will laughed and they shook hands when Suell said he had to get back to the house. "Quixie's fixing roast chicken and dressing. Why don't you join us? She always fixes plenty."

"No. Thanks anyway, but I reckon I'll hang around here."

As Suell's old truck jostled down the road, Will said, "Sam, that's one good man there." The mule nickered as though he agreed.

Will had spent two weeks cleaning and repairing the barn. The harness and plow were ready and the next morning he hooked up the mule and tried him out. They were a perfect match and it was as if old Sam had come back home.

Now he had it all, a home, a truck and a mule. What more could a man want?

A few days later, Will was straightening the quilt on his bed when he heard a light tap at the front door. He knew who it was.

Hurrying down the narrow hall, he opened the door wide. "Come in, come in. Are you hungry? I found some donuts at the store that look pretty good."

Chris came in and looked around the front room. It was the first time he had been inside the house.

"We have a fireplace too. In the winter, we roast marshmallows. Do you ever do that?"

"When I was a boy we used to pop popcorn in the fireplace. For a treat, Mama drizzled molasses over it to form little balls. They were sticky but delicious."

"We've never done that. I'm going to tell Mama about molasses balls."

Chris sat in the rocker by the fireplace, looking as though he had something on his mind.

"I noticed that you got a mule. He sure is big. What do you call him?"

"His name is Sam. Would you like to meet him?"

The boy's eyes sparkled with pleasure. "Sure would."

They went outside with Esther trailing after them. When the kittens saw Esther bouncing across the grass, they proceeded to follow, tripping along in a haphazard line.

Chris stopped to pet them and then he looked up at Will with concern in his eyes.

"Won't the mule step on the kittens?"

“No. Mules are smart. When tiny critters roam around their feet, they never step on them. They never step in holes either.”

Chris looked at Will with eagerness written all over his face. “Mama and Daddy wouldn’t let us get a horse because they were afraid it would step in a hole and we’d fall off and get killed. If they knew mules don’t step in holes, maybe they’d let us get one.”

Will laughed. “I imagine your daddy knows that already. They won’t drink too much water or eat enough to founder, either. If they get too hot or too tired while they’re working, they know enough to slow down. You could ‘yea’ and ‘haw’ all over the place and they won’t budge. I think they’re smarter than we are.”

Sam grazed in the lot next to the barn. Chris’s eyes grew wide with excitement when he saw the handsome animal.

“You can pet him if you like.”

Chris gingerly moved closer to the huge animal and patted his side. The mule turned his head towards the boy, and Chris backed away.

“He wants you to rub his muzzle. Don’t be afraid, he’s real gentle.”

Hesitantly, Chris came closer, and then he rubbed Sam on his nose and the side of his head. The mule pushed his huge head into Chris’s body, nearly knocking him over, but Chris stood his ground.

“Easy, Sam. You’re a big fellow aren’t you?”

Chris’s body generated pleasure as he continued to talk to the animal and stroke his head. Will watched the boy, gratified by his happiness. Getting Sam was the best thing he could have done.

“Would you like to walk him around?”

“Sure.”

Will stepped inside the barn and came out holding a long rope. He made a loop, flung it around Sam’s neck and handed the rope to Chris. Then he followed close behind as the boy walked around the field.

“I’m planning to fence in this area so Sam will have a place to roam. Any chance you’d have time to help me?”

“I know how to fence. I’ve helped Daddy lots of times. I’ll come every day after school.”

“I’ll pay you for your work.”

“You don’t have to do that. Daddy says we should always help our neighbors.”

“I figure you’d be my hired hand, so it’s only right that I pay you.”

“Well, I’ll ask Daddy first. It doesn’t seem right to take your money. Walking Sam is payment enough.”

“You ask him, and whatever he decides, we’ll do. Is that a deal?”

“Yes sir, that’s a deal.” And they shook hands, sealing the bargain.

Then Chris looked down the road towards his house. “Could I show him to Bobby and Mama?”

“No, we’ll save that for another day. It’s time to give Sam some feed and water.”

Chris looked disappointed, but he followed Will into the barn where he put Sam in the stall. Will showed the boy where he kept the feed and Chris scooped some into the feed trough where Sam gobbled it up. Then Will handed Chris a big bucket.

“Come on. I’ll show you where we get the water from. It’s a pretty good walk from here. The spring is up the hill behind the house. You can carry the bucket up and I’ll carry the water down.”

Chris ran ahead of Will, easily maneuvering the rocks in the creek with the kittens tiptoeing after him. As they passed the garden, the old man smiled at the scarecrow. Isn't it grand having a boy around the place again?

Chapter 19: Lucy's Mother

The stiffness in her back longed for relief as Ida pulled herself out of bed. The pains in her hips were in hellish harmony with the fluid in her swollen ankles. Every day the pain seemed a little worse, but her movements would ease it, allowing her to stretch her back. She was ever fearful of the day when the pain would be all there was.

“Clara, Clara, where are you?” Her words bounced off the walls of the little white house which had become like a prison since her health declined. She wanted her coffee and that good-for-nothing colored girl was nowhere in sight. She didn't care that it was only five o'clock in the morning and Clara didn't come until six. Useless piece of trash.

Miss Ida knew that Clara needed the money. Her husband worked for the shirt factory, but his meager salary couldn't stretch very far with six mouths to feed. They had three children plus Clara's mother to provide for at home. The old woman thought that Clara should be grateful for having this job, especially since it was within walking distance.

As she roamed around the kitchen, Miss Ida thought about the groceries that Robert bought on Saturday. Her pantry was full, but the nagging thought that he forgot something irritated the old woman. Miss Ida wanted to choose her own groceries,

but each time she went with Robert, her stamina gave out. She felt humiliated having to search for a chair to sit in until her fluttering heart slowed down to a normal beat. She was angry with him and angry with her body because it betrayed her. No longer a strong, young woman, she fought her frailties like a man fights the dry earth with his plow. Forced to depend on Robert for nearly everything, it galled her.

After Clara came to work for her, Ida got into the habit of checking the cupboards for fear the girl might steal something. You have to watch those people. They'll take anything that isn't nailed down.

The old woman filled the coffeepot and put it on the stove. I have to do everything myself. Remembering there was a slice of brown sugar glazed walnut cake left over from Sunday, she looked in the icebox. Maybe those brats haven't eaten it.

Kaye cooked breakfast every Sunday morning at Miss Ida's and always left extra sausage and biscuit or coffee cake for the old woman to snack on during the week. She liked the food but wished they would leave the children at home. Robert took them outside when the weather was nice but Sunday had been rainy, so she had to suffer the whole morning with them. Her husband, Hershel, had been dead nearly fifteen years so all she had was Robert, and he kept reminding her of Lucy. Painful memories were always around him.

She found the coffee cake and wrapped it in a towel to warm it in the oven. That's how she liked it, warm with butter melted on top. While waiting for the cake to heat, she went into the bathroom to wash her face and hands. An old wrinkled woman stared back at her from the mirror and she quickly turned away. Ida Hayes was once a pretty woman, but time and bitterness had left deep lines on her sphinxlike face and smiling was a stranger to her. She didn't need a mirror to brush her hair and plait it in its usual single braid. Her stiff fingers couldn't grasp

the hairpins as they once did, and strands of hair escaped from the slender pins.

Bending over the sink to wash her hair made her dizzy, so Robert talked her into going to Betty Lou's Beauty Shop once a week. He offered to drive her, but that got her back up and she insisted on walking. It was just around the corner on the square, and it got her out of the house once a week, so he agreed.

The thought of going to the beauty shop reminded her of that silly woman, Alice Green, who pranced around in tight black Capri pants with bright colored flowers in her hair. She was too old to wear flowers, let alone Capri pants. Every time she went in the shop, Alice's hair was a different color. That brassy woman was always trying to talk her into a haircut.

"If I wanted my hair cut, I'd have it cut. I'm going to say that the next time she bothers me about it. She drives me crazy with all her talk and she knows too much about everyone in town."

As Ida put the last pin in her hair, a thought struck her. "I wonder what she knows about William Donnelly. There might be some things that she needs to know."

Ida splashed warm water on her face and patted it dry with her latest purchase from Fuston's Five and Ten, a blue towel with embroidered pink and white roses along the edge. She loved nice linens. Ida bought herself a new towel at least once a month and saved them for her own use. Anyone using her bathroom would find a worn, tattered towel, but in the corner of the linen closet was a tall pile of new towels that she treasured.

The fragrant smell of coffee had already filled the kitchen when the back door opened.

"Good morning Miss Ida. I brought your ironing."

It's about time. Now I'll have to show her how I want it hung, otherwise I'll never find anything when I need it.

She returned to the kitchen and with her arms crossed, glared at the younger woman.

"I had to make the coffee myself this morning."

Clara ignored the old woman's tacit remark and said, "Can I fix you some breakfast?"

"No, I can't eat a thing. I want those clothes hung before they're wrinkled."

"If it's all right with you, I was hoping to finish a little early today so I can take Mama to the doctor if it won't inconvenience you, ma'am."

Humph! I'm sure she's not worried about my inconvenience. She led Clara to the bedroom closet, where she pushed aside some empty hangers. Then she stood watching her as she carefully hung each garment.

"I'll need the bathroom and kitchen cleaned today and I've got some sewing for you to do. You didn't shorten my new dress the way I asked you to and you'll have to do it over."

"I was sure I measured it right."

Ida's hand shook a little as she grabbed the beige dress from the closet and shoved it at Clara. "I told you it's not right."

"Could you try it on so I can measure it again?"

"You know how hard it is for me to change clothes. Just get one of my other dresses and measure it by that."

"Sorry, Miss Ida. I'll fix it again."

Clara took the dress and went back to the kitchen so her employer could finish dressing. She could hear the old woman mumbling under her breath, but this was a common occurrence. Clara found the coffee cake in the oven and retrieved it before it burned. She knew better than to mention the oven to Miss Ida, but she would say something to Mr. Robert. The old woman had been forgetting more and more lately and they worried she would burn the house down one day.

Clara needed the money, but when Mr. Robert approached her about caring for his grandmother, she hesitated. Ida Hayes

was a tyrant and everyone in Woodbury was aware of her mean-hearted nature. She was demanding, incapable of being satisfied and indifferent to anyone's feelings, but a woman can tolerate a lot to help put food on the table. Clara was a patient woman and tried not to dread coming to work, but it was like spending a whole day stepping on cactus in bare feet.

Clara laid the coffee cake on a plate in the middle of the table and poured a cup of coffee.

"I've poured your coffee, Ms. Hayes."

"All right, all right, don't rush me," Ida hollered from the bedroom.

"It'll be cold when I drink it," mumbled Ida. "Why did she have to pour it now? I'll just have to warm it again. No one respects age these days. They always take advantage of old people. Wants to leave early, but she'll expect full pay. I'm talking to Robert about her today."

Ida's house was on South Tatum Street, so she only had two short blocks to walk to get to Robert's shop on the east side of the square. She knew everything that went on in town and the latest gossip on most everybody. Some she knew first-hand, the rest she made up herself. When news of William Donnelly coming back to Woodbury reached her, she looked for him every day. She didn't believe it was true until she saw him driving with Suell. His appearance in Woodbury had given the old-timers who sat on the benches near the courthouse whittling something new to chew on. The latest news reached them before anyone else and then branched out to the beauty shop, Gunner's Diner, the drug store, hardware store and even the courthouse.

He has some nerve coming back here. Ida's anger was still raw from seeing him in church. Her hands balled up so tight they began to throb. She pulled the green flowered dress over her head and struggled to find the sleeve holes for her arms.

“Clara will have to button this for me,” she mumbled.

Her chest hurt when she got angry, making her feel sick to her stomach. Why did he have to come back, dredging up memories that needed to stay buried? Him sitting in that church like he belonged. He had no right coming back.

“Ms. Hayes? Do you need help with your dress?”

Ida jumped at the sound of Clara’s voice. “Don’t holler at me! Button this dress, will you?” She stood stiffly with her back to Clara as the woman gently fastened each button.

“Have you heard they let William Donnelly out of the insane asylum? He marched right into the church and disrupted the service. He comes from a sorry lot. Do you know about him?”

“No, ma’am.”

“He’s dangerous and he has a past,” she hissed. “I can remember when he was a boy that he beat a man to death with his bare hands. He’s crazy. Stay away from him and tell your folks, too.”

Ida’s body was tense, and the veins stood out around her temples as she spoke to Clara about William Donnelly.

“Yes, ma’am. I sure will. Do you have your belt?”

Ida felt around her waist for the belt, but it wasn’t there.

“You didn’t bring it back with the dress. What am I going to do without the belt?”

Clara picked up the hanger lying on the floor and removed the belt. “Here it is, ma’am.”

Ida snatched it from her and struggled to slip it through the belt loops, but her hands trembled, feeling Clara’s eyes on her.

“Make the bed instead of just standing around watching me.”

Clara could feel the cactus strong today. Why was Miss Ida so upset about that Donnelly fellow? He hasn’t lived around here since before I was born. Oh well, she has to have something

to complain about or worry after. Clara straightened the old woman's bed and hung up her robe and gown. The words of a hymn kept running through her mind. Lord, Lord, my burden is heavy, help me Lord, help me.

She watched as the old woman rummaged through her closet. What is she looking for now?

"Clara, come help me. In the back of the shelf behind that hatbox is a package wrapped in brown paper. Lift it down for me."

Clara came around the bed and lifted the box down.

"Is this what you want, Miss Ida?"

"Yes, give it to me."

Clara handed her the package and sighed as the old woman left the room, clutching it so tight that the paper tore at the corner.

Ida poured the cup of coffee in the sink and turned on the stove to reheat more. She was standing at the window, still holding the package, when Clara returned to the kitchen.

"Aren't you feeling well, Miss Ida? Maybe you should see Doc Adams. Would you like me to mention it to Mr. Robert?"

"No, I don't need no doctor. If you intend to leave early, I suggest you get to work. Did you bring in the newspaper?"

"No, ma'am, I'll get it for you now."

Ida went into the living room and found a pair of scissors in a drawer. She sat on the couch and cut the string from around the package. She took the paper off and uncovered a pink satin, heart-shaped valentine candy box with a white bow in the center. The cover was stuck and wouldn't come apart, so she pried the edges loose with her finger. A musty odor lingered around the box and strengthened when she opened it. Picking through the papers, she found an official-looking document with a seal stamped with the words "State of Indiana" in gold letters. When

she heard Clara come in with the newspaper, she jammed the paper inside the box and put the lid back on it.

“Clara, come here,” Ida hollered.

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Sit down a minute.” Clara looked surprised by the invitation.

“With such a big family,” continued Miss Ida, “I guess you didn’t have a chance to go to school, did you?”

“No, ma’am. We had to help on the farm and there was no time for school. There were eight of us in the family, so having enough food came first.”

Ida was pleased with her answer. “That’s too bad.”

She began rewrapping the box and didn’t look at Clara as she spoke. “I’m getting old and I could pass any day. I need to ask you a favor. If I ask you to make me a promise, will you keep it?”

“I always keeps my promises, ma’am, but I don’t think....”

“Never mind that. Go get my Bible from the table.”

Clara jumped up and reached for the Bible on the end table. She still had not recovered from her surprise of the old woman inviting her to sit down. Her suspicion grew when Miss Ida started asking her personal questions. When she returned to the couch, her stomach was turning at the thought of having anything personal to do with the woman. Her mind told her to refuse whatever it was, but deep inside she felt sorry for Miss Ida.

“I want you to lay your hand on the Bible and swear to keep a promise. I don’t want people going through my things after I’m gone. I want you to hide this package. Then after I’m gone, I want you to burn it and everything inside it. Will you do that for me?”

Clara really felt sick now. “Ma’am, I really feel like you need to get someone else to do this. Isn’t there anyone else you could ask?”

Clara flinched when Miss Ida glared at her.

“It’s not like I ask much. Have I ever asked you to do anything for me before?”

“No ma’am but” Suddenly Clara noticed the address on the package.

“You’ve had that package a long time, Miss Ida. You haven’t lived in Prater for many years.”

Miss Ida’s glazed stare frightened the colored woman.

“Are you all right, Miss Ida?”

Through clenched teeth, the old woman said, “You can read?”

“Yes, ma’am. Mama taught all of us to read and write.”

Miss Ida’s voice creaked as she said, “You were lucky to have educated parents. Since you feel uncomfortable doing me this favor, just forget it. There’s plenty of others I can get to help me.”

Relief washed over Clara and she stood up. “Is that all you wanted Miss Ida?”

“Yes, you’d better get back to work if you want to get to the doctor’s office on time.”

As Clara pushed the wet mop across the kitchen floor, she thought about Miss Ida and the box. When she found that I could read, she changed her mind. I wonder what’s in that box.

Maybe I should say something to Mr. Robert.

She hated complaining, but it might be something he needed to know about. By the time she finished cleaning the floor, she decided to keep it to her herself. The Lord will let me know if I need to tell anyone.

Miss Ida was just a foolish, senile old woman. At her age, acting strange was normal. Her own mama was beginning to slip every now and then.

I wonder what's in that box. Sure was pretty.

The house was quiet and Clara was thankful that Miss Ida had left her alone for a while. As she scrubbed the bathtub, her thoughts returned to the dress that she had to rework. I wish she would try it on again, but there's no way she'll do that. I guess I can find the piece of paper with the measurements on it. I am sure it was right, though.

"I have something I want to give you."

Miss Ida's sudden appearance gave Clara a jolt.

"Land sakes, you scared me, Miss Ida."

"I want to give you this so you will remember me when I'm gone."

Clara didn't know what to say as the old woman held up a little pin shaped like a bird in flight. It was right pretty and shimmered in the light with colors of blue, white and silver.

"Here take this. It's a gift. You'll keep this between us now, won't you?"

"You don't have to give me anything. Mr. Robert pays me fairly for my work here."

"It's a gift ... of friendship. From me to you." Miss Ida neglected to mention that she had received the pin as a birthday gift from the grandchildren.

Clara didn't know what to do, but she didn't want to offend Miss Ida so she took the pin and slipped it into her apron pocket.

"Thank you, Miss Ida. I'll finish in here and then if there's nothing else you need, I have to go. Mama is waiting for me."

As Clara walked down the sidewalk to the street, she felt Miss Ida staring at her from the front window.

Chapter 20: Neighbors

Days came and went and Robert never found time to visit his new neighbor, but Chris and Will's friendship grew like red clover in a hay field. Every day the boy hurried through his chores and homework, then raced down to the head of the hollow to visit Will and Sam. Being able to ride the mule most any time delighted the eight year old. As he trotted around the yard on the broad back of the mule, the boy's grin grew so wide it nearly ran off his face. After filling Sam's feed bucket and watching him gobble down the food, Chris would stand with endless patience, brushing him with a big wire brush.

One rainy Sunday afternoon, Chris came down the hollow carrying a plate of fried chicken and potato salad. He nearly dropped it crossing the creek on the slippery rocks. Will had just returned from the outhouse when he heard someone kick at the front door.

"I didn't expect to see you today, young'un. What have you got that smells so good?"

"Mama sent you some chicken and potato salad. She said to tell you that she hasn't been over to see you because of spring cleaning, but hopes you enjoy the food. I wanted to bring you more, but this is all I could carry."

"Is there enough for two?"

“No, I already ate, but you go ahead. I’ll just sit on the porch.”

“Tell you what, I just happen to have some candy I picked up at the store. I’ll get it and a cup of coffee, and we’ll both sit on the porch and watch the rain fall. Don’t let Esther eat my dinner.”

Chris grinned and held the plate high over his head as Esther weaved through his legs in a figure eight. The cat poked her nose in the air sniffing the food, but Chris held tight until Will returned, carrying a cup of coffee and two Hershey bars. The boy’s eyes lit up. He loved chocolate candy. When Will finished one of the chicken legs, he tossed it off the porch and Esther leaped from the boy’s lap to retrieve it. The cat didn’t like the rain pelting her, so she grabbed up the bone and ran under the porch. The air was fresh, and the grass and trees shone with an intense green that they could almost taste. Chris and Will sat quiet for a while until the rain slowed to a mist. On the dark side of the hill, puffs of smoke floated upwards as though someone had built a fire, but it was just the fog rising up.

“Rabbits must be cooking their dinner,” said Will.

Chris looked at him. “What?”

“That’s what the old-timers said when they saw puffs of fog floating after a rain. Of course, we kids liked to think it was wild Indians sending smoke signals. When I was a boy, many families lived in Prater. This whole area was part of the Seventh District and politically speaking, even if you lived on the other side of the hill, you were still part of the Prater Community. Because of all the hills, traveling was kind of tricky. There was a saying that if you climbed up to the top of a hill, you could look down your neighbor’s chimney and see what they were having for supper, but to reach their house you’d have to travel several miles.”

“Where did you go to school?”

“There was only one school in Prater, and it sat at the mouth of Wauford Hollow for many years. If you walk to the end of our

hollow and turn left, it was the next hollow on the left. When it burned down, they built a new school in a field across the river from the Prater Store, which was about three-quarters of a mile down the River Road on the right.”

“Did you like school?”

“I liked it pretty good. I liked to read. Every Friday afternoon, us kids would gather in the schoolhouse yard for the spelling bee. It was an important social event, and all the parents came to listen. Often they only had hay bales or logs to sit on, but they came anyway. Many people couldn’t read or write, and they were real proud when their children could.”

“Guess the kids were real good back then.”

Will laughed. “We were the rowdiest bunch you ever saw.”

“You’re just saying that.”

“No, I’m not. Let me tell you the story about Darrell Johnson.

“Reading time was called Books and in a one-room school it could get pretty noisy. Us scholars held our books in our laps and studied in a loud mumble, sounding each word aloud. The schoolroom sounded like a swarm of locusts. The boys sat on one side, the girls on the other, little ones in the front and big kids in the back.

“Now, some of the big boys chewed tobacco. A boy named Darrell liked to sit next to the wall in the back and spit his tobacco through a break in the chinking. The teacher was particular and outlawed tobacco chewing during Books, but the boy refused to stop. He was a big boy and the two of them got into a roaring fight.”

“The boy actually fought his teacher?”

“I told you we were rowdy.

“The teacher got the better of the boy and threw him out the door and told him not to come back. Darrell went home but came back with an old musket and sat on the fence all day waiting for the teacher to come out.”

Chris's eyes grew big as saucers. "He was going to shoot the teacher?"

"I reckon."

"What happened then?"

"School let out, but the teacher didn't show and the boy sat on the fence 'til it was growing dark. An old man who lived in the Parchcorn Hollow heard the story from his grandson. He was curious and rode his old mule to the school to see if Darrell was still there. He came splashing across the river on a mule and stopped in front of Darrell but didn't say anything for a long while. It was like he was studying on something. He looked up at the sky and rubbed his mule's mane, and finally he looked at the boy and asked him why he didn't just go home.

"Darrell was still madder than a hornet and told the old man that he wasn't going to let anyone get by with insulting him. Then he spit hard so that it splattered the mule's foot. The old man looked down at the spit, then back at the boy, and shook his head. Then he asked Darrell if he didn't think the teacher was smarter than to come out of the schoolhouse helpless. Darrell thought a minute, then said he didn't care and that he was sitting right there no matter how long it took."

Chris sat on the edge of the chair, his eyes big as dinner plates. "What did he do then?"

Will took a long drink of coffee, savoring its taste and enjoying Chris's anticipation.

"The old man scratched his beard and thought a minute, and then told the boy that he only meant to warn him. Then he turned his mule around and headed back across the river."

"Did the teacher come out?"

"It was after dark when the boy saw a movement in the blackness of the schoolhouse door. He gripped his musket and set the hammer back. The words of the old man echoed in his head. That teacher's smarter than to come out helpless.

Darrell was scared to death, but his pride and stubborn streak blinded his good sense. Suddenly he saw a gun barrel coming straight at him. It scared him so bad that his finger closed on the trigger, discharging the musket, and knocking him backwards off the fence. In the blackness, he scrambled around the grass searching for his gun, but he couldn't lay hands on it. Then it came to him that it would take five minutes to load the darn thing. Reckon his good sense came back to him, and he took off running along the fencerow, trying to stay out of sight of the schoolhouse door. Darrell ran for two miles without stopping until he couldn't run anymore."

"What happened then, Mr. Donnelly?"

"The boy told everyone that the teacher had snuck up on him with a shotgun and threatened to kill him on the spot if he didn't go home and never come back. A couple of days later the old man on the mule stopped to talk to the teacher. He asked him where he got the shotgun.

"The teacher laughed out loud and said the boy couldn't tell a shotgun from a broomstick. The old man grinned and said he'd never know the difference from him."

"That was a good story, Mr. Donnelly. If a kid tried to shoot a teacher today, he'd be put in jail. Did they arrest Darrell?"

"In those days people figured a lesson learned was better than time in jail."

"I tried some chewing tobacco once. Didn't like it. Made me sick to my stomach."

Will grinned. "I never liked it much either."

They could hear the screech of a hoot owl off in the distance, then the bellow of a cow. Esther had finished her chicken bone and returned to the porch, looking for another handout. She stood on her hind legs and stretched her neck towards Will's plate, twitching and sniffing.

“Your mama is a good cook.” He tossed the cat the last bit of chicken and finished up the potato salad and biscuit. “I guess another reason I liked school was because we only went about three months out of the year.”

“Only three months? How come?”

“We had chores that had to be done. We would have to cut enough wood to last all winter and there was always water to haul because no one had inside plumbing. In late summer, we pulled fodder from the corn for the livestock. We had to take the corn to the gristmill to be ground, and the hay and wheat had to be gathered. My daddy made furniture so we had to help him cut lumber. We had two mules, Hercules and Sam, and it was easy for them to pull a wagonload of lumber. We worked year-round back then, so there wasn’t a lot of time for school.”

“That’s why you named your mule Sam?”

“Yes, he reminds me a lot of our old mule. He stood seventeen hands and was real smart. Hercules was a good mule, but Sam had personality.”

“I wished I lived back in the old days. I’d rather work then go to school.”

“You might think so, but school was a lot easier, except when you misbehaved. The teachers were strict and always kept a good supply of hickory switches for serious offenses. Mostly, though, we would have to stand in the corner if we talked too much or wear a dunce cap for being mischievous. Do you know what the worse punishment for a boy would be?”

“Being whipped, I guess.”

“No, a whipping got over quick and it was like a badge of honor to get a whipping without crying. The worse punishment was being made to sit with the girls. The boys would be mortified and their faces would turn beet red as though they had a sunburn.”

“Oh, cripes, that would be bad. Girls, yuck!”

“You won’t think ‘yuck’ in a few years,” laughed Will.

Chris made a face and shook his head, and then they stopped talking for a while. Esther finished her chicken and sat on the top step, licking her paws with a satisfied look on her face. Chris placed his hands on the arms of the rocker and a serious look clouded his bright eyes.

“If I ask you a question, will it make you mad?”

“I don’t think so. What is it?”

“Are you crazy?”

The question caught Will by surprise, but it made him smile. “I guess that’s what you’ve heard, isn’t it?”

“Some dumb boys at school have been saying it. They said you went crazy during the war, and they locked you up in an insane asylum. You don’t act crazy.”

“I was sick for a long time, but I’m better now.”

Chris sat rocking back and forth in the chair with Esther stretched out in his lap. Will knew the boy was still mulling something over in his mind, and he waited.

“Mr. Donnelly, why do you talk to the scarecrow?”

He thought a minute before answering. “When you ride Sam, do you ever talk to him?”

“Sure, but he’s alive, just like a cat or dog.”

“Guess you have a point, but they can’t answer you, can they?”

“In a way they can. They wag their tails and lick you. One day Sam burrowed his head on my shoulder. That’s just like talking.”

“Yes, I guess you’re right. I think I talk to the scarecrow because I’m alone most of the time and talking to him makes me feel less lonely.”

“Oh,” Chris sighed. “I never thought about grownups being lonely.”

After Chris went home, Will sat on the porch smoking a cigarette. Their conversation left him uneasy. He wished the boy hadn't seen him talking to the scarecrow. He meant to keep it private, between him and the scarecrow.

Suddenly his thoughts came rushing back at him.

"Something private between myself and the scarecrow. My God! No wonder Chris asked me if I was crazy. I'm depending on an inanimate object to keep me going every day."

It had become so natural to talk to the scarecrow. Was this another part of his mental illness? Perhaps he only imagined seeing and hearing Jacob in the yard. Will threw his cigarette out into the darkness, and then he grabbed his cane and walked towards the garden. The sky had cleared and stars were scattered, but there was a haze circling the moon. His eyes grew accustomed to the darkness and he could see the silhouette of the scarecrow. He searched the face looking for something, but silence filled the air. Did he imagine the whole thing? Shame filled him when he thought once more about the little boy.

Will yanked at the stick that held the scarecrow in the ground and was surprised when it came up easily. Looking around, he wondered what he should do with it. He walked towards the workshop and leaned the scarecrow against the building, then went back to the house to get a lamp. As he carried it back to the workshop, the lamp cast an eerie light, preventing him from seeing more than a few feet in front of him. He pushed the door open and set the lamp on the worktable, then went outside and picked up the scarecrow. He cradled it in his arms and a rush of memory brought him back to that day on the battlefield when he found Jacob. Please don't be dead. Please don't be dead ran over and over in his mind like the stuck needle on a Victrola record player. If I can get him off this ridge, they'll be waiting with the ambulances below. Hang on, Jacob, you'll be all right, just hang on.

