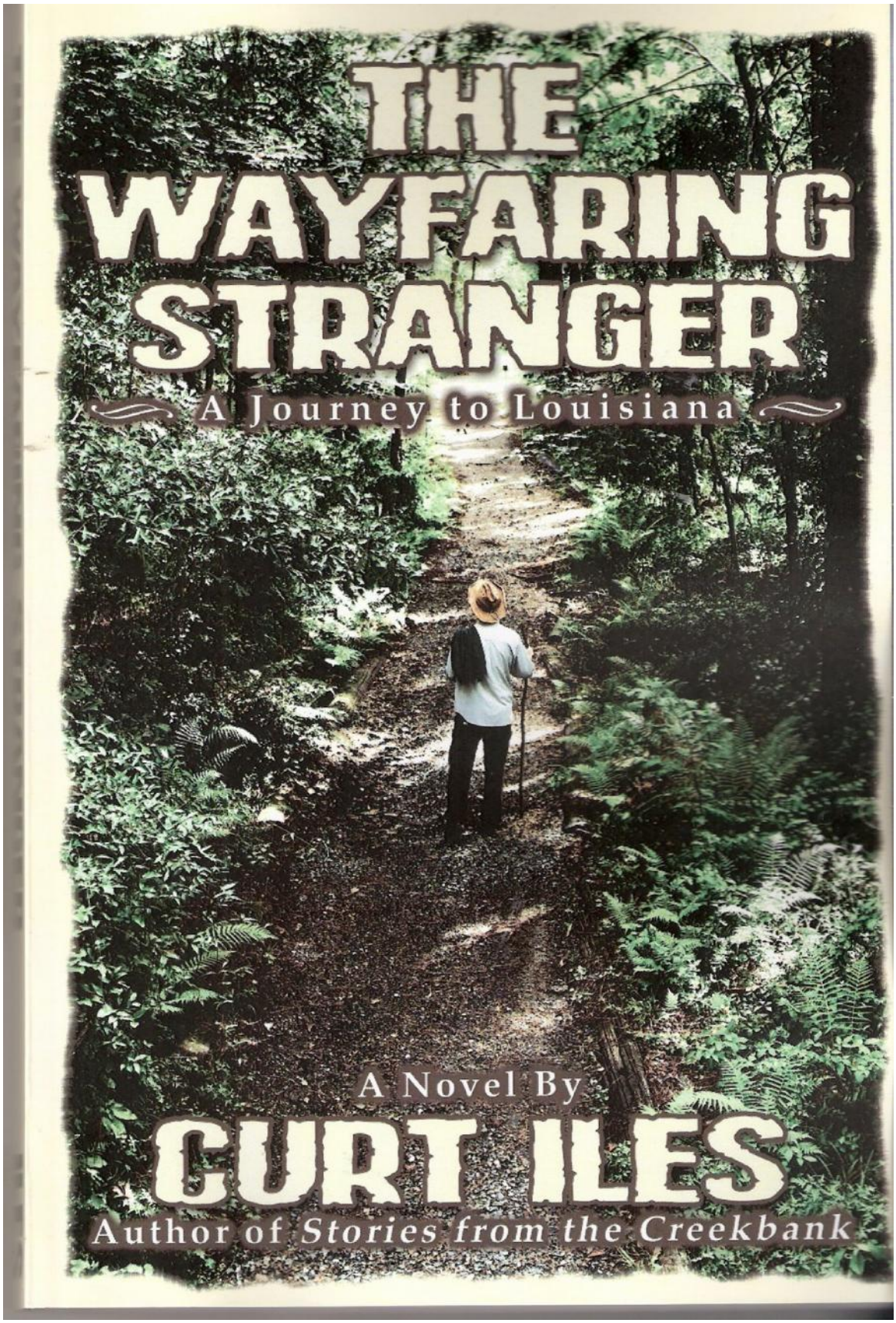
THE WAYFARING STRANGER
A Journey to Louisiana
A Novel By
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Chapter 1

I am a poor wayfaring stranger,
Traveling through this world of woe.
There is no sickness, toil, or danger
In that world to which I go.

"The Wayfaring Stranger"
Traditional Ballad

I knew my life would finally end this way.

That was the burning thought in Joseph Moore's mind as he lay hidden behind the stone wall. With his heart pounding, he tried to calm himself to hear the barking of the tracking dogs. He felt the aching from the dog bite below his knee and withdrew his hand to see blood.

The dirt felt cool against his face as he lay on the ground. The sweat from fear and exertion ran down his cheek in a trickle onto the dirt. Wiping his face, Joseph watched through a hole in the wall, scanning carefully for any sign of the men and dogs.

Lying there, he breathed in the smell of the soil he knew so well. Normally, he loved the unique smell of the dirt of western Ireland; but today was not a normal day. It was a day full of events that would change his life forever—if he survived.

On this day, in the year 1849, Joseph Moore from the village of Westport, Ireland, was a young man of seventeen—a tall, lanky teenager with sandy hair and a pleasant, freckled, ruddy face.

His deep green eyes peering from the stone wall were intense, fiery, and passionate. In the last four years, these eyes had seen plenty of pain and death up close. The blight-caused failure of the potato crop had brought widespread famine and cost the lives of thousands throughout Ireland. Coupled with the desperate mass emigration of even more who'd left by boat, it seemed Ireland was becoming barren of people.

The smell of the dirt beneath his face was also a reminder of the many graves he had helped dig. I just wonder if someone will be digging me own grave before this mess is over.

Joseph reflected on the day's events that had brought him to this terrifying moment: this spring morning had begun innocently enough. There were always plenty of chores to do on the small Moore farm. What had earlier been a family of seven now consisted of him and an older widowed sister. Everyone else was gone: his father exiled to Australia by the authorities, other family members had emigrated to England or America, the rest were dead from starvation or the famine fever that had swept through during the worst days of the past four years.

When the trouble started on this particular spring morning, Joseph was digging with a shovel in the potato rows. He had planted this spring's crop early on the treeless hills, in hopes that the crop would make before the potato rot hit.

Joseph was just out of sight from the last possessions of the family farm— their small sheep herd that consisted of an old ram, two ewes, and two young lambs. They grazed in the next field, hidden from view by the stone wall.

Along with the garden, these sheep were the livelihood of his sister and himself. They were so precious that he brought them nightly into the dirt-floored cottage.

That was exactly why the sounds Joseph heard filled him with fear. Dreadful bleating mixed with loud yelping came from the adjacent field. Shovel in hand, Joseph ran toward the noise. What he saw as he reached the stone wall sickened him: a pack of four dogs was attacking the sheep.

As is their nature, the sheep were huddled helplessly in the corner of the stone wall. Blood poured from the neck of one of the ewes as a young lamb lay twitching in convulsions of death beside her.

Joseph sprinted toward the dogs filled with sudden rage, shouting as he waved his shovel. All but one of the dogs loped off. That dog, a big yellow hound, did not run but rather bit down on the neck of the other lamb. Angrily, he struck the dog across the back with his shovel. The snarling dog turned on him and with lightning quick speed latched onto his right leg.

Joseph let out a painful yell and felt a blind rage. He began to strike the dog repeatedly on the head. It quickly released its grip on his leg and fell yelping in pain.

The dog lay with blood pouring out of its mouth and one ear. Even after he had hit the dog enough to kill it, he continued a steady rain of blows. It was as if all the anger—from the heavy-handed abuse of the landlords, the potato failure, the constant hunger and poverty, the unending death of family and friends—seemed to pour forth from him, directed at the body of the prone dog.

Joseph's green eyes now were filled with a burning passion and rage. Breathing heavily, he knelt down beside the three dead sheep and the dying dog. His leg throbbed from the dog bite. He looked at the dead sheep, tears filling his eyes as he realized what this meant for him and his sister. He hung his head as tears poured down his cheeks, seemingly finally beaten down by the hard life of this difficult time.

As Joseph knelt over this tragedy, he had no idea an observer had watched the entire episode. This witness to the attack also knew to whom the dogs belonged. They were the property of the English land agent, Smith, who oversaw the rental land near Westport. The dead dog, lying by Joseph, was the man's prize hunting hound. The observer also knew the land Joseph lived on was part of Smith's land holdings.

The silent observer didn't wait long to send word to the Englishman Smith's estate about the Irish peasant who had killed his best dog. As in any rural town anywhere, most of the village knew about the encounter by noon that day. Not only did the news of the incident spread, but also Smith's echoing threat to kill the boy who had dared to kill his best hunting dog.

When a neighbor ran to tell Joseph's sister, Bridget, of this threat, terror filled her heart. Everyone knew this wealthy English land agent meant what he said and was used to getting his way. She was not surprised that the nobleman would place a hunting dog above the life of a mere Irish peasant boy. Bridget remembered last year how Smith had allowed the public flogging of a salmon poacher caught trespassing on his private river. The resultant beating was so severe that the man nearly died. When townspeople complained of the flogging's brutality, Smith's icy

comment was, “I bet the next man who thinks about trespassing will be reminded to stay out of my river.”

Recalling this, Bridget took her younger brother by the shoulders, “Brother, ye must go. Run for yer life! Only death awaits ye here. Aye, go—go now!” She tenderly kissed him as she pushed him on his way, “God bless ye, Joseph. May God lead ye away from this horrible place.”

Her push was not one moment too soon. As he went out the back door, four men approached about two hundred yards away. Joseph, easing along the side of the house, recognized Smith first. On each side of him were British soldiers. One of the soldiers had two tracking dogs on leashes. A fourth man dressed in civilian clothing cradled what appeared to be a shotgun. He also carried something in his other hand that Joseph could not quite make out.

He ran for the safety of the nearby three-foot-high stone wall. As he reached it, he leaped over and hid. Joseph crouched and crawled along—out of sight of his pursuers. He soon reached the end of the wall, which had no cover past it. Crouched there, he thought of how a fox on the run must feel.

Watching over the wall, he saw the men pass the house, ignoring Bridget who stood in the doorway. He could now see what the shotgun-toting man had in his other hand—it was a long crowbar. When a landlord wanted to evict a tenant, a crowbar was used to knock down the entire stone cottage. This was called “tumbling down” and meant nearly certain starvation for the evicted family.

Fearfully, Joseph watched the approaching men. He had several minutes to watch the dogs trying to pick up his scent. The dogs led the men in circles—sometimes moving nearer his hiding place and then over the fields where he had worked earlier.

This gave Joseph time to think. For some reason, the words of his beloved mother echoed in his heart. He recalled the statement she had always repeated, “Joseph, every step of your life will be led by God. In times and days where ye don’t quite know where to turn, He will guide you. He has put a compass in your heart to send ye along the right path.”

These oft-repeated words came to him now behind the stone wall. He was not sure he completely believed them but was desperate at the moment. So he prayed, “Lord, I’m definitely in a bind here. I do need you to guide me steps. If you don’t—I probably won’t get out of this mess.”

As he continued watching the hunters, again his mother’s words came back to him, “Son, ye have a good name. I named ye after Joseph of the Old Testament. He was a young man who God guided every step of his way. His path was not an easy one, but God’s plan was to guide his every step. It will be the same for ye, my son.”

Joseph spoke as if his mother was right beside him. “Well, Ma—your Joseph is in a real bind right now. He’s gonna need some step-by-step guidance, for sure.”

As he said this, he watched the hounds, noses to the ground, moving closer toward his hiding place. He took a deep breath and steadied himself. Well, they may shoot me, but they’ll have to hit a running target.

Watching their approach, he selected a small shrub beside the road, and then looked behind him at the next stone wall, about fifty yards away. When the dogs reach that shrub, I’m going to jump up and run for me life. If I can make it to that wall, I’ll be safe.

He had selected the roadside shrub because he felt the pursuers were still out of shotgun range at that distance. He just hoped the soldiers with their side arms were slow and had poor aim.

Then he prayed again, “Lord, if ye could, please turn those dogs. I sure need a little help to get out of this one.” However, as he ended this heartfelt prayer, he was betrayed by a bird. In the bushes along the wall, a corncrake had built a nest. This common bird, with its scratchy metallic call, was a common resident of the fields of Ireland.

Because Joseph had disturbed the corncrake, it began calling with its loud grating call. He said, “Lord, I asked you to turn the dogs, and instead you sent a loud corncrake to give me away. Thanks a lot!”

The dogs—and the men—turned toward the bird’s call. As if the corncrake had just announced his name, the men started trotting toward the stone wall.

Joseph stood, ready to run. Well, it’s now or never! With a yell that seemed to be a curious mixture of pent-up rage and extreme fear, he began sprinting. He never knew if he heard one or two shots. Everything happened fast, and he definitely wasn’t looking back. He heard the pellets whistle past him and felt a sting in his arm, leg, and butt. He hollered, but in spite of these wounds, was making tracks for the wall’s cover, hurdling the potato rows.

Joseph, reaching the wall, never even considered slowing down. He ran a long time before the baying of the hounds faded behind him. Finally, stopping to stoop over, he placed his hands on his knees and tried to get air into his lungs. Looking back over the treeless fields, he saw his pursuers, now holding the dogs, watching from a distance of about a quarter mile.

Joseph heard Smith yell with cupped hands in a distinctly English accent, “You can run, young Irish, but you can’t hide! We’ll get you tomorrow—or the next day. It’s only a matter of time; jest a matter of time. You know for sure how this will all end; we’ll get ye!”

As Smith’s voice faded away, Joseph heard another voice, unspoken but clear. He was not sure if it was his mother’s voice, sister’s, or maybe even the Lord answering his prayer: “You cannot stay here. You must go.”

Chapter 2

Eliza Jane Clark came awake in the night. She glanced out the window and could sense dawn was approaching. As her bare feet hit the dirt floor of her family's cabin in Louisiana's No Man's Land, she moved quickly. Slipping out of her bedclothes into a blouse and dress, she tiptoed over and took the clock off the mantel above the fireplace. The fire gave enough light for her to see that the time was just after five o'clock. Sunrise that morning would be just before six, and she needed to be at the creek long before then.

Slipping to the door, she put on a jacket, unlatched the door, and went outside. That morning's date was Thursday, April 6, 1849. Eliza was sure of the date because it was her sixteenth birthday.

As Eliza tiptoed outside on this cool morning, her eyes began to adjust to the darkness and the awesome canopy of stars became clear in the sky above. As always, their brightness and clarity astounded her. She had observed the night sky all her life and never ceased to be amazed about their beauty. It seemed as if she could just reach up into the sky and touch them. With a shiver, she whispered, "Lord, lookin' at that nighttime sky, I always know You're up there."

The morning was cold enough for her breath to vaporize as she spoke. In spite of being barefoot, Eliza didn't feel chilled. Normally, outside in the dark, she would have put on some shoes, but because the weather was still too cold for snakes, she could walk the trail barefooted.

Eliza Clark, on this birthday morning, began walking the descending trail to Cherry Winche Creek. This beautiful, flowing stream, a quarter mile from her home, was the source of life for the families that lived along it. The creek supplied water for washing, swimming, and bathing.

The morning was completely quiet as she hurried toward the creek. A nearby noise startled her. She stopped completely still as she heard steps approaching from behind. In the darkness, she couldn't make out what, or who, was coming.

Then she heard the voice of her younger brother, Elijah, "Sister, where you think you're going?"

She breathed a sigh of relief as he ambled up and joined her. In his squeaky ten-year-old voice he added, "I heard you leave the house. Where are you headin'?"

Eliza didn't answer, but that didn't faze her brother, "Now, you know Poppa and Momma told you not to be sneakin' off in the dark no more. Remember what happened last time—"

Eliza cut him off, "If you're goin' with me to the creek, you'll have to be quiet and keep your mouth shut." She tried to act annoyed at her brother's intrusion, but was actually glad to have him come along.

The land they were now crossing belonged to their family. Like most settlers in this part of the young state of Louisiana, the Clark family lived on a homestead—their tract was about two hundred acres. Most of this land was set among the tall longleaf pines that dominated the area. Her family's home was built on the higher ground where these pines thrived. Towering and

magnificent, these trees, also called long-straw pines, blocked out the sun and kept the ground beneath them clear of other trees and vegetation.

In daylight, Eliza loved how you could see for long distances under these pines. She had never traveled far from their shadow in her entire life.

Entering the edge of the swamp, the dirt beneath her feet turned to oozing mud. It felt good between her toes and made her glad to be alive.

Her dad had carefully chosen their home site on the higher pine grasslands that were always free from flooding. However, it was also essential to be near this bottomland for year-round access to water and firewood, as well as to a steady supply of acorns and beech mast for their woods hogs.

Coming to the creek, she could hear the sound she loved dearly: the creek gurgling over the flattened log they used for washing clothes. Eliza called the sound of the water "swamp music," and its song always brought a peace to her heart.

They eased down the creek bank and sat on the edge of the log. Elijah nestled up close to his big sister and started to say something, but she put her hand on his shoulder and whispered, "Shh, it's nearly time. Jes' listen real close."

Using a stick, she scraped the mud and creek sand off their feet. Eli said, "That mud and sand reminds me of Momma's sugar cookies."

Finishing her scraping, Eliza said, "Well, I don't hardly believe it'd taste the same!"

Pointing to their muddy feet, she spoke quietly, "Now, this here mud on our feet is Clark mud. It's from land owned by Poppa and Momma that one day'll belong to you and me. Let me put it the way Poppa says, 'This here land really belongs to God and He's just loanin' it to us for a while.'

"Eli, I once asked Poppa, 'Do we have any papers proving we own this land?' and he answered, 'Honey, if you mean could I go to the courthouse in Alexandria and show you a piece of paper proving I own this land, the answer to that would be no—but this is our land. Our ancestors settled here generations ago. The Spanish, the French, and now the Americans, have all claimed to own the land, but the truth is, it belongs to us.'

"Then Poppa said something else: 'Liza girl, I don't know so much if we own this land or it's more of this land owning us.'"

Elijah leaned his head on his big sister's shoulder and said, "Eliza, in Ten Mile is where I plan to live out my whole life. How 'bout you?"

"Eli, it ain't never even entered my mind to live anywhere else. Why would a person want to live anywhere but in the freedom of the piney woods? This is our home and where God put us."

Eli, who was never comfortable with silence, asked, "Eliza, would you rather be called a 'Ten Miler' or a 'Redbone'?"

She looked annoyed at him, "Talk quieter. Now why'd you ask a question like that for?"

"Oh, I just heard Poppa and Momma laughing about it the other day."

"Well, Eli I don't mind if you call me either. I figure I'm both. A 'Ten Miler' is someone living in our area—along Ten Mile Creek or Cherry Winche Creek, or even along this side of the Calcasieu.

"Everyone I know in the Ten Mile area, also are called 'Redbones.' That's just a name for our people. It's what the outsiders often call us—Redbones. That ain't never bothered me; does it bother you?"

"Not a bit. Don't it have to do with our Indian blood?"

"I've always thought so. 'Red' for our 'Red Man's blood.'"

Eli was ready to ask more, but Eliza said, "Eli, we gotta get quiet to listen. I tell you what, on our next trip to the Weeks' home, you ask them. They are the experts on all things 'Ten Mile.'"

He had one final question, "Why'd you come to the swamp this mornin'?"

"'Cause it's 'Whip-poor-will Day.' You probably don't remember how Ma always said this date, April 6, was 'Whip-poor-will Day.' She'd add, 'If a girl hears the first one before mornin' light and that call is answered by another nearby whip-poor-will, it means her future man will think of her today.'"

Elijah smirked, "You don't believe that, do you?"

She replied, "Course not, but I still like to be in the woods on this morning to remember Ma."

Eli said, "But Eliza, I thought there was a saying about the whip-poor-will's call and death? When Ma died, didn't a whip-poor-will call her soul away?"

Eliza answered angrily, "Eli, I don't want to hear you say that agin!"

"But I was just asking—isn't it true?"

Sharply she replied, "Shh, get quiet. I'll tell you 'bout it some other time."

He sat quietly, knowing his question had somehow touched a nerve. Even in the darkness, he could see a tear rolling down his sister's cheek.

Eliza preferred to think about the romantic adage of the whip-poor-will's call. As a child, she frowned at the thought of boys. Now, at age sixteen, that had long ago changed. Not only did she closely notice the boys—the boys had definitely taken a liking to her. There was no doubt she was a beautiful young woman and, although the attention somewhat embarrassed her, she liked the attention of the boys. In fact, in its own way, it filled her with joy.

"Filled with joy"—now that was a term that best described Eliza Jane Clark! She was a woods girl who found joy and laughter in the entire world around her in both nature and people. She had a natural curiosity that seemed unquenchable, always wanting to know about things, people, and nature. Sometimes her curiosity caused trouble—like her sneaking out of the house this morning—but this inquisitiveness was also an appealing quality that made folks naturally like her.

Breaking the silence again, Elijah asked her, "Why do you like whip-poor-wills?"

"Oh, they're mysterious. I've only seen one in my whole life. They have big dark eyes that help them see how to fly at night."

Eli said, "Robert Ray Thompson told me you have the darkest and prettiest eyes of any girl in Ten Mile."

Eliza scowled, "I don't really care nothing 'bout what Robert Ray Thompson said."

"Everybody says you're gonna marry him one day."

Eliza, threw her stick in the creek and said, "What everybody says don't mean it's goin' to be so."

"I heard Aunt Bertie say what a fine pair you'd make. She said that his family has the most livestock in the whole woods, and then Momma said that he'd be a fine catch for you."

"Well, I'm not trying to catch him—and he ain't going to catch me either."

Eli, not knowing to be quiet, continued, "So you're here this morning to hear that whip-poor-will and know he'll be thinking of you?"

"Eli, I don't plan on marrying Robert Ray Thompson."

Eli studied his sister, then said in admiration, “Your eyes are what folks say set you apart. Robert Ray told me that your long black hair and deep dark eyes are what made him fall in love with you.”

“Eli, why don’t you just hush up and listen,” then quickly added, “Did he really say that?”

But Eli took her first statement and hushed up. After he’d been quiet a few minutes, he drifted off to sleep and began snoring softly.

Eliza decided she would wake him when the first whip-poor-will sang. Several minutes later, she heard the call she’d come for. It came from the woods to the east. The sound was loud, clear, and urgently repeated a dozen times. It was a whip-poor-will! Each syllable was accented in a unique way: “Whip-poooor-will.” The sound was beautiful, lonesome, and haunting—all at the same time.

The accents were on the first and last syllables: WHIP poor WILL, WHIP poor WILL.

Eliza sat quietly as the bird called over and over. She’d always thought what a lonely call this bird had. It seemed to live in a solitary world. This bird was spread throughout the swamps, just like the Ten Milers—a people who were kin, yet each family living separate and isolated—never willing to be part of a village or town.

As Eliza listened to the lone whip-poor-will’s repeated calls for several minutes with no answer, she finally heard a reply—a long, long distance away. The returning call was faint, and at first, she wasn’t sure if she’d only imagined it. Then she heard the call for sure—another whip-poor-will was answering. Because of the great distance through the swamp, this returning call was much fainter, but it was all the nearby bird needed. The two whip-poor-wills—one close and the other far, far off—began calling back and forth in the quiet woods of Cherry Winche Swamp as the eastern light began to build through the silhouettes of the oak, beech, and hickory trees.

Eliza Clark, age sixteen on this day, leaned over and whispered to her sleeping brother, “Well, Eli, do you think my future husband’s thinking about me?” She sighed, “And jes’ where do you think he might be right now?”

Chapter 3

It was more than ironic that Joseph Moore, a young man trying to stay alive, was silently slipping into a graveyard after midnight. This was the first of two places he must go before daylight.

Even in the darkness, he easily found the grave. He had been here plenty of times. His prior nighttime visits had occurred when sleep would not come and raw sorrow filled his heart. On nights like that, he would walk the three miles to this cemetery.

The stone marker he knelt in front of tonight was crude, but was the common type of marker in the cemeteries of the Irish poor. He could barely read the etched inscription: Winnie Malloy Moore 1810–1846.

Putting his head against the stone, Joseph said, "Mother, I've come to see ye and tell ye that I may not be back. I love t'is land, but I have to leave. However, you'll go with me in me heart."

Standing up, seemingly with the weight of the world on his shoulders, he reached down and picked up a pebble beside the headstone. Then he stopped—he heard something on the wind—the words of an old Irish tune.

Its words made Joseph smile and grimace at the same time. The words were soft and gentle on his heart:

I am just going over Jordan.
I am just going over home.

His mother had spoken those last words just before she died. In that darkened room of their cabin that sorrowful day two years ago, he had watched life seep out of his mother. Her words were so faint that he had to lean down to make out her words.

I am a poor wayfaring stranger,
traveling through this world of woe.
There is no sickness, toil, or danger,
in that bright land to which I go.

The words were spoken so weakly he was not sure anyone else heard them. Looking around, he could tell his sisters had also heard—the words of one of their mother's favorite songs, "The Wayfaring Stranger."

She had stopped then—finally, she quietly sang, seemingly as if she saw something the others in the room didn't see:

I am just—just going over Jordan
I am just going over home.

Then—she was gone!

Joseph, now at his mother's grave in the darkness, knew the wind was playing tricks on his mind, but he seemed to hear the words of that song again:

I am a poor wayfaring stranger,
wandering through this world of woe.

Then all was quiet . . . and he knew he must be gone.

Joseph Moore, now a wayfaring stranger himself, put the small pebble in his pocket, and hurried off into the darkness toward the village of Westport. He must hurry if he was to reach his second destination before daylight.

As he stole into the village, he went by the imposing dark walls of the workhouse at the top of Quay Hill. This was the last resort of refuge for many of the famine victims. When all else had failed, many had come into its prison-like conditions to live, work, and usually die. Joseph had spent two weeks inside those workhouse walls and had vowed to die before returning there.

As he passed the nearby potter's field called "The Rocky," his pace quickened as well as his resolve. Through gritted teeth, he said, "I will escape from this place. I must escape County Mayo if I am to live. I will not be buried in The Rocky!"

Hurrying past the workhouse under the cover of darkness, he moved along the cobblestone streets of Westport toward the harbor. The port, located where the mouth of the Carrowbeg River flowed into the Atlantic Ocean, was a busy one, receiving and dispatching ships across to America, as well as to English and European ports.

There were four or five smaller freighters docked at the port. In the darkness, still limping from his dog bite and aching where the pellets had peppered him, Joseph shuffled quietly along the streets. In his confused yet focused mind, he had developed a plan to escape Smith. However, it was not a plan just for tonight or tomorrow. He had made up his mind to get as far away from Westport as possible.

He eased down to the pier alongside a freighter and quietly called out, "Snyder. Are you there? Hey, it's Moore—Joe Moore. I need your help."

The coastal freighter was named the Murphy. Because the river depth was only twelve feet at Westport Harbor, the huge transatlantic clippers could not come in this far. They docked at the nearby deep water harbor on the island of Inishlyre.

Smaller ships like the Murphy were called "hooker ships" and did the important job of ferrying supplies between the harbor and the big boats. To escape the trouble awaiting him in Westport, he needed to get to the island where the larger ocean-going ships were.

He heard his friend Snyder sleepily call out. Joseph stepped onto the gangplank and then onto the boat. Telling Snyder of his plight, his friend agreed to hide him and get him to the island.

With daylight, the Murphy sailed out of the harbor going to pick up another load of Indian corn that had arrived from America for the famine. Hiding below deck was Joseph Moore.

He hid on the ship throughout the day as the loading of the corn progressed. When the Murphy turned back toward Westport, Joseph climbed down a ladder into the cold water of Clew Bay. He silently swam to the dock and found a quiet spot, awaiting darkness.

Joseph's plan was both simple and desperate: he planned to climb aboard one of the large ships as a stowaway. If the ship stopped in another Irish port such as Clifden—or even Liverpool, the nearest English port—he could climb off the ship and then figure out what to do next.

However, he was terrified. What if the ship he boarded was headed across the ocean? If he boarded an outbound ship, it could be going across the Atlantic to any of dozens of American

ports; that journey would be a point of no return. He would be at the mercy of fate as to his destination as well as his destiny. The idea of crossing the ocean on one of these ships gave him a chill, and a real fear of the unknown gripped him strongly; the thought of leaving Ireland, the home of his ancestors for seven hundred years, sobered him. But to stay was not an option.

At the same time, this great unknown lying before him offered brightness and hope that he had not felt in a long time, living with the desperation and distress that depicted western Ireland. He was reminded that what he saw behind him did not offer much in the way of hope. Four years of famine, death, and emigration had sucked the life out of his beloved County Mayo. The silhouette of the ships, creaking as they rocked on the water of the harbor, seemed to beckon and say that his real future lay on one of them.

But which of these ships should he board? As dusk fell, he watched a line of three darkened ships moored together along the dock. For some reason, a decision he would question for the rest of his life, he passed up these three ships and saw a fourth anchored off the dock. It was about two hundred feet from the dock. Its three masts were fitted with sails and there was activity on the ship, evidenced by a number of glowing lanterns and the echoing of voices aboard ship. Joseph carefully watched the shadowy forms moving about on this vessel.

Growing up in a harbor town he knew that a ship anchored away from the dock with the sails set was ready to pull out soon. This was exactly what he needed for his escape.

It was quiet except for the gentle rocking of the ships against the dock and the clanging of a metal bracket hitting the wooden side of the farthest boat. He quietly dropped into the cold waters of Inishlyre Harbor and stealthily swam toward a rope ladder hanging down from the main deck.

A small canvas-covered rowboat was tied alongside the ship. Joseph quietly swam to the boat with his head low in the water.

Approaching the small boat, he grabbed hold of the side, making sure not to rock it. A rope ladder hung down from the ship to the rowboat.

A sailor above him on deck stood near the ladder. Joseph waited until he heard the silhouette's steps walk away toward the stern of the ship. With cat-like quickness and quietness, he straddled the boat's side with his arm and leg. He rolled into the bottom of the boat and lay for what seemed like hours, waiting for the opportune time to climb the ladder. Several times, he heard the sound of a man's footfall as the sentry walked by.

Finally, having listened enough to the passing of the sentry to be able to time his rounds, he climbed the ladder after the sailor passed. Reaching the top, a climb of about fifteen feet, he cautiously peered over the ship's edge to see a deck filled with barrels of all sizes. He hoisted himself over the ship's railing, plopping down onto the main deck. He rolled over, found his feet, and quickly scrambled to the space between two rows of barrels.

Kneeling among the barrels, his heart pounded within his chest. The previous day and night had been full of terrible stress and anxiety. His head pounded and his stomach reminded him that he had not eaten since the day before, but none of that mattered now. He was locked into a survival mode and the adrenaline of being pursued had given him a determination to both survive and live beyond this crisis.

Looking back to ensure he hadn't been seen, he crawled further in among the rows of wooden barrels lashed to the deck. Soon voices came toward him as two men conversed in a language he did not understand. Joseph had never taken time to glance at the ship's flag or name. He only knew this was the ship that was going to take him away from trouble.

Settling in among the barrels for the long night ahead, he peered at the dark outline of nearby Westport, where a few remaining lights flickered. One by one the lights went out as the small village settled down for the night. Sitting hidden among the barrels, exhaustion soon overtook Joseph and he fell asleep.

The next morning, the jolt of the ship moving awakened Joseph with a start. He would later call it "his defining mark of coming to America." Peering from his hiding place, he watched the ship moving slowly to sea. He had never actually been on the sea before, but in spite of the fear in the pit of his stomach, he breathed in the bay's fresh air and watched as the island receded in size. On his left he watched Croagh Patrick, Ireland's most beloved mountain, began to shrink steadily in size.

Croagh Patrick meant "Patrick's Mountain" and was a landmark known by all. Joseph knew its story well: the mountain had played an historic role in the lore of Ireland. St. Patrick, sometime in the fifth century, had spent forty days of Lent on the mountain. It was then that God had given him his mission to the Irish, and the Saint had supposedly banished all snakes from the island.

He had climbed it alone on many occasions as well as been part of the yearly pilgrimages when barefooted pilgrims scaled and scrambled their way to the rocky summit.

Watching Croagh Patrick disappearing, this young stowaway, now on a pilgrimage of his own, wondered if he would ever see this mountain again. At that moment, he realized that he had literally never been out of the shadow of this mountain in his life. Looking one last time through the mist to see the mountain, Joseph Moore felt the most alone he'd ever felt in his seventeen years of life.

As if in a dream, he seemed to hear a song on the wind—it spoke to him as a reminder of what he now was:

A poor wayfaring stranger,
traveling through this world of woe.

Chapter 4

The sailors on the deck of the ship were so busy that Joseph was able to peer out undiscovered from his hiding spot among the barrels. The three-masted ship was thrashing through the waters of Clew Bay as he watched the small islands of the bay slip by.

The ship sailed past the nearby lighthouse. They had now reached the open part of Clew Bay where it merged with the Atlantic itself. On his left, to the south past the mainland, was humped-back Clare Island.

Joseph knew the next hour of sailing would reveal the ship's, as well as his, direction and destiny. As a boy, he had loved to climb up Croagh Patrick and watch the ships coming and going in the Bay. From these years of observation, he knew outbound ships approaching Clare Island would do one of two things: some boats would veer left for the safety between the mainland and Clare Island, but a ship heading out to open sea would stay the course and pass to the right of the last island. This straight course signified the beginning of a journey across the Atlantic.

Still peering above the barrels, Joseph watched Clare Island approaching. Just then, there was activity on the deck. He watched the sails being adjusted and felt the large ship groaning as it began a gradual turn to the west.

He closely watched Clare Island shifting from ahead to now coming in view on the left. At that moment, he felt a strange mixture of dread and a thrill of anticipation. The coming minutes would reveal their destination and possibly, Joseph's destiny.

The ship lurched toward the coastline. We're staying coastal and headed south. However, a second jolt of the ship shifted the direction due west. Joseph then said, "Well, I do believe we are headed out to sea—'cross the Atlantic!"

In the next hour as he watched Clare Island and the Irish coast disappear from view, his outlook was sobered. For the first time, he was physically separated from the land of his birth. He was now joining what so many thousands of his fellow citizens had become in these last few years—an Irishman separated from Ireland. He was now an immigrant. That word stung his soul as he said it aloud: immigrant. It was something he had sworn never to be until the sudden events of yesterday.

Whether becoming an immigrant was good, or bad, would only be revealed by time. Once again, the old song filtered through his mind—that of a wayfaring stranger, getting farther and farther by the minute from home, a home he probably would never see again.

For the next two days, Joseph Moore stayed hidden among the barrels of the ship. It rained on the second day and he was able to sip enough water off the barrel tops to quench his thirst. However, hunger tormented him and seemed never to leave his mind. He was used to ongoing hunger, but he had now been nearly three days without food.

He still had a great fear of being discovered and returned to Westport. So his mind—fearful of capture—battled his stomach. On the second night at sea, his stomach won the battle as he knew he must find something to eat, even if it meant being discovered.

He had noticed scattered kernels of Indian corn on the deck. Many of the ships visiting Westport were full of this American corn called maize, sent to feed the famine-starved Irish.

He hungrily picked up the kernels, chewing their hard shells. It did not ease his hunger pains, but it was better than nothing. The famine years had definitely taught him this one thing: anything was better than nothing.

He also discovered what the principal cargo of this westward bound ship was. This discovery occurred due to a leak in one of the barrels beside him. The amber liquid dripping from between two slats was too much for his curiosity. With his finger, he caught several drops and was surprised to find it was whiskey. A closer inspection of the barrel revealed it stamped as Levingstone's Distillery, Westport, Ireland.

That night, there were only two guards on deck. Joseph studied them and watched carefully during their first hours on duty. One sat down and seemed to be dozing at one end of the ship. The second sentry was preoccupied with something at the stern.

He carefully slipped out onto the deck and began easing toward the bow. He had watched men during the day congregated around a barrel. They seemed to be eating something, and he intended to find out what it was.

The barrel sat right beside a smaller barrel of water. Joseph grabbed the ladle hanging from the side and guzzled water, as it ran out of his mouth and onto his clothes. Looking around for any sign of the sentries, he pried open the larger barrel and reached into it. He pulled back a handful of tough jerky. But to him it smelled and tasted as good as any bacon or ham he'd ever tasted.

Just as he was filling his mouth with strips of jerky, footsteps startled him. Without bothering to replace the lid, he scooted into the darkness as one of the sailors approached the water barrel. He heard the sentry replace the lid on the jerky barrel, and then drink some water. Then, the man's footsteps retreated to the rear of the ship.

Before returning to his hiding place, Joseph returned to the barrels for one more drink of water and greedily stuffed his pockets with the salty jerky.

The next morning the sea became rough, and the ship nearly seemed to become airborne as it crested the large swells. Being full of jerky and water, he soon became very seasick. He did not know if it was the tumbling on the sea or the lack of food, but the sickness inside him would not go away.

As his stomach, bloated with the jerky, rebelled, he swore he'd never eat jerky again. It was one of the longest days of his life as he lay prone and sick among the barrels as the ship rode over the rough waves.

This seasickness was accompanied by another type of sickness: homesickness. It was mixed with the bitterness, anger, and fear of the unknown that had overtaken him. He now understood another term: exiled.

Joseph was exiled. Cast away from his country with no home, no friends, and an uncertain future.

In the end, it was a rooster that gave him away.

On the day the seasickness hit him is when the rooster first appeared. Many sailing ships of the 19th century carried a rooster as a feathered good luck charm.

But to Joseph, in his seasick condition, there was nothing good nor lucky about this rooster. It flew onto a rope that stretched above Joseph's hiding place and soon claimed the area as its own. Strutting about on the rope and nearby stacked barrels, it seemed to crow, "I am the real captain of this ship." The rooster seemed to enjoy flying up into the netting, perched in complete contentment, crowing throughout the day. The bounding and bouncing of the ship did not seem to deter the rooster one bit. Its crowing and flapping went on without relief. After the second day, it really began to get on Joseph's nerves.

However, the crowing wasn't what nearly drove him crazy—it was how the bird carefully chose its perch directly over Joseph's hiding spot. The nightly overhead cackling, crowing, and wing flapping was bad enough, but the bird's unerring aim at placing its droppings right on him was aggravating, disgusting, yet impressive.

Living on a farm, he had hauled animal manure all of his life. Nevertheless, he believed he'd rather haul two tons of cow manure than scoop one wheelbarrow load of chicken mess.

At the rate of the rooster's bombardment, there would be a wheelbarrow full of chicken droppings either on or around him by journey's end. He tried to shift around in his cubbyhole amidst the barrels. It only seemed as if Captain Rooster carefully walked along the taut horizontal rope and adjusted its aim.

After the second bad morning—filled with way more direct hits than near misses, Joseph cursed at the rooster in Irish. It was at this precise moment as he cursed the bird above his head that two sailors came by.

Normally, he would have heard their footsteps, but three days undiscovered among the barrels had caused him to be less careful.

He never even heard them approaching.

But they heard him. Just as he continued in Irish, "If I could get my hands on ye, I'd wring your neck, and cook ye, but I bet you'd be tough as a…"

He never finished his threat. Rough hands grabbed him and he was stunned to look up into the eyes of two stern-faced sailors as they pulled Joseph from among the barrels.

As they dragged him across the deck, no one noticed the ship's rooster crowing with all of its might.

Chapter 5

Eli sat behind his sister Eliza as they rode along on her horse, Sam. They ambled through the pines heading north from their home. Their dad, Willard Clark, astride his horse Topper, led them down the trail. They were heading south along Cherry Winche Creek.

There were many things Eliza Jane Clark loved: the woods, the animals, and the people of the Ten Mile area. But if asked, she would have replied that she loved the tall pines best. Everything about them was majestic—straight as an arrow, stretching up to the sky. She loved to lie under the pines and stare up into their canopies as the wind blew them. It made her dizzy to watch where the limbs began fifty or sixty feet above the ground. Placing her hand on the massive trunks, she could feel them sway even near the ground. This flexibility, as well as their stability, made her feel grounded as she stood beneath them.

As she, her dad, and Eli rode along under these pines, she was reminded of how these pines and her father seemed to possess the same qualities. As she watched her dad's sweat-soaked shirt stick to his back, she smiled and whispered, "There ain't no one in these woods that can hold a candle to my Poppa." To Eliza, her father and the pines shared the characteristics of strength, stability, and a sense of durability.

Both of the Clark children were close to their dad, but there was just something special about the relationship between Eliza and her father. She called him "Poppa," and he always referred to her as "Liza." He never called her "Eliza"—it was always Liza. Sometimes he added her middle name and would sing, "Oh little Liza, little Liza Jane, Oh little Liza, little Liza Jane."

Eliza shared this deep connection with her dad. She always looked forward to this trip, which took place about once a week, normally on a Thursday or Friday. If the weather was good, he'd take her along, and she loved these rides because it allowed them to visit. He would point out trees, grasses, and animals as they rode.

Today's trip included her younger brother, Eli, who had been allowed to go because he'd finished his chores. They were riding to check on one of Ten Mile's oldest couples, Arch and Mollie Weeks.

That was what had prompted Eli's question, "Poppa, why do we call them Uncle Arch and Aunt Mollie if we ain't kin?"

His Dad answered, "Son, that's jes' a respectful term given to any older folks who are deeply loved. It's jes' tradition in our neck of the woods and is a reminder of how we owe them our care and he'p. That's why we're goin' to check on them."

Eli's next question came quickly, "Do we call all old people 'uncle and aunt'?"

"No, but Uncle Arch and Aunt Mollie done spent their whole lives doing good and he'ping others. All of the Ten Mile folks consider them part of their family. That's one of the reasons we drop in and check on them."

Eli then asked, "Poppa, don't Uncle Arch and Aunt Mollie have no children or grandchildren to look after them?"

"Son, they don't have no children. Arch and Mollie Weeks been married for half a century, but never had no children. Age has kind of wrapped its blanket around both of them, they can't take care of their place and animals as they once did. So me and some other men take turns checking on them.

"Their cabin is on the southern end of Cherry Winche, not far from where it empties into the Calcasieu River. Because of that, they're kind of isolated. Have you noticed how we haven't passed any other houses in a while?"

Coming in sight of their farm, Eliza asked her dad, "Poppa, do you think Uncle Arch and Aunt Mollie will know what day of the week it is?" This was a common joke between Eliza and her dad. The old couple loved arguing about every detail of their lives. No visit was replete without the two of them getting into a good argument over some minute detail of a story. They constantly interrupted each other, corrected each other, and challenged every aspect of any fact shared by the other spouse.

Willard Clark liked to call them "Uncle Dog and Aunt Cat." This was due to his statement that if "one said dog the other one would say cat."

There was an additional Ten Mile term used in reference to Mollie Weeks. It was called "telling an Aunt Mollie." This was the term used when someone told a long, long story with detail after detail. Aunt Mollie Weeks was famous for telling marathon stories that took on more characters and blended facts, gossip, and whatever. That was referred to, out of her earshot of course, as "telling an Aunt Mollie."

The old couple most loved to argue about two things: the weather and what day of the week it was. Because of the almanac and planting by the signs, most of the other families knew the date at least. But Arch and Mollie Weeks had no calendar, clock, or almanac. They had lived their long lives by the sun, moon, and seasons. Due to their isolation and age, they often were mixed up on what day of the week it was.

So as Eliza, her dad, and brother tied their horses at the Weeks' Cabin, she knew the weekday argument would probably be on the agenda. As they walked across the yard to the front porch, Willard Clark leaned down to young Eli and said, "Son, don't forgit your manners. Say please and thank you to Aunt Mollie. And don't do what you did last time and blurt out, 'Aunt Cat' when you're answering her! She's 'Aunt Mollie' to you."

Eli innocently answered, "But, Poppa, I've heard you call them that so much, it's hard not to."

The old couple, as always, was happy to have company. Their location in the southern end of the settlement and off on a muddy side trail meant they didn't get many visitors. Uncle Arch, a tall thin man clad in faded overalls and barefooted, came out on the front porch to meet them. His long, weathered face featured a sly smile that was always the precursor of something humorous coming from him. His way of talking was so typical of the sayings, words, and humor of the older Ten Milers.

Aunt Mollie, much shorter and compact, also came out on the porch, shaking flour out of her apron. Her smile was much tighter and her humor had more of a bite to it, especially when directed at her husband.

Arch Weeks called out, "Well, Willard, it's good to see y'all. Mollie will get us a fresh pot of coffee, if y'all will drink some."

"Uncle Arch, I'd ride five miles any day to sit on your porch and drink a cup of coffee."

"Well then, if it's not too cold for the children, we'll sit out here on the front porch." He pulled up three cowhide chairs and he and Willard Clark sat down. Eliza sat by Eli on the front steps and softly whispered to her brother, "Listen to how many times Uncle Arch will say 'Well' when he starts a sentence. And he'll say it like this—." Eliza put her mouth right beside Eli's ear and said real loud, "Whaale." They both laughed as she continued, "He says it like it's a big, long, drawn-out fish instead of a greeting."

Aunt Mollie returned inside to put on the coffee. The two men began talking about the weather and their crops. Eventually Mollie came out and sat on the other side of Willard. From the steps, Eliza leaned over and whispered to Eli, "Uh oh, Poppa's got stuck between them again and that ain't good!"

The two men continued discussing if it was warm enough yet to plant okra. When there was a lull in their conversation, Aunt Mollie got the opening she was awaiting and blurted out, "Now Willard, Arch and me been arguin' for two days about this—is today Wednesday or Thursday?"

Willard Clark glanced at Eliza, winking as he answered, "Now Aunt Mollie, I hope you didn't bet any money on either of those, because today is actually Friday."

Aunt Mollie took up the gauntlet, "See Arch, I told you yesterday that it was Thursday, so that does make today Friday!"

"Oh no, that was Wednesday when you said it were Thursday."

"You know better than that—it was yesterday."

"No, it was the day 'fore—the one I called Wednesday."

This arguing went on and on. Aunt Mollie was a formidable opponent and could always get in the most words.

Eliza's father, being the peacemaker, finally got in the middle and changed the subject back to the weather. With that, Aunt Mollie left and soon returned with a steaming cup of black coffee for each man and a cup of coffee milk for the younger folks. She sat back down and was soon in the middle of the conversation between the two men.

Willard Clark asked, "Uncle Arch, have y'all heard any of the rumors about that timber company buying up all of that land?"

The old man sat upright in his chair. "No Son, what's goin' on?"

"Story is that there's a timber company going to come into Alexandria and buy up a bunch of chunks of land at the courthouse. Supposedly, a good portion of this land is between the Calcasieu River and Ten Mile Creek. They've said they don't plan to take any occupied land, but the rumor has still made a lot of folks nervous and upset."

Aunt Mollie butted in, "Willard, do you see trouble comin' on this?"

"I sure hope not. None of us here has got a land deed, but our families been here for generations. I don't know of a Ten Miler who'd give up one square foot of his land without a fight unto the death."

Uncle Arch, who seemed genuinely alarmed by this rumor, added in an emotional voice, "Well, I'll say this: this here is where I was born and where I plan to turn up my toes. Ain't no man, or deed or law, gonna take me off alive from here along Cherry Winche."

Eli asked, "Uncle Arch, where does our land of 'Ten Mile' start and end?"

Arch answered, "Son, what I call 'the kingdom of Ten Mile' stretches along Ten Mile Creek, which you know all about. However, it covers the whole area to the east—here along Cherry Winche that we live along—as well to the east toward Steep Gully and Six Mile. This is our land and our home."

Aunt Mollie, as usual, butted in: “Arch and I been arguin’ for a lifetime about the north and south ends of the area. I say it goes up to across from Hineston and down to near Sugartown.”

Her husband jumped in, “No, no, no. It don’t go as fer north as Hineston. No way on God’s green earth!”

Before they could argue more, Willard Clark tried to bring the conversation back to the land rumors. After he had told a particularly long story about the land, Willard stopped and said, “Now, I know I’m telling an Aunt Moll . . . ” He caught himself and had a sudden coughing fit, nearly dropping his cup of coffee. Eli leaped up, slapping him on the back.

Eliza was tickled, but knew only she could save this moment.

She jumped up from the steps and said, “Uncle Arch, Aunt Mollie . . . Eli here’s been asking a lot about how our folks of the Ten Mile area got here and how we got to be known as ‘Redbones.’ Could y’all fill him in on where our people came from?”

She quickly jerked Eli away from slapping the back of their coughing dad and pulled him over to listen. But Aunt Mollie was already scolding her dad, “Willard Clark, what were you fixing to say about telling ‘an Aunt Mollie’?”

Then she stopped abruptly—she could not resist getting the first word in ahead of her husband, so she turned away from red-faced Willard Clark and quickly took over answering the question: “Eli, now my daddy always said that our branch of Ten Milers came as a group from up in the Carolinas in the late 1700’s. For some reason, these Louisian’er piney woods reminded them of home and there weren’t no law and lots of open spaces, so they just stopped here and settled.”

Aunt Mollie drew a breath and that was all Uncle Arch needed, “I tell you, Babe, I know exactly why Mollie’s people come down from there—well, they wuz probably a bunch of hog thieves and no counts and got run—”

Mollie’s raised eyebrows and loud huff stopped Arch in mid-sentence. In mock seriousness he corrected himself, “No, Mollie, I want to apologize. That weren’t the real reason your people came down here.”

Uncle Arch continued in a conciliatory voice, “No, no, no—I take that back about your people.” He turned to Eliza, “Here’s the real truth, Eliza, Mollie’s people were the stubbornest people in the Carolinas. One day the English, or somebody in charge up there, told the settlers that nobody could leave—they all had to stay put. That night, the whole clan loaded up, skedaddled, and eventually got down here. Whaale, I tell you, Babe—that’s still a trait of her people: they are some kind of gosh awful stubborn. You can’t tell them nothing—not even the time of day or the day of the week—Well, like the fact that today is Wednesday.”

It was the needle he meant to stick in his wife and she yelled, “Thursday.”

“Nope, it’s Wednesday.“

Eli chimed in, “Y’all are both wrong. Today is Friday.”

Both Willard Clark and Eliza spoke in unison, “Eli, hush!”

Aunt Mollie was now prepared to go on the offense again. “Arch Weeks, at least I know where my people came from and who they are. Your bunch ain’t got quite the same pedigree, that’s for sure.”

The old man sat up straight and proud in his cowhide chair. “Suunnnn, I’ll tell you about my people—my peoples didn’t come from nowhere. We didn’t have to get run out of the Carolinas. We’ve always been right here among the pines and the creeks.” He held his head up and his entire long face took on a smile, “My family line of Redbones always been here. We’re

descendants of the Injuns that lived in these woods. Well now, you can look at me and see that real easy."

Looking at the profile of Uncle Arch's face as he sat there, Eliza could definitely see that Indian heritage: the dark skin and eyes, hawkish nose—each told of Indian blood in Uncle Arch. It was also easy to see how proud he was of this.

He continued, "Yep, that's why we're all called 'Redbones.' We got Indian blood in us."

Eli asked, "What kind of Indian are you?"

"Whaale, a little bit of them all, Son. Our blood comes from the early Attakapa who lived here, and maybe a dash of Choctaw. Then there were them escaped Injun slaves from Texas—them Apache and Comanche.

"My Injun ancestors mixed in with some of the Frenchmen and probably some of Lafitte's pirates, and we Redbones are the result of that. That's why we're wild, free, and impossible to tame." His voice went up an octave as he stated, "That's also why ain't no timber company's gonna take our land. They'll find out about that Injun blood if they try! Well, that's where we got our independent ornery streak from here in No Man's Land!"

Uncle Arch, whom Eliza liked to call "Chief" when he gave his Indian heritage talk, sat smiling as he shook his head proudly.

Eli asked, "Where 'xactly is this here 'No Man's Land'?"

Uncle Arch said, "Let me put it this way: Ten year'ago, two gov'ment surveyors came through these parts. They stayed with Mollie and me for a couple of nights. One of them knew a lot 'bout history and filled me in about our area. He said that 'fore Louisiana became a state, this area was fought over by the Spanish and Frenchmen. They couldn't agree on a border between, and war nearly broke out over it.

"Finally, cooler heads got together. They agreed Spanish Texas would have their border at the Sabine River and the French would stick with the Calcasieu River. This made a fifty-mile wide area between the rivers into a 'Neutral Strip.'

"That surveyor said that because both countries agreed to keep their soldiers out of the strip, it became a haven for every outlaw, escaped slave, and renegade Indian who wanted to escape the long arm of the law. The area between the two rivers, stretching from the Gulf of Mexico to 'bout Natchitoches became known by three names: 'The Neutral Strip,' 'No Man's Land,' and 'The Outlaw Strip.'"

Uncle Arch ended his history lesson with a personal note, "I ain't never liked that 'Outlaw Strip' name. Most folks around here, like our peoples, aren't outlaws. They jes' came here 'cause they wanted to live where no gov'ment would bother them. We just don't want nobody tellin' us what to do. That's what I call freedom—jes' being left alone!"

On Uncle Arch's last sentence, Eli whispered in his sister's ear, "Twelve." She looked at him quizzically and he said, "That's how many times he's said 'Whhaaale' already." Eli pronounced it just as he'd heard, and they both tried to suppress the giggles.

At this moment is when Eliza changed the direction of the conversation, "Uncle Arch and Aunt Mollie, I got something been bothering me a long time that I want to ask about. When I was 'bout Eli's age, I made one of my few trips out of the Ten Mile area and went with Poppa to Sugartown. While we were in the general store, a curious girl 'bout my age came up. She had gold hair and wore a dress that looked store-bought. She looked me up and down before asking, 'Who are you?' I told her, 'Eliza Jane Clark.' The girl shook her head as if to inform me that was not what she really wanted to know and then asked, 'No, what are you?'

"I laughed as I told her, 'Well, last time I checked I was a girl.'

"The girl's puzzled look let me know what she meant: 'What are you? Are you Indian? Spanish? Something else?'

"I didn't have a ready answer for her. I finally told her I lived at Ten Mile. Then I asked her, 'And what are you, Sugartown girl?'

"She said with a smile, 'Why I'm 'Merican! Aren't you?'

"Until that day the idea had never entered my skull that I might be an American, too."

Eliza continued her story, "Then a woman marched over and grabbed the girl, scolding her, 'You git away from that girl. She ain't our kind.'

"The golden-haired girl tried to argue, but her mother said, 'We don't have nothing to do with them kind. She's got colored and injun in her. You remember that. She's not our kind!' That little girl was crying as her mother dragged her away—and so was I."

As Eliza finished her story, a tear coursed down her cheek. Even her dad had never heard Eliza's story. No one knew what to say—even the old couple sat there wordlessly.

Willard Clark, who hated to see his daughter cry, finally said, "But Liza, you never told me about—"

Aunt Mollie broke in, "Baby, you be proud of who you are. You are as beautiful and wonderful as any of them there girls in Sugartown—or anywhere else. Hold your head up high and don't never apologize for who you are!"

Arch Weeks, who always found humor in every situation, broke the tension by pointing at his dark arms, "Well Babe, I can't tell y'all exactly what we're made of, but somebody definitely left the biscuits in the oven too long on me."

Eliza burst out laughing at his words. She loved the unique way that the old-timers could coin a phrase. The wise words and humorous words of this old couple were just what she needed.

Her laughter made Uncle Arch turn on her in mock anger, "What you laughing at, girl? You look like your biscuits done got browned a little too much yerself!"

With a wink he added, "You're a fine girl, Eliza Jane Clark. You're gonna marry that Thompson and have a good life. A real good life."

Eliza started to speak, "But Uncle Arch, I don't…" but then she stopped.

Eli butted in, thereby saving the day, "But Uncle Arch, aren't we proud to all be Redbones?—and Aunt Mollie, just 'cause your people came from Carolina, does that mean you're not Redbone?"

Finally, here was something Arch and Mollie could agree on. They realized their picking might have confused the boy a little, so they teamed up together.

She began, "Eli, this here No Man's Land or Neutral Ground, or whatever you want to call it, is a free land—plenty of space, wild game for the taking, and woods aplenty. The folks that've come here—all of them is what makes up a real Ten Miler. I've been asked by the younger folks like you, 'Aunt Mollie, what's in us Redbone's blood?' My answer to 'em is this: a better question would be, 'What's not in a Redbone's blood?'"

The old man, smiling but in a more serious tone, added, "Son, there is one thing we were both taught by our families: A feller ought to be proud of who he is—and what he is—and be proud of every drop of blood that makes him who he is, no matter where his kin come from.

"Now me, when I look in the mirror, I believe I ain't one bit better than nobody. At the same time, I don't believe there's a person out there walking God's green earth, that's better than me. Us folks here in this Ten Mile area are Redbones—ain't no outsiders welcome or needed. Be proud to call yourself a Redbone. It's a term I use proudly and always will. You'd do well to do the same."

Aunt Mollie opened her mouth, “But I say—”

However, Willard Clark, sensing another long argument brewing, headed her off at the pass and cut in, “Well, this good visiting’s let the time get away. It looks from the sun that we’d better be on our way before dark catches us going home. Uncle Arch, you got any idea what the time is?”

“Babe, it’s got to be close to four.”

Aunt Mollie, pointing at the sun streaming through the tops of the pines said, “No, no, no. When the sun’s right there in April, it’s ‘bout three a’clock.”

“Mollie, if I’m lying I’m a-dying. It’s four or later.”

“Well, I say. You think you know everything. I’d swear on a stack of Bibles, that’s it’s not a minute past three.”

Her husband shot back, “Mollie, it’s a sin to swear. The Bible says so, and you’re tryin’ to use a whole stack of them to be wrong.”

“Oh hush up, Arch.”

Before leaving, Willard Clark retrieved a few things around the house that the old couple couldn’t reach.

Eliza and Eli went out, gathered eggs, fed, and watered the pigs. While climbing up to reach a nest, Eli said, “Eliza, Uncle Arch said it thirty-eight times! And I may have even missed a few of them ‘whales’ when they swam by.”

Finishing, they returned to the porch and said their goodbyes. As they rode off, Eliza looked back and saw the old couple standing on the porch steps, side by side, watching their visitors ride off.

Uncle Arch’s arm was draped around Aunt Mollie’s shoulder. They stood closely together nearly as one body instead of two. What made this image even more memorable was how the late evening sun, filtering through the trees, cast a bright beam on their faces.

From that day, she always carried a mental picture from that scene. In spite of their isolation, odd ways, and seemingly unending arguing, the old couple had an obvious deep commitment to each other. Riding along, Eliza remembered two tall pines she had once seen that had grown together. Their trunks had intertwined to where they grew as one—Arch and Mollie Weeks reminded her of those twin pines. They have what it takes for the long haul: a loving dedication that has seen them through both the good and bad times together in these woods.

Settling back on her saddle as Sam plodded back to the main trail, Eliza Jane Clark wondered if she would one day find that same kind of companionship she saw so clearly in Arch and Mollie Weeks. She just wondered if there was a strong tall pine out there for her—she sure hoped so.

Chapter 6

If the two sailors dragging him had stopped, Joseph would gladly have walked wherever they were pulling him, but they had no intention of allowing him any latitude on this. They finally stopped, roughly releasing Joseph, who fell hard to the deck.

Rolling over, he saw five sailors gathered above him. A rough looking man, with scarred face and a half-closed eye, came forward from the knot of onlookers. He grabbed Joseph by the throat and sneered, speaking in an unknown language. He then dragged Joseph to the edge of the deck.

Standing on the edge of this rocking ship, being throttled from behind by a sailor, only inches from being pushed into the Atlantic, Joseph felt a burning anger, and didn't really care if they did toss him overboard, he just wanted to get loose, but that was impossible. The burly sailor was much stronger and had him in a grip that was impossible to break.

The sailor underestimated the strength of the young, thin Irishman. Turning to make a comment to his sailor friends, he momentarily relaxed his grip. Instantly, Joseph got an arm loose and quickly turned on his tormentor. The blow he landed to the man's cheek was quick, powerful, and unexpected. The sailor then turned furiously toward the teenager, his face twisted into a mask of rage.

The man pushed with all of his might, and Joseph felt himself slipping off the deck. With only a fraction of a second to react, he caught hold of the sailor's rope belt. It didn't stop his descent—it only meant he wasn't falling alone.

The two men hit the water as Joseph kept his grip on the belt. They went under and the bigger man was thrashing about wildly and trying to get a hold on him. Joseph let go of the belt and quickly rose to the surface, gasping due to the frigid water. He turned to find the ship, from which echoed all manner of yelling. The only word he understood was their repeated cries of "André."

The big sailor, who was evidently named André, had also resurfaced but to say he was "swimming" was probably an exaggeration: wildly flailing his arms, screaming, and going under about every two or three waves. Only about ten feet from Joseph, he was vainly trying to reach him, but the Irishman slowly paddled away. It was obvious this man couldn't swim. There was no way Joe was going to let this fellow get him in a death grip that would send them both to the bottom.

Joseph saw a man on deck throw a life ring attached to a short rope. It landed nearby, so he swam to it.

There was still commotion and yelling aboard the ship. Evidently, the crew was attempting to stop the ship's forward motion, and hopefully return for a rescue.

He clutched the ring to his chest and dog-paddled toward the ship. He looked back to see the weakening struggle of the other man. Serves you right. Joseph turned his back—not wishing to see the look on the man's face as he slipped below the surface for the last time.

On deck, the sailors were still watching, pointing, and hollering. Joseph didn't understand one single word—but he realized what he must do if he was to survive: toss the life ring to the drowning man.

This had less to do with any kindness and more with a primitive sense of survival. Joseph realized that if he let the sailor drown, the ship would not come back for any rescue—they would leave him as punishment in letting their shipmate drown while he held a life ring nearby.

The drowning sailor grabbed the ring. He was blubbering and crying as he reached it. Joseph didn't know if he was cursing, praying, or threatening to kill him. To be safe, he dogpaddled slowly and kept his distance from the sobbing man.

Joseph turned and was shocked at how far away the ship was. However, it was easily evident that it was attempting to turn back

His partner in the water was still crying and talking wildly. This was accompanied by shakes and nods of his head. Joseph knew the man was imploring him to come to the ring. However, he didn't want to be near a man who only minutes earlier had been ready to toss him overboard to drown.