Mournful tears slid down his cheeks, but this time they served a purpose. They washed away the guilt that had tormented his soul and damaged his mind. The realization that he had done everything humanly possible to save Jacob became clear to him. Only God could have saved him and He chose to take him. Will sat the scarecrow in an old chair in the corner of the workshop. He found a stool and sat across from it.

“Is this what you were trying to tell me?”

He waited, but the scarecrow was silent and the face was blank.

Chapter 21:

Isabel

One Saturday towards the end of April, Kaye was home alone with the baby, washing windows. Robert had taken the boys to mend fence at the top of the hill where his land ended and his neighbor's began. Their five cows had grown to ten since the birth of calves in March and he wanted to make sure they wouldn't wander away. Kaye packed them some dinner in case they got hungry before they finished their work.

It was past noon when she finished ironing the last curtain. As she hung the last panel, a warm spring breeze pushed the yellow checked curtains lazily back and forth. It was taking her longer to finish her spring cleaning and she was glad her little daughter was content to play on the kitchen floor with the pot lids, plastic bowls and spoons. Kaye loved to open the doors and windows and let the fresh air of the new spring come inside. Today was different, though, because Kaye didn't feel like her usual self. She was used to putting in a full day's work, but lately everything she did left her exhausted.

"I'm glad we're finished, Isabel. Mama's tired," said Kaye as she brushed a strand of honey blonde hair from the baby's forehead. Beads of perspiration slid down the side of Kaye's flushed cheeks and her hair felt damp and sticky. Heaving a sigh of relief, she removed her apron and tossed it on the counter. She

held her arms out to the baby and Isabel laughed as her mother lifted her high in the air.

“Looks like you need a change, young lady, and it’s nap time.”

Kaye filled a baby bottle with milk and carried it into the bedroom. Isabel usually drank from a glass now, but sometimes a bottle of milk was a welcome friend when she took a nap. She changed the baby’s diaper and laid her in the crib with her bottle.

“Night, night, little girl.” Kaye kissed her daughter and placed a light cover over her, which Isabel pulled up to her neck. Kaye picked up the homemade Raggedy Ann doll from the dresser and laid it next to the baby. Isabel had been resisting her naps now that she was nearly two, so when she went down without a whimper her mother was grateful. Kaye went to the bathroom to freshen up and was disturbed when she looked in the mirror. Her hair was dull and lifeless, and dark rings circled her eyes. She was only thirty-five but lately had felt like sixty. She decided to lie down for a while. Kicking her shoes off, she climbed into the big four-poster, pulling the afghan over her. She took one last look at the crib, then closed her eyes and fell into a deep sleep.

After finishing her bottle, Isabel played with her doll, but sleep wasn’t on her agenda. She stood up and peered over the railing at her sleeping mother. This was the first time Isabel tried to get out of her crib. It didn’t take long for her to figure out how to swing her leg over the bar and scoot over the top, using the headboard for support. She stood on the edge of the mattress, let one foot dangle, slid her hands down the rungs on the side and dropped down in a heap. The braided rug quieted the thump of her little body against the floor. She wasn’t hurt and was very pleased with her escape. The toddler walked over to

the bed and patted Mama's arm, then softly whispered, "Night-night." Her bare feet felt cool against the linoleum as she padded across the living room floor and discovered the unlocked screen door. Kaye never heard the door close.

Isabel stood for a moment on the porch watching a spider weave a web under the railing, and then she touched the arm of the old rocking chair, moving it back and forth. She pulled a weed with a tiny purple flower growing through the wood slats of the porch. The big calico cat that lived in the barn ran across the grass and Isabel decided to follow it. Sitting on the top step, she began scooting down the three steps to the ground, then looked back at the front door, but Mama wasn't there. The cat disappeared under the barn door. The baby walked towards the creek that ran in front of the house. The days had been exceptionally warm, and the sun had already begun to dry the creek bed, leaving only a thin steady stream flowing over the rocky bottom.

The sun's reflection made sparkles on the water that fascinated her and pulled her toward them. Ripples formed each time the baby's hand reached for a sparkle. The water was very cold, but Isabel didn't notice. Suddenly, tadpoles appeared, skirting across the water's surface. She tried to catch them but they eluded her. Isabel turned a complete circle, trying to catch them, but to no avail. A fat frog hopped across the rocks and she watched it disappear into the milkweeds. Isabel walked along the edge of the water and ran her fingers across a clump of dainty violets just like she did when walking with her mother. She leaned over to smell them, and they tickled her face and made her giggle. A smooth stone lay in a shallow part of the stream and she grasped it with her chubby fingers. She threw it into the water and laughed when it splashed. As she searched for more rocks, she moved farther and farther away from home.

Isabel walked a long way and her eyes were getting heavy with sleep. She had slipped and fallen several times but got back up without crying. She didn't care about her muddy diapers or the long muddy smear left on her face when she rubbed her sleepy eyes, but her clothes were wet and a chill made her shiver.

She began to cry.

Baby sounds that sounded like a dove cooing or a tiny kitten slipped from her lips.

Those sounds interrupted Will's thoughts as he unhitched his mule from the plow. He looked towards the creek bed, but the bright sun blinded him. He leaned on the handle of the plow and shaded his eyes with his big, calloused hand. A tiny figure at the edge of the creek bed became visible. It might have been an illusion left by the bright sun shining on the water, except it was getting closer. A little barefoot girl with golden hair and a blue-and-white checked dress stood in the creek. "My God. It's a tiny child." Her diaper sagged with muddy water. She slipped on a rock and began to squall when she saw him. He hurried over to her, and as tears spilled from her eyes, she raised her hands up to him. Without hesitating, he lifted her into his arms. In spite of the mud, she was beautiful, and the dimples on her cheeks deepened when she looked at him.

"Me, me," she whimpered and clung to his shoulder, her tiny hands clutching his shirt. He cradled her in his arms to warm her chilled body.

"Where did you come from, little one?"

Isabel laid her head on his shoulder and whispered, "Night-night." She closed her eyes and pulled her legs up under her body. Will slowly walked towards the porch, eased into his chair, and began rocking the baby as though he had done it a hundred times before. He knew she probably belonged to the Dawsons

and someone would be looking for her soon, but he wasn't in any hurry for them to arrive.

An hour passed and no one came. "I don't understand why someone hasn't missed the baby after all this time? They must be careless fools." The baby began to squirm and turn her head from side-to-side. Her eyes opened and she lifted her head looking all around, but didn't cry.

"Are you awake, little one?"

She shook her head no and laid her head on his shoulder, but only for a moment. With a deep frown etched across her forehead, she said, "Mama?"

"Mama's not here right now, but how about we clean you up? I believe you need a new diaper."

A clean pillowcase was the only thing he could think of to use for a diaper as he carried her into the house. He sat the baby in the middle of the kitchen table and told her not to move, then filled a pan with water and put it on the stove to heat. Then he carried her into the spare bedroom and sat her on the floor while he looked for some baby clothes. He eased down to the floor using his cane for balance and rummaged through the trunk at the foot of the bed. Near the bottom he found a box and inside, carefully wrapped in paper, was a long white dress trimmed in blue ribbon. He couldn't help but smile because it reminded him of the time Mama was sick with pneumonia, and he had to care for his brother and sister for nearly two weeks by himself. Sarah was sixteen months old and still in diapers. He had dressed Sarah in this dress and Mama fussed at him because it was a special occasion dress. But the baby looked so pretty with the matching bow in her curly blonde hair that Mama just sighed and made him promise that he wouldn't let her wear it outside.

A sharp pain in his knee brought him back to the present. He closed the trunk lid and using it and his cane, made it to his feet. The baby reached for him when he bent down to pick her

up. A small white cabinet in the kitchen held all the household linens and he found a pair of embroidered pillowslips.

"This might work," he said, and the baby smiled at him.

Kaye woke with a start. Her head throbbed. She looked over at the baby's bed as she rose, puzzled to find it empty. Robert must have come home with the boys and taken Isabel out of her crib. She felt around the floor until she found her shoes, slipped them on and went in search of a brush for her hair. The screen door slammed and Bobby called out.

"Mom, what's for dinner? We're starved."

"I'm coming," she answered. She was filling a glass with water to take some aspirin, when Robert appeared at the bathroom door.

"Hi, honey. Did you get a nap? I'll get Isabel."

"Isn't she with you?" she asked. The aspirin bottle fell into the sink as she rushed to the bedroom where Robert stood, staring at the empty crib.

"Where's the baby?"

"I thought she was with you! Oh my God. What have I done?"

Her legs wilted and she grabbed her husband's arm to keep from falling. Her pale, ridged face alarmed him as he tried to steady her, "Don't worry. She can't be far. We'll find her."

Kaye's body seemed to turn to stone as she watched Bobby search the kitchen while Chris made a beeline towards their bedroom. They knew the little girl liked to play in the boys' room, but she wasn't in the house. The search spread to the yard. Kay could hear them calling the baby's name and she forced her legs to carry her to the front porch.

"She must have gotten out the screen door, but she couldn't have gone far," said Bobby. By this time Kaye was so frightened

she had to lean against the railing to keep from collapsing. She began to wail like a frantic animal caught in a trap.

“Oh, Robert, we have to find her.” Her body was trembling and Robert made her sit down.

“Kaye, wait here in case she is close by and wanders back. I’ll check the barn. Boys, you split up and start looking in the trees behind the house.”

“Yes, sir,” they hollered and disappeared around back.

Kaye stared after the boys. Fear’s icy grip left her choking for air. What is the matter with me? Why didn’t I hear her get up? She must have made a noise. What kind of mother would lose her own child! My baby, where’s my baby?

Kaye covered her face with her hands as panic overwhelmed her. Suddenly her head jerked up and she looked towards the creek. Isabel loved to walk along the creek bed; maybe that’s where she went. Kaye ran towards the creek and looked both ways, but Isabel was nowhere in sight. Crossing the stock gap, she started down the dirt road that ran alongside the creek bed. She prayed to see tiny footprints, but the water hid any depressions. Loose gravel made her stumble and her breath came in gasps. She had to remind herself to breathe. Her head ached, but adrenaline kept her moving and looking, always looking for a sign, anything to show her that Isabel passed this way. She called the baby’s name, but her voice came out in a ragged whisper. As she neared the head of the hollow, she saw something that for a moment made her think she had lost her mind. She was looking at a scene from out of an old tintype picture. A big mule stood by an old man wearing a brown felt hat and overalls, and in his arms was a baby wearing a long white dress trimmed with blue ribbon. In her golden hair was a blue bow. Isabel!

“Isabel,” she cried, but her tears choked out her voice and she was barely audible. Will looked up, but Kaye missed the

concern on his face. As soon as Isabel saw her mother, she called out, "Mama."

Kaye reached for the baby, but she was dizzy and nearly fell. The old man caught her arm and steered her towards the porch where she sat heavily on the steps. An overwhelming sense of relief rushed through her body as he placed the baby in her arms. She hugged Isabel until she began to whimper and Kaye whispered over and over, "My baby. My darling little girl. You're all right. You're all right!"

Kaye had nearly forgotten about Will until he handed her a glass of iced tea. It was so cool, she drank until the glass was empty. Kaye rubbed her cheeks with the cold glass and the awful throbbing in her head began to ease. Isabel touched her Mama's face and whispered, "Mama." Quietness spread like a peaceful cloak over them as Kaye rocked the baby and Will sat in his chair, watching them.

Kaye noticed the beginning of a garden that stretched all the way to the tree line. A tranquil aura hung in the air and everything—the mule, the barn and the house—looked as though they had been there since time began. As she rubbed Isabel's smooth skin, her finger snagged a fray from the lace along the edge of the dress. Yellowed with age, she wondered how old it might be. Isabel climbed down from her lap and began chasing a butterfly around the yard. Kaye smiled for the first time and looked at Will.

"My name is William Donnelly."

"Please forgive my manners. I'm Kaye Dawson. My little girl is Isabel. I really should get back to let my husband and the boys know that we're all right."

"She wandered up the creek bed about two hours ago. How did she get away from you for so long?"

"That's what I can't understand. I put her down for a nap and I fell asleep. I was very tired and slept much longer than

I meant to. She has never climbed out of her crib before, but somehow she managed and I didn't even hear her. The screen door doesn't have a lock, and I didn't hear her leave. My God, I didn't hear her. Anything could have happened."

Will noticed the dark circles around her tear-filled eyes. "Just sit still. The men folk will figure out where you are and be heading this way before long. So her name is Isabel," he said. "When I first heard her, she sounded like a little kitten." He stood up and took her empty glass. "I'll get some more tea."

"Thank you," Kaye said, and he knew she was thanking him for much more than the tea.

They sat quietly watching Isabel play in the yard and this is how Robert and the boys found them a few minutes later.

"There's Isabel and Mama," shouted Chris, and the boys began chasing after the baby. When Robert looked at Kaye, he noticed for the first time that she looked ill.

Chris came tearing up to the porch. "Hi, Mr. Donnelly. This is my whole family. This is my Daddy and Mama, and my baby sister Isabel. That's my brother Bobby. You finally got to meet everyone." Chris was glowing as he pointed everyone out. Bobby stayed in the yard with Isabel and didn't say anything.

"Robert, Isabel walked all the way to Mr. Donnelly's house. Can you imagine?"

"No, I can't," he said, smiling at the baby as she ran with Chris and Bobby.

Robert's mind had been reeling since he set out to find the baby, wondering how Kaye could have slept so long, but now he realized that something was very wrong with her. Why hadn't he noticed before how thin she was? He could feel the old man's eyes on them and wanted to get Kaye and Isabel home. Offering his hand, Robert thanked him.

"We appreciate your help and looking out for Isabel."

"These things happen and forgive me for sounding like a busybody, but you need to put a lock on that screen door."

Robert agreed, "You're right. I'll fix that door as soon as we get home."

Mr. Donnelly seemed like a gentle person, and it made Robert wonder why Miss Ida harbored such contempt for him.

"I'm sorry we haven't had a chance to speak with you before. I meant to come down and apologize for my grandmother. She's quite old and is getting senile. I can't explain her actions. Do you know her? Ida Hayes? She and my grandpa, Hershel Hayes, lived in Shinbone Hollow."

"I think I remember them. As I recall, she didn't get out much, and we seldom saw her. Didn't she have a daughter named Lucy?"

"Yes, Lucy was my mother."

"Who was your father?"

"Michael Dawson, a man from Hammond, Indiana. That's where we lived. They died in an automobile accident when I was very young, so my grandparents raised me."

Will nodded. Kaye stood up and held her hands out to him

"I'll return the dress to you."

"I have no use for it and it looks pretty on her. Wait, I have her clothes hanging out back."

Chris came running up to the porch. "Isn't he nice? And look! There's Sam. Mr. Donnelly lets me ride him around the yard."

Kaye caressed her little boy's cheek and said, "Yes dear. He's very nice."

She was deeply touched when she discovered Mr. Donnelly had washed the dress and diaper. "Thank you so much for taking care of my little girl. I'll never forget your kindness. How do you know so much about children?"

"I had a baby sister and a younger brother."

Kaye and Robert thanked him again and called to the children, who were petting the gentle mule grazing in the yard.

“Have you and Sam been plowing today?” Chris asked.

“We got most of the garden turned. I’ll be planting in a day or so. Are you going to have time to help?” He stopped suddenly and his cheeks began to flush. “Maybe you’d rather he didn’t come down here?”

Kaye smiled at Will. “Of course the children can visit as long as they aren’t a bother.”

A slow grin crept across his face. “Well, maybe now and again. I’m liable to put them to work.”

“That sounds like a good idea to me. It will keep them out of trouble,” laughed Robert.

“Oh boy,” cried Chris, and Bobby shoved his little brother as they followed their parents down to the dirt road.

Will noticed that Robert walked with a slight limp and he wondered about it. They all turned back and waved before disappearing around the curve.

The sun slid down behind the hills, leaving a reddish dusk that smelled of dried hay, sweet and musky. Will sat on the front porch basking in the tranquil stillness of the evening. Suddenly he thought about the little rocking chair that he had been sanding.

“Maybe I’ll put a finish on it and set it on the front porch.”

Chapter 22: Memories

As soon as they got out of earshot, Chris bombarded his brother. “Didn’t I tell you he was nice and isn’t that a great mule? He lets me ride it, and I bet you could ride him too. Why don’t you come with me tomorrow? There’s plenty of stuff to do.”

He grabbed hold of Bobby’s arm. His brother pulled away and pushed him. They continued pushing each other all the way down the dirt road.

“Why don’t you two run ahead and set the table for your Mama,” ordered Robert. “Wipe your feet and don’t slam the door.”

Kaye laughed. “Mr. Donnelly is very nice. It’s funny, but I felt at ease with him right away. His place is so peaceful. Wouldn’t you know the boys would notice the mule first thing? Couldn’t we get them a pony?”

“Listen, Kaye, I want you to see the doctor first thing Monday morning. No if, ands, or buts. I don’t want you to do anything else until you’ve seen the doctor. Why didn’t you tell me you weren’t feeling well?”

“I’ve just been tired, that’s all.” Kaye rested her head against his arm as they walked up the porch steps. “Besides, it’s been exceptionally hot lately. Guess I’m just getting old.”

“Be serious. You haven’t seen the doctor since Isabel was born. Promise me that you’ll go Monday morning. We can leave Isabel with Quixie and the boys will be in school. She’s always asking us to bring Isabel over, so you don’t have to worry about imposing on her.”

“All right, I’ll go, but it’s nothing serious, so don’t worry.”

But Robert did worry. Kaye brought love into his life where none had existed for many years. Robert was seventeen when Grandpa passed away, and living with Miss Ida was worse than living alone. The house was silent, like living in a tomb. After he graduated from high school, he moved up north to Hammond, Indiana, to work in the steel mills. His salary was more than enough to take care of his needs and send money home to Miss Ida. The two-room apartment he found was adequate, but he hated the city. Diligently, he saved his money, always with the thought that one day he would return to Tennessee.

On December 7, 1941, Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. Without hesitating, Robert joined the thousands of men who believed it was their duty to protect their country. He went to boot camp at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. One winter morning, while walking aimlessly around Fayetteville, he saw Kaye for the first time. She was walking with a little boy that Robert thought was her son. They got on the same bus and sat near each other, giving Robert a chance to study her very carefully. She looked like an angel wearing a blue dress with white collar and cuffs. Her soft blonde hair held in place by a gold barrette fell past her shoulders. He noticed the gentle way she spoke to the boy and was delighted when he realized she was his teacher. After only a few stops, they got off the bus and Robert followed them. They crossed the street and entered a restaurant. He didn’t want her to know that he was following her, so he waited a moment before entering. He would order coffee and sit in the back so she wouldn’t notice

him. The waitress came around the counter and picked the boy up in her arms.

“Hi, my little man. How was school today? Miss O’Brien, thank you so much for bringing him. I don’t know how I could manage without your help.”

“You’re welcome. Jimmy is a good boy and a wonderful student. See you tomorrow, Jimmy.” She patted the boy’s shoulder and left the restaurant. Robert panicked when she hurried across the street to the bus stop. He could see the bus coming. He threw a quarter on the table and rushed out of the restaurant, leaving the waitress staring after him, holding a steaming pot of coffee. Robert ran across the street just as the bus arrived. It was full of people and he was glad to find an empty seat across the aisle from where she sat. He tried to act nonchalant by looking at his watch from time to time.

“Are you following me by any chance?”

Robert looked at her, hoping she couldn’t hear the thumping of his heart. He smiled, but couldn’t find his voice to speak. She turned her head and looked out the window. Robert was in agony, trying to think of something intelligent to say. She seemed so generous, caring and beautiful. Robert was in love. He couldn’t stand the thought of letting her disappear and suddenly words began falling out of his mouth like the rush of a waterfall.

“Excuse me. I’m Robert Dawson from Woodbury, Tennessee. I’m stationed at Fort Bragg, and I don’t know anyone here and was wondering if you would have a cup of coffee with me. I know this seems strange, but I don’t have much time and I don’t want to lose ... well, you looked nice and ...”

The young woman looked at him, studying his blue-gray eyes and the way a slight hint of blush appeared on his cheeks as he stammered. He was obviously very nervous and looked more like a little boy than a soldier.

An older woman sitting by the window next to Kaye got up. "This is my stop. It would be easier for you two to talk if you sat next to each other." She winked at Robert, then went down the aisle towards the rear of the bus where she got off.

Robert stood up. "Do you mind?"

Kaye moved over to the window seat and Robert sat next to her. An hour later, they sat across the table in a little café drinking coffee.

"My name is Kathleen O'Brien and I'm from Grand Rapids, Michigan. After I received my teaching certificate last year, I found a job at the elementary school here in Fayetteville. I'd never been in the South; for that matter, I'd never traveled much, and thought it might be a good experience."

They talked about their past and shared dreams of the future. They held hands when he walked her home and when they arrived at her apartment, sat on the front steps for a long while. They talked as though they had known each other forever. He didn't want the evening to end.

Robert's face became serious and he took her hand. "Kaye, I'll be going overseas soon. Can I write to you so we can get to know each other? By the way, you're not married or engaged, are you?"

No one called her Kaye except her father and his words rushed out of his mouth as though he would burst if he didn't say them. She couldn't keep from laughing and when she did, he looked at her as though he had never heard laughter before.

"No, I'm not married, but you don't even know me."

"I'm willing to take the chance if you are."

In the weeks that followed, they spent all their free time together. Robert knew that his orders to go overseas could come any time. It was crazy to wait and take the chance of never seeing her again, so he asked her to marry him. She said yes, and they were married in the Fayetteville courthouse. They promised to

write every week and their letters deepened their affection for one another while World War II kept them apart.

Robert got her letter about the baby while he lay in a hospital bed in London. Shrapnel had penetrated his leg during combat and he feared being a cripple. He was going to be a father and he was on an emotional roller coaster. Would Kaye still love him? Was he going to be able to work and support a family?

When he returned to the States, he received extensive therapy and soon was able to walk with a cane, but he was discouraged. He had a bad limp and felt like a cripple. After discharge, he boarded a train to Fayetteville, North Carolina. The train arrived early in the morning, so he decided to stop at the little café where he and Kaye had coffee that first day. Sweet memories of their time together filled him with a burning need to see her, but he feared her reaction when she saw him. After several cups of coffee, he found the courage to go home to the apartment.

He paced back and forth in front of the building for nearly an hour, mumbling and sometimes cursing under his breath, when he heard Kaye's voice. "I wish you'd come in," she hollered. "I'm getting awfully hungry."

She was leaning out the window, smiling at him. His stiffened jaw relaxed, his eyes softened and he raced up the steps where she met him at the door. In her eighth month, she blossomed with the fullness of motherhood. He laughed joyfully when he tried to hug her and could barely get his arms around her. They clung to each other, never wanting to let go.

Robert's fears dissolved when Kaye whispered, "My dearest, how could you make me wait so long?"

He used a cane for a long time and probably would walk with a limp for the rest of his life, but she didn't care. They lived in the apartment until the baby was born on December 1, 1942.

They spent hours talking about what their life would be like in Tennessee and Robert was happy to find out Kaye always wanted to live on a farm. When the baby was six months old, they packed up their few belongings and took the Greyhound bus to Woodbury, Tennessee.

Robert received a substantial back paycheck and would receive a disability check from the government. Kaye saved part of her salary and still had the money they received as a wedding gift from her family. When the baby was born, her parents sent a large package filled with baby clothes and diapers. Robert wrote a letter to his grandmother and sent a picture of his little son, but never received a reply. He would have liked to buy the farm in Shinbone Hollow from Miss Ida after Grandpa passed away, but she made the excuse that she couldn't wait for the money.

Robert found a two-room apartment for them in town. He knew the property owner and received a reduction in the rent by doing repairs on the building. When Robert introduced Kaye to Quixie Edmonds, they became fast friends. She agreed to keep the baby when Kaye went back to work as a substitute teacher at the grammar school.

When the realtor told him about the property in the Gilley-Young Hollow, Robert and Kaye went out to see the land and they liked it immediately. A hill farm consisting of eighty-six acres, it included a natural spring, groves of trees and a level area near the road that would be the perfect spot to build a house. At the top of the hill, they found a place that would always be special for them. In the spring, flowering dogwood trees covered the landscape. It would have been an ideal location for their home, but was nearly impossible to get to in bad weather. It was enough to know the spot was there and walking that hill became a daily ritual. Robert loved the farm and it was no time at all before he started building.

Their new home had a front room, kitchen, bathroom, and two bedrooms. Robert was an expert carpenter and with the help of neighbors, built a barn and a tool shed. Eventually he rented a storefront in Woodbury, where he opened his woodworking shop. Robert was so content that it worried him how two people could have so much good fortune.

As he thought of all these things, a heavy feeling came over him. What if there was something seriously wrong with Kaye?

Chapter 23: Changes

Miss Ida's restlessness in church distracted Robert. She kept looking up and down the pews as if she wasn't sure where she was. Every time the door opened, her head jerked around to see who came in. Robert wondered if Mr. Donnelly was on her mind, but he would never ask her. It had been several weeks, and it looked as though he never would return. Robert still wondered why she was so adamant in her hatred of Mr. Donnelly. Knowing Miss Ida, he probably would never know.

After worship, Brother Allen stood at the front door greeting the congregation. He hugged Kaye and joked with the boys, but Miss Ida walked past him before he could speak to her. He grabbed Robert's arm and in a low voice said, "Would you wait for me in the vestibule? I'd like to speak to you about something."

When the congregation dispersed, Brother Allen stepped inside to speak to Robert.

"Mr. Donnelly never returned after that first visit. I went out to his house a few days later to see if anything was wrong, but I couldn't catch him at home. I left a note inside the screen door but he hasn't responded. Do you know why he hasn't been back?"

"I'm afraid it's my grandmother's fault. She verbally attacked him that day, and I guess she made him feel as though he wasn't welcome here."

"Why in the world would she do such a thing?"

"I have no idea. Since he came home, she's been like a lit fuse waiting to go off. She refuses to talk to me about it. I was stunned when she went so far as to threaten me if I have anything to do with him. I put it off as senility on her part, but I'm afraid Mr. Donnelly won't be returning to church any time soon."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Do you think it would help if I talked to her about it?"

Robert frowned. "I appreciate you making the offer, but I don't think she would listen to anything you had to say. She's the most stubborn woman I've ever met."

Brother Allen shook his head. "I suppose you know his story."

"Suell and Quixie Edmonds told us about him. I'm afraid we haven't been good neighbors, though. I only just met him the other day, but Chris has taken up with him."

"I'm glad to hear that. He can use a friend and Chris would make a good one."

Just then, thunder rumbled in the distance and Robert said he needed to leave. They shook hands and Brother Allen stood in the doorway watching him sidestep the rain puddles. Puzzled by Miss Ida's attitude toward William, he decided to pay her a visit after lunch

Outside of complaining about the baby fussing in church, Miss Ida didn't have much to say when he drove her home. Something was on her mind, but Robert had no interest in knowing what it was. After they left Miss Ida's house, Bobby started complaining about the boys making fun of him because of Mr. Donnelly. As Robert stared at the windshield wipers moving back and forth, he felt his patience wearing thin. He was

getting tired of Bobby's complaints. The only thing concerning him now was his wife. Her doctor's appointment was eleven o'clock tomorrow morning and they hadn't asked Quixie about keeping the baby yet.

"Bobby, I'm sure you're making a mountain out of a molehill and I don't want to hear any more about it. We have to stop by Quixie's house for a few minutes. Remember your manners."

Chris was delighted, for he loved Quixie and Suell, but Bobby just shrugged his shoulders. He was angry at Daddy for ignoring his complaints about his problems at school. Why didn't he understand how miserable his life had become because of that crazy old man? Petey Youngblood and Jimmy Ferrell had caught him coming out of church today and tormented him to no end about the crazy man in the hollow. He knew the taunting would continue at school the next day. They knew Chris had made friends with the old man because he told everybody at school about the mule. As he thought about it, he glared at Chris, but his brother was staring out the window and didn't notice. Why couldn't Daddy at least try to understand?

Suell and Quixie were reading the Sunday newspaper in the front room when they saw the Dawson's car pull into the driveway. Quixie ran to the front door and her eyes lit up when she saw the children.

"Come in out of the rain. Hi, boys. My, you're growing like weeds."

Quixie couldn't wait to get her hands on the baby. Everyone gravitated to the pink and white kitchen where a pineapple upside-down cake was cooling on the counter. It may have been cloudy outside, but it was sunny and warm inside. A vase filled with white daisies sat in the middle of the table and Quixie pulled one out and gave it to Isabel. "A flower for a flower," she said. Kaye tucked it into the child's barrette and everyone agreed she

looked pretty as a picture. It didn't take long for Isabel to start pulling on the flower until all the petals fell off.

"Hey, Sweet Pea, isn't it time we cut that cake? It sure would taste good with some hot coffee. I'll bet these boys could use a big hunk of cake with a cold glass of milk."

Suell began pouring coffee and milk while Quixie cut slices of cake for everyone. She fed bits of cake to Isabel, and Suell found a bowl of grapes in the refrigerator. The children started grabbing them by the handfuls.

"Where are your manners, boys? Isabel doesn't know any better, but you do!" laughed Kaye.

They looked at their mother, then at Quixie, who just grinned at them.

"Ah, Mama, let them have all they want. After all, they're growing boys," laughed Suell as he rubbed their heads with his knuckles.

The grown-ups talked while the children ate. Suddenly out of nowhere, Chris said, "I wish you were our grandparents. You're nicer than Miss Ida."

Kaye stiffened. "Chris, you shouldn't talk like that about your grandmother."

Robert stared at his coffee cup and didn't say a word.

"You can have more than one set of grandparents," said Quixie. "We could be your, well, we could be your unadopted grandparents. Couldn't we, Suell?"

"If unadopted means we'd like to adopt you if we could, then I thought we already were," he laughed.

"Really?" said Chris, looking at his mama, who just smiled and nodded.

"Well, since it's official that you're grandparents, maybe you won't mind taking care of Isabel tomorrow while I take Kaye to the doctor?" asked Robert.

"Of course, we'll keep the baby. Are you all right, Kaye? You have been looking a little pale."

Kaye hurriedly answered, "I'm only going to satisfy Robert. I've been a little tired lately, that's all. It's probably just old age catching up with me. We had some excitement at our house a couple of days ago."

"What happened?" Suell and Quixie spoke at the same time.

"I fell asleep after putting Isabel down for a nap. Somehow, she managed to get out of her crib. She got out the screen door and walked all the way to the end of the hollow. It frightened me to death, but Mr. Donnelly took care of her until we found her." A soft look filled her face as she thought about the little house at the end of the hollow. "I felt so comfortable with him, as if we'd always known him. There's something very special about him."

Quixie beamed. "I'm so glad you finally met him. You'll never have to worry about the children when he's around."

"He lets me take care of his mule," said Chris.

"All you think about is that stupid mule," interrupted Bobby. "I'm sick to death of hearing about it."

"Bobby!" cried Kaye. "That's no way to talk to your brother."

Quixie and Suell looked at one another, surprised by Bobby's sudden outburst.

Robert glared at Bobby. "That's enough, young man. I don't want to hear another word out of you.

"I'm real worried about Kaye." He cupped her hand in his as he continued, "She hasn't been feeling well and she's tired all the time."

Robert's voice was so grave the boys looked at their mother in alarm.

"The other day when Isabel got out and Kaye didn't hear her, I knew something was wrong. She never sleeps that sound."

Kaye dropped her eyes and her cheeks flushed with embarrassment, but Quixie reached over and patted her shoulder.

"It's time you saw the doctor," said Quixie. "Don't worry about Isabel. I'll be glad to keep her. Ya'll come for dinner tomorrow night. We'd like to hear what the doctor has to say."

Robert wanted to say something else but stopped, knowing the boys were listening to every word.

"Guess we'd better go home," said Robert. Thanks for the coffee and cake. If it's all right, we'll bring Isabel about ten forty-five in the morning."

"That will be fine," said Quixie. "Maybe we'll see you tomorrow, boys."

They hugged Quixie and she picked up the baby and carried her to the door.

"It's fishing time," said Suell. "Maybe next Saturday we can go out to Walter Hill and see if the trout are hungry."

"Could we, Daddy?" asked Bobby and Chris in unison.

"We probably can."

"I'll pack a picnic lunch and you boys can make a day of it," said Quixie as she stroked Isabel's soft blonde hair. Kaye and Quixie hugged each other and walked out to the porch together. "You look like you've lost a lot of weight," whispered Quixie.

"Don't you start worrying now," said Kaye. "I'm sure it's nothing."

Suell and Quixie waved as they watched the car go down College Street and turn onto Main Street. "I'm kind of worried about Kaye. I hope it's nothing serious," she said.

"The doc will find out if there's anything wrong," said Suell. "Did you get the feeling Robert wanted to say something else?"

"Yes, but I think he hesitated to say anything in front of the children. It's a shame about his grandmother. Such darling children, and she doesn't appreciate them at all."

A slow steady rain fell as the Dawson family headed home. It would be a lazy Sunday afternoon.

Quixie was putting a bow in Isabel's hair when she heard footsteps on the front porch. Isabel followed right behind her as she went to the door. The little girl had been like her shadow all day. She made a charming companion and being with her helped ease the worry she felt about Kaye. The smile on her face disappeared when she saw Robert leaning against the doorsill. He looked disheveled, the lines in his face had deepened, and his skin was ashen. She pulled open the screen door and steadied his arm as he came in.

"Robert, where's Kaye? What's the matter?"

"She's really sick, Quixie. She's been ill for a while and I didn't pay any attention to the signs. I should have noticed. I should have taken her to the doctor sooner. How could this have happened? How will I tell the boys?" Then he picked up Isabel and hugged her hard until she began to squirm.

"Come and sit down. I'll get you a cold drink and then you can tell me all about it."

She took Isabel from him and carried her into the kitchen. After giving the little girl a cookie, she fixed some iced tea for Robert. Quixie was frightened. She had been friends with Kaye ever since they moved to Woodbury and thought of her more like a sister than a friend. Oh God, please don't let anything happen to Kaye. She fixed a bottle for Isabel and laid her down for a nap, hoping she would go to sleep. Then her thoughts turned to Suell and she wished he could read her mind and come walking through the door. As she carried the tea into the front room, she tried to calm herself. Robert needed her strength, so it wouldn't do for her to break down too.

"Now, tell me everything. Whatever it is, we'll help any way we can."

Robert covered his face with his hands and began to sob. She didn't know what to do, so she held him in her arms like a child, trying to comfort him. Abruptly, he pulled away from her.

"Please forgive me, but when I saw Isabel, I realized that the children could lose their mother and I fell apart. Kaye may have leukemia. Her blood tests show that she is anemic. The doctor explained that the white blood cells that defend her body against germs and viruses are extremely low and the red blood cells needed to produce blood aren't functioning properly. That's why she has anemia. Oh God, I don't understand it all, but they sent her to the hospital to do more tests. They have to check to see if her spleen or lymph glands are enlarged. When the doctor mentioned leukemia, he said there were two kinds, chronic and acute. He won't know anything for certain until he gets the results of the tests. If it's acute leukemia, she could die in a few months. Oh God, what would I do without her?"

She could barely understand his last few words, for he was crying again. Why was it so hard to see a man cry? Comforting him was impossible, for he was hardly aware of her presence. Isabel started crying, so Quixie went to check on her. She sat with the baby in the rocker and softly crooned, "Hush little baby, don't say a word Papa's gonna buy you a mockingbird. And if that mockingbird won't sing, Papa's gonna buy you a diamond ring."

Soon, the little girl's eyes began to droop and Quixie laid her on the bed and put a light cover over her. When she returned to the front room, Robert sat staring down at the floor.

"Robert, when will you know the results of the tests?"

"It will take a few days. Some of the tests have to be sent off somewhere, but meanwhile they want to keep her in the hospital."

"You have to think of the children. I know how frightened you are about Kaye, but she needs to know that the children are

all right. Why don't you leave Isabel with us for a few days? She seems content here, and it will give you and the boys a chance to figure out what you should do."

Robert's head bowed and he ran his hands through his hair. Quixie wasn't sure if he was really listening to her, but she continued, "Don't try to shelter the boys. They need to be part of whatever is going to happen. She's your wife, but she's their mother, and you and I both know what it's like to lose your mother at a young age."

"I know, I know. Don't you think I've thought of all that?" Robert jumped up out of the chair and began pacing back and forth. He kept running his fingers through his hair where gray strands at his temples seemed to have appeared overnight. When he looked back at Quixie, she saw the face of a tortured little boy. He sat on the couch next to her and took her hands in his.

"Quixie, I didn't mean to yell at you. You've been like family, and I really appreciate your offer. Yesterday when Chris said he wished you and Suell were his grandparents, I wished the same thing. If only Miss Ida could act like a real grandmother, but I know damn well this won't make any difference to her one way or the other. Both Kaye and I have been deeply grateful for your kindness towards the children."

"Suell and I love the children, and we'll help any way we can. I meant what I said. Suell would love having the little one around, and the boys can come here after school until Kaye comes home."

Taking a deep breath, Robert's body gave way to the back of the couch. His hands in constant movement, he searched Quixie's face. "Doctor Taylor said if it is chronic leukemia, they have medicine that can help her and she could live a long time." His eyes dropped, "I don't want her to suffer, though. All I could think of in the doctor's office was the way Mr. Donnelly's father

suffered before he died. He seemed to shrink away to nothing. It would kill me to see that happen to Kaye.”

Tears welled up in his eyes and she put her arms around him. Just then, Suell came through the back door, calling out to Quixie as he usually did. “Look what I got for the baby.” He was carrying a big brown teddy bear, but when he saw Robert and Quixie, he stopped dead in his tracks. The bear fell to the floor as he whispered, “Ah be Jesus!”

Later, as the three of them sat around the table drinking coffee, Robert said, “Kaye wants me to bring the boys to the hospital this evening so we can talk about everything. Actually, there’s not too much we can tell them, except that she is very sick and things are going to be different for a while. Knowing her, she’ll put up a big front and act like she’s not sick at all to keep the boys from worrying.”

“Afterwards, all of you come over for supper,” said Quixie. “Thank God, Isabel is too young to understand what’s going on. When life throws troubles at you, children always seem to be the ones who suffer most. But children are resilient. I’m sure God made them that way on purpose.”

“I’m picking them up after school, and we’ll go to the hospital. Maybe coming back here will make it easier on them. I’m going back now to stay with her till then. I don’t want to be away from her any longer than I have to. Thank you for everything.”

When Robert left, Suell came around the table and wrapped his arms around Quixie. “Have I told you lately how much I love you?”

She rested her head on his shoulder. “Those are two good people. It just isn’t fair for this to be happening to them.”

“I know, Sweet Pea. Promise you won’t keep anything from me. If ever you have the slightest pain, tell me right away. I don’t ever want to lose you.”

Quixie looked into Suell's eyes and smiled. "I promise, but don't forget the same goes for you. No secrets, okay?"

They held each other close, knowing how blessed they were to have each other. Both of them had experienced enough hardships to appreciate every day they had.

The boys were very solemn when they arrived at Quixie's house that evening, but it wasn't long till Suell had them laughing at one of his fishing stories. Quixie made their favorite foods: hamburgers, french fries and fried apples. The chocolate cake with chocolate frosting made them forget how full they were. Quixie added big dips of vanilla ice cream to the cake. Sweet iced tea washed everything down. Suell kept telling funny stories so the boys would laugh and Quixie knew it was his way of easing the tension. The evening went by fast, but when it was time to go home the boys were disappointed that Isabel was staying.

"It's just for a little while," Robert said. "You can walk to Quixie's house after school, and I'll take you home in the evening. This way I'll be able to stay longer with Mama. We don't know what's going to happen yet and I want to be available if she needs me."

Quixie's heart was heavy when she saw the boy's sorrowful faces. Then Robert stooped down so he would be eye-to-eye with the boys and put his arms around them. "I'm counting on you to be strong for your mama. We're family and we need to look out for one another."

Both boys chimed, "Yes, Daddy," and they wrapped their arms around him. Quixie couldn't keep herself from hugging Robert when they walked to the door.

"Don't worry about Isabel," she said. "Maybe you'll be able to take her to see Kaye tomorrow."

"The hospital has strict rules and I'm afraid she's too little," said Robert.

"We'll take good care of her," said Quixie.

It was still light out when the wheels of Robert's truck bumped across the stock gap into the yard. The days had been getting steadily longer and in a month, summer would arrive. When Robert parked the truck, Bobby headed for the house, saying he needed to work on a science project that was due in the morning. Robert knew the boy wanted some time to himself to think about everything. Many changes would take place before this was over, and it would be hard on all of them, especially the boys. Chris followed silently as Robert walked up the hill and stood by the fence, watching the white-faced cattle nibbling on the grass. There were three calves trying to butt each other as they ran together. Life continues to renew itself no matter what is going on in the world around them.

Robert put his hand on Chris's shoulder and the little boy asked, "Daddy is it okay if I go see Mr. Donnelly for a while?"

"You like him, don't you?"

"Yeah, and I think he likes it when I visit him."

"You can go, but don't stay too long. It's getting late."

"Okay," called Chris as he raced towards the creek. Robert watched until the boy disappeared around the curve. He thought about the old man and felt grateful for the kindness he had shown Chris. He was glad his son had him for a friend. Robert looked back at the sleepy-eyed heifers, then started for the house, sighing deeply. In slow motion, he climbed the steps and went inside.

Will sat on the porch making a list of what he needed from Rigsby's Feed and Seed Store. He was proud to have his own truck and get what he needed without asking for help. Going

to the store wasn't his favorite thing to do, but he hoped after a while it would feel more natural. He had the feeling that people were watching him, but that was to be expected in a small town. As a boy, he remembered that everyone knew when a stranger came around. A stranger would fill conversations for weeks at a time. There was no harm meant. Folks were just curious. It bothered Will that they thought of him as a stranger, but he couldn't blame them. Maybe in time things would get better. He'd come a long way in the last couple of months.

He looked out at the garden and smiled when he saw how straight the rows were. Having the mule sure made it a lot easier. It was too late for seeds so he decided to buy some plants. Then it would look like a real garden. He could visualize rows of corn, beans, okra, and tomato plants. He thought he'd get squash, too, and maybe some watermelon and cantaloupe. Will stood up and walked down the steps to take a closer look. Looking towards the workshop, Will wondered what he thought about the garden, then turned away. It was getting easier all the time.

Out of the hollow's stillness, he heard someone call his name and he grinned when Chris stepped from the creek bed. His smile quickly vanished when he saw the worried look on the little fellow's face.

"Mr. Donnelly, are you busy?"

"Not a bit. Come sit a spell."

Will started to walk back to the porch, but Chris just stood there staring after him.

"What is it, Chris?"

The boy's body sagged and tears welled up in his eyes as he spoke. "My mama is sick in the hospital, and Daddy's real worried about her. Isabel has to stay with Quixie and Suell so Daddy can stay at the hospital with Mama. Everything is all mixed up and I hate it."

He wiped his face with his shirtsleeve and squeezed his eyes shut. His body trembled and he took a quick breath that came

out in a shudder and said, "I want Mama and Isabel to come home."

Will reached out, gathered the boy in his arms and let him cry.

Sleep would not come that night to Quixie and Suell. She turned to lie on her back and sighed deeply.

"What is it, Sweet Pea?"

"I was just thinking about that little girl in there. Doesn't it seem natural to have a child in the next room?"

"I reckon it does." Suell turned over, put his arm around Quixie and began stroking her shoulders and her breasts.

"Do you remember why we didn't adopt a child?" asked Quixie.

"It just seemed time got away from us. I've been happy with you, Sweet Pea, and I don't regret anything." He leaned over and began kissing her gently on the mouth and neck.

"You'll wake the baby," whispered Quixie.

"Not unless you start hollering," he whispered.

Quixie giggled and wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him close. They melted into each other like butter melts into warm toast.

They didn't make love as often as they once did, but that seemed to be the nature of aging and the growing contentment brought by time. Their love was constant. A steady flame that flickered in the breeze but never went out.

Suell always teased her by saying their life was like a delicious cake and sex was the frosting. You could have it with or without and still have something wonderful. But tonight, they hungered for reassurance. They needed this moment to touch and know they had each other. To cling together and never let go ... at least for tonight.

Chapter 24: Questions

As Robert dragged himself out of the truck, he thought about his sleepless night in the lonely four-poster bed. If he could make one wish, it would be to lie in bed with Kaye snuggled up close to him with no clocks to watch, no people to see, and nowhere to go. Sleep had been a stranger since she went to the hospital. Stifling a yawn, he turned the key in the front door of his shop and then he heard someone holler.

“Hey, could you use some coffee?”

It wasn't exactly an answer to a prayer, but it was a close second. Suell was trotting across the square precariously balancing two steaming cups of coffee and a paper bag in his hands. Robert held the door open for him and switched on the overhead lights.

“I figured you just came from the hospital and didn't take time to eat so I brought some donuts, too.”

“Thanks, especially for the coffee.”

They stepped to the back of the shop where Robert had a desk and two chairs. Robert sat down, stretched his long legs under the desk and yawned.

“Sorry. I didn't sleep well last night.”

Suell smiled and popped the lid from his coffee cup. Each of them took a glazed donut out of the bag and bit down into the soft texture of sugar and dough.

“How is Kaye doing?” asked Suell.

“The medicine seems to be doing its job and she’s getting stronger. She keeps begging the doctor to send her home, but I think it’s too soon. I’m afraid she would start doing too much and then have a relapse. They’re going to keep her a few more days. Hopefully I can bring her home on Friday.”

“That’s great news.”

“I know the boys will be glad. We’ve been eating a lot of beans and cornbread lately.”

“Shoot, that’s better than steak,” said Suell. “Quixie wants you and the boys to come for supper tonight. She’s making a pot of my favorite stew and she had her hands in some bread dough when I left the house this morning. Between taking care of the baby and fixing stuff for Will and ya’ll, she’s been as content as a well-fed kitten. I never knew a woman who got so much satisfaction doing for others.”

“She’s been a godsend to us. Our lives have been upside down and she’s brought the only normalcy we’ve had since Kaye went to the hospital. It’s affecting all of us, especially Bobby. He sulks all the time. I’ve been so worried about Kaye that I guess I’ve neglected the children.”

Suell passed Robert another glazed donut and they sat quietly as the church bell rang twice. People went in and out of the courthouse. A taxicab parked across the road waited for a fare as trucks and cars passed down Main Street. The sharp ring of a telephone caught their attention and they watched as the cab driver hurried out of his vehicle to answer the phone that was perched on a pole nearby.

Suell emptied his cup and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. “The sheriff stopped by the garage this morning asking me

questions about Will. Seems the ladies at the beauty shop are in a tizzy about the crazy man living in the hollow. He wanted to know my spin on it.”

Robert frowned and shook his head.

“Being a young fellow, he didn’t know anything about the Donnellys so I explained how things were. He asked me directly if I knew anything about Will being violent. I figured Miss Ida had a hand in spreading that lie and told him there was no truth in it. When I told him about Quixie knowing him since they were youngsters, he seemed satisfied. Robert, I wanted you to know what I said. I wouldn’t say anything behind your back that I wouldn’t say to your face.”

“I appreciate you telling me about it. You and Quixie have been good friends and nothing will change that. I don’t think there are that many people worried about Will. It’s not like he’s running up and down the street waving a gun or something. He’s just an old man trying to live out his life peacefully. I figure most folks will take Miss Ida’s gossip with a grain of salt.”

“That’s what I figure too, but Ramsey sure got my blood to boiling this morning. We were all sitting around Gunner’s Diner when Charlie from the County Clerk’s office made a comment about his wife being scared of William Donnelly. You know how fractious his wife Myrtle is.”

“That’s one way of putting it,” laughed Robert.

“Evidently the gossip at the beauty shop made all the women warm up those party lines and the telephone wires nearly caught fire from all the calls. It’s ridiculous how they can get excited about nothing. They even mentioned the incident at the church when Will left early. Myrtle was sure she saw a crazy look in his eyes that day.”

“Miss Ida was to blame for that too,” said Robert.

“Anyway,” continued Suell, “Charlie asked Ramsey if he wasn’t an old friend of Will’s. He remembered that they both

lived in Prater when they were boys. Ramsey's face turned pink when everyone looked at him, waiting for his answer. Then he claimed that he hadn't seen Will in forty years and didn't know anything about him."

"Why didn't he just tell them the truth and that he knew Will was all right?"

"Durn if I know. My mouth dropped open and I told them that we were friends of Will's and that Quixie had known him for years. I didn't say anything else until Charlie and the others left. Then I asked Ramsey the same question. He stood up with a strange expression on his face and looked me in the eye and said, 'I wish I'd never set foot in that VA hospital.'"

"That's the craziest thing I ever heard. Instead of helping matters, he only made things worse."

"I know he was away many years, but they were good friends as children and I can't understand how he could turn on him like that."

Robert tossed the cups and sack in the basket and stood up. "I don't know, but time has a way of working things out."

"Amen, brother."

It was the end of May and the last day of class at the Woodbury Grammar School. To avoid running into anyone, Bobby stayed late to help the teacher empty trash or any other chore she could find. The empty schoolyard tempered his anxiety until he reached the end of the fence with his bike. Four boys from the seventh grade, Patrick Jones, Jimmy Farrell, Petey Youngblood and Frank Clifford rode up on their bikes and Turney Gibbs was with them. The boys waited by the gate, staring down Bobby as if he were an insect they were planning to stomp.

As he came closer, Bobby noticed that Turney was flicking his index finger against the thumb of his right hand. He did it

constantly until there was a callus worn on his thumb. It was a nervous habit, but one that put Bobby on edge. It was as though he were saying, "I can flick you away like a fly with one finger."

"Hey, Dawson, we need you to do something for us," Turney said as he sent a wad of tobacco spit to the ground. His pants had holes in both knees and the collar of his shirt was ragged along the edges. The seams along the back of the shoulders had opened as though someone had yanked on them. As he stepped closer, Bobby's nose scrunched up, for the boy smelled as though he hadn't bathed in a long time. A new baseball cap with the letters WGS printed on the front kept his long, greasy hair out of his eyes. It was the only clean-looking thing about him. Three of the other boys wore the same type hat, but the fourth boy was noticeably bareheaded. They circled around him like a pack of wolves closing in on the kill.

"We figure to go out to the old man's house and check on him ourselves. I bet you know a way we could get close to the house without him ever knowing we were there, don't you, Bobby?"

"Don't be stupid. We'll get in trouble." Bobby tried to move away, but Turney grabbed him by the arm.

"If you know what's good for you, you better help us. Besides, if he checks out okay, you won't have to worry about your neighbor anymore."

"My dad would kill me."

"He's afraid of his old man, boo-hoo," the boys taunted with fake crying. Bobby was ready to punch one of them when Chris rode up on his bike. He saw the boys, but acted as if they weren't there.

"Bobby, Quixie's looking for you."

Bobby was glad to see his little brother, but the feeling didn't last long.

“Hey, Chris, I hear you’ve made friends with your loony neighbor,” chided Turney.

“He’s not loony! I’m leaving, Bobby. Are you coming?”

“Wait a minute. I want to talk to you,” hollered Turney, and he pulled Chris off his bike and put him in a headlock.

Bobby yelled, “Let go of him!” and tried to pull his brother away from Turney, but it only made him squeeze harder until his brother’s face turned blotchy red. Bobby could feel the excitement building up in the other boys. They kept moving and edging closer, all the while making animal sounds like a pack of wild dogs. Suddenly, hands began grabbing at him until they finally pulled him to the ground. Turney was the leader of this pack and he had full control of his followers.

“If you don’t want something to happen to your brother, you’d better meet me on the Stone’s River Road at the mouth of the hollow Friday night at seven o’clock sharp.”

“But I can’t.”

“You’d better think of a way. I’m not kidding,” said Turney. He released his hold on Chris’s neck and sent him sprawling to the ground.

The boys let go of Bobby and he scrambled to his feet. Turney kicked the gate open with his worn boot and walked over to his bike. Skull and crossbones stickers were stuck on both fenders as well as the middle of the torn, black vinyl seat. The sticker, cracked and stretched, looked to be the only thing holding the seat together. Turney climbed on his bike and headed towards McCrary Street with the other boys following like mindless sheep.

There were tears in Chris’s eyes when Bobby pulled him off the ground. He handed Chris his bike, picked up his own and they walked towards the street.

“Why do they want to bother Mr. Donnelly? He never did anything to them.”

"I don't know. I wish he'd never come back to Woodbury. I'm tired of it all. Ever since he came back, there's been nothing but trouble. Mama's sick, Daddy's busy all the time, and I'm tired of hearing about that crazy old man."

"He's not crazy, Bobby! If you'd only get to know him you'd see."

"Shut up and leave me alone. What does Quixie want, anyhow?"

"She don't want nothing. It was all I could think of to get you away from Turney."

Bobby looked at Chris and shook his head. They climbed on their bikes and headed towards Quixie's. When they reached her house, they left their bikes in the driveway and sat on the porch steps.

"What are you going to do, Bobby?"

"I don't know. Don't you say anything to anyone, okay?"

"I won't, but please don't let them hurt Mr. Donnelly."

"Don't be stupid. No one is going to get hurt."

Quixie saw the boys ride up on their bikes and knew something was wrong. She went back to the kitchen where Isabel was eating a freshly baked chocolate chip cookie.

"Maybe I can tempt the boys with these." She fixed a tray of cookies and two glasses of milk and carried them out to the porch. Isabel trailed behind her.

"Hey, boys, I thought this would be a good way to celebrate the last day of school."

Their eyes lit up when they saw the cookies.

"How did you two get so dirty?"

"We, ah, we were just wrestling," Bobby said.

"Oh, are you sure that's all it was?"

"Yes, ma'am, that's all," and they filled their mouths with cookies.

Quixie wasn't convinced. Maybe Suell can find out what they've been up to.

"I've got some good news for you. Your mama is coming home this weekend."

"Really?" said Bobby. "She's not sick anymore?"

"Well, she'll have to take medicine for a while and the doctor will see her from time to time, but it's a good sign that they are letting her come home."

"I'll be so glad to be home with everybody again," said Bobby.

"Me too," said Chris

Quixie sat in the rocker with a sleepy Isabel nestled in her arms. She looked at the boys, then back down at the little girl. The children would be gone soon. She missed them already.

Perspiration burned Quixie's eyes as she struggled with the Bermuda grass that was trying to take over her flowerbed. She could see why some folks called it moody grass as she yanked another endless strand of root that seemed to go on forever. It could get you in a foul mood before you knew it. Year after year she pulled it out by the root, but it grew back twice as thick. It spread on the top of the soil and then rooted at its own discretion, leaving weedy arms that choked the flowers. It wound itself so close to the flowers that it was difficult not to pull them up with the grass.

In spite of the sweat and her aching back, she loved working in the yard. It never ceased to amaze her how she could drop a seed in the soil and it would turn into a beautiful plant. Suell built a rock wall around the large bed in the backyard and it was her favorite area. She filled it with Shasta daisies, vinca, zinnia, salvia and lilies. It was a conglomeration of flowers that didn't necessarily go together, but she planted whatever struck her fancy. It tickled her when she found a volunteer. Through the

years, she had planted many different kinds, but it was always a pleasant surprise when one came up that she wasn't expecting. Sure enough, two little begonias were squeezing their way in between the vinca. As she walked towards the porch to get a drink of lemonade, a soft voice called to her.

"Quixie, may I talk to you a minute?" Her neighbor Joanne leaned over the back fence with a concerned look on her face. Her house was an old Victorian style structure that had been there since the turn of the century. She was raised in the house and inherited it from her parents. Quixie often wondered how she could exist in those endless rooms by herself.

"Good morning. I was just getting a drink. I'm hot as a firecracker." She took another sip of lemonade, set the glass down and walked over to where Joanne was fidgeting. The woman's lips pinched together as though a lemon lodged in her throat and she fretted with her handkerchief, kneading it in her fingers relentlessly. She reminded Quixie of Chicken Little and the falling sky. Her flaccid chin quivered as she spoke.

"Quixie, have you heard the talk about William Donnelly?"

"What talk is that?" asked Quixie as she pulled her gardening gloves off and wiped her forehead with them.

Joanne beckoned her to come closer and looked over her shoulder, as though she didn't want to be overheard. Quixie fought back a grin as she looked at the timid spinster, frightened of her own shadow. Her hair was a nondescript gray, cut in a pageboy style and so neat, it looked like a wig. Dark slacks and long-sleeved blouses were her standard mode of dress, summer or winter. She had worked at the Colonial Shirt Factory since it opened and other than going to church Sundays and Wednesday evenings, had no social life. She spoke in a near whisper and her tiny eyes kept darting from one side to the other.

"I was at Grace's Beauty Shop the other day and Miss Ida came in. She comes in once a week to have her hair washed. I always wonder why she doesn't have it cut or anything."

She frowned, thinking about that a moment before continuing. "Well, anyway, she told everyone about a Mr. Donnelly who was recently released from an insane asylum. She said he was dangerous and we'd better lock our doors at night. It's got me scared to death, and I wondered if you knew anything about him."

"That's ridiculous, Joanne. I've known William Donnelly since we were children. He was wounded in World War I and spent many years in veterans' hospitals, but he's well now. I've seen him and talked to him."

"You have? Miss Ida told everyone in the shop that he has a violent background and is a danger to the community."

Quixie's face turned scarlet. That old witch. "You should know better than to pay any attention to Miss Ida. She's old and senile. How would she know anything about William?"

"She said she knew him way back when they lived in the Prater Community and that Mr. Donnelly beat a man to death and that his whole family was unbalanced."

Quixie took a step back, fighting to calm the explosion in her chest. Her daddy was the only man William ever laid hands on. How dare that wicked woman spread such lies!

Quixie's voice burst out of her mouth. "That's the craziest thing I ever heard. Don't you believe a word of it, and for heaven's sake don't spread that old woman's lies. She's the one who's crazy, not William."