It was a long time before the ship returned to the spot where they'd fallen overboard. As the ship finally pulled alongside them, Joseph saw the flag for the first time. It was the unmistakable French Tri-Color. The blue, white, and red flag fluttered stiffly in the Atlantic breeze. He also saw the ship's name: Amelia. Below it was painted: LaHavre, France.

As the crew tossed down the rope ladder, Joseph found it a little more than ironic that he was once again climbing this ladder to re-board—not as a stowaway, but rescued from the sea.

The big, wet sailor had a much harder time getting up the ladder. Two men had to climb down and assist him. His battle with the ocean had left him limp, wet, and exhausted.

Finally, after much exertion by the sailors on deck and a rope being tied around André's waist, he was hoisted onto the deck where he collapsed in a heap.

Joseph silently watching the commotion, suddenly found himself looking into the eyes of the man whom he knew must be the captain of the Amelia. He started to speak, but felt his head spinning dizzily and he collapsed to the deck not far from his new friend, André.

Chapter 7

When Joseph woke up, he was lying on a straw bed, evidently below deck. He had no idea how long he had been asleep. As his eyes adjusted to the dim hold, he glanced around him. In every direction, there were barrels—lashed together and stacked high. He sniffed and detected pipe tobacco smoke and then found the source of the smoke. An older sailor sat on an overturned barrel puffing away contentedly. Joseph wondered how long he had been watched by this guard. As his eyes adjusted, he could see a quizzical look on the old fellow's face as he spoke, "That was quite a bloody good show you and André put on out there."

Joseph's chill was not the result of what the man said. It was the accent—this man was English. He had never had a good conversation or experience with an Englishman. His encounters with them could be summed up in three words: disdain, dismissal, and cruelty.

So he expected the very same treatment from this pipe-smoking English guard. However, the man repeated his comment, this time with a slight smile.

"Bloody good show by you and André. Right fine show."

He then added, "What's your name, boy?"

"Joseph Moore."

"Where, and how in God's good name, did you get on this ship?"

"I slipped aboard in Westport."

"Well, my name is Gill from Sheffield County, England. But for over forty years my real home has been on these seas. And you, Mr. Moore, are the reason I'm in trouble!"

The Englishman had removed his pipe and took on a disturbed look. "I was in charge of making sure no stowaways got on board—you know you Irish are the worst with this famine and all of the trouble—because of you, I'm in the doghouse with the Cap'n. That's why he put me down here with you."

"Well, I'm sorry for your trouble."

Gill snorted and returned to puffing his pipe, "Sorry for your trouble—eh. You don't have any idea the trouble you've put me in."

"Well, Mr. Englishman, I am truly sorry for your trouble that I caused. I just got me tail in a crack back home and needed to make a quick getaway. But I didn't know it was going to take me across the Atlantic."

Gill's eyes were fixed on the boy as he scolded, "Well, you might want to think about that next time afore you climb on some ship and get an honest working man in trouble!"

Gill was trying to be serious, but it was evident he was tickled at what had happened with André.

"Well, Son, it does seem you've got some 'moxie' to you."

"What is moxie?"

"Moxie is what you've got a lot of, boy—slipping aboard this boat and hiding for three or four days. Then dragging old André into the drink with ye—that's moxie, all right!"

Joseph, who could seemingly find a way to laugh at himself, ruefully replied, "I believe it was more desperation than 'muxie,' or whatever ye call it."

"It's moxie…bloody moxie…it means you've got guts…a lotta nerve—and I do believe you've got a belly full of it."

Joseph had another question ready: "Where's the Amelia headed?

"We're going to the port of New Orleans in the new American state of Louisiana."

"Never heard of it. Is it a big town?"

"Yep, big, bad, and full of life. You'll hear more about it as we near it."

Joseph asked, "What's an Englishman like you doing on a French ship? I thought you British hated the French?"

"Son, you've heard too many stories in your life. Things aren't always so cut and dried on who gets along, and who doesn't. Well, ship life is kind of like what they say about politics: it makes for strange bedfellows."

"Well, it seems pretty strange bedfellows for one Englishman to be on a ship full of Frenchies."

Gill laughed, "No stranger bedfellows than an Englishman sitting on a barrel visiting with an Irish stowaway in the middle of the Atlantic."

Joseph added, "Tit'is. Surely tit'is."

Gill stood up abruptly. "Well, it's time to take you to see the Cap'n. We might as well get it over. He's already chewed on me for letting you hide on board his ship. Now it's your turn."

"Tell me about the Captain."

Gill grinned, "You're fixing to find out yourself about the Cap'n. You'll see for yourself in just a little while."

"What t'is his name?"

"Cap'n."

"I mean t'is given name."

"He don't have one that we know of. Just Cap'n."

Gill led Joseph up from the hold to a forward room near the stern. After following Gill up a set of stairs, he found himself standing in the Captain's quarters before a man bent over his desk. Gill asked if he was needed but the Cap'n curtly dismissed him.

Joseph stood there in front of his desk as the man continued looking over some papers as if no one was in the room. This long pause gave him ample time to glance around the cramped, untidy room. The only sound in the room was the ticking of a clock on the captain's desk. This uneasy silence gave him opportunity to study the Captain. He seemed to be in his fifties. He had a head full of grey hair that was uncombed and unruly. The desk that he sat at was cluttered with maps, charts, and papers.

It was probably ten minutes before the Captain stopped his writing and paper shuffling and looked up. He stared at Joseph, not bothering to hide his disgust, "So you're the rat that decided to ride on my boat for free?"

The Captain's English was not bad, but all Joseph could do was look down at his bare feet.

He stabbed his finger at Joseph, "Nobody rides free on my ship. So you'll work if you plan to sail to America with us."

Finally, Joseph spoke, "That's fine with me, Sir. I've never been one to be 'fraid of work."

"Good, you'll get to prove that plenty of times between here and New Orleans. Gill will show you the job of dauber. It's not a nice, clean job but one that a boy your age can easily do. Are there any questions we need to get clear before I turn you loose?"

"No Sir."

"I'm going to put Gill in charge of you. He's English, and they know how to keep you Paddies in line. And he gets lonely with no one to speak English with." The captain smirked, "I'll bet you and him will get along just swell."

That smirk was eclipsed by a tightness in the Captain's jaw as he added, "Now I don't humor stowaways. One stowaway can ruin an entire voyage with his disruptions. I've got several options with you: I can put you off on any European-bound ships we meet. I'm sure there's a price on your head, and they'll gladly take you and find out.

"Secondly, I can put you off on any islands we pass later. I've done it before, and I'll do it again if needed."

Joseph stood stoically, never taking his eyes off the Captain.

"Then there is one final option I have—if you behave and work hard, you'll disembark with us in New Orleans. What happens to you after that will be your problem, but at least you'll be back on solid land.

"That's all. Just stand there quietly until Gill arrives."

A younger sailor came in, and the two conversed rapidly in French. The sailor left and Gill soon limped back into the captain's quarters. It was evident the Captain was not happy to see him nor was Gill pleased to be back in the Captain's presence.

"Yes Sir?"

"Gill, this is your boy here that you allowed to board our ship as an unannounced guest. You're in charge of him for the rest of the voyage. If he causes any more trouble like today, I'm going to lock both of you in the brig.

"Show him how to be a dauber and make sure he understands that he will be moored below deck and is not to leave the hold without special permission. We'll lock him down there at night to make sure he doesn't cause us any more delays."

"Sir—yes Sir." Seriously, Gill turned from the captain and motioned for Joseph to follow. Gill sighed as they came back on deck, "Well, that wasn't near as bad as it could have been." He looked squarely at him. "But if you cause anymore distractions, we'll both be in deep trouble!"

They silently went back down into the depths of the ship. It was dim, damp, and musty. As his eyes adjusted to the dark hold, Joseph was amazed at the vast size of the hull and how many barrels were stacked in it. What astounded him even more was how at various places on the wooden frame, water seeped through the cracks.

All at once, Joseph greatly wished he was standing on firm land—whether in Ireland, America, or even England—anywhere on land seemed better than in the middle of the thrashing Atlantic in the hold of a leaking ship.

Gill read his thoughts and said, "Don't worry, boy. That dripping is just part of it. Most of the time, the wood swells and seals itself off. We try to close the other leaks with pine tar. That is going to be your new job."

Gill limped over to a barrel on which was stamped: Naval Stores, Savannah, Georgia. He picked up an old wooden bucket and handed it to Joseph. "Son, you are now appointed first mate dauber of the fine ship, Amelia. Your job is to paint this pine tar, or resin as we call it, onto those leaking cracks." He handed Joe a thin-coiled rope of hemp and a wooden mallet. "This here cord is called 'oakum.' Paint it with tar and hammer it into the cracks where you can."

Gill gave him a homemade paintbrush and next opened the lid of the naval stores barrel. "Here's your daubing material. Use that ladder for the places you can't reach."

With that, the Englishman smiled, dropped the paintbrush on the floor, and walked out.

The next few days found Joseph hard at his new job. The pine tar was a thick gooey black resin that did a remarkable job of stopping seeps and leaks on the wooden hull. However, it was impossible to apply the pitch without getting it all over him. Soon Joe's hands were black and sticky and his clothes became caked with pitch.

Days pass slowly when you're stuck in the hold of a ship. The uncertainty of the voyage was bad enough—but the loneliness that Joseph felt might have been the worst part of it all. He was homesick and confused, and missed normal conversation. It was as if this hold was his prison, and he'd been assigned solitary confinement.

The only time he would see anyone was when a surly cook would bring down his two meals a day. So Joseph passed the long days by working: dutifully daubing every seeping crack he could find. He told himself that he was helping keep this old boat afloat with his work.

He looked forward to the only other visitor he saw other than the unhappy cook: Gill, with his supervisory visits below deck. The old English sailor would gingerly come down the stairs, weave through the barrels of whiskey and visit with him.

Joseph's tar-blackened face would grin when he saw the old man coming. Also noticeable was the warm smile on Gill's face as he sat down on his overturned barrel, lit his pipe, and commenced with stories of his life on the seas. Gill would motion for him to keep working before beginning long stories of voyages, dangers, and the rigors of life at sea.

One day after a round of stories about his earlier years in the British Navy, Gill asked him, "Moore, what about your life?"

Joseph briefly shared about his family and life in Ireland.

He spilled out the hardships imposed on the Irish by the British. A tinge of bitterness edged his remarks as he shared of stolen land, confiscated rights, starvation, and the plight of the "mere Irish" as the English callously called his race. When he mentioned the workhouse, Gill interrupted him, "What's a workhouse?"

Joe explained, "When the famine continued, the government opened workhouses. They were a place of last resort for starving families. After me mother died and me father had already been sent to Australia, they sent me to the workhouse in Westport. It was just like prison: they issued you a uniform and treated you like a dog. Families were separated—men to one section, women to another, their children taken to another."

Joseph spat bitterly. "If you escaped, they'd catch ye, and arrest ye on the charge was that you'd stolen your uniform.

"After several weeks of that, I scaled the wall one night and got away. I guess because I was so young and alone I slipped through the cracks. They never came looking for me—probably just said 'good riddance.'"

Bitterly, Joseph added, "Maybe, you can understand now why we hate you British!"

Gill didn't reply to Joseph's last statement, but said, "Son, I've seen a lot on these four decades aboard a ship—I've seen many a man running from things who've gone asea to escape something in their past back home. But most of the time, whatever they were running from sneaked aboard with them. Like you—they'd been mistreated by society or someone and they sought to escape it by going somewhere new—but the bitterness they carried in their heart accompanied them—and unless they got rid of it—eventually ate them alive.

"Here's the way this old salt sees it: a man is either gitting bitter or better. It's a series of choices he makes in his life—it's one that you're making in yours now. You can leave the land

of oppression by us English—or whoever your 'boogeyman' is at the moment—but you'll still have them with you if you get bitter…and stay bitter."

Gill reloaded his pipe with fresh tobacco and carefully lit it, "Well, I've probably said too much and you didn't ask for my . . ."

Joseph interrupted him, "Keep on going. I'm a-listening."

But Gill was finished with anything he had to say—at least for now. It was as if he had planted just the seeds he wanted and was content to let them grow. He stood and said, "Well, I better git out of here with my pipe fore I catch you on fire and burn up this wreck of a ship as well as a good boatload of Irish whiskey." With that, he gingerly eased back up the steep stairs into the light of day on deck.

The sound Joseph hated came next: The metallic click of the hatch lock closing, followed by the silence of the dark hold.

A man working by himself has lots of time to think, especially working in the hold of a rocking ship in the midst of the Atlantic Ocean, especially when below deck for days on end. Joseph Moore thought carefully over the words of his new friend. As he painted on the pine tar, Gill's words echoed in his soul:

A bitter man or a better man.

It seemed as if every swab of the brush or dip into the tar bucket said: bitter or better… bitter or better. He couldn't seem to shake it.

On one of Gill's visits, the old man limped to his customary perch on the barrel. This time, instead of telling him to keep working, Gill motioned for him to sit nearby, pulled out his pipe, and said, "Well, how have things been in the world of the ship's dauber?"

"'Tis pretty quiet down here."

Gill began filling Joseph in on the progress of the journey, "We're coming up on the last days of our Atlantic voyage. We'll be sailing around the southern tip of Florida and entering the Gulf of Mexico soon."

After puffing silently for a few minutes, Gill asked, "Joseph, have you thought about what we talked about on my last visit?"

Once again, Joseph Moore was surprised: This sailor—this English sailor—just addressed me by my first name. How did he know? I liked the way he said it; it reminded me of the way my own grandfather would call my name back in the old days.

Joseph ducked his head. "In fact, Mr. Gill, it's really all I've thought about: bitter or better. I can't seem to get it off me mind. In fact, I spent the first day mad at you for bringing it up!" Shaking his head he continued, "But as much as I hate to admit it, me heart is full of bitter. I don't like it, but if you'd been…through…what...I'd . . ."

He stopped in mid-sentence. A look into Gill's eyes revealed that this older man had been through his own struggles and personal hell.

Seizing the silence, Gill said, "Well, I been saving this man's story for you. Let me tell you about him. I met him—oh, about fifty years ago in London. He was in his eighties and I was still a young man of twenty-five years old or so.

"Like me, this old man named Newton had been a sailor for much of his earlier life. I'd heard about his story and made up my mind to meet him if I had a chance.

"That opportunity did arise in March of 1802. I saw in the papers where Newton was going to talk about the fifty-fourth anniversary of a seagoing experience that had changed his life.

"Newton was the son of an English sea captain. From his earliest years, he'd been aboard ships. From what I'd read, he'd been a pretty vile character in his younger days—most of it spent as a British Navy sailor and crew member aboard slave ships.

"So on this particular anniversary day, I traveled to London's St. Mary's Church to meet this old English sailor, John Newton.

"The church wasn't huge, but on this particular Sunday, it was packed. Others had evidently come to hear his story just as I had.

"Newton, who was the pastor of this church, was very old and moved slowly as he ascended to the pulpit.

"I don't remember everything he said that day, but I believe I recall every word of his story of going from a rough sailor to standing in the pulpit of this church. Do you mind if I tell you his story, best as I remember it?"

"Sure, I'd love to hear more. Go on."

"Newton told how his dad was always gone on voyages for months, even years. When his mother, who was evidently a good and godly woman, died, young Newton, now age six, began accompanying his father on the ocean, mostly on slave-trading ships. He took to the seafaring life and learned all of the skills and knowledge required of sailors and captains. He also took to the evil living that often accompanies our profession. He described himself as a 'terrible blasphemer and drunkard.'

"According to Newton, when he was age twenty on a voyage, the crew threw him off near the western coast of Africa. That's how bad he was—they just put him off on a seemingly deserted island to fend for himself and sailed away.

"He was taken in by a slave trader and treated as one of the slaves. He commented on how ironic that it was how that he had traded in slaves and now was like one of them himself.

"Newton spent about two years in terrible conditions on this coastal island. One day as he sat beside a fire on the beach, a passing ship sent a dinghy ashore to investigate the source of the smoke. The ship was an English one, and amazingly, the captain was a friend of John Newton's father. So he was rescued from the island.

"About a year later on that same trip, the ship was swept up in a great Atlantic storm. Newton told how he awoke in his cabin to find water all around him. He quickly manned a pump, saying, 'If this will not do it, the Lord have mercy upon us.' He then spent the next nine hours frantically pumping water out of the hold.

"Then the Captain put him behind the wheel and for the next half day, Newton was alone in the storm fighting with all of his might to keep the ship afloat.

"He said that during those long hours at the wheel was when God touched his life. At the ship's wheel, he had time to examine the bitter and hate-filled life he'd lived—plenty of time to realize that this storm was probably going to end that same life.

"He realized that his earlier statement when manning the pumps was really the beginning of his turning to God. Finally, he cried out to God for mercy and grace and after more hours of peril, the storm ended. But what had happened in his life didn't end…he was a changed man. He recorded the date in his logbook: March 21, 1748."

Gill, who had Joseph's complete attention, continued, "Son, the day I heard him preach and tell his story at the London church was March 21, 1802, fifty-four years to the day since his conversion in the storm.

"Joseph, do you know what John Newton is most famous for?"

"I guess, maybe, that story?"

"Well, that's part of it. He's famous because of the song he wrote after that story. It's one of the best-loved hymns of our English churches and I'll bet you're familiar with it too. It's called 'Amazing Grace.' Do you know it?"

Joseph said, "Amazing grace—how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me?"

"That's it. Don't it sound like a song written by a guy that had been to the bottom?"

"Sure does. But tell me, why are you telling me this story in the hold of the Amelia?"

"Because his story has everything to do with being bitter or getting better."

With that, Gill turned and limped back up the stairs. Like Newton, Joseph Moore was left with thinking time on a ship on the Atlantic Ocean.

Chapter 8

Eliza stopped as she saw a lone figure approaching down the path to her family's cabin. She knew it was her Uncle Nathan from his limp. From how fast he was trotting, she knew something must be wrong.

No one in Ten Mile knew him by his given name. He'd been called "Unk" for most of his life. Fifteen years older than Eliza, Unk was the younger brother of her mother. His many nieces and nephews all called him Unk; the name had stuck and was the only name most folks knew him by.

When he had been born thirty years before, he'd had what the settlers called a "hard delivery" and his mother had nearly died from the loss of blood. Unk had suffered some brain damage during the birth as evidenced by his limp and constant pasted-on smile. Eliza never liked the way people described her uncle as "touched in the head." They meant he wasn't right—didn't have all his senses.

Even though he was her uncle, he called Eliza "Sister," which also described how he felt about her. Eliza loved the constant smile on Unk's face. It was a grin that seemed to say much more than words could express. Her poppa called it "the smile of the cat that just ate the canary." Brother Willis, the local pastor at Occupy Church, once said from the pulpit, "Unk, I believe you know some secret that you ain't never let the rest of us in on."

However, Eliza saw no semblance of a smile as he stood before her this morning. He stopped by the barn and looked behind him as if he feared he was being followed. His greeting was whispered, "Sister, come here. I need to talk to you real bad."

"Unk, what's wrong?"

She'd never seen her uncle this upset. Normally, he was a jovial laid-back man, not easily upset by the things that bothered normal people. Eliza had always thought that Unk's "being touched in the head" had made him a much better and calmer person than most folks she knew.

She sat the milk pail down and walked over to him. He looked around before speaking, "Sister, somethin' bad's happened! Unk needs you to come wit' me."

"Now wait a minute, Unk. I ain't goin off with you until you tell me more. Now settle down some and get a grip on yerself."

Eliza noticed his hands were shaking and she saw they were caked with red clay. Looking down, she saw his boots were covered with the same red dirt.

"Unk, what have you been doin'?"

He looked around carefully as if the wind, trees, or dogs might be listening, and then leaned in, "Been digging. There's somethin' Unk needs to show you—and show you soon."

"Did you bury somethin' or dig it up?"

"Yep."

"What do you mean 'yep'? Now, did you dig somethin' up or bury it?"

"Dug it up, and then bur'ed it."

Eliza shook her head as her long black hair fell in her eyes. She jabbed him playfully and said, “Well, Unk I guess you’ll have to show me if you won’t tell me—but let’s wait ‘til after breakfast. I don’t want us drawing too much curiosity ‘bout this dead body—or buried treasure—or whatever it is you’ve dug up or buried.”

Unk looked startled and stammered, “How’d you know about a dead body and treasure?”

Eliza still wasn’t taking him too seriously. She said, “Oh, I don’t know. Sometimes I don’t know what to do with you!”

“You’ll do me right, if you’ll just go with me and take a look. Unk needs your he’p.”

Eliza picked up her pail, leading Unk toward her house. He seemed to have calmed down a little once he smelled breakfast cooking. As Eliza’s mother served up fresh eggs and salt bacon with homemade cathead biscuits, Unk ate silently. Usually he had a great deal to say on his sister’s fine cooking, but not today. She noticed it and said, “Brother, are you feeling okay?”

Filling his mouth with eggs, he mumbled, “Unk’s fine, sister. Just fine.”

But his sister knew better. Trying to make conversation she continued, “Unk, are you stayin’ with the sheep over in Big Pasture?”

“Yes’m, I am. There’s a lot of green grass after they burned off the pasture last month. I believe . . .”

It was then they heard the first distant shot—the first shotgun blasts were soon followed by two other equally spaced shots. Ten seconds later, three more shots were heard. They recognized this as the local way of alerting the community that something was wrong and help was needed. Whether it was a fire, an accident, or a death—the repeated succession of three shots was the signal for help.

They all left their plates, and went out on the porch just in time to hear the next report of three shotgun blasts. With that, Eliza and Unk ran toward where the shots were coming from.

It wasn’t too far down to the main road and south toward a small crowd gathered in a circle. As they neared the circle, a neighbor came forward and grabbed Eliza, “I wouldn’t come any closer ‘cause we done found a dead man. Don’t nobody know him. He’s dressed real nice and not from these parts, but his life has sure ended in these parts—been stabbed to death, and it’s not a pretty sight; sure not a sight for a lady.”

Before Unk could continue on closer, Eliza grabbed him by the arm, pulled him aside, and accusingly pointed at his mud-caked boots, “Does this have anything to do with your digging?” Unk never said a word, but Eliza sensed there was some connection.

In spite of the warning to stay away, Eliza followed Unk as they both went closer to get a look. The dead man’s saddled horse stood idly eating shelled corn from the roadway. The dead man was slumped in the roadway, and blood from a head wound soaked into the dust. Surveying the scene closer, Eliza noticed an odd sight: This man had been carrying four large bags of corn behind his saddle. All the bags had been slit open at the bottom, and corn was scattered everywhere.

The scene just didn’t make sense: A horse was a valuable commodity in these parts. If you wanted to steal something, a horse was a good place to start. Yet, the man’s horse had been left; and the ripped bags: somebody was hunting something that this rider had evidently tried to hide. Eliza eased closer until one of the men scolded, “This ain’t the place for a girl. Git on back to your kitchen.” As Liza backed away from the men, she looked down—and that is when something shiny in the dirt caught her eye.

She quickly put her foot over it and stood there glancing around for a few seconds. Certain no one was watching, she knelt as if to tie her shoe. Deftly she reached under her foot, picked up a gold coin, and stood up.

She turned to Unk who stood silently looking at the body on the ground. “Well Unk, we seen about all we can. Let’s git back to the house. There’s work to be done.”

When they’d gone a safe distance from the crowd, Liza hissed, “Nathan Horace Dial, you done got in the middle of a mess!” Putting the coin under his nose, she said, “Does this all have anything to do with this coin?”

He was evidently shocked at the sight of the shiny coin but quickly stammered, “No, it don’t have nothin’ to do with that one—it must have got left behind—but there’s a bunch more than that.”

“You didn’t have nothin’ to do with robbing and killing that man, did you?”

“No. You know Unk wouldn’t do something like that. But I saw it happen.”

By now, they were approaching Eliza’s house where her mom stood on the porch anxiously awaiting a full report on what had happened. Unk whispered, “Eliza, tomorrow mornin’ early—real early, I’ll be by to git you. I’ll take and show you more about this.”

“Unk, I want to know about it now!”

“No, we can’t go there in daylight, might get seen. I’ll be by early and git you. Just trust your Unk.” He winked as he said it. His grin was evidence that he was getting his feet back.

Before going up on the porch where her mom stood waiting, Eliza sighed as she looked at her uncle’s grin. He winked again and gripped her hand before letting go and ambling off.

Her parting words to him were whispered, “Unk, sometimes I just don’t know what to do with you. I really don’t!”

Chapter 9

Eliza woke up looking for the gold coin. She didn't remember if it had only been a dream or if it was real. In the dark, she found the coin right where she'd hidden it and knew this was no dream.

It was about an hour later when Unk arrived and tapped on Eliza's shuttered window. She was already dressed and ready to go, and quietly slipped out the front door. Last month, she had gotten in trouble with her mother when Eli blurted out about their whip-poor-will morning trip, but here she was again—slipping off into the dark.

It was the perfect morning to be out if you didn't want anyone to see you. First of all, it was Sunday. Nobody would be working in the woods—it was a day of rest in the Ten Mile community.

Being a shepherd, Unk had wandered the vast woods and knew more about the land than most anyone else. It seemed as if God had given him recompense for not being able to do book learning. His insight into nature and the outdoor world was impressive. Additionally, he had an inborn curiosity to know about things of the natural world.

Walking across the field, they both stopped when a meteor sped across the sky. Unk said, "I believe it's a shooting-star night. I saw five of them walking over here." They both stood there in the darkness and watched several more streak across the dark sky.

Unk turned to Eliza, "Sister, you think people all over the world can see a shooting star all at the same time?"

"I don't know, Unk. I never thought about it before. I guess a person a thousand miles away might have just seen those same falling stars."

Just then, a large red-colored meteor, so bright it left a crimson streak in its wake, arced across the sky. Unk gasped and then said, "Well, I bet folks could see that one from Chiner." Then he added, "We better git goin' if we're gonna git to the ant colony before daylight."

"Unk, why are we going to an ant colony?"

She got no answer; Unk just led Eliza down the trail and past the Big Pasture where the stranger's murder had occurred. They both stayed away from the spot where the body had lain. The men had taken the body and buried it over at the edge of the pasture.

As daylight slowly came, Eliza followed Unk on past the pasture and into the edge of the hardwoods. They eased along through the oaks until they came to an open spot. Eliza immediately recognized this area as a town ant colony. Large mounds of finely ground dirt covered the area for about thirty square yards. She'd seen this place once before and always found it interesting.

The mounded dirt was red in color. The topsoil was only inches deep and beneath it was hard red clay. This clay was difficult to dig and stuck to everything when wet: shovel blades, boots, clothes, as well as hands and feet.

The town ants lived in colonies like this throughout western Louisiana and were also known by their other name: leaf-cutters. Many times in the woods, Eliza had come across a steady trail

of black ants going hurriedly in both directions. The ants going toward the colony carried shreds of green leaves in their jaws.

She had seen large areas completely defoliated by the leaf-cutting ants. They could completely de-leaf an oak tree in a day or two. So whether you called them town ants or leaf-cutting ants, they were very interesting insects to watch. She'd always wondered what the ants did with the leaf pieces in their nests.

However, her major wonder this morning was as to why Unk had brought her to the ant colony. He told her, "Stay here." He slipped off into the trees and returned quickly with a rusty broken-handled shovel.

"Follow me, Sister." Stepping off about ten paces, he stopped on top of a mound, and began digging. After digging in several spots to no avail, Unk was digging furiously when they both heard a metallic click Unk exclaimed excitedly, "Hello! There we go!"

Eliza came over to see what he'd found. Remembering the gold coin she'd found yesterday at the murder site, she already had a good idea. She leaned in and saw a small metal can. Unk opened the can and poured out a pile of gold coins. Looking at the shiny pieces, among the red dirt and the scurrying ants, Eliza knew she'd never seen this much money in her entire life. Looking around carefully, Unk scooped up a handful of the coins and said, "Lookee there, Sister!"

Eliza didn't quite know what to say. Her thoughts were scattered and came quickly: How had Unk gotten hold of this money? Why had he buried it here? Did he have any part in the stranger's murder? She definitely had a bunch of questions and wanted answers from her uncle. So, she looked her uncle square in the eye and said, "Now you tell me right now the story on all of this money!"

Unk acted as if he hadn't even heard her. "Sister, I've got them buried in three other piles over the—"

Eliza interrupted, "Unk, you're gonna get in bad trouble being mixed up in this! How many coins are there—" She caught herself in mid-sentence: Unk couldn't count past five without beginning to repeat, mix up, and invent numbers.

That didn't stop him from confidently stating, "There was sixty-thirteen for sure. I counted them twice."

Eliza smiled. She immediately thought of her dad's saying on Unk, "Your uncle is the most complicated simple person you'll ever know." This saga with the coins had only reinforced her dad's statement in her mind. The simple ingenuity of burying the coins among the ants and their dirt made her shake her head in wonder. Was it just an accident that he chose this spot or was it by design?

Unk picked up his shovel and was stepping off toward another town ant pile, "One … two … three … fourteen … five." Stopping, he drove the shovel into the soil.

Eliza grabbed him: "Stop digging. If we stay out here, someone's gonna see us. I believe you when you tell me there's sixty-three coins buried out here."

"I didn't say sixty-three—there's sixty-thirteen and I'm sure of . . ."

"Oh, whatever. I believe you. But let's get out of here, quick!"

Unk returned to the original digging spot and fell to his knees. Carefully, just like an artist, he began shaping the ant mound just like the other untouched ones. Eliza was amazed as she watched him. Unk whistled softly as he worked. After about a minute, he stepped back and admired his work. He repeated this same work at each of the other places he had dug.

With that done, he walked over to the nearby small pines and broke off two limbs. He said, “Liza, you move back over there,” as he pointed to the pines.

Eliza watched as he used the straw-tipped limbs to carefully cover their tracks. He backed up as he painstakingly went over every place they had dug. When he finished, there was no sign a human had ever been near here. It was just a colony of leaf-cutting town ant mounds visible due to the undisturbed red mounds.

Unk continued to back away covering their tracks until they were well back under the pines where the thick straw left no footprints. Every time Eliza tried to ask her uncle more about the mystery of the coins, he schussed her, “Shh, Girl, I’m workin’ right now. There’ll be time for talk later.”

She wanted to come up behind him and give him a good kick in the butt, but refrained. She had to know what was going on, and she wanted to know now.

As Unk finished and they walked away, she grabbed him from behind. “It’s time for you to let me in on what’s going—” She was interrupted by Unk forcefully pushing her down.

He plopped down by her in the straw. “Somebody’s comin’. Git quiet!”

As they huddled behind a big pine, they heard horses approaching. As they neared, one snorted and she heard the sound of two men talking. When they came into sight, it was easy to recognize one of the riders: He was too big to be anyone but Amos Long.

He was riding with another smaller man that Eliza didn’t recognize. They were deep in discussion as they were talking seriously about something of grave importance. It was evident that they were being secretive but, being in the open and desolate woods, were talking louder than they realized.

Long exclaimed bitterly, “I just can’t believe it was gone when I went back. I know exactly where I buried it. I had even marked it with a pine knot I jabbed in the ground.”

The smaller rider inquired, “Are you sure you were in the right spot?”

“You bet I’m sure, Rooster. The pine knot was there and everything. But when I dug down, it was gone.”

Even as Eliza listened, she spared a glance at Unk. He looked back at her and just shrugged his shoulders as if to say: Well, what do I know about it? He started to speak, but Eliza clamped her hand over his mouth and put a finger to her lips.

By now, the riders were out of earshot, but Eliza had heard enough to start piecing the puzzle together. However, there were still some blanks in this puzzle she couldn’t figure out, but she was kneeling behind a pine tree with the one person who could probably fill in the puzzle.

She looked at him beside her with his silly sideways grin. The answers lay within the mind of her uncle, Nathan Horace Dial—the world’s most innocent soul—but also, for now at least, the richest man in Ten Mile.

They squatted behind the pines until they were sure Amos and his friend, Rooster, were gone. They quickly began easing through the woods away from the riders and back toward home.

Neither had spoken since the riders went past. Several times Unk had started to speak, but Eliza had hushed him. She wanted to make sure the men were far past before a word was spoken.

She could tell that Unk was about to burst, wanting to talk. After they’d gone about a quarter mile, she turned, “All right, Unk. Tell me the story.”

“Sis, that was him! It was that bad man, Long, that killed the horse rider. I saw it all.

“Yep, I saw it all—over in the Big Pasture.”

“Go ahead, Unk.”

"I was with the sheep and had left them to walk over to check on somethin.'" He grinned, "No, really, I'd et a bunch of dewberries and got sick to my stomach. I was hunting a good place to relieve myself. I even had a good handful of leaves."

Eliza punched him before he could continue, "Unk, there is a thing called too much information, and I believe you're treading right on the line. Now what did you see, not what'd you do?"

Unk began, "This stranger was riding south along the Sugartown Road. Didn't seem to be in no hurry. Out of the woods came another rider. He approached the stranger and they were talkin'. They couldn't see me because I was squattin' in the bushes taking care of . . ."

"All right Unk, I got the picture. Was the second man Amos Long?"

"I couldn't tell at first. It wasn't till later that I knew for sure it wuz him. The two of 'em talked for a while. Then it all happened—and it happened real fast like."

"What happened?"

"Amos reached up and grabbed the rider by the arm and jerked him off his horse before the fellow knew what had happen. I saw the knife in his hand and it was all over. He stabbed 'em in the chest and then stood over him and cut his throat. Sister, it was the worst thing I ever seen in all me living days!"

Unk stood there sadly shaking his head. There was no doubt in Eliza's mind that what he was telling had happened; Unk was too innocent and pure to make something like this up. She hated the idea of him seeing this meanness take place and wondered how it would affect him, but before she could worry more, he began again, "The stranger laid there on the ground kind of jerkin' around for a while, then he got real still. I knew he was dead. Amos didn't even wait around 'til he was dead to start goin' through his bags. Yeller corn spilt everywhere, but I could see somethin' else bright and yeller pouring into Amos' hands: It was those gold coins! He stuffed them into a bag and rode off."

Unk stopped and grinned at Eliza, "I guess that one you found in the dirt was one he missed. That kind of makes you part of this mess too, don't it?"

Eliza scolded him, "You be quiet on that. What I want to know is how the money ended up in the ant hills and what was your part in that?"

Unk was at the best part of the story and he began actually acting out the next parts. Bending low, he mimicked following Amos: "As he rode off, he kept looking around to make sure no one had seen what just happened. He didn't have no idea I was squatting over there getting rid of my dewberries."

"Uncle Nathan—that's enough of that. Then what happened?"

"Well, he rode off into the woods. I'd seen which way he was headed and just slunk along that direction until I spotted his horse tied up. I took off my boots and did my best Indian scouting to find where Amos was.

"He was just finishin' digging a hole. I watched him put the flour sack of coins in a metal box and bury it. After he'd finished and covered the spot with leaves and pine straw, he made a cross of two pine knots on the ground. Then he carefully stepped off from two large pine trees, took out that bad knife again, and scraped a little bark off each tree."

"Unk, when and how did you get the money?"

"Well, I waited an hour or two just thinkin' and plannin'. When it got close to dark, I got that shovel Amos had been kind enough to leave for me, and dug up the metal box. Then I carefully filled the hole, moved his knots, and took off. However, I didn't go toward them anthills yet. First, I went the other way."

Unk winked, “I’d like to have seen Amos when he came back and started looking!” Eliza could just imagine watching Amos Long anxiously wandering the woods looking for his treasure spot. Even though this was serious business, she couldn’t help but smile and admire her uncle’s pluck and resourcefulness.

Now fully into the joy of telling his story, Unk continued, “I enjoyed stealin’—I mean borrowin’—the money. That big rascal Amos has always been mean to me, calling me ‘village idiot.’ I figgered this was just a little payback to the big man.”

“How’d you come up with the brilliant idea of hiding the money among the ants?”

“Sis, I was born at night—but not last night. I just figured it’d be easy to hide them there and easy to find it later.”

Eliza then got up right in Unk’s face, “But that isn’t your money. The man whom it belonged to got killed over it. We—you—can’t keep it. What do you plan to do?”

Unk inclined his head, “That’s why I put it in the ‘Ant National Bank.’ I figger that’s safer than any of them banks up in Alexandria. It’s safe there until we find out whom it b’longs to. Then we’ll return it to them.”

Eliza countered, “But if Amos or his crowd finds out you took it…” Unk interrupted and patted her on the shoulder, “Don’t worry. I’m the last person in the world he’d ever expect to take his’m money. I’m just gonna leave it right.”

Eliza stopped and stared closely into his face, “Why’d you show me?”

“Because you’re my niece—like my little sis—and I trust you more than anyone in the world. I know you won’t blab it around. And I wanted you to know so if something did happen to your Unk, you could take care of it.”

This gave Eliza pause for thought. “But what if—” Then she stopped and went in another direction, “What if no one ever claims it?”

Unk had a quick reply, “I done give that a lot of thought and prayer. The Lord showed me down in my heart that if it’s not claimed in a year, what I’m supposed to do with it—all sixty-thirteen pieces of it.”

Eliza couldn’t help but be a little nosy, “What’s your plan?”

“I can’t tell you—yet. If I told you now, I might hafta kill you.”

He slashed an imaginary knife in her direction and laughed. Eliza immediately went after her uncle’s weak spot: He was the most ticklish person she knew. She goosed him good, and he went to hollering, so she stopped and said, “Hush, Unk—Amos and Rooster are going to hear you and come get your money.”

Serious once again, she asked, “Unk, do you realize how much those coins are probably worth?”

“I got a pretty good idea: worth enough that Amos Long was willin’ to kill a man to get his hands on ‘em.”

Eliza asked, “But you wouldn’t use some of that money to he’p yourself? I mean there are things you could use.”

Unk shook his head as if Eliza had never ever even looked at him before. “What would your Unk do with a bunch of money? It’d just mess me up and keep me from being happy as I am right now. Naw, I’m gonna just wait a year and see what happens. Those sixty-thirteen gold coins ain’t going nowhere. I don’t believe the leaf ants will eat them.”

He then began walking slowly toward the Big Pasture where his sheep awaited him. Eliza watched him until he disappeared into the trees. She wondered if this mystery of the coins would

have a happy or sad ending. Only time would tell. You could never predict anything with Unk Dial involved.

Eliza smiled. Now what did Poppa say—that Unk was the most complicated simple person he'd ever known? Or was it he was the simplest complicated person?

She shook her head. That baby could be described either way.

Chapter 10

This may be last time I ever see the ocean. Those were Joseph's thoughts as the Amelia neared the mouth of the Mississippi River.

A brilliant falling star flared across the sky. Its trail of light was brilliant with a reddish glow that lingered in the sky. It had streaked toward the north—the very direction they were now sailing as they entered into the river.

He saw more falling stars, but none that could match the red one. He wondered if it was an omen.

Joseph looked to the south and east one more time. As far as he could see, the Gulf stretched to the horizon. He deeply breathed the salt air and felt its familiarity in his lungs. All of his life he had lived on the edge of the sea—before this journey, he'd never ventured more than a day's walk from the North Atlantic coast of County Mayo. Now after an immense journey of over a month and four thousand miles, he was leaving the sea. He squinted toward the northeast and pointed in the direction he guessed Ireland was. He was a long way from home and felt it deeply as the homesickness pressed tightly against his soul.

He wondered if he would ever see or smell the ocean again. He was heading up the Mississippi River into a new world—into this land called America. For better or worse, this unknown land seemed to be the place of his destiny. He gave a heavy sigh; however, at the same time an excitement was building in him: this was the land of his destiny. He liked the way that sounded.

The Amelia entered the Mississippi through what was called the Main Pass. It continued for several miles until they turned northward into the main channel of the great river. Joseph stood on the deck and whispered, "Well, let's see what this new land of destiny has to offer."

Initially, all that he could see in every direction was treeless, stark marsh. The reeds and marsh grass were filled with open spots of water. It was hard to tell where the river ended and the marsh began. As they continued upstream, a small bank appeared on each side of the river that delineated it from the surrounding wetlands.

The ship was now several miles up the Mississippi River. Joseph spent all of that afternoon watching the land of Louisiana pass. It was hard to believe a river this large existed. Compared to the local rivers of County Mayo, this slithering brown serpent was indescribable. It seemed to stretch a mile wide and was filled with thick muddy water. The rich brown water looked thick enough to walk on. On its surface floated huge trees and other debris. The current of the river swirled, eddied, and nearly seemed to be alive. It had a strong smell that was completely different from any body of water he had been on.

Gill had earlier told him that the Indians named the big river, "The Father of Waters." Seeing its vastness now, Joe understood that name. He whistled and said, "What a river!"

Gill appeared on deck just before dark. He whistled and said, "Man, the river is high. I've never seen it this high before. I bet there is flooding upriver."

Then he pointed ahead, “That big left-hand turn is called Plaquemine Bend. The Americans have two forts guarding this key spot in the river.

“That one on the left is Fort Jackson. The one past it, and on the right side, is Fort St. Phillip. It’s impossible for any ship to pass this spot without coming close to the guns of one or the other.”

For the first time Joseph saw an American flag. A huge red and white striped flag with a blue square in the left top corner fluttered in the wind from the rampart of Ft. Jackson. As they neared, Joseph could see the blue square was full of white stars. Watching the flag, Joseph tried to count the stars. He could see that it had six rows across and five down. He asked Gill, “Why does that flag have what looks like thirty stars?”

“I believe it’s for each of their states. Those people keep adding states all of the time so the number changes. Then those red and white stripes represent their thirteen original colonies or states.”

Joseph watched the flag as the ship moved past it. He then saw the same flag flying as they passed Fort St. Philip on the right. These flags reinforced something that was becoming more evident with every minute: he realized he was in a foreign country—a place called America.

That night at supper, as the Amelia continued its winding one-hundred-mile journey upriver to New Orleans, Joseph ate with the crew. Several of the men spoke to him in French or rudimentary English phrases. Others ignored him. But one man never took his eyes off Joseph—this was one of the few times he’d seen his fellow swimmer André since their adventure earlier on the voyage. Gill had warned him to watch out for and avoid André. He’d been put to shame by the overboard incident, and Gill warned Joseph, “Watch him. He’ll try something before you leave the ship. The closer we are to port, the more watchful you should be.”

As the men ate, there was a happy mix of rowdy laughter and loud talk. It was the sound of men nearing the end of a long journey. In the midst of this, André stood up, angrily pointing at Joseph and uttering a long series of sentences in French. Joseph did not understand much but could easily tell André was not wishing him well. He picked up the term “Irishman” several times as well as “New Orleans.” However, there was one term André used repeatedly. It seemed to Joseph as if it was something like “jaune jacques.” Over and over, he used the term and seemed to spit it out toward Joseph: “jaune jacques”—“jaune jacques.”

With the mention of those two words, the entire galley became deathly quiet. Now no one was eating, talking, or laughing. An invisible heaviness hung over the room.

Everyone was staring at Joseph. Confused, he turned to Gill, “What is he saying? And what is that ‘jaune jacques’?”

Gill seemed uneasy and looked from André to Joseph and back again. Finally, he spoke, “The term he is using is ‘yellow jack.’ He’s saying that the yellow jack is going to get you in New Orleans.”

Joseph wondered as to how two words could instantly change the emotions of a room full of sailors. He had detected a seriousness among men when André had uttered, “yellow jack.”

So he asked, “What is ‘yellow jack,’ Mr. Gill?”

“It’s yellow fever—a mysterious disease that occurs during the hot months in New Orleans. New immigrants—like you—seem to be most susceptible to it.”

Gill pointed at André, “He’s telling you that they’ve got a betting pool going on how long you’ll be alive in New Orleans. He says you won’t last two months in the city. If the cholera, murder, or flu don’t get you quick, yellow jack will before fall.”

Joseph had stood and was facing André and the other men. Without looking at Gill, he asked, “What else did he say? I want to hear it all.” Gill hesitated but Joseph insisted, “I want to hear it all.”

“He said new Irish workers are simply ‘food for the fever.’ It kills thousands of them every year. You’ll be one of them because the life of an Irishman is worth next to nothing here. The Irish work the dangerous jobs that they don’t even put the slaves on. He said you’re headed for what every Irishman gets in New Orleans: a wet grave—in some forgotten spot.”

When Gill finished, Joseph still had his eyes locked on André.

“Tell André that I’m not afraid of yellow jack or whatever he calls it. I didn’t come out of Ireland to come across here and die young.” Gill grabbed Joseph by the collar, and pushed him from the room before more trouble could start.

The next morning the ship was heading further upriver, but the surrounding land had changed. There were now levees on each side with cultivated fields lining the areas behind the levees. They were also beginning to encounter river traffic. Boats of every size and description plied the waters of the river. Joseph watched schooners, large masted ships like the Amelia, and many smaller vessels darting about.

About ten miles further upstream, Gill said, “Follow me and I’ll show you something else.” He led Joseph to the starboard side of the ship and pointed past the levee. “That right there is where the Battle of New Orleans was fought in 1815.”

“Who was fighting in that battle?”

“The Americans were fighting us British in the final battle of what was called the War of 1812. In fact, this battle actually occurred after the peace treaty had been signed. Word just didn’t get down here in time.”

“I’m assuming the Americans won?”

“Yep, the Americans led by General Andrew Jackson beat a larger British army badly.”

“Good for the…” Joseph tried to stop himself, but it was too late. He didn’t mean to offend his English friend.

Gill laughed, “Moore, you’re going to have to let go of that sooner or later.”

“I know, I know . . . a bitter man or a better man. I’m really trying.”

“Well, since you love English history—especially if we’re getting beat, let me tell you more about the battle:

“Jackson and the small American army had help from many citizens in the New Orleans area, including the Pirate Jean Lafitte and his band of men.”

“Who is Jean Lafitte?”

Gill continued as he was enjoying sharing this information to curious ears, “Lafitte was a French pirate who had become rich in the slave trade and the economy of supplying things people wanted but couldn’t get legally.”

“Was he a hero to the Americans?”

“To some he was, to others he was considered a thief and scoundrel.”

“It sounds as if these Americans are unusual people.”

The Englishman pointed toward the smoke from the chimneys of the city of New Orleans, “You’re about to find out for yourself—just for yourself.”

Finally, with Gill and Joseph still standing on the deck, the ship began the huge turn that formed the crescent of the Mississippi. Gill said, “Joseph, I have one more story to tell you, if you don’t mind. It has a lot to do with this city you’re coming to.”

As usual, the old man had to fill and light his pipe before continuing: “A couple of decades ago I sailed with an Arab man named Oman. He didn’t speak lots of English but was a wonderful shipmate and friend. He was also a heck of a storyteller. He claimed this story from his hometown was true.

“Oman said that an old wise man sat at the city gate each day. He gave advice as well as directions. On one particular day, a young stranger approached. This traveler nodded at the gate and asked, ‘Tell me old man, what kind of city is this one here?’

“The wise man at the gate asked, ‘Well, first tell me about the city you came from.’

“The traveler snorted, ‘It was a terrible place. They treated me unfairly. That’s why I left and am looking for a good place.’

The old man sadly replied, ‘I’m sorry, but this city is just like the one you left. ’

“An hour later, a second traveler approached the gate. His question was similar, ‘Tell me about this city?’

“As you can guess, the old man asked, ‘Tell me first about the city you came from.’ The stranger smiled and told of the friends he’d left behind in the city of his birth. He said he was looking for new opportunities in business here.

“The old man also smiled, ‘You’ll find success here—because our city is just like the one you left.’”

The Englishman named Gill, who had become the one and only friend Joseph Moore had found on this French ship, stood quietly. He finally added as he turned to leave, “This city of New Orleans is just like that story. You’ll find exactly what you’re looking for—be it good or bad.”

Chapter 11

As Eliza and her father Willard guided their horses down the trail toward the Weeks' home, the going was tough. A rain two days ago had made the entire area a sea of mud.

The horses continued to sink in mud, and progress was slow as they made their weekly trip to check on Uncle Arch and Aunt Mollie. The plodding conditions allowed more time for Eliza and her dad to visit as her brother Eli walked behind them.

The talk of the community was still the death of the mysterious stranger and Willard Clark commented on the various stories floating around. He detected a reluctance on Eliza's part to say much on the murder. So he asked her, "Liza girl, you sure are tight-lipped. Something bothering you?"

Eliza winced, "No, Poppa—I guess just seeing that man's dead body laying there has kind of stayed with me." For a brief moment, she thought of telling her father about Unk's secret, the money at the ant hills, and Amos' involvement in the killing. Then she remembered her vow to Unk. No—she couldn't tell—and wouldn't tell.

So she tried to subtly change the subject: "Poppa, do you think that murder had anything to do with blood feud between the Tyler and Wilson families?"

"Nah, I don't believe so. A Ten Mile feud is usually between two families and only spreads to those who get involved. That poor man was just traveling through and had the bad luck to get bushwhacked."

"Where did that term 'bushwhacked' come from?"

"Well baby, it's a word describing how revenge is sometimes carried out in this area. Someone will hide in the bushes, usually at night, and shoot an unsuspecting person they have a grudge with. You've heard it said, 'Never sit too near your campfire at night—that makes you too good a target.'"

Willard Clark continued, "This fear of bushwhacking is why you've got to be careful approaching a house after dark. My daddy always advised me never to approach a dwelling at night.

"The threat of bushwhacking was so ingrained that none of the men would venture out onto the porch at night. They might send their wife out to talk, but the man wouldn't go out himself and present an easy target for a bushwhacker. Daddy always said anyone approaching his home at night would probably be greeted with a load of buckshot."

Eliza continued to steer the conversation away from the murder, "What started the Tyler-Wilson feud?"

Willard Clark clicked to his horse as they came out of a muddy spot. "Liza, believe it or not, it all started—oh, 'bout six, seven years ago over a stolen pig. Clem Wilson supposedly stole a woods hog from the Tyler herd. That led to accusations and a bad fight. Then that led to more trouble and the burning of the Wilson family's pine pile. Before long, the Tyler barn was burned—and then about ten of the Wilson cattle were poisoned. Then Clem Wilson's house mysteriously burned down. He claimed it was a burnout by the Tyler clan."

Her dad just shook his head, “When things get out of hand between two families, it’s just like one of our winter woods fires, the wind picks it up and there’s no controlling it. That’s just how this feud has been. Sooner or later, someone’s gonna get kilt because of it. That’s part of the reason we call it a ‘blood feud.’”

Eliza asked, “Why won’t the Tyler and Wilson families settle the blood feud? I’ve got friends in both families, and I wish they’d get along.”

“Well, that’s the other reason it’s called a ‘blood feud.’ It gets between families and their blood—and blood is always thicker than water. People begin choosing up sides and it only gets worse. Once again, my daddy had a saying: ‘A Redbone is a wonderful friend to have, but the worst enemy you could ever want.’ This infighting and clan warfare is just a part of our culture. Always has been; probably always will be.”

“But, Poppa, what can end a blood feud like the one between the Tylers and Wilsons?”

“Sadly, I’ve only seen about two ways they will end: one is when the burning, revenge, and killing get to the point where one family just picks up and leaves.”

“What’s the second way a feud can end?”

“Liza Jane, once or twice I’ve seen some outside force—an outside group of people, a drought, or hard times—be the instrument to cause folks to come together to unite against an outside threat. Our people will fight each other at the drop of a hat or insult—however, we are just as well known to quickly unite against any external foe.”

“Poppa, I sure wish those families would have something to cause them to drop it. Maybe something will happen from the outside to end it.”

Riding along, Willard Clark didn’t answer for a while. Eliza watched her dad’s face, as he seemed to be surveying the sky for any weather changes. He finally spoke as he pointed in the direction of the Calcasieu and the “civilized” region beyond it: “Liza, there may be bad things or bad people out there that would be way worse than any Ten Mile blood feud.”

Her dad was quiet after that, and Eliza knew him well enough to respect that.

Coming in sight of the of the Weeks’ home, as if to lift the mood, Willard Clark laughed, “One of my favorite things about Arch and Mollie is how they like to say ‘A big’ when they’re describing something.”

Eliza knew exactly what her dad meant. Eli, who had caught up, didn’t understand so he asked, “Poppa, what do you mean?”

“Son, when either of them describes something kind of unusual or outlandish they’ll say it. If talking about a recent flood, one of them will say, ‘Now that was A big rain!’ Or, ‘Say, Babe, that was A big deer!’ They’ll really bear down on that ‘A’ before the ‘big.’ Just watch and listen.”

The old couple was already out on their porch, glad to have company. The trail to their place showed little wear. Evidently, Aunt Mollie had been waiting for them for she said, “I’m glad y’all have come. I made a syrup cake yesterday.”

Eliza smiled. There was nothing she liked better than rich, moist syrup cake. Uncle Arch didn’t make his own syrup anymore but others always brought him plenty of it. He’d tell them, “Well, y’all are just bringin’ it so Mollie will make her syrup cake, and you can get you a piece of it.”

Aunt Mollie sent Eliza out to the well to pull up the milk jug she kept in it. Syrup cake and cold milk were a combination hard to beat. The old woman happily heated up several pieces of cake on the wood stove and the rich smell soon filled the house as they visited.

When there was a small break in the conversation, Eli innocently asked, “Aunt Mollie, that was some kind of rain last week, wasn’t it?”

Before she could lean forward and speak, Uncle Arch blurted, “Say now, that was A big rain! It was a real frog-choker of a rain!”

Eli slapped his knee, convulsed in laughter.

Uncle Arch looked puzzled, “What’d I say that was so funny?”

Willard said, “Oh, he’s just got the ‘sillies.’ Don’t pay him no mind.”

However, Eli wasn’t through. He said, “Uncle Arch, did you hear about that huge black boar hog that one of the Sweat boys killed?”

Aunt Mollie sprung into action while Arch was trying to down his mouthful of coffee. She said, “Honey Babe, that was A big hog! I saw it myself and its feet dragged from the limb where they hung it to dress it.”

Once again, in spite of Eliza’s kick, Eli was laughing loudly. Aunt Mollie turned to Eliza’s poppa, “Son, is that boy all right? He’s gonna split a gut laughing.”

It was at that moment that Willard Clark turned the conversation. He began, “Aunt Mollie, we done brought you something. It’s a poor trade for your syrup cake.” He pulled out a gallon can and handed it to her. Because it was mid-May, everyone in the room knew what it was, but it was still a treat to watch her face.

She opened the can and exclaimed, “Willard, you brought me huckleberries! You know how I like making huckleberry cobbler. Arch and I are too old to get out and pick berries anymore.”

The arguing was ready to start, “Speak for yourself, old woman. I’m still a hooking bull and all of you know it.”

Still looking at the gallon of huckleberries, she snorted, “Your bull done hooked out as far as I can see. You are just full of bull, that’s all.”

Eliza interrupted the looming argument, “Eli and I picked them along Cherry Winche. The bushes are loaded and the birds haven’t got to them too badly yet.” Aunt Mollie thanked her, adding, “Baby, it takes a lot of picking to get a whole gallon of huckleberries.” She kissed Eliza on the forehead and said, “When you and your daddy come next week, I’ll have some huckleberry cobbler waiting on you.”

Eliza’s dad said, “Aunt Mollie, you know you just bribe me so I’ll keep coming down this cow trail you call a road. You know syrup cake and huckleberry cobbler will keep me coming cross Cherry Winche to see you.”

Mollie waved her hand in mock disgust at Willard, and turned to Eliza, “Baby, have I ever told you how Cherry Winche Creek got its name?” Eliza had heard the same story by Aunt Mollie about a dozen times, but before she could reply, the old woman started, “Well, it was told to me that once on this creek, about five miles north of here, there lived a man who had a full-blooded Cherokee Indian wife. Some say he was a Negro. Others weren’t so sure, but his wife was definitely Indian. The man died suddenly and was buried along the creek. The Cherokee woman had nowhere to go and no family, so she stayed in their little cabin.

“Other arriving settlers began calling the creek that ‘Cherokee Woman’s Creek.’ Soon that got changed to Cherokee Wench’s Creek.”

Eli, who was leaning on Aunt Mollie’s knee, asked, “What’s a wench?”

“Well, baby, it’s a word for a woman that kind of lives alone. It can mean several things—some of them not good. Pretty soon, the creek became known as Cherokee Winche’s Creek. That just naturally got shortened down to ‘Cherry Winche Creek.’”

Uncle Arch was ready to take on his wife's Cherry Winche story: "No, no, no. That ain't how it happened. My mom, who'd been told it by her mom, told me many times how the creek got its name. Here's how it goes—"

"Archie Weeks, I ain't through with my part."

"Woman, you wouldn't be through with it by dark. It's my turn now."

He turned to the helpless Eli, who glanced from one to the other, "Boy, this here's the real story."

Aunt Mollie sadly shook her head as she yielded the floor. Eliza wondered if they argued like this even when no one else was present.

Arch said, "Son, it was named because of the cherry bark oaks that grow along its banks. They are the finest and straightest of the red oak family and are still common along here. The Indians, in their language, called it Cherry Bark Creek, and somehow got it scrambled up in English where it ended up being 'Cherry Winche.'"

Mollie scoffed and commented as if her husband couldn't hear her, "Last time he told the story he claimed it was wild cherry trees—now it's cherry bark oaks. The old feller can't remember his own name half the time."

Their sparring continued with each other. Neither of them noticed what Eliza saw: her dad and Eli were leaning on each other, both snoring softly.

Chapter 12

Nothing—or no one—could have prepared Joseph for what he saw when the Amelia rounded the big bend of the river and New Orleans came into view. Gill had joined him on deck to see his reaction to the city and the old Englishman was not disappointed. Joe stood in amazement and said, “I never imagined there could have been this many ships, buildings, and people in one place in the whole world!”

The city he saw was a place bursting at the seams. It had doubled in population in just twenty years, now topping over one hundred thousand residents. Half of these were immigrants, primarily Irish and German. A busy city of factories, slaughterhouses, and muddy streets, it had quickly become the South’s biggest city as well as the fifth largest in all of America.

As the Amelia began easing toward the dock, Joseph stared in wonder at the river traffic and the chaotic activity and noise of the wharves. He was especially fascinated with his first views of steamboats. There were dozens of them docked along the levee. Some were belching black smoke, hissing steam, or loudly gunning their engines.

The constant movement on the wharf contributed their own sounds. The crash of crates, chains hoisting cotton bales, coughing and chugging steam engines, as well as whistles and bells from every ship—all created an ear-splitting racket. Joseph had never seen—nor heard—anything quite like it!

Joseph tried to take in every sight of this new land of America. On the dock were men of seemingly every color. He had never seen black people before, and they seemed to be everywhere.

As the ship came to the Port Street wharf, Joseph could easily see to his left the French Quarter, the original higher elevated area of the city. The spires of St. Louis Cathedral caught his eye as it did any first-time arrival on the river.

The next two days were spent unloading the ship of its bounty. Hundreds of Irish whiskey barrels rolled down the gangplank and onto waiting wagons. Joseph worked as hard as he ever had in his life. His introduction to the sapping Louisiana humidity began that day. Within an hour, his clothes were sweat- soaked and dripping. This stifling heat was different from anything he had experienced back home.

A skinny American deckhand carried on an ongoing conversation with Joseph, as they would pass on the gangplank. Noticing Joseph’s profuse sweating as well as his accent, he easily recognized him as a newcomer. With a big grin and a playful shove, he laughed, “Boy, you think it’s hot now; just wait ’til August gets here!”

Then “Skinny” added, “New Orleans folks, that can afford to, leave in the summer. They go north where it’s cooler, the mosquitoes aren’t as bad, and diseases like the yellow fever aren’t found. Everyone else, like us roustabouts, stays here and sweats, just hoping and praying we don’t get hurt. This is a hard town—a read hard town.”

For Joe, there were so many new words and terms he'd heard already. Determined to learn more, he asked, "What's a roustabout?"

Skinny proudly grinned, "It's guys like us who load and unload these ships. Lots of us ride on the steamers up and down the river doing the same kind of work."

When they took a break, the deckhands began discussing the level of the river. The Mississippi had broken through at various spots northward. Everyone wondered if New Orleans would be spared this same fate.

Skinny, who had evidently taken a liking to Joseph, hollered at him as they passed on the gangplank, "Hey, St. Patrick over there—I bet you ain't never even seen a snake! How 'bout it?"

The truth was Joseph hadn't. Snakes didn't live on the island of Ireland. As the man had just alluded to, legend had it that St. Patrick had banished the snakes from the island. However, Joseph knew the cold climate of Ireland was the reason no snakes existed—rather than the good saint's eviction notice.

Joseph commented over his shoulder, "There's a saying in my part of Ireland: 'Our island was too cold for the snakes and the Roman armies, but we like it just fine.' You see, those Romans armies decided against colonizing Ireland—it was just too windy and cold for them. They named it 'Hibernia,' which in their language meant 'Land of Winter.'"

On his next trip down the gangplank, Joseph, in his best Irish brogue said, "Well, we don't have any snakes to see in me country. Maybe I can help you get rid of the population around here."

Skinny laughed. "Come on. I got a big black moccasin in the ditch in front of my house that you can come run off anytime you get ready!"

Joseph asked, "What's a moccasin?"

"Oh, it's the blackest, ugliest, and meanest snake that we have in our waters. You'll get to know them when you start digging in the swamps. You know that is what you'll be doing—digging somewhere. That's why we call you Irish 'diggers.'"

Joe laughed, "I guess I could do worse."

Finally, the last barrel rolled off the Amelia. The Cap'n was in a fine mood as he began paying the men. The men were in even a finer form as they stuffed the money in their pockets and stepped off the levee ready to blow most of it in the city of New Orleans.

Joseph wasn't quite sure what to do next and walked toward the levee, but the call of the Cap'n stopped him. "Moore—Moore, come over here." He looked back and the Cap'n and Gill were standing together at the top of the gangplank.

He eased over not quite knowing what to expect. Cap'n was talking to Gill who was nodding his head in agreement. Gill then turned to Joseph, "Cap'n here—who don't say a good word unless he means it—wants to thank you for your help. You did the best daubing he'd ever seen and your work on unloading the ship was noticed by all of the men. He wants to give you something."