Joanne stepped back, alarmed by Quixie's outburst. "Well, I don't believe in gossiping, but I was worried. I didn't mean to get you so upset." Joanne looked like a scolded child.

"I'm sorry for hollering," said Quixie. "That old woman is so trying at times. I promise you there's nothing to be afraid of and I'm glad you asked me about it. If you hear anything else, will you let me know?"

"Yes, I will. I'll, I'll see you later." Joanne backed away a few feet, then turned and headed towards her back porch. She picked up the big gray cat stretched out on the steps and gently scolded her. "Naughty girl. Where have you been all morning?"

Quixie watched her neighbor go in the house as her mind whirled with unanswered questions. Why would Miss Ida care anything about William? What would make her lie so viciously about him? I bet that's what's been bothering Bobby lately. Suell must have heard something.

Hanging the spade in the garage, she tossed the bag of weeds into the garbage can, then went into the house. She was no longer in the mood to work in her flowerbed, for there was other weeding to do.

Quixie pulled her clothes off and took a quick shower, all the time thinking about what Joanne had said. Most people in the county hardly remembered William Donnelly except maybe the old-timers. Shoot, everyone was too busy with their own lives to be overly concerned about an old man living alone in the hollow. She knew, though, that no matter where you live, there's always someone to stir up trouble.

The green dress with the tiny coral flowers would do, she thought as she combed her hair back into a ponytail. The silver barrette Kaye gave her for a birthday present was perfect to hold her hair neatly at the nape of her neck. She slipped on her brown leather sandals and grabbed her purse. She would stop by the garage to talk to Suell on the way to the butcher shop.

"You shouldn't have any more trouble with that starter, Joe," Suell waved as his customer went out the door. Suell was

counting the money from his register to take to the bank when the door opened and the sharp click of cowboy boots sent prickly spines up his backbone.

“How about a loan, buddy boy?”

Suell saw Jack’s piercing eyes follow the money into the leather bank satchel. His plaid shirt was soiled, and the rolled-up sleeves revealed a tattoo of a hula dancer on his left arm and skull and crossbones on his right arm. His bushy mustache had dried food and chewing tobacco crusted to it. Stringy black hair hung down nearly to his shoulders under a suede cowboy hat. He spit a wad of tobacco into the garbage can sitting at the end of the counter and a dribble clung to his lip.

“I’m getting ready to close. What do you want?”

“I’ve got a car for sale and wondered if you’d be interested in buying it. It runs pretty good and I’ll make you a good deal.”

A feeling of loathing churned in Suell’s stomach as he looked down at the cash register. He probably stole it, he thought.

“Do I look like a car dealer?” asked Suell. “I fix cars. I don’t buy and sell them.”

“We go back a long way,” smirked Jack. “You know I ain’t going to stiff you with a hot car. I bought it fair and square from a guy who needed some quick money. I figured on making a few extra bucks, that’s all. You know how it is when a man is raising a kid by himself. He needs some new shoes and I’m a little short.”

“I told you I’m not interested.”

Jack jumped to his feet. “I’d-a thought you’d want to help a disabled veteran. Say, that reminds me, have you heard about that crazy old coot Donnelly who moved back here? Was he the guy I saw you with a while back? They say he’s holed up in a hollow somewhere like a hermit. Seems like he was in the war way back, and it broke him.”

Jack laughed and spit another wad into the basket. “Can you imagine that? Shit, I was in WWII and should-a got the

Purple Heart and it didn't break me. Outside of having a bum back, I did real good and I saw plenty, too. They say he was crazy before he ever joined the army. Maybe I ought to check him out."

Jack's last words made Suell bristle and it was all he could do to keep from punching him.

"Sounds like you're looking for trouble and I don't think you want any more of that."

He slammed the register closed and glared at Jack. "Like I said, I'm closing up."

"You sure ain't very friendly today. Having trouble with the old lady?"

"Get the hell out of here before I toss you through that window."

Jack spit another wad of tobacco into the basket and gave Suell a crooked grin as he left the shop. "What a stupid bastard," mumbled Suell as he watched him walk towards the café.

Suell kept thinking about what Jack had said about Will. That good-for-nothing was crazy enough to do anything and Will was a perfect target. Suell locked the front door and pulled the shade, then went to wash up in the bathroom behind the counter.

He heard a knock on the window and said, "What now?" His face lit up when he saw Quixie. Unlocking the door, he bowed low and said, "Come in, my lady. I'm honored to have such a lovely guest visit my humble establishment."

Quixie kissed him on the cheek, then sat down on the bench and patted it so he would sit next to her. "I've just heard something that made my blood run cold."

"Let me guess. It's gossip about Will."

"Yes, then you've heard it too."

"I just had a visit from Jack Gibbs and he mentioned it. He's just a fool. No one will pay him any mind."

“He’s not the only one. Robert’s grandmother has been spreading lies about William at the beauty shop so that means the whole town knows. Do you know what she said?”

“I can’t imagine.”

“She said that he was violent and beat a man to death before he ever joined the service. You know she’s talking about my daddy. William never lifted a hand to hurt anyone and the only reason he beat up Daddy was to protect me.”

Tears filled Quixie’s eyes. “Suell, what should we do? If this gets back to William, he’s liable to give up and go back to the hospital. That would be horrible, just because of some cruel people.”

“Now, now, Sweet Pea. Calm down. He isn’t as helpless as you think. All of this business will run its course. He’s getting out a little more, and people will get to know him better. They’ll see what kind of man he is. Everyone knows that Jack is a fool, and no one’s ever paid any mind to Ida.”

“I hope you’re right. Should we say something to William?”

“I don’t think so. He’s not a child, Quixie, and you can’t protect him from everything. You shouldn’t try to, either.”

They sat quietly on the bench and then Suell whispered in her ear. “How about a date, young lady? I’ll take you to dinner and a show.”

Quixie grinned. “You’ll have to have a bath and change your clothes before I’ll be seen with you.”

“Yes, ma’am. Your wish is my command. Come on, let’s go home.”

Chapter 25:

Jack

Jack Gibbs parked his truck alongside the house and waited for the Hank Williams song to end on the radio before turning off the ignition. The popularity of the singer had increased since he died in the back seat of his Cadillac on New Year's Day a year ago. His music could be heard on all the country stations. Jack stumbled out of the truck and slammed the door, causing the cracked window to tremble. He cursed under his breath because he didn't like coming home to a dark house. "Damn brat ain't home yet."

He opened the front door and waved his hand in the darkness, searching for the string to turn on the light. A shot of pain ran through his leg when he fell against a chair and a low, guttural curse slipped from his lips. Tomorrow he'd never remember how he got the painful bruise on his shin. The light from the single bulb burned his eyes. He slammed the front door shut and began rummaging through the icebox. A piece of tainted bologna wrapped in butcher paper would be his supper. A half loaf of stale bread sat on the counter, but when he reached for it, a large cockroach darted to the edge of the sink and disappeared down the side.

"I should have stopped at the diner before it closed. There's nothing fit to eat in this dump."

Heading for the worn couch along the right side of the room, he knocked off a pile of dirty clothes before sitting down. A lopsided lampshade hung on the metal lamp, but where a bulb should have been was an empty, cracked socket. Jack looked at it in disgust. He slunk down in the couch, sticking his cowboy boots on the coffee table. In his drunken haze, he didn't notice the worn spots on his boots. The shiny silver plating of the trim was all he could see. He smiled as the light from the rocking bulb caught the silver and made it blink like a neon sign. He switched on the radio and sighed when Hank William's hungry voice filled the room.

"That's my man."

Pulling off his hat, he rubbed his greasy scalp with the heel of his hand, leaned his head back on the couch and listened to the words he knew by heart.

Hear that lonesome Whippoorwill, he seems too blue to fly.
The midnight train is whining low,
I'm so lonesome I could cry.
The silence of the fallen star lights up a purple sky,
and as I wonder where you are,
I'm so lonesome I could die.

When the song ended, he got up to see if there was any beer left in the icebox.

"That kid better get his ass home pretty quick," he mumbled. "Dishes piled up, no clean clothes. He's as worthless as his mama was."

There was no beer left, so he slammed the icebox door and laid on the couch, pulling his hat over his eyes to block out the light. It wasn't long before his raspy breathing filled the room.

The puny boys surprised Bobby. It was obvious they were town boys and had no idea how to maneuver through the thick stand of trees. Every sound made them jump and they kept

looking for snakes. If Bobby wasn't so worried, their actions would have made him laugh. He had hardly taken a breath since they started up the hill. Finally, they descended until they reached the tree line along the side of Mr. Donnelly's house.

"Can you see anything?" whispered Turney

"No, he's just sitting on the porch. It looks like he's talking to himself," said Jimmy Ferrell. "Where's the scarecrow? I thought he talked to a scarecrow."

"Ain't that a hoof?" snickered Petey. "So crazy he talks to a blamed scarecrow."

"Yeah, he's crazy, just like everyone says," squealed Frank.

"Shut your trap," whispered Turney. "He'll hear us."

"Come on. Let's get out of here before we get caught." Bobby eased back into the shadow of the trees and the boys slowly followed him.

Chris stared out the bedroom window, praying to catch a glimpse of Bobby. He could hear his mama and daddy laughing at Minnie Pearl as they listened to the Grand Old Opry on the radio. With all his heart, he wished Bobby and him were sitting in the front room with them. But he promised Bobby to cover for him. They had stuffed clothes under Bobby's blanket so it would look like he was asleep.

Chris grabbed the Lone Ranger comic book lying on the dresser and lay on his stomach across his bed. Tonto and the Lone Ranger were always the good guys. They galloped across the plains searching out people to rescue. Chris opened the pages, but the pictures were a blur. He kept listening for sounds from the back of the house. Dread filled him as he wondered what was going on at Mr. Donnelly's house. He was worried about his brother, but he was afraid for Mr. Donnelly. Maybe he should have warned him about the boys. Chris struggled with his conscience and still wasn't sure if he had made the right choice.

In the front room, Robert couldn't keep his eyes off his wife. Stretched out on the couch with her favorite blue and white afghan covering her legs, she still looked like an angel to him. A vase filled with white daisies sat on the coffee table, and she was smiling at it.

"You never forget do you?" she said.

"Nope, never. How do you feel?"

"Better than I've felt in a long time. I'm so glad to be home. The boys went to bed early, didn't they?"

"I think they knew we needed some private time together."

She patted the couch. In a low sleepy voice she said, "Why don't you sit over here with me?"

"Are you sure it will be all right?"

"Of course, silly. I didn't have surgery. You can't hurt me."

Kaye scooted over so Robert could sit on the end of the couch and she laid her head on his lap. He stroked her face and patted her hair, not wanting to look at anything but her.

"Have I told you how much I love you?"

"It's been a long time. At least five minutes."

They laughed softly so as not to wake the children. Kaye closed her eyes. Robert was more at ease than he'd been in a long time. She's finally home. Everything is right again.

After they turned around to go back, relief flooded through Bobby's body. He kept telling the boys to be quiet because they would swear every time one of them stumbled on the rough terrain. They hadn't walked far when Turney stopped and told them to wait. What now?

"We can't just leave," Turney said. His thumb was flicking back and forth like a grasshopper and it made Bobby nervous. "We're here, and we gotta do something."

"What do you mean?" Bobby asked, his breath catching in his throat.

"I saw an old outhouse in back of the house. Does the old man have a bathroom inside?"

"I don't think so," said Bobby.

"Perfect. Come on, we're going back. We've got some work to do."

Bobby felt sick to his stomach. "I have to go home. My daddy's liable to be looking for me."

The boys laughed softly. "He's still scared of his old man."

"You stay right where you are. You're as much a part of this as the rest of us. Besides, we won't get caught. This won't take long at all."

It was harder passing through the trees in the dark, but soon they were on the edge where the garden began. Will had gone inside, and only a glow shone from the front of the house. As the boys crept past the back porch, there was no sound or movement from inside. From where they stood, the outhouse was about ten feet away, but then Turney noticed the workshop.

"What's that over there?"

"I don't know. Just an outbuilding, I guess. What are you going to do?"

"You and Jimmy get some of that wood piled up near the back porch. Petey, you and Frank find some dry brush and carry it to the outhouse."

"You're not going to burn the outhouse are you?" whispered Bobby. "You're going to get us in a pack of trouble. You asked me to show you the place. You didn't say nothing about burning anything. I don't want any part of this. I'm going home."

"If you know what's good for you, you'll shut up and do what you're told. Remember what I said I'd do to your little brother if you didn't cooperate?"

Bobby felt sick. He should have told Daddy or Suell. What was he going to do?

The boys kept looking towards the house as they crept through the yard, carrying brush and wood. They tossed it inside the door of the outhouse and Pete held it open while Turney pulled out a book of matches. He squatted down in the doorway and began lighting one match after another, until small flames began licking the brush. The dry shrub caught fast and soon the flames reached up towards the walls and smoke began pouring out the door. Turney shut the door and started running towards the woods with the other boys following at his heels.

The woods close up at night and they couldn't see anything but darkness as they tripped over roots and bushes. Low branches dangling from the trees slapped them in the face.

"We're far enough now, let's head towards the road and get out of these trees," said Petey.

"Yeah," agreed Turney. "That old man can't chase us with a bum leg."

The boys turned left towards the road, but Bobby headed for the ridge. He followed it until the lights from his house shone from below. Bobby was anxious to get back inside the safe walls of his room and forget this night ever happened. He climbed down the hill at the back of his house and peeked in the kitchen window, praying he could slip inside without being caught.

Turney lost track of Petey, Frank and Patrick. He didn't know that together they found an open spot that led to the road. They sneaked quietly past Bobby's house, then opened up into a full run until they reached the mouth of the hollow where they left their bikes. There was no sign of Jimmy or Turney, but they smelled smoke.

"Man, I'm not waiting any longer. I'm getting out of here," said Petey.

That's all Frank and Patrick needed to hear. They jumped on their bikes and headed down the Stones River Road towards Woodbury.

Night crowded in on Turney and he was completely lost, but he didn't dare admit it. He knew Jimmy was scared because he clung to him like a scab. No sounds came from the other boys and blackness surrounded them. The woods were so thick that even the light from the moon was no help. Turney lit a couple of matches, but couldn't see further than his hand. They had taken a wrong turn and the woods had swallowed them. Trees jumped up when least expected and gnarled bushes with bony fingers grabbed at their shirts and pants, searching for the tender skin beneath. Crazy thoughts of never finding their way out burned in Turney's brain.

"Bobby, where are you? Show us how to get out of here," he yelled, but there was no reply.

When Turney and Jimmy heard bushes rustling behind them, their imaginations got caught up in coyotes, wolves and the never-ending fear of unknown creatures that lurk in the dark. They panicked and began running as fast as they could, reaching forward with their arms and hands to protect their faces.

In Turney's frantic mind, he was lost in a wild forest where darkness hid the threats of bottomless holes, vicious animals, poisonous snakes, and distorted trees that reached out for him. In dense woods, trees grow in odd shapes and sizes due to lack of sunlight and space. As Turney ran, he stretched his arms forward, but a large poplar tree with a misshaped trunk stood in his path. A long, thick branch shaped like an arm that bent upwards from the elbow grew from the side of the poplar tree and the boys were running towards it. Jimmy managed to miss the contorted branch, but Turney slammed into it. It hit him across the chest so hard that it knocked him flat on his back

where he struck his head on a rock. Flashes of light swirled in his head. He couldn't breathe, for the blow had knocked the wind out of him, and his chest was bruised.

Jimmy sensed Turney's fear and all his bravado disappeared when he heard the sound of Turney's body hitting the ground. Should he go back and help his friend? The boy's body trembled and his legs turned to rubber. He sank to his knees and began crying. He closed his eyes, hugged his body with his arms and rocked back and forth.

"Why did I listen to Turney? I want to go home. I want to go home."

Will had drifted off to sleep and didn't notice Esther pacing back and forth with her tail flicking the empty air. The kittens lay on the rag rug in front of the hearth, but their noses scrunched up, sniffing the room. The smell of smoke seeped into the house. In his sleepy state, Will thought the flue in the fireplace was clogged. Then he remembered it was too warm for a fire. Pulling himself out of the chair, he followed the smell and walked into the dark kitchen. Then he saw it. Flames had completely enveloped the outhouse. Without thinking, he grabbed the bucket of water and hurried out the back door. He soon realized there was no way to put out the fire and hurried towards the workshop where a can of kerosene leaned against the door. He wanted to get it a safe distance away from the fire.

Then he thought about the scarecrow. It was sitting inside the workshop. Fear ran through Will's brain. What if it caught fire, too? He had to save him. He couldn't let the scarecrow burn. Will ran to the workshop and flung open the door. He felt around in the dark until his leg bumped into the side of the chair where the scarecrow leaned over the arm. Once again, he cradled it in his arms and carried it to the house. Setting it on the floor of the porch with its back leaning against the wall, he searched

its face. Snatches of light from the fire gave the face an eerie appearance and Will turned away. He shook his head. Would he ever be able to let go of this obsession? Then he remembered the can of kerosene and hurried back to retrieve it. He carried it to the house and stuck it under the porch. There was nothing left to do but watch the flames chop at the old outhouse until it crumbled to the ground.

When Bobby opened the back door, Robert was waiting for him. "You've got a lot of explaining to do, young man."

Chris sat in the living room with Mama and Bobby could tell he had been crying. Bobby knew the whole thing had been wrong, but he was backed into a corner by Turney's threats. The relief he felt telling his daddy the truth was worth any fear of punishment.

After Bobby told his story, Robert called Suell, told him what happened and asked him to meet them at Will's house. When Robert got off the phone, he told Kaye that Quixie was coming too. Bobby looked at Chris, wanting him to know that he wasn't mad at him, but he didn't say anything. Chris stayed with his mama while Bobby and Robert drove to Mr. Donnelly's house.

"Where are the other boys now?" Robert asked.

"I don't know. I lost them in the woods."

"After I see about Mr. Donnelly, we may have to look for them."

As Robert's truck headed towards the head of the hollow, the sound of its motor reached Jimmy's ears. The boy looked up and realized that the road had to be nearby. He retraced his steps and called Turney's name. A low moan led him to where Turney lay sprawled out on the ground, his breath coming in short gasps. Jimmy helped him to his feet and pulled him in the direction where he heard the truck. When they reached the dirt road, the boys looked around and then began the trek back

to where they had left their bikes. Jimmy had to keep stopping for Turney to catch up. He wanted to leave Turney behind. It was his fault they were in this mess, but something inside Jimmy wouldn't let him desert the injured boy. As Turney attempted to climb onto his bike, he cried out in pain and fell to the ground. Jimmy cursed under his breath as he struggled to pull him to his feet and get his bike upright. What if Turney couldn't ride his bike back to town? Jimmy held Turney's bike as he tried once more to ride it. Clumsy at first, the boy finally got it moving at a slow, steady pace. Jimmy kept his eyes on Turney and when he was satisfied the boy was going to make it, he jumped on his bike and followed him.

As the cool evening breeze whipped at Jimmy's face, he thought about what had happened. Why had they listened to Turney? He was always looking for trouble and they were dumb enough to go along with everything he wanted to do. They were afraid of Turney but after tonight, no one would ever be afraid of him again.

It was only seven or eight miles back to town, but it felt like fifty. The full moon was no match for the black inky darkness that lay ahead of them. It was as though they were moving through an endless hole. When lights from an oncoming vehicle startled them, without saying a word they got off the road and hid in the ditch until it passed. Neither boy spoke the whole way back to Woodbury.

When Robert's truck stopped in front of Will's house, the charred smell of smoldering wood filled the air. He knocked on the door but there was no answer. He and Bobby walked around back and found the old man sitting on the step of the back porch, staring at the empty space that once occupied the outhouse.

"Are you all right, Mr. Donnelly?" asked Robert.

"I'm okay, but that outhouse has seen better days. Guess I'll have to do my business in the woods like the Indians for a while."

Robert couldn't keep from grinning, but he was surprised at the old man's calm demeanor. He pushed Bobby forward and the boy stood in front of Will, his head hanging low, afraid to look him in the eye.

"I'm real sorry, Mr. Donnelly. It was my fault. I brought them boys up here, but I didn't know they would do anything like this. I'll help you build another outhouse."

Will looked at him for a minute, then at Robert. He put his hands on Bobby's shoulders and with a slow grin spreading around his lips said, "You know what? I don't think I want another outhouse. I've been trying to decide if I needed an inside toilet and it looks like you've made up my mind for me."

Robert was stunned. He didn't know how Will would react, but he didn't expect this. Instead of being angry, he was making jokes.

"We'll pay for the damage. I'm awfully sorry for the trouble he caused."

"It got me riled at first, but since you brought your boy over to apologize, there's no sense staying mad. I'm glad it didn't spread. I'd hate to lose the workshop."

"Are you a carpenter?" asked Robert.

"My daddy was a top-notch carpenter. I'm afraid I didn't inherit his talent, but I like to piddle. I'm what you call a fair barn builder. The fire looks like it's worked itself out. Why don't you and your boy come in and sit a spell? I could use a cup of coffee. How about you?"

They went inside and sat at the kitchen table while Will put on a fresh pot of coffee. The house reminded Robert of his grandmother's house with no electricity or running water. The ease with which the old man moved around the old-fashioned kitchen intrigued him.

“So you’ve been thinking about putting in a bathroom?” Robert asked.

“Yes. It’s been hard going back to an outhouse after being used to bathrooms with showers all these years.”

“In my experience,” smiled Robert, “once you’ve had a real bathroom you can’t go back.”

Will laughed as he poured coffee for them. He reached inside a cabinet and pulled out a package of oatmeal cookies, laid some out on a saucer, then poured a glass of milk for Bobby.

“When I came home I wanted things to be like they were when I was a kid. Guess that was foolish. I’m not a kid anymore, and old age has made me appreciate modern conveniences. I’ve even been thinking about getting electricity hooked up. How did you have it done when you built your house?”

“It wasn’t any problem and it wouldn’t be any trouble getting them to extend the line down here. I can help you build a bathroom and show you how to get water from the spring into the house.”

“I think I can do a lot of the work myself,” said Will, “but I’d pay you for your help.”

“Don’t worry about paying me,” said Robert. “It’s the least we can do and it will give Bobby a chance to make up for his poor judgment.”

Robert smiled at his son when he saw the pink flush spread across his cheeks. The boy quickly shoved another bite of cookie in his mouth.

As Suell let Quixie out of the truck at Robert’s place, he assured her that everything would be all right. “If it’s just a prank by some kids, Will is going to be able to handle it all right. Tell you what, if there’s any problem, I’ll come right back and tell you. If everything is okay, I’ll stick around in case they need my help. Is that a deal?”

Quixie kissed him on the cheek and said, "That's a deal, Mr. Edmonds."

Suell waved and headed towards the end of the hollow. As soon as he climbed out of the truck, he could smell the smoke and charred tang of burnt wood. He started to walk around back, but the sound of talking and laughter steered him to the front porch.

He knocked on the screen door and Will hollered, "Come in, come in." Suell was surprised at the bright look on his face.

His eyes nearly fell out of his head when he saw Robert, Bobby and Will sitting around the kitchen table, eating cookies and acting as though nothing happened.

"Hi, Suell," said Will. "I'm glad you're here. We could use your thoughts on where I should put my new bathroom."

"Bathroom? Is that what you're talking about? What burned?"

"The outhouse. What do you think?" exclaimed Robert. Everyone laughed, but Suell wasn't sure what was so funny.

"Say, when you came up the River Road, did you see any boys on bikes?" asked Robert.

"No. We didn't see anyone on the road."

"Did you see any bikes lying on the ground when you turned into the hollow?" asked Bobby.

"I wasn't looking for any bikes, and I didn't notice any. Why?"

"The boys must have found their way out of the woods," said Will.

"Oh, I see. Some boys from town came out and set fire to your outhouse. Now I understand. When you said there was a fire at Will's, you left out the outhouse part."

Then Suell looked at Bobby and said, "Do you know who they were?"

Bobby's expression changed and he looked like a thief with his hand in the cash register.

"I showed them the way to Mr. Donnelly's house. I'm sorry, Suell. It was wrong."

"We need to tell the sheriff what happened."

"I've been thinking about that," said Will. "I'd rather not say anything to anyone, at least for now. No harm was done, and I don't think those boys will be back any time soon."

"But Will, they need to be punished," said Suell. "Your house could have caught fire and you could have been hurt."

"But it didn't and I wasn't. I'd appreciate it if we could keep this between ourselves. Don't you see? This would draw too much attention. I really want to avoid any more trouble."

Robert and Suell looked at each other, then Bobby said, "They were really scared in the woods after it got dark. Even Turney was scared."

"Turney Gibbs?" asked Suell.

"Yes," said Bobby.

"I'm afraid this thing may not have ended yet," sighed Suell. "His old man is a troublemaker and if he gets wind of this, there's no telling what he might do."

Will poured a cup of coffee for Suell and topped off his and Robert's. Then he sat with his head bowed, watching the steam rise from the hot cup. "I don't want any of you involved in this. If this Gibbs fellow wants to talk to me about it, he'll know where to find me."

Suell was quiet, thinking his own thoughts. Esther had been lying on the chair in the front room and decided to join the men in the kitchen. Reaching down to pet her, she shunned Suell and rubbed against the boy's leg. She made one circle, then jumped into Bobby's lap. Her nose began twitching and the smell of cookies couldn't be resisted. She stretched her paw and began picking at the crumbs on the table. Bobby broke off a piece of

his cookie and fed it to her. She jumped off his lap and gobbled it down, then stood up on her hind feet, begging for more.

“She has no manners,” grinned Will. “You know, while I was watching the fire, I got to thinking about my brother and his pranks.” Looking at Bobby, he said, “Jacob was about your age when he and his friends pushed over several outhouses. He got a beating but that didn’t slow him down. The following year, he dressed like an old crony woman and hid in the trees. Whenever someone passed by, he would scream like a witch and jump down at them. Everyone was scared to death. For the longest time, no one knew who it was until I found him caught up in a tree with his skirt wrapped around a branch. I laughed till I cried, but my daddy didn’t think it was funny at all, and he got another beating.”

Suell sat in silence listening to the old man talk. It was the first time he ever heard him mention his brother. Soon, they were talking about how much lumber it would take to add a bathroom in Will’s house.

After they drove home, Bobby lay in his bed with his arms folded under his head and thought about all that had happened. He was mad at himself for listening to that dumb Turney and he wasn’t afraid of him anymore. When he thought about Mr. Donnelly, shame filled him. He was a good old man, and Chris was right about him. Bobby looked over at his sleeping brother. That dumb little kid was pretty smart.

As he thought more about it, he wondered if the man’s craziness was what kept him from getting mad. That was stupid. He was just lucky Mr. Donnelly took everything so well. He’d been too angry to consider what kind of person lived down the road from them. He had been angry with Mama for getting sick and angry with Daddy for not paying more attention to him. He had been wrong about everything.

As the boy turned over, he thought about his mama. "Please God, make her stay well."

It was late by the time Turney and Jimmy reached Highway 70. They stopped by the side of the road to rest, and Turney reminded Jimmy not to tell anybody what they did.

"When you see those other guys, tell them not to say anything either."

"Yeah sure," said Jimmy. He rode away, leaving Turney standing in the road looking after him. Jimmy had been afraid, but he had seen the bully's fear. Never would any of Turney's toothless threats scare anyone again.

Turney watched the boy ride away until he was nothing more than a speck in the night. He dreaded having to get back on the bike, but he had to make it to Clinch Street. When he reached his corner, he got off the bike and walked the rest of the way home. He saw the light coming from the front room and dreaded facing down his old man. Maybe he'd be passed out. Turney eased the door open, trying not to make a sound. His daddy's snores were louder than the music coming from the radio. The boy tiptoed over to the table and switched it off and then pulled the string hanging from the light bulb. He was thirsty, but wouldn't chance the running water waking his old man. His daddy could be real mean when woke too soon from a drunk. Turney slipped into the bedroom and quietly closed the door. His ribs ached as he pulled off his shirt. The pillow had no pillowcase and the lone sheet was dirty, but it felt good to lie down. At least it was quiet and maybe he could get some sleep. He turned on his side, drew his knees up, and then sucked on the knuckle of his thumb until he fell asleep.

Chapter 26: Turney

Sunday morning brought the sound of the church bell ringing from the Woodbury Church of Christ, but the only sound from Turney's house was his old man ranting and raving about not having any clean clothes to wear and nothing to eat. The boy clung tight to the dirty sheet and pretended to be asleep.

His daddy stormed into the bedroom. "Get up, you lazy bastard." He pulled at the sheet, and Turney came with it, falling to the floor. Howling in pain, he clutched his chest and rolled out of the way before his daddy's boot could reach its mark. Turney jumped up, cowering in the corner.

"What's wrong with you? Are you crazy or something?"

"What time did you get home last night? This house looks like a dump. I told you if you plan to live under my roof, you'll have to earn your keep."

He stepped towards Turney, his fist balled up, ready to throw a punch, when something caught his eye.

"What's wrong with your chest? What's that mark?"

Instinctively Turney covered his bruised chest, but Jack pulled his arm away and stared at the long black-and-blue mark.

"Look at you. There are cuts and bruises all over your face. What caused that mark on your chest? Who have you been fighting? You better tell me you won."

Turney went blank. He never thought about his daddy seeing the bruises and the words stuck in his mouth. His daddy grabbed him by the shoulders and started shaking him until he thought his ribs would come through his skin.

“Who have you been fighting?” he yelled.

The pain made Turney howl. “Stop, stop. I’ll tell you. It was that old crazy man. A bunch of us went to his place and set fire to his outhouse. He chased us with a big stick. He went nuts and we had to run for our lives.”

Turney couldn’t tell his daddy that he knocked his own self out when he panicked, running through the woods. Truth wasn’t in the cards this Sunday morning.

“Is that so,” said Jack. The man dropped his hands and looked at the boy. “Well, well. Looks like I’ve got some business to see to.”

“What are you going to do?” whispered Turney. The sinister sound of his daddy’s voice sent shivers down the boy’s back. His thoughts rushed to Jimmy and the chance that he might tell what really happened. His daddy would kill him. The wheels in the boy’s brain started turning faster and faster. He had to find Jimmy and make sure he didn’t tell anyone what really happened, but it was going to be hard getting away. He would have to wait until later tonight, when his daddy went searching for whiskey.

Robert’s insistence that Kaye stay home from church washed over her as if he was talking to the wall.

“Miss Ida will be expecting us to pick her up for church,” said Kaye. “You told her that I was home from the hospital, didn’t you?”

“No, I just told her that Clara would stop by on the weekends until things got back to normal. She’ll be fine and you need to take it easy.”

“It will make me feel better to go. Besides, I hate the boys to miss church service.”

Robert could never say no to Kaye, and within the hour they were packed in the car and headed towards Woodbury.

Ida saw the car pull up in the driveway, for she had been sitting near the front window since dawn. She twisted the corner of her sweater and swatted it with her hand. Why didn't they just leave her be? They'd come to take her to church and she didn't feel like going today. She didn't need to hear that preacher talk and she didn't want to put up with those children. Tiredness hovered over her because her nights had turned to days. She wandered the house at night, unable to sleep. Afternoon naps became a habit, so her days and nights had turned around. Miss Ida knew that Clara would come after church to fix her dinner, so there wasn't anything for her to worry about. All she wanted to do was sit in her chair by the living room window and watch the day go by. She would tell them that she wasn't feeling well. That's all she needed to say, then maybe they would leave her alone.

Kaye saw Miss Ida in the front window as they pulled into the driveway. The lonely look of her pulled at her heart and she hoped the old woman would go to church with them. The children waited in the car as Robert and Kaye went inside. It took a long time for the old woman to answer the door and when she did, she greeted them with a grunt.

“You look tired, Miss Ida,” said Kaye. “Do you feel like going to church?”

“I am tired,” she answered. “I'm not up to going to church today and nothing you say or do will change my mind.”

The old woman looked shrunken since Kaye had seen her last. Kaye slipped her arm through Miss Ida's and guided her back to the chair.

"Can I make you some tea or get you anything, Miss Ida?" asked Kaye.

"No. I just want to sit here."

"We'll check on you later," said Kaye as she covered the tiny woman with an afghan.

"When will Clara be here?"

"She comes after church."

"I could stay until she gets here."

"You go on. I just need to be left alone."

The old woman shut her eyes, and her lips closed in a hard, straight line. Miss Ida had dismissed them.

Kaye was quiet as they drove to church, but finally she said, "I'm worried about Miss Ida."

"I am too," said Robert. "I get the feeling that she's just waiting for death."

Kaye grabbed his hand, "That's just what I was thinking."

It was early when they arrived at church, so Bobby and Chris went to look for their friends while Kaye visited with some of the women. Jimmy Farrell was standing alone on the sidewalk in front of the church and Bobby went up to him.

"You didn't tell on us, did you?" asked Jimmy.

"No. Mr. Donnelly didn't want to get anyone into trouble."

Jimmy's eyebrows shot up at that bit of information.

"I'm sorry we ever went up there," said Jimmy. "Turney turned out to be a real dud. I can't believe how afraid we were of him and he's nothing but a little coward. He nearly killed himself trying to get out of those woods."

Bobby grinned. "I never thought about your getting lost in the trees, but it does get pretty dark up there at night. They won't be coming back, will they?"

"I won't, that's for sure, and I don't think any of the others will either. Turney was scared to death, so I don't think he'll want to be reminded of that any time soon."

Just then, Jimmy's mother called to him and said it was time for church. "Thanks for not telling on us. I won't forget that."

Jimmy stuck out his hand, and Bobby shook it. As the boys parted, a weight lifted from Bobby's shoulders and a big smile crossed his lips.

After church, Kaye insisted on going back to Miss Ida's to check on her. The boys groaned and she shushed them, but Robert never said a word. When they reached her house, Clara was at the front door, knocking with a worried look on her face.

"Oh, Mr. Robert, come quick. Something is wrong!"

He opened the door with his key and they rushed into the house. Ida sat in the chair with her eyes closed and looked as though she hadn't moved since they left. They thought she was dead. Kaye knelt down, touched her shoulder and spoke to her.

"Miss Ida, are you all right?"

Her eyes fluttered open and she stared at them. "What are all of you doing here?"

"Are you all right?" asked Robert. "Clara was banging on your door and when you didn't answer ..." The blank look on the old woman's face made him wonder if she understood what he was saying.

"I'd better take you to the hospital."

The old woman's head jerked up and in a bitter voice, she said, "I don't need no hospital, and I don't need no doctor either. Just leave me alone."

The boys stood by the door with Isabel and Kaye told them to play outside for a few minutes. She went into the kitchen and made a cup of tea for Miss Ida, while Robert and Clara talked on the front porch.

“She’s been slipping a lot, Mr. Robert. I wanted to say something to you before, but you know how she is.”

“I understand, Clara. I’ve been asking a lot from you lately, but right now my hands are full and there’s no one else. I’m taking her to the doctor tomorrow whether she wants to go or not. If he sends her back home, could you keep coming every day? I don’t expect you to stay the whole day with her, but if you could check on her, I sure would appreciate it. I’ll come as often as I can. I’ve gotten behind with my work and I still have to keep a close eye on Kaye.”

Robert saw the strain on the colored woman’s face and his heart went out to her. He knew she disliked being around the old woman, but he was desperate. She hesitated, but finally agreed to keep coming as long as they needed her.

“I’d better get dinner to cooking, Mr. Robert. Are you and the missus going to stay?”

“No, I need to get Kaye home. She tires easily and needs to rest.”

When they came inside, Miss Ida was sitting up in the chair, sipping her tea. Kaye knelt in front of her, gently rubbing her feet and ankles. A rush of anger filled Robert, but it quickly passed when he saw that the old woman’s legs looked scalded.

“Robert, her ankles are badly swollen. It’s a wonder she can walk at all.”

“I’m taking her to the doctor’s tomorrow.”

Miss Ida started to speak, but Robert held his hand up, “It’s no use arguing. You’re going and that’s final.”

Miss Ida closed her eyes. She was too tired to argue and the warmth of Kaye’s hands gently stroking her legs made her so relaxed that her mind began to wander. Time turned to fluid and she drifted back to when she was younger and Lucy was there. It was Lucy massaging her legs, talking gently and caring for her. Tears welled up behind Ida’s lids as she thought of her daughter.

Suddenly she pulled her foot from Kaye's grip and in a cold voice said, "Stop rubbing my skin so hard. You're going to rub it raw."

Kaye released Miss Ida's foot and stood up. In her twisted thinking, the old woman knew that Kaye was trying to help her, but she wasn't going to allow it. Hate was as much a part of her as the gripping pain in her back and legs. She would never show weakness to her or anyone else.

Tears filled Kaye's eyes and she stammered, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

Ida saw her tears, and for a moment felt sorry that she had made her cry. Lucy had cried too before she left and never came back.

In a low, tired voice she said, "I'm old, and my skin is thin, not strong like yours."

She watched as the younger woman straightened her skirt, picked up her purse and gloves, and left without saying anything else.

Turney put clean sheets on the bed and found a torn but clean case for the pillow. He smoothed the trousers as best he could, for there was no iron in the house. Daddy sold it a long time ago, along with the toaster and some pots and pans. The woman at the laundromat gave him hangers for the shirts and he folded the rest of the clothes and put them in drawers.

"Maybe if I get the house straightened out, the old man won't be in such a bad mood when he comes home."

A sink full of dishes needed washing, but first he put away the milk, lunchmeat, cheese, bacon and eggs they got from the store. It wasn't much, but they would have enough to eat until the check came in the mail.

Turney never spent much time with his daddy and he had mixed feelings about it. He loved his daddy, but he was scared of him too. Fear can put an awful dent in love.

“Maybe he won’t get too drunk today.”

He figured on going over to Jimmy’s house as soon as he finished, until the blare of the radio from Daddy’s truck filled the room. Damn, how am I going to get away now?

Jack stumbled through the door carrying the remains of a bottle of whiskey in a brown paper sack and a six-pack of beer. He shoved the six-pack in the refrigerator and tore the bag off the whiskey bottle.

“Make some bacon and eggs,” he ordered.

“Okay,” mumbled Turney.

The boy figured that after they ate and he cleaned up the kitchen, his daddy might let him go out for a while. After going to the bathroom, Jack flopped down on the couch and switched on the radio. He turned it up so loud the neighbors could hear it all the way up the block. Turney fixed the food and set it on the table.

“It’s ready, Daddy.”

Jack dove into the food, using his sleeve to wipe his mouth. As Turney washed up the dishes, he kept an eye on his daddy lying on the couch with his arm flung over his face.

Maybe, he’ll go to sleep, thought Turney.

“Daddy, do you care if I go to my friend’s house for a while?”

His daddy jerked his arm away from his face and looked at him. “How come you never want to spend any time with your old man?”

“I do, but we spent the day together, and I just thought, well ...”

"Can't you say something outright without tripping over yourself? A hint of a smile crossed Jack's face as he said, "You're tired of being with your old man. That's it, isn't it?"

For just a second, Turney thought he might get his way, but then he saw a dark look come over his old man's face, and his good feeling tumbled out the door.

"We need to talk, boy. I've been doing a lot of thinking, and I want to know exactly what happened that night the old man jumped you."

"I told you what happened. We set fire to the outhouse, and when we tried to run away he caught us and hit us with a big stick."

"I thought the old man was crippled."

"He limps a little but he gets around good."

"Nobody's got the right to hit my kid," drawled his daddy as he went to the icebox. He pulled out a bottle of beer and sat down at the kitchen table.

Jack kept drinking and talking until the six-pack was gone. Then he insisted the boy go with him to get another six-pack. There was no way Turney was going to get away from his daddy tonight.

After the boy went to bed, Jack sat quiet for a long while thinking.

What right did that crazy old bastard have to lay a hand on my boy?

He got up and moved his chair near the sink. The chair nearly flipped over when he staggered, trying to stand on it. Jack pushed his hand through an opening in the ceiling over the cupboards, where a scurry of roaches fled. Some ran over his hand but he was numb to them. He pulled out an object wrapped in a tan rag. It was a remnant from an old army shirt. The chair teetered over and hit the floor with a bang. Jack

managed to land on his feet, but the rag flew out of his hand and a gun slid across the floor. His body froze as his eyes bore a hole in the bedroom door. There was no sound. That damn kid can sleep through anything.

He reached for the gun and picked up the chair. Moving it over to the table, he slumped down in it and began stroking the side of the gun. It felt snug and warm against his palm. The first time he laid eyes on it was in Germany in 1943. He hated every minute of his service time. Following orders never came natural to him, but it was do or die. His company had orders to clear an area where snipers had killed several of their boys. It was their job to see if anyone was alive and get them to the medics. His stomach turned at the bloody bodies they found and he stopped behind a tree to throw up. The other soldiers thought he was a useless coward, so they ignored him and continued clearing the area ahead of them. Jack got scared when he lost sight of the other men and ran to catch up with them. Something tripped him and he fell to the ground with a thud. A spray of curse words broke the silence of the woods. When he looked up, he was face-to-face with a soldier half buried in debris. The man's eyes were open and Jack spoke to him. As he stared at the gray face, he saw gnats and flies buzzing around his body.

Jack rolled away when he realized the soldier was dead. The nausea returned with a vengeance. As he wiped his mouth with his sleeve, something sticking out of the dead man's shirt caught his attention. It was a .38 Smith and Wesson service revolver. Without hesitation, Jack decided it was too pretty to waste on a dead man. Now it belonged to him. Voices coming through the woods behind him made his brain go into overtime. Forgetting his upset stomach, he snatched up the gun and jammed it inside his shirt. Another idea started buzzing around in his head. This would be his chance. A sly grin crossed his face as he thought about how smart he was and what fools the rest were. He got

behind the dead man and gathered him in his arms as if he were carrying him, then sat back and waited. In a moment, the sergeant appeared.

“Gibbs, what the hell are you doing?”

“I heard this guy moaning, Sarge, and I tried to pick him up, but I pulled something in my back. Can you help me?”

Jack watched the sergeant peer at the dead man and hoped he wouldn't notice the bugs on him.

“What are you trying to pull, Gibbs?”

“Honest, Sarge, I was trying to help this guy. I'm hurt bad.”

The sergeant gently pulled the dead man out of Jack's arms and laid him on the ground. When he gave Jack his hand to help him up, the strong odor of vomit caught his attention. Bent over like an old man, Jack began to groan. He held his back with his right hand and squeezed the pistol to his side with his left arm.

“I'm really hurting, Sarge.”

“Can you walk?”

“Yes sir, I'll manage, but I can't go fast.”

It was a good charade and he got away with it. Not only was he discharged but he got a disability check, too.

I fooled them all. I was always smarter than the rest of them.

He sat like a child playing with the revolver. Opening the cylinder, he found four bullets tucked neatly inside. He snapped it shut and began twirling the gun in his hand like a cowboy. Yeah, he was a real cowboy like Gene Autry or Roy Rogers. He was sure his idol, Hank Williams, had a gun, too.

Jack clutched the gun tightly to his chest as he emptied the beer bottle with one long swig. Tossing the empty into the trash can, he walked over to the couch and stuck the gun under the cushion. He didn't bother pulling off his boots, and soon guttural snoring filled the room.

Chapter 27: Suell

“That fool Jack Gibbs is going all over town telling everyone that Will attacked his boy. I could kill that man!”

Quixie nearly dropped her iron when Suell burst through the kitchen door, hollering like a madman. He leaned against the sink with his head down, and his breathing was deep and stressed. The creases in his weather-beaten face had deepened and his body trembled.

As she stared at him, Quixie thought how difficult the last couple of months had been for them, what with working on Will’s house, then worrying about Kaye and her family. Even before William came home, Suell had put on a new roof, repaired weatherworn doors and replaced planks in the front and back porches. Now he was helping Robert install the new bathroom. He had taken so much time from the garage that some of his regular customers were beginning to grumble.

It was natural for her to want to help, but her husband’s attitude surprised her. William was a stranger to him, but he attached himself to the man as if they were brothers. It seemed as though he had gone beyond what the average person would do and now he was more upset than she had ever seen him before.

“Suell, please settle down. I’m sorry I got you involved in this. I had no idea things would get so out of hand. You keep telling me that William can handle things himself. Why are you so upset?”

“He doesn’t deserve all this harassment. The old man stays on his own property and doesn’t bother a single soul, yet these fools keep talking about things they know nothing about. And now, this crazy bastard is stirring up more crap. The man deserves some peace after all he’s been through.”

He turned on the cold faucet and stuck his head under the water, letting it run down his face and neck. His body stopped trembling and his breathing eased.

Quixie was frightened. Crazy thoughts kept buzzing around her brain and she asked a question that seemed to come out of nowhere.

“Is there something you haven’t told me?”

A deep sadness filled Suell’s face and a shot of fear wrapped itself around Quixie. He rubbed his eyes with the towel, then stopped and looked at her.

“Fix us some coffee will you, Sweet Pea?”

She automatically reached for the cups hanging on little hooks over the sink. She poured coffee in each one, then got the cream and sugar and two spoons and laid them on the kitchen table. They sat across from each other and Quixie reached for his hand. He looked at her small dainty fingers and kissed the back of her hand.

“I didn’t enlist in World War I, but I was over there longer than most who did. I volunteered as an ambulance driver in 1915 and watched men from England, France, and Canada die in the bloody battles along the trenches of the Western Front.”

“You never told me that before.”

“It wasn’t something that was easy to talk about. I think I wanted to forget that it ever happened. “

He drank some coffee and pulled a pack of Lucky Strikes out of his shirt pocket. He lit the last cigarette, then crushed the pack and tossed it in the garbage can near the sink. He took a long drag from the cigarette, then continued his story.

“The trenches were visible as far as the eye could see and death hung in the air like a shroud. The land was burnt and black with great gaping holes that held the forgotten remains of bones and flesh. Living trees or grasses didn’t seem to exist, and outside of a stray bird passing over, there were no animals.”

As Quixie listened to Suell, his voice changed and grew deeper. He didn’t sound like her husband anymore. A stranger was sitting in her kitchen telling a horrible story about an unknown world.

The muscles in his face twitched and his eyes darkened as he continued. “I often wondered if the constant threat and presence of death could drive someone crazy. Sometimes madness crept into my brain after episodes of battle when we had to carry the torn bodies of young men to their final resting place. Their sounds of laughter silenced and their dreams to love and be loved all snatched away in a single moment.”

In all their years together, Quixie had never heard Suell talk like this. He never mentioned that he was involved in the war and it was difficult to understand why he kept it a secret all these years. She started to ask him something, but he put his finger to her lips.

“I had a friend, a Frenchman named Claude Duchet, who was killed on the Somme. He was my closest friend during the war. Talking to him kept me from going over the edge many times. When he died, I was tempted to chuck it all and go home, but it felt cowardly so I stayed.

“A short time later, something happened that has haunted me all my life. It was a Friday and I was on duty when a new regiment arrived. It was difficult talking to the newcomers. They

seemed like young boys to me, even though I was only twenty-one, but war has a way of aging a person. There was no way to tell them that they would be living in a shroud of death day and night between disease, filth and the next bullet. Their only companions would be the man next to them who might fall at any moment, and the rats who waited for him to fall. They would stumble over bodies, mangled, bloodied, and rotted. It was the awful truth that we witnessed every day. A man might survive, but how could he live with no arms, no hands or no feet. Sometimes men were so damaged it was difficult to identify them. We didn't mention to the newcomers that war is like living in a horrible nightmare that you never wake from.

"I knew better than to get attached to the boys coming through, but I broke my own rule when a young fellow approached me as I was working on the motor of my ambulance. I had spent several frustrating hours trying to assemble makeshift parts to replace those that had broken from the awful jarring they got on the rough country roads. I didn't mind it, though, because it gave me a rest. With my head inside the engine, it kept me from thinking about everything else. The young soldier had been watching my attempt to get the motor running and offered to help. His only experience with motor cars was in the army, and he was anxious to practice what he learned. An hour later, we were talking as if we had known each other all our lives, covered in grease up to our elbows and happy as two pigs in a poke. I learned this expression from the boy. It took several hours to finish, but we got to know each other very well. His name was Jacob Donnelly."

Suell paused to look at Quixie when he said the name. Shock filled her face and in a breathless voice she said, "You knew Jacob?"

He nodded his head and closed his eyes for a moment. "Let me tell you the rest."

Suell's cigarette had gone out and he crushed the butt in the ashtray. He took another swallow of coffee and continued his story.

"He shared endless stories about growing up in the hills of Tennessee, but I never tired of listening, for his slow Southern drawl was soothing to the ear. His stories about his family made me a little envious, but when he told me he was only seventeen I felt sick. He didn't have to be there at all. I asked him why he joined the service and he looked at me with a cocky smile and claimed he was anxious to see the world. Cannon County was a very small place that was hardly a dot on the map and he longed for some excitement. When his older brother joined the infantry, he wasn't going to be left behind. We parted after promising to look each other up after the war."

Quixie sat on the edge of her seat wanting to hear the rest, but dreading the end.

"A few weeks later as the Americans attempted to capture a pillbox filled with Germans, I saw Jacob again. We had two ambulances waiting below to receive the injured, but were close enough to see much of the action. In the midst of battle, a crazed man carried another soldier in his arms across a barren ridge jugged with holes. With so much artillery going off, it was a miracle that he was still on his feet. We hollered at the man to get down, but he continued to run towards us. He carried the soldier as though he were a small child. Soon, we got caught up in the drama of it. Voices all around cheered as though he was carrying a football and running for a touchdown. Bullets sliced through the air, but the man kept coming. As we watched, a mortar shell exploded and when the smoke cleared, the man was down. There was a shocked look on his face and blood everywhere. He lay half sitting with his back against a boulder, still holding the man in his arms. I found out later that it was Jacob, and the man carrying him was his brother, William."

Tears ran down Quixie's cheeks and she wiped her eyes with her apron. She grabbed hold of Suell's hand, praying that the story had ended. But there was more.

"Then something unforgettable happened. You might think I'm crazy or that I just imagined it, but I promise you I saw it with my own eyes. Amid the thunder of battle, a mystical peace settled around the two men and I saw Jacob reach up and touch his brother's face. I was sure he was dead for his side was ripped wide open. I looked around to see if anyone else noticed, but the men stopped watching after that last mortar shell exploded. It felt as though I had dropped over the edge of sanity. I was alone, but all around me were soldiers struggling to survive in a world filled with smoke, gunfire and explosions. As I waited, a sudden lull in the fighting brought an unnatural quiet to the area. The men hunched down, clinging to their rifles and afraid to move. It seemed to take forever, and the silence was spellbinding, but suddenly as if by an unheard command, everyone began moving. Able-bodied men began piling up dead bodies or helping the wounded get back to the ambulances. I ran towards Jacob and William. Everyone else had forgotten them. I tried to pull Jacob out of his arms, but even in his unconscious state, he held fast. I called to the other ambulance driver for help, and it took both of us to retrieve the body. We laid Jacob on the ground near the already huge pile of corpses.

"When we returned with a stretcher for the wounded man, we found him lying with his hands in a clutching position as if he still held the body. We lifted him onto the stretcher and carried him to the ambulance. That was the last time I saw him."

Suell held his head in his hands and closed his eyes. They sat in silence as Quixie's mind wrapped around the story. A knot in her throat made it difficult to breathe. The tick of the clock on the wall was loud, and water dripped in the sink. Children played outside, and their laughter filled the air. Next door, her

neighbor Joanne was calling her cat. Life was all around them, but they heard none of it. For the moment, they were standing in the middle of a battlefield where William held Jacob and all they heard was the silence of death.

A deep breath brought Quixie back and she walked to the sink and poured out her cold coffee. The heaviness in her chest began to lighten with each breath. She rinsed her face with cold water and dried it with a towel, then walked out to the front porch and sat in the rocker. As she rocked back and forth, Suell came out and sat next to her. He took her hand and covered it with his own.

“Are you angry that I didn’t tell you this before?”

“No.” She looked towards the funeral home, then shut her eyes. “When William came home, I thought you were helping him because of me. Now I understand the real reason.”

The pain in her voice cut into Suell. “I would have helped him no matter what. I knew how much he meant to you. I wasn’t trying to keep anything from you, but it was a time in my life that I’ve been trying to forget. The way I’d been living, I could have died a hundred times. Instead, a merciful God sent me to Tennessee and you. I’ve been a lucky man. I figure William needed some luck too.”

“I remember that Mrs. Donnelly received a letter from someone telling her how Jacob died.”

“A military telegram is so cold. I felt she needed to know what happened. I signed the letter Frank with no last name. I dropped my first name when I came here and started using my middle name.”

“Your name is Frank Suell Edmonds?”

“Actually, it’s Francis.”

She smiled at him. “Francis?”

“That’s why I dropped it.”

“Did William remember you?”

“No. I’m sure he didn’t. I never mentioned it to him because I didn’t see how it would help. It might just conjure up memories that need to remain buried.”

They sat for a long time, neither one knowing what else to say. Cars drove past the house and they waved, but that was all. The sun began to sink behind the trees and a cool breeze chased away the heat.

Quixie thought about William and Jacob when they were boys. She came to know them well when she stayed at their house. They were handsome boys, but different as night and day. Jacob was always into something, never satisfied to follow the rules and always looking for adventure. William was sure about what he wanted and was willing to work for it. His love for his mother was obvious, but a strained bond existed between him and his daddy. She sense how much Mr. Donnelly depended on William, but Jacob always worried him. He would have taken his belt to Jacob everyday if it hadn’t been for his brother. William protected Jacob and kept him out of trouble. Jacob was a good boy, but he was a dreamer, like a balloon that breaks its string and floats aimlessly.

Fresh tears filled her eyes and she looked at Suell with a crooked smile. “Why did you really come to Cannon County? It wasn’t just by chance. You came here on purpose.”

“Jobs were scarce after the war and I had no home to go back to so I roamed around the country. I could always make a buck or two fixing someone’s car. That was the only good that came from the war. I learned to be a good mechanic. It was a matter of life or death to the soldiers as well as me. Memories of those two boys haunted me and I always wondered what happened to William. Next thing I knew I was in Nashville and I thumbed a ride to Woodbury. I liked what I found and when I met you, there was no turning back.”

Quixie's face flushed. She'd liked Suell the first time he came to call that September in 1920. Quixie worked as a seamstress in the clothing store on Main Street. Suell rented a room at the old motel on McCrary Street and started working with Frazier Young at the blacksmith's shop behind Fuston's Store. He came into the clothing store one day to buy a suit of clothes and caught Quixie's eye immediately. She blushed all over when he began flirting with her. After he paid for his suit, he told her that he was trying to impress the prettiest girl in town. The following Saturday, Suell came to call at the boarding house where Quixie shared a room with a girl named Alice Green. He was wearing his new suit. Quixie still remembered the shocked look on Alice's face when she followed him out the door. The following Christmas, Alice stood by her side as she promised to love, honor and obey Suell Edmonds.

Suell knew the town needed a good mechanic, for the automobile industry was growing. He liked to say that cars were multiplying like rabbits. There was truth to it too. Producing cars had become more economical and that meant more people could afford one. Quixie smiled when she thought about the day Suell opened his garage on the west side of the square. He sent flyers in the mail promising that he could fix any car in Woodbury. Before long he had more customers than he could handle. Their life was good and their love everlasting. Now they were heading into their twilight years, grateful to have each other.

Chapter 28: The Sheriff

Robert followed the pipeline from the spring to the house. He found a couple of high spots on the ground in the path, but they wouldn't interfere with the water's gravity flow. A light blowing sound made him look to the right and there nestled between two poplar trees in tall grass was a doe with two speckled fawns. Robert stood very still, so as not to frighten the animals. What a sight, he thought. I wish the boys could see this. He started back towards the house as quietly as possible and the deer never moved from their spot.

The work on Will's bathroom progressed better than anticipated. The large container Suell found would make a good storage tank for the incoming water, and the red oak stored in the back of the shop would make a pretty floor. An oak cabinet that didn't satisfy one of his customers would be the right size for Will's small bathroom. Things were coming together.

As he neared the back porch, he glanced over at the antiquated workshop, its walls leaning cockeyed in the corner of the yard. The door had been replaced, but the rest of the building looked tired. Something on the ground caught his attention and he walked over to see what it was. "Would you look at that?" he said as he squatted down to examine an old International kerosene engine. The red and black paint was all

but worn off, but the name was legible. He whistled when he made out the 1913 in the corner.

He lifted the canvas and saw a flywheel on the engine that was wide enough to support a belt. Then he saw the hole cut out in the side of the workshop. "Of course, the belt would go through the hole and into the shop. A person could run any number of machines with it." Robert couldn't resist peeking through the window, which was clouded with time. It took a minute to adjust to the dimness. His eyes opened wide when he saw the large table saw and lathe sitting in the middle of the room. There were pulleys going across the ceiling that would easily support several belts. Fascinated by the workshop, he wished he had seen it when Mr. Donnelly was alive. He walked back to the house, dropped a handful of nails from the tin can on the porch into his carpenter's apron and went inside.

Will leaned on a broom studying the area that would soon be a bathroom. Robert smiled when he noticed his wood scraps left earlier were cleared away and his tools were lined up on the dry sink.

"Remind me to hire you on my next job. I've never worked with anyone who was so organized before."

"Daddy was real particular about keeping things picked up and old habits stick with you, especially when they're good ones."

Robert began hammering the nails into the framing. Will maneuvered around him with the broom, never getting underfoot. A comfortable feeling settled in Robert as he watched Will's slow, steady movements. He was a good old man, easy to be around, and Robert felt like he'd known him forever. Gentle humor was an intriguing part of the man, and simple things satisfied him. His opinions regarding work, family, or people in general were never pushed, but gently nudged until a person figured things out themselves.

He acted grandfatherly towards the boys and now even Bobby liked him. He was a different boy since the night of the fire. His anger had fallen away and he was learning to cope with his mother's illness. Maturity seemed to arrive overnight in the twelve-year-old. The more he thought about it, the more it seemed those scallywags did them a favor when they burned down the outhouse. It served as a good lesson for Bobby, who came to know and like the old man, and Will was getting help from neighbors who had long neglected him. Yes sir, it had all turned out for the best.