The Cap'n approached Joseph with a small cloth bag. When he placed it in the boy's hand, the older man smiled and said, "Merci beaucoup."

Joseph opened the bag and couldn't believe what he saw—it was money. Real money! Real American coins. He didn't know anything about United States coins but knew it was more money than he'd ever held before.

He could hardly speak. "Well—uh, Cap'n. I want—I want to just say, thank you. Thank ye very kindly."

The Cap'n never said another word. The look in his eyes was never forgotten by Joseph Moore—it was a look of respect—a look he liked and wanted to see again on the faces of those he would meet in this new land.

It was time to leave. He knew no proper way to say goodbye to old Gill. They both knew their paths would most probably never cross again. "Thanks for your words and friendship."

"You're right welcome, Son. Right welcome. Just keep your eyes open out there." He pointed with his pipe toward the city. "There are lots of vultures out there. And don't let your path cross with André. He'll be roaring drunk and is a dangerous man. Keep your eyes open. Also stay away from New Orleans' policemen; they love using their clubs on the heads of Irishmen!

This kind Englishman turned back toward Joseph and held out his closed right hand. He waited for the Irishman to extend his. Joseph hesitated, holding back.

"Come on boy, put your hand out. I've got a present for ye."

Slowly and cautiously, Joseph put forth his open hand.

"This is something just for you from me. It'll come in handy where ye're goin." A heavy shiny object dropped solidly into Joseph's hand. At first inspection, it seemed to be a fine pocket watch, but he then realized it was a compass: a worn silver-plated seaman's compass. Joseph examined it and turned it over in his hand. He was filled with total amazement—it was without a doubt the nicest thing he had ever held in his life.

"There's no way I can keep that, sir. It's too nice and expensive and probably means the world to you." Joseph, not wanting to, but knowing he must, thrust it back toward the kind man. "Thank ye kindly, but I can't keep it. It's too nice."

Gill pushed Joe's hand away, "Why that is the very reason I'm giving it to you, because it is nice. A man starting a new life in a new country needs a good compass to guide him. I insist—it's yours."

Joseph couldn't even look up at the man. His eyes were mesmerized by the shiny compass. Then remembering his manners, he looked directly into the eyes of Gill, "I thank you kindly. I'll take good care of it and I'll try me best as I carry it to remember your words on being better, not bitter. I'll really…try my best."

Gill detected tears building in the young Irishman's eyes. It didn't matter—they were running down his own cheeks, too.

Joseph composed himself and said, "Mr. Gill, I'll always remember where it came from."

"I'm sure you will, Son. I'm very sure you will."

"Thank you, Sir." He warmly embraced Gill and whispered, "A better man, not a bitter man. I'm gonna be better—thanks to you." He stepped back, saluted the captain and stepped off the gangplank.

Joseph Moore now officially set foot in his new country of America. Walking along the levee, he was a sight to see: Seventeen years old, wearing clothes that were grimy, ill fitting, and smelled like tar. He sported a shock of unruly sandy hair. Other than what he was wearing, all he carried was a compass around his neck, a small bag of American money and a pebble from an Irish cemetery.

He pulled the compass from under his shirt. "Well, let's see where this thing will lead me in this new world." Consulting his compass, Joseph headed toward the American sector of the city and its Irish Channel, where many of his countrymen lived.

The crew had warned him about the dangers and temptations of New Orleans. The Captain and Gill had volunteered to walk with him from the wharf toward the American sector. However, Joseph would have none of it. “I’ve got here just fine and I’ll be okay. Thanks anyway.”

On the levee, he quickly blended in with the crowds of workers, street vendors, seamen, and vagrants. He looked no different from any of the rest of the working poor, young Irishmen of New Orleans.

An old man and woman selling pralines on the levee watched him approach. Joseph stopped at their wares and gazed at the strange foods before looking into their faces. Turning to leave, he gave them a quiet nod and a “good morning” before passing on.

The old man spat and told his wife, “There goes another young digger to die as food for the fever. How many have we seen traipse by on their way to die?”

His wife stared after the back of the disappearing boy and said half to herself, “No, I’m not so sure about that one. Did you see the look in his green eyes?”

Not far from the wharves and docks, small knots of men and boys lazed in the shade. Some were looking for work, but most were determined to avoid it at all costs. There were better ways of making money than rolling barrels or loading cotton.

Like a flock of vultures, this group eyed every person coming from the docks. They knew they could make their money off sailors with a pocket of gold or green immigrants, far from home and alone.

Two of the younger men came forth to greet Joseph. Blocking Joseph’s path, one of them playfully asked, “Well, what county are ye from, me lad?”

The man had an Irish accent and Joseph started to relax as he recognized the voice of a fellow countryman. Then he recalled something Gill had wisely told him, “Remember that not every Irishman you meet will be a friend.”

With this in mind, he kept walking but now both men blocked his path. They tried to look friendly and helpful, but Joseph was instantly suspicious.

The first one asked, “Where are you going? Do you have a place to stay?”

“I’m fine, thank ye. Good day to you.”

“We’d sure like to help you if you’d stop.”

Joseph kept marching forward, determined not to stop.

He didn’t see a smaller boy run out from behind a barrel. The boy, about age eight or nine, stepped right in front of Joseph where he had to either stop or walk over him.

The boy, a true street urchin if Joseph had ever seen one, stood toe-to-toe with Joseph and pronounced, “For half a bit, I bet I can tell where ye got those shoes!”

The boy pointed to Joseph’s feet. Joseph looked down and was embarrassed as to how ragged his shoes were. He felt slightly better when he saw the boy was barefooted.

The boy repeated, this time louder, in as clear a Galway accent as Joseph had ever heard, “I bet yer half a bit, I can tell ye where ye got those shoes. If I’m right, ye owe me. If I’m wrong, I’ll pay ye.” The boy procured a shiny coin from his pocket and said, “There it is. I’ll bet ye.”

Joseph had decided that a plan of silence was the best defense against this persistent boy.

“Come on, I bet you this coin I can tell you exactly where you got those shoes—even though I know you’re new here.”

Joseph wasn’t about to bet this boy anything. Especially with the other vultures gathered around ready to pounce on his every word.

“Look, I don’t want to bet you nothing. I don’t care to talk about my shoes or where I got them.”

When the boy heard his reply, his much-rehearsed act kicked into high gear.

"Yes sir, I can tell you where you got them shoes: you got them on your feet!"

The older men who had crept up all laughed uproariously. Several of the group began stating that Joseph owed the boy a half bit. He had correctly told where he "got those shoes": on his feet.

Joseph looked around for some help or support but the street was empty save for this crew.

They descended on him like a pack of wolves. "You bet him. I heard ye. Give him his money. It's only fair."

From their voices, he realized they were all Irish. It only served to make him madder. They've forgotten one thing about a good Irishman. He'll fight—especially over his money. Joseph had a bag full of money but they weren't going to take it—not a half bit or all of it—without a fight.

When the surrounding crowd realized pressure wouldn't work, they went to their backup plan.

"Shame, shame on you. You made a promise and won't keep it. What county are you from? Your parents would be ashamed of you for not keeping your end of a bet with an innocent boy."

Joseph had just about had enough. "I don't owe him anything, and none of you can make me, shame me, or force me to give him the time of day."

With that they "bum rushed" him. That was a term any Irishman knew. They surrounded him and pushed him roughly to the ground. He could feel prying hands going through his pockets as the bigger ones held him down. He kicked and squirmed but within seconds, the weight of his pockets was lightened and his shirt ripped.

Suddenly a whistle and shout brought this melee to a frozen halt. The cry of "Police" was enough to stop every one of the attackers. They all relaxed their grip on Joseph and stepped back before running.

But the approaching policeman's call did not stop one member emerging from this wad of arms, legs, and heads. When the bigger men let go of Joseph's pinned arms he became a whirlwind of action. He got a fine right to the nose of the biggest man who had earlier been breaking his ribs and suffocating him. Another conspirator was holding his palm open viewing what he had pilfered from the victim's pockets. Joseph kicked him as hard as he could and the man went down in a heap with the contents of his palm scattering in every direction.

As the group scattered, he made three cat-like steps and seized the young boy. He got him by the nape of the neck and tried to twist an ear off before roughly shoving him away.

By now, the crowd was running in every direction. Only Joseph stood where the trouble had been. On impulse, he knelt down, scooped up a loose potato-sized cobblestone and flung it at the back of one of the scurrying men. It found its mark right in the small of the back and he heard the man go "Uhhh" before cutting loose with a string of cuss words as he put his right hand over the spot where the rock had hit.

As they ran out of "rock shot" but not quite out of earshot, he shouted one of his favorite Irish curses, "Six horse-loads of graveyard clay on top of you!" Since his attackers had been his own countrymen, he added a curse any Irishman would understand, "—and the curse of Cromwell on the whole lot of you!"

Dusting himself off, Joseph was right proud of himself for the account he'd given. Most of all, he was proud and pleased that his money and precious pebble were securely tucked into a bag he'd tied and placed inside his pants. He laughed aloud as he recalled the confused face of the man he had kicked. When the man opened his hand and saw nothing but a few smooth

stones, he looked sick. Later on as he told and retold the story of this official greeting to the Crescent City, he would call it “the Second Battle of New Orleans.”

The policeman rode up on his horse and looked down at the disheveled dirty teen. One shoe lay on the cobblestones and his shirt was torn. Blood oozed from a cut above his eye. The taste of blood was in Joseph’s mouth and he spat onto the pavement.

The law officer stared intently for what seemed like a long time. Joseph, not knowing what to do or say, simply stood there, his green eyes still glowing from the scrap. He had a small silly grin on his face that went well with the cut above his eye and dirt in his hair.

However, that grin vanished when the policeman dismounted from his horse and slowly walked, billy club in hand, toward Joseph.

Chapter 13

“Poppa, why can you be so sure there will always be an ‘Easter cold spell?’“ That was Eliza’s question as she and her dad hoed among their snap beans. It being mid-April, most of the settlers had put their entire spring garden in the ground, but not the Clark family. Willard Clark would never plant his okra, peas, or small patch of cotton until after Easter.

He would solemnly tell Eliza, “Them’s warm weather crops—okra, peas, and cotton—if you plant them before the Easter cold snap, you’ll just be wasting your time and re-planting later.”

Eliza questioned her dad on this, “Poppa, if Easter varies from year to year, how can there always be a cold snap at Easter?”

Her dad shook his head. “Liza, all I know is since I been your age and younger, it always turns a little colder right at Easter. It might be a few days before—like in three days on Good Friday—or it might be a day or so after, but grant you me, there’s going to be an Easter Cold Snap.”

He pointed to the three pecan trees in their yard. “Lookee there, those pecans ain’t budded out yet. They know cold weather is coming. You can fool lots of the trees, but you can’t hardly fool a pecan tree.” He then scanned the sky and seemed to be smelling the air. “It sure does look ‘rainyfied’ today.” It was one of her poppa’s favorite words to use. Eliza liked the way he said it: ‘rain-e-fied.’

Sure enough, three days later on April 13—Good Friday—it turned cloudy and the wind turned from the south. By afternoon, this wind brought in the first rain. Eliza stood out on the porch as the big drops splattered in the dusty yard. The wind was blowing strong and flapping the clothes on the line. Her mom came to the door. “Baby, go out there and get those clothes in before the rain gets hard.”

By the time Eliza got the clothes in, the rain had started in earnest. The south wind drove the rain sideways and even the chairs on the porch were soon wet. She retreated inside the front door and watched the cascading rain. Her dad joined her. “Yep, it’s just like I said. That south wind, then the rain, and now the wind’ll turn and our cold snap will be here.”

“Poppa, how can you be so sure?”

“I can just smell it. Anyway, when you get the south wind blowing those clouds north all day, it means rain and a raw north wind will be blowing them all back within a day. Never fails. Never fails.” He stood there watching the pelting rain. The drip off the cedar shingle roof soon became a torrent.

For the next hour, it rained as hard as Eliza could remember. As is common in the spring in Louisiana, cracks of lightning and accompanying thunder signaled the arrival of the front. She stayed at the door even as the rest of the family retreated inside to the quieter front room.

Her father came to look outside. The rain was still blowing sideways and the yard was now a small lake—this was a serious rain. Eliza waited expectantly for one of her dad’s weather statements. He was full of dozens of old sayings concerning the weather. She didn’t have to wait long. Looking about, he commented, “It’s raining bull heifers, and enough hay to feed them.” She giggled—that saying was one of her favorites.

The “bull-heifer rain” continued all night. As Eliza and her family lay safely tucked in their beds, they could hear the heavy rain on the roof all night long. It must have been after midnight when the wind changed out of the north. One thing about living in a pioneer home was that you always knew when the weather turned cold. It did not take long for the cold wind to make its presence felt throughout the drafty house.

By morning, the rain had slackened. The light drizzle was driven by a raw cold wind that seemed to be coming right out of the Arctic. It was a miserable morning for doing the chores. Everyone pitched in to finish the outside jobs as quickly as possible and run back to the warmth of the fireplace. When her dad came in, he said, “Hey, it’s cold out there. Who left the barn door open?”

As they sat around the kitchen table, Willard was quite pleased with the weather, “It’s just like I told you ladies—you can depend on the Easter snap to cool things down. You can always count on it.”

Virginia Clark dryly commented to her husband, “I’m not sure if you’re glad your Easter snap came so you can say you’re right or if it’s ’cause all of the other neighbors done planted their okra and cotton.”

He laughed, “It might be a little of both. They’ll be re-planting their gardens this week just as I’m planting mine.”

Eliza could not resist asking her dad, “Poppa, how hard did it rain during the night?”

He gave another of his favorite Ten Mile rain descriptions, “Honey, it rained like a tall cow peeing on a flat rock.”

Virginia chastised her husband, “Willard, don’t be talking like that!” However, even her scolding featured a smile at the vivid description that was easily understood.

Eliza couldn’t resist one more prompt to her father, “Poppa, how would Uncle Arch describe this rain?” She giggled as her dad drew himself up to his full height and cocked his hat at an angle just like Arch Weeks. In a shrill voice, just like the old man’s, he said, “Say now, Babe, that was A big rain.”

Even Virginia Clark burst out laughing at this perfect rendition. Eliza turned to her mother, “Say, and that was A big imitation of Uncle Arch.” Her mother, caught up in the moment of fun, added, “And you two birds are A fine pair. Now, y’all get out of here and let me work!”

By afternoon it was evident this was not an ordinary cool snap. The temperature continued to drop. The rain finally tapered to a stop, but a howling north wind took its place.

Just before dark, something happened that even the old-timers could not remember occurring before: it began snowing. This was a snowstorm in mid-April! In this part of Louisiana, about one hundred miles from the Gulf, snow was rare at any time. When it did occur, it was always in the depths of winter, but this was mid-April! It was unheard of!

Eli called everyone’s attention to it. “Look out here. I believe it’s snowing!” The flakes were small and scattered but it was definitely snow. There was sleet mixed in that bounced as it hit the ground. The wet ground was too warm for the snow and sleet to stick, but it was still a sight to see.

The entire Clark family went out in the yard to stand in the snow and sleet. None of them had ever seen snow or sleet this late in the spring. It was the day before Easter, and it was snowing!

All Willard Clark could do was crow, “Yep, you can always depend on that good Easter cold snap. You can put that in your pipe and smoke it, Babe. There’s always gonna be an Easter cold snap.”

The next day, Easter Sunday, was cold but dry. There was no sign of the previous day's snow, and the ground was drying quickly thanks to the strong north wind.

Eliza wondered if they would still go to church due to the bad weather, but she should have known they would. Her parents believed that when the doors were open, the Clark family was supposed to be there. However, she did not mind church. She actually loved every part of it—the singing, the visiting, even Reverend Willis' preaching. They only met twice monthly and, due to the preacher being in his eighties, he often was too weak to be there.

She'd never known Reverend Joseph Willis to miss an Easter Sunday. There was talk that this might be his last Easter as pastor of Occupy Church and Eliza could not imagine Occupy without him. He had been pastor here since 1832 and was the only preacher she had ever known. Her parents were the first couple he'd married when he came to Occupy. Ten years later, he had baptized their oldest daughter Eliza in Ten Mile. She and the preacher had a special relationship that bridged any generational age gap. He was so beloved in the area that many of him referred to him as "Father Willis." It was a term of endearment and respect given to this beloved man.

Eliza hoped to speak with Joseph Willis today. She had been thinking about something that she needed his wisdom on.

The service that morning was bright and happy. Easter is always a solemn but happy occasion for Christians the world over. For the simple folk of Ten Mile, this was especially true.

Their Easter finery was not fancy, but everyone wore their very best and newest clothes. The clear cold weather that had pushed out the rain and clouds added to the newness of this Resurrection Sunday.

Joseph Willis' message was on the story of the resurrection of Lazarus. His key text was Jesus' words in John 15, "I am the resurrection and the life. He that believeth in me, though he die, shall live again."

As the frail old preacher read Jesus' words in his still rich, baritone voice, Eliza heard a woman in the pew ahead of her whisper, "I bet this is his last Easter with us. He's sure aged and looks like he's pert near the resurrection hisself."

Eliza wanted to kick the lady under the pew. She did not want to hear any talk about this man being gone. He was the only pastor she had ever known—and he was her friend and confidant.

She prayed, "Lord, keep Father Willis around a little longer, if—if it's Your will." Then she reverently added, "But, not my will, but Thine be done."

The thought of him being gone in the future heightened the sense that she badly needed to talk to him. She had been wrestling with a problem and vowed not to put it off any longer.

As they filed out the back door of Occupy Church, Joseph Willis stood speaking to each member of the congregation. A cane and one of his older sons supported him. He looked pale and washed out as if he had just given every ounce of energy left in his body to this sermon on the Resurrection.

As he shook Eliza's hand and smiled, she whispered, "Bro. Willis, could I come by this week and have a talk with you?"

"Well, sure, Baby. How—say, how about tomorrow after lunch?"

"I'll be there."

The next day she took Eli with her and they walked the four miles to the Ten Mile home of the Willis clan. It was truly a clan—when Joseph Willis had moved to Occupy Church in 1833 from Bayou Chicot, his entire family had come with him—over twelve children ranging in a

wide spectrum of ages. Two more children had been born to him in Ten Mile. He liked to quote from Psalms 127: “As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them.”

Once when he had quoted this in a sermon, Willard Clark had whispered, “The Bible says ‘a quiver-full,’ not a wagon-load.” Eliza and her mother had gotten so tickled, Father Willis paused in his message and stared at them impatiently.

As Eliza approached the Willis family home, she smiled at her dad’s quote. She and Eli arrived and found the old preacher sitting on the porch. Her brother ran off to play with one of the younger Willis boys and left her and the preacher on the porch.

They watched a pair of cardinals in the yard. The secretive female blended in with the leaves of the trees while her bright red mate sang and flitted about in the sunlight.

Willis nodded at the bird. “Eliza, did I ever tell you what my mother said about the redbirds?”

“No Sir.”

“You know my mother was full-blooded Cherokee, don’t ye?”

“Yes sir, Pastor, and warn’t she one of your father’s slaves?”

“That’s right. My mother was a slave who belonged to my daddy—a plantation owner in North Carolina. Anyway—my mother said there was a Cherokee legend that the cardinal was a somber brown bird with no song. One day it asked the great chief of our tribes to make it colorful and full of song.

“On that day, it was changed into the bright red bird it is now and given that fine song that greets us each mornin’.”

The male cardinal in the nearby tree, as if knowing he was the subject of their conversation, began singing loudly, “Birdie, birdie, birdie.” The Preacher laughed, “I believe that redbird knew I was talking ‘bout him.” He turned to Eliza, “Well, I always enjoy your visits, but I also know you usually have something important to discuss. How can I he’p you?”

Eliza bit her lip and began, “I been thinking ‘bout a sermon you preached last month on forgiveness. It was that one about Peter being told to forgive 'seventy times seven.' Well, I been real bothered for a long time about that blood feud between the Wilson and Tyler families.

“When I talk to Poppa about the feud, he reminds me, ‘Liza, we don’t have a dog in that fight, so you stay out of it.’ You know the Wilson girls and I have been best of friends since I don’t know when. Then those Tylers are distant kin of mine and their son Ben’s always been my friend, too.”

She paused as if to give the preacher a chance to comment, but he wisely sat quietly, his attention focused on her words. “Well, pastor I been wondering if maybe the Lord could use me to he’p patch up that feud—at least among the ones my age anyway.”

Pastor Willis shook his head approvingly before speaking, “Eliza, that’s a right good thought you have. Being a peacemaker is a good calling and God smiles on the peacemakers. At the same time, a feud like this is complex as well as complicated. I went to talk to both families right after it began and got run out of one house, and I was told that it weren’t none of my business at the other home. But I tried—and that’s important. So you look for a chance to put in a good word to your friends, but be careful. It’s easy to get in the middle of a mess like that and get blood on you, too.

“People have to make up their own minds—with the Lord’s help—to get past grudges and feuds. We can’t do it for them. Every kettle has to sit on its own bottom. People have to make

their own decisions in the end." He patted her on the cheek. "But I believe God smiles when we try to help them along."

Joseph Willis leaned back. She knew he was going to tell a story from his past. His face took on this dreamy quality as he reached back sixty or seventy years into his younger life. "Eliza, in my life and preaching ministry, you probably know I been run off from more places than most people—I was kind of disowned by my family up in Carolina. Over in St. Landry Parish, the Catholics got after me real bad, and we had to load up and get out quick. Even my Baptist brothers over in Mississippi kind of shunned me because I'm dark and only half-white."

Joseph Willis grinned and this let Eliza know he was proud of having to overcome these obstacles. "Why, I even had a man come in one of my church houses with a gun and tell me if I ever preached agin there, he'd shoot me!

"But I didn't run—and somehow later won him over as a friend. Eliza, I've spent every dollar I ever had nursing these piney woods churches along, and here I am in the last stage of my life with no earthly wealth at all, but I can honestly say that I don't have an enemy in these woods. However, to get here, I had to do a lot of forgivin' and forgettin' along the way.

"Here's my thought on that feud: lots of times I've seen Ten Mile feuds ended by an outside event that caused everyone to come together. Redbones'll fight each other all day long 'til something outside will cause them to drop the trouble and band together.

"Let's pray that somethin' might happen, hopefully not too bad, to unite the families to drop their feud." With that said, Pastor Willis bowed his head and prayed a simple but heartfelt prayer begging the Lord to do just that. He and Eliza both said "amen," and she stood up to go.

Then she stopped. Normally she was sure with words but found herself stuttering and stammering: "There's—uh—one more thing that's—sort of—been eatin' at me—I mean bothering me—that I need your advice on."

Getting ready to continue, she visualized Unk and the ant mounds out past the Big Pasture. Hesitantly she began, "Now, Father Willis, if a person knew about somethin' . . ." She hesitated—it felt as if her mouth was so dry her tongue was stuck to the roof of her mouth.

He helpfully said, "Go ahead . . ."

"If a girl knew something that might . . . uh . . . be dangerous . . ."

She stopped. She just could not go on. The wise old preacher patiently waited; but she had no more to say. Her desire to tell her pastor about Unk's secret about the murder and gold was overshadowed by the solemn vow of secrecy she'd made to her uncle.

Eliza stood silently in embarrassment before quickly finding the words to make her exit: "Well, I believe maybe I'll keep that question for our next visit. That all right with you?"

Joseph Willis had listened to hundreds of people in his lifetime of ministry; therefore, he knew when to push and when not to. Something told him to give her some room. He hugged her and said, "Sure, Baby. Sure. I'll be ready when you're ready."

Before she could change her mind and speak, Eliza Clark turned, trotted down the steps, and was out of the yard to find Eli.

The old preacher, son of a Cherokee slave and English planter, watched the beautiful young woman nearly flying as she hurriedly left out of the yard. The rust-colored skirt she wore that matched with her olive blouse reminded him of the female cardinal that had a nest in the nearby crepe myrtle bush. He watched her until his dim eyes could see her no more.

Chapter 14

If one wanted to know the exact day when the West Calcasieu land war began, it was on a summer morning in 1849. That was the day when the stranger came into the Rapides Parish Courthouse office and the trouble officially began.

John Loftin, land clerk at the courthouse, had acquired a vast knowledge of the acreage making up the area of Louisiana called Rapides Parish. On this day in 1849, as he unlocked his office and took off his coat, the land comprising Rapides Parish covered a large section of central Louisiana.

Loftin knew this parish better than anyone. Not only did he know the topography of the streams, fields, and forest, but a lifetime in public service had taught him much about the unique people who populated what he called “His parish.”

So on this day, he was the man to see if you wanted answers about land questions. Therefore, it did not surprise him when a well-dressed man entered the office and inquired, “Mr. John Loftin, please.”

Many land and timber buyers were referred to him by others. Loftin took a quiet pride in his knowledge and expertise. He was known for his honesty and forthrightness.

John studied the visitor: A well-dressed man who carried a rolled-up map under his arm. The visitor also carried himself with an obvious air of self-importance. Removing his hat, he introduced himself, “Mr. Loftin, I am Travis Thomas, chief land procurer for the Piedmont Timber and Turpentine Company of Wilmington, North Carolina. I am in your county—I mean parish—to finalize some purchases of timber lands. I was told you could help me. Would you pull your maps and go over several tracts with me?”

Travis Thomas had impeccable manners and speech. Studying him, John Loftin guessed that the visitor was about age forty-five, and seemed well educated, as well as self-assured.

Loftin replied, “I’d be glad to help you, Sir. Where would you like to start?”

“We’ve bought a 2000-acre tract in the northern part of your parish.” Consulting a sheet in his hand he continued, “Yes, there it is. It’s in that township there.”

John Loftin expertly pulled the correct land plat and laid it out on the large desk. Thomas studied it and asked several questions that Loftin easily answered.

The timber man asked, “May I tell you about our company?” Without waiting for a reply, he continued, “It was started by my grandfather in the virgin pine forests of the Carolinas. Our specialty is purchasing cheap, uninhabited land close to waterways and then tapping the turpentine and rosin from the pines. That is why nearby navigable streams are imperative for our land.

“We also harvest marketable timber, both pine and hardwood, near creeks and rivers for removal to downstream markets. As you can see, the tract you just showed me is close to the Red River. The next tract I want to look at would be accessible to the new sawmills on Lake Charles down the Calcasieu River.”

Thomas continued with his overview, “Our business has been an extremely profitable venture for our family as well as shareholders. However, the growing settlement of the eastern

coast forces us to be constantly on the search for new land that is undervalued as well as available." He smiled and added, "This search has brought us to Central Louisiana and we look forward to doing business here."

Thomas then cleared his throat. "The tract I'm most interested in seeing is a much larger section we've purchased in the western portion of your parish." Once again, he consulted his sheet before lowering his voice, "It is west of the Calcasieu River—over here in Township 1 South and… uh…Range 4 West."

He laid the sheet down on Loftin's desk and pointed to a figure. Loftin did a double take when he saw the figure: 18,500 acres. He looked up and saw Travis Thomas smiling calmly at him.

John Loftin turned away and pulled several maps that would be needed to show this sizable western area of the parish. Thomas could easily see that the courthouse man seemed slightly flustered, and it gave him a glib sense of satisfaction.

However, the timber buyer had no idea that the look on John Loftin's face was not due just to the amount of land, but rather where the land was.

Thomas continued, "My understanding is that this land west of the Calcasieu is good longleaf pine. There are several creeks flowing through it including, I believe… Ten Mile, Six Mile, and what's this one?" He was looking at his list again. "Is that one called 'Cherry Witchie'?"

Loftin corrected him, "No sir, It's called 'Cherry Winche' and it flows into the Calcasieu right there."

Thomas asked a question to which he already knew the answer, "And what about the timber on these lands?"

"As good longleaf pine as there is anywhere in America. Huge trees in stands stretching for miles. Along the creeks, there's good hardwood, especially cypress and oak."

Neither man spoke as they stared at each other. Years in the courthouse had taught John Loftin not to divulge more than the customer requested.

Thomas said, "Mr. Loftin, my understanding is that our western lands there are sparsely populated and all of the residents there are squatters?"

The term "squatters" irritated Loftin, but he remained cool. "Sir, define what you mean by 'squatters'?"

"Oh, they hold no clear legal title to the land."

"That would be correct. There are no records here in the courthouse listing them as the landholders although census records—such as those in the clerk of court's office, show they've been there for years."

Thomas smiled the smile he had flashed in courtrooms and offices like this across five states. "Thank you, Sir, but I'm not interested in census records, only the land."

However, Travis Thomas' interest was piqued. "It seems you must know something about the squat—I mean—residents of this area. Tell me more."

John Loftin stood silently for several seconds before carefully speaking, "Yes Sir, the residents live in an area collectively called 'Ten Mile.' These folks, who live scattered along the creeks and in the pines, are called Redbones. They are a mysterious and clannish people who don't like outsiders." He purposely looked directly into the man's eyes as he said "outsiders."

"Are these Redbones of Indian origin?"

"Yes, they claim a large part of their heritage as Indian. They also seem to be a mix of Spanish, Mulatto, and who knows what else."

"Do you foresee that our company will have any difficulty in removing these people?"

Loftin waited before replying, "Mr. Thomas, I am a land clerk and therefore not an expert in the law or about people. However, since you've asked, I will give you my answer: The Ten Mile Redbones are the most fiercely independent people I've ever seen—they are devious and will fight an enemy to the death. When you go in there to move them off their land, you will encounter some of the most stubborn and violent people you've ever seen. They have chosen to live there because of its isolation and freedom from the government. Why, we don't even know how many there are. Our census takers in 1840 mostly refused to enter the Ten Mile area and those that did were met with resistance and silence. They have what's called a 'dead line.' It's a 'signless' border, beginning west of the Calcasieu and is found on no maps. Wise outsiders know they move into the area at great risk." John Loftin, who found that he was enjoying being blunt with this man, bit off the words "wise outsiders."

Thomas politely said, "I thank you for your opinion, Mr. Loftin, and will keep it in mind. However, our company has worked with squatters on our company lands for years. We are no more afraid of Indians than we are of anyone. Our removal of the Cherokee in my home state attests to our success at this."

"Mr. Thomas, I didn't say they were Indians. I just said they claim strong Indian blood. The Redbones are different from probably any group you've encountered in your travels. You'll find out what I mean personally once you go in and try to move them off their land."

Loftin stopped and stood up. "I'm sorry, Sir, if I've seemed a little straightforward, but you did ask."

Thomas smiled his same patronizing smile. "Yes, I did—and you definitely answered! Your honesty is appreciated!" With that, Travis Thomas rolled up his maps, put on his hat, thanked Loftin for his assistance, and exited the office.

John Loftin walked him to the office door and then stood with his hands on his hips, shaking his head. To no one in particular he said aloud, "I don't know what 'Mr. Fancy Pants' has encountered in running people off land in the Carolinas or wherever he's been, but I'm not sure he's ever encountered anyone like our Louisiana Redbones—he's in for the fight of his life."

Chapter 15

Joseph watched the big New Orleans police officer approaching. Looking at the billy club in his hand, he remembered Gill's word of warning. He stepped back and made a half turn, looking behind for a place to run.

However, suddenly the thought of running again made him sick to his stomach. He was tired of running. He would face this like a man.

It was at this very moment when the policeman stopped, shook his head in bewilderment and said in a thick Creole accent, "Welcome to New Orleans, Son. Welcome to our city."

Then the man broke out into a broad grin. "Looks to me like you handled your welcoming committee well. I especially liked the Irish curses and that cobblestone you'd clocked the fellow with."

The man continued, "Well sonny boy, where are you headed?"

"Sir, I'm not rightly sure."

The big officer stared at him long and hard. "I'll tell you where to go. Head up the river here toward Girod Street. Near there you'll find more Irishmen than you can shake a stick at. Be careful 'cause not everyone is a friend. If you really need help, go to St. Patrick's Church at the corner of Camp and Girod. Father James Mullon is a good man, and he will help you."

"How far is it?"

The man knelt down and used his baton to draw a crude map of the river and adjacent city. "You're in the Third Municipality now. We call it Faurboug Marginy. As soon as you cross Esplanade, you'll be in the old part of the city, the French Quarter. After walking along the river about a mile, you'll cross our widest street, Canal Street. We call it the neutral zone. Once you cross it, you'll be in the American Sector. That is where St. Patrick's is located. You can't miss its steeple—it's the highest point in the city."

Joseph thanked the policeman for his help and began walking. A soft drizzle began to fall. Before he'd made five blocks, it turned into a steady rain, and Joseph was soon thoroughly soaked. The wind began to turn and he felt the air cooling. After the heat of the recent days, this cool wind, even with its accompanying drizzle, felt good.

Coming to Girod St., he turned away from the river. Sure enough, he saw the spire of what he knew had to be St. Patrick's less than a mile away. Just then, on this Saturday evening, it began to rain harder. Joseph looked around at the gathering dark clouds and wondered where he could go to get out of the rain for the night.

The policeman, in his parting words, had warned Joseph to be careful of the area he called "The Swamp." He had described it as an area along the upper end of Girod that was filled with bars and boardinghouses. He had added, "Don't stay at those houses. They'll cram you into a small room with twenty other Paddies, eventually take your money, confiscate your luggage, and then send you on your way penniless. Pass them on by, boy. Pass them by."

Sure enough, some men were lounging on the steps of a three-story building. Above the door was a sign in English and Irish that read, "McShane's Boarding House." It had a rundown and evil look to it that was enhanced by the muddy and smelly ditches in front of it. A dead

bloated dog lay along the roadside. He understood why they called this area "The Swamp." One of the men called to him, "Come over here boy. You look as if you need a place to stay. There's plenty of room here—plenty of room." Nevertheless, Joseph kept moving. He'd had enough trouble with strangers today. He would take his chances at St. Patrick's Church.

Approaching the church entrance, he found the doors locked. He walked on past the church entrance and found a gated entrance. The wrought iron fence was about five feet high and topped with sharp spikes. This didn't deter Joseph as he got a foothold and swung over into the courtyard. In the gloomy darkness, he crept along the stone walkway. After about twenty steps, there was another entrance into an inner courtyard. This was barred by a high iron gate that obstructed any further passage.

To himself he whistled, "Well, look's like this is as good a place as any to take in a night." Just past the fence he had jumped was a set of stone steps that went to an adjacent building. A sturdy wooden door, locked tightly just as he suspected, was at the top of five steps. The alcove over the steps made a good hiding place and allowed Joseph to be out of the rain and wind.

The stone steps and wall felt cold as he wedged into the corner where no passersby could spot him. It felt lonely but it also felt safe. Looking up at the towering spire of St. Patrick's, he felt secure. He pulled out an apple that he had pilfered from a fruit stand and enjoyed his supper.

The fact that the bells tolled every hour all night long kept him from sleeping for too long at a time, but there was something extremely comforting about their pealing and the feel of the stone wall and steps.

He was awakened the next morning when the door was unlocked from the inside. It was still dark outside, but the candlelight from the inner room silhouetted a white-haired nun standing in the doorway above him.

In a good Irish accent that seemed to disarm him instantly, she chortled, "Well, well, well, look what the cat dragged up during the night."

Joseph sleepily arose and tried to look innocent. The nun continued, "Well, we've had babies left on these steps before, but never one your size!"

He hoarsely spoke, "Sister, I'm looking for Father Mullon. I'm told he might be able to help me."

"That's right unusual—everyone is looking for Father Mullon and everyone has something they need done for them. You'll probably have to just take your place in line—especially early on Easter morning."

She looked behind Joseph at the locked gate and said, "For crying in the bucket, by the way, how did ye get in here?"

"I guess you could say I just got blown in here by the Atlantic."

"Look, I've got me hands full on Easter morning and have half a mind to shoo you out of here; but I guess we'll find someone to help you." She turned away but stopped before closing the door: "What in heaven's name is that accent you've got?"

"County Mayo, Westport town."

"I knew it was either that or Donegal. Well, just wait here."

Fifteen minutes later, a young priest returned. He looked disgusted as he scanned Joseph up and down. It was the same look Joseph had seen when someone was ready to shoo off a stray cat.

"Boy, what do you need on Easter morning?"

The priest's accent was unusual. Joseph couldn't place it but knew for sure it wasn't Irish.

Joseph lied, "I'm supposed to see Father Mullon. I believe, uh, he might be…expecting me this morning." He grimaced at his own fib which he knew wasn't very convincing. The priest

looked him up and down shaking his head sadly before adding, “Your accent tells me that you haven’t been here long enough to make too many appointments, and that’s not the story you told Sister Mary Kate.”

Joseph smiled, “Well, a Mayo accent is hard to disguise or get rid of, so I believe I’ll just keep mine, if you don’t mind—and I never got to finish my story with the Sister.” In disgust, the young priest wheeled on his heel and strode away, head high in the air.

Joseph sat there anxiously. He started to get up and just leave—no use staying where he wasn’t welcome.

However, just then, the priest reappeared. “Come with me,” he nodded.

The inside of the cathedral astounded Joseph. It was ornate and huge, and featured a huge set of three paintings behind the altar. As he took in the sights of the vast building, the younger priest went forward and was in animated conversation with a tall older priest. Joseph had the distinct feeling he was going to be quickly sent on his way by this one too. Then the younger man walked back and told Joseph to follow him. They were soon standing in the presence of the older man.

Before this older priest even opened his mouth, Joseph knew he was Irish. Everything about him radiated Irishness: his lanky build, intense face, and long thick white hair gave him a wild, yet distinguished look. The priest’s piercing green eyes were direct descendants of the type common throughout Ireland. Coupled with his sharp nose and flushed cheeks, these eyes gave him a look of alertness. Father Mullon looked to be a man who was always on the go and not one to humor fools.

In spite of this intensity, the priest smiled and laid a weathered hand on Joseph’s shoulder and winked. “I’m Father Mullon. I was beginning to wonder if you’d forgotten our appointment, my Son. I looked for you during mass yesterday and didn’t see you, but here you are early on Easter morning. Come, come.” With a silent nod of his head, he dismissed the aide.

The two of them walked off side by side as the bewildered younger priest watched the man of God in his bright white vestments walking with the poor peasant boy who had probably just gotten off one of the boats in the harbor.

“What County are you from?”

“County Mayo on the west coast, Father.”

“How’d you come across?”

Joseph wanted to lie, but just could not. “Well, I got in a little trouble and had to, uh—leave kind of in a hurry. I hid away on a ship that just happened to be coming to New Orleans.”

“When is the last time you ate?”

“Yesterday morning, Father.”

“Are you Catholic?”

Joseph started to lie, but stopped. He ducked his head and stammered, “Well, part of me is. My Da is, or at least, was. My mother was Church of Ireland, but she’s dead now. My Catholic dad got transported to Australia during some of the troubles.”

Father Mullon looked seriously at Joseph, “Half Catholic and half Protestant. Hmmm, let’s see—I guess we’ll just feed you half of a meal then.”

Joseph didn’t know what to say. Then Mullon burst out laughing. “Oh come on, boy. I’m sending you to where they’ll feed you good. You’d be welcome to stay here and eat with me, but the day is busy with Easter and all. I’m sending you to the O’Leary home. They are natives of County Mayo and will be glad to take you in.”

Mullon called back the sober young priest. He instructed him to take Joseph to the O'Leary home on the upper end of Adele Street—right in the heart of the Irish Channel.

As they journeyed down Camp Street toward Adele Street, the young priest had little to say to Joseph. The day was dawning, and Joseph studied the houses and streets as they walked together. They turned right at Adele and began traveling away from the river. Even in the darkness, Joseph could see that they were in a poorer neighborhood than he'd seen earlier.

The young priest finally spoke. "This whole area is called the Irish Channel. It's the heart of where you Paddies like to stay. You Irish make up about one out of every four folks in New Orleans. Because of that, you're scattered all over the city. But the dream of every Irishman is to live in this area." He spat as he continued, "It's a really nice area, isn't it?" The sarcasm dripped thickly from his words, and Joseph didn't know whether to kick him or reply. He decided wisely to do neither.

Finally, the priest began counting down house numbers on this block. He stopped and looked up at a dilapidated house that had definitely seen better days. He dismissed himself with, "Well, here you are. Good luck." Before Joseph could even reply, the man was gone. He had left as if he was fleeing a dangerous jungle full of beasts and diseases.

Since it was early, Joseph decided to sit on the steps until he heard movement in the house. About an hour later, he heard talking inside, so he stood and hesitantly rapped on the weathered door.

Soon the door creaked open and Joseph looked into the face of a young man who could have passed as his double. He was about the same size, with the same hair color, and smile. The boy at the door may have lived all of his life on the streets of New Orleans, but looked as if he really belonged among the peat bogs of Western Ireland. Their mirrored resemblance was so remarkable that each boy stepped back in surprise.

It was the first glimpse Joseph would have of the friend he would thereafter know as Mayo O'Leary.

However, as Joseph stood in the doorway looking at what seemed to be his identical twin, he had no idea of the friendship that awaited him in this house. In his best Westport accent he said, "Father Mullon sent me here. He told me a new Irish immigrant would find a warm welcome, especially one from County Mayo."

The young man invited him in with a sweep of his arm. "Then come on in, Cousin. My dad will definitely want to meet a County Mayo man."

Joseph wiped his feet and removed his cap. Walking into the cramped darkly lit apartment, he felt as if he was home again. The furnishings, the smells, and the voices seemed to have been magically transported from Ireland.

In the midst of this homecoming of sorts, he remembered his manners: "May God bless this home." Then he added in Irish, "Ceade mile failte."

A woman's voice returned from behind the curtain that separated the room from the kitchen, "And one hundred thousand welcomes to whoever enters this home also—especially if he has a fresh Irish accent!"

The woman came out from behind the curtain wiping her hands on her apron. There was no doubt she was Mayo's mother—they shared the same eyes, freckles, and quizzical smile. She introduced herself, "I'm Mary O'Leary and you've just met my son, Mayo. Follow me."

Going back into the kitchen, she sat Joseph at the table. She continued, "My husband, Tommy, works at the docks. He worked until midnight last night getting a ship loaded. He's still

asleep, but he'll want to meet you. It's been twenty years since we arrived here from County Mayo and any word from home is always welcome."

Joseph ducked his head somewhat before muttering, "I'm sorry to say, Mrs. O'Leary, that much of the news I bring from County Mayo is not happy news. Times are difficult."

She smiled, "Nonetheless, Tommy will still want to quiz you, so be ready." She turned to her son, "Mayo, go wake your dad and tell him St. Patrick has climbed down from his mountain and come to see him on Easter morning."

She turned back to Joseph. "Our people live in Louisburgh, just past Croagh Patrick. Surely, you've been to the mountain?"

"Yes, Ma'am. I've been to the top of it many times."

Just then the man of the house appeared. He looked tired and dirty, but his big smile erased any repulsion due to his appearance. He made a low bow and said, "And who may I have the pleasure of meeting here in my own home? Are you really St. Patrick?"

Mary smiled, "Tommy, I am going to introduce you to him if you'll stop talking—as if you've ever stopped talking since I married ye." She turned in mock anger toward Joseph and said, "I do believe my husband must have kissed the Blarney Stone 'tree a four' times as a lad. Tommy, be quiet so I can introduce this boy. This is Joseph Moore, lately of Westport, County Mayo."

That was all Tommy O'Leary needed—he began pumping Joseph's hand, "Well, well, a fellow from me home county. Welcome to our home. May God bless ye."

Joseph replied, "And may God bless this house and all in it."

"Ah, a son of Ireland with good manners taught by his da and ma."

Joseph couldn't help but look back between Mayo and his two parents. It was obvious Mayo had the look of his mother, but his warm personality definitely came from his bubbling dad, who was now tickling his wife and telling of the ship he worked on the night before. Joseph thought, Here is a man with the gift of gab. I do believe he kissed the Blarney stone and got his lips stuck on it.

One by one, the O'Leary children came in. Joseph lost count at five as they all gathered around their dad. Mary O'Leary was setting the table for a good Irish breakfast. Joseph felt as comfortable as he'd felt in a long time. Even though he was far from home, he felt at home. Mrs. O'Leary dipped up the eggs, bacon, potatoes, and biscuits and began spooning them onto the plates. Joseph was amazed when she brought out black pudding for everyone. Before the famine, it had been one of his favorite foods. Made from pig's blood, it was a delicacy loved by the Irish. The lean years of the famine had taken any meals with pork, including black pudding, off the plates of the poor Irish. He savored every bite of the meal. He equally enjoyed the banter around the table that was full of stories, joking, and joy. He was in the presence of a happy Irish family.

Toward the end of the meal, Tommy asked Joseph, "Son, what about my hometown of Louisburgh? Do ye have any news?"

Joseph swallowed hard and tried to concentrate. His reply was mumbled, "Well—uh—sir, times are hard there just like everywhere else. I was there only last—." Joseph stopped and reached for his glass of milk. He did not, and could not, continue. Tommy O'Leary who was balancing a forkful of egg in front of his mouth observed Joseph quietly. Joe didn't have the heart or words to tell how the village was nearly empty of people.

That Easter Sunday was a whirlwind of activity for the O'Leary family and their new guest, Joseph Moore. The family introduced him to many of the neighbors and took him on a tour of

their area of the city. They had lived right in the same house for twenty years since their arrival and knew everyone and everything about their neighborhood.

From that very first day, it was evident that Joseph and his mirror image in the O'Leary home, Mayo, were destined for a special friendship. Even on that Easter Sunday, they both realized each had something the other one craved.

Mayo had never seen Ireland except in his imagination. His family and neighbors had told so many stories that he believed he knew the country well. Moreover, here was another Irish boy, of his age and size, who knew all about it. His hunger to know more of his true country would be slaked through his friendship with Joseph Moore, another son of County Mayo, Ireland.

At the same time, their friendship was built on another factor: Mayo O'Leary knew about America—at least the part of it near New Orleans. His life and experiences could be the open window for Joseph's education of his new country.

Therefore, each boy had something the other desired. It was the foundation for a perfect friendship—"two peas out of the same pod" as Mary O'Leary liked to say as she watched them together.

That first afternoon, Mayo adjusted Joseph's name. He told him, "Son, you've got a new name now. A man in a new land needs a new name, just like old Peter, or Israel. From now on as far as I'm concerned, you're Joe Moore."

When bedtime came, Mayo showed Joseph where the two teenagers would share a corner in the house. For the first time in years, Joseph slept on what he would consider a real bed. Mayo had insisted that he use his bed, falsely complaining, "This old bed's been hurting my back, and I need a night's break from it. Be my guest."

As Mayo lay on a pallet on the floor next to Joseph's bed, they talked until midnight—sharing their dreams, hopes, and beliefs for the future. Finally, when Mayo's mom told them to hush up, Joseph Moore lay back on the simple rope bed with the worn, stuffed mattress. No king in the world slept in more comfort that night than Joseph Moore, lately of Westport, Ireland, and now residing in the Irish Channel of the city of New Orleans, Louisiana.

His last thoughts before drifting to sleep were, I believe I might could stay here in this city.

Chapter 16

Joseph's first week in the city of New Orleans was a time he would always re-member. It was a busy time of loading cotton at the docks during the long days, followed by evenings among the Irish of the Channel.

On Thursday of his first week of working, Joseph, Tommy, and Mayo were working on the docks near the French Quarter. Mayo had joined them at work the previous day after finishing another job. At the end of a sweaty day of cramming cotton into the holds of an England-bound ship, the three of them began walking the levee toward home.

The levee, as usual, was a sea of activity as workers scurried about as the day ended. There was a human river atop the levee next to the full Mississippi. This river of people, like the Mississippi itself, seemed as if it could at any moment spill over and pour down the steep landward side.

From the top of the levee, Joseph could see both the river and city. Where he stood gave an overview of the precariousness of the city's location. The river was right up to the levee's edge and the French Quarter looked to be much lower than the river. It was plain to see that a break here would fill the city with many feet of water.

Tommy replied, "What's amazing is that the Quarter here is actually the highest part of the city. The oldest part here was built on the highest ground—the natural levee that had built up during centuries of floods of the pre-levee years." He nodded behind him toward the area where they lived, "What's bad is that we live in what they call 'the bottom of the bowl.' We'll get the real flooding if the levee breaks."

As they neared the French Quarter, Joseph asked Tommy, "I've heard about the slave pens near here. I'd like to see them for myself."

Tommy looked at him stiffly before speaking, "Do ye really want to see it? It's just one more example of man's inhumanity to man."

Before Joseph could reply, Mayo said, "Da, everybody ought to see them once for themselves." So, the three of them walked off the levee into the French Quarter. When they reached Esplanade Street, they turned away from the river onto it, and soon reached a fenced compound. Behind the fence were open areas filled with Negroes of all ages, sizes, and degrees of darkness.

However, this was different from the other blacks he had seen—these Negroes were held captive in the compound. A crowd of onlookers was gathered on the street—some were staring, while others were writing down information. The slaves stood glumly with their heads down, helpless to avoid the stares. Above the fence was a sign: Freeman's Slave Lot.

Joseph was amazed and had one thought: This reminds me of the workhouse in Westport—people closed in, captive, with no hope.

He saw the look in the slaves' eyes and knew it well—it was the look of hopelessness he had seen so often in Ireland, especially within the walls of the workhouse. He had not expected to see it here in America, the land of freedom. It troubled him how these Americans seemed to highly value their own freedom but did not correspondingly value it in another human.

An anger and hurt built in Joseph and he turned to Tommy, “How can these people—“

But before he could finish, a nearby shout brought everything to a halt. The slave shoppers stopped their note-taking and those walking by froze in their tracks. Everyone turned and looked toward the Mississippi River.

A short man was running from the river and yelling in French. The crowd all begin staring toward the nearby levee. Instantly Joseph knew it had something to do with the flood but he could not make out anything other than the man’s repeated scream of, “Crevasse! Crevasse! Crevasse!”

The rest of his babbling was unintelligible. However, Tommy heard the only word that mattered: Crevasse! He turned to the boys, “There’s been a crevasse—a break in the levee!”

Tommy found a man nearby talking in English. Grabbing him by the arm, he asked, “Where is the crevasse?”

“It’s upriver, on the east bank, evidently about fifteen miles up at River Ridge, at a place called Sauvé’s Plantation.”

Mayo grabbed his dad, “Will it flood the city?”

“Hopefully the swamp and Lake Ponchartrain can take it away from us, but most probably, it eventually will flood us. It’ll take the water several days to get this far, but if it does—we live at the bottom of the bowl.“

They worked their way through the panic-filled streets toward home. Every rumor imaginable was spreading throughout the streets of New Orleans. As they entered the Irish Channel, rumors were rampant. Some told of floodwaters already being within the city on the river. Tommy assured them that this was untrue, but many residents still believed it and feverishly worked to move items and furnishings upstairs.

The question now was, when—not if, the floodwaters would reach New Orleans.

Chapter 17

The sound from the woods made Eliza stop.

She was side dressing the field corn when she heard it. It was a bird calling: "Spring of the year—spring of the year." To Eliza's ear, this song had words—it was the call of a meadowlark. Normally a quiet bird, in late spring, they began singing to find a mate. Then they became much more visible, perched on fence posts and shrubs.

Eliza laid down her hoe and walked over to find the meadowlark's location. Each year, several lived in the open pasture next to the garden. As she walked across the field, the singing meadowlark flew up and landed on a nearby fence post. She could easily see its conspicuous, bright yellow breast with a corresponding black V across the chest.

Eliza said, "Welcome back, Mr. Meadowlark." It seemed to answer with its repeated song: "Spring-of-the-year. Spring-of-the-year."

The meadowlark's song made her immediately think of her friend, Miz Girlie Perkins.

Miz Girlie and Eliza shared a common love of many things—however, their deepest bond was their mutual love of birds. They had a tradition of visiting each other on the first day either one heard a meadowlark.

So that afternoon, Eliza walked the two miles to where Girlie lived alone on the edge of the woods.

It was a story in itself as to why she lived by herself. Eliza had heard the tale from her parents. Like most of the women of the Ten Mile area, Girlie had married early. George Perkins was eight years older than she was. She was kidded about marrying "an older man," but she only laughed and told them this was the man for her.

Everything was great until just after they had celebrated their fifth wedding anniversary. George Perkins was killed in a logging accident over in West Bay. A group of men was cutting cypress trees near the river and a tree fell wrong and pinned George to the ground, killing him instantly. Also instantly, Girlie became a widow—a frightening condition for a woman in No Man's Land.

As Eliza walked to Girlie's home, she mentally figured how long ago the woman had been widowed. If her information was correct, it was now thirty-six years since her husband's death. Miz Girlie had lived alone in this house ever since. Even now at the age of fifty-eight, she was a strong and independent woman.

She had had plenty of interested men and chances to marry again, but all were turned away. Girlie tersely let everyone know she was not interested in another man. "I done had a good one in George. I think I'll just stay as I am now."

After about a dozen suitors had been turned away, the single men of Ten Mile realized they were beating their head against a pine tree—so they left her alone.

Nearing Miz Girlie's place, Eliza laughed at her favorite statement from her older friend. Eliza had once asked her why she didn't marry again. Girlie, who had the wonderful Redbone way of responding to a question, spat out, "When George died, I just got me a dog. A dog

couldn't replace my George, but most of them were a heck of a lot better than the men who'd come sniffing around here." Pointing at her Catahoula Cur, Jezebel, she continued, "And I believe a dog is a whole lot less trouble than any man."

Listening, Eliza had watched Girlie's face as she said this. Eliza wasn't sure, but she thought she saw a twitch on the corner of her mouth and tears welling up in her eyes. She wondered how lonely it was to live out where she did—isolated and alone.

However, lonely or not—Girlie was Eliza's special friend. She'd learned much from this wise older woman, whom she respectfully called, "Miz Girlie." That was what everyone below age forty called her.

Once a fellow church member had referred to her as "Aunt Girlie" and received a brisk brief lecture on how that "auntie stuff" was just for older folks, and she was a long ways from being old. That definitely nipped it in the bud. She continued to be called Miz Girlie. That was her name, and it was spoken respectfully by the younger generation. It wasn't "Girlie." That just wasn't the way folks talked.

And it sure wasn't "Miss Girlie." Anyone calling her that received a stern lecture as well.

This gruff side of Miz Girlie never bothered Eliza. She easily saw through it and looked into the kind heart of this woman.

The older woman came out on the porch as if she'd been awaiting her visit all day. Wiping her hands on her apron, she smiled.

"Miz Girlie, guess what I heard today?"

"Let me guess. Was it a panther or a bellowing bull?"

Eliza said, "You know better than that! It was the first meadowlark of the year!" Miz Girlie tried to act surprised. She had been hearing one for the past three days herself, but wasn't about to let Eliza know. She'd been eagerly awaiting this visit from her younger friend.

"—And I heard it sing, 'Spring-of-the-year.'"

In mock horror, Miz Girlie replied, "No, no—it says, 'laz'ness will kill ye.'"

"Nope, it's 'spring of the year' if I've ever heard anything."

"Sounds like 'laz'ness will kill ye' to me."

"No Ma'am, it's 'spring-of-the-year.'"

"La-z-ness'll kill ye."

They went back and forth in their yearly battle. Girlie claimed her grandmother, a real bird lover, had taught her the laziness song. Eliza replied that it was just common sense that a bird, singing in the spring, would be saying, "spring of the year."

They sat on the porch and began visiting in the way special friends always pick up right where they last left off. Eliza was one of Girlie's few sources to "the outside world" as she liked to call it. As usual, Eliza had a whole list of newsworthy stories to share. Most of it had to do with babies born, crops, the weather, and the woods. As the afternoon wore on, Eliza helped Miz Girlie with the chores on her small neatly kept farm. Eliza wondered how this woman, living alone, kept a better-looking place than many families with strong men and a handful of children.

Usually Eliza's visits would last for several hours. However, today she planned to spend the night. Her dad had agreed to later come by to ensure Eliza's safe arrival at Girlie's house.

Just about two hours before sunset, Willard Clark rode up. Miz Girlie offered him a cup of coffee and the three of them sat on the porch visiting. Finally, he stood up, stretched, and said, "Well, ladies, I best be on my way if I'm going to get home before dark." He winked at Eliza as he spoke to the older woman, "Now Gertrude—you can whip this girl here if she gives you any backtalk."

Girlie winced at the use of her "other name." She didn't like her name of Gertrude and no one dared use it—save Willard Clark. For some reason he could do it and escape without a good tongue-lashing. Therefore, he never missed a chance to use it. In fact most of the time he would find three or four opportunities to say it like this: "Ger-trude." Each time she would act as if she'd been hit on the head, but never said a word.

There had been many discussions in the Clark household over whether her first name was really "Girlie." She claimed it was—"My dad already had four girls in the house counting momma. When I was born, daddy said, 'My Lord, another girlie.' From that came my first name: 'Girlie.'"

Often Willard Clark would call her "Girlie Gertrude" which she didn't like any better. Climbing on his horse, he added one more zinger, "Now, Girlie Gertrude, don't be filling that girl's head with all your mess about woods creatures, goblins, and men with the 'evil eye'. Last time, it took us two weeks to straighten her out!"

He clicked his heels and whistled as his horse eagerly started toward home. The women watched him silently. Finally, Girlie said, "Your daddy there—he's a piece of work, ain't he?"

"He's one of a kind for sure, Miz Girlie—one of a kind."

Shaking her head, Miz Girlie continued, "My momma had a saying for characters like him. She'd call them 'an eye doctor.' That was her way of saying that person was really somethin' else. That's sure what your daddy is—a real eye doctor, for sure!"

As the sun set and the two women finished supper, they sat on the porch. Eliza always saved questions for her visits here. Things she wouldn't share with her own mother or even her friends, she found that she could honestly ask Girlie and always get a straight answer.

As they sat on the porch enjoying the last of the daylight, a hoot owl called off toward the swamp. Both of the women listened quietly as the lone owl called repeatedly over and over waiting for a reply that never came. When the owl finally stopped, Eliza asked, "Miz Girlie, do you believe there's just one right person for everyone?"

"Well, what do you mean by that, Child?"

Eliza nodded up the road that her dad had ridden off an hour ago. "I mean like Momma and Poppa—I watch them and they just seem to fit together. It seems as if each one of their strengths fits in with the other's weaknesses. I guess you'd say they make a good team, kind of like a team of two oxen that lean on each other to pull the load together."

Girlie replied, "Yeah, I see what you're saying. Are you asking if there could be another ox that fit in the yoke just as good as the one there?"

"Yes Ma'am, I guess that's kind of what I'm thinking."

"Well, Eliza, I can't speak for your momma and daddy or anyone else for that matter, but I can speak from my own experience. When George and I got married—over forty years ago now, we were kind of teamed up in the same yoke. My, my—how I loved that man! At times he drove me crazy, but didn't I love him deeply!"

She paused and had a faraway look in her eyes. Eliza always noticed this gaze when she spoke of her husband. He'd been dead more than twice as long as Eliza had been alive, yet it was clear Girlie would take her undying love of George Perkins to her grave.

She sighed, "When that man got killed over in the swamp, I thought my life was over. I couldn't imagine life without him. For a long time, I didn't want to live. I just wished a tree would fall on me too, but over time, my heart began to heal. Now, it's not ever going to be completely healed, but I'm pretty happy—considering. I could have had another man. It seemed like every ol' Tom, Dick, or Harry in these woods wanted to rescue me from widowhood. Most

of ‘em were crippled, half-blind, or just desperate. But me, I’ve never been that desperate, at least not yet.”

She paused and looked off as a tear flowed down her cheek. The lightning bugs were lighting up the yard and the woods toward the swamp. Finally, after staring off into the darkness for several minutes, she turned to Eliza, “Girl, that’s some question you asked me. Why do you want to know if there’s only one man for one woman? What’s going on with you?”

“Well, I just was wondering about it. I look around at the boys my age or older in these woods and don’t none of them light a fire in me. They seem a lot more interested in me than I am in them. Most are nice, but they just don’t seem the kind I’d want to spend my life with, raising babies, and making a home.”

Girlie stood up, and then sat back down as if she’d seen something off in the dark. “Well, maybe you just ain’t found the right pine knot that’s got enough sap in it to light your fire real good. Believe you me, if—I mean when—he comes along, you’ll get your fire lit—if your wood’s not too wet.”

They both laughed.

“Girl, you just keep your eyes, as well as your heart, open—looking for that one man that’ll fit right against you in the yoke. Promise your old friend here that you won’t settle for less than the best.”

Eliza quietly said, “You know I ain’t never settled for less than the best on nothing—and I sure don’t plan to fall for the first man that comes along.”

“That’s good, Child. There’s probably some Ten Mile boy right now dreaming about holding you. If he’s the right one, he’ll light your fire all right. Oh yeah, he’ll lit ye fire.”

“Miz Girlie, it seems everyone, including my momma, thinks I’m set to marry Robert Ray Thompson. I believe I’d rather marry that fence post there than him. He’s all right, I guess. But I don’t feel nothing, especially passion, toward him. Is something wrong with me?”

“There ain’t nothing wrong with you. A girl has to go with her heart and don’t nobody know your heart like you do.”

Then Girlie added, “But don’t be expecting no man to be perfect. They ain’t that.”

Eliza had waited to ask this one last question. “But do you think that boy—that right man—could be outside this neck of the woods?”

Girlie scowled, ”Now Eliza Jane Clark, you listen closely. We Redbones stick to ourselves. We take care of our own and marry our own. Going outside our people would be like—let me see how I can say it. Oh, it’d be like your Ten Mile meadowlark falling in love with a wild goose. What kind of pair would they make? It just wouldn’t work. No, I can’t see it. Just wouldn’t work—no way.”

Eliza, who liked to get in the last word, couldn’t resist one last remark, “But, if they did get together—that meadowlark and wild goose—would the baby bird honk or sing ‘spring-of the-year’?”

“I’m definitely sure it’d be a honker. But that honk would say ‘laz’ness will kill you.’” As the darkness fully covered the swamp, they both laughed the comfortable laugh of two friends enjoying each other’s company.

Chapter 18

Each day the first floodwaters moved closer to the Irish Channel. Joseph Moore and Mayo O'Leary would rise early and walk down Adele Street to check the progress of the water. On this sixth day after the levee break, they did not have to go far.