Working with Will was a learning experience for Robert. Even though the old man claimed to be just a barn builder, he was obviously a capable carpenter. He had a good eye for measurements and never had to cut anything twice. They were able to keep up a conversation without slowing down on the job. They talked a lot about the old Prater Community and the people who lived there. It was interesting for both men, for Will knew about the old times while Robert could tell what happened in the later years.

On the days Suell came to help, things lightened up, for he was always cutting up and making jokes, so laughter rang out the rafters of the little house. With three sets of hands helping, the work went fast. Quixie brought lunch on the days Suell worked and sometimes Kaye would walk down with the baby to watch the progress. She was doing well on the medication the doctor prescribed, but she still tired easily. She hated having to go to the hospital every month to have her blood tested. Robert understood they would have to take it a day at a time and he cherished each day they had.

"We're ready for the dry wall," said Will.

"Just about," agreed Robert. "These two-by-fours need a few more nails and I just remembered the electric company is

coming out today to hook up your electricity. I need to run into town and pick up the supplies to finish the job.”

Will got a sheepish grin on his face. “I feel like a kid at Christmas with all the changes going on and I can’t wait to pull the string and watch the house light up.”

Robert smiled as he pulled off his apron and took his keys out of his pocket. “Is there anything else you need while I’m in town?”

“Actually, there is something else. I’d like to have another door so I could get to the bathroom from the back porch.”

Creases lined Robert’s forehead and then he grinned. “That would be a pretty good idea, but I’d want to have a double lock on it.”

“There wouldn’t be any need for that. I doubt if a polecat or deer would want to use it.”

Both men laughed and then Will grew serious, “How is your grandmother?”

“When I took her to the doctor on Monday, he said she probably had a light stroke. I hoped he would hospitalize her, but she wasn’t having any of that. She fussed so much that the doctor said she would do as well at home as in the hospital, so that was that. I’ve quit worrying about her so much because she’s going to have her way no matter what I think.”

Will sighed, “I can understand her not wanting to go to the hospital. Let her stay home as long as possible.”

“I will.”

Will’s compassion toward his grandmother touched Robert. He’s a damn good person. Before Robert climbed into his truck, he looked back at the house. It was a nice place. He remembered when Mrs. Donnelly and her daughter lived there after Mr. Donnelly passed away. It was during the time he and Kaye were building their own house and he had so much work to do that there was no time to get acquainted. Sometimes Kaye

would walk down with Bobby to visit, so she got to know them better than he did. The few times he cut wood for them, Mrs. Donnelly would give him a pie or cake to take home. When she passed away, the house stood empty and sad-looking for a long time. Will had done a good job bringing the place back to life. The garden was flourishing, and the yard looked pretty since he trimmed the bushes and mowed the grass.

As Robert put the truck in gear, he saw a movement in the bushes behind the house. He watched for a moment but everything was still. Must have been the deer he saw earlier.

Jack Gibbs knew that the Sugar Tree Knob Road ran off the Stones River Road then back on again. It was like striking pay dirt when he discovered the fork that went along the hill behind Robert and Will's property and an old wagon road that climbed to the top of the ridge. He fought his steering wheel as he climbed through the overgrowth. After parking the truck, it was an easy walk down the hill and he could hide in the tall bushes behind the old man's house.

Hot damn! No one would see him come and no one would see him go. This was his chance to check out the old man while he decided what to do about him.

A good feeling stayed with Will from the time they started work on the house. So much had changed in the past three months. He was a new man, a different man, an almost happy man. His friendship with Suell, Robert and the boys came at him in a flurry, like snow on a winter's day. It fell all around him and filled his life, so that his need for the scarecrow faded.

Will went to the kitchen and looked out the window towards the workshop. "You said you would stay as long as I needed you. Maybe I don't need you anymore."

He went outside and walked towards the workshop. Suddenly, Esther appeared, followed by her four kittens.

“Where have you been, Mama? That’s a mighty fine family you have there.”

Esther passed between his legs as Will bent over to pick up one of the kittens. “Let’s get you some dinner. You need to keep up your strength for this rowdy crew.”

He turned back to the house and forgot about the scarecrow. After he fed the cat, he sat on the front porch for a while, but he couldn’t sit still. Picking up the hoe that was leaning against the rail, he headed for the garden. About an hour later a truck from the electric company pulled up and a man in work clothes called to him.

“Morning. I wanted to let you know that we’re starting work on the lines today. It may take a couple of days because we have several poles to put up first. We’ll holler at you when we finish. Pretty place you’ve got.”

“Thanks.” Will smiled and waved as he watched the truck leave.

When Robert left the electric supply store, he noticed Suell talking to the sheriff, Tom Haney, in front of the garage. He put the supplies in his truck and walked across the street.

As Robert approached, the sheriff turned to him and stuck out his hand. “Morning, Robert. I heard you’ve had some trouble near your place.”

Robert looked at Suell who quickly explained, “It’s serious, Robert. Jack Gibbs has been making threats against Will. He’s crazy enough to do something and I felt Tom needed to know so he could keep an eye on him.”

“Will won’t like this, but I guess you did the right thing.” Robert turned toward the sheriff and asked, “What will you do about Gibbs?”

"I'll pay him a visit and see if I can cool him down. He probably hasn't got the guts to face Mr. Donnelly, but he might decide to do some damage to his property. Maybe I can nip it in the bud before anything bad happens."

The sheriff drove away, but Suell still had a worried look on his face. "I don't trust Gibbs as far as I can throw him."

"I know, but that's all we can do for now. The electric company is coming out today and I've picked up the supplies to wire the house. Will you have any time to spare tomorrow?"

"I should be able to finish this brake job today. Quixie needs the car to go to Murfreesboro tomorrow and the carburetor for my truck won't be in until Friday. Is there any way you could pick me up in the morning?"

"Kaye and the children are going with Quixie, so I'll pick you up when I drop them off."

"She didn't mention they were going too. Wonder what they're up to?"

"Kaye has been feeling a lot better and she wants to take the children shopping. They haven't gone on a shopping trip for quite a while. I wouldn't be surprised if they picked up some things for Will at the same time."

"Lord, we'll be like wild bachelors," laughed Suell.

"I reckon," said Robert. "See you in the morning." He waved and walked back across the street towards his truck.

As Suell went inside his garage, Ramsey's truck moved slowly down Water Street and turned back on Main Street from the Doolittle Road. He saw Suell and Robert talking to the sheriff and wondered what was going on. He drove back around the square and parked in front of Gunner's Diner. The place was nearly empty as he eased into the chair at his usual table. He waved to Benny, who was cleaning the grill, and raised his hand to his lips indicating he wanted some coffee.

Benny was a small-built young man with a crew cut that made his jaw seem too large for his face. He always wore a clean apron, kept his hands clean and nails trimmed short. Benny was deaf and dumb, but that didn't keep him from doing a good job at the diner. Gunner hired him about six months ago and told everyone that it was the smartest thing he ever did. They worked out a system for Benny to take food orders and even the customers picked up on the sign language.

Benny was raised hard and never had any schooling. Everyone thought that when his mama passed away he would end up in an institution. When the sheriff went out to the house to check on him, he found the boy could keep house, wash clothes, cook, and take care of things very well. But he needed a paying job to survive.

No one would give him work until Gunner agreed to hire him. The nineteen-year-old was a quick learner and everyone in town grew to like the young fellow. He even had a girlfriend. He couldn't hear the men teasing him, but the ridiculous looks on their faces and their hand signals made it easy to understand. They made jokes about him getting married and not having to listen to his wife nagging all the time. They didn't mean any harm and he was good-natured about it.

Just as Benny set a cup of coffee in front of Ramsey, Coop Walker from the post office came by and sat down across from him. He motioned to Benny for coffee.

"Did you hear about the trouble out at the Donnelly place?"

Ramsey froze. "No, what happened?"

"Seems some kids burned down his outhouse. Turney Gibbs got hurt and his Daddy is fighting mad about it."

"Did Donnelly hurt the kid?"

"Jack Gibbs thinks he did."

"When the sheriff gets wind of it, he'll take care of Gibbs. I don't think he likes the man anyway," said Ramsey.

Benny returned with Coop's coffee. Ramsey didn't say any more, but he figured that was what Suell and Robert were talking to the sheriff about. Helen was right about Will causing trouble. Maybe it's just as well that he stayed away from his old friend.

As the sheriff headed back to his office, he got to thinking about Jack Gibbs. He was a drunk who carried trouble with him wherever he went. He joined the army to keep from going to jail for transporting liquor across the Kentucky line. Somehow, he managed to convince the army that he hurt his back, so they cut him loose. Anyone with half a brain and one eye could see there was nothing wrong with him. After his discharge, he couldn't go back to Smithville, so he shuffled around Putnam County a while. He worked for a farmer repairing fences one summer and became obsessed with his fifteen-year-old daughter, Beth. It wasn't long before she turned up pregnant.

No one knew if he ever married the girl. They moved to Woodbury and set up housekeeping. He bragged to anyone who would listen that he was injured trying to save another man's life. A service connected disability check from the federal government paid the rent on the little four-room house on Clinch Street. It was a run-down ramble-shack house built close to the road with no front yard, just like all the others on that street.

When Turney was two years old, Beth died. She had been hanging clothes in the backyard where the ironweed, sickle weed, and thistle grew four feet high. Jack never bothered to plant grass. He wouldn't buy grass seed, let alone a lawnmower, but he always had drinking money. When they found her, the sheriff figured that a copperhead snake hiding in the weeds bit her on the leg and foot. It buried its long fangs into her calf, filling it with poisonous venom. No one heard her scream. She managed to drag herself into the house and shut the door so

the baby wouldn't get out. After that, they figure she lay on the bed and waited for someone to come. She had to be in terrible pain, and her leg swelled and turned purple. Beth was frail to begin with, but the poison from the snake made her weak and nauseous.

It wasn't until the next evening that the baby's constant crying made the neighbors call the sheriff's office. Tom would never forget the night they broke into the house. Beth was lying in the bed and the baby was sitting next to her, covered in his own waste. It didn't take the doctor long to figure out what killed her. Her leg was swollen three times its size and beet red. The doctor said Beth died because she was a tiny woman and in poor health, but the sheriff figured different. The young woman died because Jack didn't give a damn.

Everyone was sure someone would take the baby away, but no one wanted to take responsibility for it. Sympathetic neighbors brought food to the house for a week and Jack greeted them at the door all teary-eyed, thanking them over and over. He acted so sad they thought his sorrow would make him a better daddy to the baby. When the food stopped coming, Jack cursed the do-gooders.

Tom's conscience still bothered him when he thought about Jack's little boy. Turney was a cute little fellow, and when he got big enough to go to school, the ladies from the Methodist Church remembered that his mama was once a member and took him some clothes. They were second-hand but they were clean. The boy was excited about going to class with the other children. It wasn't long before he could read and write. Jack never noticed how well the boy did in school and how smart he was, and soon Turney lost interest. By the time he was in the fourth grade, it was hard to keep him in school. The Truant Officer came out now and again to check on him and Jack always promised to send him back to school. The boy went back for a while, but it didn't

last long. He skipped school most of the time. On the first day of eighth grade, he went to class and told his teachers that he and his daddy were moving. They didn't move, but the Truant Officer stopped going to the little house on Clinch Street.

As Tom thought about Jack Gibbs, it occurred to him that if anyone needed a beating it was him. He put his hand on his holster. Tonight he would go by the house and have a little talk with him.

Before Robert left the square, he went by his shop and loaded the lumber in the back of his truck. He found the cabinet leaning up against the wall behind the stack of wood. Looking around, he couldn't think of anything else they needed, so he locked the door and climbed in his truck.

Robert kept thinking about the sheriff and wondered if he should mention it to Will. Maybe the sheriff could take care of Jack Gibbs. No sense worrying the old man for nothing.

Thinking about Will reminded him of Miss Ida, and he decided to go by her house. When he knocked on the door, Clara opened it.

"Morning, Mr. Robert. How you doing today?"

"I'm fine. How's Miss Ida?"

"She's been kind of quiet. I think the medicine the doctor gave her is making her rest better. I just made some iced tea. Would you like some?"

"No thanks. I don't have much time. I think I'll just look in on Miss Ida for a minute."

Clara closed the door and went back to the kitchen where she was ironing. The smell of cinnamon and apples cooking filled the house and his stomach grumbled. He hadn't eaten lunch yet and decided to swing by Millie's Restaurant before he went back to Will's place. Gunner's Diner had good country cooking, but Millie made the best hamburgers.

He peeked in the bedroom, where his grandmother was lying on her side with one arm covering her face. Thinking she was asleep, he started to close the door but she moved and looked at him.

“How do you feel?”

“I’m all right. I want to get up.”

Robert picked up her robe from the chair next to the bed. He put his arm around her and gently pulled her so she could sit up. She sat still as he placed the robe on her shoulders and then helped swing her legs to the side of the bed. He waited as she put her arms through the sleeves and buttoned the front of her robe. Robert held out his arm so she could support herself and they walked out to the front room. Sadness filled him as he thought about the years of anger that separated them. She was still his grandmother and he wished things were different. Embedded in his mind were memories of her coldness and the fear that hovered over him as a child. He wondered from one day to the next when she would send him away and prayed his grandfather wouldn’t let her. He missed his grandfather. Never would he say it aloud, but he wished she had died first instead of him. Guilt fell over him as he looked at the frail, tiny woman and he remembered the promise made to his Grandpa years before. He would be kind to her until the end.

As she sat back, her tiny body hardly made a dent in the chair. “You’ve been mighty busy lately. What have you been up to?”

“I’ve had a lot of work to catch up with at the shop. I got behind when Kaye was in the hospital.”

“Is that all? Work in your shop?”

Robert knew what she was hinting at, but he was determined to stay calm. “I’ve been doing some work for Mr. Donnelly. I owed it to him and I always pay my debts.”

“Humph, you don’t owe him anything. You never listen to me. I’m your only blood relative, but you chose him over me.”

“Grandmother, I’m not going to talk to you about this anymore. You rest, and I’ll check on you tomorrow.”

He didn’t give her a chance to respond, but called out, “I’m leaving, Clara. Call me if you need anything.”

Clara stuck her head out the kitchen door. “Thank you, Mr. Robert. Say hello to the missus for me.”

Ida watched the front door close, but all she could hear in her mind was the word grandmother. It echoed in the air, crashed against the wall, then fell broken to the floor. It was the first time he called her that since ... yes, she remembered now, since the day he arrived on the train looking so much like her Lucy. It cut through her when he said it the first time, but this time it was different. She didn’t know why. It was just different. She thought about the box in the closet. Trying to lift herself from the chair, she found there was no strength left in her arms. Oh well, she would ask Clara to get it later. It could wait.

When Robert stopped his truck in front of Will’s place, he noticed the water in the creek bed was low. He eased the tires across the rocks and pulled up the hill until he was a few feet away from the porch. Things were getting easier all the time.

Robert went inside, waving the bag of hamburgers like a flag. “Hey, I’ve brought lunch.”

“Glad you thought of it. I was getting hungry. I’ve got coffee brewing. Pull up a chair, and let’s see what you’ve got.”

As Will poured two cups of steaming coffee, Robert sat down. When he opened the bag, the delicious smell of grilled beef and onions reached his nostrils. “Umm, smells good. Have you got some catsup for the french fries?”

“Coming right up,” said Will as he dug in the icebox.

"I see they've brought out the poles for the electric lines," said Robert.

"Yeah, they stopped by and said it would take a few days to install them."

"I had some red oak left over in my shop and thought it would make a nice floor for the bathroom, and there's a cabinet I want you to look at. I made it some time ago, but my customer changed his mind on the size. It's just been sitting there gathering dust."

Will stuck a french fry in a pile of catsup on his plate. "Sounds fine to me." Grease dripped from both their chins when they bit into the hamburgers. That explained the extra napkins in the bag.

After lunch, they went out to Robert's truck to carry in the wood. When Robert pulled the paper from the cabinet, Will's eyes lit up. "That's a beauty," he said. He stroked the wood with his hand, noticing how smooth and clean the lines were. Grooves cut in the door left a diamond design that made the cabinet look elegant.

"I thought it would come in handy in the bathroom," said Robert.

"You're a good woodworker. Who taught you?"

The old man's compliment pleased Robert. "I picked it up here and there."

"I need to pay you extra for this. It's much nicer than one of those metal cabinets."

"I don't want any money for it. It was just taking up space."

Robert started to pick up the cabinet, but Will stopped him, "Have I thanked you for all your help? You and your family have truly been a blessing to this old man. I wish there was some way to pay you back."

"A long time ago my grandfather taught me that being a good neighbor is the next best thing to family. You've been a

good influence on my boys and they think a lot of you, and the care you gave Isabel when we lost her, well, we'll never forget that. Believe me, you don't owe me a thing. Now, let's get back to work. This wood isn't going to walk into the house on its own."

That evening Kaye and the children arrived, pulling a wagon filled with Isabel and a basket of food, fried chicken with all the fixings. They managed to carry everything into the house without dropping a thing. Isabel called, "Daddy, Daddy," and ran up to him, wrapping her arms around his legs. Then she looked at Will and in a loud, singsong voice hollered, "Hey Papa," and wrapped her arms around his legs. Everyone laughed, but Will had a lump in his throat that left him speechless.

Kaye wiped off the kitchen table and told the boys to set it while she emptied the basket. Will found an extra chair in the bedroom and squeezed it between Chris and Kaye. He held Isabel in his lap while they ate. The boys filled their mouths with chicken legs while Robert told Kaye his plans for finishing the bathroom.

"It will take me a day or so to wire the house, but after that everything else will go fast."

"You are going to put in a window, aren't you?" asked Kaye.

"I hadn't thought about a window. What do you think, Will?"

"Do I need a window in the bathroom?"

"The room will be dark and gloomy without it. Besides, we plan to make curtains. Quixie and I are going shopping tomorrow," said Kaye. "We can pick out paint to match them."

Will frowned. "That's too heavy for you to carry."

"We won't have to carry it. The sales clerk will put it in the trunk and you men can unload it. You'll need towel racks, a toilet paper holder, a basket, and a mirror. I think there's room for a small bathtub, too. That will save you from having to drag in a tub every time you want to take a bath."

“Wait a minute,” laughed Will, “I’ve never seen anyone living in the country with a bathtub.”

“That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t have one,” said Kaye. She pinched her lips together and looked ready to stand on a soapbox to argue her point.

Robert and Will looked at each other, then at Kaye. Nothing was going to change her mind.

Will scratched his head and rolled his eyes in exasperation, then in a near whisper he said, “I guess you could look for one while you’re in town, but an old man like me doesn’t need a fancy bathroom.”

Kaye’s face beamed. “Everyone needs a fancy bathroom,” she laughed. “Please let us do it. We’ve been talking about this all week. Quixie and I have some ideas for the kitchen, too. You could put a pump in the sink so you wouldn’t have to walk all the way to the spring for water. That wouldn’t be any trouble, would it Robert?”

Will laughed when Robert rolled his eyes and said, “I guess not, but we may have to order the pump. I don’t know if Gerald Moses carries them in his shop. Can you afford all of this, Will?”

“I’ll be right back,” he said as he sat Isabel on the floor. He went into the bedroom and when he returned, he had a fistful of bills in his hand. “Spend whatever you need and then I want each of you to buy yourselves something nice.”

Robert frowned when he looked at the money. “Don’t you keep your money in the bank? It’s not safe to leave it around the house.”

“I withdrew some extra when we started this job. Since you wouldn’t take any money for the labor, I wanted to get something for all of you. I can’t pick it out, so you take it and get whatever you want.”

“Oh, boy,” cried Chris. “Can we get new baseball gloves?”

Kaye told him to be still and then looked at Will with a sweet but sad look on her face. "We don't want anything. We're just doing what we should have done when you first came home."

Will's face flushed. "I really want to do this. I never expected to have ... friends like you. It's made all the difference ..." His voice choked up and he looked away so they couldn't see the tears rising in his eyes. Everyone grew quiet, even Isabel. She looked up at Will, then held her arms up and he lifted her to his shoulder. She touched his face with her tiny hand and said, "It's okay, Papa."

Then Bobby said, "We don't need baseball gloves. Ours are fine."

"That's right," said Chris. "Ours are plenty good."

Robert reached for another biscuit and said, "Why don't we get this work done first? Something unexpected might come up that may cost more than we planned."

"I guess you're right." Will handed Kaye the money and said, "Now don't get too fancy. I'm an old bachelor and won't need frills and lace and such."

She touched his shoulder. "We'll take care of everything."

As the sheriff, Tom Haney, drove by Jack Gibb's house, it was hard to tell anyone lived there. The roof had holes where shingles had broken loose and there was garbage strewn all over the porch and yard. Two rusty metal chairs with the paint chipped off set side-by-side in a batch of weeds. Several windows were broken or cracked, and cardboard or newspaper filled the gaping holes.

Tom parked two houses down and waited. It was late when Jack pulled into the driveway and he didn't see the sheriff's car. He sat in the cab, waiting for the song on the radio to end before turning off the ignition. As he stumbled up the porch steps, his foot knocked over an old coffee can and thick brown tobacco

spittle dripped down the edge of the cement steps, smearing his boot. A curse flew from Jack's mouth as he rubbed the toe of his boot against his pant leg.

The sheriff called out to him, "Jack Gibbs, I want to talk to you."

Jack's body stiffened and he wiped his mouth with his shirtsleeve before turning to face the sheriff.

"Howdy, Sheriff. Have a seat. What can I do for you?"

The sheriff's massive body filled one of the metal chairs and he stretched his long legs out, never looking directly at the man. The smell of whiskey was heavy as Jack slid into the chair next to him.

"I've been hearing some talk about you today," said the sheriff. "Seems a fellow in the Gilley-Young Hollow had a fire and your son was involved. Now you're going around accusing the man of attacking your boy. Is that about right?"

"I'm a peaceable fellow, Sheriff, but when wrong has been done to me or mine, I can't ignore it, now can I?"

"I'd say you should be grateful the old man isn't filing charges against your boy. By the way, where is Turney?"

"He's out with his friends." Jack laughed nervously. "You know how boys are. They got to sow some oats every now and then."

The corner of Tom's mouth turned up in a sneer. "I saw him earlier today and we talked for a long time. When he told me his side of the story, I got to wondering."

Tom took off his hat and his head like he was thinking real hard about something. "It seems to me if he'd been running away from something or someone, he would have been hit in the back, not in the front. Doesn't that make sense to you?"

He could see Jack's face from the light of the street lamp and could almost hear the cogs turning in that little pea brain.

Jack took a deep breath and when he expelled, a low “hummm” came with it. “Boys will be boys, won’t they, Sheriff?”

“I thought you’d see the right in it. Woodbury’s a quiet little town, and I want to keep it that way. I won’t have to worry with this anymore, right?”

“I’ll take care of that boy of mine. By the way, who told you about it?”

“A concerned citizen who figured you weren’t seeing things quite right.”

Jack pulled a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and offered one to the sheriff. “I got no problem with anyone. It was just a misunderstanding.”

The sheriff stood up, pulled a silver lighter from his pocket and lit his cigarette. He looked at Jack, than shoved the lighter back in his shirt pocket.

“I’m real glad to hear that, Jack. See you around.”

“Yeah, Sheriff. See you around.”

Jack watched the rear lights of the sheriff’s car move down the street, then disappear around the corner. He sat quiet with the unlit cigarette hanging from his lips, a warm anger creeping into his brain.

In a low, raspy voice, he spoke to the empty darkness. “The boy lied to me. He’s made me look like a fool.”

Chapter 29: Shattered Glass

The door creaked as Turney slipped into the front room. Sprawled out on the couch, his daddy's arm dangled over the side and drool leaked from his half-opened mouth. The boy wondered why the lights were off. Daddy always fell asleep with the lights blazing. The change worried him and added to his fears. He eased into the bedroom, shutting the door behind him. Without making a sound, he worked off his boots and set them under the bed. The springs squeaked from the weight of his body and a broken wire poked another hole in the mattress. It brushed his arm when he shoved it under his head and a trickle of blood stained the pillow.

Turney stared at the light coming through the window. The moonlight came through the glass in one long line that ran up the wall and stretched across the ceiling. The light spread like liquid spilling around corners and under doors. He wondered how it could do that. Turney stared at it for a long time until his eyelids grew heavy. The boy jerked awake when he thought about the sheriff. He didn't believe his story and if Daddy found out the truth there'd be hell to pay. He lay there awake, dreading the next morning and it came too soon.

"Boy, you made a fool of me," bellowed Jack as he grabbed the boy by the neck like a stray dog. "Nobody makes a fool of Jack Gibbs. You hear me?"

He drew his fist back and Turney felt the blow before it ever landed. The boy flew across the kitchen and fell against the garbage can, knocking empty soup cans and rotted trash all over the floor. Roaches scurried behind the fallen can. Turney saw stars, but he forced his legs to pick him up. If he didn't keep moving, his daddy might kill him. Think, brain. Think of something.

"Wait, Daddy. Wait, the old man's got money! A bunch of money!"

"How the hell do you know? Is this another one of your lies?"

Jack grabbed him by the arm and Turney covered his head with his other arm to block the next blow. "I saw it. Really, I saw him coming out of the bank the other day," cried Turney.

The boy's voice came out like the squeal of a pig as tears and mucous ran from his eyes and nose. Jack pushed him away, saying, "Go wipe your face, crybaby, then tell me about this money."

As Turney rinsed his face in the kitchen sink, Jack opened the icebox and grabbed the bottle of milk. He turned it up, drinking until the bottle was empty. Wiping his mouth with his sleeve, he slammed the icebox door and tossed the bottle in the sink. Turney jumped back as pieces of glass sprayed the counter. Two roaches ran up the wall seeking refuge behind the cabinet.

God, I hate him, thought Turney. I wish he would drop dead.

The boy stood with his back to the wall as Jack swung the kitchen chair around and sat on it backwards. He rested his arms across the back and glared at him.

"Well, I'm waiting."

"The other day I was riding my bike on the square and I saw him coming out of the bank. I watched him shove a wad of bills into his pocket and figured with him being crazy and all, he probably took it out to hide it in his mattress."

His voice quivered and he held the dishrag over his swollen eye. Jack's eyes narrowed as he rubbed the stubble on his chin.

"Could you tell how much money there was?"

"I think I saw some hundred dollar bills."

Jack was quiet, but his brain registered the hundred dollar bills and an idea began to blossom.

"Get your boots on. You're coming with me."

"Can't I eat something first?"

"If things go like I figure, we'll have us a real good meal later. Hurry up."

As Jack pulled a clean shirt out of the closet, his plans began to take shape. That sheriff is going to be hanging on my neck like a yoke. It might be time to make a change. When the old man was with Suell, I saw a wad of money and now the kid says he saw some too. The old goat might keep a stash in his house. If I can get my hands on some money, I could get the hell out of this dump and go someplace exciting. That brat better not be shitting me.

"Have fun, girls, and you kids behave." Robert kissed Kaye goodbye. "What time do you expect to be back?"

"We're going to have lunch at the City Cafe in Murfreesboro, but we'll be back in plenty of time to fix supper."

Suell leaned his head through the driver's side window and kissed Quixie on the cheek. "Drive careful. See y'all later."

The men watched the car until it turned down Main Street heading for Murfreesboro.

"Ladies love to shop," sighed Suell.

"That's the truth, so we'd better get to work so we can pay for it. I figure it'll take us a couple of hours to wire the house. Then we can put up the dry wall. Are you sure you can spare the

time from the garage?" Robert knew Suell had been receiving some flack from his customers.

"I've only got a couple of boys complaining, but mostly because they can't hang around the garage and drink up all my RCs," laughed Suell as he climbed in Robert's truck

Will had just finished sweeping the porch when he saw Robert and Suell coming up the road. "Have you had breakfast? I've got some sausage and biscuits left."

"We'll eat them for lunch," said Suell. "Say around ten o'clock?"

They laughed and went inside. About an hour later, Robert let out a howl. "The box is empty!" There's supposed to be a fuse box in here and all I've got is an empty box. Damn, I'll have to make another trip to town."

Will looked up from where he had been squatting on one knee and said, "I'll go for you. You can spare me, but we can't spare you."

"No, I'll go. They know me and they might give you a hard time. Besides, I can get some plumbing supplies while I'm in town and that will save me a trip tomorrow."

Will's knees creaked when he stood up, and Suell groaned, holding his back "I can do a day's work, but all this bending around is rough." He grinned at Will. "Why don't we take a break while the young fellow runs his errand."

"Sounds good to me. Don't get lunch, Robert. I can fix some sandwiches when you get back"

"Okay, I shouldn't be long," he said and headed out the door.

Suell stretched to work out the kinks in his back and Will heated the coffee. "You were right about Robert and his family being good neighbors."

"I knew you'd like them, and I knew things would work out for you if you gave it a little time."