After the levee break on May 4, it took four days for the first floodwaters to reach the outskirts of the city. When the muddy water began flowing into the city proper, it was an exciting time for the two teenagers.

As the level of the flood rose inch by inch, day by day, the lowest parts of the city—where most of the immigrants lived—were the first to flood. The O'Leary home on Adele Street was no exception. Joseph couldn't believe how muddy, smelly, and nasty the river water was. Dead fish, animals, marsh grass, and driftwood accompanied the waters.

One advantage of the flood was the amount of work available for any young man that didn't mind getting muddy. Joseph and Mayo took advantage of every opportunity and soon found their pockets bulging with more money than they'd ever had.

After a hard day of work ferrying furniture in a small rowboat they bought with their earnings, they would lay out on the levee watching the steamboats and ships plying the mighty Mississippi.

One evening, as they lay on the levee of the river watching a steamship plying northward, Mayo brought up the conversation that was to shape Joseph's life and future: "Joe, have you ever heard of the 'No Man's Land' of western Louisiana? It is near the Sabine River, which forms the border with the new state of Texas.

"From my understanding, it was left uninhabited by both France and Spain. Because there was no law or armies present in this strip, every rogue, outlaw, adventurer, and cockroach moved into the area."

"How'd you hear about it, Mayo?"

"For a while I helped unload a weekly steamer coming down from the Red River port of Natchitoches—it's a French city a couple of hundred miles north of here. The men off the ships were always talking about this wild area southwest of there they called 'The Outlaw Strip' and 'No Man's Land.'"

"What'd they say 'bout it?"

"The usual lying about panthers as big as cows and snakes twenty feet long. They spoke of mysterious Indian tribes hidden in the woods. But most of all, they described unending pine forests stretching in every direction—and they told of how there's 'land a plenty' available for anyone brave enough to homestead it."

Joseph asked, "Mayo, what's a 'homestead'?"

Mayo got very excited as he described this American opportunity: "If you stake out a claim on unoccupied land and live on it for five years, it is yours. I've heard you start out with a hundred and twenty acres. That is land a plenty for a fellow, ain't it?"

"Land a plenty." It was a term that Joseph rolled over in his mind. Coming from land-starved Ireland, the idea of getting more than a hundred acres free just by living on it was hard

for him to grasp. He blurted out, “Say now, a fellow could grow a lot of taters on that much land!” They both laughed at this typical Irish use of the potato as the defining item of all commerce.

Trying to go to sleep that night, the phrase kept turning relentlessly in Joseph Moore’s mind: “land a plenty.” So much of the troubles he’d seen in West Ireland were the direct result of too little land. Generations ago, families like Joseph’s had been evicted off land they had lived on since the time of the Viking invasions.

Many, like Joseph’s ancestors in the eastern county of Wexford, had pulled up stakes and come west. In a way, it was similar to what was happening in the growing nation of America. When things got crowded or uncomfortable, there was land and hope to the west.

However, these migrants had immediately found that the western part of Ireland was sparsely populated for a reason: it was a barren land—few trees, heavy rains, howling winds, and blowing storms. The soil was rocky, hilly, and not suited for good farming. On the western coast, the ruling English had given the land to absentee landlords who piled high rents and taxes on the backs of the working class.

“Land a plenty” was a phrase that rolled around in Joseph’s mouth just like a swig of cold water. “Land a plenty” could wash away a lot of past injustice. Lying there in bed that night, with the horns of the ships on the distant river echoing in through the open window, he sat up, adjusted his mosquito net, and asked himself: What would it be like to own enough land that when you looked in every direction it belonged to you? Could you imagine the feeling? No landlord to cheat or extort you! Land a plenty...

His last thoughts as he drifted off to sleep were of he and Mayo traveling to this mystery area to claim their “land a plenty.”

In the exciting days of May 1849, Joseph and Mayo were much too busy working to do much daydreaming. However, in the evenings, they made up for it. They discussed the open lands of western Louisiana and the Texas country beyond that. This unknown land became their promised land as they toiled among the mud and floodwaters of New Orleans.

Mayo said, “Joe Moore, we’ve got to go see those pines and that land for ourselves. There’s land a plenty and big trees to boot!”

Yes, land a plenty and big trees to boot! It became their theme…as well as their obsession. These two future land barons scrimped and saved every penny they had, worked every extra dirty job they could find. Everything was for one reason: to get enough money to go where a man could own land. Not a little spit of treeless rock-strewn land with one-inch topsoil that the next Atlantic storm might blow away, but good land with rich soil, timber, and game to hunt. In addition, they didn’t want to live in a city slum where a person only scratched to survive even in the good times—a city where a person could regularly expect to encounter malaria, yellow fever, and the periodic floods they were experiencing now. They made up their mind. When they had enough money, they would be heading out to a place where there was “land a plenty” for the taking.

Each day the two boys would roam the city looking for work. One day they heard about how workers were needed over near Magazine Street. Arriving at the address, they were greeted by a handwritten sign in the store window: Irish need not apply.

Mayo was familiar with things like this, but it shocked Joseph. In a hurt voice he asked, “Why in the world wouldn’t they want to hire us?”

Mayo just shrugged his shoulders as they walked away, but Joseph stopped and scooped up a good-sized cobblestone. Without a word, he hurled it right through the window where the sign hung. The boys ran as fast as lightning—not stopping until they were blocks away.

Mayo told Joseph, "Man, you are one crazy Irishman!"

Joseph laughed, "I wonder if they'll hire an Irish glass man to replace that window!"

As the third week of the flood began with the water still filling the city, the boys heard about a job opportunity they couldn't pass up. A neighbor told them, "They're working like crazy to try to fill in the crevasse at Sauvé's Plantation. They're paying excellent money for young bucks like you to fill sandbags."

The two Irish teens had plenty of work in the city, but just couldn't resist the chance to see the crevasse for themselves. So, the next day, they began the fifteen-mile walk upriver on the levee. In many places, the levee was the only thing above water for miles. On one side of it flowed the mighty Mississippi and on the other side were the floodwaters that stretched as far as the eye could see toward the cypress swamps and Lake Ponchartrain. The boys couldn't believe any river could deposit that much floodwater and not be falling. Joe said, "I understand once again why they call it "The Father of Waters."

As they came closer to the crevasse, they were astounded at the noise. Even five miles away, you could hear the rush of the river through the levee break. A thundering roar seemed to drown out all other sounds as they came within sight of the work at the crevasse.

They met a small gang of men who were headed back toward the city on the levee. When questioned as to where they were going, Joseph and Mayo told of their desire to work on the crevasse. The men all shook their heads and one spoke out, "Boys, if you got any sense a'tall, turn around and go back with us. It's dangerous game going on back there. They'll never stop the river from flooding through there."

Of course, the boys kept right on going. The river hadn't met the two land barons who would conquer it before going to claim their fortune in "No Man's Land."

They easily got jobs on the levee. They were given shovels and picks and put to work filling sandbags. For hours, they worked wordlessly and without even looking up. The sandbags were heavy and cumbersome to bring up the levee. It was definitely hard work and every man was sweating profusely in the humid Louisiana air.

Due to their agility and youth, they were assigned to work closest to the actual crevasse. The current, flowing through the levee cut, was strong and they were fighting an ongoing battle to constrict the escaping river with pile after pile of sandbags. Often, the river would wash a section of bags away to the dismay of the men who had laboriously carried them up the levee.

The noise of the crevasse and steam-driven pile driver made conversation difficult. During breaks, the talk of the workers had been the rumor that they were bringing an old ship down to sink it at the crevasse to help obstruct the flow. On that first day, nothing happened except the steady flow of sandbags offered into the flooding water, seemingly as useless sacrifices to the thundering river gods.

When they stopped work after dark, the workers wearily ate supper and bedded down on the levee. They were dirty and tired, and the mosquitoes made the night even more miserable.

The next day they continued their discussions of the tactics to close the break. Most had seen enough of the river's force to doubt that anything could plug it. The focus of conversation was the rumored flatboat that would be sunk in the gap to help plug the crevasse. Most agreed it was a waste of time. However, any effort that might lessen the number of heavy sandbags they were lugging up the levee, was welcomed.

It both amused and irritated Joseph how the slaves present were not working on the levee itself. They had difficult jobs too—they were digging and filling the sandbags, then carting them to the base of the levee. One of the Irish workers commented, “It’s something how the life of a slave is much more valuable than any Irishman. Slaves are considered an ‘investment,’ but we all are easily expendable. There’s always another boatload arriving ready to fill the places left by the injured, sick, or dead.”

The Irishmen fully understood why the slaves weren’t put on the edge of the crevasse or at the top of the levee: It was just too dangerous. At any time, a portion of the levee or sandbags could break loose. It had happened several times since the crevasse. Most of the men swept away had survived, but three had drowned or been crushed in the collapse.

They had discussed this danger and agreed to be careful near the water’s edge. Mayo had confided to Joseph that he did not know how to swim. Joseph laughed, “A good Irish lad that doesn’t know how to swim? In County Mayo, every boy learns to swim early.

Mayo retorted, “But I didn’t grow up with the swimming places you had. I’m New Orleans born and bred. The places to swim here are dirty garbage-filled canals and alligator-filled bayous. I say, that’s not swimming for this boy—and this river—” Mayo stopped as he put down a sandbag, “This river here is not the place to learn to swim.”

The next day was when the rumored ship was towed to the crevasse. It was an old flatboat that had seen its better days and seemed destined to be buried in the river here at this spot. As the towing ships worked the hulk into position upriver, the men were all called together and given instructions. The boss said, “Men, they’re gonna drag that ship along the levee just above the break. As they pull it across the gap, another ship will ram it and try to wedge it in. If it sticks and stays, we can use it as a bulwark to sandbag around it and eventually even under it.”

From the back of the gathered workers, a voice called out, “Cap’n, do you really think this is gonna work?” The boss man tried to sound optimistic, but his tone belied his doubt. “Well, we’ll just have to see. We’ve all seen enough of this river to know that nothing don’t come easy.”

Everyone was given assignments and positions. Joseph, Mayo, and three other younger men were assigned the edge of the crevasse on the downriver side. When the boat was put into place along the levee, they were to begin placing sandbags underneath near the bow and anywhere else nearby that water was still coming through. They had piled a large amount of dirt on the levee top. Shovels were provided. An adjacent pile of sandbags was ready for use next to the dirt.

As the decisive moment approached and the ships neared the cut, Mayo punched Joseph and pointed backwards, “Look Joe Moore, they’ve moved all of the darkies away. It’s just us expendables left near here.”

Sure enough, Joseph saw that the slaves had all been moved a respectable distance back. Even some of the foremen had decided to watch the culmination from a safe point.

Being young, foolish, and brave, the boys laughed at the others. Mayo grinned, “When there’s real work to be done, call on us County Mayo boys!”

The key was to tow it at an angle where it would not sail through the strong current of the break. Instead, the goal was to keep it crossways until each end was against the levee. Then hopefully the push of the river through the gap would hold the ship against the levee and allow the workers to shore it up.

For a moment, it seemed as if the ship was going to turn straight in and float out through the crevasse. However, the steamboats ahead of it gunned their engines and succeeded in turning it broadside. Joseph, Mayo and the others on the south end of the levee felt the boat creaking as the

bow slipped past the gap. The boat shuddered which caused the sandbag-extended levee to shake beneath their feet.

The man assigned to their end shouted, “Men, let’s git it while the gittin’s good! Shore her up!” They all sprang into action carrying sandbags to the ship’s edge. Water was still flowing furiously underneath the ship, but their end showed signs of holding. As sandbags were lowered and placed, shovels flashed as dirt was thrown on top of the bags.

It was at this precise moment, as everything seemed to be working that disaster struck.

Now, the second part of the plan was unfolding in which one of the steamboats was to ram the boat to ensure it was lodged against the levee. The steamer came across the current and struck the levee-obstructing boat with a loud crash. Several men had climbed onto the hull to secure it to the levee with ropes. They were either thrown or jumped into the water on the backside of the levee. Luckily, they were soon fished out by onlookers to this unfolding drama.

Mayo, Joseph, and the other men did not see the oncoming boat either. When it struck broadsides, they were right along the levee edge on the river side. The collision of the steamboat caused the bow of the stationary boat to swing violently toward the river. It knocked Joseph down flat.

Going down, he saw the hull strike Mayo a terrible blow. The wooden hull caught him full force in the chest and flung him out into the river about twenty feet. All Joseph saw was his friend hitting the water—and then he was gone.

The only thing that even showed that a man had gone into the great river was Mayo’s hat floating down river. Joseph jumped up and tried to catch his breath. He ran along the levee, shovel frozen in his hand, hoping to see Mayo’s head bob up.

He was ready to jump in to either find his friend or drown with him. Two of the workers, evidently sensing this, grabbed him from behind, one of them sadly saying, “He’s gone, poor lad. He’s gone.”

Joseph, his heart about to burst, broke loose from their grip, and sprinted down the levee. As he ran, he prayed he would see Mayo in the water. But this was one prayer that would not be answered.

He continued down the levee trying to gauge the speed of the current and how far it might carry a body in the time since the collision. He knew a body was the best he would find. The blow from the hull either had knocked Mayo unconscious or killed him outright. Even so, a non-swimmer was no match for this river that had caused so much heartache in the miles up and down this very levee he was now running.

Finally, Joseph stopped. He looked back and realized he was a good quarter of a mile from the crevasse. He stood there alone—crying. His lonely silhouette was highlighted against the blue sky, green levee, and the dark muddy water of the river.

Standing there, forlornly still scanning the river for any sign of Mayo, he only saw floating logs and debris. Joseph turned to look back toward the crevasse and saw the men were all back at work hefting sandbags and shoveling dirt. They were back at work as if nothing had happened. He couldn’t believe it. It looked like a colony of dark ants as men scurried about on the levee and the ship. It was as if nothing had happened. As if Mayo’s life had never existed.

Looking at the shovel in his hand, Joseph grabbed it with both hands by the handle and slung it as far as he could out into the river’s current. Just like Mayo, it struck the water and was gone.

He then started walking along the levee. He never even looked back at the crevasse. In fact, he never even looked back until he was a long ways along the fifteen-mile walk back to New Orleans.

When Joseph reached the Shell Road at the edge of New Orleans, he turned north on it instead of following the levee to the Irish Channel. He could not bear the thought of telling Tommy and Mary O'Leary of Mayo's death. He knew he had to eventually, but it just wouldn't be today.

The land on both sides of the Shell Road was underwater and in some places, it flowed over the road. Joseph followed the road toward Lake Ponchartrain. He didn't have a definite destination in mind—he just wanted to get away from the river and the flooded city.

After five miles of walking, he reached the end of the road at a spot on the Lake called West End. It was now nearing dark and the lakefront seemed empty. Fishing boats bobbed up and down at the pier. Overhead sea gulls called as they dove for fish. The Ponchartrain, a brackish lake, still had enough salt water in it to emit that ocean-like smell Joseph knew so well. All of this, coupled with the shock of Mayo's death, combined to create an acute sense of homesickness in Joseph's soul.

He temporarily forgot the hardships he'd left behind in Ireland. He chose not to remember how all of his family, save a sister, was gone from his home island. He just knew he wished to get on a boat and get as far from here as possible, to just go back home to Ireland seemed a plausible wish.

For hours, he sat on the rock seawall at the pier and looked out over the lake. Darkness came and a full moon rose on the east shore of Lake Ponchartrain. It was beautiful as well as majestic, but it only saddened him. The stars shone in the clear sky, but Joseph, head down, didn't even seem to notice. Out on the lake, lanterns twinkled from nighttime fisherman.

He sat there all night in one spot watching that full moon, reflected in the lake, make its arc across the sky. Joseph's mind was a fog of sorrow, confusion, anger, and hurt. He tried to pray, but the words seemed to fall out of his mouth and roll down the rocks into Lake Ponchartrain.

He had a decision to make, but daylight came with no sleep and no guidance on what to do. As the sun came up over the eastern edge of the lake, Joseph Moore sat with his compass in his hand—knowing he could go in any direction the needle pointed, but seemingly unable to move. He wearily got to his feet and began trudging back down the Shell Road toward the city. There were things he didn't want to do—but must do.

Reaching the river levee, he turned left and headed toward the city and the O'Leary home. It disturbed him that someone else might tell the family before he did.

He walked down the levee to Girod Street, which had not flooded on its upper end. When Joseph passed the church and crossed Camp Street, he hesitated. His faith at this moment was very weak, but he needed someone to talk to. He turned around, went inside, and began searching for Father Mullon.

He found the priest sitting in the front row of the cathedral, seemingly deep in thought. He asked quietly, "Father Mullon, do you remember me?"

Awakened from his reverie, James Mullon studied Joseph's face before a smile of recognition came, "Oh yes, you're the stowaway from Mayo that I sent to the O'Leary's. Well, how have you handled our flood?"

Joseph sat down beside the priest and slowly unfolded the story of Mayo's death. A look of compassion came over the priest and he placed a hand on Joseph's shoulder. Mullon had a

reputation for being tough as nails but also carried the compassion of Jesus in his heart. This latter quality revealed itself in the way he listened and reacted to Joseph's story.

As Joseph finished his tale he added, "I know I must go tell Tommy and Mary what has happened. But it breaks my heart to do it."

"I know, my Son, t'is true, but it must be done—and soon."

"Yes, you're right, Father."

Father Mullon stood and looked into Joseph's eyes, "But I will go with you. The O'Leary's are my parishioners, and I can walk beside you. You need to tell them, but I'll go with you."

They trudged through the ankle-deep water down Adele Street until they reached the home. Mary was sweeping water out the door when she saw them. She smiled at Joseph and said, "Well, how have the levee pluggers done? I've been—." Then she stopped in mid-sentence as she realized Mayo wasn't with Joseph, but the priest was. She dropped her broom and said, "I don't want to hear about it. I will not hear about it. Go away! Leave!"

With that, Mary went back into the house. The two men could hear her crying and the sound of plates breaking.

Ten minutes later, Tommy O'Leary came through the door. His face looked pale and he nodded at Mullon and spoke to Joseph, "Well, Son, let's hear the news—good or bad. I reckon it's gonna be bad."

"Yes Sir, 'tis." Joseph didn't think he could continue. It seemed as if he didn't tell about Mayo's death, it might not be true.

Tommy waited patiently until Joseph began. He painstakingly told of the accident at the levee. All three men wept silently as the news sunk in that Tommy had lost his son. Tommy invited the men to come in, but they politely refused. He asked them to remain outside until he could talk to Mary.

Joseph and Father Mullon stood miserably in the flooded street. Although silent, the priest kept his strong hand on Joseph's shoulder as neighbors gathered around.

Finally, Tommy returned with his wife. She was still crying but was more composed. She went straight to Joseph and hugged him. "Joseph, whatever happened is not your fault. Mayo loved you, and your friendship was a bright light in his life. He would not want you to carry this burden, and neither does Tommy or me." Her words were comforting, but Joseph could hardly look up.

They invited him to stay with them, but he declined, knowing that with a flooded house, grief, and their other children, he would be in the way. He also turned down Mullon's offer to stay at the rectory.

For the next several days, Joseph roamed the levee, asking docking ships if anyone had spotted a body in the river. It was a question met with many strange looks, but no affirmative answers.

Joseph went wherever he could to get out of the weather. His mind was a spinning compass as he tried to focus on what to do next.

Much of the time, you could see him standing on the levee watching the river flow by. Ships of all nationalities came and went around the big bend that turned toward the Gulf and foreign lands. Other boats, much smaller and usually steam-driven, headed in the other direction upriver to Natchez, Memphis, or Ohio. Joseph considered both directions and knew he must choose one. To stay in this stinking, flooded city of death was not an option, but which way to go: back to the old world or deeper into the new, that was what he must decide.

On the third day of his wandering, he reached a decision. He turned from the levee and walked back down Girod Street. It took a little while to find Father Mullon. The priest strode into the front of the auditorium and was visibly relieved to see him. “Joseph, we’ve been worried about you.”

“Father Mullon, I’ve made a decision. I’m leaving New Orleans. I’m heading upriver. Mayo and I had a dream to go to the wild part of Louisiana—what they call “No Man’s Land.” Even though he won’t be going with me, I’m on me way, and I’ll be carryin’ him in me heart.”

James Mullon closely studied his Irish countryman. “Joseph, I believe that sounds like a reasonable, good decision for you. What are your specific plans?”

“Just to get out of here as soon as possible. I’ll figure it out as I move along.”

They sat there in silence. Father Mullon had his eyes fixed on one of the murals behind the altar—a painting of Jesus walking on the water.

Finally, he spoke, “Yes, Joseph I think you are making a wise decision to continue your journey. I’d like to give you my blessing for this journey.

“However, the most important journey ye are on is not with your legs. It is with your heart. So much has happened to ye in such a short span of years. I cannot explain why God allows these things, but ye must make the decision on where this inner journey leads: to peace with God or deeper into resentment and anger. It’s a matter of becoming better . . . or bitter.”

Joseph looked up directly into the priest’s eyes at those words. Once again: a bitter man or a better man.

“Son, have you ever heard about my journey across the Atlantic?”

Joseph turned his gaze to Mullon, “No.”

Mullon said, “I was born in Londonderry, up in the north of Ireland. When I was about eight, my parents decided to immigrate to America. It was such an exciting time, but the voyage was much different than I expected. My mother died of ship fever on the way and, all at once, what had been so exciting seemed like the end of the world.

“My Da and I came on to America and tried to make the best of it.” Mullon stopped. Once again, his gaze was on the three murals. He seemed to be looking at each one for the first time in his life.

Putting a firm grip on Joseph’s arm, Mullon added, “Now, you’ve had some hard knocks along the way. Many more knocks than you deserve, but you’re not the only one who’s been knocked down. You have a lot of hurt in your heart, and some of that hurt has hardened into bitterness. God can’t use you and you can’t be happy in life if you’re bitter. At some point, you’ll have to choose to let it go, or it’ll eat you alive. Faith cannot grow where bitterness lives.”

Joseph sighed, “But I think I lost my faith a long ways back. I don’t have any faith.”

The Irish priest rose to his full height. What he said next wasn’t unkind, but said in a firm way that Joseph not only heard, but also felt: “Son, you haven’t lost your faith. You’ve just lost the faith of your parents. Go out and get some of your own! Go to that no man’s land, or Texas, or those woods, or wherever it is you’re headed, and get among those trees and whatever kind of people are out there … and carve out of those woods a spot for your own faith.”

Briskly, with no time for a hug or goodbye, the priest turned and strode away. It was the last time Joseph Moore would ever see James Mullon, but the words of the St. Patrick’s priest would never leave his heart.

The next afternoon Joseph stood on the Mississippi River levee. Finally, the river was now slowly falling. The crevasse upstream had been plugged, and the water in the city, although not draining, at least was no longer rising.

Earlier that day he had said his goodbyes to the O'Leary family. They were so gracious, and Mary O'Leary gave him some of Mayo's clothes and a canvas haversack to carry them in.

Joseph slipped into the house and carefully placed all of the money he and Mayo had saved into a box where Mary kept her sewing needles. He knew it would come in handy for the family in the days to come.

Then he was gone from muddy Adele Street and soon standing on this levee. Joseph pulled out his compass, the gift from his sailor friend Gill. It seemed like years ago, instead of weeks, since he'd arrived in this city of New Orleans. He laid the compass in his hand, aligned its base with the wavering needle, got his bearing, and began walking toward the Port Street dock and a steamer river packet called the Caddo.

Chapter 19

The cardinal just would not shut up! Each morning it woke Eliza up with its singing in the maple tree by her window. She called it her "personal alarm clock." Its shrill whistling "what cheer-what cheer" song was beautiful to hear. Her dad laughingly said he was going to pepper it with birdshot and shut it up.

Long before the other birds of the woods began their day, this redbird was already into its third verse. Some of the Ten Milers said the cardinal's "what cheer" song was really saying, "Wake up boys—wake up." Either way, the sound usually began Eliza's day. She had never had the many things a city person might have: fancy clocks, jewelry, or photographs of herself and her family. She'd never even held a compass in her hand. She would have scoffed at the need for one. She knew the woods and swamps she lived in as well as anyone. Like the cardinal outside her window, her world was not very large, but it was her home, and she knew it intimately.

Like the cardinal, Eliza was settled. Unlike many of the birds of the Louisiana woods, the cardinal never left or migrated. It chose to spend its life year-round in the temperate climate of the south, living close to the land and trees where it had been born. When one is settled and happy in the land you inhabit, you do not feel the urge to wander.

Eliza, belying her Indian roots, had a deep love of the land. It supplied practically everything her family needed for shelter, clothing, and food. There was still a distrust of "The Americans" in this part of Louisiana. They were the outsiders that were creeping in and passing through the Redbone country on their journeys to Texas, the Sabine River, and points west. As she watched their wagons passing along the Sugartown Road, loaded down with everything they owned, she wondered why they were on the move. Why had they left their homes—wherever that might be—for new land that might not be anything as good as what they had left? She would look around these woods and vow this would never happen to her.

Because of this feeling of stewardship and kinship, Ten Milers like Eliza and her family would have trouble grasping a man and his timber company being willing to sacrifice the beauty of these woods for the almighty dollar—it would have been unfathomable.

Had someone told her that a timber company's wheels were now turning to evict her family off their land, her initial reaction would have been unbelief. The idea was simply not within her reach.

However, her second reaction would have been typical of the Ten Miler attitude, "They'll take my land over my dead body." A deep love of the land will make a person say things like that.

However, on this morning, with a cardinal singing "what cheer" outside her open window, the idea or thought of land trouble brewing was not even on her map. Instead, she looked out into the slowly developing first light of morning and thought about how much she loved this land.

There was a feeling best expressed by her dad's earlier statement, "Liza girl, we don't own this land near as much as this land owns us."

However, Eliza had no idea as this summer day unfolded that a man would show up whose sole aim was to take and destroy this very land she loved.

Travis Thomas, in his responsibilities for the Piedmont Timber Company, had his own methods of going into an area where they had purchased tracts of land. He always preferred to make first contact himself and try to pursue full ownership of the land in a peaceable way.

However, he also had a series of steps that were as he put it mildly, "more disagreeable" to be used as needed if original negotiations failed.

He laughed when he used the word "negotiations" because he held the land deeds in his hands. Normally, as it was also true in the No Man's Land tracts, the squatters had no legal right of ownership of the land. He was aware that many of their families had lived there for generations. However, the paper deeds he held trumped that history. He had found that stacks of paperwork, his good use of legal wording, and intimidation—to whatever degree that was needed—usually took care of the initial resistance. It had worked in North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Tennessee. He fully expected to be successful in Piedmont's first purchase of Louisiana land.

This was his attitude as he approached the Ten Mile country. He was accompanied by three of his men, including his chief enforcer, a big man called "Turk." Rounding out the horse-riding crew was a reluctant Rapides Deputy named Jones. The deputy's job was to inform the residents that Thomas's claims were legal.

Eliza was outside when this crew of five riders came up to the Clark homestead. She eyed them carefully as they slowly rode up. When one of them came forward and identified himself as a deputy, she caught her breath. It was unusual to see any law enforcement in Ten Mile and it was never good news. The deputy introduced himself, "I'm Deputy Jones from the Rapides Parish Sheriff's Office. Is your father or mother home?"

Just then, Willard Clark came around the side of the house. He'd been chopping wood and heard the horses approaching. The deputy introduced himself as well as Travis Thomas. Eliza watched each carefully. Two of the riders hung back but Thomas and another man, a big ugly red-faced man, got off their horses and approached her poppa.

The man named Thomas was well dressed, well spoken, and extremely courteous as he began speaking with her dad. The big man, whom she believed had been called Turk, was a different story. He exuded arrogance and made a show of displaying his long sidearm in its holster. After dismounting, he never took his eyes off Eliza. She had been around enough to know when a man was looking at her with evil intent, and there was no doubt he was doing just that.

She started to turn and walk away. Then she thought better of it, she wanted to hear what was going on. But her Poppa turned to her, "Eliza, you go on in the house. Right now!"

He said it with such determination in his voice that Eliza knew better than to argue, so she promptly obeyed. Once inside, she went straight to the mantel above the fireplace and took down her poppa's double-barreled shotgun. She knew he kept it loaded with one round of buckshot and the other of squirrel shot. She couldn't remember which barrel had the buckshot, but if that bad man bothered her poppa, she'd give him both barrels. Then she eased back to the door ready to defend her father at all costs.

As Eliza cracked the door open, Travis Thomas was showing the deeds and maps to Willard Clark. He'd been ensured in Hineston that this was a good home to start with his campaign of claiming the land. His plan was always to single out several reasonable and influential families to

make a quick monetary settlement with. This usually ensured that other families would also agree to sell out and vacate the premises.

Thomas had reached the critical point of his discussion with Willard Clark. He pulled out a checkbook from his vest and smiled, “Now, Mr. Clark, even though I own this land—and you have no legal claim to it—I am a reasonable man. I’m willing to offer you two hundred dollars to relinquish your claim. I believe that is very fair, considering the situation. Don’t you?”

During the entire conversation, Willard Clark had not spoken a word. He only stared at the man as he tore out the check and handed it to him with a flourish.

However, Willard Clark made no effort to take it or even acknowledge it. His eyes were locked into the eyes of Travis Thomas.

Thomas, with check extended, repeated, “Mr. Clark don’t you think that is a fair offer?”

Willard Clark began speaking. Eliza wasn’t sure she’d ever heard her poppa speaking in the voice he was using. It wasn’t an angry voice or loud—but it seemed as if every word was measured and carefully chosen.

“Sir, you’ve come on my property wanting to buy, or take, my land. Now your papers and maps don’t mean much to me. I can’t even read. But they wouldn’t mean much to me even if I could.”

He swept his arms around the surrounding timber, “This place has been my home since me and my wife settled it, cleared it, and made a home out of it. It ain’t for sale—not for two hundred dollars, not for no amount!”

Willard Clark turned toward the house and Eliza thought maybe he’d seen her, but his gaze continued toward the big maple tree beside the house.

He pointed at the maple as he continued, “Over there’s a family of redbirds—cardinals—that live in that there maple. They’ve been there as long as we’ve been on this land. Do you plan to evict them, too?”

Thomas seemed flustered, “Now, uh, Mr. Clark, you know—”

Her dad continued, “Well mister, we’re just like those cardinals. This is our home—it’s where we been and where we are. Those birds don’t have no deed either, but you’d have to kill them to get them to leave that maple—that’s their home. Sir, I believe you’ll find that the folks along Ten Mile and Cherry Winche aren’t going to take real kindly to you taking our land. So good day to you.”

“But, Mr. Clark, try to be reasonable and—”

“Sir, I said good day. I ain’t even goin’ to offer you a cup of cold coffee. I’ve seen people like you before—the kind that’ll pee in your pocket and tell you it’s raining—can’t trust them a lick. Now, please git off my place now!”

Travis Thomas’ entire demeanor changed instantly. His smoothness was replaced by an iciness that sent a chill through Eliza as she watched. The outsider said, “Well, I will have my land. Sooner, if not, later. You can mark my word. Just mark my word!”

Peeking through the door, Eliza saw the man called “Turk” had his hand on his big pistol. She thumb-cocked the shotgun and got it into position to shoot through the crack in the door.

Willard Clark quietly stood there—not uttering another word.

Finally, Thomas shook his head and walked away toward his horse. He muttered to no one in particular, but loud enough for everyone to hear, “This is my land. I will have it!”

Turk kept his hand on his pistol as he slowly backed away. His eyes, however, were not on Willard Clark. He was staring carefully at the cracked front door. Standing behind it, Eliza wondered if he’d seen her or the shotgun barrel poised by the crack.

Through clenched teeth Turk said, “I’ll see you again, and it’ll be on my terms, not yours.”

Willard Clark realized the man was not speaking to him, and turned toward the house and saw nothing, except the slightly open front door. He then stood in the yard impassively until the riders were out of sight. He wondered where they would go next.

Eliza stayed at the door listening and waiting. She uncocked the shotgun and leaned it against the wall. All of a sudden, she felt dizzy and drained. As she tried to catch her breath, the only sound she heard was the steady calling of the cardinals in the red maple tree by her bedroom window.

Chapter 20

If Eliza Clark, living among the piney woods of Louisiana, identified with the cardinal, Joseph Moore, now journeying up the Mississippi River, would have chosen the wild goose as the bird he most resembled.

Walking up the gangplank of the steamboat Caddo, Joseph Moore did not look or feel like a cardinal. An observer would have seen more the wanderlust of the wild goose. Just as the geese would be flying south in the coming winter, Joseph was now moving north—and west.

The difference between him and the geese was this: the geese knew where they were going. They had a destination clearly in mind. This seventeen-year-old immigrant was different. He didn't know where he was going to. He was more aware of what he was trying to get away from.

The steamer began laboriously pushing its way up the river's strong current. He was joined on the deck by a worker named Jock he'd met during the loading.

As Joseph stood by Jock observing these two river banks, he commented, "Just look at that—two sides of the same river; one devastated and trying to recover, while everything seems business as usual on the other bank. It's just like life. There are the haves and the have-nots. The only differences are the circumstances—which side of the river you were born and live on. It's all a matter of fate."

Jock looked at him curiously, "That's some awfully deep thought and talk for a young man your age." Joseph said nothing but continued staring out toward the flood-ravaged east bank of the Mississippi.

There was a part of this river trip he wanted to get behind him quickly: passing the now-closed crevasse where Mayo had drowned. He had no desire to return to the spot where he had tragically been recently, but there was no alternative to get upriver without passing it. Joe's desire to go upriver to the pioneer country outweighed the pain of passing the spot of his friend's death.

As the Caddo came upon the crevasse spot, all of the passengers came to the east side of the boat to see the spot that had so affected New Orleans and the surrounding areas. The river was much lower than when Joseph had last been here. Even so, there was still evidence of the force of the water that had poured through the levee break. On the land side of the now-repaired levee, all trees and grass were gone. Everything had been washed away by the violent force of the water.

As the onlookers leaned over the rail gawking and pointing, Joseph found a spot away from everyone near the stern. Looking back at the churning paddlewheels, he watched the current of the great river pushing toward New Orleans and the Gulf beyond. Somewhere out there, buried beneath the great river was the body of his friend, Mayo O'Leary.

As if Mayo could hear him, Joseph spoke through clenched teeth, “I tell ye, Mayo, I will find that land you and I talked and dreamed about. Your dream goes with me as I go forth. Your dream lives on.”

He remembered an Irish blessing his mother had taught him. Softly and slowly he spoke in Irish, “Sla‘n agus, beannacht, leat.” Then as if remembering Mayo spoke better English than Irish, he added, “Goodbye, friend, and blessings be with you.”

The area upriver from New Orleans was much different from what he’d seen coming up from the gulf or being in the city. As they plowed northward among a steady stream of vessels of all sizes, they left the swampy areas along the river and entered the cane fields of the river plantations. As far as the eye could glimpse beyond the levees were row after row of green sugar cane. From time to time Joseph could see large white-columned homes surrounded by dozens of barns, outbuildings, and small sheds.

During the two days of loading and unloading the steamboat, Joseph became better acquainted with Jock. A young man in his late twenties, Jock Ellis hailed from Kentucky. He had come down about ten years earlier on a flatboat and decided he liked the land of the Deep South better than his family’s land along the Ohio River. When the rest of the flatboat crew gathered their proceeds, sold their boat, and began their long trek back to the Midwest, Jock just told them goodbye and set about making a living in the New Orleans area. He had quickly found work along the wharves. Soon he began working on the steamboats that plied up and down the river. About a year ago, he had first worked aboard the Caddo. Since then, he had become a full-time deckhand. He loved going up and down the river, seeing the sights, and living the semi-nomadic life of a river rat.

Jock took a liking to Joseph. “Boy, I like the way you work. You’re also about the first Irishman I’ve met who could stay sober for more than two days in a row.”

Joseph laughed at this before Jock continued, “But most of all, Mr. Irishman, I sense the same spirit of adventure in you that we Americans have a good dose of. You’re gonna like our country. I believe it and you are a good fit.”

Looking across the wide Mississippi, Joseph answered, “I sure hope it’s a good fit, ’cause it looks like me and America are stuck with each other.”

Jock took time to explain many of the sights along the river. He explained about the various ships passing by. As he watched Joseph’s keen observance of the plantations, he continued his job as personal tour guide. “That’s the big house there. At least that’s what the slaves call it. Those buildings around it are the homes of the various overseers and other families. See that one with the smoke coming outta the chimney; that’s most likely the kitchen or cookhouse. They keep it separate so a fire won’t burn down the big house.”

Pointing toward the rows of small shacks along a road, he added, “Those are the slave quarters. A plantation this size might have a hundred or more slaves. They live in those one-room shanties supplied by the plantation owner.”

As they proceeded upriver, Joseph was amazed at the large groups of slaves working the cane fields. In New Orleans, it was common to see slaves, but you saw them in small groups of two or three. To see dozens of slaves hoeing along the rows was an eye-opening experience. He thought back to his first view in New Orleans of Freeman’s Slave Pen. He had never quite gotten over the anguished faces of the slaves awaiting their sale and uncertain future in a new place.

Even from the great distance on the river, Joseph could easily distinguish the men from the women. The women all wore brightly colored scarves on their heads while the men wore hats.

He was astounded at the vast numbers of smaller bodies working among the rows—these were the children.

The plight of these workers, especially the children, reminded him of the similar plight of many in Ireland. Stripped of their land and titles by the English, they were forced to subsist on rented tracts of land that became smaller with each succeeding generation.

He mentioned this to Jock: "You know the main difference between us Irish and the Negroes is that they were forced to come over here from a land they probably loved just like your people love Kentucky. It's a sin to take a man from the land he loves and put him in a strange land. Now in Ireland, no one has been made a slave, at least officially, but when you don't own your land, and you're forced to work it to survive, it's a little like those folks out there in the cane fields."

This didn't seem to make much of an impression on Jock. "Joseph, a fellow can think too much. Maybe it's just those people's lot to be out in that cane field. At least you had the chance to walk away from whatever it was like over there and get a new start."

Thinking of the circumstances that finally brought about his leaving his beloved County Mayo, Joseph replied acidly, "Well, I wouldn't say I exactly walked away from it."

A few miles later, the Caddo docked on the east bank at a landing. They had a scheduled one-hour stop for passengers so Joseph told Jock, "I'm going for a little walk on the levee."

Jock explained that it'd be about an hour before they departed. "Just listen for the steam whistle. The first one's telling you it's ten minutes till we undock. The second one means we're casting off the lines. Don't be late! This boat don't wait on no one, especially deckhands."

Joseph turned north on the levee and began walking. In the distance among the cane fields, he saw a large group of workers spread among the rows. Several wagons were at the end of the row and he could pick out the silhouette of a man on horseback riding among the workers. He walked down the steep slope of the levee and made his way toward them.

As he came closer, he clearly heard the sound of singing. At first, he wasn't sure that's what he heard, but the nearer he approached, it became clear the slaves were singing.

It was like no other singing he'd heard before. Being Irish, he just naturally enjoyed music, but he'd never heard this type of singing. Getting closer, he could tell that an older woman was calling out the words. In time, the rest of the slaves, probably about thirty of them, would echo back her words. It was unique, sad, and unforgettable. Their voices were rich and full of depth. However, their words and the way they sang them were what made it saddest to Joseph.

The closest thing he could relate it to was the keening of the women at an Irish wake. The singing coming from the cane fields had this same intensity and depth of soul. It could only be sung by a people who'd been beaten down by an oppressor. But in spite of its sadness, the singing also had a sense of victory to it. Most of the words, which he tried to listen to closely but couldn't always understand, seemed to be concerned with unwavering faith, the hope for a better life in the hereafter, and dependence on God to make it through the road ahead, or in this case, the row ahead.

Joseph stood quietly listening. The slaves were slowly working their way toward the end of the rows where he stood. The white man on the horse, evidently an overseer or foreman, rode along slowly cradling a rifle in his arm. He spied Joseph and stared at him. Joseph knew he ought to move along to avoid any trouble, but he seemed rooted to the ground just like the knee-high sugar cane.

He wondered if they sang all day like this. This seemed to be their method of dealing with their lot in life.

Joseph was just about ready to turn and leave when the workers became silent. When he had just about decided the singing was ended, the leader with her rich alto voice sang out,

"I'm just a poor wayfaring stranger…"
The others—the women, men, and the children all answered back,
"I'm just a poor wayfaring stranger."

Joseph stood mesmerized. The tune was slightly different and the pace of the song much slower than how it was sung in Ireland, but it was definitely the same song. This song, which in his mind had only existed in Ireland, had somehow found its way to a cane field along the Mississippi River.

The woman, lifting her head and eyes toward heaven continued, each time answered by her choir of sugar cane co-workers,

"While traveling through this world of woe.
There is no sickness, toil, or danger, in that fair world to which I go.
I'm going home to see my mother; she said she'd meet me when I come,
I am just going over Jordan; I am just going over home."

Joseph was deeply touched by this. To hear "Wayfaring Stranger" sung in a foreign land moved him deep down in his soul. He hoped the slaves, and especially the overseer, were far enough away to not see the tears coursing down his cheeks.

After a pause, the red-scarved woman continued, still answered by the others,
I know dark clouds will gather o'er me;
I know my pathway's rough and steep.
But golden fields lie out before me,
Where weary eyes no more shall weep.

That verse had always been Joseph's favorite as a boy. He could always vividly picture this pilgrim, this stranger, struggling along under a heavy load up this rough, steep pathway. Ma, his mother, would always close her eyes, arch her head, and rock slowly as she sang this verse from her heart. She had traveled that rough and steep pathway, too. Just like this woman singing it now.

The slaves had worked their way to the end of the rows where Joseph stood listening. They never even looked up at him. He realized their world did not extend one inch past the end of this plantation.

The overseer rode over to him and gruffly said, "Boy, what are you looking at? Who are you?"

"I'm from the steamboat. Just stretching my legs during our break."

The man shifted the rifle cradled in his arm to remind Joseph he was armed. "Well, just don't mess with my darkies. They're having a bad day today, and we don't need no more trouble."

Joseph couldn't help but be inquisitive. "Why are they having a bad day?"

The overseer grimaced. "Last week the plantation owner sent ten of our slaves to the market in New Orleans. She—she's the widow of the long-time owner and she ain't got no business sense. Spends most of her time and money in New Orleans.

"Anyway, money got tight so she sold ten of them—got about $12,000. That'll buy her a lot more pretty dresses and furniture." The overseer continued bitterly, "But when you sell off ten of your workers, you're breaking up families among the slaves."

He glanced at the silent slaves who were now hoeing down the turn rows away from the river. "I ain't got nothing for them darkies, but it sure makes them poor workers when they've lost children and spouses to a slave sale. I told the owner that, but she didn't pay no attention. Now I'm stuck with a bunch of crying and moaning workers, who don't do half of what they did before."

He turned his horse to catch back up with the workers. "Boy, I'd git as far 'way from this field as I could. Ain't nothing but sorrow and death out here. Jes' sorrow and death."

The man rode off. As Joseph stood motionless, not believing what he'd just heard, the singing of the slaves resumed, led by the woman:

I want to sing salvation's story, when I get up there with all my friends
I want to wear my crown of glory, I want to touch those nail-pierced hands.
I'm going there to see my Savior, He shed for me His precious blood,

The song-leader continued,

I'll soon be free from every trial…

All of a sudden, the singing was drowned out by a sound—it was the shrill wail of a steamboat whistle. Joseph could still see the mouths of the singers moving although he couldn't hear them. They continued working and singing as if they'd not even heard the whistle. That steamboat, and its whistle, meant nothing to their lives.

But the whistle meant something to Joseph Moore. He turned and realized he was much farther from the Caddo than he'd meant to be. The lure of the cane fields and the mesmerizing singing had made him forget both the time and distance. Looking back, he could only see the distant smokestacks behind the levee. He figured it was close to two miles back to the boat.

He turned and ran toward the levee. Scaling it quickly, he began sprinting with all of his might for his ship. It'd be close if he made it.

As he ran, he heard it once again, although much more distant:

I am just going over Jordan,
I am just going over home.

Joseph sprinted to the landing just as the second whistle blew. The crew was loosening the moorings as the smokestacks billowed black smoke. He was the last one up the gangplank before it was pulled in. As his feet hit the deck, he felt the boat shake as she went in reverse and pulled away from the landing.

Jock stood there shaking his head. "Man, I thought we'd lost you. What in the world were you doing?"

Joseph just grinned and said, "I got detained with some new friends I made. That was close, wasn't it?"

"Closer than you'll ever know."

The next few days were busy as the riverboat stopped at landings along the Mississippi. They passed by the city of Baton Rouge and Port Hudson, an army fort north of there.

Finally, they reached the point where they would leave the Mississippi River. Jock walked over and pointed out the confluence of the rivers: “Well, we’re leaving the big river to head up the Red. It’s kind of like a fork in the road. Can’t go both ways. Gotta choose.”

Joseph looked at his Kentucky friend, “You’ve kind of been on rivers all of your life, haven’t you?”

“Yep, I’m a lifetime river rat—whether it’s the Ohio, Mississippi, or this here Red River.

“Always when we come to the mouth of the Red, I always remember that if we kept going north, I could eventually be home. But we always turn west here and this is as far up the Mississippi as I’ll probably ever go again.”

“You could go back—go home if you wanted to.”

Jock spit in the river. “I’ve made up my mind. I ain’t going back up there. The dye’s been cast. What about you, Mister Irishman? Couldn’t you jes’ go back home across the ocean?”

Joseph stood staring for a long time, and then he turned to his American friend. “No, no, there’s no going back.” As he turned and walked away, he added as he flicked his head behind him, “There ain’t nothing or no one to go back to there anyway.”

Jock later wondered if Joseph had been referring to New Orleans or Ireland when he commented on nothing to go back to anywhere. He finally realized Joseph meant both of them.

As the Caddo cleared across the Mississippi’s current and into the mouth of the Red, Joseph instantly saw where the smaller river got its name. This river, about half the width of the Mississippi, had a rich rusty color to it. It looked as if you could take a shovel and dig mud right off the top of the current. The Red was still a big river, especially compared to the rivers of Ireland. Joseph Moore leaned around a column to get one last look at the mighty Mississippi. He shook his head back toward the Big Muddy, “Now that’s a river there.”

The trip up the Red was uneventful. There was very little river traffic, and no humans were seen along the banks. The land on each side of the river was swampy and filled with cypress trees and what Jock called water tupelo trees. Many egrets and shorebirds sat in the trees and scattered when the steamboat approached. This was a wild and uncivilized area. Joseph wondered how often these birds saw boats or humans along this stretch.

On their second day, they passed what Jock called Miller Bluff. After passing a large river island, Jock announced, “Well, we’re nearly to Alex.”

Business picked up on the steamboat as preparations began to be made for landing. Joseph first made out the settlement of Alexandria and its sister city of Pineville as he saw smoke from the chimneys drifting across the river. As the boat began to slow toward its docking on the west bank of the Red, Joseph got a good look at both cities. Pineville sat on the higher east bank while Alexandria, the larger of the two towns, was closer to the level of the river.

The Caddo blew its steam whistle as it pulled alongside the wharf for Alexandria. A small crowd of workers and merchants were gathered on the dock.

Jock pointed upstream, “Right around that bend are the rapids. It’s a small series of waterfalls that gave this settlement its original name, Post de Rapides. The river’s plenty high right now, but in low water, boats with much of a draft can’t get upriver.”

Just then, the steamboat bumped into the wharf and two men jumped off to tie her up. The two gangplanks were quickly put down and as passengers debarked on one, the process of unloading cargo began. Joseph fell in line and began helping the men with this job.

It took a couple of hours before all was unloaded. Then the process of loading up items for the next leg of the trip began. There were all types of produce and wares. What caught Joseph’s attention were the heavy barrels that they rolled up the gangplank. These oaken-slatted barrels,

each weighing about four hundred pounds were labeled: Naval Stores—New Orleans. As he sweated to help roll the awkward barrels up the gangplanks, he could smell that resiny smell he would always associate with his cross-Atlantic journey.

Finally, the last barrel was loaded, and the Caddo blew its whistle for embarkment. Jock turned to Joseph, “Now you’re sure you want to stay here? It’s not too late to get aboard and stay with us, go to Natchitoches, and return to New Orleans.”

“Nope, my mind’s made up. I didn’t leave anything down there. It’s time to move on.”

They gave each other a warm handshake.

“Best wishes to you, Jock.”

“Same to you, Joseph.”

Joseph stood a long time on the wharf until he could no longer see the steamboat Caddo as it navigated up the Red toward Shreveport. For some reason he pulled out his compass and held it level in his hand until the spinning needle settled. As he aligned the compass with the needle, he looked west. Turning and walking on the levee, he said to no one in particular, “Let’s go see what this city of Alexandria has for me.”

Chapter 21

Joe had a funny feeling about trouble when he stepped off the Caddo that day. Alexandria, a city of about seven hundred citizens, sure didn't look like trouble, but he still had an uneasy feeling.

Calling Alexandria a "city" was probably an exaggeration. It was more like a town or a village. This small-town quality was brought out by the fact that not much went on in 'Alex' as it was called, without being noted.

Even the arrival of a young, poor Irish immigrant did not go unnoticed. Joseph Moore had no idea he was walking into a situation where great prejudice combined with fear would change his plans.

As he carefully descended the levee, he cheerfully spoke to several workers at street level. They stared at him and turned aside.

Before he'd gone a hundred steps, a deputy approached him. The uniformed officer, followed by two other civilians, blocked his path. Joseph stopped in the middle of the street waiting for whatever greeting or warning that awaited him. He could easily tell from the set of the deputy's jaw that it was more likely to be the latter of the two.

"Where you headed, boy?"

Joseph had quickly learned in the South that being called "boy" in that manner was not a compliment.

"Sir, I've just arrived by the steamboat and I'm kinda hunting for a place to stay."

"Where you from?"

Trying to break the ice, Joseph smiled, "Well I'm sure you can tell from my accent I'm not from around here."

His attempt at humor brought only a cold stare from the officer. The other two men, each armed, eased menacingly closer. Joseph waited for another question, but quickly realized it wasn't coming.

"Sir, I'm actually from Westport, Ireland. But I've come up from New Orleans on the steamer Caddo." Joseph turned toward the river and wished he could have seen the Caddo's smokestacks. He thought, if that boat was still here, I'd run up that levee, jump in, and swim out and get out of here.

However, he had watched the steamboat going upstream an hour ago. He was stuck here—at least for now. He turned back to the three men who now surrounded him.

The deputy bristled, "The likes of you ain't welcome here. It's folks like you that bring the yellow fever upriver to our town. How long had you been in New Orleans?"

"I arrived there in May."

"So you ain't yet had the yellow jack?"

"If you're talking about yellow fever, no I haven't. That's part of the reason I got out of there before summer got too far along."

"Well, your timing's bad as far as we're concerned. Last year three Irishmen showed up from New Orleans, and the next thing we knew, we had yellow jack breaking out here. 'Cause of that, you're not real welcome here."

"Now, wait a min . . . " Joseph started to tell the man that the fever could have come from all kinds of sources besides the three men. But he stopped in mid-sentence. The looks on the faces of the men told him that words or reasoning weren't going to make a difference here.

Joseph turned and looked the men full in the face. "I'll tell you something—I don't care to be in your town one bit more than you want me here. So I'll just make us all happy and clear out. Just point me toward Bayou Rapides, and I'll be heading for the No Man's Land and git out of your hair."

One of the deputies pointed upriver and said, "The Bayou's right there. Good riddance and happy walking."

As Joseph walked away, he hoped the deputies didn't understand Irish, because he let them have it in his native language. He never even looked back to see if they had a reaction to his words. He just kept walking, eager to get out of town.

It took Joseph a full day to reach Hineston by walking along Bayou Rapides as it wound its way west. As if to complement his dark mood, it began to drizzle. The slow steady rain soon had Joseph soaking wet.

Instead of cane fields as he'd seen on the Mississippi, Joseph now was walking in the land of cotton. Rows and rows of cotton stretched in every direction. Groups of slaves worked among the rows. They were hoeing among the plants, which were still small. In spite of the rain, they worked on—oblivious to the weather.

Stopping, Joseph could hear them singing. Once again, it was a haunting song like the one he'd heard along the Mississippi. He didn't know this song but it filtered down into his soul anyway. However, he didn't stop long. He was ready to leave the land of the cotton fields, singing slaves, towns, and lawmen.

He was headed toward "No Man's Land."

After walking about ten miles along the bayou, he came to a small crossroads called McNutt. After inquiring at several houses before getting any help, he found that he needed to turn west here to reach Hineston and the Calcasieu.

So he continued on his journey. Soon the cotton fields and flat flood plain turned into rolling hills populated with tall pines in every direction. The rain, accompanying mist, and stillness made everything seem eerie and even ghostly. This low fog kept Joe from being able even to see to the tops of the big trees.

As he followed the winding wagon road through the pines, his steps quickened, putting space between him and the places behind that seemed to have only brought sorrow to Joseph Moore.

At the end of a day of muddy walking, he arrived in the hamlet of Hineston. There were several stores and people milling about on the rutted road that went through town and then dropped down as it entered the Calcasieu Swamp. This was the last civilized place before a traveler crossed the Calcasieu and entered "No Man's Land."

Hineston was built on a high bluff that protected it from even the highest floodwaters of the river. The Texas stage road turned downward into the swamp as it came to the Calcasieu River.

It was near dark, so Joseph found a grove of trees and spent the night there. He was exhausted from the day's walk of over twenty-five miles. Sleep came easily that night.

The next morning he wearily—and hungrily—got up. The rain had stopped, but he was still soaked. He made his way to the small row of stores along Hineston's only real street.

In front of a saddle shop stood a tall man sipping a cup of coffee.

He called out to Joseph, "Morning, morning, morning. How are ye, young man?" In spite of his recent bad experiences with strangers, Joe walked over to the porch to get a look at this seemingly friendly man.

The tall man was dressed in simple work clothes. Joseph immediately noticed his hands. Like the man himself, the hands were long and thin. They were heavily callused and several fingers were bent at odd angles. This was what caught Joseph's attention. He was completely bald and sported a face with a lifetime of wrinkles etched from his forehead down to his mouth. The wrinkles around his eyes and mouth seemed to be permanently etched there. There was a twinkle in his eyes and his mouth seemed to have a perpetual smile that had caused those laugh-line wrinkles.

Joseph had no idea who he was. He might be the town hangman for all Joseph knew, but he liked him immediately. There was something about his manner that suggested peace and kindness and those were two things Joseph Moore hadn't seen much of lately.

The smile and the twinkle in his eyes lit up. Joseph immediately noticed that the man had a very strange accent. It wasn't one he was familiar with from Ireland or his recent travels.

Joseph and the tall man looked at each other. Not comfortable with the silence, Joseph said, "Sir, that's some kind of fine accent you've got. Me ears don't quite recognize it as one from these parts."

The man squinted his eyes and his face became a ripple of wrinkles as he smiled deeply, "Now, you saying I've got an odd accent is what we call 'the pot calling the kettle black.' You've got a little bit of an accent yourself!" It was said in full humor accompanied by a hard slap on the back.

The tall man continued, "Well, I got my accent across the wide Atlantic just like you did. Mine's from Denmark. I'm Erik Andersen." He reached out his hand to Joseph.

Andersen invited Joseph in to his saddle shop and offered him coffee and breakfast. He didn't have to repeat his invitation. Joseph was soon hungrily wolfing down a plate of eggs and bacon.

Erik Andersen stood in the doorway and talked to Joseph as he spoke to every other person walking by in the street. He seemed to know everyone by name as he spoke to him or her.

After finishing his third helping of breakfast, Joseph turned to this new friend. "Why did you help me out—a rank stranger?"

Rubbing his bald head, Andersen replied, "Well, the good book—by the way that's what I call the Bible—talks about taking care of strangers. Let me see if I can quote it. I learned it a long time ago. He cleared his throat. It's…It's over there in Exodus 23, I believe. Here's how it goes: 'Also, thou shalt not oppress a stranger: for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.' I've been a stranger in Egypt myself and haven't forgotten how it feels. I take seriously what the Bible says, so I just had to help you."

"Well, this stranger sure appreciates it!"

"You're welcome. We'll take you to my home to get cleaned up, and the stranger might have a better chance of getting a few more friends."

The next day at the saddle shop, Joseph asked about "No Man's Land."

Erik Andersen pulled out an old tattered map of Louisiana and handed it to Joseph. Just then, a customer entered and Erik went to the front of the store. Joseph studied the crude homemade map that was about a foot high and wide. It was evidently fashioned from earlier in the century right after Louisiana became a state.

Tracing down the map from Alexandria, Joseph found the winding line that was labeled "The Calcasieu." He practiced saying it as Erik had pronounced it, "Cow-ka-shoe." When Erik said it, he really put emphasis on the last syllable—it always sounded as if he was sneezing as he said it—"Cow-ka-shooo..." Joseph reminded himself to find out what the word meant. It sounded like an Indian word to him, and he could picture wild Indians paddling along this river.

As he studied the map, he was intrigued how it showed the expanse between the Calcasieu and Sabine as a blank space on the map. On the east side of the Calcasieu, it showed roads, villages, and creeks. But when you moved west, it was blank until the Sabine and Texas. Joseph found the date of 1825 on the map.

The only thing shown in this area labeled as the "Neutral Strip" was one road winding from Hineston west to the Burr's Ferry over the Sabine. And that was it! No creeks or rivers, no dots for villages or crossroads. Just open space.

Joseph Moore ran his hand over this white space. I just wonder what it looks like. This map has it open just for the taking. I plan to have a look see for myself.

When Andersen returned to the back, Joe asked, "Mr. Erik, who lives in that area between the rivers?"

"Not much of anyone—travelers who've been through there tell about a fierce group of people who live in the part of the strip west of Hineston and further south along a stream called Ten Mile. That is the home of the Redbone people.

"They are a clannish and secretive group that doesn't take well to strangers. It's all right as you travel through there; just don't stop. Most groups traveling through there move on through the Redbone country with minimal stopping. When you get near the village of Sugartown, about forty miles from Hineston, you are out of their territory."

Joseph Moore's imagination was full of the picture of these people in the neutral strip. "Who are these people called 'Redbones'?"

"They are a mysterious people. Not much is known of their origins. They are dark-skinned and have strong Indian features with high cheekbones. Redbones are all black-headed and have deep brown eyes. I've only seen a few here in Hineston. The thing that caught my attention was their dark, fierce eyes."

That night Joseph Moore tossed and turned. His dreams were filled with the images of a dark group of people living in the deep woods with freedom. That word—freedom—echoed in his mind and heart. He wondered what it felt like—freedom from tyranny and injustice. It seemed as if the very authorities he'd seen—the English in Ireland, the Creoles in New Orleans, the slave owners over their slaves, had been the most oppressive. He understood why these so-called Redbones wanted to live where they would not be bothered by authority.

He woke from these dreams and knew he was leaving Hineston that day.

That morning Joseph went into the store to tell Erik of his plans. The old saddler stood there in his apron, a tack hammer in one hand and three saddle tacks sticking out from his mouth. As Joseph told of his decision to go to the Neutral strip, Erik Andersen spit out the tacks and feigned great indignation, "I knew good and well when I told you about that dark country, you'd have to go. Every Irishman I've ever known is pig-headed and looking for trouble. No wonder those

English keep knocking the devil out of y'all. They're trying to beat the stubbornness out of you buggers!"

Joseph stood there with his hands on his hips, a look of hurt pride on his face. But a wink from Erik's wrinkled face let him know this was all said with tongue in cheek. Anyway, Joseph could hardly argue against Erik's assessment of his stubbornness. He knew in his heart that it was true and was proud of the Irish reputation for tenacity.

"Well, Son, let me hear from you down the road."

With that final word Erik slipped a gold coin into his hand. Joseph looked down in amazement at the coin and up into the warm eyes of this old man: "Thanks, Mr. Erik. I won't forget all you done for me."

As Joseph walked out of the saddler's shop, Erik coughed to get his attention. "Wait, just a minute, Son, I got one more thing for you." He went to the back of his shop as Joseph stood patiently. In a minute Erik returned with a rope and rolled-up piece of canvas in his hand.

"Joseph, here is a canvas to make a shelter with and this new rope is for you, too. Folks around here swear that if you put it on the ground in a circle around your bedroll, no snake will crawl over it." With that said, he put the rope in Joseph's hand. It had a coarse and rough feel to it and looked to be about twenty feet long.

"Do you think it works?"

"I'm not sure, but it's worth a try. Where you're going there'll be plenty of times to try it out—you'll be sleeping plenty of nights on the ground, and there are plenty of snakes out there to test it with!"

Before turning away, the saddler added a benediction, "Now just be sure you don't get hung with it over in the Outlaw Strip!" He winked and turned back to his work bench.

All Joseph could say was, "Thanks. Thanks a bunch."

The saddler was already turning back to work on that cavalry saddle. As Joseph walked out, he could hear a gentle humming coming from Erik Andersen as he stood at his workbench.

With that, Joseph Moore quickly left the saddle shop in Hineston, Louisiana, ready to start the next part of his long journey.

Chapter 22

Carrying his haversack, Joseph walked to the Calcasieu River. The river was much smaller than he'd imagined. After crossing an ocean and being on the Mississippi, most bodies of water would pale in comparison. There was a ferry across the river, but Joseph wasn't about to part with any of his precious money, so he walked downstream to a place where he could see the sandy bottom most of the way across.

One final time he glanced back eastward toward Hineston, even Alexandria, and his journey from Ireland. From all accounts he'd heard he was now entering a dangerous and hostile land to newcomers. The Outlaw Strip stretching westward for fifty miles to the next big river, the Sabine, was avoided by most travelers if possible. Here was Joseph choosing to enter it alone. Then the thought came to him, Maybe I'm not really alone.

He pulled off his straw hat, tossed it as far toward the far shore as he could, and waded in. The hat didn't clear the other bank and began floating down stream. Splashing loudly, he got to his hat and then waded across the second half of the Calcasieu River.

Wading out of the river on the far bank, wet to his chest, and shaking his damp hat of excess water as he put it back on his head, the young Irishman said aloud, "I've crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land. There's no turning back."

Joseph's hat made him think to his childhood: he and his adventurous friend, Pat Dooley, would take many treks across the fields and bogs of County Mayo. They were both about ten years old, wandering far and wide during the long days of summer. Often on their journeys, they would come to large stone walls that obscured their journey. Pat would pull off his cap, toss it over the six-foot wall, and laugh. Joseph would do the same and Pat would then add, "Well, we've thrown our hats over the wall. We've no choice but to climb it and go on."

Joseph then knew why he had spontaneously thrown his hat across the river. He walked up the sandy west bank of the Calcasieu. As he'd been told by Erik, the road split at the edge of the swamp. Straight ahead loomed the main Texas road—that would take him due west to the Sabine and the Texas frontier. He began walking along it—headed for a westward destination.

But then he seemed to stop as if confronted by a wall. For the rest of his life he would remember this moment as a key decision in his life. I plan to see Texas for sure, but I know I won't pass this way again. I believe I'm going to mosey through this Ten Mile country. I've always wanted to be among some real Indians—and it sounds like these Redbones I've heard so much about are worth seeing.

With no further thought to the enormity of his decision, he retraced his steps back to the fork in the road and began walking southwest along the Sugartown Road.

The first day after crossing the Calcasieu, Joe Moore saw no one. At the end of that day when he'd walk what he estimated to be ten or so miles, he came to a fork in the trail. Not sure which one to take, he veered left. Another hour of walking brought him back to the Calcasieu. The trail he was following continued through the swamp, roughly following the river's path.

Joe walked through the hardwood swamps in the flood plain of the river. Huge cypress trees with their wide bottoms, smooth trunks and canopies of bright green leaves left him amazed. Interspersed with the cypress were oaks of every variety. Acorns were on the ground everywhere and they crunched beneath his feet in the drier places he walked.

Eventually the trail meandered in a westerly direction, away from the river and swamp, at least for a while. The land began to rise slowly. The bottomland trees were soon mixed with tall pines. After crossing a small creek and scrambling up the far bank, he began to climb upwards into the land of the tall longleaf pines. This was what he had come to see. The tall, straight pines reached well over one hundred feet into the air. A cool wind blew through their thick, green-strawed tops. The wind blowing through the pines gave off a song that was music to his ears. He was now in the piney woods of Louisiana.

Walking aimlessly through the seemingly endless stands of pines, he was amazed at their girth. Coming from rocky Western Ireland and up through the marshy areas and cotton fields between New Orleans, Alexandria, and Hineston, he couldn't get over the circumference of the pines. Standing against the trunk of a particularly large tree, he looked up and grew dizzy as the top of the pine swayed in the wind. He wondered if a hunter could knock a squirrel or coon out of the top of the biggest ones. He also noticed there were no limbs for over thirty feet on most of the trees.

No other trees, not even smaller pines, grew underneath the tall pines. It was as if this was their kingdom and no foreign trees or lowly shrubs were welcome in the land of the pines. Underneath the trees was a thick mat of pine straw that carpeted the area. Joe picked up a pine needle. Laying it on his arm, he saw that it stretched from his wrist all the way to his elbow. The dark green needles occurred in bundles of three. With the strong wind blowing above, a steady stream of pine needles cascaded down from the tops of the pines.

He walked among these tall pines for the next two days as he continued southward. He was amazed that he'd not seen a person. The trail continued to grow smaller and showed little evidence of recent use.

As another day of walking ended, and the evening sun settled behind the pines and the shadows lengthened, Joe began searching for that night's camping spot. He'd just crossed a small creek with clear fresh water. The pines were mixed with oaks as the terrain dropped down to the creek. This looked like a great place to get a much-needed bath, cook supper, and spend the night.

Exploring the nearby area for firewood, he came upon an odd circle-shaped area of hardwoods. As he explored it, he realized it extended for several acres. Most of the tree-filled circle stood in water the color of black coffee. Judging from the look of it, it didn't seem deep.

What made this swampy area even more memorable was how it extended out into the pine area. On every side except where the creek was, tall longleaf pines surrounded the swamp. The wet area was beautiful and featured tall majestic canopies of every shade of green imaginable. The wind filtered through them and leaves fluttered down around him. Regularly the acorns fell through the canopy, loudly striking limbs and leaves on their way to the ground. He picked up a bright green acorn and bit into it. It didn't taste bad—then he spit it out—it was bad! It had a bitter aftertaste that took a long time to get out of his mouth.

He would later learn that this circular grove of hardwoods was what the settlers called a "bay gall."

Joe knelt down in a wet area and drank his fill. The water, tinged a dark brown, had a slightly bitter taste similar to the acorns. He decided that his next drink would come from the nearby creek.

He unloaded and untied his small pack, then unrolled the canvas tarp that had been the only shelter over his head for the last week. He tied a rope from two smaller trees and draped the cloth over the rope, carefully tying down the four corners to small bushes. This created a tarp that would keep most of the rain out if the wind didn't blow too hard. Experience had taught him about tying the corners to a bush. Last week he had used sticks driven in the ground to anchor the corners. A strong wind blew one corner loose and the result was everything getting wet and the other three corners coming loose.

By tying the corners to bushes, the tarp could bend and give in to the wind instead of ripping the sticks out of the ground. Standing back and admiring his work, he couldn't help but remark, "Well, a fellow's kind of got to be like that tarp. You've got to bend with the wind and give a little without turning loose."

With that thought, he began gathering twigs, limbs, and leaves for a cooking fire. He also gathered enough larger sticks and dead wood to build a good companion fire after supper. He got his trusty new rope out and made a large circle on the ground surrounding where he planned to sleep. He wasn't sure it would keep snakes away, but wasn't taking any chances.

Just as dark approached, the sound of flapping came from the slough. He turned toward the water and saw a pair of ducks land, giving off one of the strangest calls he'd ever heard. Within seconds these two ducks were joined by five more. With it being nearly dark and his body being shielded by a large cypress, the ducks were not initially aware of his presence.

They continued with the strangest squealing and clucking he'd ever heard. It was different from any waterfowl he had encountered on his island. There was an eeriness and lonesomeness in their call that terrified him, yet made him smile. Later, telling of this encounter he would call it "the woodsiest sound" he'd ever heard.

It was only later that he learned these birds were known as wood ducks or squealers. They were the native ducks of the creeks, streams, and wooded sloughs of Louisiana. During the day they feasted on acorns and beech mast in the creeks. Evening brought them daily to their roost spots where they stayed on the open water to rest and remain out of reach of predators.

This slough in the bay gall swamp was one of these roost spots. For the next ten minutes, ducks winged their way in, splashing loudly as they landed. They mostly came in pairs, but also in smaller groups of four or five. He wasn't counting but he guessed that over three dozen had landed as he watched. The pairs were always a hen and drake. The wood duck hens were mottled brown and slightly smaller. It was easy to see how their natural camouflage would hide them in the bushes during nesting season.

The drakes were the most unusual, and without a doubt the most beautiful bird he'd ever seen. Their distinguishing feature was the bright green head, topped by a hood. The rest of their body was a wonderful blend of green, blue, black, and white. There is no way he could have adequately described them.

Landing, the pairs could sense Joe's presence and quickly swam away. The females made the unusual squealing call. Listening to these calls, he sensed that there were two calls: one a type of warning call and the other an invitation to incoming flocks to join the party.

What a party it was! The males made a softer call. The hens seemed to be competing as to who could call the loudest and most. It was a wonder to be this near this spectacle.

Slowly, the parade of incoming wood ducks lessened and then ended. The bay gall area was now very dark and he could only see the outlines of the ducks and the wakes they left on the water as they swam about in groups.

The ducks called and carried on for the next hour before settling down. Throughout the night, Joseph would periodically be awakened by the loud squeal of the birds, but it didn't bother him at all. He smiled, rolled over and enjoyed the best night of sleep he'd had in months.

The next day he continued with his walk southward in the heat and humidity of late August in Louisiana. The humidity hung like a blanket over Joseph. He found himself soon soaked in sweat.

He found that the land along the creeks is where the humidity and heat seemed worst. However, when he came to a higher pine-filled stretch, it was always a few degrees cooler and a breeze blew through the pines.

So that morning, when Joe came to a fork in the small trail, he chose the right trail due to his belief that it would lead back up into the pines—and it soon did. Walking along under the tall pines, he soon decided that the song of the wind in the pines was his favorite thing about this new country he was walking through.

However, he seldom looked up very long into the swaying canopies. His eyes were intently scanning the path ahead of him, one thing was on his mind: snakes.

Only someone who had grown up in a land without snakes could understand a little of his phobia. Joe had heard enough American snake stories to help maximize this fear about reptiles. People love to exaggerate on snake lore, and it has always been one of the greatest sources of outlandish lying among woods people.

Since arriving in New Orleans and traveling up the two rivers, he had seen a few snakes. As he walked on the brown pine straw watching for snakes, he saw what appeared to be a snake on the trail. Closer inspection revealed it to be a dark stick. Catching his breath, he continued along.

An hour later, he encountered his first real snake. It was about a foot and a half long and brown with darker spots on its back. As it flicked its tongue in and out, Joe wondered what that tongue did.

He watched it for several minutes. During this time, the snake hardly moved. Finally, feeling braver, he picked up a small stick and tossed it over by the snake. The reptile went into action—it reared its head up, began hissing loudly, and searched about for an object to attack.

Then it pulled its head back toward the ground and spread a hood. This done, it reared its head up and continued this noisy, hissing display.

Joe stepped back four or five feet more, fully ready to run if the snake moved toward him. He didn't see any rattlers on the dark end of its tail. However, in spite of no rattles, the snake was shaking its tail in the leaves, giving off a rustling sound.

Joe moved back even more before throwing a larger stick which landed right on the snake.

This brought out a completely different reaction to anything he'd seen earlier. It pulled in its hood, began writhing in great distress, and rolled onto its back. It shuddered a few times and then for all practical purposes seemed to be dead. He was nearly sure the stick he tossed could not have killed the snake—but there it was: white belly up, body twisted in the throes of death. Stepping closer, Joe even noticed a small trickle of blood coming from one side of the mouth.

He watched carefully for nearly ten minutes. Slowly, watching every step for more snakes, he began stepping away. Before he had gotten very far away, the snake put on one final show: Slowly it "came alive again" and rolled back onto its stomach. Carefully, its head came up and

flicked its black tongue. After surveying the scene carefully, the dark snake quickly slithered off into the grass and was gone.

This is a strange, strange land I've come to, but I like it. When I find someone from around here, I'm going to find out more about that snake...

Now across Cherry Winche Creek, about eight miles northwest of where Joe stood watching the snake, Eliza Clark and her brother Eli were also walking.

As the siblings walked, Eliza told her brother, "In these dog days of late August, snakes are shedding their skin. Shedding makes 'em blind and they're a lot more likely to bite."

Eli asked, "Why's it called 'dog days'?"

"I've always heard 'cause its so hot the dogs stay under the porch and don't go out. At least, that's what Unk says."

Scanning the trail ahead of them, she added, "Another reason for watching out good is that snakes are on the move. They are preparing to find a hibernation spot for the coming winter. Finally, when the leaves fall, it makes them harder to see.

It was about ten minutes later when Eli saw a snake right in the middle of the trail.

"Lookee there," he said. There was a good three-foot-long copperhead hidden among the leaves. The three shades of brown on its back seemed to perfectly match the ground cover.

Eli, way too close for Eliza's comfort, said, "That's a big rattlesnake pilot, ain't it, Sister?"

She said, "Eli, that's a copperhead, ain't it?"

"Yep, a right big one too."

"Why'd you call it a "rattlesnake pilot?"

Eli, who knew all things about snakes, said, "That's just another name for the copperhead. Poppa said it comes from the old-timer's belief that copperheads guide, or 'pilot,' rattlesnakes to their hibernation dens."

"Do you believe that?"

"Sister, I don't know, but I always look carefully for any rattlesnakes when I see a copperhead."

Eli wanted to kill the snake, but Eliza forbade him. "You might get bit and then we'd be in a fix. Leave it be."

They walked on and Eli, lagging behind, couldn't resist making a buzzing rattlesnake sound in his sister's ear. She came alive and got him by the shirt and gave him a good dutch rub, threatening, "You do that again and I'll wrap that snake around your neck!"

Eli laughed loudly.

Once again, eight miles away, Joe Moore continued his piney woods walk. What happened next is what he later called, "The defining mark of my coming to America." Here is what happened:

He continued carefully to make his way under the pines. Hearing a noise in the nearby bushes, he picked up a stick and waited. Soon, what appeared to be a black badger came out of the brush. Joe was familiar with badgers as they were common throughout Ireland. This American badger was black instead of brown. Like his native one, it had stripes on its back but this one's stripes were whiter and wider.

As a boy, Joe had raised a badger that he kept for several years as a pet. So, he was not scared of this animal as he had been of the snake. He eased closer to the badger. He did not intend to bother it, but wanted to examine it better. As he eased up to it, the animal seemed to ignore him as it dug in the grass.

Joe couldn't resist poking it with the long stick he had. The badger continued to scratch in the dirt. On the third poke, it did a strange thing. It turned its back on Joe, lifted its tail and …

It was a lesson not easily forgotten—a lesson that things in this land are not what they always appear—whether a badger or a snake.

The spray that came from the badger did not hit Joe with a direct shot—he was at least lucky on that. What did reach him was enough—it was the worst smell he'd ever encountered. When he realized what had happened, he sprinted away from the badger, determined not to get any more of the terrible-smelling spray on him.

Even though he quickly left that spot in the woods, the "badger"—or at least its smell—continued with Joe Moore for that day—and the next—and the next. He tried everything: Washing off in every creek or stump hole he came to; hanging his clothes out to air every night; even scrubbing them with sand. But it was to no avail. He tasted it, smelled it with every breath, and even dreamed about it.

He now had two things on his list he intended to find out about: the Louisiana hooded snake and the smelly American badger.

Chapter 23

Joe continued on a trail winding to the north. He was making a large circle as he traveled in No Man's Land. He was amazed that he'd been out walking for five days, and not seen a human yet.

However, as he walked through the vast pine stands, he soon began to see cow, sheep, and even horse tracks. When he crossed small creeks, he did see a few human tracks.

On the third day after the badger encounter, Joe smelled something else: smoke. Experience told him that it was from a chimney fire, and he thought he detected a faint scent of bacon. He decided to discover the source of the smoke and scent, and find out for himself.

Within a hundred yards at a bend in the trail, he spied a dwelling through the trees. Sure enough, smoke came from a clay-daubed chimney. Quietly nearing the house, he hid behind an especially big pine to get a better look. It would be better to scout things out before making a grand entrance. In his brief time in America, he'd been run off by enough settlers, slaves, servants, dogs, and overseers to make him wary.

The house was basic and small—squared logs made up the walls. They seemed daubed with the same color of clay that the chimney had. The two windows on the chimney side were closed with hinged board and batting window covers. Above one window was a door that evidently led into a loft or attic. The pitch of the roof was steep and shingled with gray, weathered cypress slats.

The front roof extended and slanted down over a full-length porch about eight feet wide. The house was built on large horizontal stripped logs that served as piers. An old door hung at a slight angle, placed between the two windows of the front wall.

Joe Moore was so focused on this close inspection that he never saw or heard the dog coming until it was too late.

He never figured out where it came from, so the dog achieved a total ambush. It was undoubtedly the fiercest-looking dog he'd ever seen.

As it bounded at him in what seemed like slow motion, Joe stood frozen in shock. He would always remember the dog's eyes as it made the last ten yards: they were a glassy, weird white that seemed to emit intense hate. The large dog drove its head into his chest. It didn't bite him . . . at least not yet. It simply had bull-rushed him and knocked him down. He tumbled to the ground, trying to cover his neck and face, while feeling for his knife.

The dog stood over him with teeth bared, a loud guttural growl emitting from its curled lips. It probably weighed about fifty pounds, and every muscle was shaking with rage. Joseph hurriedly tried to back away on his hands and knees, but the dog stayed over him letting him know it was in charge. Joe couldn't find his knife, and no stick was near.

As the growling dog snarled in his face, he took a desperate look at his attacker: The dog was a dark-brownish blue with black spots on its side and back. It had a white-striped chest and its legs, shaking with rage as it growled in Joes' face, were strong and white-sock footed.

But most of all, those eyes had Joe's attention. The eyes looked like glass eyes, the kind you saw in mounted animals, and they gave the dog an evil look.

The dog, still emitting a low growl in its chest, finally backed off a step or two, allowing Joe to get to his feet.

It was then he heard the shrill whistle. It was repeated again and a harsh female voice boomed out, “Jezebel—you come here! What you done caught there?” The growling dog still held its ground, but was evidently distracted by the woman’s voice. The voice repeated louder, “Jezebel. Come here right now!”

Suddenly, the dog turned and trotted obediently toward the porch. This allowed Joe the opportunity to turn and observe his rescuer.

The woman was dressed in a blue dress, covered with a white apron. She was a large woman without being fat. It was evident she was strong by the look of her arms and how she stood. Looking her over the best he could, he got his first glimpse of what he figured must be a Ten Mile Redbone: the woman was dark-skinned with long black hair and her face had a hard look to it. He hadn’t seen many Indians but knew this woman had the look and presence of that race.

Even more than her appearance, he took note of how she cradled a shotgun in her left arm. Slowly, she removed it from the crook of her arm and leaned it up against the porch railing. Taking another glance, Joe saw the woman was smoking a corncob pipe. The blue smoke filtered up above her head into the rafters of the porch.

She stared at Joe, but never said a word. He started toward the porch, but she stopped him. ”Stay right where you’re at, buddy. I’ll decide where you go from here. Do what I say, or I’ll turn old Jezebel loose again or worse—shoot you full of buckshot.”

Joe heard the dog growling under the porch.

For the first time he spoke, “Where am I, Ma’am?”

The woman squinted her eyes at him. “What’d you say?”

I said, “Where am I at?”

“You sure do talk funny. Are you from up near Cane River?”

“No Ma’am, I’ve come from Alexandria—before that New Orleans—and before that, me home was in Ireland.”

“What’s your name?”

“Joseph—I mean—Joe Moore.”

“Well, ‘Joseph-I-Mean-Joe Moore’, when’s the last time you et?”

Joe was trying to be polite but he was getting about one third of what she said with her peculiar way of talking. ”Ma’am, I don’t quite understand ye: ‘When was the last time I et’?” She took a puff on the pipe and studied him closely, “I meant, ‘when was the last time you had something to et?’”

Finally, Joe understood. He also once again remembered how hungry he was. “I ate something real about two days ago. Yesterday, I ate some wild green onions. Other than that, it’s been pretty sparse.”

All of a sudden, Joe thought he detected a softening in the woods woman’s face. A glint of a smile seemed to penetrate the weathered face. ”Boy, you come on in here and let Miz Girlie fix you some victuals. Follow me.”

However as Joe approached the porch, she stiffened and sniffed, ”Boy, you been playing with a skunk?”

“What’s a skunk?”

She now caught a bigger whiff as Joe neared. “What’s a skunk? A skunk is what done sprayed you down and—why, it’s a pole cat. You never seen a skunk? It’s what sprayed you and made you smell like you do!”

"I—I thought it was a badger. We've got badgers in Ireland. I once kept one in a cage as a pet—"

"Son, you done been sprayed by a skunk. No wonder Jezebel was trying to eat you alive. You smell like a skunk!" The lady was now tickled. Her hard look was replaced by hearty laughter. "I bet you won't try that again. I don't know what we'll do with you. Come on. I'll let you eat on the front porch while I find some old clothes for you. You got any more with you?"

"No Ma'am, just what's on my back."

"Well, we may have to burn them if we can't get that smell out."

Before turning to go inside, she spoke to the dog, "Jezebel, you be nice to this man." The dog kind of whimpered as if in agreement as the woman walked right past the shotgun into the house, saying over her shoulder, "You stay right there, Irishman. I'll fix you up with some food and clothes."

Soon, she brought out a pan of cornbread and a smoking pot of greens. Joe smelled the cornbread before she even got to the porch. She cut a big slice and scooped up a pile of greens. Filling his plate, she commented, "Those are collard greens I canned from the winter. Do you like greens?"

"Ma'am, right now, I like everything."

It was then that Joe saw the bacon in the pan. The woman had lined the bottom of the cornbread skillet with bacon. It was crisp and she included it in the generous helping of cornbread Joe was now wolfing down.

She sat watching closely as he ate. He'd never tasted anything better in his life and he made a fool of himself cramming the greens and cornbread into his mouth.

To be polite, he slowed down and asked her a question. Looking around at the house and yard, Joe said, "Have you lived here all of your life?"

The woman's answer was quick and direct, "Not yet."

It was Joe's first introduction to Ten Mile humor and it took him a second to realize what she'd just said. He grinned as she got up and returned to the kitchen for more cornbread and greens.

This time he crumbled the cornbread up in the greens and enjoyed every bite as only a starving person can do.

This lady, who called herself "Miz Girlie," watched every bite. Joe wondered if she often had anyone around to feed. She laughed as she said, "Son, I do believe you're hungry enough to eat a frozen dog. You et like you were starving."

Trying to show his Irish manners, he said, "That is the best meal I think I've ever had. I thank you kindly."

Then Joe looked around the porch. "May God bless this house and all who dwell within it."

It was evident she liked that and rose to get another helping of food for Joe. He waved her off as he patted his belly and sat the plate down.

The lady looked at the plate and scolded him, "You done et pert near all I got. Ain't you gonna drink that pot liquor?"

Joe was confused as well as embarrassed as to what she'd said and why she seemed upset. She repeated, "Go ahead and drink that pot liquor. It's the best part of the meal."

Joe finally understood she meant the juice left from the greens on his plate. He was more than glad to make her happy as he slurped up the last of the meal.

As she returned to the kitchen, he spoke to the dog, who lay near the steps, "Jezebel, I believe I've just made my first friend in No Man's Land."

Chapter 24

Off to the west, Eliza could see the darkish clouds gathering and hear the faint rumble of thunder. She wondered if she could make her trip before the rains came.

Earlier, her mother had said, “Eliza, I want you and Eli to go over to Miz Girlie’s and take a ham and three quarts of these peas I just put up. With the growing season nearly over, we need to make sure we got her supplied up for the winter. Take the horse and carry all of that with y’all.” Scanning the sky, she looked worriedly at the dark clouds and added, “You two watch out for lightning.”

Virginia had lost a teenage cousin to a lightning strike years ago and had a deep fear of storms.

Eliza and Eli headed out for the two-mile trip to Girlie Perkins’ place. They hadn’t gotten far when the rumbling of thunder began getting louder behind them. Eliza knew the best sign of an approaching storm was always the sound of far-off thunder. As the sounds neared, she and Eli began to see the first flashes of lightning. Eli would count out loud: “One Mississippi . . . two Mississippi . . . three Mississippi . . . four . . . .” Their dad had taught them that sound traveled about a mile every six seconds. By counting, Eli was roughly gauging the distance of the storm. The lightning flashes and thunder were getting closer together. The storm would be on top of them soon.

The next harbinger of a thunderstorm was the wind. Sure enough, the wind began to blow from the direction of the storm. Dust devils spun out of the dry dust of the trail. The wind was most evident up high in the pines. They swayed and sang as the wind bent them.

Eliza called it her “song and light show.” The sound she loved was how the pines carried the wind. Their song in the wind was so different from the way oaks sounded in a strong wind. She had never been to the ocean, but the roaring of the wind in the pines was the way her mind imagined the ocean would sound.

The lightning continued getting closer. She’d always been warned to stay away from pines during a thunderstorm. Her mom called them “lightning magnets.” Eliza had seen ample evidence of what lightning did to a longleaf pine. It was common to see these tall pines featuring a long fresh scar down its entire trunk from a lightning strike. Soon the tree would drop its straw and die.

However her mom had warned her against being in the pines during a storm. Not before one—at least that is the way she interpreted the warnings. So as the wind picked up she told Eli, “We’ll need to get out from under the pines before the storm hits—but don’t that wind feel good right now.” As the wind blew, they joyfully stood under the pines, taking in their song. Eliza spread her arms and felt the wind blowing her hair and blouse. To Eliza, it was not just a sound show—it was also a light show. The long leaf pines of the Ten Mile country seemed to be a prism.

Whatever the level of light was—whether the sunshine was brightly shining on a clear day, or the clouds sent rolling, shimmering shafts of light that were further segregated by the pines, the pines gave this light show. On short winter afternoons the low angle of the sun sent yellow

shafts through the pine trunks. Then on dark rainy days, it seemed sinister, gloomy, and nearly scary; Eliza liked each mood of this light show under the pines.

As the thunderstorm approached and the time between the lightning and thunder narrowed, she best enjoyed the light show. It was already late afternoon and the sun was lower. Soon the storm clouds blocked out the sun and they felt the first drops of rain. The next flash was followed by thunder that shook the ground in only four seconds. It was time to get out of the pines and reach the shelter of Girlie's place. She and Eli rode like the wind, but the storm had gotten there before they got out of the pines.

They were both startled when a lightning bolt struck a nearby tree. It was so close the lightning and resounding boom of the thunder seemed to be together. The large pine was only about fifty feet away—directly ahead of their direction toward Miz Girlie's house.

It was all Eliza could do for the horse not to pull away and scamper off. It dragged her twenty feet before she got back to her feet and grabbed a small pine as an anchor. Eli ran and grabbed Eliza around the waist. Eliza felt his shaking body and felt ashamed for placing him in proximity to danger. Even though her ears were hurting from the loud peal of thunder, they were both okay. So she grabbed Eli and the horse and said, "Let's get out of here quick."

As they neared the pine struck by the lightning bolt, it was smoking from top to bottom along the ragged strike mark. Pieces of smoldering pine bark were scattered away from the tree. Amazingly, Eliza and Eli looked up to see that a section of the tree, about thirty feet up, was actually on fire. Small flames burned from the split along the bark. They stopped and stared at this strange scene. It was nearly hard to believe.

Eliza then turned to Eli and shakily said, "Well, Brother, they say lightning don't strike twice in the same place, but let's not stay around and find out." She had to drag Eli who seemed mesmerized by the fire up in the pine.

The first large drops of rain had seemingly been shaken loose from the sky by the thunder. Quickly the few drops became a torrent of rain. As they ran away from the tree and toward the safety of Miz Girlie's, Eliza gave one backward look and saw that the rain had already put out the fire in the pine.

However, before they could get to the house, the rain became harder and harder. They were soon soaked, and squealing, and their destination was in sight.

Back at the Girlie Perkins' place, the Ten Mile woman had ordered Joe to relinquish his clothes for a desperate final attempt at cleaning. She had thrown him an old feed sack dress of hers. "Son, I ain't got no man's clothes—no man's been here in forty year. You'll have to wear this or go naked."

She also gave him two half-filled jars. "One of these is vinegar and this other one is tomato juice. While I'm washing your clothes, you stay out in the barn and wash yourself and hair with these. Do the vinegar first and then the tomato juice."

"You mean you want me to wash my hair in tomato juice?"

"If you don't want to smell like a skunk for the rest of your life, you'll do it. Just when you get through, rinse off real good at the well or just get out in the drip off the barn. It's fixin' to be rainin' real good."

Joe was so full from the greens and cornbread he could hardly move, but he followed her orders. With a snort, he took the dress, jars, and an old sack he could use for a towel. Just as she had said, the rain started and every peal of thunder brought more of it down.

Reluctantly, Joe ran to the barn and changed into the dress. At least it didn't smell like a skunk. Donning the dress, he took his pants and shirt back to the porch and hurried back to the barn feeling like a real fool.

From the barn he watched as Girlie came out, took his skunk-scented clothes and began washing them in an iron pot with a pine knot fire built under it.

Joe was sitting forlornly in the barn washing his hair in sticky tomato juice and vinegar when he heard something—the sound of approaching squealing and laughter above the din of the rain. He went to the barn door, and through the pouring rain, saw a boy and a young woman running for the barn. They were both laughing loudly as a horse trotted behind them.

Joe, in his dress, with tomato juice in his hair, made a dive for the ladder and was up in the loft just before the wet runners arrived at the barn. Quietly he slipped along the loft floor until he found a crack between two floor boards. Lying on the hay in the loft, he watched as the young boy ran in and the woman followed with the horse.

Within the safety of Miz Girlie's barn, Eliza Clark and Eli could safely watch the rest of the storm. Now out of the wind and rain, and seemingly safe from the lightning, they enjoyed watching the rest of the sound and light show of this Louisiana afternoon thunderstorm.

Joe Moore had a great vantage point from above and was doing a thorough job of scanning the three intruders. He saw that the horse was tan and the boy seemed to be about ten years old—but it was the young woman who kept his attention.

He guessed she was close to his age. He noticed, with delight, how her wet dress clung to her body. She was a finely built woman and the dress showed off her womanly figure. She and the boy were laughing and making light of their predicament.

Joe found her to be extremely appealing. She had a fine face with high cheekbones. Her dark skin was best described as olive in complexion. It was beautiful and smooth. Her black hair, in long braids, was as dark and straight as hair could be. Watching from his excellent vantage point, he was able to study her face and was enthralled with her eyes. They seemed to be extremely dark. He thought: I want to look into those eyes a lot closer—just not right now.

As he watched her laughing with the boy, a thought came to Joseph that captured his heart even more than her appearance: She seems to not have a care in the world! She just seems—happy. Yes, she looks happy.

The younger boy, who appeared to be her brother, kept calling her "Eliza." Joe repeated the name to himself, "Eliza."

Finally, she spoke. Her voice was full and husky. It was a sweet woman's voice, not a girl's. "Eli, when the rain settles down, we'll go on to the house and see Miz Girlie."

What happened next nearly made Joe fall out of the loft. The sweet voice of the young woman continued, "Now, Eli, you go out under the eaves. I'm gonna take this dress off and wring it out. Git—go out there. It'll just take a minute."

Watching from the loft, Joe thought to himself: This is going to be a fine minute for me.

The woman stood at the other end of the barn, right under Joe's hiding spot, and started unbuttoning her dress . . .

It was then that Girlie Perkins, holding a small canvas sheet over her head, walked into the barn. She spoke to the young woman, "Girl, I saw you and Eli coming up the trail with your horse. Y'all looked a sight in that rain!"

He could see Girlie scanning the barn as Eliza excitedly recounted their run through the thunderstorm. Joe knew Girlie was trying to figure where—or if—he was in the barn.

Joe wasn't sure if he was going to like this pipe-smoking woman with the glass-eyed devil dog—but he knew he'd never forgive her for her untimely visit. He sighed as he watched the girl named Eliza re-button the top two buttons she'd loosened.

The girl smiled, "Howdy, Miz Girlie, I'd sent Eli out. I was gonna shuck this dress and wring it out. We got some kind of wet coming over here!"

Just then the younger brother returned into the barn. Miz Girlie said, "Hello, Eli." Still looking about the barn, Miz Girlie asked both of them, "Have y'all seen any critters in here?"

Eli answered for both of them, "No Ma'am. Just those two goats in the corner plus old Ben here that we brought with us. You missing something, Miz Girlie?"

"Well, uh, I did have another goat out here, but I guess she—I mean he—must of run off in the woods. He was kind of wild, anyway."

The older woman once again scanned the barn. Joe saw her look up and thought she might have seen his face through the loft crack. If she did, he was thankful she didn't mention it. Lying there in a feed sack dress with tomato juice in his hair and smelling like a skunk coated in vinegar, he didn't want to meet this woman—at least not at this moment… But he did want to meet her. She might just be the most beautiful girl-woman he'd ever seen!

The humans returned to the house, leaving Joe with the two goats and the horse. Finally, he slipped down from the loft and carefully watched the house. About an hour later, the woman and boy got on the horse and left. When he assumed it was safe, he went to the porch.

Girlie smiled and said, "Why, I was hoping you'd come out to see our company. Why didn't you?"

Joe looked down at the old dress he was wearing and smirked, "That would have made a good first impression with my dress, smelling bad like I do, and tomato juice all over me!"

He quickly asked, "Who was that girl?"

"What girl?"

"That pretty girl I saw in the barn?"

"Were you in the barn when I came out there?"

"I was up in the loft, hiding."

"Son, you weren't in there when she was fixin' to take off her dress, were you?"

"Yes Ma'am."

"You should have let her know you wuz up there. A gentleman would have announced his presence."

"I didn't want to scare her."

"Horse feathers and bull corn. You ought to be 'shamed of yerself."

She'd re-lit her pipe and was smiling. "Well, I'm glad I saved the day."

"I ain't."

Miz Girlie got in the last word as she puffed out a cloud of smoke, "That girl is Eliza Jane Clark and you best stay away from her. She's way too nice for some foreigner to try to steal away."

Joe Moore already knew better than to argue with Miz Girlie Perkins, especially when her dog, Jezebel, lay growling at his feet.

Chapter 25

"I don't believe that skunk smell is gonna come off you." Those were Miz Girlie's words three days after his arrival. By the time his clothes had finally lost the skunk odor, he had been her guest for nearly a week. His being there was what she called "a mutually beneficial arrangement."

She lived off her land and needed good help to farm and take care of her place. She'd reached the age where she couldn't quite do what she once had done. Joe was more than happy to help with anything she needed. Miz Girlie was more than pleased with his work.

In return, Joe was the recipient of food from the best cook in Ten Mile. Miz Girlie loved to cook and the chance to feed an eager young man was something she relished.

But the best part of this mutually beneficial arrangement was the friendship that developed between them. They both were eager for company. Being from different worlds meant they never ran shy of questions about life and the worlds each had come from.

Joe slept on the porch and, except for the mosquitoes, found it fine. In the evenings after chores were done and supper was cleaned up, they would sit on the porch and visit. Miz Girlie laughed when Joe would invariably bring the conversation around to Eliza Clark.

"Boy, I believe you got that girl on your mind. Now, listen here. She is my favorite, and I don't want no crazy Irishman coming in here and taking her off. Git it out of your mind!"

However, this was always said with a wink and slight smile. In fact she let it slip one day, "Son, if you and Liza Jane weren't from different worlds, you would make a fine pair—"

Then she had stopped and said, "Nope, it just wouldn't work. Our people are different from your kind. Just wouldn't work."

Joe Moore didn't see it that way but wisely learned that arguing with her was counterproductive, so he would find another subject—at least until the next evening when he'd bring Eliza's name up again.

From these conversations, he learned much about her and her family. It only made him more determined to meet her if he got a chance.

Miz Girlie sensed that and warned him, "Now don't you get no ideas and wander across Cherry Winche to see her. That ain't how we do things here! You'll probably get to meet her sooner or later."

For instance, she explained about Jezebel to him, "Son, that dog is a Catahoula Cur. It's a mix of a Spanish war dog and a breed the Indians kept. It's the only type of dog with them glass eyes. Jezebel is called a 'leopard spot.' See how she has those dark stripes over her grayish-brown coat? Dogs with her 'markings' make the best dogs for hog hunting and protecting a place. She gave you a fine greeting, didn't she?"

Joe grimaced as Jezebel, seemingly knowing she was being discussed, growled low at him.

He also learned about his Louisiana hooded snake. When he recounted the encounter, Miz Girlie scoffed, "Son, that was a spreading adder—we also call it a hognose snake. It don't even have any teeth: it eats worms and insects. It's just a bluffer. That hissing and spreading its hood

is just for show. That's why when you poked it, it rolled over dead, and played possum on you. A spreading adder won't hurt anyone."

During Joe's first week at Miz Girlie's, a strange thing happened. He'd burned his arm on the wash pot the day before. It wasn't a bad burn, but had bothered him and seemed slightly infected.

She noticed it and told him to sit down. Miz Girlie sat opposite him and began rubbing the burn and saying some words in a low voice. It nearly seemed as if she was in a trance. When she got through with this rubbing and talking she added, "I believe in the morning, that'll be much better."

The next day, Joe didn't even notice the burn. He was amazed when he saw how the burn was no longer infected and seemed to be nearly healed. He touched it and found the pain was gone.

At lunch he immediately asked Miz Girlie about it. She seemed unwilling to say much about it. He pressed her and she finally curtly answered, "Joe Moore, that's a gift I got from the Lord. Been passed down in my family for generations. God done gave me the gift to heal burns and other things like that. I'm a healer. But you can't say nothing about it. Most folks around here know it, but it's not polite to brag about it or talk it around. Keep it to yourself."

She closed the discussion on it by quoting some passage from Ezekiel about burns and fires. Then she said, "Now, you just enjoy it being healed and we won't talk about it again."

One of Joe's main jobs was to read the Bible for Miz Girlie. Although she could quote many Scriptures, she admitted to not knowing how to read one word.

But she loved the Bible and would pull out a worn copy and have Joe try to find Scriptures and read them. Though she knew many verses, she had trouble placing them. So Joe spent much time thumbing the pages trying to find something Jesus said, or the Apostle Paul's words about obeying the government, or one of David's Psalms.

Miz Girlie really loved the Psalms. Joe would read one and she'd sit there with her eyes closed, rocking on the porch as the sun went down and darkness came to Ten Mile.

Joe slept each night on the porch. Miz Girlie gave him an old quilt and moss-filled mattress to lie on; aside from the mosquitoes, it was a fine place to sleep.

Every morning about daylight, he'd hear the old lady leave the house. She'd be barefooted and trying to slip out quietly, but invariably he'd hear her footsteps.

After the third day of watching her leave each morning, his curiosity got the best of him. When she returned an hour later through the tall pines, she greeted him as she got to the porch. Joe didn't know if it was the early morning sunshine or something else—but her face seemed to have a glow to it.

As she ascended the front step, he asked, "Miz Girlie, now I ain't trying to be nosey or nothing, but, uh, where do you go each morning?"

The old woman smiled. "Baby, you come with me and I'll show you where I go. It'll be a sight easier to show it to you than tell you about it."

They walked out of the yard and into the tall longleaf pines. The shafts of sunlight shone through the tall canopies and Joe Moore was reminded of why he already loved the Louisiana piney woods.

Miz Girlie led him to an old twisted pine that was obviously in its last stages of life. The woodpeckers had drilled holes all up and down its thick trunk. Under the tree was a homemade bench that showed evidence of long use.

"Joe, this here spot was what my momma called her 'prayer tree.' It was where she started her day all the years I can remember. It didn't matter how cold it was—raining or August hot—she came out here every morning.

"Son, it was her place to start the day with the Lord—under this here prayer tree—just her and the Lord, and a cup of coffee. When she passed in the year 1827, I just adopted it as mine. It's now my prayer tree—a place where I meet every morning with the Lord, and we jes' visit." She smiled in a way Joe would always remember. "It's my place to meet with God."

Joe had been at Miz Girlie's for over two weeks now. He decided it was time to go looking around and scout for some land of his own. When he told her of his plans to leave, her disappointment was easy to see. She had come to depend on him and enjoyed his company. However, she understood his need to explore and made him promise to come back.

As Joe walked down the trail away from her house, Miz Girlie Perkins wondered if, and when, she would see Joe Moore again.

As his walk under the pines continued, it amazed Joe to trek all day and never be out of the shadow and canopy of the tall trees. It felt as if he walked to the edge of the world; the last thing would be a row of longleaf pines above him as he fell off the edge of the earth!

On the second afternoon out, he stopped short when he heard the sound of a human voice. He got behind a big pine as the sound neared him and soon realized it was the sound of a person singing. As it came closer, he could detect it was the voice of a man. Nearer still, he knew it was the singing of a man badly out of tune. However, it did seem be a happy song. He found himself relaxing as if he knew the person singing out this loudly and cheerfully would be no danger to him.

Peeking out from behind the tree, he spied a solitary man coming along. He carried a pack of some kind on his shoulders. The small man, who walked with either a slight limp or just an odd gait, sang out,

"I'm workin' on a building; I'm workin' on a building,

I'm workin' on a building, for my Lord, for my Lord."

Joe couldn't help but grin at both the awfulness, as well as the passion, of the singer. He drew back when he saw that the singer was carrying what looked like a slim rifle. However, as the singer came closer, Joe could see his weapon was not a gun, but a long wooden staff. And the light-colored pack on his shoulders was actually a lamb, its dirty legs hanging down on each side of the singer's chest. At first Joe thought the small lamb was dead, but during intervals in the singing, he would hear a faint bleat. He let the singer and the lamb come closer as he sang,

It's the Holy Ghost building, it's the Holy Ghost building,

For my Lord, for my Lord.

As if on cue, the lamb added to the refrain on each step: "Baah, baah." It was nearly in rhythm to the song.

Joe now had a good view of the man. He seemed young and slight of build; Being hatless, he had dark curly hair that was thin on top. He was very dark complexioned and not very tall. His unusual gait, seemingly nearly in time with the singing, was something Joe knew he would recognize anytime he ever viewed this man again.

A comical grin seemed plastered on his face. Just as the singer neared his tree, Joe stepped out.

"If I was a builder, if I was a build . . ."

The singer saw Joe and stopped, but didn't seem startled. He simply stood there, lamb draped across his shoulders, with that silly grin.

Joe noticed he had the darkest eyes that stared into his. The dark eyes then spoke, “Well, what have we here?” The voice was low and pleasing—much more pleasant than the singing voice. It had a deep rich tone. The singer had a lisp that Joe wasn’t sure whether it was just his accent or some defect.

“Well, who are you, friend?” The “well” was spoken as if referring to the big fish of the ocean as in “whale.”

There was something about the guy Joe instantly liked. “Well, ‘Mister Singer,’ I’m Joe Moore. Top of the morning to you.”

The singer came up closer to him, scrunched his face and said, “By Balaam’s donkey, I ain’t never heerd nobody talk like you.”

Joe couldn’t resist, “Well, Singer, that might be a case of the pot calling the kettle black.”

“Well, black or white—and you seem a lot whiter than black, I’ve never heard anyone like you. Where you from?”

“I’m from Ireland by way of New Orleans and Alexandria.”

The singer furrowed his brow in concentration. “Now ‘Irland’—is that up past Natchitoches?”

Joe knew he was dealing with a real card. He wasn’t sure if the singer was serious or joking. But a closer examination of the guy’s face revealed that he was completely serious: He’d never even heard of Ireland. Then the irony struck Joe: Back in Ireland, I’d never even heard of a place called Louisiana—and here I am right in the middle of it.

“No sir, Ireland’s another country across the Atlantic Ocean. I came by boat to get here. By the way, what’s your name?”

Before the singer could answer Joe’s question, he asked his own, “Why in the world would a feller leave his country to come way ‘cross some ocean in a boat?”

Joe sighed, “It’s a long and complicated story.”

“Well, not to be rude: My name is Nate Dial from Ten Mile, Louisianer. As you can see, I’m a shepherd. People say I’m not quite right, but they always add that I’m ‘special.’ What do you think, Mr. Joe Moore?”

“I don’t know if you’re right or not, but I can tell you’re special. You’re the first singing shepherd I’ve seen or heard in these parts and you’re definitely one of the few people I’ve not had to tell my name to three or four times, Nate Dial.”

“I heerd you when you said it the first time—Joe Moore. By the way, don’t nobody here call me Nate. I’m known as ‘Unk’ so just call me that.”

“That’ll be fine, Na . . . I mean Unk. By the way, what does Nate stand for?”

Nate “Unk” Dial stood proudly. “Well, it was my grandpappy’s name, but I’m also named after Nathan, that propit in the Bible.”

The lamb bleated weakly and Unk placed in on the ground where it lay still as if too sick even to move.

“Oh, ‘cuse me for not introducing ‘Alfalfa.’ I been out hunting him for two days. He’s pretty sick. Wandered off from the herd, and I had to go fotch him. Like to never have found him. When I did, he was laying down pert near dead.”

“How many sheep do you have?”

“A few over thirty. Yesterday’s count was thirty-three. Alfalfa makes thirty-four.” Unk Dial puffed up his chest as he intoned, “thirty-four.” Joe wondered if the man could even count that high.

Joseph thought of his small herd of five sheep back in Ireland. A man with thirty sheep would have been wealthy. He exclaimed to the shepherd, “Turdy sheep is a whole lot where I come from.”

Unk Dial looked as if he’d been shot, “How many sheep did you just say?”

“Turdy—turdy sheep.”

Unk shook his head, “I don’t believe I’d say it like that. It’s thirty, not turdy. Thirty sheep.”

Joe Moore laughed as he realized what Unk was saying. “Friend, my language doesn’t have that ‘th’ sound you have in English. I grew up speaking Irish and have never got the hang of that ‘th’ sound, so that’s just the way I say it—‘turdy.’”

Unk shook his head. “There you go—you said it again. Now, I won’t take offense at it, but some folks around here might fight a man for saying that he had turdy sheep.”

Joe decided the conversation could use a change in direction. Pointing at Alfalfa he asked, “By the way, Unk, do you call all of your tur . . . I mean all of your sheep by name?”

“Sure do. They’re part of my family. Alfalfa here is a twin. He has a sister named Omega. All of my sheep got Bible names. These two get their names from where Jesus talked about him being ‘the Alfalfa and the Omega’ in the book of Revolutions.”

Joe thought about correcting him about the Alpha and the Omega and John’s Revelation. Then he thought better of it: I can think of ’bout turdy good reasons not to set him straight on Alpha and Alfalfa and that final book of the Bible. I believe I’ll just let a sleeping dog lie.

Instead, he asked Unk, “How’d you get the name ‘Unk?’ “

“Oh, my niece couldn’t say ‘Nathan’ too good when she was little, so I got called ‘Unk’ by her—it spread to my family and then to everyone else. It’s all I’m known by now. Don’t you think it fits me a little better?”

Joe laughed, “I sure do. You look a lot more like an ‘Unk’ than a ‘Nathan’! Then Joe asked, “Unk, do you know where I might find a good camping spot north of here?”

Unk looked him in the eye and said, “Aahh.”

Joe repeated, this time louder and slower, “Do you know of any camping spots near here—north of here?”

This time Unk shrugged his shoulders before repeating, “Aahh.”

He said the word with a short “a” as if he was going to say the word “at” and stopped before the “t” and just dragged out that first sound ‘til he ran out of breath as in “aaaaahh.”

Confused, Joe asked, “What in the devil does ‘aaahh’ mean?”

Unk shook his head as if Joe was the one mentally deficient: “Well, everybody knows it means: ‘I don’t have no idea.’ Y’all don’t use that word in ‘Irland’?”

Joe had made up his mind not to even think of correcting Unk on “Irland.”

“No, evidently the cultural habit of saying ‘aahh’ for ‘no’ never made it ‘cross the ocean yet.”

“Well—aahh, I can hardly believe that.”

Now, Joe was the one shaking his head. “And by the way, Unk, why do you say ‘whale’ before nearly any sentence? And why do you drag it out as in ‘wwwhhhale?’”

“Well, it’s just how we talk up here. I never thought nothing ‘bout it before.” Unk hesitated before continuing, “Joe Moore, I’m headin’ toward my sheep. Where are you goin’?”

“I’m just wandering round to see this country and find some land.”

“Well then, why don’t you wander along with me back to the sheep? We’ll visit some more about Irland, and you can stay for supper.”

The idea of a good meal appealed to Joe. He had nowhere to go anyway. “That sounds good, Unk. You lead the way.”

Unk carefully returned Alfalfa to his shoulder perch and headed back south. Joe Moore, who had been walking north turned around and prepared to retrace his steps. He could never have guessed how this conversation would affect the rest of his life.

As Joe enjoyed a meal with Unk Dial, he shared why he had come west of the Calcasieu. Unk listened closely as Joe told of Mayo O’Leary’s dreams, his tragic death, and Joe’s subsequent journey to “No Man’s Land.”

He asked Joe, “Do you plan to stay here?”

“I believe I may.”

“Don’t fergit you’re an outsider here. Folks don’t take well to outsiders.”

“I know, but I just believe I’ll take my chances. Unk, I really want some land to have for my own. Do you have any ideas where I might look?”

Unk stirred in the fire, deep in thought, then said, “Yep, I do know a place. The key around here is to stake a claim where no one else is, or wants to be. Then you have a better chance of being left alone.”

Joe was curious, “Unk, where is your land?”

He pointed in every direction. “I own it all. I wander these woods and creeks, using all of the land as I please. I don’t want no patch of ground to tie me down. I gave my sister Virginia the part of my folks’ land when momma died.”

Then as Unk could do so well, he shifted subjects, “In the morning, Joe, I’ll take you to where your land will be.”

They walked about five miles the next day to the spot. A weather front had moved through and the air was fresh and cool. Unk stopped. “Do you hear ‘em?”

Joe said, “Hear what?”

“Them geese. It’s the first ones I’ve heered this year.”

Joe heard them. They both looked up and found them high in the eastern sky working their way southwest.

“Joe, it means winter is comin’ soon. It’s time for you to get settled in.”

Joe watched the geese, his mind far away. “Yep, you’re right, Unk. It’s time for this wild goose to get settled in.”

After another mile, Unk pointed to an area where most of the pines were broken over. The resulting open field, of around twenty acres, was covered in bright yellow flowers.

Unk explained, “Most places are built close to the creek for water. We are right here ‘bout half way between Cherry Winche and Ten Mile. It’s way too fer to tote water, so nobody’s claimed this area. Follow me.”

They walked through the waist high flowers. “These purty flowers are called “lazy susans” and they bloom every October. They’re really a weed and only grow out in the open. When the tornado knocked down these pines, the flowers took over.”

Joe was curious, “What tornado?”

“The tornado that knocked down all these pines last spring. See how they’re all twisted off? It came through and did lots of damage all through Ten Mile. Right here is when it bounced down and took out the trees. Two people got kilt further north of here.”

Unk finally stopped among the flowers and splintered tree trunks. He was searching for something. “There it is.” He trotted over about fifty feet to an area where the grass was thicker and greener. “Here’s the spring.”

Joe followed him and saw the small spring bubbling out of the ground. It wasn’t large but the water was clear and looked deep. Around it grew strange single-stalked red flowers. Unk called them “spider lilies” and said they bloomed at the same time as the lazy susans.

Unk grinned, “Don’t nobody know ‘bout it but me. I use it to water the sheep when I’m in the area. Don’t you see how this would make you a good homestead—water, open land, your wood for building is already on the ground drying out. What do you think?”

“I think it is where I’m going to build me a homestead. I think I’ll call it Westport.”

Chapter 26

Joe spent the next week working hard on his homestead. Unk helped him and loaned him his ax and cross-cut saw.

During their visiting, Unk often referred to “Brother Willis.” Joe soon learned that this was a preacher named Joseph Willis who pastored the local Baptist church. It seems Brother Willis was a legend in these woods. Now in his eighties, the old man was no longer able to travel and preach as often as he had, but still had the deep respect of everyone in the Ten Mile country.

When Joe Moore found out that Reverend Willis’ wife, who had died, had been Irish, Joe made up his mind to go meet him.

Unk gave him directions toward Ten Mile Creek and Occupy Church where Willis had preached for nearly twenty years. They wished each other well, and Joe headed west—deeper into No Man’s Land than he’d ever been.

That day he followed a wagon road that paralleled a creek as he walked. His compass showed him going slightly northwest. Because of the road’s proximity to the creek, he was surrounded by hardwood forests on each side of the road. With the arrival of fall, the leaves had turned. Coming from a land without trees and having been in mostly treeless New Orleans, he was amazed at the bright colors of red, orange, and yellow he saw everywhere.

Even though the distance to the home of Joseph Willis was less than ten miles, it took Joe all day to find it. Directed to it by a neighbor, he knocked on the front door. Finally, after what seemed an eternity, a young woman came to the door.

Joe Moore stood there, hat in hand. “Ma’am, I’ve come to see Rev. Willis. Is he in?” The woman carefully looked Joseph up and down, not quite sure what to make of him. She turned and went back inside without a word.

In a few minutes, she returned, unlatched the door and invited Joseph in. “Follow me. He’s out back.”

They walked through the house and Joseph scanned the furnishings, pictures, and rooms. Everything was very simple but neat. She led him to the back porch where an ancient man, covered in blankets, sat in a rocker.

His first glimpse of Rev. Joseph Willis was unforgettable. First, he had had no idea how old the preacher was. He wasn’t sure if he’d ever seen anyone that looked older than this grizzled man of God. His snow-white hair accentuated his brown skin. There was no doubt this preacher was half-Indian.

Joe’s first words were careful and calculated: “Reverend Willis, my name is Joseph Moore, lately of New Orleans and before that, Westport, Ireland. I was told you could give me some good advice.”

It was evident the old preacher’s hearing was not too good. He leaned closer and pulled the Irishman toward his left ear. “Come closer to my good ear so I can hear you. Now, who are you and where are you headed?”

“The name is Moore from Ireland. I’m here to visit the No Man’s Land—the Neutral Strip.”

Reverend Willis looked quizzically at Joseph. “And why, pray tell, would a young Irishman wanna do that?”

“Sir, I came for freedom—and some land I can call my own. There’s not much of either where I come from.”

The preacher smiled wanly as he let Moore’s statement sink in. “So you’ve come to the land of milk and honey. Come sit here, boy, and we’ll visit. How’d you know to find me?”

“Nathan Dial told me about you. You know him, don’t you? He goes by the name of ‘Unk.’”

“Sure, I know him.”

“Reverend, I heard you had an Irish wife and so I wanted to meet you and her.”

The old man smiled, “Yes, yes, Sarah was a fine woman, but she was the second of my wives. She died years ago, just six years after my first wife, Rachel. God bless both of their souls.”

Joseph wanted to apologize for thinking his Irish wife was still alive, but the woman who had earlier met Joe at the door returned. She asked the old preacher if he wanted a cup of coffee. He smiled as he said, “Bring two cups, Honey. I believe our visitor would like some too. And by the way, he’s gonna be staying the night with us and taking supper with us.”

When the woman had exited the back porch, Joe couldn’t help but ask, “Reverend, is that ye daughter or a granddaughter?”

Joseph Willis went into a coughing fit that was part laughing, part nearly crying, and all parts loud. The young woman stuck her head back in, “Are you all right?” Still sputtering with a tear running down one cheek, Reverend Willis wiped his face with a bandana and waved her away. “No —ahem—I’m alright.”

Finally, he settled down enough to speak again. Joe feared he had caused a seizure that might kill the old man.

“Son, just for my pleasure, would you repeat that question?”

“You mean: ‘Is that ye daughter or granddaughter?’”

“Yep, that’s the one. That woman there is neither. She’s my wife!”

Joe Moore nearly fell out of the chair he was sitting in. He thought, That woman couldn’t have been over thirty and he—he—he was—what—he is close to ninety?!

Of course, Reverend Joseph Willis was fully enjoying Joe’s reaction to this news. He then added, "Well, let me put another load of pine knots on this fire. There’s more to this story.” With that he continued, “Son, I done lost and buried three wives. Along with that, I’ve buried five of my own children. God’s always been good to me, but He’s never been easy on me. It truly does rain on the just and unjust.”

Scooting closer with his rocker, he leaned toward the younger man, “After I lost my third wife—her name was also Sarah—I decided my next wife was gonna outlive me—I believe I might have accomplished that, don’t you think?” The preacher was smiling with a twinkle in his eye.

That twinkle was all Joe needed for his Irish humor to come forth. He patted the old preacher on his knee, saying, “A betting man would definitely put money on her, but you’ve got a pretty good track record yourself. I’m not sure I’d count you out.”

When Evely Sweat Willis, age thirty, the fourth and probably final wife of Joseph Willis, had brought in two steaming coffee cups on a tray, the two men were enjoying each other’s company.

Sipping the coffee, Joe Moore felt warm and welcome. As Joseph Willis recounted the adventures of living in No Man’s Land, he mentioned his church at “Occupy.”

"Reverend, how did a church get named 'Occupy'?"

Willis picked up a tattered black Bible. Slowly thumbing through it, he came to the page he was looking for, "Here it is—over in Luke 19. Jesus is sharing a variation of what we call the parable of the talents. The master in the story gives each of his ten servants a certain amount of money to ten of his servants, and he tells them, 'Occupy till I come.'

"That statement to 'Occupy till I come' meant, 'Stay put until I git back.' When we founded this church, most folks thought it wouldn't last. That's why we named it 'Occupy.' We're to stay where God has placed us 'til Jesus comes back to No Man's Land."

"What about the people in No Man's Land?"

"Son, don't forget the actual No Man's Land is a large area going down to the Gulf. This part is what I'm most familiar with. My church here at Occupy is situated just east of Ten Mile Creek. It was organized in late 1832. My people whom I pastor are a wonderful but unique group, usually called Ten Milers or Redbones. As you've seen, they are a mixed breed of people—a lot like me. That's probably why I'm able to pastor a church in this area that normally excludes outsiders."

"Reverend, if you don't mind me asking: Are you considered a Redbone?"

Willis smiled, "I guess you could say I am. Like me, the Ten Mile Redbones have a lot of Indian in them. Also dropped in is a whole mixture of other groups and adventurers who found their way into this part of Louisiana. To me, being a Redbone is more of a way of living than a race."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Redbones are known for living independently in this area of Ten Mile and Cherry Winche. They are very protective of their privacy and are proud of their isolation. There are no Redbone villages. Instead, they live on small farms spread out throughout the woods. Few of them can show you a land deed, but they feel a close and deep connection with the land they live on.

"They have big, big hearts and will share whatever they have with a stranger. However, if crossed, they are fierce enemies to encounter. Most are very religious and worship God in a unique emotional way that I've never gotten tired of observing."

Joe asked, "Where did the Redbones come from?"

"Son, There are all kinds of stories. The Indian blood has probably been here forever. That Spanish influence can't be overlooked, nor can you discount the escaped-slave factor regardless of whether they were Indian, Negro, or whatever.

"Others of the people here took the same route I did—down from the Carolinas, across on the Natchez Trace."

Joe had a thousand questions. However, being the wise pastor he was, Joseph Willis also knew how to listen. He then began asking questions of Joseph—about his family, faith, troubles, and dreams.

The young Irishman filled him in with the challenges, sorrows, and storms he had come through. Willis asked him about his religious background and Joe began on this thorny subject:

"Back in my home land of Western Ireland, there were only two kinds of churches: The dominant Catholic Church or the Protestant 'Church of Ireland.'

"One's choice of religion in Ireland is more than just a spiritual matter. Families have long histories of being staunchly one or the other. English domination of our island was built on eradicating the Catholic Church.

"Brother Willis, I'm the product of the oddest part of this centuries-old skirmish: the child of a mixed-religion marriage. My dad's family, like nearly everyone in County Mayo, has

been Catholic for centuries. When he married my mother, who's from a Protestant family, it created a scandal in Westport. People on both sides of the religious split were in an uproar—only there were a lot more on the Catholic side to be upset.

"Son, it sounds like you grew up as a half-breed, just like me!"

They both laughed and Joe continued, "Now, I've never known any other way to be: I just knew my Catholic Da and Protestant Ma loved each other and agreed to a truce at some early stage of their marriage. All of their children, including me, were taught the tenets of both religions and then told to sort it out themselves.

"Because of where I lived, I grew up more in Catholic Church settings. Although not a regular attendee, I understood the rudiments of the Church and its teachings. My father, and especially me grandmother, instilled their beliefs and faith in me.

"I know it sounds like a baffling mix that would lead to confusion or bad theology, but I kind of weighed it all out and developed my own sense of God, right, wrong, and faith. All of me life I heard my father say, 'Our Church tells us this' as well as mother's 'We go to the Bible for our belief on this.' I grew up with a good dose of each, and me last few years have led away from either of the churches. I still believe strongly in God and all, but I have to admit this belief hasn't always affected my daily life and decisions."

Reverend Willis had listened quietly and thoughtfully, periodically nodding his head or grunting. Joe now expected him to begin preaching or admonishing him for his stated lack of faith.

But Willis did neither—the old man wisely said, "Son, it sounds like you're on a good journey; not just with your feet, but with your heart. Where you end up on a journey is important and I believe you're headin' to the right spot. It's just as important what you do along that journey. The destination is not just the ending, but who you become along the way. You just keep walking. God's got a good plan for you."

Reverend Willis continued to question Joe on his beliefs. Every answer brought another question from Willis. Even though Joe was now doing most of the talking, the preacher was the one leading the conversation.

Joseph didn't notice it then, but later realized that Willis seemed as interested in Joe's reactions to his troubles, as the troubles themselves.

This was brought out when Willis sighed and responded, "Son, I know you've been given a rough row to hoe by life so far. It seems as if you've been given the short end of the stick at every turn of your life. There is nothin' I can say or do to change the past, but I'd like to share some things that could make a difference if you'll take them to heart.

"Now I'm mighty tired. This good visiting wears me out, but that's not a bad thing. Let's break off a limb right here and come back in the morning."

For Joe, to sleep in a real bed again was something! He couldn't believe it after weeks of coming upriver and walking dozens of miles, being in the woods, on Miz Girlie's porch, and with Unk under the pines. The bed was a little too soft for his liking, but he slept great.

After breakfast the next morning, the two men returned outside to visit. Preacher Willis was very unbalanced and shaky but insisted on using his canes and walking himself to the rocker.

Crossing his legs, the preacher sat holding his cup of coffee. Joe, being brought up in a culture where you allowed elders to speak first, held his tongue. There was so much more he wanted to ask, but he waited.

As they sat there silently, Joe looked around and saw one of the brightly colored yellow trees he had noticed on his walk from Hineston. Pointing at it he asked, “Reverend Willis, what kind of tree is that one with the bright yellow leaves?”

Willis’s eyesight was not great, but he studied it for a few seconds from his seat. ”That’s a hickory. It’s a tree prized in these woods for its strength. All of our handles for shovels and hoes are made of hickory. It holds up well. It is also excellent when dried for firewood. It’s difficult to split but burns hot and long in the fire. Don’t you like those bright-colored leaves?”

“Yes sir, I think they’re one of the prettiest trees I’ve seen.”

They returned to the silence. Joe knew that Reverend Willis had something to say and waited for him to begin.