Esther interrupted their conversation by pawing at the screen door, begging to come in. Will poured a saucer of milk and headed for the front porch. Suell followed, carrying their coffee cups, and the men settled in the rockers waiting for Robert to return. Neither spoke, both content to rock and enjoy the spring morning. Summer was just around the corner and Will's garden bloomed with bright green lettuce, onions, radishes and the promise of beans and tomatoes to come. Carpenter bees bore holes in the eaves, making flakes of wood float through the air and settle on the banister. A squirrel stood at the bottom of the elm tree, studying the men on the porch. When Suell rested his foot on the banister, the squirrel bounded across the grass and disappeared up a poplar tree. Will had begun to nod off when Esther's kittens came out from under the porch to join their mother for lunch.

His eyes opened and a big smile filled his face. "I've got a houseful to feed now," he laughed and reached down to retrieve the empty bowl. "Hold on, fellows. I'll be right back." Esther jumped on Suell's lap to escape the demands of her kittens as Will went inside.

As his hand reached for the handle on the icebox door, a noise out back drew his attention to the window. A man in a cowboy hat and a young boy walked towards the back porch.

"Where in the world did they come from?" said Will to himself.

Tightness gripped him. They don't look like hunters, so why are they coming from the back of the house? When he stepped out the back door, he noticed the man had stringy long hair, and the ragged boy looked as though soap and water were strangers. It didn't take long to realize that it was Jack Gibbs and his boy, and suddenly he didn't want this to be happening.

“I don’t want any trouble out of you, Donnelly. You caused my boy to get hurt and I figure you owe me something.”

Will looked at the boy and was sickened to see his left eye swollen shut and bruises on his arms and neck. The old man’s neck felt hot and his body shuddered.

“Did you do that to him?”

“That’s none of your business. Like I said, you owe me. Tell the boy where your money is, and you and I will visit out here.” Will took a step backwards when Jack pulled a gun from inside his shirt.

Turney yelled, “Daddy, no!”

He fell forward when Jack pushed him towards Will. A flash of memory reminded the old man of another time he faced a man with a gun. In France, his company had captured a bunker filled with German soldiers and as they lined them up, one of them pulled out a revolver. Instantly three rifles pointed at him and one of the American soldiers warned the man to put down the gun. Suddenly, the soldier stuck the gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

Will shook away the memory and glared beyond the gun into the man’s eyes. “You shouldn’t be doing this in front of your son.”

Jack was sure he saw fear on the old man’s face, and it satisfied him to no end. “I won’t hurt you, old man, as long as you do as I say. Go on, Turney. Check his pockets.”

“Have you lost your mind entirely?” Suell yelled as he came around the side of the house. “Your boy burned down this man’s property. If anyone owes anything, it’s you. Now put that gun away and get the hell out of here before someone gets hurt.”

Will froze. “Stay out of this, Suell. Go back inside. Mister, why don’t you leave and we’ll forget the whole thing?”

Jack twisted sideways, aiming the gun at Suell. His mind flew like a whirly-gig. There wasn't supposed to be anyone else here. Damn it, damn it! His teeth felt brittle and he clamped them together as he stared at Suell.

"You're the do-gooder who told the sheriff. When are you going to learn to mind your own business?"

Panic filled Will's brain for everything was happening too fast. Suell could get hurt. How could this be happening? The old man put his hand on the boy's shoulder and stared into Jack's eyes. "You don't want to do this in front of your boy. Why don't you take him home?"

"Shut up and give me your money. Empty your pockets!"

Jack's face turned scarlet and his cheek was twitching. He held the gun with both hands to keep it steady. When Suell took a step toward him, Jack pointed the gun directly in his face.

"You'd better back off. I'm telling you, I'll blow your brains out!"

Turney began sobbing. "Please, Mr. Donnelly, just give him your money, and we'll go away. You'll never see us again. Isn't that right, Daddy?"

"You damn crybaby. Shut up and get the money," screamed Jack.

Suell kept moving closer to Jack. "You sick coward. I knew you and I were bound to tangle," he growled and lunged at Jack, grabbing for the gun.

"NO!" howled Will and he ran forward to stop Suell. The gun exploded and bullets screamed through the air, one hitting the post on the back porch while another ricocheted, shattering the kitchen window. The third bullet hit something solid and the quiet that followed was deafening. Suell's body slumped into Will's arms as Jack backed away, clutching the gun, unable to let loose of it.

Jack's eyes grew big as saucers and his face paled with the look of death. "I didn't mean to shoot him. It was an accident." His arms dropped to his sides, his shoulders sagged and for the moment, he forgot about the gun dangling from his hand.

The weight of Suell's body brought Will to the ground, but he never felt the pain shooting through his knee. His friend's blood spilled out, covering Will's shirt and hands. A moaning sound from the old man's lips grew loud, rendering the air with the deafening cry of a wounded animal. Jack covered his ears and began running backwards until he turned and raced up the hill into the woods.

"Daddy, wait for me! Don't leave me!" screamed Turney.

The boy started to run after the man, but he stopped and covered his face with his hands.

"He left me," he sobbed. "Without a second thought, he left me. I'd rather go to jail than go with him."

When Robert returned he found Will sitting on the ground with Suell's body stretched out in front of him. He held Suell in his arms, rocking back and forth. Turney sat on the porch squeezing his knees to his chest, trying to slow the trembling of his body. Robert stared at the boy then looked back at Will and Suell.

"Mother of God, how could this have happened?"

He'd only been gone a short while, but long enough for the world to go crazy. Robert didn't have to ask who did it, but the why of it escaped him. He squatted down next to Suell and placed his fingers on his neck desperate to feel a pulse, but there was none. Robert went inside to find something to cover the body. He grabbed the blue and white quilt that Quixie had made from Will's bed and carried it out to the yard. Tears slid down Robert's cheeks as he helped Will to his feet. Ever so gently, he covered Suell's body with the quilt. Robert started to order

Turney not to go anywhere, but the boy just sat there, staring as if frozen to the porch step.

“I have to get help. Will you be all right?” Robert put his hand on Will’s shoulder, but had to turn away from the old man’s shattered face. Will nodded and sat down on the edge of the porch near Turney.

Robert’s foot twisted on a rock as he hurried towards the front yard, sending a shock of pain through his bad leg. A curse flew from his lips and he bent over to rub his leg, urging the pain away. His eyes searched the sky for an answer. “Why? Why did this happen?” When he tried to put the key in the switch to start the truck, his hand shook and he pounded the dashboard with his fists. Then he began to take deep breaths, slowly breathing in and out so he could get his emotions under control and think clearly.

By the time Kaye and the children came home with Quixie, the ambulance had taken Suell’s body to the hospital and the sheriff had taken Will and Turney to his office.

It was strange how Quixie reacted when Robert told her about Suell. He was sure she would scream and cry frantically or collapse, but she was quiet. So quiet it frightened him, but her grief filled every crevice of the room.

Kaye tried to hug Quixie, but she pushed her away. “I have to go to the hospital to see about Suell,” whispered Quixie.

Robert offered to drive her, but she put her hand out and said, “No, I need to be alone for a while.”

“You’re not in any condition to drive now, let me ...”

“No.” Her voice scraped like a nail over glass.

She looked down, shocked by the sound of her own voice. “I’ll be all right. I need to do this by myself.”

Kaye and Robert watched Quixie walk to her car and drive away. Chris ran to his room, slamming the door shut, but Bobby

went outside to sit on the porch. Robert held Kaye in his arms until she pulled away. Concern filled her face.

“You need to talk to Bobby. He’s going to think he’s to blame. We have to help him, Robert.”

He kissed her on the forehead and went out to the porch. The boy sat on the top step, his head bowed with his arms folded in front of him.

“It was my fault, son. I should have listened to you when all of this first started.”

“Daddy, if I hadn’t taken Turney up there, this never would have happened.”

“If it wasn’t that, it would have been something else. Jack Gibbs is the type of man who seeks out vulnerable people. He’s a spineless coward who has to make people afraid so he can feel big. You may not understand it right now, but there are people in the world like that, and their lives overflow with trouble and turmoil. Turney had to bully the kids at school just to feel important. You can’t blame yourself for the actions of a fool.”

Bobby buried his head in Daddy’s chest and sobbed. “Why did Suell have to die?”

Robert pondered on that as he held his son in his arms. “He was protecting Will. Greater love has no man than to lay down his life for a friend.”

Father and son clung to one another as night fell around them.

Will and Turney rode in the sheriff’s car back to Woodbury. Each of them pressed close to their window staring out, but not seeing anything. The sheriff interviewed them separately and was satisfied when both told the same story.

“What will happen to the boy?” asked Will.

“We’ll contact relatives living in Bedford County. Should have done it a long time ago.” Tom was thinking of the other

times Gibbs had neglected his son, but all he ever got was a slap on the hand. He sighed and finished filling out the police report.

"Can you find out how Quixie is doing?" Will asked.

"I'll call the hospital."

Tom looked at the boy. "You're not under arrest, but for now we have to keep you in a cell till we can find you a home."

"I don't care." Turney held an ice pack on his eye and sat with his elbows resting on his knees.

The sheriff located Quixie at the hospital, so Will decided to walk over and check on her. It was dark and a cool breeze brushed against his skin. Thankfully, he had his cane, for the pain in his knee was worse. As he crossed Main Street and looked towards the hospital, he saw Quixie standing outside the door. She looked lost, as though she didn't know where to go. When he called to her, she looked up. As Will approached, he saw disappointment on her face.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"I don't know how to answer that. I keep rerunning this day over in my brain, but it still doesn't make any sense."

Quixie hugged her purse to her body and shivered as though a chill ran through her. "William, I need to go home."

He took her hand in his. "There's no way to tell you how sorry I am," he whispered.

"I'm sorry, too," she said and hurried away.

It was late when the sheriff drove Will home.

"At least it didn't happen inside the house. Blood is a bitch to clean up," the sheriff said as Will opened the car door to get out.

He closed his eyes for a moment as a shudder ran through his body.

"Thanks for the ride. I'll be here if you need me for anything."

"We're going to find Gibbs," said the sheriff. His jaw tightened and his voice cut the air as though he were talking to a roomful of deputies preparing to search for the killer. "When we do, you'll have to testify."

"I reckon," said Will. He watched the rear lights of the sheriff's vehicle disappear around the curve and then began the unsteady walk in the dark across the rocks of the creek. As he struggled like a blind man not to fall in the water, he wondered why he hadn't built a bridge across the creek.

Sitting in his favorite chair, he watched the kindling in the fireplace take the flame and didn't bother to light the lamp. Esther and her kittens slipped inside when the door opened and they were satisfied to snuggle on the rug in front of the hearth. Numbness filled him, and he wasn't sure what to do next. There was something, but for the life of him he didn't know what it was. He got up, felt his way to the kitchen and looked out the window. Darkness filled the yard, and he was grateful for the night.

He went back to the front room, lit the lamp and carried it to the kitchen. Broken glass lay everywhere and he began picking up the pieces. A sliver cut his finger and he pulled his handkerchief out of his pocket and wet it from the bucket on the sink. Seeing the blood on his finger made him think of Suell and he moaned. "Oh, God, why did this have to happen?"

Will continued picking up pieces of glass, dropping them into the trash. He was tired but knew sleep was impossible. Loneliness filled him and he needed to talk to someone. Then he remembered something. He reached for the lamp and opened the back door. When the cats heard the door open, they ran out with him. The scarecrow still sat where Will had left him on the back porch. He picked it up and put it across his shoulder so that he could carry the lamp in his other hand. Following the worn path to the workshop, he laid the lamp on top of the old engine

so he could open the door. It opened easily, but it took time to adjust to the darkness even with the lamp.

Setting the lamp on the workbench, he placed the scarecrow back into the chair. It slouched over the side of the arm and Will could see dust and cobwebs clinging to the chair. Will sat on a stool in front of the scarecrow and waited. He needed to talk to someone and the scarecrow was all he had. He waited, but no words came. Time past and silence filled the room.

A sudden knock on the door startled the old man, and he jerked his head up. Someone was outside. He stood up and when he opened the door, a dark figure faced him making Will nearly swoon.

A hand reached out and took hold of his arm. "Will, it's me, Robert. Are you all right?"

Later, the two men sat facing each other at the table drinking coffee and talking.

"It's strange how you showed up when I was wishing for someone to talk to."

"I couldn't sleep and saw the sheriff's car go by. I figured you couldn't sleep either. What were you doing in the workshop?"

A half-grin of resolve filled Will's face and he replied, "I was looking for an old friend."

Will spent the next hour explaining about Jacob and the scarecrow. Robert never asked a question, and passed no judgment. He just listened.

"I've never told anyone about it before. I was afraid and ashamed. Telling you makes it feel as though a fog has lifted. Now you know what a crazy neighbor you have living down the road."

Will's hands circled his empty cup and Robert was silent for a long time. The old man stood up, poured coffee in Robert's cup and filled his.

Robert took a long swallow of coffee then spoke. "I've never been able to talk about the war, but memories still cling to my guts and won't go away. We weren't meant to see such horrors and it's left us with bits and pieces of broken things floating in our brain. I don't think you're crazy, only bruised and battered. I think Suell recognized that when he became your friend."

The mention of Suell brought the horror of the day back, and Will flung his cup against the wall.

"It shouldn't have happened. I should be the one lying on that slab in the hospital, not Suell."

He got up and walked to the door and Robert knew the old man would grieve for a long time. Glancing around the room, Robert's eyes settled on the door opening of the unfinished bathroom. The men had finished the drywall and painting would have been their next job.

"Hey, since we're awake anyway, why don't we paint the bathroom?"

The old man turned and looked at Robert as though he were crazy. "Paint the bathroom? Now?"

"Why not? I can't sleep, you can't sleep, so why waste the time? I bet we could get the whole thing finished in an hour."

Will scratched his head. "Have you got the paint?"

"It'll just take me a few minutes to run home and get it. I need to tell Kaye what I'm doing so she won't worry."

"I guess we could," mumbled Will as he bent over to pick up the broken handle from his cup.

As the sound of Robert's truck faded in the darkness, Will looked up at the star-filled night and whispered a prayer for Suell and Quixie.

Chapter 30: Goodbyes

Quixie sat at the kitchen table, clutching her cup of coffee that had long turned cold. The house was quiet. On the table, three yellow roses, brown and bent, pulled at the last drop of water in the vase. Suell had bought them from the flower shop three weeks ago and she couldn't throw them away. The hamper held his work shirt with his name printed on a label over the left pocket and his dirty sock hid under the bed. Dust gathered on the tables and wood floors, but Quixie was blind to it. She had no energy for anything except waiting for the funeral home to open its doors.

Her house was across the street and two doors down from the Woodbury Funeral Home on College Street. Before this day, it had never bothered her being so near, but now it held Suell prisoner with no escape. She thought about the day she walked through the room filled with coffins, all different, yet the same. When the funeral director asked her about music, she looked at him dumbly. He patted her hand and said he would take care of it. Suell had tried to talk to her about buying a plot, but she ignored him and said there was plenty of time. The funeral director helped her with that, as well as a tombstone with both their names engraved on it.

The moment she looked in his coffin, she worried about him being cold. Friends begged her to sit down, but she refused. She needed to warm his cold, stiff fingers. Numbness filled her and her body functioned like a robot, welcoming visitors and receiving their condolences. She prayed for it all to end so she could grieve alone.

Quixie stayed at the funeral home until exhaustion forced her to seek rest, but the silence of the house was unbearable. She found herself listening for the back door to slam and the sound of Suell's voice calling out, "Hey, Sweet Pea. I'm home." But the house remained silent. When she tried to sleep, she longed for his hands to find her and ached for the warmth of his body next to her, but her husband, her friend, her world was gone.

Will asked Kaye to pick out an arrangement and sign the card 'from a friend.' The first day of visitation, the funeral parlor overran with flowers and half of Woodbury came to pay their respects, everyone except Will. Fear of people's reaction kept him away. Besides, he didn't want to look at Suell lying in the coffin.

At night, his dreams were confused with visions of Suell and then Jacob. He watched as they walked together up a long dirt road that began to glisten with bright light. They turned and waved, then disappeared into the brilliance. He woke with a peaceful feeling that left him wondering.

When the midnight hour struck on the second night of visitation, there was no one in the funeral home but Quixie and the undertaker. When the clock struck two in the morning, the deserted streets were quiet except for Will's truck, which moved slowly down College Street. There were no cars in front of the funeral home, but there was a small light coming from Quixie's front room. Will hoped that she had gone home to get some sleep. He parked the truck and walked up the steps of the funeral

home. The door opened without making a sound. He followed a soft light coming from one of the rooms on the left side of the hallway. When he entered the room, he saw Quixie sitting in a chair next to the coffin with her head resting on the side of it. She didn't move when he came closer and he realized she was sound asleep. His first impulse was to pick her up and carry her to a safe place as he had done many years before. Instead, he stood watching her for a long time. Even in sleep, she looked sad and lost.

If he had not come home, Suell would be alive. He should have stayed in the hospital. Blame weighed heavy on his mind. Then from somewhere deep in his subconscious, other ifs popped into his brain. If he hadn't been out hunting that night, he wouldn't have found Quixie. If he stayed in the hospital, he would never have met Suell, Chris or Then as though someone whispered in his ear, he heard the words, "You are a foolish man, Willie Donnelly." Silently, he left the funeral home.

The next morning, Robert and his family were the first to arrive. Quixie stood next to the coffin wearing a black dress and hat. She held two yellow roses. She pulled the veil back when Kaye approached and held her hand out to her friend.

"I'm glad you're here. I need to ask you something."

"Anything. How can I help?" asked Kaye.

"Will you sit with me today? I'd almost forgotten that Suell was the only family I had. Will you be my family just for today?"

"We'll be your family today, tomorrow, for as long as you want us," said Kaye and she wrapped her arms around Quixie and held her close.

As Robert sat on the front bench holding Isabel, he watched the people file in the funeral parlor. Tom Haney sat across the aisle on the front bench wearing his sheriff's uniform and holding his hat in his lap. He would be one of the pallbearers. Robert

knew he would lead the funeral procession, flashing the light on top of his car like a beacon.

When Ramsey and Helen came in, she kept looking at her watch as though she had some place else she needed to be. They sat behind Robert and he heard Helen say, "Why do we have to go to the cemetery?"

Ramsey shushed her and whispered, "Because that's what I want to do."

If Helen responded, Robert didn't hear what she said. Lionel came in wearing his old Milwaukee Braves baseball cap, but he pulled it off right away. After looking at Suell, he turned to Quixie and said that he would never forget the little man with the big heart. He was another pallbearer.

Betty Lou from the beauty shop arrived with Alice Green. Both of them had red, puffy eyes and looked as though they had cried a river. Alice and Quixie had been roommates when they were girls and she had cut Quixie's hair since high school. They hurried past the coffin and went up to Quixie, giving her a big bear hug, and saying how sorry they were. They walked towards the back of the chapel where Betty Lou pulled a large box of Kleenex out of a paper bag she carried under her arm. Their sobbing continued throughout the funeral service.

Benny came in with his girlfriend, Daisy. They held hands as they looked at Suell. When he turned to look at Quixie, he held his right hand to his heart and bowed his head.

"He wants you to know how bad he feels about your loss," said Daisy. "He cried when he found out about Suell. Your husband was very kind to Benny."

Quixie pressed her hand on Benny's, and then mouthed the words 'thank you.'

Robert never saw Quixie cry and he worried about that. He believed that crying would help her release the pent-up frustration and anger she must feel. Bobby and Chris were quiet,

and outside of hugging Quixie, they barely talked to anyone else. Robert felt sad for them, for Suell had been like a grandfather as well as a good friend.

At the graveyard, Will tried to stay in the background, but Robert steered him to the front next to the gravesite. Although Suell and Quixie never attended church, Quixie asked Brother Allen to officiate at the funeral. Suell wasn't a church-going man but he and the preacher were friends.

As Brother Allen said the final prayer, he walked over to Quixie, hugged her and spoke quietly to her. He stood by her side as she placed the yellow roses on top of the casket before they lowered it in the ground. As the coffin descended, Bobby and Chris began to cry. When she saw her brothers cry, Isabel cried too. Tears streamed down Kaye's face, but the veil hid Quixie's tears.

Will's eyes followed her every movement, but she never looked at him. Robert and Kaye begged her to come home with them and even offered to stay with her, but she refused.

Finally, it was over and everyone left the gravesite but Will and Quixie. He took her hand in his and begged, "Please let me help. You shouldn't be alone."

She removed her veil, revealing her sunken pale face and swollen eyes. He gathered her in his arms and held her tight so she couldn't pull away. She tried to resist, then gave up the struggle and leaned her head against his chest.

"Why do I always lose the ones I love?" she whispered so low that he could barely hear her.

"I don't know, little girl. I just don't know."

A few days after the funeral, Robert installed the toilet and the claw-footed bathtub that Kaye had ordered for Will's bathroom. The next afternoon he and Kaye returned, carrying two packages. Will was happy to see them.

“I’m so glad you came by. I have something to show you.” He walked over and pulled the string hanging down from the ceiling. When the light went on his face beamed. “How about that? I’ve been dying to show this to someone. I’m still not used to having electricity and I’m forever lighting the oil lamp.”

Like a child, Kaye clapped her hands together. “That’s wonderful.”

Robert smiled and said, “Kaye was determined to finish the bathroom and insisted it wouldn’t be complete until the window curtains were hung, so here we are.”

She pulled two curtain panels out of the bag. They were snow white with blue ruffles that matched the paint in the bathroom. After she hung them, she tied them back with a strip of blue fabric the same color. The other bag held a blue rug, a basket and a set of towels with blue flowers.

“Flowers?” the old man mused.

“I couldn’t resist,” grinned Kaye. “Quixie made the curtains before ... before we went shopping for the rug and she asked me to bring them.”

“Have you seen her?”

“Only once and that was when she gave us the curtains. We’re trying to respect her wishes, but we’re worried about her. She refuses any show of sympathy, but she wears her grief on her sleeve.”

“I went to see her yesterday,” he replied, “and she asked me to leave her be for a while. She told me that she needed time to think and decide what to do, and she didn’t want anyone’s help.”

Kaye looked at Will. “I guess time is the only thing that will help. Even then, I think she will carry his loss to the grave.”

A helpless quiet filled the room for a long moment. Then Kaye said, “We left the children home alone so we need to get back. Why don’t you come for dinner this evening? The children would love to see you.”

“I’ve missed them. Maybe I’ll come in a day or so. Let me bring something.”

“Bring anything you like,” smiled Kaye and kissed him on the cheek.

As the truck bounced over the stock gap, Kaye said, “He seems to be handling everything all right, doesn’t he?”

“I think he’ll be fine,” said Robert and pulled Kaye next to him.

Robert felt guilty for not visiting his grandmother, but so much had happened that time slipped away from him. He called Clara, who assured him that Miss Ida was getting along and not to worry about her. Saturday he would visit and restock her food pantry. When Saturday arrived, he found her lying in bed looking disheveled.

Clara looked relieved to see him. “She don’t want to get up or do nothing, Mr. Robert. She won’t eat but a little and it’s even hard getting her up to use the bathroom.”

The old woman opened her eyes. There was dried crust in the corners of her mouth, her hair was matted and there were stains on the front of her bed jacket.

“Miss Ida, if you won’t eat and let Clara clean you up and fix your hair, I’ll call the doctor about it. He’s liable to have you put in the hospital. You don’t want that, do you?”

“Why haven’t you come to see me? Are you still helping your neighbor?”

The sarcasm in her voice grated on him and his defense mechanisms turned on before he could stop them. “As a matter of fact, I’ve been busy with other things. You must have heard about Suell Edmonds. His funeral was last week, and I’ve had a lot of things to see about. Suell is a good friend ... was a good friend.”

His voice trailed off and his defenses slackened as the memory of Suell lying in Will's arms rushed back to haunt him. Sorrow washed over him and he wondered why this old woman could inflict pain so easily in him.

He bowed his head, a sharp pain nudging his right temple, and in a tired voice said, "You remember Quixie, don't you?"

"I remember her and I remember her daddy too."

He sighed, ignoring the old woman's dig and asked, "I'm going grocery shopping today. Is there anything in particular you want me to get?"

She twisted the hair hanging down on her shoulder and didn't answer him right away. For a moment, her fingers froze in mid-air and she looked past him at something on the wall. Miss Ida seemed to forget that he was in the room.

Robert spoke louder. "Miss Ida, what do you want from the store?"

She looked at him, but there was no recognition on her face. Then she looked down at her fingers kneading the folds of the blanket and vacantly said, "Get what you want."

"Will you let Clara bathe you while I'm gone?" His voice pleaded like a small boy.

The old woman closed her eyes, but she nodded her head yes. He left the room, closing the door behind him.

"Clara, clean her up a bit and see if you can do something with her hair. How long has she been this way?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Robert, but I hated to bother you with all your troubles. She's been getting a little worse each day. I begged her to let me clean her up and she started throwing things at me."

Her brown eyes reflected frustration. She twisted her hands and said, "Mr. Robert, I don't know how much longer I can stay with her. Please make some other arrangements as soon as you can. I just can't do this anymore."

Tears filled her eyes and she wiped them with her apron. He knew Clara had put up with more than most people would. She told him that Miss Ida had been seeing things and talking out of her head. For the last two weeks, she had stayed day and night fearful of what the old woman might do. Her nerves couldn't take any more.

"I'm sorry, Clara, and I appreciate everything you've done. Give me until Monday or Tuesday. I'll talk to the doctor. Surely he can tell me what to do."

Lord, I don't need this right now, he thought.

Robert was beside himself with worry, and he didn't want to bring it home to Kaye. She would insist on staying with Ida, and Robert knew she wasn't strong enough. His wheels squealed as he pulled away from his grandmother's house, but she never heard them.

Clara crept into the room with a basin of water and some soap and a towel and washcloth over her arm. She was startled to find Miss Ida sitting up in bed staring at the wall and smiling.

"Miss Ida, you'll feel better after I clean you up."

The old woman didn't respond at first, but kept smiling at something on the wall. When Clara started to unbutton her nightgown, the old woman grabbed her arm and began beating on her. "Get away from me. Get out! Get out!" she screamed.

Clara pulled away, amazed at the old woman's strength. She opened her mouth to speak, but the old woman screamed again. "Get out NOW!"

"I'm getting out," cried Clara. "You'll never see me again."

She pulled the door shut and ran to the kitchen. Clara slammed the kettle down on the stove and picked up the chair, wanting to throw it against the wall. Realizing what she was doing, she set the chair back down.

"I'll wait for Mr. Robert to come back and then I'm leaving for good."

Miss Ida had visitors. Hershel and Lucy were standing in the room looking at her. She smiled, stretching her arms out to them.

"Hershel, you've come for me, haven't you? I knew you would come."

She struggled to sit up. "My little girl, you've come too. Let me hold you. I've missed you so much."

She saw tears on Lucy's face and heard silent words. "Why couldn't you love him?"

Dread filled the old woman. "I took him into my house and cared for him all those years. I did the best I could. You can't blame me."

The first time she'd seen the boy, it was like a knife going through her. He was beautiful, just like her Lucy, but she couldn't love him. Bitterness raged inside her mind as she struggled to defend herself. "I never told anyone. You still have your good name."

Ida panicked when Hershel and Lucy turned away from her and began to fade into a fog that filled the room. Her breath caught sharply and she began gasping as a pain in her chest took her by surprise. It felt like something heavy was pressing on her chest, cutting off the air. Her eyelids fluttered and she reached her gnarled fingers towards the receding figures. Weighed down by the hate she'd been carrying through the years, she lay back on the pillow.

"Don't go," she pleaded, her voice coming in a cracked whisper. "Don't leave me. Take me with you."

But they vanished.

Clara's anger subsided and she made a cup of tea for Miss Ida, hoping it would ease her temper. She knocked on the bedroom door and then slipped inside.

"Miss Ida. I've brought you some tea."

The old woman's eyes were open, but she wasn't looking at anything. Clara laid the cup on the nightstand and took the old woman's hand.

"I'm sorry I hollered at you, ma'am but ..."

Her hand was limp and cold, so cold. Clara dropped it and clutched her hands to her breast. A silent scream stuck in her throat.

Robert's car followed the hearse to the Prater Cemetery. Miss Ida would rest with her husband and babies. Brother Allen preached a compelling sermon, reminding everyone of her devotion as a homemaker and mother, and it satisfied Robert. He stared down at the grave dry-eyed, unable to release the child's tears hidden away. His tears, spent many years ago, could no longer be called upon.

Only a handful of people came to the funeral. He knew Quixie wouldn't be there because it would have been too soon. He was surprised to see Will and he was very grateful. Clara left her family standing by the car to come back and speak to Robert and Kaye.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Mr. Robert. You've always been kind to me and I wish things hadn't ended like they did."

"Thank you for all your help, Clara. You did everything that could be done and I won't forget."

Clara hugged Robert and Kaye, then made her way back to where her family waited.

Brother Allen hugged Kaye and spoke to the children. He shook Robert's hand and said, "You've had more than your share of burdens and heartache, Robert. At least she's at peace

now. Please don't forget that God is with you. He won't forsake you in your hour of need."

"Thank you, Brother Allen."

When the preacher turned to say something to Will, he noticed that the old man was standing by his parents' graves. He walked over to join him.

Will let out a deep sigh and said, "I'll always regret that I didn't come home sooner."

"God chose this time for you to return. We can only trust His judgment. Our lives touch one another whether we realize it or not, and perhaps He felt this is when you would be needed most."