“Son, I’ve done a lot of thinkin’ and prayin’ after our talk last night. I really enjoyed it and was amazed at the stories of your homeland and journey to get to these here parts. If you don’t mind, I want to hear more and then maybe I’ll have a few ideas for you to roll around in your mind. Is that all right?”

“Yes sir.”

“I took note during our conversation yesterday that you kept repeating a certain word: freedom. It’s a word I like, too. As I tell you my story, you’ll understand why. Son, freedom is something that beats in the heart of every man and woman that has ever lived. To be free is to decide your destiny—where you’ll live, who you’ll be, who’ll you’ll marry, and the kind of work you’ll spend your life doing.

“God put it in the soul of every person to want freedom. It’s as natural as breathin’. That hankering for freedom is a large part of why people have come to this so-called No Man’s Land. It is a wild, difficult, and unsettled area—but those things mean freedom for those with enough ‘sand’ in them to stay here. Don’t matter if they’re a former slave, Redbone, Indian, Spaniard, Acadian, or even an Irish immigrant runnin’ from who knows what.

“Whatever their reason for coming, it’s freedom they’re looking for. Everyone’s got someone trying to push them down and keep them from that freedom. You Irish have the English, the blacks have the slave owners, the Indians have the white man, and some of the Americans have their own government. The Ten Milers have come here to escape all of those groups and more. They mainly want to just be left alone.”

The old preacher, stopped—gathering his thoughts and catching his breath—before continuing, “Let me tell you a little about my life before coming here. There are some parts of it that I believe you can identify with.

“I was born in North Carolina about 1756. My mother was a Cherokee slave on the plantation of my father, Angerton Willis. Any slave—whether black, Indian, or whatever—was prohibited from marrying a white person, so my dad never married my mother. However, he openly acknowledged me as his son.

“I was his only child. However, under the laws of the state, I was still a slave. But my father treated me as his full legal son, assuring me I would inherit the family lands plantation and vast land holdings one day.

“When I was age twenty, he passed away and the trouble began. Two of my dad’s brothers began working behind the scenes to deny me the land and holdings as my father had stated in his will. The Willis family was well-known and politically connected in the state—and the half-breed son of an Indian slave was no match for their conniving and influence.

"The legal case went all the way to the governor of North Carolina. The final ruling was that the son of a slave couldn't be the rightful heir of a free father—even if that was his written wish. In the end, I ended up with a little land, but nothin' close to what I deserved."

Joe Moore interrupted, "Did it make ye hate your uncles and their family?"

"I guess my honest answer would have to be yes. I did hate them at the time. That time in my life was the first in many hurdles I would have to overcome in living free from hate, and its first cousin, bitterness. You see, I told you earlier that every man desires freedom. I want to expand on that: there's a whole bunch of freedoms. A man can seem free but be a slave to things on the inside. This inner bitterness I felt toward my own kin was hard to battle."

"Well, how'd you overcome it?"

Reverend Willis studied Joe Moore. He was fully aware that his own journey of freedom was very similar to the path the young Irishman was on. He prayed silently: Lord, help what I'm telling him sink in and guide him.

Willis carefully contemplated his next words. Finally, he said, "Joseph, I was bitter. I'd been cheated out of what was rightfully mine. Nothin' spites a man like losing what he knows belongs to him. It don't matter if it's land, a woman, or money—nobody likes having somethin' forcibly taken from him.

"I was just a little older than you when this happened. For months I stewed in my own juices. I dreamed of how I would one day get even with them. Even though I had been officially freed as a slave, I warn't really free because I was eaten up with hate.

"Finally, my mother, who had watched me during this time, spoke. In her quiet Indian way she told me that I must choose my path. It could be the path of bitterness and living in the past—or the path of forgiveness and moving on. Then she told me another story . . . "

But Willis didn't tell his mother's second story—at least not yet.

Instead, he said, "Joe, the hardships of that stage of my life, and the many to follow, taught me one thing: a man has to learn to forgive if he is going to make it through this life. Just like you, I've had plenty of things to resent and grow bitter about. But I made up my mind a long time ago that I was going to become better instead of becoming bitter. A man has to decide which of these it will be. You can't be both, that ain't gonna happen. But a feller has to choose one or the other. That choice is yours and yours alone. It's like an old saying, 'Bitterness is kinda like drinking poison and hoping it kills someone else."

Joe Moore had listened hard to every word of the old preacher. When Willis spoke of bitterness being like a poison, Joe looked up soberly and the Preacher detected a look of fire in Joe's green eyes. He wasn't sure if it was evidence of his message sinking in or a determination to pour poison on the long list of trespassers into his life.

Joe Moore asked, "You said earlier your mother told you another story during your time of bitterness, but didn't tell the story to me."

Willis smiled, "Are you familiar with the story of Joseph?"

"Are you talking about Jesus' father, or that Joseph over in the Old Testament?"

"The older one—he took a little side trip into Egypt, kinda like your journey."

Joe answered, "Yes sir, my mother'd tell me that story as a child."

The Preacher opened his tattered Bible, but then shut it. He knew it by heart. Best of all, Joseph Willis had lived this story. In a way, it was his story, and he told it in a way that that was unforgettable.

"That Joseph of the Bible was privileged and spoiled in his young life. But when he was about your age—seventeen or so—his life changed in one day.

"Joseph was sold by his brothers as a slave. Just like your unplanned ocean trip, his life changed all at once. Then like me, he was betrayed by family. That's a pretty tough double blow for a fellow his age, ain't it?"

Joe Moore nodded at the apt connections.

Willis continued, "Well, our namesake ends up in Egypt as slave of an important man named Potiphar. Ol' Potiphar gets the bargain of a lifetime: Joseph is a born leader and is soon running the whole household.

"Then just as things are lookin' up for Joseph, another problem develops—her name is Missus Potiphar. She takes a shine to Joseph, tries to lure him into bed, and when he refuses, accuses him of raping her. Our hero then finds himself in jail when he's as innocent as the day is long."

Preacher Willis smiled and added as an aside, "Once when I was preaching this passage and got to this part, an old Redbone hollered out, 'Ain't no good deed goes unpunished preacher! Nary a one.'"

They both laughed as he continued, "It seemed that Joseph's obedience to God only put him deeper into trouble. That baby had a lot to be bitter about, didn't he?"

Joseph answered, "Sounds like it to me."

"He spends a bunch of years in jail for this, but the Bible says that the hand of the Lord was on him there. Joseph bloomed where he was planted!

"Well, it's a long story, but through the interpretation of some dreams, Joseph ends up in the palace as Pharaoh's right-hand man. He's put in charge of preparing Egypt for a coming famine.

"As you can imagine he does a great job of preparing the country—that baby doll just knew how to get things done! Then in the middle of the famine years, ten dirty, tired travelers show up to buy grain. It's them brothers who sold him down the river twenty or thirty years ago.

"They don't recognize Joseph. He looks, dresses, and speaks Egyptian, but he sure as shootin' knows them."

Joe noticed that Reverend Willis was really getting into the story. Being a fine storyteller, he was using his hands, voice, and emotions to tell the story.

He continued, "Now it was time for revenge and getting even with the brothers. 'Cept one thing happened: Joseph chose not to 'return evil with evil.' Instead, he put 'em through a series of tests to find out where their hearts were now.

"Finally, Joseph revealed who he really was. I'd like to seen their faces!"

Reverend Willis then did something that Joe decided was a Ten Mile conversational trait, as he had noticed both Girlie and Unk doing it—The Reverend cocked his head over to the side, winked, and said, "Weelll say, them babies thought they'd had it for sure. It was all over for them. Their gooses were cooked!"

Joe Moore laughed out loud at the expressions, as well as how he turned his head, on saying it.

The Preacher said, "But 'Brother Joseph' extended complete forgiveness to them and later brought them and their families to live in the shadow of his prosperity."

Willis stopped before emotionally continuing. "When my mother told me this same story many years ago, she asked me, 'Now, when did Joseph forgive his brothers?'"

Willis waited for Joe's answer to the same question. Finally, Joe said, "Right then and there … in the palace?"

Willis shook his head slowly. "No siree, my wise mother said it had to have been years earlier. She told me, 'Somewhere earlier—maybe walking to Egypt chained to a camel, or in

Potiphar's house, or maybe in that prison—somewhere earlier he chose to forgive them—long before he became a ruler, and long 'fore the brothers showed up in Egypt.'"

Joe interrupted, "But, how did she know that, Brother Willis?"

The Preacher shrugged his shoulders, "Son, she knew it by simply knowing human nature and the freeing power of forgiveness. Here's how she told me that day, 'A bitter and unforgiving man can't be used by God like Joseph was used. Harboring bitterness—and the term 'the Lord was with Joseph'—can't go together.'"

Willis was now crying, but his voice remained strong, "Joe Moore, I had to discover that same thing in my early life—betrayed by family, rejected sometimes by Christian brothers because of the way I looked, run out of town for preaching, losing three wives and five children."

He stopped, his voice becoming husky, as he pointed a finger right in Joe's face, "But with God's help, I got past it all. I got better instead of bitter. Now, what about you?!"

Joe didn't answer. Some questions are too fresh, deep, and penetrating for an answer, so he simply stared into the old preacher's eyes.

That afternoon, Joe Moore left the Willis home. He stood by Reverend Joseph Willis on the porch. The two men with the same given names put their arms around each other as Joe Moore warmly embraced Brother Willis.

The older man prayed as he watched Joseph leaving. His prayer was simple but heartfelt. "Lord, help that there boy to get where he needs to be. Send some angels to direct him and lighten his load. I done passed on to him Joseph's story. Let those lessons take root in his heart—this new Joseph, Joseph Moore. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen and amen."

He opened his eyes and through tears saw the boy disappear into the pines. There was a lightness in his step that made Reverend Joseph Willis believe his prayer was already being answered.

Chapter 27

Eliza would always equate her first glimpse of Joe Moore with a strange singing bird. For the last two days, she had been hearing it in the oak trees behind the house. She searched among the canopies of the trees but could never quite locate this bird with a song with which she was unfamiliar.

Later that day her friend Bessie Wilson came to stay for a few days. She was just a few months younger than Eliza, and they'd been friends since childhood.

After Bessie arrived, the two girls were off to the pines. One of Eliza's chores for the day was to gather pine knots. They were piling the pine knots and kindling for her dad to haul to the home. No Ten Mile home was complete without a huge pile of pine knots to stoke the fires of cook stoves and wash pots.

Bessie Wilson, whose family had been in the midst of the feud with the Tyler family for the past ten years, said, "Eliza, I ought to know how to find pine knots, because three times someone's burned our pile. Have you ever seen a pine pile burning?"

"No, I don't guess I have."

"Girl, it's a hot and black fire like you ain't never seen. I know it was those Tyler boys that did it. Every time I see Ben Tyler, he kind of sneers at me, and I know he done it."

"But, Bessie—Ben is my good friend. I don't think he'd do that kind of thing."

"You don't know those Tylers like I do. They can put on a good front, but they're devious as the devil."

"To be truthful, Bessie, I've always believed Ben Tyler kind of has a shine for you."

"Get out of here!"

"No, I'm serious. He's kind of hinted at it before."

Bessie scoffed, "Well, that would never work. It'd be like putting a jackass and a… let's see… a white-tailed deer in the same pen—and expecting them to get along."

Eliza laughed, "I'm sure Ben Tyler would be the jackass?"

"Of, course. That's what those Tylers are."

Their conversation was stopped by the sound of approaching sheep. They could hear bells and the gentle baaing of the sheep. As the noise neared, two men walked ahead of the sheep.

It was at a bend in the road when they spied the men and the sheep, so the girls had time to scamper into the woods and hide for a better look.

Bessie whispered, "I can tell from his walk that one of them's your Uncle Nathan."

Eliza agreed. "That's him all right. Poppa says he walks like he's got a corncob up his behind."

Both girls giggled. Eliza, who loved to get her best friend in a tizzy, continued, "Bessie, I believe that's Ben Tyler walking with him."

"Get out of here. That ain't him. He's too tall."

"It's him all right. I'd recognize him anywhere. I'm going to get you two together. I've always wanted to get a jackass and a deer in the same pen."

"You shut your mouth. If that's him, I'm gonna run off."

Of course the second man wasn't Ben Tyler. In fact as the men got closer, neither girl initially recognized him.

Finally, Bessie whispered, "I believe it's that Irishman. That one named Moore who's been hanging around Miz Girlie's place. I saw him from a distance a week ago. Yep, that's him all right. He's way too white for our people."

Eliza felt her heart quicken. She'd wanted to see him for herself, and sure enough, here he came walking beside her own uncle. Eliza eased down behind a pine. She wanted to see him but definitely did not want the Irishman to see her.

Bessie leaned over, "Let's scare them when they pass by."

"Girl, I will hit you up side the head if you make a sound or say a word."

"Oh, come on. It'll be fun."

Eliza grabbed her best friend, "We are not going to make a first impression on Unk's friend by jumping out like two goblins. It might scare him all of the way back to Ireland."

"Sounds like you want to meet him in a personal way—Hey, you're blushing just looking at him. What have we got here?"

"Hush your mouth, girl. I'm going to hit you when they git by just for the heck of it."

Both of the girls had a giggling fit but managed to contain it by the time the men and sheep approached. The men stopped and waited as the sheep lazily walked along, some stopping to graze.

Bessie looked over at Eliza and seemed ready to burst out laughing at any moment. Eliza leaned into her ear and whispered, "Think of something sad so you won't laugh: pretend your house burned down or your momma got sick… or someone died."

This only made Bessie giggle more. However, the noise of the sheep coupled with the conversation of the men kept them from hearing the girls as Eliza cupped her hand over Bessie's mouth and glared at her.

In spite of her attention on her snickering friend, Eliza's main focus was on seeing this Irishman. She stood and leaned to the right of the pine, silently keeping her dark eyes on the stranger.

Unk was telling some story of how he nearly starved to death one cold winter. They walked by the girls' hiding place just as Joe spoke. Eliza had never heard an accent like this. His words had a sing-songy rhythm to it. Eliza liked the sound of his voice. At first she wasn't sure if he was speaking English or some Irish dialect, but it was English . . . just of a different sort.

Unk laughed and said, "Well, a feller can be poor, and still have it better than someone else."

Joe Moore laughed, "In my country, we have a saying, 'among the blind, the one-eyed man is king.'"

They were close enough that Eliza could see her uncle look puzzled at Joe Moore, trying to figure out what that saying meant. The girls couldn't hear any more conversation as the men and the sheep passed southward.

Eliza repeated it to herself: "In my country, we have a saying."

Then, trying to mimic the accent, she whispered aloud, "In mine country, we have a sawing."

My country…. This Irishman was from another country… somewhere across an ocean. Eliza, who had never seen a body of water over sixty feet wide, could not imagine water stretching unending for over three thousand miles.

She told herself, I want to hear about the ocean from that boy.

Again, this time louder, she said, "In mine country …"

Bessie was rolling in the high grass giggling sillily. "You sure did get a good look, didn't you? You were peeking around that big pine just like a cornered cat squirrel."

Eliza goosed her friend and said, "Well, you look like you got your eyes full, too. The pot can't call the kettle black. You were craning your neck like a calf looking at a new gate."

Then the two friends fell into the wiregrass wrestling, tickling, and thinking of any other Ten Mile animal insults they could exchange. Bessie got the final zinger in, "Speaking of jackasses and white-tailed deer, I believe you'd like to get in the pen with that Irishman. That'd be a pairing wouldn't it?"

Even though she was still smiling, Eliza didn't say a word.

It was only that night as she and Bessie lay in the darkened Clark house that Eliza openly expressed what she felt when she'd seen this Irish stranger. "Bessie, have you ever looked at someone and seen the future?"

Even though it was dark in the bedroom, Eliza could feel Bessie sit up in the bed as she said, "Eliza Girl, I want to tell you something straight up: there is no future for you with that boy. He is from a different world than you are. He is no more winnable for you than if he was still in Ireland across the Atlantic. Get it out of your mind right now. I don't care if he has the greenest eyes ever created by God, he is not for you.

"He and you are from different worlds. Men like him have come to our country trying to win the love of a local girl. I've never seen it ever turn out good. Remember about three years ago when that Dyess fellow came from Alex to court the oldest Sweat girl. Not only her dad, but all of the local men, took care of it. Now that outsider was persistent about seeing her. He was never seen again after that Saturday night barn dance. The word I got was that he had been told not to return, but showed up anyway. Word is that ol' Ephraim Sweat took care of him; I believe he killed him.

"Now take my advice: leave him be. White-tailed deer don't chase after jackasses. And strange birds that show up in our woods don't last long. Leave him be!"

The next day is when the counterweight to Eliza's sighting of Joe Moore happened. She was in the back of the house sewing on a blouse when she heard a horse. Her momma went out on the porch and Eliza heard her say, "Hello, Robert Ray. Eliza will be so glad you've come. Come sit here on the porch and I'll go get her; she's inside sewing."

Virginia Clark had set this all up carefully and felt the timing was perfect. Shutting the door carefully behind her, she went in to get Eliza.

A blouse with a needle and thread were setting on the chair but Eliza was nowhere to be seen. The nearby open window and fluttering curtain silently told the story.

Virginia ran to the window, but Eliza was nowhere to be seen. She was hidden, kneeling under the edge of the house. She heard her mother go back on the porch and say, "Well, Robert Ray, she was in there a minute ago. I don't know if she went out to the outhouse or what—"

Eliza had heard enough. She was running as fast as she could for the stand of pines.

Chapter 28

Joe had met Arch and Mollie Weeks when traveling with Unk on one of his sheep-herding rounds. The old couple immediately liked him. Uncle Arch especially loved to just listen to Joe's accent. He would make Joe repeat words, sayings, and Bible verses and laugh uproariously at his pronunciation.

This didn't bother Joe one bit. He enjoyed listening to their stories and the unending arguments they had. Their humor reminded him of the type he'd observed in many older couples in County Mayo—biting, but in fun.

Soon he found himself going by their house quite often. Aunt Mollie Weeks loved trying all of her Ten Mile recipes out on him and he was more than happy to eat them.

In return, he would spend the day splitting wood, working the fields, and taking care of chores under Uncle Arch's supervision and instruction. The Weeks' home place was an ideal place for Joe to learn about the woods and people of the Ten Mile area.

On a Tuesday, Joe was sawing up a pin oak that had fallen behind the barn when he heard horses. It was unusual for any visitors to come this way because of the isolation of the homestead near the mouth of Cherry Winche.

Three men rode up and tied their horses at the porch. Joe could see Uncle Arch greeting them and the men coming up on the porch to sit. Joe went back to work.

A minute later he stopped. He had a funny feeling about these visitors and decided it wouldn't hurt to go check on things. Workers from the timber company had been snooping around lately, and he wondered if these men might be involved in that. Coming from the barn, he eased up to the side of the house and got where he could hear.

It seemed a cordial conversation as Uncle Arch regaled the visitors with stories of the history of the region. One of the visitors was the only one talking. He had a clipped, fancy way of talking that Joe wasn't crazy about.

He slid up to the porch edge where he could glance around the banister and see things without being noticed.

The fancy talker said, "Mr. Weeks, as you are probably aware, we are here on business today."

"I figgered as well."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said I figgered as well."

"Oh, I see. Well, our business is this: my company, Piedmont Timber, has bought up blocks of land in this area. Your place is on our largest tract."

Joe saw Uncle Arch sit up straight. He figured the fancy talker took Uncle Arch for being stupid, which he was not.

"Mister, my land ain't on your tract of land. I done checked that out. I believe you're barking up the wrong tree."

"Excuse me, Mr. Weeks, but I believe it is."

"No Sir, it ain't."

Joe could see a bigger man sitting beside the talker. This fellow shifted in his seat, scooting his rocker toward Uncle Arch in a menacing way. Joe decided to make himself known and walked innocently around the corner.

He spoke, "Howdy, Grandpa, we got company?"

Everyone looked startled, especially Arch Weeks.

Joe said, "Afternoon, gentlemen. Welcome to our place." Joe was trying to sound Redbone but knew his Irish accent was probably shining through. Regardless, he had started this and meant to finish it.

The talker turned to a smaller man and said, "I thought you said this old couple didn't have any family?"

The man just shrugged his shoulders and stared from Arch to Joe Moore and back again.

The fancy talker turned to Joe, "Well, uh, it's good to meet you. I'm Travis Thomas, with the Piedmont Timber Company. I was just talking with your, uh, grandfather here about a little land problem we have."

Joe came up on the porch where he could be eye level with the men. "Well, go ahead with your conversation. Don't let me stop you."

Thomas cleared his throat, "Sir, we'd like to make a deal with you on your land. We'd like to get clear title to it, and let you and your wife stay on it until you both, uh, pass away."

Joe butted in, "But grandpa, what about me?"

Arch Weeks looked at him funny, then smiled, "Sir, the boy is right. I done promised him this place. I can't go back on my word, can I?"

Thomas said, "To be honest, I will have all of this land, sooner or later. I'm just trying to be reasonable."

Uncle Arch retorted, "Well, why don't you jes' go find someone else to be reasonable with. I ain't interested."

The big man stood and moved toward Uncle Arch. Thomas said, "Now, Turk," but he continued, "You know, sometimes bad things can happen to people and their places when they aren't cooperative."

Joe took an intense dislike to this man, but also noticed he was armed and had his hand on his pistol. He said, "Fellows, I believe you've got better things to do than pick on an older couple in the last years of their lives. Why don't you just get going and bother someone else?"

Turk turned to him, "You telling us to leave, boy?"

"Nope, just asking you to move on."

The bully moved toward Joe but was stopped by Thomas, who said, "Well, we'll do just that. But we'll be back."

Joe stood by Uncle Arch as the three men went down the steps. Before he got on his horse, Travis Thomas said, "Son, you sure don't look Redbone to me and your speech has a touch of Irish. Are you sure you're his grandson?"

Before Joe could answer, Arch pulled Joe next to him and said, "Can't you see the resemblance when we stand right beside each other?"

The timber man shook his head in disgust and rode off.

Chapter 29

It was a Saturday afternoon, several weeks since Eliza had secretly seen the Irishman, Joe Moore. She had tried to learn all she could about this stranger. It was hard not to seem too curious as she listened to folks describing their encounters with him.

Eliza wondered what she would say when, and if, she met Joe Moore. As she prepared to go to a dance at the Cole home, she had no idea that that question would be answered soon.

From time to time, one of the homes in the Ten Mile area would host a house dance. It was a fun time for the hard-working settlers to get together, blow off a little steam, and have fun. Most of the Ten Milers were strong Baptists, but they still enjoyed getting together for music and fun.

Eliza loved these dances. Other than church, this was the only time a good-sized group of people gathered. Every age would be there, and the music, food, and laughter would be enjoyed by all.

Tonight's dance was to be held at the Daniel Cole home on the west side of Ten Mile Creek. The Cole place was one of the larger homes in the area, which meant more room for dancing. This dogtrot house, with a long hallway down the center, had a large room on each side of the open hall.

As Saturday afternoon progressed, Eliza worked hard on her hair and wore her nicest dress. Her father loaded up the wagon and they headed out on the hour-long ride.

Nearing the Cole home, they could first see the lights from the lanterns and soon heard the music. They climbed off the wagon, and Eli scampered up on the porch, which was already crowded with other children laughing and playing games. The cool evening was perfect for those who gathered outside. Over by a live oak tree, a group of men was gathered in a circle. Eliza could smell their tobacco smoke and see the dim glow of the cigarettes. She wasn't sure, but thought she caught a whiff of whiskey wafting from the circle. Many a good country dance had been ruined by a moonshine jug passed around outside.

As Eliza walked up the steps, she saw all of the furniture of the Cole family stacked on the porch. This allowed both rooms to be used for dancing. The adults would dance in one room and the younger folks, carefully chaperoned by several respectful matrons of the community, would dance on the other side.

Eliza saw the two musicians sitting on cowhide chairs in the hallway. Most Ten Mile dances were played by Mose and his nephew, Shine. Mose was the finest fiddle player around and Shine ably accompanied his uncle on guitar. These two Negro men lived in a small settlement further north on the Calcasieu.

They were playing furiously to a tune that Eliza loved, called "Listen to the Mockingbird." Sweat poured from the face of the old fiddler, as he stomped his foot in the rhythm to the music. Shine's guitar was also furiously playing as he strummed.

Eliza always thought it peculiar that Mose or Shine were not welcome in Ten Mile at any other time. Negroes were intensely disliked by the majority of Redbones. It was only when they

were needed for a dance that several of the local men would go get them in a wagon and bring them in. The entire time they were at the dance, one of the local men was assigned to watch them.

Eliza felt the entire house shaking from the movement of the dancers in both rooms. Most of the nicer Ten Mile houses, like this one, were built up off the ground on wooden piers topped with pine board floors. This caused the whole house to shake when dozens of folks danced about. They even had a saying for it: "settling the house."

Tonight's well-attended dance was definitely a "house settler." There was a fine crowd in the yard, on the porch, and in the rooms.

She quickly made her way into the young people's room and saw the faces of many of her friends dancing in the lantern-lit room. The boots of the men made a fine sound as they cavorted to the sound of the fiddle and guitar. Along the walls were others either too bashful or young to be out on the floor. The boys lined one wall, and the girls stood along the other. As at dances all over the country, they were known as "wallflowers." Tonight Eliza had no desire to be a part of them.

The fast song ended and Mose and Shine followed up with a series of slower waltzes. Soon Eliza was in the middle of the dancing and having a good time. From time to time, she would spy her mother glancing in to check on things. Each time, Mary Jerdan, one of the young people's chaperones, would go to the door and dutifully report on who Eliza had danced with, ensuring Virginia Clark that no body parts had touched except "hand to hand" and the occasional foot stomped by some clumsy boy.

It was during another fast reel as Eliza spun in and out of the line that she heard an audible gasp from some of the wallflowers and chaperones.

Eliza turned and saw the reason for the reaction. There in the door stood Unk. That was no surprise—but beside him stood a stranger who leaned on the doorframe with a shy smile on his red face. It was the Irishman, Joe Moore. Most in the room had only heard about him. However, Eliza had earlier seen him hidden in the pines and knew exactly who he was.

He removed his hat, nodded at the chaperones, and found a spot along the wall between two younger boys. Unk squeezed in and joined him. Evidently, Unk considered himself Moore's chaperone for the night. Between songs, Unk saw his niece, and he came over to hug her. As they hugged, Eliza whispered, "Unk, why in the world did you bring that Irishman here? There will be trouble for him!"

Unk just shrugged, "He said he wanted to see a house dance, so I brung him."

Eliza returned to the girl's wall and stood along it. She turned down the next few dances and tried to compose herself. Every eye in the room, including hers, was on the stranger. He seemed to not notice the attention, simply enjoying being among folks his age.

Unk, his faithful chaperone, pointed around the room, explaining who was who and how the dance was organized. Joe thoughtfully nodded. Unk, who was never subtle, pointed for a long time at Eliza as he talked to Joe. The entire time Joe smiled with his eyes on her. When she glanced over, he bowed slightly and mouthed "Hello" across the room. Eliza quickly looked away and felt her face flushing. It was as if he had seen her before and knew exactly who she was.

She moved to the corner where she felt less conspicuous. She felt her knees grow weak as Joe eased over to her corner. He smiled and said, "My name is Joe Moore, Eliza. Unk has told me all about you. It's so nice to finally meet you."

His accent mesmerized her. But most of all, she would always remember her first look into his eyes. They were the brightest and most unusual green eyes she'd ever seen. They had a passion and fire in them that nearly scared her as she looked into them.

Eliza didn't know it, but this wasn't Joe's first glimpse of her either. He had thought many times of the day he had watched her from the barn loft. Now this first close-up look at her was something he'd waited for.

Her eyes also captivated him—they were the darkest and deepest brown he'd ever looked into. He'd never seen eyes like this back home. He knew he was staring too long into her eyes, but couldn't help it.

Of course, he was staring too long. Chaperone Mary Jerdan saw it too, and promptly left to go consult with Eliza's mother.

The music started again and the dancers took the floor—which shifted at least some of the attention away from Joe and Eliza.

Even though they were tentatively nervous and the initial conversation was stilted, they became comfortable quickly. Joe noticed one of the boys along the wall loudly stomping his right boot to the rhythm of the song and commented, "In my country, we call that stomping 'playing the boot.' It's always done by one of the musicians as well as many spectators."

Eliza quietly said, "Uh—Joe, do you have house dances in 'your country'?"

"Oh yes we do, but my favorites were always the crossroads dances."

"What's a crossroads dance?"

Joe was warming to the conversation. "Musicians called 'dance masters' would travel the countryside. When they'd come through our county, they'd post advertisements of dances to be held at various crossroads in the area. Young people would come for miles around. The masters would teach new dances—waltzes, reels, steps, and Irish jigs. Then for the next few nights, we'd dance these new ones to their playing. This is how the dance masters made their money—everyone would pay a small fee and also pass the hat. Then the dance master would move on to another area. We'd not see them until the next year about the same time." He looked into Eliza's face, "It was wonderful and one of the highlights of our year."

Then she noticed how his face darkened, "Then the famine came and these crossroads dances became a thing of the past."

Eliza had no idea what he meant by "the famine." She didn't know him well enough—yet—to ask more, so she shifted the subject: "Do you know how we pay Mose for playing? When this song ends, go out on the porch and watch."

As Mose and Shine moved into the last verse and the song slowed down, Joe eased to the doorway. He walked right into a dark woman who looked at him with a fierce, stony silence. He noticed something strange about her too—her eyes had that same look as Eliza Clark's.

Out in the hallway, Joe realized he had probably just 'met' Eliza's mother. She didn't look too happy. He stood in front of the two musicians. While Mose played the ending of the song one more time, an older man came up and extended a coin in his hand. Mose opened his mouth and the man put the coin right in his open mouth. The fiddler nodded and the fellow returned back to the dancing room across the hallway.

Mose ended the song, set his fiddle down, and quickly took three coins out of his mouth. He dropped them into a hat between his feet where they collided with what sounded like a small pile of coins.

When Joe returned to the room, another boy was standing in his place, but Eliza scooted over and motioned for Joe to return by her.

Joe asked, “They actually put the money in his mouth!”

“You saw it, didn’t you?”

“That’s something.”

Mose and Shine, accompanied by their faithful guard, took a smoke break outside. As the two Negroes sat on the edge of the porch smoking, a crowd of men talked by the chimney. Mose may have looked simple, but he never missed anything. Listening as they talked, he knew something devious was being planned. The strong smell of whiskey only made the men talk louder than they realized.

A bigger man, whom Mose knew was Amos Long, was doing most of the talking. Amos said, “We’ll wait for …down at Barnes’ Crossing…he’ll have to go that way…t’ward where he’s staying…that damn Irishman… what we’ll do…teach him ‘bout talking to our women.”

Even though Mose only got pieces of the conversation, he had a good idea of the plans being made and whom they were to be directed at. Mose didn’t like Amos one bit. Once during a dance, drunk Amos had walked up and broken Mose’s bow during a dance. It seemed he hadn’t liked the tempo the fiddler was playing on the last song.

Mose quietly finished his cigarette. Shine sat far enough away on the porch that he had heard none of the chimney-side conversation. As Mose and his partner returned to their chairs, he told his guard, “‘Eighth of January’s’ up next.”

The man repeated that into each room. Joe heard it and noticed how the dancers all clapped their hands and smiled.

Eliza told him, “The ‘Eighth of January’ is Mose’s best fiddle piece. He sometimes plays a fifteen- or twenty-minute version of it. It’s the highlight of any dance he’s at.”

The dancers were pairing up for this Ten Mile favorite. Joe asked, “Eliza, what’s the song about?”

“It’s a lively fiddle tune about the battle of New Orleans and General Jackson’s defeat of the British. Are you familiar with the story?”

Joe recalled Gill telling the story as the Amelia had passed the spot where the Mississippi River battle was fought.

“Yes, I am. In fact I saw the spot where it took place coming to New Orleans.”

Eliza seemed astonished, “You’ve been to New Orleans?”

“Yes, I have.”

Just then the music started and the dancers hit the floor. ”The Eighth of January” was indeed a lively tune with a stomping happy beat. Mose sawed on the fiddle as Shine furiously strummed the guitar trying to keep up.

Every few minutes, Mose would bring the song to a close and the dancers would groan and beg for more. Then he’d stomp his foot and start again, even faster than before.

The third time Mose stopped, Joe leaned over to Eliza, “It’d be a real shame for an Irishman not to dance a jig to a song celebrating the British getting their butts kicked. Would you dance it with me?”

Eliza looked around the room nervously. She looked into the impassive faces of the chaperones. What would they say? What about her mother?

Then she turned to Joe Moore and smiled, “I’d love to dance with you.”

They merged into the crowded dance floor and held hands as they danced to the fine song. Even though two cultures and styles of dancing were clasping hands on the Cole home wooden floor, they weren't too bad.

Joe Moore was a good dancer. Sweat popped up on his forehead and his cheeks got cherry red. Of course, Eliza's olive cheeks didn't redden—she was much too dark for that. Several of the dancing couples backed away to watch this strange pair: A Redbone girl dancing with an Irishman.

In the background, Mose played away on the "Eighth of January" as those along the wall clapped faster and the dancers swung and swayed. All of the dancers stepped back away from their partners and continued stomping and clapping as they danced.

One young dancer would holler out the door each time he and his partner went by the hall way, "Play it boys! Play it fast."

Joe Moore loved step dancing, an Irish-type featuring stomping and prancing with the legs. Being caught up in the music and moment, he put his hands on his hips and began this unique dancing.

One girl stopped dancing and blurted, "I ain't never seen nothing like that in my life!"

Mary Jerdan whispered to the other chaperone, "I do believe he's drunk, carrying on like that." Unk who was standing behind them and never missed a word, leaned in and said, "No Ma'am, he ain't drunk. He's just Irish."

The Redbone woman added acidly, "I've always heard they are one and the same for his kind."

Eliza stood in amazement, not quite sure what to make of this strange creature stomping away in front of her. Every eye in the room was on Joe, who when he realized this, grabbed Eliza and went back to swinging her in the manner and dance of the others. Soon, the entire room was dancing away merrily to the fiddle and guitar.

To everyone in both rooms, as well as Mose and Shine, time seemed to stand still. Everyone agreed they had never had a better dance or more fun.

Everyone agreed—except a small knot of men who continued smoking and drinking outside by the chimney. As the dance began winding down, one by one they slipped off northward toward a place called Barnes' Crossing.

As the crowd dispersed, Joe and Eliza said their goodbyes. "I sure enjoyed it, Eliza Clark. Thanks for making me feel at home with ye. I hope to see ye again."

She shyly smiled, "You're welcome, Joe Moore."

As Joe came out on the porch, he fished for a coin in his pocket. He leaned down and dropped it in Mose's hat.

The fiddler grabbed his sleeve and whispered softly, "Son, don't you go home by way of Barnes' Crossing. There's some bad men waiting to bushwhack you there."

Joe looked up startled into the man's eyes. The fiddler gently pushed him away and said loudly, "I'm glad you enjoyed the dance, Sir."

Eliza was waiting on the porch, so Joe walked her to the wagon. Mrs. Clark curtly said, "Eliza Jane, climb aboard. We're late already."

She squeezed his hand and whispered goodnight before running to the wagon. She noticed he was quiet, but had no idea of the words he had just received from the fiddler.

As Joe and Unk parted ways in the yard, Joe thanked him for bringing him to the dance. Then he began the long dark walk toward home. He soon noticed a figure trailing along behind him. To lose this person, Joe sped up and then hid along the roadside. Soon the shadowy figure

walked past. Joe couldn't recognize him, but saw he held a long object in his hand and was trying to be discreet as he eased along.

Joe Moore waited several minutes, got back on the road, and re-traced his steps in the opposite direction—getting as far from Barnes' Crossing as he could.

Chapter 30

Joe slept in the woods that night after the house dance. The next morning, he took a different road and began walking home. He felt reasonably sure it was safe, but didn't want to go near Barnes' Crossing, just in case.

Nearing his place, he noticed smoke in the distance. The closer he got, the more sure he was that it came from his small camp, and he quickened his pace. He was running by the time he rounded the last bend in the trail and saw what he feared—what had been his homestead was now a smoldering pile of ashes and timbers.

The bushwhackers hadn't gotten him, but had evidently taken out their frustration on his place. Nothing was left. The smoldering scene reminded him of evictions he'd seen in Ireland where families had watched their thatched roofs burned and the stone cabin "tumbled down" with crowbars.

It was Joe's first direct contact with a Ten Mile burnout. It was a favorite trick of feud and anyone with a score to settle. It did not totally surprise Joe, but still cut him to the soul.

He took a stick and began probing through the ashes. He didn't own much, but what he did have, he cherished.

However, there wasn't anything to salvage. The hot fire had taken care of that. He had only acquired a few changes of clothes. He found the sleeve of one shirt and that was all.

He continued digging around. There were only two possessions he really wanted, and he was determined to find them both.

He quickly found one of them. The compass had not done well in the fire. Its glass cover had shattered and the heat warped the metal. The needle was bent and the directional marks burned off. It was now useless.

Joe thought about the day Gill had placed it in his hand as he left the Amelia in New Orleans. The sailor had said, "It will guide you. A man coming to a new land needs a good compass."

Looking down at the ruined compass in his hand, he recalled how it had felt when he first held it. In spite of its now useless condition, he still tenderly placed in his pocket and said aloud, "Well, I don't really need a compass anymore. I've come to where I plan to stay anyway."

He then turned to continue sifting in the ashes. The item he most cherished had to be somewhere near where the compass had been found, but he couldn't find it. It was small and he wondered if the fire could have consumed it.

He put the probing stick down and used his bare hands to sift through the ashes. Soon his arms were soot-covered to his elbows, but he kept digging. Just as he had begun to despair, he felt a small round item in the ashes. He'd found it.

He picked up the pebble from his mother's grave. It was charred by the hot fire, but still intact. He held it tightly in his hand. It was really the only thing he deemed irreplaceable. It was his only tangible link to his old life in Ireland.

Joe sat for a long time on a nearby log, planning his next move. He then said, “Well, my compass is gone so I can’t leave. And there’s nothing behind me back in Ireland that really matters. So I guess I’ll just stay here.”

He stood up, put the pebble in his pocket next to the compass, and began clearing away the debris. He was ready to rebuild on his homestead of Westport. They had burned his dwelling, but this was still his land.

Two days later, as he was working on his house, Joe saw a horse and rider approaching. A closer inspection revealed that the rider was actually walking beside the saddled horse.

It was a nice dark brown horse that immediately caught Joe’s attention. Even though he had never owned a horse, and never expected to, he could sure admire them from a distance. This one was a beauty.

As the two neared, he saw it was Unk Dial leading the horse. This surprised him further because he had never seen Unk with a horse.

Unk had his usual smile on his face, until he realized Joe’s house was gone. “What happened to yer cabin?”

“Had a burnout.”

“When?”

“After the house dance. I must of stepped on somebody’s toes.”

“Well, Joe Moore, welcome to Ten Mile. You’ve not been accepted here ‘til you’ve been burned out at least once.”

“I don’t believe they meant it to make me feel welcome.”

“Probably not.”

Joe had never seen Unk with a horse, so he asked, “What have you got there?”

“This is Dallas.”

“Is Dallas your horse?”

“Heck, no. Why would Unk want a horse?”

“Well, Unk, I would think everybody would want a horse.”

“Not ol’ Unk. I’m afraid it’d slow me down.”

“Well, whose horse is Dallas?”

“She is going to be yours!”

“What’d you say?”

“Dallas is your horse. I got him fer you.”

Joe was speechless. ”Are you saying this is me horse?”

“No, I’m saying it is my horse.”

“I thought it wasn’t yours.”

“Joe, it isn’t mine. It is yours. But, you confuse me when you say ‘me’ and you mean ‘my.’”

“Oh, Unk, that’s just an Irish thing I can’t seem to break.”

“Yeah, Joe.”

“Now, let me get this straight. Unk, you are giving me this horse named Dallas?”

“That’s right. No strings attached. Just a gift from a friend.”

Joe walked over and petted the beautiful horse. ”Unk, I can’t just take this horse from you for nothing.”

“Why not? I wanna give it to you.”

“But this horse cost you a lot of money … and where did you get the kind of money to buy a horse?”

“I inherited it exactly a year ago today. But there is one catch to taking Dallas.”

"And what might that be?"

Unk moved closer and spoke in a conspiratorial voice. "You can't tell nobody where it came from."

"What do you mean I can't tell anybody? People will think I stole it. They know I don't have any money!"

"Oh, I've taken care of that. Lookee here." Unk handed Joe a completed bill of sale from the Harrison Livestock Company in Hineston, Louisiana. The bill of sale was made out in the name of Joseph William Moore of Ten Mile, La. It was stamped "paid cash" even though the price had been blacked out.

"Now, Unk I can't believe you did this on your own. Who helped you on this?"

"Can't say."

Joe turned toward the woods. "Was Girlie in on this?"

"Can't say. Won't say."

Joe tried to think who else might have been a partner in this. Then it hit him: "Now, Unk, did your niece Eliza Jane Clark have anything to do with this horse business?"

"Can't say. Won't say."

But the way Unk said it, his mouth quivered a little and one of his eyes twitched.

Joe couldn't believe he now had a horse. Unk reminded him, "The only catch is no one knows it came from me. Got it?"

"Well, I guess so." He took the horse by the bridle and looked it in the eye. "As me Da always said, 'Don't look a gift horse in the mouth.' If the conditions are that I don't link the horse to you, I guess I'll have to abide by them. I just don't quite know how to say thanks."

"Well, jes' say thanks then."

The simplicity of Unk Dial always amazed Joe. "Well, t'anks is what I'll say. T'ank you, Unk. I appreciate it."

He grabbed Unk's hand and pumped it up and down. That same knowing smile stayed on the simple man's face. A smile that said I know something that you don't and I ain't telling.

As Unk walked off, leaving a horse behind, Joe thought about the events of these past few days. Life was sure a crazy combination of giving and getting, finding and losing, joy and sorrow. It seemed as if every positive was sooner or later balanced against a negative—and vice versa.

Joe shook his head, looked and his new horse, and said, "Welcome to Westport, Dallas. Welcome."

Chapter 31

Everyone agreed it was one of the prettiest springs they'd seen. At the end of the first week of March is when the shrubs and trees of the piney woods began turning green. Down in the swamps along the creek bottoms, the hardwoods took on the bright greens that seemed to dazzle one's eyes.

Joe came from Ireland, the land of "forty shades of green," so he knew all about the bright colors of spring. However, even he had to admit that the greens of an early Louisiana spring were right up there with his homeland.

He had made up his mind to get to know Eliza Clark better. He liked what he saw in her dark eyes and womanly figure. He couldn't tell for sure if she was interested in him, but was determined to find out.

Unk had divulged that Eliza came to the creek each Thursday for clothes washing. He decided that he would be there at the wash spot to "accidentally meet her" there. He gathered up his only spare set of clothes and headed down Cherry Winche to the spot. It was easily recognized because it was in a sharp bend of the creek. A low log across the creek had been flattened on the top to make walking on it less slippery. Four fence posts stuck up out of the creek for laying clothes on in the current. Up on the far bank there was a wash pot and a wooden bench. A line was stretched between two trees to hang the clothes on after washing.

So it just happened at this wash spot that Eliza Clark walked up with a basket of clothes from her side of the creek. She was startled to see a man on the log washing clothes. She was even more startled to see that it was Joe Moore. She wasn't sure if her heart began pounding because it was him or just the surprise of the moment. He seemed not to even see her as he worked hard at scrubbing a shirt on the log.

Little did she know that he had been carefully watching for her for an hour. When he saw her coming, he had jumped down from behind his spy tree and went to work as if it was the most important job in the world.

He could feel her watching him but dared not look up. Being nervous also, he scrubbed harder and faster as if the motion of his hands would solve the awkwardness of this moment. He wanted badly to look up and smile surprisedly, but couldn't do it.

Eliza had quietly slipped back behind the very spy tree he had earlier used to watch her. Standing with her basket she watched with fascination. She couldn't take her eyes off his sandy hair. His head was down as he scrubbed. She'd never seen hair the color of his. It was so light-colored it stood out against the jet black hair of the Ten Milers.

She thought, "I wonder how his hair feels. I'd like to run my hands through it and find out."

Then she recalled those green eyes of his. She'd never seen anything like them. She wanted badly to look into them again, but fear overtook her. She quietly began to back away, using the careful footwork her dad had shown her for squirrel hunting. She painstakingly only stepped on the bare roots and avoided the loud crinkly leaves. After about twelve steps she seemed to be making her getaway.

It was right then that Joe couldn't keep his head down. He looked up expecting to see her staring at him from the creek bank, but saw that she was gone. He knew she had been right there—where had she gone?

He nearly panicked and fell in the creek. Catching his balance he stepped up the bank. Reaching the top, he saw her back as she stepped carefully away step by step. It reminded him of how you crossed a rock-filled stream back home—carefully choosing each step.

He couldn't let her get away! But how to do it? He dropped back down toward the creek and called out, "Hey, who's up there? I heard somebody. Come out right now."

At these words Eliza froze. Her first impulse was to set down the basket and run, but her body seemed paralyzed. She stood there waiting to see what happened next.

She tried to get behind a tree but there were only smaller trees where she was. Regardless, she eased behind several as she saw Joe Moore's head appear on the creek bank. He called out, "Hey, I see you over there behind those trees. Come out and show if you're friend or foe!"

Her face reddened as she thought, "This is my family's land and our wash spot. Why am I hiding from him?" With that, she stepped out and walked slowly toward the creek grasping her basket with both hands.

Joe feigned surprise and said, "Why it's you, Eliza. I thought it was a bear or a wild Indian."

She knew her face was blushing but didn't know if her dark skin would reveal how she felt right now. She felt stupid when she said, "Oh, it's you, Mr. Irishman."

Eliza wanted to kick herself for saying this, especially when she realized it hurt his feelings that she seemingly had forgotten his name. However, Joseph recovered quickly. "It's Joseph—Joe Moore, Eliza. It looks like you're here for the same reason I am—it's wash day. Come on down and I'll help you."

She nodded appreciably and approached him. He reached for the basket to help but she drew it back. "Thanks, but it's got uh, some, uh personal items in it that a man don't need to see."

Now it was Joe's turn to feel stupid. His foolproof plan of washing clothes together had not considered the simple fact that a woman had clothes to wash she didn't want any man to see.

However, he was determined to visit with her and wasn't going to let a minor distraction stop him. "Well, come on anyway. I'll finish washing mine while we visit. If you want to start any of your uh, less delic…I mean, uh special garments, uh…" He stopped in mid-sentence, grinned, and put his forefinger to his head as if he was shooting himself.

They both burst out laughing and the tension was broken. She put her basket down and sat on the log as he returned to his vigorous scrubbing.

She said, "Looks like you're pretty serious about washing that shirt. I hope you don't rub a hole in it."

It was evident he was not used to washing clothes. Part of the fun of watching him was the fact that he apparently knew nothing about what he was doing. In fact, she wasn't sure she'd ever seen a man scrub clothes, for that was woman's work in the Ten Mile country.

Eliza sat on the log with her bare feet in the water. Joe would look up from time to time and grin, then return to his scrubbing.

Trying to make small talk he said, "Is it always this pretty here in March?" Whether he knew it or not, he had landed on the subject Eliza loved to talk about.

She told him, "March is always my favorite month." Looking around at the green surroundings she pointed, "And that's why. There's nothing like the first greens of spring. They are the brightest and seem to feature every shade of green imaginable. Joe, what's March like in Ireland?"

He stopped his scrubbing and knelt on the log near her. ”Oh, in Western Ireland it’s still windy, cold, and wet. It’s not until May that our ‘forty shades of green’ bloom.”

“What do you mean, ‘forty shades of green’?”

“Well our country, which is an island, is actually known as the Emerald Isle. Our land is famous for the various hues of green found among the rolling hills.” Pointing at the nearby beech trees with their pale green leaves he continued, “But our greens come mainly from the grasses and fields. We have hardly any trees.”

Eliza interrupted, “You mean a land without trees? I can’t even imagine it. Why ain’t there trees in Ireland?”

“At one time our entire island was thickly forested but over the centuries the trees were cut and used. Ireland is not a huge place like your United States, so the supply was limited.” Joe grimaced, “Most of our trees were cut and exported by the English. When they fully took over our country about four centuries ago, they made sure to strip cut anything that was left. We have a saying: ‘The forests of Ireland are now in the houses of England.’”

“It don’t sound like there’s no love lost for the English.”

“Eliza, that is truer than you’ll ever know—”

He stopped, looking up to see her staring deeply into his eyes. He felt weak inside.

Eliza felt the same weakness from the accented way he said her name. It had a sing-songy sound to it that made her smile.

Joe couldn’t continue. He could only look back into those smiling dark eyes. They seemed deep and endless and seemed to be looking into every corner of his soul searching out the hurts, joys, and journeys he had been on.

Eliza was just as mesmerized with the emerald eyes of Joe Moore. They seemed to be burning with a passion that was evident as he spoke of the mistreatment of the English.

I want those eyes to look passionately at me!

Had they been more confident, and not from different worlds, they would have come together on this log for a kiss. But neither one was quite sure enough of themselves yet, so the moment passed.

Joe’s thought was: You idiot, you had your chance to kiss her!

Eliza tried to hide her disappointment. This was the perfect time and place for that first kiss.

But Joe made no movement, so she broke the silence. ”Well, I’ve really got to be going. It’s not really proper to be alone with a man like this.”

Joe, with his wet shirt dripping all over him, said, ”No, I’d better be going. You can stay here and wash your clothes.” Not able to resist, he impishly grinned, “And don’t forget to wash those delicate personal items!”

She smiled and pushed him, nearly sending him into the creek. As he wavered on the log, she grabbed him, embarrassed at how hard she’d pushed. He pulled on her trying to catch his balance.

Neither fell in—they had caught each other. They stood laughing on the log in the tight grasp of each other with their faces only inches apart. Joe pulled Eliza close to him. As their lips met, he felt her womanly body pressed up against him. Everything about this moment felt good.

Eliza’s eyes were closed as their lips met, but he couldn’t close his eyes—or maybe he just didn’t want to. He wanted to see and drink in every second of this moment. And it was a special moment; the smell of her long hair so near to Joe was enchanting, the feel of her body, her arms around his neck, his hands on her back, their lips pressed together—everything felt full and right.

He wasn't sure how long this first kiss lasted, but it could have lasted all day as far as he was concerned. As their lips finally parted and Eliza opened her eyes, she smiled shyly, yet warmly. She said softly, "That was nice."

Joe stared into her brown eyes. I want to kiss this woman just like this for the rest of my life. I want to stare into those enchanting eyes and be swallowed up by them.

Although his mind was spinning rapidly, Joe was speechless. He couldn't seem to find words that would dignify or define this moment. So, he blurted out just what was on his mind after this moment of life-changing passion, "My knees feel weak."

As soon as the words left his mouth, he could have kicked himself in the butt a dozen times. What a stupid thing to say in this moment! But he'd said it. She said, with a playful smirk, "Well, Joe is it a good thing, or a bad one, that your knees are weak?"

Joe stammered and sputtered. He knew he could not trust his own mouth to say anything right or fitting at this moment.

"Believe you me, Eliza Clark, it's a good thing. Yep, a real good thing."

Pulling her close again, drawing her lips to his, he whispered, "You bet it's a good thing."

The kiss, or kisses, lasted a long time. They stood on the flattened log on Cherry Winche Creek. Finally, Eliza kissed him on the cheek, saying, "You'd better go and I'd better get to washing before my momma comes down here."

Grabbing his washed clothes, Joe stepped off the log, climbing up the creek bank before stopping, "I enjoyed being with you, Eliza."

"And I enjoyed it too, Joe Moore."

Walking away, he wanted to yell out loud and take off running all the way back to his land.

Eliza slipped up the creek bank to watch him walk away. Just like that first day she spied him, she hid behind a tree and stared. She watched him until he blended into the green trees and she could no longer distinguish him from the woods.

Going back to the wash spot, she softly whispered, "So, this is how it feels to really fall in love." Glancing around, she caught the whiff of honeysuckle along the creek and she said, "I've always wanted to fall in love in the spring—among these 'forty shades of green.'"

Chapter 32

After that first kiss, Joe Moore made sure that every chance he got he'd find a reason to see Eliza. He would be willing to undergo a whole lot of trouble before he'd miss a chance to see her.

And that is what led to his first visit to her home the week after the kiss. He and Eliza had planned it carefully and she greeted him warmly at the front porch.

He first met Eli who made him feel more comfortable. Eliza's mother, Virginia, who had been forewarned about the visit, greeted him coolly but politely.

Her husband Willard was out in the field when Joe arrived, so that introduction would have to wait.

Joe and Eliza sat on the front porch swing. Jed, the family dog, came up the steps, eyed Joe suspiciously and lay down under Eliza's feet. From time to time the dog would stare up at Joe, growling softly.

I believe everybody here is out to get me away from her—even the family dog.

Eliza's mother would conspicuously come to the door and cough just to let them know she was watching closely. Joe knew he was under close surveillance.

Every once in a while he'd feel eyes watching him and would see Eli staring around the corner of the house. Eliza sensed it too, for she called out, "Eli, if you're gonna snoop around out there, come on out and sit here." Her brother came and sat on the porch edge and began whittling on a sweet-gum stick.

They were swinging and talking easily when Willard Clark came around the house with a bucket in each hand. Eliza later said she thought her father was going to drop the buckets and chase Joe off the porch.

However, he didn't. As he passed by the porch, he nodded, "Mornin' Eliza, Eli. And you must be Joe?"

Before Joe could say hello, Mr. Clark walked on, but before he could clear the yard, Eliza blurted out, "Poppa, couldn't you use Joe's help?"

Both her dad and Joe looked at her in horror. Joe later said he'd not been more scared if Eliza had tossed a big cottonmouth moccasin in his lap.

Willard Clark turned toward the porch and opened his mouth as if to say something, but stopped. Joe glanced above his shoulder and saw Virginia Clark observing the scene from the open door.

Eliza, flashing the same smile that both her dad and Joe couldn't resist said, "Joe, why don't you go help Poppa with the watering and firewood?" As she said this, she nudged Joe out of the swing toward the steps. She whispered, "Go ahead, he won't bite ye."

The two men, in the clutches of a girl neither quite knew how to handle, marched off together like two prisoners sentenced to hard labor. Joe did take one of the buckets from Mr. Clark.

Eli jumped up to follow them but was stopped in his tracks by Eliza's, "Boy, you git back to that whittling." He shrugged his shoulders and plopped back down.

Joe trudged along beside Willard Clark with neither man venturing a word. Even when they reached the hog pen with the water and filled the trough, the snorting and splashing of the pigs was the only sound, and it did nothing to break the tension.

Clark then went to the wood pile with Joe following obediently. Joe would stand up the logs for Clark to split them. The man was like a machine as he expertly split the logs into small sticks of stove wood.

Willard Clark stopped to wipe his face with his bandana and finally spoke, "Y'all got lots of firewood over in Ireland?"

Joe felt his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. All of a sudden he was self-conscious about his brogue and the odd way he said lots of American words. "Uh, well, uh, we don't have hardly any trees in our part of Ireland."

This seemed to interest Mr. Clark. "Well, if you don't have trees what do you burn for heat and cooking?"

Now Joe Moore had a subject he felt comfortable with. "We burn peat for our fires."

"What is peat?"

"It's strips of turf cut out of the bogs. We cut it with a shovel, dry it and burn it. It has a sweet smell and burns with a blue smoke."

Mr. Clark leaned on his ax and spat, "Burning dirt. Now that's a new one on me. Never heard of such a thing!"

Then Clark added, "You mean to tell me you come from a place with no trees? I can't imagine a place with no trees."

Joe felt more at ease and decided to extend the conversation a little: "Mr. Clark, I . . ." He stopped himself. He was embarrassed that he'd called him by name. They'd never even really been introduced, and it was somewhat presumptuous to call him "Mr. Clark," especially when he knew the man would be very happy if he just disappeared off the face of the earth—at least the Ten Mile part of it.

"Uh, Mr. Clark, we don't have trees but we got something I bet you'd like—we got mountains. You've never seen anything until you stand atop a mountain and look in every direction for miles. I won't say it's better than tall trees, but it does give you the same sense of awe."

Willard Clark looked at him thoughtfully. Joe wasn't sure if calling him by his name had helped or hurt. "You know I never been very far out of these woods. Never had no reason to go. But I have always had dreams of standing on a mountain and seeing the clouds at eye level. I bet it's something."

"Yes Sir. I live, I mean I did live, right beside Ireland's most famous mountain, and I'd climb it and seem to be able to see forever. "

"Son, you think you'll ever see it again?" The question itself startled Joe but not nearly as much as his use of "son."

He looked off to the east for a long time, and then kicked at the ground before looking up right into the Ten Mile man's face. His eyes felt moist and he hoped tears didn't run down his cheeks. "No sir, I don't s'pect I'll ever cross that ocean again and see my homeland. It has been a hard journey and not one I'd want to retrace. Besides, I kind of like it in these piney woods."

Joe instinctively knew he'd said too much. He knew Eliza's dad would interpret "I kind of like it in these piney woods" as "I kind of like it 'cause it's where Eliza Clark lives."

Clark picked up his ax and furiously began chopping. As quick as Joe could stand a piece up, it was split.

Joe wasn't sure if Clark was working hard due to what he'd just said, or because he couldn't think of anything else to say. But Joe knew enough to stay quiet and stand up the logs.

Clark stopped and handed Joe the ax. Since he had come to Ten Mile, he had cut and split firewood in trade for food and supplies. He split the logs just as fast as Clark had.

They worked in silence, both of them sweating and the only sounds were the dull thud of the ax and their grunts as they worked together.

Finally, Clark said, "Well, that's a good pile of stove wood there. Let's go in."

On the way in, Joe could tell Eliza's dad wanted to speak. In fact, twice he started to say something but stopped. He hesitated again and then coughed, "Son, I know kinda . . . uh . . . how you feel about my daughter, Liza. I can see it in your eyes and I can understand why a young man like you would like to have her. And it ain't that her momma and I don't cotton to you."

He stopped. Once again, Willard Clark was struggling to express himself, "It's not that we don't want you around, or don't care for you. We jes' ain't comfortable with . . ."

He couldn't seem to get his words straight, so he changed the subject: "Son, what about your folks back in Ireland?"

Once again, Joe wondered if he could hold his emotions in check. He never spoke of his family unless asked.

"Well to be right honest, I don't have no family there except one sister. All of the rest are gone."

"What do you mean gone?"

"Several, including my Ma, died of the fever during the worst days of the potato famine. I watched another one drown in the harbor as their boat sunk leaving for America. Earlier, before all of this, my dad got sent to Australia and we never heard from him again."

"Why'd your dad go there?"

"Well, he didn't choose to go. They sent him 'cause of some political trouble in our town. That's what the British do with troublemakers—send them halfway around the world to Australia."

"Was your pappy a troublemaker?"

Joe carefully examined this question and the way it was asked. "Well, Sir, my daddy was probably a lot like what I've seen of you Ten Mile men—he didn't like nobody lording it over him and treating him like a caged dog. 'Cause of that, he bucked at how they did things and it got him sent to Australia.

"The British call it 'transporting.' In reality it's a one-way ticket from Ireland from which no one ever returns."

Willard Clark thought pensively for a moment. "That's a serious thing to send a man away from the only home he's ever known."

"Tit'is."

"What'd you say?"

"Tit'is."

"Oh, you mean 'it is.' You sure got a funny way of talking, boy." Mr. Clark grinned and it was the smile of one man becoming comfortable with another man.

They neared the house and Clark stopped. "Son, do you know about our land trouble with the timber company trying to evict us off our land?"

"Yes Sir, I've thought of it. As you just said, it's a serious thing to throw a man off the only land he's ever lived on. We have first-hand experience with that in my home country."

Joe continued, “That is why you people can’t let those big company people push you off your land. It’s your land and they got no right to try to take it.”

Clark put his hand on Joe’s shoulder, “Son, you’ve not been in these parts too long, but I bet you’ve seen enough of us Redbones to know that no one will push us out of these woods without a fight to the death. We believe God gave us these creeks, woods, and pines to live on, and ain’t no piece of paper is going to convince us otherwise.

“Now I’m a man of peace. I try to live by the Good Book and teachings of Jesus. I’ll turn my cheek—to a certain degree. But when you back me into a corner, you’re gonna have to fight a wildcat. And I believe the Peed-mont Timber Company is going to find that out before this is all over.”

The conversation ended when Eliza came around the house smiling, “Well, it looks like you boys are having a good time getting to know each other.”

Willard Clark scoffed and walked off. Over his shoulder he said, “Irishman, if you can handle her, you’ll be better than I am.” Joe saw him wink at his daughter as he turned.

Chapter 33

Joe's next visit was a week later. The tension was not as evident, but it went downhill quickly. Virginia Clark had been persuaded to allow Joe to eat with the family. Of course, Joe readily accepted—the chance to enjoy a good meal sitting by Eliza was a double portion of pleasure for him.

Still, the meal was strained somewhat. Willard Clark had warmed up to Joe and tried to be friendly. Eli kept the conversation going throughout the meal with Eliza's help. The main topic of conversation was the news over twenty of Unk's sheep had been found poisoned. It had happened near the Calcasieu where the timber company had set up a camp. There was no doubt in the Clark household that there would be more trouble in the days ahead.

However, after discussing this at length, an uneasy silence ensued, broken only by the sound of chewing and silverware clinking against the plates. The source of this uneasiness was without a doubt Joe's presence, and the focus of it was Virginia Clark. There was no doubt to everyone around the table that she was not happy he was here.

When the meal ended and the ladies began cleaning up, Willard Clark invited Joe to sit on the porch with him. He sent Eli on an errand before turning to Joe: "Son, you just be patient with Eliza's mom. She'd be skeptical about any man that came around here to see her daughter. It ain't really nothing personal—even though you being an Irishman does make you a 'ferringer' to us."

It took Joe a minute to make out what a "ferringer" was. "Mr. Clark, I may be a 'foreigner' to you people, but my heart's just the same as yours."