He held his hand out to Will and said, "I told you I wouldn't keep after you about coming back to church, but I wish you'd think about it."

"You never know, Med, I might surprise you one day."

The preacher said his goodbyes and walked back to the car.

As Kaye and the children turned to leave, Robert looked over at his grandpa's grave and whispered, "Grandpa, I kept my promise the best way I knew how."

Will followed Robert and Kaye back to the house. He sat on the porch with Bobby and Chris for a while, but turned down Kaye's offer to stay for supper. The little house at the end of the hollow called to him.

Chapter 31:

Family

The pungent scent of fresh cut hay hung in the air as Kaye stuck the last clothespin on the line. Watching her clean sheets dance in the sun was as satisfying to her as watching cattle graze was to Robert. She stood with her hands on her hips and her eyes closed, breathing in the glorious smells of summer. The past few weeks she had felt better, but fear of the future haunted her. More than anything she wanted to live to see her children grown. She and Robert had promised to cherish every day they had and all they could do was hope and pray.

Suddenly her box of clothespins tipped over and she found herself struggling to stay upright as a tiny body lunged at her. Miniature arms circled her legs and then gales of cherubic laughter filled the air.

“You little monkey, you almost knocked me down.” She swooped Isabel up in her arms just as Chris came diving from under one of the fluttering sheets.

“She’s getting fast,” he panted, leaving a dark smudge on the corner of the sheet he had just invaded.

“Chris, for goodness sake, you and Isabel play on the other side of the yard. My sheets look like an army of gremlins with dirty feet danced on them.” Her smile gave away her pretense of anger, but Chris took Isabel and carried her down to the barn. They disappeared inside and when they emerged, Chris had

the little red wagon filled with Isabel and two kittens sitting on her lap.

Kaye watched Robert close the gate after setting a block of salt out for the cattle. He and Bobby would spend the next hour unloading hay. For the last five years, Robert had helped Mr. Ferrell haul hay from his field on the edge of the Stones River Road and in exchange received enough bales to feed his stock all winter. Now Bobby was big enough to work in the hay field and Kaye pined for the little boy she once carried on her hip.

Chris was eager to go down to the end of the hollow to ride Sam, but Kaye said he would have to wait until after lunch. She needed to finish her work without having to chase after Isabel. The two year old was like a young colt trying to bust loose from the corral. She would run away and then look back to make sure someone was chasing her. Kaye stayed cautious of her ever since her journey down to Will's house in the early spring. She enjoyed watching the spirited child and was glad the little girl was so full of life.

The grumbling of a vehicle coming up the dirt road stopped everyone in their tracks. It had been a while since a stranger had come into the hollow. An ancient gray truck rumbled into the yard with smoke pouring out the exhaust. Three chocolate-skinned children sat in the bed of the truck, holding tight to a black dog with splashes of white on his ears and chest. Clara jumped out of the passenger side and straightened her dress while holding tight to a package.

The children sat rigid until their mama hollered, "You can get down, but don't start running all over the place and keep hold of that dog. I don't know why I let you bring him."

They scurried out of the truck and bunched together in a row. The middle-size boy who looked about Chris's age squatted on the ground and kept a tight hold on the dog. A tall lanky boy whose Duckin britches were riding high on his ankles waved at

Bobby. The little girl, slightly older than Isabel, pulled at one of the tiny braids that covered her head. She peeked at the baby as she climbed out of the wagon. As Isabel walked towards the little girl, the kitten she held caught sight of the dog and began squirming in her arms. When the dog caught sight of the kitten, all hell broke loose. The kitten scratched Isabel's arm as she tumbled to the ground in a run. The dog tore after the kitten, Isabel cried and Clara started jumping up and down.

"Get that dog! I told you to keep hold of him. Now look what he's done to the baby. I'll thump every one of you."

Kaye ran to Isabel while the other children chased after the dog. In due time, they found a piece of rope and tied the dog to the bumper of the truck. Kaye carried Isabel to the water trough to wash the scratch.

Robert pulled his baseball cap off and rubbed the sweat from his forehead as he walked towards the old truck. Clara's husband piled out of the driver's side, a big smile on his face exposing two gold teeth flashing in the sunlight.

"There's never a dull moment with this bunch of heathens."

Robert offered his hand to the colored man, who must have stood six feet five inches in his bare feet.

"How are you, Teddy? What brings you our way today?"

"Well, Mr. Robert, Clara's been fretting over something for weeks, and this morning right after breakfast, she shoved my hat at me and said we're going to see Mr. Robert and here we are."

Once Clara satisfied herself about the children, she walked back to where the men stood.

"Mr. Robert, I need to talk to you about something ... in private, if you don't mind."

"Why don't we go inside? Teddy, you coming?"

"You stay here and watch the kids so they don't cause any more trouble," snapped Clara. "I'll only be a minute."

Clara's stone eyes glared at the great hulk of man and he dropped his gaze to the ground, where a honeybee settled on some clover. Robert followed Clara into the house as Kaye returned, carrying Isabel.

"Is something wrong, Teddy?" she asked.

"I don't know, ma'am. Clara's been struggling with something for weeks and this morning she said she needed to talk to Mr. Robert about something real important. She wouldn't tell me what it was."

In the house, Clara sat on the couch with a package in her lap while Robert sat in a chair next to her. "What's the matter, Clara?"

"Mr. Robert, I haven't been honest with you and my conscience has been talking to me, but I've tried not to listen. This morning I made up my mind. You know, I never was one to break a promise, but at the same time I'm a firm believer in loyalty to my employer, which is you, or at least was you."

"What promise are you talking about?"

"Well, it wasn't an actual promise, mind you, but before Miss Ida got so bad sick, she asked me to do her a favor and wanted me to keep it a secret between us. I promised, but then she changed her mind about the favor. It was still a promise, but it bothered me that she didn't want me to mention it to anyone, especially you. It preyed on my mind, but then you had all your troubles and I hated to bother you with it."

"Clara, is there any way you could tell me right off what you're talking about?"

"It's this package, Mr. Robert. It belonged to Miss Ida. When she got so sick, I worried about her doing something with it and I just knew there was something in it that belonged to you, or at least something that you should know about." Clara turned sorrowful eyes toward Robert, and pulled a handkerchief out of

her purse. "I'm sorry, Mr. Robert, but I got real upset with her, so mad I couldn't see straight, and I think it was mostly vengefulness is why I took this package. After she passed, I thought about burning it, because that's what she said to do if anything happened to her. Why would she hide something from you, Mr. Robert? You'd always been so good to her. I knew something was terrible wrong when I asked her why she didn't have you take care of it and she said it weren't any of your business."

She dabbed at her eyes again. "It's evil to talk about the dead this way. Please forgive me, Mr. Robert."

He patted her arm. "It's all right, Clara, I know what you were up against. She was a difficult woman."

She nodded her head up and down, then pushed the package towards him. "This belongs to you. I'm glad to be rid of it." She leaned forward, barely able to sit still as he read the address on the package.

"What's in it?" he asked, turning it over in his hands.

"I opened it once, but didn't dare look at the papers. It didn't belong to me so I just wrapped it back up and put it away."

Robert pulled his work gloves off and untied the twine around the package. Recognizing the address, a dull ache lodged in his stomach. It was the house in Shinbone Hollow where he was raised. Inside was a pink satin candy box. He lifted the lid and fingered through the papers until he came upon an old photograph. A young girl wearing a long gingham dress stood next to a young man wearing a military uniform. Sadness shadowed her pretty face in spite of her smile. Robert stared at the picture and his memory rushed back to when he was six years old. He recognized his mother, but who was the man? He showed the picture to Clara, but she didn't know the man either. His hand rested on a folded document that was brown along the edges. Pieces of the aged paper flaked off in his fingers. It had an official-looking stamp in the corner with the Seal of

Indiana printed in a circle. As he read the document, a puzzled expression filled his face. Suddenly, he drew a quick breath and very carefully read it again.

He hadn't realized he held his breath until it expelled in a rush. He leaned back in his chair trying to collect his thoughts, unable to comprehend what was on the paper.

"Clara, have you read this?"

"No, Mr. Robert, I didn't think I should, but I was mighty curious. What is it?"

"It's my birth certificate and the man in this picture may be my father."

After Clara and her family drove out of the yard, Robert told Kaye that he needed to go see Will.

"Can't you tell me what's going on, Robert?"

"I may have just received a surprising gift. I want to check on some things and then I'll tell you and the children all about it. Be patient. It won't take long."

He kissed her on the lips and hugged her, then started for the front door. Then he stopped, pulled a small object out of his pocket and handed it to Kaye.

"When Isabel gets bigger, we can tell her this was a gift from Grandma Ida."

Kaye looked at the little bird pin shining in her hand and looked at her husband.

"Thank you," she whispered and kissed him on the cheek.

Robert climbed in the truck and drove to the end of the hollow. Will was painting the front porch when the truck pulled up. Robert nearly slipped twice coming across the rocks, but he couldn't get his legs to slow down. He clung tightly to the package as though it were a treasure.

"Glad to see you," said Will as he laid his paintbrush across the top of the bucket. "How about a glass of lemonade?"

“Not right now. I want to show you something.”

Will’s eyebrows raised in curiosity at Robert’s excitement. “What’s got you in such a frenzy, young fellow?”

“Do you know who this man is?” He shoved the picture at Will and waited for his response.

The old man studied the picture for a minute and then his mouth opened as he sucked in a breath. “It’s Jacob. Where did you get this?”

“Look at this.” Robert opened the paper and gave it to the old man.

He looked at it, and then looked at Robert with a stunned expression on his face.

“Read it out loud,” said Robert.

The old man wiped his glasses, stuck the handkerchief back in his pocket and read the paper aloud. “Birth Certificate of Live Birth, State of Indiana. April 1, 1918. Mother, Lucy Hayes; Father, Jacob Donnelly.”

They stared at one another, then slowly big smiles filled their faces. “That makes us family,” said Robert. “You’re my Uncle William.”

Will grabbed Robert’s arm and looked into his eyes. He searched for signs of Jacob, the dimple in his chin, the flecks of color in his eyes, a hint of red in his hair. Of course, that’s why he felt so comfortable with him from the first time they met. They were part of each other.

Suddenly Robert took a step back. Darkness filled his eyes as a slow anger washed over him. “My grandmother was ashamed because my mother and father weren’t married. Is that why she was so angry all those years? My God, she kept this from me and she meant to destroy it so I would never know the truth. I had a grandmother, another grandfather, an aunt ... and

an uncle I never knew about. All those years I was so lonely and they were right here. My family was right here.”

He leaned against the pillar with his back to Will, clutching the box in his hand. He was silent for a moment with his head bowed, staring at the ground.

“I don’t think I can ever forgive her,” he finally said, letting the words fall and float around him.

The happiness of the surprising good news suddenly faded. Will had spent many years trying to forgive himself. What was it like having to forgive someone else?

“It looks like there are some letters in the box. Have you read them?”

Robert turned. “No, I was so excited about finding the birth certificate that I never thought about the letters.”

“Why don’t you take the box home so you and Kaye can go through it? Maybe things will look different to you tomorrow.”

Robert looked at the older man, his eyes filled with sadness. “When I realized what this meant, it made me happy to know we were family.”

Will’s emotions got the better of him and his arms fell to his side, helpless. He pulled his handkerchief from his pocket again, wiped his eyes and blew his nose.

“You take these home now. I’ll see you later.” Will handed him the certificate and the picture.

“I will,” said Robert.

“There’s some pictures around here too,” said Will. “I’ll look for them and bring them by tomorrow.”

“That would be good,” said Robert as he stepped off the porch and walked slowly towards his truck.

Will watched the younger man cross the yard. His limp wasn’t so noticeable and he walked tall with his shoulders straight. Why didn’t I notice the resemblance before?

Suddenly, Robert stopped and turned around. He looked at Will, hesitating, and then he hurried back to the porch.

"I forgot something." He jumped up on the porch and wrapped his arms around the old man's shoulders. They hugged, patting each other's back. When they pulled apart, their eyes were shiny with fresh tears.

"See you tomorrow, Uncle Will."

"You bet, nephew."

The old man sat in the rocking chair on the porch for a long while, thinking about Robert and Jacob.

"You always did things on the spur of the moment without giving any thought to anyone else. I'm not saying you were right, but for once things turned out okay. I hope you can see him. You'd be real proud of your son."

Robert didn't want to talk to Kaye and the children until he dealt with the bitterness that plagued him. Instead of stopping at the house, he drove past it, heading towards the River Road. Without thinking, he turned at Shinbone Hollow and followed the dirt road until it ended at the old farm once owned by his Grandfather Hayes. Other people lived there now, but no one was home. Sitting in the truck, he looked at the house and barn, thinking about the first time he came here. He was a little boy who rode on a train all by himself with his name written on a piece of paper pinned to his shirt. Left alone after his parents died, it was like journeying to a foreign land to meet strangers who happened to be his grandparents. As he looked at the barn, he recalled the day he and Grandpa hauled hay and he had asked him why Grandma didn't like him. He never forgot their walk to the graveyard or Grandpa's explanation about their lost babies. Perhaps what turned Grandma into a bitter old woman was the hurt from losing so much. When Lucy got pregnant, the

shame of having an illegitimate grandchild and then sending her away must have broken her.

Did Grandpa know? He must have known the truth, but he remained loyal to his wife. It must have been hell for him to live that close to the Donnellys and carry that secret inside about their grandson. How many times did he want to tell them, and then didn't because of Miss Ida? Tears welled up in Robert's eyes when he thought about Grandpa.

"I wish you had told me."

Robert turned the truck around and drove back to the Gilley-Young Hollow. After supper, they gathered in the living room and Robert showed Kaye the birth certificate and the picture.

"Jacob Donnelly was my father and that makes Will my uncle." Then he turned to the boys and said, "And your great-uncle." The boys were speechless and Kaye put her hand to her mouth, smothering the "Ohh" that burst out. The boys were anxious to look at the picture of their grandmother and grandfather.

"They look so young," exclaimed Bobby. "Do I look like Grandpa?"

"She was beautiful," said Kaye, "and what a handsome man Jacob was. You know, I think you and your daddy look like him."

Chris and Bobby wanted to look in the box, but Robert told them to wait. "Mama and I need to go through it first."

"Aw," moaned Bobby and Chris. "Are there any other pictures?"

"I haven't found any more, but Will, I mean, Uncle Will, said he has some that he's bringing over tomorrow. You children get to bed now."

Before Chris went into his room, he turned and said, "You know, I always had a feeling about Mr. Donnelly."

"I think I did, too," said Kaye. "Sweet dreams, son."

After the children went to bed, Kaye made coffee, and they sat at the kitchen table sorting out the papers. They found Robert's first grade report card and several letters from Lucy to her mother. In one, Lucy wrote that she would stay with a cousin who lived in Indiana until the baby was born. Another told how she found a job and worked while the cousin cared for the baby. Several birthday and Christmas cards addressed to Miss Ida and Robert's grandpa, looked unopened. Every letter ended the same way, with Lucy apologizing and hoping her mother would forgive her. In two letters, Lucy begged her mother to let her come home with the baby. Finally, in a letter dated September 1920, she told her mother about a man she met. He was ten years older than she was, but he was in love with her and cared very much for little Robert. A picture of them standing together in front of an old Ford car was in the envelope. It was odd looking at a picture of the man he thought was his father for so many years and suddenly realizing he wasn't.

The picture brought back all sorts of memories. Robert told Kaye where they lived and how he remembered walking to school with his mother. He remembered the neighbors next door that he played with and the church they attended twice a week. On his fifth birthday, Mother dressed him in a suit and tie and took him to get his picture taken.

"One day I found her crying and when I asked what was wrong, she said there was no letter for her in the mailbox. I searched until I found a pencil and paper and scribbled some letters on it, and then folded it and gave it to her. I told her it was a letter for her, so please don't cry anymore. She laughed and squeezed me up in her arms until I couldn't breathe. I haven't thought about those things in years," he said as he reached for Kaye's hand across the table.

"In my mind, I've often thanked her for sending you to Tennessee to live with your grandparents. When you think about

it, we might never have met otherwise. Everything that happened led you to me. For that I'll always be grateful."

Robert smiled. "You've been my life and if that's what it took, it was worth it."

Kaye opened the last envelope and three pictures fell out. A short note to Lucy's mother said that they were going on a trip. The letter was posted two days before the car wreck. The pictures were of Robert when he was a year old, three years old, and the last was on his fifth birthday. Kaye squealed when she saw that he looked just like Bobby as a baby.

Robert collected the letters, placed them back in the box and they went to bed. He lay awake for a long time thinking about his mother and struggling with his bitterness towards Miss Ida. Kaye was awake too and laid her head on his chest.

"We've been very happy, haven't we?"

"Of course. What made you say that?"

"All these years, I always pitied Miss Ida for what she was missing. Think of everything we've had together, and the joy our children have brought us. In a way, it seems like not being able to love was her punishment. Don't you think so?"

"I never remember her being happy, that's for sure."

Robert squeezed Kaye close to him and kissed her forehead.

A peaceful feeling settled over him and as his eyelids grew heavy and sleep was near, he whispered, "Goodnight, Mrs. Dawson, I love you."

The next day, Will came in carrying a small cardboard box. They gathered around the kitchen table and watched him pull out several yellowed photographs. A faded picture of Will's mama and daddy holding a small baby drew Kaye's attention.

"Is that you, Will?"

"No, that's Sarah. There were no pictures before she was born."

Kaye found a picture of Jacob and Will in uniform grinning as if they were drunk. Another one showed Quixie and Will standing on the front porch. Quixie looked like a little girl. Chris found one of Quixie holding a baby in her arms. She was looking at the baby and grinning.

"I didn't know Quixie had a baby," said Bobby.

"She didn't," said Will. "That was Spencer, her baby brother."

"Where is he now?" asked Chris.

"He's buried in the Prater Cemetery next to his mama. He died a hero in the second world war," said Robert. "I went to school with him."

"Wow," echoed the boys.

"It's been a lifetime ago since I looked at these pictures," said Will in a shaky voice. He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and blew his nose.

Kaye put her hand on his shoulder. "They make me want to cry, too, Uncle Will." He patted her hand, and then Robert said, "You know what I'd like to do?"

"What?" everyone asked.

"I'd like to go to the graveyard to find my daddy's grave."

Kaye stood up and said, "That sounds like a good idea. It'll just take me a few minutes to get ready."

They took Robert's car. Kaye rode in the back with the boys and Isabel sat on Will's lap in the front. Robert drove slowly over the wooden bridge crossing the creek and stopped where the old church used to sit. They walked the rest of the way up to the gate that marked the entrance to the cemetery. Will looked at every tombstone, remembering the faces of many of those buried there. A wilted purple and yellow wreath lay on Miss Ida's grave, but they passed by it without stopping. Robert thought Jacob's grave was at the top of the hill towards the back of the

cemetery. Kaye held Isabel's hand to keep her from stumbling over the rocks and broken branches.

As they neared the top of the hill, Isabel broke loose and ran ahead. Will watched her pick up strands of straw scattered on the path that led to the top of the rise. By the time they reached Jacob's grave, her arms were full of straw. Will wondered what she was going to do with it. Isabel looked at the stone and spread her arms open, letting the straw float down over the grave like a blanket. Then she took hold of his hand and looked down at the grave. Very quietly in words that only he could hear, she whispered, "Night-night, Papa."

He stared at her, then smiled, picked her up and put her on his shoulders. "When you get bigger, little girl, I've got some stories to tell you."

Late that night, Will sat in his chair with the Bible on his lap. He couldn't sleep and thought reading might help, but it didn't. The thing about Isabel and the straw stayed in his mind. Why was all that straw in the cemetery?

Grabbing the oil lamp, he lit it and walked out towards the workshop. The light from the lamp cast an eerie glow on the yard. When he passed the spot where Suell died, he walked around it, treating it as hallowed ground.

He opened the door of the workshop and lifted the lamp to look inside. The chair sat in the same spot, but the scarecrow was gone. The only thing remaining was the old hat that lay at the foot of the chair.

Will thought about the scarecrow's words. "I'll be here as long as you need me."

He picked up the hat and found little bits of straw sticking out from under the brim. He walked outside, still holding it in his hands, and looked up at the star-filled sky.

"So long buddy ... and thank you."

The End



LIVE ANOTHER DAY

A Short Story by Sharon M. Haley

Kyriaki's finger brushed the crack in the window as she searched the road outside her block dwelling. Pulling her hand back, blood smeared the glass. The frustration of staring out of dirty windows was more than she could bear. She wasn't used to living in filth. Crossing herself, she prayed for patience.

Waiting made her restless and her back ached. She longed to return to the fields with her husband and sons, but the violence had escalated, and they were prisoners in their own home. The Bulgarians would soon reach Doxato. The gray September sky mirrored the dreariness that hovered inside the house.

In 1941, Germany, with the help of its Bulgarian allies, occupied most of Greece. The government was in upheaval and the economy all but destroyed. Food shortages left thousands of people on the brink of starvation. Rumors of atrocities committed by the Bulgarians paralyzed the towns scattered throughout the northern part of the country. The Bulgarians pillaged and murdered wherever they went, without conscience.

The Kanatzidis family lived on a farm in the northeast corner of Greece. Their home near the Mounar-Bashi Springs

was about six miles from the foot of the Kouslari Mountain that bordered Bulgaria. Papa had gone in search of their son, Prodromos, who at seventeen ran away to join the resistance.

Kyriaki was alone except for her fourteen-year-old son, Gregori, who slept on a mat near the fireplace. He slept the sleep of innocence, his chest rising and lowering with each intake of breath. Gregori was born late in life, when she thought there would be no more babies. When this beautiful boy with large dark eyes and long brown lashes came along, he became as her heartbeat.

She touched his arm. "Wake up, sleepyhead, it's time to rise. It is our turn to get water."

Gregori stretched his arms and yawned deeply. "I'm up, Mama." He pulled on his trousers and shirt, then rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

"Do you think Papa and Prodromos will be back soon?"

"I pray they will, but we must have patience. Run and fill the bucket while I fix our breakfast. Don't stop anywhere."

Kyriaki watched him struggle with his out-grown jacket and she handed him the old black cap that once belonged to Prodromos. She couldn't suppress a smile when he raised the cap from his head and bowed low with an exaggerated salute like a young courtier. Then he grabbed the bucket and hurried out the door. He ran down the path and soon disappeared from view. Anxiety would fill her until he returned.

Later, as Kyriaki placed bits of kindling on the fire, Gregori burst through the front door, his face beet red. "They wouldn't let me get water. They are afraid and ordered everyone to stay in their houses. I'm sick of hiding. I want to fight those devils. I want to join the resistance like Prodromos."

In a blind rage, she struck the boy hard across the face, knocking him down. Shock fused him to the floor as blood dripped from his nose.

“Don’t ever say that again,” Kyriaki cried.

“I don’t know where Papa and your brother are and your sister’s husbands have gone in search. I am filled with dread of losing them all, and it is eating my heart away. I can’t lose you, too!”

The anger in his dark eyes softened and he took her hand and kissed it tenderly. “I’m sorry, Mama. I never meant to hurt you, but I feel so useless. All we do is wait and sometimes it makes me feel crazy. If only there was something we could do to help.”

“I know, my son. I feel the same, but all we can do is pray and wait.”

Kyriaki put together a meager breakfast. There would be no lunch and possibly only a crust of bread for supper. Their food nearly gone, they waited for Papa to return with rations, but when would he return?

As darkness fell, Katina and Sotiria tapped on the back door.

“Mama, the Bulgarian soldiers are going to every house and taking all the men in the village,” cried Katina.

“Thank God, Makis and Nikos went after Papa,” moaned Sotiria. “We must hide Gregori. They are taking boys as young as fourteen.”

Kyriaki covered her mouth to hold back a scream.

Gregori cried out, “Don’t send me away, Mama! I can fight. I will protect you.”

Gunshots and a loud voice booming from a megaphone silenced them. The voice demanded everyone come to the town square. The children stared at their mother seeking deliverance, but there was none, for she was as helpless as they were.

Kyriaki looked at Gregori. “You must come with us, my son. Promise me you won’t say anything.”

Reluctantly, he nodded his head. The women kept the boy close as they hurried to join their neighbors. Hundreds pressed together as a battalion of soldiers shouted orders and waved guns at the crowd.

An officer walked back and forth, slapping a long stick in his hand. A bandolier slung over his shoulder and the pistol at his side looked menacing. Beneath a tall, fringed hat was a brooding face covered with a black beard and mustache. Bushy eyebrows nearly concealed dark eyes that stared like a cat in the night.

A woman in the front row clung to her husband as a soldier pulled him from her grip. She dropped to her knees and began beating her breast, crying to God to save her husband.

The soldier yanked her to her feet. "Do you wish to join your husband?"

Kyriaki closed her eyes and prayed. Suddenly, she whispered something to Gregori and then dropped to her knees. Having no scissors or knife, she began ripping his pant leg with her teeth. Katina thought she had lost her mind, but then realized what she was doing. Greek boys under thirteen never wore long pants. Silently, Katina dropped to her knees and began ripping his other pant leg. Automatically, their neighbors closed in around them.

The soldiers never noticed what they were doing. Kyriaki and Katina jammed the torn fabric into their blouses. They rose slowly, one at a time, so as not to draw attention. One by one, the soldiers shoved the men and boys together until they looked like one living organism. Finally, their turn came.

The officer stared at Gregori. "How old are you, boy?"

Struck dumb with fear, he began to stammer, "I ... I ..."

Kyriaki whispered, "He is twelve, sir."

"What did you say? Speak up," said the officer and pulled her towards him.

Katina and Sotiria kept hold of Gregori who reached for his mother. "Be still, be still," they whispered.

Kyriaki repeated her words. "He is twelve, sir."

Involuntary trembling overtook her body as the officer glared at her in silence. Something about her face caught his attention, but she was afraid to move. Suddenly, a bit of string brushed her cheek and she understood what he saw. Threads from her son's pants had attached themselves to her hair and shawl.

He is no fool. He will know what I did. God in Heaven, help us.

His gaze turned toward her daughters, but they stared at the ground. He looked at the boy, nearly smashed between the bodies of the women, and saw the ragged pants exposing pale thin legs. Fatigue seemed to wash over the officer and for one fleeting moment, Kyriaki thought she saw a melancholy look in his eyes. His chest expanded within his tight jacket when he took a deep breath. The moment seemed to last forever and Kyriaki closed her eyes and held her breath.

As if an impulse seized him, he pushed her backwards and she would have fallen if not for her daughters. A curse flew from his lips as he turned away and moved on to the next family. Instinctively, she grabbed her son, who hid his tear-stained face in the folds of her shawl.

When the interrogation was over, they forced four hundred men and boys to march towards a field near the outskirts of town. The remaining soldiers locked the women and children inside the elementary school. It was a small building meant to house young schoolchildren, but they squeezed them inside like sardines in a can.

Katina and Sotiria clung to each other while Kyriaki held Gregori in her arms. All around them cries of fear and anger permeated the air.

Air was a precious commodity to the smothered souls, but whispered tales of the Bulgarians burning their prisoners alive kept them scratching at the door and walls. Kyriaki waited with the rest for the inevitable flame and smoke to take their last breath.

All through the night, gunshots pierced the darkness. Sporadic crying and moaning carried by the wind drifted through the trees and mingled with the fog. The interminable night did not bring their death sentence and after twenty-four hours they were released, many on the brink of asphyxiation. The soldiers waved their guns and ordered them to return to their homes. Kyriaki and her children waited for hours, listening for the sounds of the soldiers, but the village was quiet.

The following morning, hunger and thirst gave them the courage to slip outside in search of food and water. The Bulgarian soldiers had deserted the village, so Katina and Sotiria returned to their homes to wait for their husbands.

Kyriaki tried to keep her young son close, but Gregori began roaming the village with the other young boys. She wouldn't let her son out of her sight, so she followed them. As she trudged along, she noticed that all the boys wore ragged clothes and many were barefooted. The cold air warned of the coming winter and Kyriaki wondered how she would feed and clothe her child. Was it so long ago when their lives were peaceful and their only concern was working to put food on the table? Stripped of everything, hunger followed them like a deathly shadow.

It didn't take long for the boys to discover the field where dead bodies of men and boys were stacked in gruesome piles. They looked in awe at the massacre before them. Kyriaki tried to get her young son to come away from the horror, but he was frozen.

At that moment, Kyriaki knew that her beloved son as well as all the others had lost their innocent childhood. This horrible

scene of death would remain in their memories forever. Disgust filled her as the boys moved closer to the pile of bodies, and she pleaded with them to return to their homes. As though given a silent order, the boys began searching for something. Kyriaki didn't understand what they were doing, but it tore at her heart to see them moving among the dead bodies.

She watched in horror as Gregori began pulling boots from the feet of the baker, Antonis. Another boy took the boots from the tobacco dealer, Petrides, then the dentist, Alanapoulis, and the butcher, Constantine. Their only thoughts were of the shoes that would warm their feet during the cold winter ahead.

At first, Kyriaki was repulsed and closed her eyes to shut out the sight. Then she took a deep breath, hesitated for a moment and slowly crept up to the field of death to join the boys on their hunt. Perhaps this was their chance to live another day.