"I'm sure that's true, Son, but…"

The men's conversation was stopped by the sound of animated talk from inside the house. It was evident Eliza and her mother were having words. Both men knew the exact source of those words—he was sitting right on the porch. They both heard Eliza's angry voice as she slammed the back door on her way out.

The two men stared silently at each other.

Finally, Joe spoke, "Mr. Clark, I been wanting to talk with your wife anyway. I think right now might be the right time."

"Son, I know her pretty well. Right now might be the worst time!"

But it was too late; Joe Moore was up and in the house.

He went into the kitchen where Virginia Clark was angrily scrubbing the cooking pot as she mumbled under her breath. She was both surprised and shocked to see Joe standing right beside her.

"Son, I don't really want to talk to you right now."

"But Mrs. Clark, I want to talk to you." He surprised himself how he said it: not cocky or pushy—simply determined.

She stopped her scrubbing and stood up as she wiped her hands. For a long time she tried to stare him down before finally saying, "Go ahead, then."

"Ma'am, I know you ain't pleased with my interest in Eliza. It's pretty easy to pick up on that. And I think I understand why. I know I'm different and an outsider and—"

Virginia Clark interrupted, "Joe, it ain't I don't like you. I'm just scared for my Eliza. I don't want to see her hurt—and taking up with you is gonna get her hurt, the way I see it."

"But, I wouldn't hurt her for the world."

"Joe, you might not mean to, but you will eventually. Your world is just too different from hers—and ours."

"But—"

"No Joe, you'll pull up and leave here one day and break her heart. Then we'll have to help put her heart back together, while you're gone off on some new adventure."

Without further comment, Joe reached into his pocket. "There's something I want to give you."

His fist was clenched with whatever he had pulled out. She drew back as if he might pull out a rattler or a knife.

"Mrs. Clark, I want to give you something for safekeeping as proof of my commitment to Eliza. Now I don't have no material things in this world—but in my hand is the most precious thing I own."

He opened his fist and in his palm rested a small pebble. She didn't say a word, but looked from Joe's palm to his eyes and then back again.

He continued as he held up the pebble, "This is the only thing I brought with me from Ireland. It's from my mother's grave and that's what makes it special. I scooped it up the night I fled from my home on the journey that brought me here. It even survived that recent fire at my place."

She could see how it was charred. She could also easily observe how tenderly he held it.

"Ma'am, now as a pledge that I ain't going nowhere and leaving your daughter to be hurt, I want you to keep the pebble for me."

"But, I can't—"

"Yes, you can—and you will!"

Joe couldn't believe he had just said that, but in amazement the woman put her hand out to his.

He continued, "You keep my mother's pebble. That'll remind you that I'm not going anywhere. If I do decide to leave, I'll come get it from ye, and you'll be the first to know." They stood staring into each other's eyes as he placed the pebble in her hand. Joe was reminded of where Eliza had gotten her deep, dark brown eyes.

For the first time, Virginia Clark looked fully into Joe's green eyes and saw more than color. She liked what she saw; she saw grit and passion.

Joe added before walking away, "But, Mrs. Virginia Clark, don't hold yer breath waiting for me to come git my rock—I plan on being right here. And furthermore, you can also quit worrying about me dragging Eliza off somewhere away from Ten Mile. I plan on being right here—and right here with her."

And that was the end of the conversation. Virginia Clark had tears in her eyes but said nothing. Joe watched her face and nearly detected a smile—or maybe it was a look of respect. However, he did not have time to look further, because she turned, went to the mantel, and placed the pebble in a metal case that sat beside the clock.

As Joe went out, he walked directly into Willard Clark, who was standing nervously on the front porch. He put his hand out, “Mr. Clark, I sure enjoyed the meal and visit. But if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to find Eliza.”

Chapter 34

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Joe added before walking away, "But, Mrs. Virginia Clark, don't hold yer breath waiting for me to come git my rock—I plan on being right here. And furthermore, you can also quit worrying about me dragging Eliza off somewhere away from Ten Mile. I plan on being right here—and right here with her."

And that was the end of the conversation. Virginia Clark had tears in her eyes but said nothing. Joe watched her face and nearly detected a smile—or maybe it was a look of respect. However, he did not have time to look further, because she turned, went to the mantel, and placed the pebble in a metal case that sat beside the clock.

As Joe went out, he walked directly into Willard Clark, who was standing nervously on the front porch. He put his hand out, “Mr. Clark, I sure enjoyed the meal and visit. But if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to find Eliza.”

Chapter 35

The bad nightmare brought Eliza instantly awake. In the dark, she couldn't figure out if it was about Joe, her dad, or Eli. But one of them was in bad trouble. As she sat up in bed, she heard an owl begin hooting right outside her window. It was as close as she'd ever heard one to the house. It hooted three times and then stopped. In a minute, it repeated its three calls. When this happened a third time, she remembered the old saying, "Three hoots of the owl near the house means death is coming." It made her shiver.

She tossed and turned the rest of the night. When daylight came, the air seemed eerily strange to her as she got out of bed.

However, it was early May and time for huckleberries, so she put the night's dreams and owl calls out of her mind. They'd promised to bring Aunt Mollie a gallon of berries on tomorrow's visit. She'd be down in the swamp along the creek, where the huckleberry bushes were found. Eliza loved this wild sweet blueberry, about the size of a small pea, that was enjoyed in pies, cobblers, and tarts each May.

Because of their small size, it took a lot of picking to gather up a jarful. It was also imperative to get to the swamps when they became ripe because all of the birds and small critters of the woods also loved huckleberries. She'd drafted Eli to go help her pick.

Brother and sister took their buckets and went to their favorite picking spot near the creek. Each picked out a bush and began painstakingly picking the small berries. Eliza laughed as she watched Eli. His purple-stained mouth showed that he was eating about as many berries as he put in his bucket.

She was also amused when a blue jay kept diving and cackling at Eli and the bush he was picking from. She hollered, "Looks like that ol' blue jay don't like you stealing from its personal bush!"

Eli swatted at the bird with his bucket and what few huckleberries he had, fell on the ground under the bush. It was when he leaned down to pick them up that she heard his scream.

At the same time her brother yelled out, she heard something else. It was the unmistakable buzz of a rattlesnake.

Eliza ran to her brother. He was sitting on the ground by his overturned bucket staring at his right arm. Eliza's blood chilled when she looked under the huckleberry bush at the coiled canebrake rattler. The snake was still giving its warning rattle and flicking its dark tongue in and out. A second look at Eli confirmed that the snake had already done its damage. Pulling her brother away from the bush, she could easily see the blood-tinged fang marks on his arm right below the elbow. A yellowish liquid tinged with blood oozed out of the bite marks with the blood. There was no doubt that this rattler had been loaded with venom.

There is no good time to get snake bit, but early in the spring, in the weeks and months after hibernation is the worst. Venomous snakes have the most potent and largest amount of poison. The rattlesnake looked to be about five feet long and had an ugly squat body. It was beginning to uncoil and slither off away from under the huckleberry bush.

Without hesitation, Eliza picked up a sturdy stick and whacked the snake across the back just behind the head. She knew she'd broken its back and it would not bite again. For one of the few times in her life, she cussed as she angrily hit the snake over and over.

Her yelling was so loud that Joe Moore, who was coming to meet them for berry picking, heard it a half mile away and came running. He splashed across the creek and came upon the scene only a few minutes after Eli had been bitten.

"Liza, what's wrong—"

Then he saw it all: the writhing dying rattlesnake, the overturned bucket, Eliza crying as she held Eli in her lap, Eli moaning as he held his arm. No words were needed to describe what had happened.

Wordlessly, he grabbed Eli up in his arms and began carrying him toward the Clark cabin. Eliza was sobbing and trying to keep up as she gathered her skirt as they hurried toward the house.

Virginia Clark was outside by now, having heard the commotion. She screamed when she saw the bite marks and Eli's ashen face. "Get the shotgun and shoot it three times close together. That'll get help on the way quick." She then turned to Liza, "Girl, go grab one of them setting hens, wring its neck, and bring it and a good knife to me."

Liza knew all of the various Ten Mile remedies for snake bites, so she knew exactly what to do. Lunging into the henhouse, she grabbed one hen on the nest and wrung its neck. As feathers, dust, and cackling chickens scattered in every direction, she headed back toward the house. She dashed into the kitchen, took a butcher knife and sliced the hen's belly open.

Virginia Clark had placed her son on the bed and removed his shirt. The ugly purple swelling was already spreading rapidly up his arm. Eli's voice was slightly slurred as cried, "Momma, am I gonna be all right? I don't want to die."

"Son, you ain't gonna die. Just settle down and try to be quiet."

Eliza pointed Joe to the shotgun and told him to shoot it over and over in groups of three. He grabbed about a dozen shells and went out into the yard. He'd very seldom shot a gun and didn't know much about how to shoulder it to absorb the recoil. By the third set of three, his right shoulder was hurting badly but he kept on with the warning shots.

Willard Clark was the first to arrive. He ran into the house without a word to Joe. Soon neighbors began arriving and going into the house. Joe slipped in to the corner of the house. Glancing around the room, the looks on the faces of everyone confirmed that Eli was in a serious fight for his life. The size of the snake and Eli being a child made for a sobering prognosis.

Sometimes a snake bite resulted in no poison being injected. The settlers believed it had to do with the signs. Others believed it was due to a snake having expended its venom on a recent animal.

Eliza's mom had taken the chicken carcass and pressed it on the snakebite. It was a local belief that fresh meat would draw out the poison. There were all kinds of suggestions going around the room on other remedies such as applying tobacco juice or kerosene to the bite mark to get the same effect.

Joe stood against the bedroom wall as this drama unfolded. He was shaking from the anxiety of wondering how things would come out.

Unk had arrived and stood silently by Joe muttering and praying over and over. Finally, he turned to Joe, "Friend, would you go git your horse?"

"Sure, Unk—but why?"

"I need to borrow it, if you'll let me."

"Unk, you gave it to me. Sure, you can use it—but can you even ride a horse?"

"I can when a life depends on it. Jes' go git it."

Joe started to ask Unk where he was going, but he looked into the eyes of Eli's uncle and knew it wasn't time for questions.

"I'll be right back with Dallas as quick as I can, Unk."

"Hurry—it's important!"

Joe ran through the woods to Girlie's barn where he'd left Dallas. He was out of breath as he began saddling the horse. His fingers seemed to fumble as he attached the girts, reins, and cinched down the saddle. He hopped on Dallas and spurred her back toward the creek and the Clark cabin.

During the ride, he prayed. He knew Eli's snakebite was a very serious one. Every face at the cabin had easily shown that as he had watched.

His prayer was simple and repetitive. "Lord, Eli's been bit bad. He's gonna need your help. Just send some help and let everybody know what to do."

Joe repeated this short prayer over and over as he rode. Arriving at the house, he saw that many more neighbors had arrived. Unk was outside nervously pacing back and forth.

As Joe got off Dallas, Unk was already on the other side putting his foot in the stirrup. When he swung up he nearly fell off the other side—only Joe grabbing him kept him from tumbling off.

"Unk, are you sure you're up to this?"

"Joe, I'm the only one that can do it. If anybody asks, just tell 'em I've gone for a ride."

Before he could explain more, or Joe could ask, Unk clumsily spurred Dallas northward. It looked as if he would fall off at any moment, but there was no stopping him now.

As Joe watched the horse and rider disappear, he heard Eliza's voice as she walked up beside him, "Who was that taking off?"

"It was your uncle."

"Unk…on a horse?"

"Yep."

"Where was he going?"

"Wouldn't tell me—just had me get Dallas and he took off to the north."

Eliza looked quizzically in that direction. "Why would he go north? Any help or doctors would be toward Sugartown or Hineston—not to the north."

She shook her head before embracing Joe. "Joe, Eli's in bad shape. He took a bad bite with lots of poison. The swelling is moving up his arm pretty fast—toward his heart. He's going in and out of consciousness." Her voice faded, "I just don't know…"

She began sobbing as Joe held her. Her body was shaking as she wept uncontrollably. "It's my entire fault. I should have been watching better. We always know to look for snakes around the huckleberry bushes. That blue jay was trying to warn us about the rattler. It's my entire fault."

Joe had never been good with words for crying women. But this was the woman he loved with all of his heart. He just held her close and whispered, "We'll all get through this together. I ain't going nowhere. I'm going to be with you."

Eliza told Joe of the owl's calls earlier that morning and the Ten Mile belief that three calls meant coming death. He wasn't sure if she believed this or not but could tell this omen filled her with dread.

"Eliza, Eli's in the Lord's hands…and no owl is going to decide what happens to him!"

Eliza looked into Joe's eyes. He wasn't much on stating his faith and that had always concerned her. She realized that his simple statement of it being in the Lord's hands was a strong demonstration of the faith that was growing in the man she loved.

Through her tears, she smiled and pulled him closer to her. He could feel her heart beating against his chest. They stayed like that for a long while.

The rest of that day and the long night that followed was a blur to both Eliza and Joe. There were long grueling hours of faint improvement followed by fading hope as Eli battled for his life. Folks had filled the house and porch. Women prayed in groups while men smoked in the dark and discussed snake stories from the past.

Joe stayed in the corner of the room where Eli lay. He never said a word and probably wasn't noticed by most of the people passing in and out. Eli's arm was swollen grotesquely and his face was ashen. His breathing was becoming shallower, but the hours wore on.

Joe had sat down in the corner and dozed off. He wasn't sure how long he'd been asleep when he was awakened by a terrible screaming from the porch that soon spread to the room.

The wailing of the women was terrible and he just knew it meant Eli had died. However he saw the boy lying there and could see his chest barely moving as he lay there. It was still dark but the first light was coming from the east. The combined screaming of the women was grief-filled, argumentative, and full of emotion.

He fought his way to the door to find out more. One of the voices he heard was Eliza's. He'd never heard her like this. She was angry, crying, and yelling. He could hardly understand a word she was saying. Her dad was trying to hold her and calm her.

Several of the older women on the porch were wailing pathetically. Joe's initial thought was the keening so common at Irish wakes. Only this wasn't a wake—not yet at least.

Eliza's anger seemed directed at the older women and this stunned Joe. This was so out of character for her. Willard Clark grabbed her and pushed her back in the house, shutting the door behind her. He stood with his back against it to ensure no one went in or came out. He was breathing heavy and Joe saw a pain that was so evident no matter how vainly he tried to hide it.

Joe looked into his eyes but refrained from speaking. Mr. Clark, sighing wearily, explained, "A whip-poor-will started calling a while ago. That's normal for this time of the year. There's an old belief among our people that a soul can't leave a body until it hears a whip-poor-will call." He nodded toward the older women who had left the porch for the safety of the dark yard, "Aunt Myrtle over there heard the calling and commented that it might be the call for Eli's soul. Your woman—my daughter Eliza—didn't take real kindly and threw a yelling fit."

Just then Joe could hear Eliza's muffled but loud voice in the house, "Ain't no whip-poor-will gonna call for my brother's soul. He's gonna live a long life, grow up to be a good man, and I don't want to hear nothing different—not from some old wives' tale—or from some old woman!"

Even in his obvious distress, Willard Clark managed a weak smile, "Son, that's a strong-spirited woman you're trying to lasso. You sure you're up to the task?"

Joe didn't quite know how to answer humor in such a moment and answered, "Well, if I've got her lassoed, I'm a little afeard to let go with how she's carrying on right now."

"Then hang on, Son. Just hang on."

Eliza's yelling, the two men's conversation, the ladies' prayer circle, and the old men's smoking group all came to a complete stop at this very moment.

Everyone's attention, both outside and inside the house, focused fully and silently on two riders who rode right up to the porch steps.

The first rider was recognized by everyone—it was Unk Dial. On the second horse was a rider who was a stranger to everyone present. When the lady dismounted and slowly went up the steps, the crowd instantly parted—out of respect, as well as some fear.

Willard Clark stepped away from the door and opened it for the silent woman to enter the room where Eli lay.

Joe was nearly frozen in amazement as the woman brushed by him. He'd never been this close to a full-blooded Indian. She went by close enough for him to smell her—she smelled nearly exotic. He could smell the leather garments she wore, the smoke from campfires she cooked by, and other aromas that he had no idea what they were.

The Indian woman, who looked to be about forty, went straight to Eli's bed and sat beside his prone body. All of the women in the room stepped back, including Virginia Clark. Joe saw that Eliza had stopped her yelling and stood mutely at the foot of the bed.

The lady leaned down by Eli's ear and began whispering. She talked so low that no one could have understood her words even if they had been in English. They were in a guttural tone that was completely foreign to Joe's ears…as well as the others in the room. From time to time, those in the room would recognize one word she spoke over and over, "Jesus."

When she would say it, she'd look heavenward and extend her arms.

Joe was mesmerized by the scene and wanted information but knew to be silent. He eased over to Eliza and put his arm around her shoulder. She was shaking visibly and shuddered as he ran his hand through her hair.

No one said a word as the woman continued to talk softly to Eli and gently stroked his arm, chest, and head. The only word anyone understood was her periodic intonations of Jesus.

Joe whispered to Eliza, "Is this woman a Christian?" Eliza didn't reply. It was as if she was off in another world and didn't even hear him.

Finally, Unk staggered into the room. He was utterly exhausted and could hardly stand. Joe wondered how far and where he had gone. No one asked Unk anything for a few minutes.

Then he seemed to rally and spoke: "I went to the Choctaw tribe up at Clifton. This here is their snake lady. They believe if anyone has been bitten by a deadly snake and survives, that person is gifted in healing. Because she was bitten by a rattler when she was a girl, she has always taken care of others who were bitten. I went and got her and convinced her to come help Eli."

Virginia Clark, her voice shaking, asked, "Brother, she keeps talking about Jesus. Is she a believer?"

Unk replied, "Sure, she is. A bunch of 'em Clifton folks are Christians. I've been around their area looking for sheep and found them to be right fine Christian folk. You people need to git out a little more."

The Indian woman never looked up or stopped her whispering and rubbing during the conversation. Once again, it became very quiet in the room. In fact nothing was said for most of the next hour.

The snake woman evidently spoke no English, so it was hard for her to make it clear she wanted everyone to leave. Various motions and gestures let the crowd realize this and everyone except Eli's parents left.

Out on the porch, Joe grabbed Unk, "If she don't speak no English and you don't speak Choctaw, how'd you get her to come?"

Unk shrugged his shoulders, “We both spoke ‘rock pigeon’ and that’s how we communicated.” Unk grinned and then tiredly slumped down on the porch. Within minutes, he was snoring softly.

During the next day, Eli lingered between life and death. But by dark that evening, he began to slowly rally. The swelling had stopped and a little color returned to his cheeks. His breathing lost its raspiness and his fever lowered.

During that second night and the next day, the snake woman never left his side. As consciousness returned slowly to Eli, his gaze was transfixed on this strange woman who sat by him talking, rubbing, and stroking his head. It looked as if Eli understood her words as he shook his head and would answer “Yes” at times to her. It was when she spoke of Jesus that his eyes became most alert. Even if asleep, he awoke when she said the name of Jesus.

As he strengthened, others were allowed back into the room. The snake woman would take no food or drink during the days she sat with Eli. Through motions and gestures she refused all offers of help. It was clear that her job and concentration could not be interrupted.

Joe took up his corner spot and watched the strange interaction between the sick boy and the woman. Just as interesting was observing the faces of Virginia Clark and Eliza. They couldn’t take their eyes off the woman. There was an aura about her that seemed to fill the room. There was no doubt in the minds of these two women that she had saved Eli’s life.

On the third day since Eli’s bite, the snake woman rose and turned to the women in the room and spoke for nearly a minute. Several times during her speech in this strange language she spoke of Jesus and pointed skyward. Pointing at herself, she shook her head furiously as if to say, “No” before pointing again skyward and smiling as she said, “Jesus.”

This short speech was clearly her farewell. The embrace Virginia and Eliza gave the Indian woman was long, emotional, and unforgettable. She leaned down and grasped Eli’s hand one last time and spoke kindly. Everyone in the room saw the tears glistening in her eyes. Eli’s weak voice said, “Thank you, thank you. I will remember everything you’ve told me.”

Then she silently went out the door. Unk had already prepared her horse, as well as Dallas. Willard Clark stood beside another horse loaded with supplies. Joe walked over to the covered supplies and smelled bacon and ham. Blankets and jackets were tied to the cover. He knew this was the Clark’s gift to this woman and her family.

Unk and the woman headed north. Many of the neighbors in the yard watched silently as they disappeared out of sight—headed back to the Choctaw tribe—hidden away in the piney woods on the northern end of No Man’s Land.

Chapter 36

Joe Moore had never seen anything like it. He'd been in and out of church for all of his life, but he'd never been to anything remotely like how they did church at Occupy.

It had been nearly three months since Eli's snakebite. During this time, his recovery had been slow, painful, but steady. His right arm had taken weeks to lose its swelling and even now was much smaller from lack of use. His fingers were still numb and it hurt to bend his elbow, but each day found him stronger and more ready to resume his active life of running through the Cherry Winche swamp.

It was now the first Sunday in August, and word had spread that Father Joseph Willis' health would allow him to be in the pulpit at Occupy Church that day. This good news was accompanied by the news that Eli Clark would be at church for the first time since his snakebite.

Everyone knew it would be a special day—and it was. The church that day was fuller than usual on this hot morning. As the building filled up, women with homemade fans kept the breeze moving for sleeping babies. The men had all rolled up their sleeves, and every window was open trying to coax any breeze out of the humid Louisiana summer morning.

It was just as Deacon Bass led in "What a Friend We Have in Jesus"

that the first interruption occurred. They were singing,

What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer.
O what peace we often forfeit: O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.

That is when Eli Clark and his family came in the back door and walked to their usual seats on the third row, right side. Folks who hadn't seen Eli were shocked at how pale and frail he looked, but the smile on his face overshadowed any fixation on his fragility. Everyone present, especially Eli and his family, knew it was the prayers of the people in this room that had made the difference in his surviving the snakebite.

Spontaneously, the singing stopped and first the children, then women, came and warmly hugged Eli. The men stayed back but their hearty "Amen's" and "Praise the Lord's" echoed through the simple, frame, one-room church.

Then Deacon Bass picked up the rhythm of the song and everyone broke out again into heart-felt singing, all confident in the knowledge that their "Friend Jesus" had pulled Eli through.

It was on the fourth and last stanza that the second interruption occurred. From the back door walked in a man, followed by another man.

The first was a usual attendee—Nathan "Unk" Dial. Unk loved three things: good singing, the Lord, and being among people. Church allowed him to indulge in—and enjoy—all three of these at once. Walking down the aisle to his pew, he began waving his right arm in rhythm to the song as if he was going to take Brother Bass' place leading the hymn. His eyes were closed as he mouthed the words. The fact that his eyes were closed nearly caused him to sit

in the lap of Esther Pollard who had sat a row behind Unk's family for all the years of Occupy's existence.

However it wasn't Unk's grand entrance that was the true interruption—it was who walked behind him: Joe Moore, hat in his hand, meekly following Unk. His face was serious and his steps seemed stiff. Every eye in the sanctuary was soon on Joe as he took his seat beside Unk and in the pew directly behind Eli, Eliza, and their family.

The song nearly broke apart in surprise. Even Brother Bass, deep into the song, seemed to stumble and forget what verse he was on. As the song rumbled to an end, a voice could be heard several rows behind Joe: "Who does he think he is coming into our church?"

There was a coolness that could nearly be felt in the building. Joe Moore instantly knew he had probably crossed a line when he entered Occupy Church. The Redbone community had tolerated him reasonably well up to this point; but coming into their church was another thing entirely.

He could feel the stares of people all over the building. He felt sweat popping out on his forehead. He'd been warned about going to Occupy with words to the effect that "Outsiders weren't welcome, especially outsiders who wanted to steal away one of their women." However, the old saying that "Fools go where angels only fear to tread" sure applied to this love-struck Irish teen.

Another reason for his tepid reception was the knowledge in everyone's mind why Joe Moore had decided to attend this Sunday's service: it was to be with Eliza Jane Clark. If there was going to be any worship in his heart on this day, it was going to be the worship of her long dark hair and beautiful face.

As another song started, Joe leaned up to Eliza who stood directly in front of him and whispered, "Good morning."

He was taken back as she hissed, "Joe, I'm not sure if this is such a good idea you being here." She didn't even turn and look him in the face as she said it. However Eliza's mother, sitting to her right, did turn and gave him one of the coldest stares he'd ever gotten. He later described her look as "hot enough to melt hard butter."

He smiled as he nodded at Mrs. Clark and then leaned in by Eliza's left ear,

"Well, Eliza I'm here and I'm not gonna get up and leave now."

"But, Joe, look at some of the stares you're getting…"

"I don't really give a rat's eyelash if they're staring. I just came 'cause I wanted to see you."

However brave Joe tried to sound, he knew he had badly miscalculated the effect his presence in Occupy Church would bring. A burning realization came to him that he had infringed on a sacred place where he was not welcome. It was different when they were fox hunting together, cutting firewood, or herding sheep with him—but he had entered their holy of holies. He was in their house of worship. Worst of all, they all knew he'd not come to worship the Lord, but to be with one of their women.

In retrospect, there were four men who saved the day for Joe Moore:

First of all, there was Unk. He had walked in with the Irishman. Because of Unk's mental limitations, which he played to the limit as an asset, he could get away with a lot. People seemed to give him the benefit of the doubt for his actions.

As he sang, he turned, pointing, and smiling at the congregants who were staring heatedly at the back of Joe's neck. These were Unk's normal actions in the pew. He continued pumping

his arm and stomping his feet to the current song, a rousing version of "I Will Arise and Go to Jesus."

A second man also helped save the day. Joe Moore could not take his eyes off this middle-aged man leading the singing. Joe had been told that Brother Hiram Bass was the song leader at Occupy and was one of a kind. Watching him quickly made Joe agree with the "one of a kind" label. Brother Bass had a well-worn Bible in his left hand and was furiously pumping his right fist in the air to the rhythm of the song.

There were no musical instruments; everything was voice-driven. The harmony was like nothing he had ever heard. The singing seemed to be coming from deep within the throats and souls of the standing congregation. A quiet and shy older woman he'd seen several times before was singing loudly—and beautifully—with her head tilted back and eyes closed. Her tall husband loudly tapped his booted right foot to the music.

Song leader Bass was also using his Bible as both a weapon and percussion instrument. Wielding the tattered book in his meaty left hand, he would routinely slap it against his thigh or hold it up toward the heavens.

Brother Bass couldn't stand in one place while singing. He wandered up and down the aisle and would point to a member from time to time as if to extol them to sing it out. He and his hands were in constant motion. Joe had watched him once using those same strong hands to hold down and shear sheep.

Joe Moore was astonished by everything about the scene. It was so different from the distant, dignified, and robed church leaders he'd seen in churches of his boyhood. He had attended Mass several times in New Orleans and found the behavior of the priests and audience to be similar to Ireland. Of course, nearly everyone at St. Patrick's Church were Irish immigrants, so that was no surprise.

However, this singing had an emotional aspect to it he had not seen before. He even noticed that several women across the right side had tears streaming down their cheeks as they sang.

Brother Bass' spirited leading seemed to sweep over and overpower the cool spirit that had accompanied Joe's entrance into Occupy Church. Joe didn't realize it, but it's hard to resent somebody when you're singing from your heart to the Lord. The cool welcome that had greeted Joe seemed to slowly ebb away—washed over by the warm worship at Occupy Church.

A third man—albeit a young one—also took the attention off the outsider's presence at Occupy and his name was Eli Clark.

When Joe entered, Eli had turned and seen Joe in the pew behind him. He quickly crawled over his sister, mother and father, and came to stand between Unk and Joe. He hugged Unk and then moved over to Joe where he also embraced him. Above the singing, he mouthed the words, "I'm glad you're here, Joe." Then he stood proudly between Joe and Unk.

Whether young Eli understood the importance of this gesture or not, it served a great purpose. Because that day's worship was partly about the thankfulness of the entire church in sparing Eli's life, the young boy's open acceptance of Joe's presence quieted the hearts of many there.

However, there was a fourth and final man there who took the spotlight off Joe Moore and put it squarely back where it belonged and his name was Reverend Joseph Willis.

After they finished the long bout of singing, the congregation sat down and Willis stood up with the help of two deacons. In spite of his frailty, his voice boomed out, "Folks, before I come up and rightly divide the 'Word of Truth,' I've asked Brother Bass to lead us in one of my

favorites. It speaks of my subject today—the precious blood of Jesus and how it is the cure for anything that ails you."

As if on cue, song leader Bass broke into the old hymn,

There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Immanuel's veins,
And sinners plunged beneath that flood
Lose all their guilty stains.

It was a song that just lent itself to passionate a cappella singing. They wailed it as they ended the first stanza with the refrain,

Lose all their guilty stains,
lose their guilty stains,
And sinners plunged beneath that flood,
lose all their guilty stains.

Joe liked how they held out "stains" on the refrain. Neither his background in traditional Irish Catholicism, nor his proper Protestant stiffness, had prepared him for this first visit to Occupy Baptist Church on the banks of Ten Mile Creek.

He'd never seen anything like it in his life! The worship was earthy, raw, and unfiltered compared to the rituals of both churches he had attended as a boy. He wasn't fully sure what to think of it but he believed he liked it.

As the crowd sat down and awaited Reverend Willis' slow and painful walk to the podium, Joe thought to himself, I've been in church all of my life back home, but this is sure different than anything I've seen. It seems as if—

His thoughts on this were frozen when Joseph Willis opened his mouth and his Bible. He'd been around Willis several times including his earlier visit in his home, but he'd never seen him in his element—in the pulpit.

Willis's voice was strong, forceful, and full of conviction. Beginning his message, he was no longer an old, sick man. He was now the servant of the Lord—ready to bring God's message.

He began, "Folks, this is a real special Sunday. It's always special to be in the Lord's house. But this day is even more so as we celebrate the return of Eli Clark to his church. Eli, Son—we've prayed for you over and over. You being here today is a miracle—a real miracle."

Throughout the crowd, hearty "Amen's" and "That's right, preacher" were shouted with abandon. Joe noticed that both Willard and Virginia Clark were weeping openly. Eliza reached back and held the hand of her younger brother.

Willis continued, "So we're gonna praise the Lord in a special way today. Turn in your Bibles to John chapter three, verses 14–16.

"We are going to talk about that serpent on a pole that Jesus talks about in this most famous chapter of the Word. It's somewhat appropriate to talk about this subject with our boy Eli Clark being back with us. In fact, I'm gonna call this message, 'The cure for the snakebite.' I believe you'll understand the connection as we go along."

The preacher read the scripture slowly but steadily,

"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish but have eternal life."

He plunged right into his message. Joe Moore had never heard preaching like this. Willis was rough in his delivery and completely unscripted, but his message was forceful, compelling, as well as entertaining.

Willis began talking of verse fourteen he'd just read, "Now you've got to understand what Jesus was talking about concerning Moses lifting up that serpent on a pole."

Joe listened carefully as the preacher related the story from the book of Numbers about the children of Israel sinning by complaining about God's care. To punish them, Willis explained, as well as get their attention, God sent poisonous snakes to bite them.

One loud voice in the back blurted out, "Hello!" when Willis mentioned God's punishment for their disobedience. Joe couldn't help but turn and look toward the voice. Unk elbowed him and said, "It ain't polite to stare in the Lord's house."

Joe started to say something smart but thought better of it.

Reverend Willis continued his narrative, "As people became sick and began dying, they turned to ol' Moses, begging for help from God. Moses had his craftsmen make a bronze snake and lift it up on a pole. Anyone who'd been bitten that looked at the snake on the pole was healed."

Willis, whom Joe realized was a gifted communicator, then brought the story back to Jesus' words in the book of John:

"Now people, Jesus wuz lifted up on a pole. We call it the cross. He says right there in John that anyone who 'looks upon Him' in belief will have eternal life. It just means to look upon Jesus and the finished work of His blood as how we git eternal life.

"Our job is to believe—believe in Jesus. That fountain He filled with His blood washes away all sin—any sin. As we like to say out here, 'All souls come clean in John 3:16.'" Willis began to emotionally quote that verse: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life."

When Preacher Willis finished this, a man whooped and hollered, "Go ahead and preach, preacher!" Several ladies intoned with loud "Amens" as well as repeating, "All souls come clean in John 3:16." Joe heard another man behind him whisper loudly, "Why, that old man is shucking the corn right down to the cob today."

The sermon went on and Willis dutifully brought it to an end after about forty minutes of hard preaching. All of a sudden, as he urged those in attendance to act on his message and respond to Jesus' fountain filled with blood, he looked tired and worn out; it was if he had literally preached his heart out. Tears rolled down his cheeks, as he implored no one there to ignore Jesus who had been lifted up on that cross.

Willis stumbled as he stepped from the pulpit. Gasps came from the crowd and several men rushed up to support their pastor. With that, Deacon Bass once again began singing "There is a Fountain."

Joe watched in wonder as folks came to the altar to pray or talk with Willis. Eli went forward and one by one or in clusters, the crowd came up to hug him or pray with him and his family. Joe Moore had never seen anything like it. It was an experience he filtered in his mind for weeks and weeks. He'd seen in these simple country folk a passion and strength in their worship.

He liked that.

In fact, he liked it a lot.

Chapter 37

The men stood in the road blocking Joe's path. He was coming up the trail near his homestead when the men stepped out from the pines. Joe saw three men step out in front, and a quick look behind revealed two more. They all carried large sticks and Joe took notice that all of them wore side arms. He thought about breaking for a run but decided he had to face this eventually.

Amos Long stepped out from the men and sidled up to him, "Now, don't get too excited, Irishman. We jes' wanna have a little talk with you."

All the while the other men with their sticks closed in. He just stood impassively. They might beat him or kill him, but they weren't going to see him cower or run.

One of the men behind hit him right across the back of the knees. This caused him to go down. Before he could get up, they had grabbed him from behind and held him.

As they held him, Joe saw Amos pull out a big knife. Try as he might, he was helpless and pinned down by the four men. Amos held the knife out and moved it to Joe's groin and held it there. "My Arkansas toothpick here might make a gelding out of a stallion."

Amos spit in his face but also removed the knife. He had an evil smile on his face. "Me and the boys here done decided it's time for you to leave. Go on back to wherever you come from. We don't care if it's Alex, New Orleans, or you swim back across to Ireland, just git gone!

"This is your warnin' and there won't be another one!" Quickly the knife was in Joe's face right up against his right eye. The big man took him by the head of the hair and pulled his head back and now put the knife right against his neck. The cold steel was pressed right against his jugular vein. Joe felt a trickle dripping down his neck, and wasn't sure if it was blood, sweat, or both.

"Get my message boy: git gone. Just clear out—and don't come back!" With that, he shoved Joe back, causing him and the two men behind to fall to the ground. They got up cussing and kicking Joe. Then, Amos walked away, the smirk still on his face. The other four men obediently followed him—the way cowards always follow a bully.

Joe watched them walk away. They never even looked back. He rubbed his neck where he could still feel the sting of the knife. As quickly as he could, he slipped off into the dark woods. This had gone far enough—he had to move.

Amos Long and his gang watched for Joe the next day. When they didn't see him and found his homestead deserted, they laughed and told that they'd given the Irishman "a going-away party" and he wouldn't be back.

Of course, their bravado spread quickly through the community and up and down the creeks. Unk, who seemed to always know all things stirring in the Ten Mile area, was the one who brought the news to the Clark household. Eliza, who had not seen Joe in three days, took it hard when she heard it. She listened to Unk's story, but did not say one word.

Unk and Eliza's parents saw the tears streaming down her cheeks before she silently went out the door, slamming it behind her. Unk started to go after her, but Willard grabbed him by the arm, "Wait. She needs a little time on her own. I'll go check on her later."

Watching her leave, the three of them stared at the floor. Unk spoke, “You don’t reckon he’d run off and leave, do you?”

Willard Clark kept his eyes glued to the floor. It was his wife that spoke. Unk noticed that her eyes were on the mantel above the fireplace as she spoke deliberately, yet without emotion, ”Don’t worry, Brother. He ain’t left. He’ll be back.”

However, Joe Moore had left. There was one last person he needed to see before he moved on: Brother Joseph Willis.

Going to the Willis home in Ten Mile, he found no one was home. After asking around the neighbors, he discovered Willis had gone by wagon to his grandson’s home on Spring Creek.

It was a long walk to Spring Creek. After crossing the Calcasieu, he still had nearly ten miles to go. It was late that evening when a knock came on the front door of Polk Willis’ house. After answering, his grandson came back, “PawPaw, there’s someone here to see you.”

“Well, bring them on in. Bring them in.”

His grandson soon returned with a young man in tow.

Willis smiled when he saw Joe, “Well, if it ain’t the Irishman, Joseph Moore. What brings you to Spring Creek, Son?”

“I’ve sorry to bother ye, Reverend Willis, but ‘tis some trouble I need to talk with ye about.”

Willis asked his grandson to leave the room so they could talk privately.

Joe unloaded his troubles with the preacher. He was pretty emotional, especially as he described the knife against his throat and Amos’ threat.

Willis listened intently. He never interrupted Joe and only asked a few questions. The old preacher stared into the fire for a long time before beginning, “Son, that’s a tough situation yo’re in. Let me think about it a minute—I need to lick this calf over agin.”

After what seemed like ten minutes of silence filled only with the ticking of the mantel clock, Willis said, “Joe, have I ever told you about my getting run out of St. Landry Parish?”

“No, sir.”

“Well, right after the turn of the century I came over from Mississippi to the area east of here. I began preaching whenever I got a chance. Lots of folks say I preached the first sermons ever preached by a Protestant west of the Mississippi. I don’t know ‘bout that but, I sure know I had a lot of trouble pretty quick.

“It was against Spanish law for anyone but a Catholic priest to preach, so I was breaking the law. Pretty soon they got a mob together that was going to take care of me and my family. Fortunately we got wind of it, and realizing our lives were in danger, loaded our wagon and headed west on the Stage Road to safer pastures in Texas.

“I believe it was the most miserable day of my life! I jes’ felt I was letting God down by leaving. After stewing in my own juices all day, we reached the little hamlet of Bayou Chicot. I got down off the wagon and announced to my family, “Folks, this is as far as I’m gonna go. I’m unloading my wagon—and stopping here. We’re going to preach the gospel here, come hell or high water.

“That’s where Bayou Chicot Church, now called Calvary, began. I had run—but I had also decided when to stop. That’s kind of the situation I see you in…”

The two men, the young Irishman and the old preacher, sat in front of the fireplace and talked long into the night. It was obvious they were planning something in great detail.

Chapter 38

On the third day after Joe Moore had disappeared from Ten Mile, Amos Long and his men were sitting around a campfire, talking, drinking, and laughing when a boy arrived.

The boy, about ten or eleven, walked up among the men and stood quietly. Finally, one of the men noticed him, saying, "What are you staring at, boy?" The boy, pointing at Amos, said, "I've got a message for Amos Long."

Amos stood up and said, "Speak."

"Joe Moore said for you to meet him alone tomorrow at noon on the other side of Davis Crossing."

Amos was at his worst when he'd been drinking. "Jes' when did Joe Moore decide to tell me what to do?"

Turning to look at the other men, he continued, "Why, I'm the one that ran him out of here. And now he's goin' to tell me where to go and when! Why, I'll be … Boy, did he send you?"

The boy stood there impassively. Amos, his anger rising, strode toward the boy. One of his friends grabbed him, "But Amos, Moore's 'fraid to cross the river like you told him not to. That's why he wants to meet you on the other side of the crossing."

This gave the big man pause for thought. The messenger boy still hadn't moved a step back, so Amos turned on him, "Boy, who are you—and who sent you? Do you know that Irishman, Joe Moore?"

"Mister, don't get mad at me, I'm just the messenger. I wouldn't know no Joe Moore if you threw him on me right now. I was just told to deliver this message. A man paid me a dollar to come over here and deliver it."

"Who was that man?"

"I didn't know him either."

Amos studied the boy carefully, "Well, was there any other part to this message?"

"No, just meet him tomorrow on the far side of the Calcasieu at Davis Crossing—and come alone."

The boy, his dark eyes still surveying the big man, backed away, turned and walked off. Amos bellowed, "You tell whoever sent you that I'll be there and Joe Moore will regret it. He'll regret it a whole bunch!"

For the rest of that afternoon, that night, and the next morning, Amos Long's mind was in a tizzy. He discussed it with his men, "Why would he want to meet me? Last time he saw me, I held a knife to the rascal's throat. I know he's skeered of me—that's why he won't cross the river. He knows the river is his dead line—if he crosses it, he's dead."

However, Amos didn't sleep much that night. By morning he'd made up his mind what to do. His plan would ensure it was the last time Joe Moore ever showed up anywhere—on either side of the river. He thought, The fool signed his own death warrant when he agreed to meet me alone.

At ten, he saddled up his horse and was met by four of his partners. He'd insisted they come with him to ensure a fair fight in case there was an ambush. One of them asked, "Didn't the message say to come alone?"

"When I get there, I will be alone. You guys will stay back in the woods and come only if needed." When they came to where the pines thinned out and the land sloped toward the river swamp, Amos gave the men instructions, "Y'all stay back here and 'bout ten minutes after I'm gone, you slip on down to that cypress grove there." He pointed at a stand of tall trees about half way to the river. "Git there and be ready to come if I holler, or you hear trouble.

"Lester, you come on with me. I'll have you closer to have my guns ready if I need 'em."

The two men rode ahead as the others waited on the edge of the ridge. As Amos and Lester neared the creek, Amos unhooked his gun belt and handed it to Lester. He pulled his rifle out of the scabbard, and after checking to ensure it was loaded, also handed it over. Lester watched him checking a bulge under his shirt and then feeling for something strapped to his right leg under his trousers. Lester spat a stream of tobacco juice and said admiringly, "Yep, Amos, I've never known you not to be ready for trouble!"

"Listen, Lester, you follow slowly behind me, but stay out of sight. If I need you, you come riding across the river makin' all kinds of noise." Amos patted the bulge under his belt and said, "I can shoot until you get there. If you hear gunfire, come riding—you understand?"

"Sure I do."

With that, Amos Long left Lester behind and rode toward Davis Crossing across the Calcasieu River. He rode his horse through the river and up onto the east bank. He didn't like to leave the No Man's Land and had not done it very often in his life. On this side of the river there was law and some order. It wasn't nearly as wild as the land that he considered his kingdom.

He sat on his horse for several minutes in a clearing as water dripped off them. He scanned the area carefully. It was a clearing often used as a campsite. Nearby there was a small woodpile and a blackened fire ring. Someone had built a crude bench between two beech trees. Amos saw no sign of anyone. After sitting there for several minutes, he had just about decided the Irishman wasn't going to show up, which didn't surprise him much.

That was just when Joe Moore stepped out from behind the trees beyond the clearing. Amos looked at this wiry, fair-skinned boy with the sandy hair and ruddy cheeks. It was evident this boy didn't belong in this part of the world. Amos planned to ensure that this very afternoon.

Moore moved slowly but carefully toward him. Amos watched as the barefooted boy removed his shirt. Quietly in a voice Amos could barely hear, the boy said, "The ancient Irish would fight naked against their enemies. They'd be all painted up and shout and holler as they went into battle." Grinning he added, "I'll spare you the naked part and the hollering."

Amos Long, who had spent his entire life fighting, had long ago learned the art of studying an opponent. He was surprised that he saw no fear in the boy's eyes and heard no shakiness in his voice.

Joe stopped and locked his eyes on the big man. "Now Amos, I don't really want to fight ye, but if that's what I've got to do to stay here, I guess I'll do it." As Joe said, "stay here" he nodded back across the river making it clear he was referring to the Ten Mile area.

"I want you to know I'm through running. My heart tells me not to run anymore."

For the first time, Amos noticed the boy's eyes. His green eyes burned with a determination and fire that was indescribable. In spite of Amos' great confidence in the outcome of this fight, those green eyes troubled him.

Amos dismounted, tied his horse, and then warily began to circle around Joe. ”You won’t be running no more, boy, but neither will you be crossing to the other side of that river. You may end up in it, but your feet won’t touch the other side.

“Moore, I’ll give you one last chance to turn and walk ‘way right now—‘way from this river—‘way from Ten Mile—and from Eliza Clark and your silly notions toward her.”

“That’s the exact reason I won’t walk away. I’ve run from other things all my life, but I’m not running no more and Eliza is the reason wh—“

At that moment, Amos sprang at Joe. But the Irishman, who was outweighed by probably fifty or more pounds, was ready. He quickly stepped out of the way of the hard-charging bigger man. As Amos went by, Joe tripped him, sending him sprawling in the leaves and dirt.

However, Joe didn’t take advantage of his opponent being down. He backed away carefully and stood ready for the next charge. Amos got up cussing and rubbing his eyes. He’d gotten dirt in them as he skidded along the ground.

“That’s just about how sorry I figured an Irish dog would fight.”

“I didn’t know fighting was supposed to be fair.”

“Well, I guess it’s not—as you’re about to find out.”

Two things had already infuriated Amos: the humiliating trip that sent him flying and the dirt that was in his eyes from his face-first tumble. As he rubbed his burning eyes, he eyed the boy who stood facing him ten feet away. He charged again, but his eyesight was blurred and he missed when he swung. Moore ducked out of the way just as he got there.

Joe’s strategy infuriated and frustrated Amos. He was accustomed to two men coming right at each other and brute strength prevailing. But this runt wasn’t going to fight fair.

Amos’ next charge was not as aggressive as the first two, as he had realized that the boy planned to use evasion as his defense. It was to his total surprise when Joe didn’t avoid him this time. In fact he took the fight to him. Amos took two punches in the face before he could retaliate with a solid blow of his own. He was so surprised he didn’t even try to grasp Joe when they exchanged blows.

Amos was impressed with how hard the boy had hit him. He felt blood in his mouth and his cheek stung. ”You little booger. You’ve fought before, haven’t you? I thought you was a total coward.”

Joe didn’t say a word. He couldn’t. The one blow from Amos had stunned him. The big man was powerful and Joe knew he could easily be laid out with one well-placed punch.

Sensing this, Amos charged him. Joe couldn’t get his hands up in time but did bring his foot up in a savage kick to the big man’s groin. As the bully wailed in pain, he connected a combination to Joe’s body that sent him to the ground.

Amos Long was in no shape to follow up the body blow. He had fallen to the ground in obvious distress. As bad as Joe’s foot hurt from the kick, he knew a certain part of his opponent’s anatomy was hurting far worse.

Although both men had stunned the other, neither were in any shape to follow up. The wind was knocked out of Joe and he tried desperately to catch his breath. Across the way, Long was cussing and groaning. As he got to his knees, he threw up and continued moaning.

By now, Joe was catching his breath and realized he still had an opening to inflict more damage before the bigger man recovered. As he prepared to charge the still kneeling man, he saw a sight that made him sick with fright—Amos Long had reached up his pants leg and pulled out a big knife.

His eyes were cold and evil as he slowly stood, “Now, Boy, it’s time to end this. I’m gonna kill you, tie you to that log right there and throw you in the river—won’t nobody ever know what happen’ to you ‘cept me. Eliza Clark will live the rest of her life believin’ you were a coward and deserted her—and the truth will be in the bottom of this muddy river.”

Joe looked at the knife he already knew too well. He had felt its cold steel against his neck. He was facing a killer and he was now at a great disadvantage.

They circled each other like two dogs. Amos was moving the handle of the knife from hand to hand. ”Which hand do you want me to kill you with? I’m pretty good with either. Do you have a preference, dead man?”

Joe couldn’t answer. First of all, he was too scared. Secondly, he was feeling with his foot for something—the Reverend had placed it and told him right where it would be, but he couldn’t find it at this moment he needed it most. He was afraid to take his eyes off Amos for one instant as he was closed in.

Then he felt something against his foot and knew he had found it. At this exact moment as Joe carefully reached down, a loud shout rang out from the nearby trees, “Unfair. Unfair.” It was the loud deep voice of an older man. It shook both Joe and Amos Long because of its volume and authority.

Amos turned to find the source of the shout. A cold chill ran through him as he saw Father Joseph Willis—Reverend Joseph Willis—standing not twenty feet from him and Moore. Willis was a massive man and his physical presence was enough to gain the attention of any man, in spite of the fact that he was over eighty years old and leaning on two walking canes. It was the rich voice shouting “Unfair” that stunned Amos. It was as if a clap of thunder had rumbled—or the very voice of God had spoken! Because to the Redbones of Ten Mile, Reverend Willis was the voice of God! Even to a non-churchgoer like Amos Long, this old man was respected.

Amos looked sheepishly at the knife in his hand and glanced at the boy standing across from him clad in only his trousers. The words as well as the glare of the old preacher—Unfair! burned into his mind. He turned away from Joe and opened his mouth as if to—

However, no words ever came from the lips of Amos Long—because suddenly everything in his world flashed a white hot, as his head seemed to come off and explode. The white heat centered in the right side of his forehead and seemed to settle down his neck and into his chest. Then he felt or remembered nothing. . .

Chapter 39

Joe Moore stood over the collapsed big man, who was out cold. He smiled sheepishly at the old preacher as he held the pine knot club he had just used to hit Amos upside the head. It was a three-foot long heart of pine stick. On the hitting end, it had a large knot about the size of a man's fist. It was perfectly shaped and weighted for what it had just been used for.

Joe said, "Reverend, that pine knot club was right where you said it'd be."

"Well, Son, it looks as if you used it pretty well. That's why I called it an 'equalizer.'" Pointing at the big knife still gripped in Amos' hand, he added, "Babe, and it looks like you were in need of a good equalizer, too!"

"And I t'ank you, sir."

"You're welcome. I wouldn't have missed what I jest seed for all of the tea in Chiner."

All at once behind them, splashing was heard in the creek and the sound of a pistol cracked. Joe and Joseph Willis, standing over the fallen and immobile man, saw Lester come charging across the creek, wildly shooting his pistol five more times in the air.

When he came up the bank, he put Amos' rifle on Joe and shouted, nearly as an echo, "Unfair, unfair. I seed it all. You hit him when he warn't looking and that's unfair."

Joseph Willis stepped in front of the Irishman as the rider reined in his horse at the clearing. "Lester, you lower that gun."

Hesitantly, but obediently, Lester lowered the rifle. "But preacher, it ain't right what that Irish tater did to the side of Amos' head. He pert near kilt him."

Willis kicked at the knife still in Amos' grip, "And it ain't real fair to take a knife to an unarmed man in a fist fight, is it?"

Lester admitted, "Well, I reckon not. I guess you do kinda have a point there." It was clear Lester's earlier confidence he'd displayed as he crossed the river had faded.

He got off his horse and walked over toward his partner. Looking at Joe, he scolded, "But you didn't have to hit 'em that hard. I saw it. That was a death blow. I believe you done kilt him."

Joe had found it advisable to keep his mouth shut—Reverend Willis was acting as Joe's defense lawyer, "Now Lester, when a man's waving a knife at you, kid gloves aren't needed. Anyway, I believe your buddy Amos is going to survive his pine-knot blow."

Amos was still definitely out but was beginning to groan softly. His right eye was swollen shut, and in spite of his dark skin, a large purple bruise was growing over his eye and cheek. Joe couldn't help but wink at the Reverend when they all heard the big man muttering weakly, "Unfair—unfair." The words were slurred and whispered, but there was no doubt what he was saying.

The Reverend said, "I believe he'll pull through, Lester. Now come over here. I need to talk to you alone."

Joe watched the conversation between the preacher and Lester. Being from a Catholic background, it nearly seemed they were having confession. The taller Willis stood over Lester who had his head bowed in shame. If this was confession, the preacher was doing all of the talking for Lester was only listening and shaking his head sadly.

Joe tried to pick up on any of the conversation. He could only catch swatches of words but noticed at some point that Lester's bowed head jerked upright and he loudly said, "Preacher, you wouldn't tell that, would ye?"

"Only if I have to, Lester. Only if you break this agreement."

"But how'd you even know about that? I didn't think no one knew. How in Heaven's name did my preacher know about it?"

"It's my job to know a lot of things—not all of them pleasant."

"But that happened four years ago. You've known it all that time?"

"Yes, but I haven't told a soul—yet. Whether it stays with me or not depends on you."

Lester had dropped the rifle without even realizing it. Reverend Willis put his arm around the man in a fatherly way. "If you tell what happened today correctly, I'll go to my grave with your story untold. We wouldn't want your wife and mother to know about this, would we?"

"It'd be the end of me, preacher. The literal end!"

"So, it's a deal?"

"Straight shooting, preacher."

"Now Lester, after all that pistol firing, that's kind of a bad way to put it!"

Even Lester, full of emotion—yet relieved, had to laugh.

As they walked back toward the clearing, they both saw Joe Moore do something that alarmed both of them. He reached down and took the Bowie knife from Amos' right hand. He held it in front of the unconscious man's face and addressed him, "Now, I can do this with either of me hands—it doesn't matter. One hand is just as good as another."

Lester couldn't believe that Joe Moore was going to kill Amos. He reached for his pistol, but knew he was out of shells and the rifle was back where he'd dropped it. When he turned to go get it, Joseph Willis grabbed his arm and said, "Don't. Stay right here."

He didn't show it, but Reverend Willis was just as horrified as Lester. He couldn't believe this young man was going to, in cold blood, murder Amos Long.

However, for some reason, he did or said nothing. At this point, he had become just a spectator to the events now taking place in the clearing at Davis Crossing.

Joe knelt down and put the knife against the groaning man's throat. "Amos, the tables are turned from jes' a few days ago. That knife is in a different hand now, and against a different throat."

He whispered a little louder, "T'is can be the left or the right. What do you prefer?"

Then he answered his own question: "I believe the right hand will do."

With that, Joe Moore quickly stood up and slung the knife in a high arc toward the river. He watched it tumble end over end before making a mighty splash in the middle of the Calcasieu River. Joe walked over to the two startled men and said, "Well, that there knife won't be causin' any more trouble."

Willis, visibly relieved, punched Joe in the middle of the chest, "It surely won't be causing any 'moore' trouble for you." Neither Joe Moore nor Lester caught the joke, but Reverend Willis laughed loud enough for all of them.

Just then—right across the creek from the spot where the knife had landed—two more horsemen came splashing across with guns drawn. The other two men had finally arrived to see what the shooting was about.

As they crossed the river and rode up, Reverend Willis turned to Lester, "It's time for you to keep yer promise."

The men rode up and instantly saw the prone body of Amos on the ground. Then they saw Joe Moore standing beside him. Next, and most amazingly, they saw Reverend Joseph Willis standing by him. This caused them to holster their guns as they looked in confusion at Lester. One of them said, "Lester, what in the world happened here?"

The eyewitness innocently shrugged his shoulders. "This here Irishman knocked our friend Amos out cold as a rock. He's been laying here groaning for 'bout ten minutes."

The riders looked from Joe Moore back to the fallen man and then back again. It just didn't seem to fit, but there it was—plain as day.

Lester was warming to his task. "He cold cocked him right upside the head. Look at that shiner he's got. Went down in a heap—I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it."

"But, I thought you was supposed to stay back away from the fight?"

"Well, I just couldn't resist seeing for myself and I saw it all."

One of the men turned respectfully to the preacher. He doffed his cap. "Did you see it too, Reverend?"

"I sure did, men. It's just like Lester here said. Joe Moore hit him as hard as I've ever seen a man hit. It was somethin' to see. Your friend Amos went down like a post oak in a tornado."

The men were staring at the tall thin Irishman and were trying to figure it out. Even though he had won, Joe's eye was swollen shut and he sported two welts on his chest where the big fists had struck.

Joe said to the men, " I believe t'is was a little bit of luck and I got a lick in on him when he wasn't quite, uh, paying attention." Saying this, he looked at Lester, who just shook his head, staring at the pine knot club leaning against a nearby pine.

Suddenly Joseph Willis decided enough had been said on this matter. He took over. "Boys, y'all need to load your buddy up. I believe I'd wash him down in the river first, that might revive him a little. We'll load him in my wagon, tie his horse behind, and take him home."

The men dutifully lifted their friend up and took him to the river. He was still moaning. One of them said to the other as they toted him, "Is he saying 'unfair' or 'unfit?'" They shrugged their shoulders and unceremoniously dumped him in the edge of the water and began washing his face.

Reverend Willis turned to Joe in the clearing. "If you'll go get the wagon, we'll help get your friend back home."

Before stepping away from the Reverend, Joe had a question that needed answering, "Father Willis, you know I did turn me cheek just like you said. Even though it was only once."

The preacher stopped in mid-stride, "When was that? I guess I missed it."

"At the first I told him I didn't want to fight him and asked him to call off his order for me to leave. I thought that was pretty much turning the cheek."

Willis said, "I guess in a way it might have been. However, the only cheek I saw turning was his when you clobbered him with that pine knot!" They both laughed. Willis continued, "Go git that pine knot. I want to take a look at it."

Joe returned with it. The preacher examined it closely. ”There’s nothin’ harder than the heart of a pine. Look—it didn’t even put a dent in it when it hit that hard head of Amos Long. I heard a crack and thought it was the club, but I believe it was his head instead.”

He handed it back to Joe. ”You better keep this. It’ll make a fine souvenir.”

“I’m not sure I want to keep it. I’d rather let the story of my fist doing the damage keep spreading.”

They came to the wagon and Joe was surprised to see Polk, the Reverend’s grandson, sitting on the driver’s seat.

Willis commented to his grandson, “You sure missed a fine show.”

The younger Willis grinned, “I didn’t miss a thing. Saw it all with my own two eyes.”

“I thought I told you to stay with the wagon!”

“You did, PawPaw, but you know a real Redbone ain’t gonna miss a fight if he can help it. I’m sure glad I saw it myself.” He hopped off the wagon, walked over to Joe, and shook his hand. ”That was something I’d pay good money to see. I’m glad I saw it, even if my grandpa here is sore at me for disobeying.”

When the wagon came down to the river, the other three men loaded Amos Long onto the wagon bed. Lester turned to Rev. Willis and said, “We’re ridin’ on. We’ll be there to meet you at his cabin when y’all brung him.” With that the three riders splashed into the river and exited up the west bank, heading for Ten Mile.

Polk asked, “Will they be trouble, PawPaw?”

“Nah, they’ll be all right, at least fer now.”

The wagon rode along through the pines. Everyone was quiet except for the periodic moaning of Amos Long. When they’d gone about two miles, a figure stepped out of the woods to await them in the road.

It was the unmistakable posture of Unk Dial. He was standing there with his hands on his hips, impossible not to recognize. Unk walked over to the stopped wagon and looked in the bed.

The Reverend exclaimed, “Unk, now how did you just happen to be along here just when we came along with your buddy? Did you already know about this?”

Unk grinned his lopsided smile, “A little bird tol’ me, Father Willis. A little tiny bird jes’ flew up on my shoulder and tol’ me all ‘bout it.”

Willis, feigning exasperation, turned to Joe. ”Son, if you want to know the defining trait of a real Redbone—and that rascal standing beside the wagon is a twenty-four-carat one—they’ll always know what’s going on. Especially if there’s trouble or gossip! This here fellow always seems to show up no matter what.” The old preacher scoffed, “A little bird—my behind!”

Unk just smiled proudly. Leaning in, he touched Long on the shoulder and inquired, “Amos, what happened to ye?”

Willis, being part of the game Unk was playing, spoke, “Unk, he’s resting right now. He’s kind of had a bad day. Fell in a stump hole and hit his head on a pine knot.”

Unk felt of the dark bruise on the man’s temple, ”It must’ve have been a pretty good size pine knot!” Joe noticed how Unk winked at him as he said it. Does he know what happened? Was he there, too?

Unk climbed onto the tail gate of the wagon, his feet dragging along the dusty road, as they continued on.

When they came near the trail to Joe’s homestead, he hopped off, thanked Reverend Willis, and wearily walked home.

As the wagon later neared Amos' cabin, a good group of folks had gathered along the road. Reverend Willis commented to his grandson, "See what I told you? Every settler in Ten Mile has already heard about it. Of course by now, there are thirty or so different stories going around 'bout what happened." He then spoke a little louder for Unk's benefit, "I guess a little bird told them, too."

It took five grown men to unload Amos Long and take him in his house. The crowd then left.

The next day brought one occurrence that Ten Mile folks would surmise about for years. That morning, Reverend Willis' wagon returned to Amos Long's cabin. On the wagon were the preacher, his grandson, and Unk Dial.

Word had spread that morning that Amos was now conscious and seemed as if he would recover fully over time. However, he was still confused and couldn't remember what had happened. When asked by his sister if Joe Moore had given him the bad lick on his head, he had puzzlingly replied, "Joe who? I don't believe I know no Joe Moore!"

When the wagon stopped, Rev. Willis was helped down and accompanied by Unk into the cabin. Several folks who were inside came out. It was now only Willis, Unk Dial, and Amos Long in the cabin.

The crowd's speculation as to this visit's purpose was intense and full of speculation:

"Did he have his Bible with him?"

"Why in the world was Unk Dial with him?"

"I bet he's gonna lead him to the Lord."

"That'll be the day--when Amos gets religion."

Another observer commented, "He don't need religion. He needs Jesus."

All of this speculation was never answered. After a visit of about thirty minutes, the two men came outside, got onto the wagon, and left without saying a word. No one ever knew what actually transpired inside the cabin. The Reverend, a confidential minister, went to his grave without revealing a word.

Within a week, Amos Long loaded up his belongings and left Ten Mile. He was never seen again, but word did filter back over the years as to his whereabouts and exploits. Stories varied from how he was killed in a robbery, drowned in the Ouachita River, or was in prison for murder.

However, the most persistent rumor that would periodically be told was that Amos Long was now a Baptist preacher in Arkansas, just as passionate about spreading the gospel as he'd formerly been in causing havoc and grief in Ten Mile.

Concerning the third man who was in the cabin that fateful day—well, Unk Dial, when asked, would just grin and act as if he didn't even remember what they were talking about. It was the best part of being considered "not quite right." He could just smile as if he knew something that they were missing out on. It drove people crazy.

The day after the big fight, Joe Moore looked and felt terrible. His head was swollen, he hurt all over, and he felt weak. However, he got up, washed up, ate a quick breakfast and was gone.

There was only one thing on his mind today. The whole reason he had fought and not left was Eliza Clark. He was going to see her. He'd heard that she was mad at him for seemingly abandoning her and he was ready to find out where he stood.

He rode up to the Clark homestead. Willard Clark walked out and whistled, "Man, that's some knot you got on your head."

Joe grinned, “But you shoulda seen the other guy.”

“Oh, I know all about ‘em. I believe you knocked him into next week. We all thought you’d run off and left Eliza when he threatened you.”

“Well, here I am—black eye, knots, and all.”

“I’ll go tell Eliza you’re here.”

Of course, Eliza Clark knew very well that Joe had ridden up. She had been watching for him all yesterday afternoon and now this morning.

Walking out on the porch, she tried to hide her excitement at seeing him, pretending she was mad. However, she failed miserably at both. She was ecstatic to see him and could not hide it, and Joe was just as glad to see her.

”Eliza, I’m sorry if it looked like I ran off and left ye. I just had to get me head on straight on how to handle t’is problem.”

“I wanted to pinch your head off, but I knew in my heart you hadn’t run off and left me. I just knew it, Joe!”

“Eliza, I’m through running. I been running all me life. But I’m through with it. The only way I’d run off now is if ye run off with me. If ye don’t want to do that, I’m staying right here. I’m afraid you’re stuck with me.”

He pulled her close and kissed her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and just wouldn’t let him go.

He repeated, “I just ain’t goin’ nowhere.”

Chapter 40

The land fight between the Piedmont Timber Company and the Ten Mile settlers had continued now for over a year and a half. It remained an ongoing skirmish where neither side seemed willing to give an inch.

During this time, Travis Thomas had made periodic trips to Alexandria to study the progress on his plan to possess the timberlands west of the Calcasieu. He had to admit that he'd never been up against a group quite like the Redbones. They were tough and unwilling to give up…or give in.

As he sat with his men in Alexandria, he knew the time had come to put up or shut up. If this group of woods rats defeated him, it would only encourage others to do the same in the future.

The meeting took all night in a hotel room. He repeated instructions over and over to Turk and his other workers. Every eventuality was covered. Thomas had thought about it long and hard. A variation of this plan had worked well in the highlands of the Carolinas about ten years ago. It was time to spring it on these Louisiana woods people.

Thomas's last words as he left the hotel to board the steamboat for Natchez was, "Turk, you do what you've got to do. Just make sure it can't be traced back to the company."

A week later Eliza met her best friend Bessie Wilson down at the creek. It was washday, and the girls had agreed to meet and visit while they worked.

The main topics in Ten Mile were two-fold. The trouble with the timber company continued to concern all of the settlers. About thirty woods hogs belonging to the Sweat family had been found shot. Whoever did it did not bother to take any of them for meat. It was definitely an act of pure meanness and everyone attributed it to the timber company workers.

The second topic was the recent ice storm that had paralyzed the area for nearly a week. Bessie and Eliza discussed it as they met at the creek.

"Eliza, we were cooped up in the house for four days. I thought my momma was gonna kill my two younger brothers. "When those pine limbs started popping, my daddy said it sounded like 'a young war' goin' on. That freezing rain coated everything, didn't it?"

Bessie, who was ready to talk, told Eliza of how there had been more trouble with the Tyler family. She said, "This time the trouble was over a hive of honeybees. The hive went missing and the Tylers just swore we took it."

As she scrubbed a shirt, Bessie winced, "Eliza, I just wish this trouble would be over and done. It is so stupid, but it's become ingrained in our families."

Bessie went up the bank to break off a limb to use for hanging the shirt she'd washed. After about a minute, Eliza heard a muffled scream and clamored up the bank, picking up a broken limb as she went.

The sight she saw when she reached level ground gave her a chill.

Bessie was in the clutches of a big man who held a knife to her throat. His free hand had began pulling open her blouse.

It took Eliza only a few seconds to recognize the man who had Bessie in his grasp—It was Turk, the big ugly man who'd come that first day with the timber man to the Clark homestead. Eliza recognized the cold evil eyes that had followed her every move that day. She saw that same look as he pawed at her friend.

However, he loosened his grip when he saw Eliza. He smiled in recognition, "Oh, I remember you. You're that Clark girl. I told you I'd see you again and things would be different…and so they are. Yep, they sure are."

Eliza moved toward him with the stick. It wasn't much of a weapon, but she would do whatever it took to help her friend. Bessie was sobbing and begging the man to let her go.

Turk told Eliza, "I'd much rather have you than her. I've had my mind on you since that day. Why don't you come on over here? I'll trade her for you. You can save your friend by taking her place. We'll have a little fun and then both of you can go."

Eliza knew his words were not true, but found herself walking slowly toward Turk. As if in a trance, she dropped the stick in the dirt and approached the man slowly step by step.

Just as he began to loosen his grip on Bessie and reach for Eliza, a voice rang out sharply: "All right mister, you've done enough. We got you covered."

Everyone froze—Eliza, Bessie, and even Turk. He put the knife back to Bessie's throat and using her as a shield began turning in a circle, trying to find where the voice had come from.

"I'll cut her throat like a pig if you do anything foolish."

A deeper voice from behind him answered, "It looks like you're the one doing something foolish. There's three of us and we've all got you in our sights."

Continuing to use Bessie as a shield, Turk turned toward the woods where the second voice had come, "I'm serious. I'll kill her."

Then the first voice, a younger voice, rang out from behind a tree, "Hey, Jasper, hoot like an owl if you've got a good head shot at him."

In a third direction, a voice hooted perfectly like a barred owl. Turk now turned that direction, nervously keeping the knife against Bessie's throat.

The same young voice called out, "Hey Bill, you over there?"

The deep voice quickly replied, "I've got him covered from the back side."

Then from around the tree, the first voice stepped out into the open. He called to his friends in hiding, "You two boys keep him covered. If he tries anything—shoot him."

A young man stood with his rifle trained on Turk. Bessie and Eliza both gasped—it was Ben Tyler standing there in the open, sighting down the barrel of his rifle.

The problem was that the rifle was pointed at Bessie, too. The big man twisted around and tried to hide behind Bessie. "You put that rifle down or I'll cut her throat!"

Eliza spoke slowly, but with emotion, "Ben, you be careful now."

He never spoke a word but moved carefully to the side. Turk matched him step for step. Even in this moment of terror, Eliza couldn't help but think of how ironic that Ben Tyler, youngest son of the Tyler clan, was holding a rifle on a man who had in his grasp, Bessie Wilson, the youngest daughter of their fiercest rivals.

These two families had fought and feuded for years. Now the destinies of the two families seemed drawn to this spot beside Cherry Winche Creek.

Turk said, "I will kill her if you don't put down that rifle."

Ben Tyler stepped back and slowly began lowering his gun. He spoke resignedly, "Bill, you and Jasper go ahead and shoot him. We don't care about the girl no way."

Turk wheeled around toward where the other two voices had earlier come from. In doing this, he turned his back on Ben Tyler.

The sound of the shot was deafening. It seemed to echo off the surrounding trees with a fury. However, to Eliza it seemed as if it was all in slow motion. With horror she watched both Turk and Bessie fall to the ground. The big man fell heavily on Bessie. He rolled over screaming in pain, and Eliza then saw a sight that filled her with horror: Bessie's face and neck were covered in blood.

Then she looked behind the two fallen people, and there stood Ben Tyler, smoke coming from his rifle. When he saw the blood coming from Bessie, his face turned to a mask of pain. He dropped his rifle and ran over. He kicked away the knife, which lay beside Bessie, and put his hands on her face.

Eliza also raced to Bessie and angrily said, "Ben, why'd you shoot Bessie, too?"

Ben had grabbed Bessie and now had blood all over him. He looked up, "Eliza, I didn't shoot her—I shot him in the shoulder. She must have got cut by the knife when they went down."

He had pulled a bandana out of his pocket and applied it to Bessie's neck. Bessie was moaning as Eliza moved the bandana to inspect the wound. She sighed loudly as she realized it was not a deep wound and had evidently missed her neck veins. However, she was bleeding like a stuck hog. Eliza turned to Ben, who was shaking and had tears in his eyes, "Ben, she's gonna be all right. It's not deep."

Ben tenderly picked Bessie up and put her in his arms. He said, "Let's get her home."

Turk was moaning and cursing right by their feet. He'd been shot clean through the right shoulder. Eliza whistled appreciatively, "Ben, that was some good shot!"

Ben, who was normally quiet, just grinned. "When he turned away he pulled Bessie to his left and gave me just the opening that I wanted."

Eliza said, "Let's get Bessie to her house before she bleeds too much more. Can your two buddies take care of this pig here on the ground?"

Ben grinned again, "Eliza, I ain't got no buddies. I'm by myself."

"What about Jasper? And uh, Bill, and the hoot owl?"

"Ah, that was just me. You know any Redbone worth his salt can throw his voice around. I been doing it all my life." As if to prove his statement, he cupped his one free hand to his mouth and hooted like an owl. Eliza turned instinctively toward the east where the sound seemed to come from—but she knew it'd come right out of Ben's mouth.

"Well, I'll be."

"It's just an Indian thing, Eliza. My old grandpa taught me how."

Ben had Eliza pick up his rifle, Turk's knife, as well as the long-handled pistol the rascal had dropped when he was pawing on Bessie.

Ben's parting words to the big man were short and succinct: "Mister, I'd advise you to clear out of these parts and get past the Calcasieu quick as you can. You were a lucky man today. You can take my word for it—if them Wilsons get aholt of you, they won't shoot for the shoulder. That river is your dead line. You cross it again and you will be dead!"

The groaning man slowly got to his knees and looked dejected as the three teenagers trotted out of sight.

Eliza wisely went ahead to warn the Wilson clan of what had happened. She knew the unexplained sight of Ben Tyler carrying a blood-covered Bessie would have probably been dealt with violently.

Needless to say, the longstanding Wilson-Tyler feud ended that day. Eliza thought about Father Willis' heartfelt prayer the previous year for something to happen to settle it. Eliza was an eyewitness to how God can answer a prayer in strange ways.

As you can imagine, Ben and Bessie were inseparable after that fateful meeting along Cherry Winche Creek.

And that man named Turk—well, though much trouble was yet to come in the Ten Mile land battle, his face was never seen again in No Man's Land west of the Calcasieu.

Chapter 41

January was normally the coldest month of the year in Louisiana, but it can also be filled with pleasant days. A stretch of nice weather like that, about a month after the ice storm, is what led to the disappearance of Uncle Arch Weeks.

Unk and Joe were working with the sheep on this fine, clear morning when they heard someone blowing repeatedly on a cow horn. They stopped to listen and discuss whether it was just a neighbor calling his dogs or the signal of something being wrong. When it continued unabated, they both stopped what they were doing and hurriedly started toward the sound of the horn.

The sounds led them straight toward Uncle Arch and Aunt Mollie's place. As they neared the cabin, there were already two or three other men gathered in a clump by the front porch. Aunt Mollie sat on the porch with two other neighbor women. As they approached, Joe heard the man holding a big cow horn say, "If he's been missing since last evening, I fear for him."

Another man answered, "Uncle Arch knows these woods as well as anyone. I can't believe he got lost on land he's tromped for all his life."

"You're right. It makes me think he might have got hurt or something worse. The bottom line is we've got to git to looking fer him."

The men, now including Unk and Joe, went to the porch, and the horn blower asked her, "Aunt Mollie, did he give you any idea where he might be a-going?"

She was rocking her legs nervously as she answered, "No, he just said it was too good a day not to go out and kill a few squirrels for a gumbo. Usually when he wanted to shoot squirrels, he'd go downstream along the creek."

"He didn't go no other places some of the time, did he?"

"Not that I know of, Child."

Seeming to scold herself she muttered, "I tried to git him not to go, but no—he just had to make another hunt. He was too old and stooped to be out in the woods like that. When he didn't come home at dark, I got real worried, but had no way to contact anyone."

She put her head in her hands and continuing muttering inaudibly. One of the women sitting by her stroked her hair and said, "Aunt Mollie, don't you worry none! He's all right—and he was gonna go hunting whether you let him go or not."

The men quickly gathered and each agreed to search a particular area. Instructions were given as to how to make contact when he was found. The men with guns were told to shoot three times in succession. The others with cow horns were told to blow them in sets of three. Joe and Unk, who had neither, were told to just start hollering and quickly work their way back to the house.

One fellow asked, "Do you reckon he could have crossed the creek?" Everyone looked around and finally a man replied, "No, I don't believe he would. I can't see him getting out on a log or wading.

Everyone headed out quickly in his assigned direction. Joe and Unk trotted toward the creek and began a step-by-step process of trying to cover all of the hardwoods area on the near bank. They got about forty yards apart and began walking parallel to the creek.

Unk would holler about every ten steps, “Uncle Arch. Where ye at? Come on out, Uncle Arch. Aunt Mollie’s got breakfast ready.”

As they worked their way along the small draws among the beech and hickory groves, they watched carefully for any signs of footprints, but found none. All this time, Unk kept up his calling, “Uncle Archie Weeks. Where ‘bout are ye? Come on out, Uncle Arch. Hide and seek’s over. It’s time to come home.”

Joe kept thinking about an old man this age being stranded in the woods overnight. It’d not been too cold last night, but there had been a light frost, which meant it had gotten below forty degrees. Not a good night for a fellow to be lost in the woods.

After Unk and Joe had been searching for thirty minutes and had gone what he estimated was nearly a mile, Joe walked over to Unk. “I just don’t believe he went this far, do you?”

“It would be a fer piece for an old crippled man to stumble along. Anyway, there’s plenty of squirrel places way back there.”

Joe asked, “Unk, you don’t think he wandered up into the pines do you?”

“I wouldn’t think so. Don’t nobody hunt squirrels in the pine stands. The fox squirrels will cut pine cones in the mixed stands of oak and pine, but they don’t like to leave the acorns and beech mast. No one knew that better than Uncle Arch.”

“Could he have crossed the creek?”

“I don’t think he would have—or could have. I can’t see him wading the creek at any ford, and that flat log crossing ain’t been used by Uncle Arch in years.”

“Could there—would there—have been any reason for him to cross the creek?”

Unk thought for a minute. ”I don’t see why. You can git squirrels easier on this side.”

They discussed their options and decided to retrace their steps, moving up from the creek. They walked more quickly in their return due to their belief that the lost hunter wasn’t in this area.

Joe asked, “Hey Unk, what is across the creek where the flat-log crossing is?”

“Nothin’ but more woods like this—then there is a bay gall with a slough in it.”

Joe stopped in his tracks; he knew exactly the area Unk had just described. It was the spot where he’d once spent the night soon after entering this part of No Man’s Land. It was the first time he’d ever seen wood ducks and the place had made a lasting impression on him.

“Unk, you just keep working your way along the creek until you get back near the cabin. I’m going across the creek just to have a look around.”

“I believe you’re jes’ wasting your time.”

“Well, so be it, but I just feel I need to take a look.”

Joe quickly came to the crossing over Cherry Winche. It was actually an old hickory that had fallen years ago during some past high water. Someone had notched the top of the log with an ax. This made for a flatter and rougher walking surface.

The log had a good bit of age on it—covered with slick green moss and showed signs of rotting, so Joe walked carefully onto it. He looked below in the water for any sign of where a person might have fallen. It was a good twenty feet down to the water—not a good distance to fall. He examined closely the top of the log for any signs that someone had recently crossed and found none. Joe considered stopping, turning around, and returning. He just couldn’t see a person Uncle Arch’s age and condition getting on this log—.

It was where the log ended that he saw it—one human footprint on the muddy bank. There was nothing else. Damp leaves covered the rest of the trail and there was no sign where, or if, the footprint had continued. If Uncle Arch had crossed here, Joe now had an idea where he had been headed.

He thought about hollering for the other men, but didn't. He'd wait and see first.

He remembered that the slough began where the swamp changed from hardwood to surrounding pines. It was a bay gall—a wet wooded area surrounded by dry land.

On one of his visits with Arch and Mollie, he had asked Uncle Arch about the wood duck slough. The old man's eyes lit up, and Joe remembered well Arch's ensuing story: "Boy, that's the first place I ever shot a wood duck. I was probably ten or so. I crawled up on the slough and shot me a pretty wood duck drake. I brought it home and my momma made me clean it, and we had the best duck gumbo I've ever tasted to this day."

Thinking back on the light in Uncle Arch's face when he'd told this story, Joe was pretty sure he knew at least where the old Ten Miler was headed. He considered hollering for him, but decided if he was there, he'd find him soon enough.

He saw the oak trees and then the dark water of the slough. Approaching the east side of the slough, Joe saw what he was looking for—the old man was sitting peacefully against a tree right by the water. He looked so peaceful there and seemed to be asleep.

But when Joe walked up to him, he realized he wasn't asleep. Joe Moore had seen enough dead people to recognize one when he saw one now—Uncle Arch was dead. He knelt down by him and placed his hand on his shoulder. The stiff body—its coldness—the color of his skin—were all mute testimony that he'd been dead a while, probably since the evening before.

There were several things that instantly caught Joe's attention: First of all was how Uncle Arch had a wood duck drake in his right hand. Even in death, he held the bird firmly by the neck. Two fox squirrels lay beside the shotgun that leaned against the tree. The old man's boots were wet as well as his pants up to just above the knees.

The second thing Joe noticed—the one that would stay in his mind—was the look on Uncle Arch's face. There was a slight smile, frozen there by death. His eyes were closed and a deep look of peace was on his grizzled face.

He couldn't take his eyes off the man's face. Joe thought back to all of the death he had seen during the famine. The visage of a person who had starved to death very seldom looked peaceful. It was a slow, hopeless, and undignified way to die.

But here was something totally different. Looking around, Joe could nearly reassemble the last minutes of Uncle Arch's life: slipping up on the slough and shooting that drake wood duck—just like he'd done as a boy. Then slowly wading out into the shallow slough to retrieve his kill, coming back out of the water with the duck, going over to the tree where he'd leaned the shotgun, all the time thinking about how good eating this would be in Mollie's gumbo.

Probably he'd been winded from the excitement of the hunt, so he'd sat down against the tree to catch his breath—and then he'd just gone to sleep.

Joe shook his head. There were lots of worse ways to go than how Uncle Arch Weeks had left this earth, holding a wood duck firmly in his right hand, sitting against a beech tree.

He recalled an old Irish saying often overheard at the wakes of those who'd lived a long life with much of their last years filled with sickness and agony: "He lived a lot longer than he should have had to." He smiled wanly as he looked at the peaceful face of Uncle Arch. He had lived just right. He'd done what every rural man—whether in Ireland or America wanted to do—he'd died with his boots on.

Joe thought about picking him up to carry him back across the creek, then he decided against it. He'd learned enough about the Ten Mile men to know they would want to see this sight for themselves.

So leaving the body right where it was, Joe headed back to the creek where he began hollering. Within fifteen minutes, four of the men, including Unk, came running.

"I found him. He's dead over by that slough."

They peppered him with questions, for which he simply answered, "You need to see it for yourself."

The five of them got to the slough and surrounded Uncle Arch's body. No one said a word for nearly a minute. Then one exclaimed, "Now if I could choose how to go, that's how'd it be, fellows. Just like that."

They all nodded in agreement. Finally, Unk commented, "It looks like he jes' nodded off asleep and woke up with Jesus."

Joe added, "He once told me this is where he killed his first wood duck."

One of the men added, "Yep, and it's whar he killed his last one, too."

Two of the men hoisted up the body, another got the shotgun, unloaded it, and put it on his shoulder.

As the men carried Uncle Arch's body up from the creek, one went ahead to tell Aunt Mollie the bad news and prepare her for the arrival of her husband's body.

As the men finally arrived, there was great weeping as Arch's body was brought up to the porch. Aunt Mollie, surrounded by neighbors, put her head on his chest and sobbed over and over, "My Arch, my sweet Arch."

Some of the women had quickly begun preparing for the traditions and rituals that went along with a Ten Mile death. The kitchen table had been cleared and covered with a sheet. The body was tenderly placed on it. One of the women shut the door and Joe could see through the window that they were beginning to prepare the body.

Aunt Mollie sat on the porch surrounded by neighbors who had come to help with the search. Joe, standing out in the yard, felt a soft hand slip into his. He quickly turned and there was Eliza.

"I heard what happened, Joe. I'm sorry you had to be the one to find him."

Joe looked into her dark eyes, "No, Eliza, I was the one meant to find him. I'm not sorry at all. I'm glad I got to see where he was and how he went. The peaceful look on his face was something I won't ever forget."

She tightened her grip on his hand and whispered, "Joe, on one of my many visits here, Uncle Arch commented, 'This here is where I was born and where I plan to turn up my toes. Right here in Ten Mile country.'"

Joe looked into her magical eyes and the words came right out of him, "I wouldn't mind turning up my toes here either."

No words were said for a long time but they weren't needed. The closeness of their bodies, the interlocking of their hands, and the look in their eyes said more than words could convey.

Just then, a man came over, "Hey, Moore. Aunt Mollie wants to see you over on the porch."

Joe looked at Eliza before releasing his grasp on her hand. But she didn't let go. In fact she tightened it. Joe heard her whisper, "I'm going with you."

The crowd of mourners parted to allow Joe and Eliza to approach the old woman. Tears stained her cheeks, but she had a quiet smile that was eerily similar to what Joe had seen on Uncle Arch's face.

"They told me you were the one to find him. I want to hear all about it from you, so come over here closer, Joe Moore."

Looking directly into her eyes, forgetting that anyone else was around, he told the story of finding Uncle Arch.

His sing-songy Irish accent was full of passion as he told the story. Aunt Mollie smiled and nodded her head as Joe shared the details.

By now, the women had prepared the body. The table with Uncle Arch on it was moved into the front room of the cabin. Aunt Mollie was placed in a chair by the table and patiently greeted each guest. By now it was late evening, and as the sun set, neighbors continued to call to pay their respects.

During this time, Eliza and Joe stood outside in the dark front yard. As they watched neighbors coming, many were bringing food for the family. Joe asked, "Liza, what are some of the things ya'll do here when there's a death?"

"Well, they'll not leave his body alone until the burial. It's a sign of respect."

Eliza added, "Normally, with a person Uncle Arch's age, they die in the house and it is often expected. The clock is stopped at the time of death and all mirrors in the house are covered with a drape."

Joe said, "We do the same thing with the mirrors. It's an Irish legend that the spirit of a person cannot leave if they can see themselves in a mirror."

Eliza answered, "I've always heard we cover the mirrors due to it not being a time for vanity." Then she asked, "Do people come to visit and keep the body and family company in Ireland?"

"Yes, neighbors come in and go to family members and say, 'I am sorry for your trouble.' In Irish we say it, 'Ni maith liom do thriobloid.'"

She leaned her head on his shoulder and said, "I like the way you say that, Joe."

"Good, you hang around me and I might teach ye some Irish."

She nuzzled closer, "Joe, I plan on hangin' around you…for a good long time."

They both smiled and moved even closer to each other, if that was possible. It was nice to be together like this. Amid the hustle and bustle of the wake, they were not being noticed, and that was fine with both of them.

Joe asked, "When will they bury him?"

"He'll be buried before sunset tomorrow."

"Where at?"

"They've got a small family plot up the creek."

The rest of the long night was filled with people milling about, visiting, laughing, and telling stories of Uncle Arch's rich life. It may have seemed a long night to some of the gathered mourners, but to Eliza and Joe it was always remembered as one of the best nights of their lives.

From time to time, Eliza would slip into the house to help with the food and cleaning. But soon, she would be back to grab Joe's hand. Around midnight as the crowd thinned, Joe and Eliza moved to the front porch swing and rocked as the night sounds of the crickets and frogs surrounded them.

The coming of daylight was way too soon for both of them. They'd never had this much extended time together.

In the future, Joe liked to tell Eliza, much to her embarrassment, "The first night we spent together was when Uncle Arch Weeks died."

With daybreak, people began coming and going at the Weeks home. Several men on a wagon came by. Eliza told Joe, “They’re going to build the grave house.”

“What’s a grave house?”

“In this neck of the woods, it is an honored tradition to build a small fenced wooden shed over the grave. It must be built on the day of the burial.”

“Why does it have to be done that day?”

“I’m not sure on that, but it will be beautiful. You’ll see it for yourself later today.”

About mid-morning, Joe was standing near the pines when one of the men came over, “Irishman, Aunt Mollie wants to talk to you.”

Going up in the front room, he knelt beside her. She said, “Son, Arch liked you and saw a lot in you.” Looking around at the gathered mourners, especially the men, she continued, “He said you was made out of good stock and was going to make a good man.” She hesitated long enough for her comment to take hold among the listeners.

“I’d like for you to be one of the pallbearers for Arch.”

Joe wasn’t sure what she had just asked. He’d never heard the word “pallbearer” before. However, Aunt Mollie’s voice and the reaction of everyone in the crowd told him she’d just asked him to do something important.

“Aunt Mollie, I’d do anything for you and Uncle Arch.”

For all Joe knew, he had just volunteered to take care of Aunt Mollie for the rest of her life, but it didn’t matter.

As he walked away from the house, Eliza approached him. He whispered, “What in the devil is a ‘pill borer?’“

Eliza tried to suppress a giggle as she answered, “Aunt Mollie asked you to be a pallbearer—to help tote Uncle Arch’s body to his grave.”

Now Joe understood. ”Oh you mean carrying the cisteog! She wants me to help with the coffin. A ‘cisteog’—that’s what we call it in Ireland!”

The time for the funeral service approached as the afternoon came. They brought the body out on the porch so everyone could see and hear as the crowd gathered around the porch.

Reverend Willis was in bed with the flu and couldn’t come, so song leader Hiram Bass began the service leading, “Amazing Grace.”

He would sing one line and allow the crowd to sing it back to him. It was what the Ten Milers called “beck and call,” where the song leader would sing or speak a line of the song with the choir singing it back.

Joe leaned over to Eliza and whispered, “In an Irish service, a group of women called ‘keeners’ gather around the body and beginning chanting, wailing, and singing. This is called ‘keening.’ Just like here, there is a leader who calls out the words and sets the rhythm for the keening. It is a key part of an Irish wake.”

“Why do they do that?”

“It’s just a traditional part of our wakes. Some families will even pay the best keeners to come and wail over their deceased loved one.”

The singers continued with their mournful, but victorious, version of Amazing Grace. Reaching the last verse, several began to cry as they sang the words, “We’ve no less days, to sing God’s praise, than when we first begun.”

Listening, Joe wasn’t sure if their wailing was due to the loss of Arch Weeks, or just the deep emotions of their hearts finding a reason to be expressed, or maybe both.

He watched the faces of the singers—eyes closed, faces uplifted, tears streaming down cheeks—in many ways just like the keeners of his homeland.

During the singing, Aunt Mollie sat surrounded by neighbors. Several women had their arms around her as they sang and wept. She had tears running down her cheeks, too, but a quiet smile was on her face. Eliza bumped him, saying, "See Joe, they're giving her what we call 'their gift of tears.' By sharing her sorrow and showing it, they are revealing their love and respect for Uncle Arch's life."

Several men got up and made short speeches testifying to the rich life of Arch Weeks. They talked about his faith, friendship, how much fun he was, and how he was loved by everyone.

Finally, one of them ended this part of the service with, "Well, Uncle Arch really preached his own funeral by the life he lived for over eighty years here along Cherry Winche. There ain't no words we can speak that would do more justice than the life he lived. So, we'll pray now and load him on the wagon and take him to his final resting place." He prayed a short heart-felt prayer and the crowd helped him end it with a resounding 'Amen!'

Eliza pushed Joe forward, "You're to go help put him on the wagon."

As Joe climbed the steps, they brought Aunt Mollie forward for one last look before the lid was nailed shut. This was a tender moment that set off a new round of crying and weeping among the assembled mourners.

Watching all of the friends pass by one last time, Joe realized this was their way of saying goodbye. After another thirty minutes of crying and passing by, two men put the lid on the coffin, nailing it shut. The sound of the hammer was matched only by the weeping of the women.

Five other men stepped forward and one motioned to Joe. Three ropes were strung underneath the coffin and the pallbearers each took an end of rope and lifted the coffin off the kitchen table.

Being careful not to let it slide off as they descended the porch, they placed the coffin on the flat bed wagon and stepped back. The man nearest him whispered, "We'll just walk behind the wagon until we get to the grave spot."

Joe dropped back and found Eliza as they began their walk through the tall pines. Joe asked, "Do your people stop for prayer at the half-way point?"

"What do you mean?"

"Our people stop at the place half-way between the house and graveyard for the Lord's Prayer. It's kind of a reminder that we've passed the point of no return."

"No, I've never heard of that."

In about a half mile, the walkers came into view of the burial spot, and Joe saw that a shed, just big enough to cover the grave, had been erected. The roof was of cypress shingles with four skinned poles for the corner posts. Lying to the side was a pile of fence pickets that he surmised would later be a small fence around the grave.

The men helped Aunt Mollie off the wagon as the pallbearers pulled the coffin off the wagon and carried it to the grave. Several rough planks had been laid across the hole for the coffin to rest on. Everyone gathered around as one of the men took out a worn Bible and read from John 15: "Jesus said, 'I am the resurrection and the life. He that believeth in me hath life.'"

He then added, "Folks, we done brung Uncle Arch as far as we kin take him. We're committing his body back to the ground from which Adam came. Now his soul is at rest with Jesus. Aunt Mollie, this here's as far as we kin go with him."

He prayed a short prayer and then most of the women walked over to a nearby cedar tree and began breaking off small twigs.

Eliza whispered, “Every cemetery has an evergreen cedar tree. Because it is green year round and can live for well over a century, it symbolizes eternal life to our people. They’ll put these branches on his coffin as a sign of respect, as well as their belief in life after death.”

A small girl took her twig over to Aunt Mollie who accepted it tenderly and gave her a kiss on the forehead. Together they placed the cedar limb on the coffin. Aunt Mollie tenderly patted the coffin as she said, “Goodbye, Arch. You sure were a good husband! Even though we argued a lot, I loved you deeply.”

This commenced the crying and wailing among the women and even some of the men. Aunt Mollie ended it by slowly turning and saying, “Well folks, we’ve done what we can. I thank y’all for coming and helping. Let’s go home now.”

They helped her back onto the wagon and the crowd closed in as the procession started back to the home place.

Before leaving, every man and boy picked up a handful of red dirt from the heap beside the grave and placed it on the coffin. This was done wordlessly but with deep feeling.

Only the pallbearers remained. Joe looked toward the wagon, surrounded by the other mourners, and heard the crowd singing soulfully as they went out of sight:

What a friend we have in Jesus.
All our sins and griefs to bear.

Back at the grave, the ropes were placed back under the coffin and they lifted it up so the planks could be removed. Carefully working together, they slowly lowered the coffin to the bottom of the grave. One of the men, with a big wad of tobacco in his right cheek said, “Careful boys, we don’t wanna knock loose Uncle Arch’s false teeth when we hit the bottom.”

Some observers might have thought this joking was out of place, but it was a key part of the Redbone personality—a man who’d been crying bitterly minutes before, now joking.

Uncle Arch Weeks, a lifelong native of the Ten Mile community, would have laughed himself if he could have.

They then began the process of filling the grave. Soon the hole was filled with red dirt. They continued piling the dirt on top of the ground.

An old man who seemed to be in charge said, “It’ll sink boys, and we don’t want no sink hole here, so keep piling.”

Through with their chore, they gathered the ropes and shovels and set out for the Weeks’ homestead.

Joe stayed to watch the grave house workers assemble the picket fence around the grave, complete with a small hinged gate. The grave house, especially in this secluded spot among the pines, was beautiful to Joe.

Finally, he began the walk back to the Weeks’ home place. It was nearing sunset and the long evening shadows of late winter were falling over the woods. A lone figure slipped out of the pines behind him.

He heard a soft voice, “You did good, Joe.”

He smiled as he embraced Eliza. ”I sure hope so.”

“You did just fine.”

After they had hugged and kissed, they began walking. Joe asked as he pointed back toward the grave site, “Eliza, what about that house back there?”

"Joe, it's a part of our culture. Practically, it's to keep the livestock from getting on the grave. But it is also built in the belief that it gives comfort to the dead as a house where their body is.

"Family and friends will also keep bringing shells on the grave. They'll get mussel shells from the creek, whitewash them, and place them on the grave until it is covered."

"What does that mean?"

"I'm not sure it even has a specific meaning. My grandma said it had been handed down from our Indian ancestors. All I know is that it is a part of any old grave site."

It was dark as they neared the old couple's home. Behind them they could still hear faint hammering at the grave house back in the pines. Ahead of them, they could hear the unmistakable sound of singing coming from the home of Arch and Mollie Weeks.

Joe stopped and pulled Eliza close to him. As their lips touched and he embraced her tightly, time seemed to stop for both of them—at the halfway point between the homestead and grave of Uncle Arch Weeks.

Chapter 42

Joe was making what he called his “firewood rounds”: he would go by Aunt Mollie’s, then the Sweats, and finally Miz Girlie’s. By the end of the day, he would have supplied every family with plenty of smaller sticks for the wood stove, as well as larger ones for the fireplace. In return, he would have a bag full of canned vegetables, meat, and supplies on his return home.

He was at Girlie’s house. A big red oak had blown down during the ice storm and it would supply enough wood for the remainder of the winter. Catching his breath, he stopped, leaning on his ax. It was a cold, windy day, perfect for chopping wood.

He watched Miz Girlie scampering about the yard and could easily tell she was troubled about something. A dead giveaway was when she puffed rapidly on her pipe. Watching her now, Joe thought she looked like one of those steamboats he’d seen on the river.

He dropped his ax and walked to the house. ”Miz Girlie, something’s bothering you. What is it?”

She refused to look at him but spoke, “I’m just troubled in my heart, Joe. I had a bad dream last night when the weather changed. This north wind has an evil feel to it that I can’t put my hand on. I’d swear I smell smoke in it.”

The cold front had moved through during the night. It didn’t have a great deal of rain in it, but the subsequent cold wind that it brought was unusually strong. By noon that day, the wind had only intensified and was blowing down pine straw and small limbs.

As Girlie stood staring off, Joe commented, “This is the strongest wind I’ve seen since arriving in America. It does remind me of how the wind often blew near the sea back home.”

Girlie continued, “This is an evil wind. If fire breaks out anywhere, with all of the limbs and trees down from that ice storm back in December and the grass being killed by those heavy frosts, it could mean trouble for everyone.”

“Is there something we should do?”

Girlie seemed to be smelling the wind, testing it as if it bore some message that only a woods woman like her could feel, sense, or touch. She stood there silently as the pine straw blew down like raindrops.

Finally, she turned to him. ”Yes, Joe—I want you to hook up the mule and plow us some fire lanes over there on the north side. Then I’ll get all of our buckets out and you draw up water and fill them all, then we’ll go break off some pine limbs and soak them in the water bucket.”

She stopped and seemed to be saying to herself even though she spoke loud enough for Joe to hear, “I know I’m over-reacting, but I just got this feeling in my bones.”

Joe took care of all of the chores she’d lined out. He figured she just had a good case of the nerves—the trouble with the land company had kept everyone on edge. This was probably much ado about nothing—but if it made her happy, he was glad to do it.

The wind only seemed to pick up stronger as the afternoon wore on. Because it was a strong north wind, it quickly dried out the ground from the night’s rain.

The thought of what a fire would do in these conditions did give Joe pause for thought. He'd once heard Uncle Arch talk about a winter woods fire that got in the tops of the pines and burned from tree to tree, whipped along by the wind. Looking up to where their first limbs began forty feet high, he couldn't imagine a fire doing that.

Later that evening as he prepared to leave, Miz Girlie said, "Joe, I don't mean to bother you, but I'd feel better if you'd stay. I'm worried about fire and I'd appreciate you sticking around to help if there's trouble."

"Of course, I'll stay, if it'll make you feel better."

"It will."

Normally a late winter cold front would blow through quickly and the winds would subside by the next day. However, that night the wind seemed to intensify. He could tell Girlie was still troubled by the cold wind. After they relit the lamp she said, "Joe, get out my Bible. I'd like for you to read out of Psalms. Baby, look over there in…I believe…Psalm 46."

Joe put the book right up by the lantern and began with the first verse of that chapter: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble—therefore will not…we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea…"

She said, "That's it. Stop right there. Now, read it again."

Joe read it again—this time slower.

Girlie had her eyes closed and was rocking slowly in her chair.

He heard her whisper, "God…our refuge…our strength…a very present he'p in trouble."

When the wind blew in under the door and the lamp flickered, she gave a shudder. As the lamp went out for the third time, Miz Girlie said, "I'm going to bed." Joe climbed up in the attic to a corner bed and settled down for the night. Joe kind of enjoyed bad weather and the moaning wind put him right to sleep. He felt as if he was back home again along the windy shores of the Atlantic.

He slept pretty well that night, but was awakened several times by things banging around outside. Once, he sat up to look around and could clearly see Girlie's silhouette sitting in a chair, watching out the window.

With daylight, a busy morning commenced with the wind still blowing with fury. The usual chores and taking care of the animals kept both of them busy. As they returned to the yard, Joe asked, "Are you still troubled about the weather?"

She knelt down and picked up a small handful of dust, smelled of it, and tossed it into the wind. It was instantly scattered and gone. "That evil wind hasn't slowed down one bit. If anything, it's worse. I wouldn't be so worried if the ground weren't so dry." She swept her hand through the air as if by doing that she could calm the wind or dampen the air.

"Joe, there weren't one bit of dew last night—too much wind. Yes, I am still worried and can't quite tell you exactly why."

Joe Moore would always remember her actions and mannerisms that morning. There was something unsettling, yet reassuring, about the old woman's connection with the weather and the woods. It had amazed him when he first met her and he was no less amazed a year and a half later.

About two o'clock that afternoon was when they first smelled the smoke. They couldn't see it yet, but the strong wind blew it in from the north. They stood on the porch and knew there was fire somewhere to the north and with this wind, it would be moving in their direction.

Girlie sprung into action. “Joe, saddle up Dallas and get ready to go warn our neighbors. I’ll turn all of the stock and chickens loose.”

The next few minutes were whirlwinds of activity. Joe didn’t feel the anxiety about the situation Girlie did, but out of respect for her he hurriedly saddled up and rode over to where she was uncooping chickens and letting the pigs out.

“You ride over to warn the Wilson and the Sweat families. You just tell them I sent you. Tell them I’m coming and we’ll meet at the crossing on Cherry Winche. The key will be to stay near a good body of water.”

“But what about the house here?”

“We’ll worry about that later. Right now taking care of folks is way more important than pine logs and cypress shingles.” She took a burlap sack out of the water barrel and tossed it up to him. ”Keep that behind your saddle. You might need it.” The heavy wet bag sloshed water all over him as he caught it. She shouted, “Now git on and go.”

Joe rode quickly to the nearby homes. He was alarmed at how quickly the smoke was coming in the wind. When he stopped at the clearing near the Sweat home, he took a deep breath when he saw the thick billowing smoke far off behind the trees. What also scared him was the width of the fire. It seemed to stretch all the way across the horizon. This didn’t look like a normal woods fire to him. It had to have been—it must have been—set. There had been too much trouble with the land company not to doubt that they would do nearly anything. Could they have set this fire? He didn’t really have time to ponder that more closely. The fire was clearly coming their way and action—not thinking—was needed.

Joe also knew where he was going as soon as he finished warning these two families—nothing was going to stop him from getting to the Clark house.

Joe spurred Dallas and they headed toward Eliza’s house. Dallas galloped through the pines as the wind blew strongly. On a normal day this would have been an exhilarating ride, but nothing was normal about the unfolding events.

He soon reached Eliza’s home. She, her momma and Eli were out in the yard, staring at the billowing smoke you could now see clearly in the distance. Eliza ran up, saying “Joe, Poppa’s gone south and won’t be back today. We’re not sure what to do.”

As he dismounted she grabbed his hand and held him—right in front of her mother—and said, “I’m glad you came, Joe.”

“Eliza, what we need to do fast is to let all of the animals out. Turn them loose so they can run ahead of the fire. There’s not much else we can do here except hope. Everyone else is meeting at the crossing on Cherry Winche.”

He turned to her brother, “Eli, saddle up both of the other horses. We’re riding out of here as fast as we can.” He walked over to Virginia Clark. “Mrs. Clark, is there anything you’d like me to do?”

She stared at him speechlessly before replying, “Joe, I thank you for coming. I think your idea to clear out is the right one. Thank you.”

Her voice and face had that same look of respect she’d shown him lately. He couldn’t describe how that made him feel, but there wasn’t time to hold feelings closely. It was time for action.

He began, with Eliza’s help, drawing water and pouring it on the rail fence and the north side of the house. He pushed down the woodpile that stood along the fence. “Scatter that firewood out so it won’t burn in a wad.” He was a whirlwind of action. Deep inside he wasn’t sure any of this would make a difference, but to do nothing was not an option.

The horses were saddled and the three of them mounted up and rode south. All of them looked back worriedly at their cabin and outbuildings. In the far distance, you could actually see tongues of fire above the trees. Virginia Clark exclaimed, "That's got to be a tree-top fire, if I've ever seen one."

Before they parted, the last words were spoken not by Eliza, but by her mother. "Joe, we'll see you at the creek crossing." Holding up a metal box, she added, "I know you'll be there."

Eliza looked at her mother and Joe quizzically before they all spurred their horses and took off.

The three Clarks rode quickly to the crossing. A good number of folks were gathered there. There were all kinds of discussions going on concerning what to do. Some wanted to return to their homes to try to save them, but wiser heads prevailed on that being a bad idea. Joe heard someone in the crowd say, "Let's stay near the creek. It's the safest place to be." A murmur of agreement swept the crowd.

Thirty minutes after their arrival is when Joe rode up and quickly dismounted. He walked among the crowd trying to take an inventory of the faces he wanted to see. He was relieved when he saw Girlie standing to the side. Unk waved at him across the crowd. One of the two families he'd warned—the Sweat clan—was already there but he didn't see the other. That worried him.

One family riding up had fearful news that caused great emotion. The wife hollered out, "We saw men setting those fires. Up north toward West Crossing, there were fellows riding along, setting the fires!"

An angry ripple flooded through the crowd. Everyone there instantly assumed it was the Timber people behind it.

At this moment, Unk came up. He went to Joe and whispered in his ear. Eliza saw Joe stiffen. It was obviously news that alarmed him. He and Unk had a short discussion replete with much gesturing and pointing to the northeast.

Then, Joe ran to his horse. As he got on Dallas, he yelled, "Does anyone know about Aunt Mollie Weeks? Did anyone see her?" A look of fear spread across the crowd just like the billowing smoke.

The Weeks homestead, where Aunt Mollie still lived alone, was isolated from the other settlers. It was down the creek from most of the other homes, and no one had thought to go check on her—until this moment.

Everyone looked in the direction of towering smoke and could easily see the fire was headed straight for Aunt Mollie's home. Everyone also knew it was too late to beat the fire to her. The fire was now between where they stood and her place.

However, one person wasn't thinking—he was only reacting. Joe Moore was up in his saddle and spurring Dallas to wheel away from the crowd before anyone could react.

Eliza only had time to holler, "Joe, wait—!" before he was gone.

What amazed the crowd watching Joe spur the horse is where he went. He didn't ride toward the Weeks home—not at first. He rode Dallas right off into Cherry Winche Creek, past the shallow crossing into a deep hole in the creek. He reined the horse right into the deepest water where Dallas had to swim. They both were soaked when they exited up on the other side and clambered up the bank and headed straight into the teeth of the fire.

An observer blurted out, "What in Sam Hill is that fool a-doing?" Eliza wanted to hit him, but before she could speak or react, her own mother said, "It looks to me as if he's going to rescue Aunt Mollie." Eliza and the others looked in amazement at her mother. Until recently, she would have been very happy to get rid of Joe Moore, even if it meant him burning up in a fire.

Another observer said, “Who was that idiot?” This time Joe Moore’s honor was defended by another member of the Clark family. Eli Clark blurted out, “That ain’t no idiot. That’s the Irishman Joe Moore. He’s going to get Aunt Mollie Weeks!”

The knot of people at the crossing watched as Joe and Dallas disappeared into the distance. There was nothing to do but wait and see now.

Riding hard, Joe reached behind him for the wet burlap sack. It was just what he needed for what he had planned next. He could see the fire now. It was raging on both the ground as well as running wickedly high up in the trees. He’d never imagined anything like this! It was a blazing inferno that seemed to be creating its own wind and energy as it consumed everything in sight.

Dallas sensed the danger and tried to wheel parallel to the fire but Joe’s grip on the reins turned her back straight. He leaned in and tried to soothe her, “Just trust me here. We’ll get through this together.” As they neared the smoke, which obscured the remaining distance to the fire, Joe said, “Well, it’s now or never, Dallas.”

He drew up the horse and came to a stop. They were both still wet from their swim in the creek and that would be in their favor. He looked vainly for another source of water—even a stump hole or hog wallow—but none was to be found.

He got off the horse and began walking her toward the smoke. Carefully he placed the sack over her head. She winced and hesitated but he spoke reassuredly into her ear. ”Come on now. You can trust me. If I’m going with you, we’ll be all right. We’ll do this together.”

The smoke covered them and obliterated all sense of direction. He bent low to try to stay below the thickest smoke. Dallas was shaking her head and snorting. Joe was coughing and his eyes burned from the smoke as crackling embers flew past them.

Finally, he knew it was time. He jumped back into the saddle and spurred Dallas. Instinctively she tried to turn away from the flames. They were close enough that they could both feel the intense heat.

The only way he kept his bearing was to move toward the terrible roar and crackling of the fire line. He held the reins tightly, kept her head straight, and spurred her with all of his might. The only way to do this was full force with no chance of retreat.

The horse responded with a great surge fueled by fear, adrenaline, and power. Fortunately they were in a small draw that although not filled with water, retained enough moisture to dampen the fire at the very spot they tore into it.

Joe felt the hair on his arm and face singe. He laid his body across the horse’s neck. Dallas snorted in pain but plowed straight ahead.

Then all at once—amazingly—they were through it. There were still small fires burning on the far side of the wall of flame, but he could breathe again. He couldn’t believe they had made it. With a short prayer, he thanked God and got his bearings as they stormed away toward Aunt Mollie’s place.

Aunt Mollie Weeks had seen enough of life to know trouble when she saw it. Only, on this day she smelled it before she saw it. When she smelled the smoke she immediately knew that a serious situation was developing. A north wind like this—combined with the conditions on the ground from the ice storm, dryness, and humidity—and now smoke could only mean one thing: a woods fire was moving her way.

And she couldn’t do one thing about it! She couldn’t run. She knew she couldn’t out-walk it. She’d rather die in her house than be caught outside in the fire. Unless someone came to help her, she was stuck. Looking at the direction of the billowing smoke, she knew all chance of

rescue lay on the vain hope of someone coming from the other side of the flames. So she realistically faced up to the seriousness of her situation.

As she had done countless times in the days and weeks since Arch's death, she talked to him. "Well, Honey, it looks like I'm coming to see you. Evidently our separation's not going to be long at all. I just can think of a lot of ways I'd rather leave this old earth other than being burnt up like a stick of stove wood."

She got down her Bible and went into the front room. The smoke was filling the room as it seeped in under the door and wall cracks on the north side of the house. Maybe the smoke would choke her before the fire got here. That would be merciful if it happened.

All of her life she had turned to the Lord in the tough times of her life. Today would be no different. She set the Bible in her lap. She could barely read, but knew by heart the verses she now needed. From memory, she quoted,

"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. 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, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me—"

It was just then that she heard the feet on her porch. She also thought she heard the snorting of a horse. She looked up as the door swung open and there through the smoke stood Joe Moore, the Irishman.

"Aunt Mollie, are you ready to go?"

"Well, I guess I am, Son. I was just getting ready to go be with Arch in Heaven, but it looks like you done gone and messed that up. So I guess I am ready to go—yes, I'll go with you. You mind if I bring my Bible and this here picture of me and Arch?"

"Yes, Ma'am, you bring them, but let's get out now!"

Joe Moore carried her out as she clutched the Bible and an old picture to her breast. He watched her face as he trotted toward his waiting horse. She was looking back—never taking her eyes off the house where she'd lived for all of her life. Tears rolled down her cheeks as he lifted her up on the horse, got on, and they rode away.

Neither one looked back as the flames engulfed the old home place on Cherry Winche Creek.

Folks who were gathered that day gathered at the creek crossing still talk about when Joe Moore and Aunt Mollie burst through the smoking woods.

They were both singed and Dallas was covered in black soot as they swung right through the crowd. Aunt Mollie was holding on for dear life and whooping loudly.

The story was repeated, added to, and became legendary among the Ten Milers.

Joe's rescue of Aunt Mollie stopped any visible opposition to the Irishman's immigration into the Ten Mile community. He was now a hero, and heroes are always welcome, even if they are an outsider, even in a place called Ten Mile.

As he wheeled Dallas to a stop and the crowd descended on them, he found himself looking into the eyes of Eliza and her mother. Both of them had a big smile.

For some strange reason, Joe's mind drifted back to that fateful day nearly two years ago when he had lain along the stone wall. He remembered his pessimistic thought: I've always known it was going to end this way—

Happily, he'd been wrong. For that day in Ireland had changed his life and brought him to this new land—and the end result was a new life in a new land.

He remembered his Mother's words: "Every step of your life—ordered—and directed—by God." He now believed she was right.

At that moment, he finally realized something else: He was no longer a wayfaring stranger. First of all, he wasn't wandering anymore—his wayfaring days were over. Secondly, he no longer felt like a stranger. When you've found your home, you can never be a stranger again.

Epilogue

Their wedding was held on a sunny day in March. It seemed everyone in the area turned out for the ceremony at Occupy Church. Country folks have always loved weddings, and this was one they talked about for years to come. It was remembered not for being fancy but for the sheer joy of the couple who were wed. It was said to be the first wedding ever between a Ten Miler and an "outsider."

Memorable also was that it was the last wedding old Reverend Joseph Willis ever performed. Many of the folks said his blessing of the marriage was one of the major reasons the Ten Milers eventually accepted Joe Moore.

It was a day that neither Joe Moore nor Eliza Clark would ever forget.

Late that night as his new wife lay sleeping in his arms, Joe Moore lay in the quietness of their newly built log home in what would later be called the community of Westport. A full moon illuminated the bedroom as well as the yard outside. A cool nighttime breeze blew the curtains, which gave off a soft whisper, contrasting with the earlier loud events of this celebration of their wedding day.

Eliza nuzzled closer to him as she laid her head against his shoulder. The wonderful smell of her hair filled his nostrils as she sleepily smiled and snuggled closer. He stroked her dark hair as he thought about the wonders of this night he had waited so long for. Some things were definitely worth waiting for, and her sweet love was surely one of them. The troubles of winning her hand faded away as he thought about the joys of living with this woman who was now his wife.

In the soft moonlight, Joe looked at the pale skin of his arm draped across her dark back. It was one of the things that had always attracted him to Eliza—her brown skin that was so different from his own. He smiled as he realized that tonight he had touched that dark skin in ways, and places, no man ever had.

Joe Moore thought back over the events since the big fire. Many of the homes in Ten Mile, including his, had burned. The new house he and Eliza slept in was the third dwelling he had built on this spot. He hoped it was the last.

The burnout by the timber company had brought out the full fury of the Ten Milers against Travis Thomas and his company. No employee of the company was safe anywhere even near the area. Equipment and buildings were burned. The residents' reaction against the intruders was swift, aggressive, and without mercy.

Before long, Travis Thomas realized he was fighting an unwinnable guerilla war against these folks. He wisely pulled away from the idea of cutting timber anywhere west of the Calcasieu. The No Man's Land of western Louisiana became just that for him.

No one could ever agree on how many homes were actually destroyed by the Burnout. It was definitely over twelve but probably less than twenty. Amazingly, every home was rebuilt within months. The Ten Mile community pitched in and helped. A spirit of cooperation was

evident during those years, which had never been seen before, and sad to say, never existed quite like that again.

One by one as new homes were being erected, families who'd been burned out were the recipients of gifts of valuable gold coins. These would mysteriously appear in small bags on doorsteps where the burnout victims were staying. The monies were used to provide the items needed to re-build and restock their home places.

Drifting off to sleep, Joe wondered where the money came from. No one had a good explanation for the appearance of the coins. Several folks tried to tie it to Unk Dial. He always seemed to have been seen in the area about the time these bags appeared.

Joe didn't put much stock in those rumors. Unk didn't have any money. He'd heard one woman scoff, "Unk Dial, he ain't got a pot to pee in or a window to throw it out. Why would he be giving anyone money to re-build?"

One day, Joe had asked Unk if he knew anything about the coins. He just flashed his silly grin and silently shrugged his shoulders and used that common Ten Mile expression, "Aahh?"

Joe Moore had long ago learned this meant, "I don't have no idea."

Smiling as he snuggled up to Unk's niece, his new wife, Eliza, he whispered, "This is a good place to be."

Eliza smiled, pulled him closer, and sleepily replied, "It's the way I always thought it would end up. It sure is."

If you enjoyed The Wayfaring Stranger, you'll want to read A Good Place, the next book in The Westport Series. This is an excerpt from Chapter 1.

When Daddy shoved me under the table, I knew this wasn't just any storm.

As the crow flies, our Louisiana log cabin was a hundred miles from the Gulf of Mexico. When this day had quietly begun, no one had any idea a hurricane was churning ashore. However, here we were less than twelve hours later, riding it out under our kitchen table.

Watching Momma trying in vain to keep the lantern lit, a knot of fear as big as a turnip formed in my throat. Giving up on the lantern, she turned to Daddy. "This ain't no normal thunderstorm. Do you think . . .?"

She couldn't, or wouldn't, say the word. In her eyes was something I'd never seen before—raw fear. Her hand trembled as she placed it on my knee. Momma's obvious alarm moved Daddy into action, and he said the word she'd couldn't. "Hurricane—this has to be a hurricane."

Crawling from under the table, he said to her, "Eliza, get the windows covered best you can." Then he grabbed me. "Mayo, come with me to get the animals in."

On that August evening in 1862, I was nearly 12 and didn't have enough sense to realize the danger, so I eagerly joined him.

As soon as we cleared the lee of the house, the wind whipped us, tearing Daddy's hat right off his head. He ran toward the barn, not even looking back as the lightning outlined his silhouette with each strike. Reaching the building and pulling me inside, he said, "Pen the animals, and throw some hay in their troughs."

He hurried out, leaving me alone in the building's growing darkness with only whimpering animals. I found our horse, Dallas, and began stroking his mane. He was snorting, pawing, and shaking as bad as Momma, sensing some kind of evil blowing in that howling wind.

Daddy stuck his head back in, "Hurry, it ain't safe. Let's git." Hunkered down, we ran by our outbuildings, stopping only to bolt the smokehouse and adjacent kitchen.

I cowered under the walkway that connected our kitchen and house, holding onto a post. With my other hand, I covered my head as debris whizzed by.

A flying object struck Daddy square in the back, causing him to stumble. He turned toward me. "Whoa! Let's go." Scampering onto the porch, I heard the first tree crash, causing both the house and my heart to shudder.

As we went through the door, my dog, Bo, brushed straight past me and hunkered down under the table with my mother and sister, Colleen. Momma, who was in the family way, squatted on the dirt floor, still fiddling with the flickering lantern.

"There ain't no use fooling with that thing," Daddy said, "There's too much wind blowing through the cracks for it to stay lit."

Holding out the cypress shingle that'd struck him in the back, he knelt by Momma. Frowning and rubbing the whelp on his back, he whispered, "It's real bad out there."

"Honey, are—are you all right?" She asked.

Before he could answer, another crashing tree jarred our house and Colleen cried, "Daddy, wh—what's happening? Is this the war?" Colleen, half my age, had a fear that the ongoing War Between the States was coming to kill us. The noise outside assured her that its cannons had finally reached Western Louisiana.

Another crashing tree, this one even closer, caused her to scream, "It's a big gun."

"No, Child, that was a tree falling." Momma said as she cut her eyes watching Daddy at the window peering out. I was watching him too, and knew one thing for sure, my father would get us through this.

"Eliza, kids, listen to me," Daddy said in a steady voice. With the howling wind outside, we had to lean in real close, but when he spoke, his words seemed to drown out the storm. "Now, this has gotta be a hurricane. I don't know how long it'll last, but we're gonna be all right 'cause we're together. We'll trust the Lord to get us through. This may've caught us flat-footed, but we'll get through it together."

We'll get through it together. That was all I wanted to hear, and it was what I needed to hear: Together.

Acknowledgements

This being my first fiction book, I have been especially dependent on the input and encouragement of others.

As always, I am appreciative to James and Shannon Newsom for the use of their cabin. Thanks to my friends at Dry Creek Camp and Piney Woods Camp for their support.

The input of folks like Frank and Weeda Sue O'Connell, Lynne Boggs, Joe and Billie Bartlett, Joe McNeill, Dempsey Parden, Joyce Waters, and Stacy Webb, was invaluable.

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Julie Johnson, a wonderful editor, worked hard on this second edition.

I made some wonderful Irish friends during the writing of this book. A special thanks to John Mayock and the Westport (Ireland) Heritage Society as well as John and Sadie Moran of The Boulevard Bed and Breakfast Inn.

Finally, I could never do what I do without my supportive family. Thanks to my mom, Mary Iles, my sister, Colleen Glaser, Clay and Robin Iles, Clint and Amanda Iles, and Terry Iles.

Anything I do is accomplished with the support and help of my best friend, my wife, DeDe. Thanks, DeDe, for always being there for me!

Author Notes

Historical Fiction is the blending of fictional characters within the historical context of a time and place. That has been part of the joy, as well as a huge challenge, in writing The Wayfaring Stranger.

Some characters in the book were real people: Father James Mullon had a rich and memorable life as priest of New Orleans' St. Patrick's Church. Reverend Joseph Willis, likewise, left a great legacy in the piney woods of Louisiana by starting many churches that still meet today. Hundreds of his descendants continue to live in our area.

The portrayal of Ireland during the famine is gleaned from much research and reading, as well as a visit to County Mayo in 2007.

The May 1849 hurricane was considered the most devastating New Orleans flood of all time—until the 2005 Hurricane Katrina aftermath.

The No Man's Land of western Louisiana is an area whose story has been neglected and seldom told. I hope my book brings to light its history and legacy.

One of the goals of this novel was to bring to life the uniqueness of the Redbone peoples of the Ten Mile region. I have always loved this wonderful and mysterious group, and hope my portrayal is received as accurate and balanced.

Finally, Joseph and Eliza are based on the lives of my great-great-great grandparents, Joseph Moore and Eliza Cavanaugh. Joseph did emigrate to America in the mid-nineteenth century where he met his future wife Eliza in these piney woods I love, and love to write from. Their descendants, literally in the thousands, live throughout this part of my home state of Louisiana.

Curt Iles

More reading

If you'd like to read more about the history of Ireland or pioneer Louisiana, here are some of the books used in researching and writing The Wayfaring Stranger:

An Unnatural Metropolis Craig E. Colten
The Southern Forest Laurence C. Walker
The Great Hunger Cecil Woodham-Smith
How the Irish Saved Civilization Thomas Cahill
Tapping the Pines Robert B. Outland III
Looking for Longleaf Lawrence S. Earley
Good Home for a Poor Man Steven Smith
Louisiana Joe Gray Taylor
Rapides Parish, Louisiana—A History George Purnell Whittington
A History of Baptists of Louisiana W.E. Paxton

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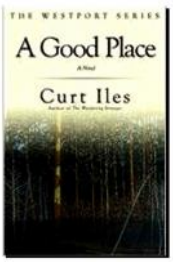
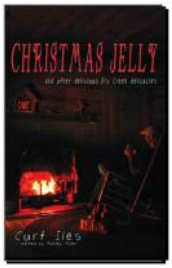
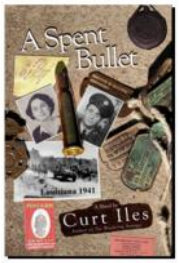
The Irish in the South David Gleeson
Redbones of Louisiana Don C. Marler

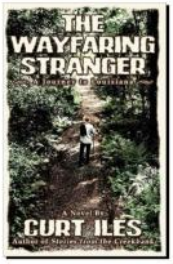
More from Creekbank Stories

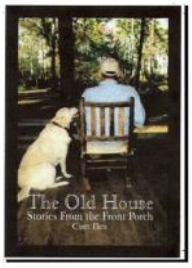
Other titles by the author:
Stories from the Creekbank
The Old House
Wind in the Pines
Hearts across the Water
The Mockingbird's Song
The Wayfaring Stranger
A Good Place
A Spent Bullet
Deep Roots
Uncle Sam: A Horse's Tale (Children)
Christmas Jelly
Trampled Grass

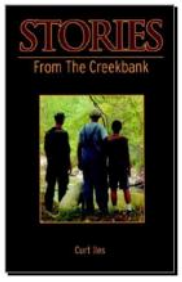


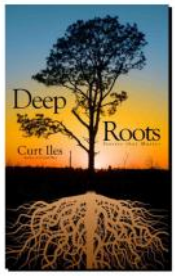


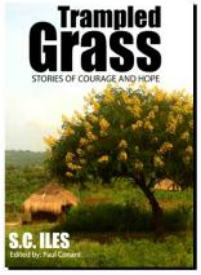












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The Wayfaring Stranger—A Louisiana Journey

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About Curt Iles

A descendant of families who settled Louisiana's No Man's Land before the American Civil War, Curt lives with his wife of thirty-seven years, DeDe. They are the parents of three sons and eight grandchildren.

After fulfilling careers as a teacher, school principal, and camp administrator, Curt Iles began writing full time in 2006. After three years on African missions, he and DeDe have moved to the central Louisiana town of Alexandria.

His personal mission statement is "to be a man God can use and be respected by my wife and family."

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