

CHAPTER ONE

Back in them days I didn't knowed the first thing bout whiskey. How the mountain dew got you feeling so good everybody your best friend. How the corn squeezings turned your gut sour like the mash it distilled from. What the white lightning made you do to other folks. What the likker tricked you into doing to yourself.

I ain't nothing but a ole bootlegger what never so much as pissed off a fly in a outhouse. But cause I the only other living soul what knowed the truth bout that fire, reckoned I the best one to spin this here tale. I gonna do my darnedest to give it justice. If Jolene did the telling, the story'd come out like a overturned basket a eggs, all cracked and splattered.

Not that I didn't take the O'Hara side in any fight. Way I see things, the truth go way beyond the fate of that Harvey fella.

Last turnoff offered a carved sign on a post pointing one way, a hand-painted one sitting on a withered ole branch pointed tuther. I picked the branch cause I feel sorry for it. That way first passed a store not friendly enough to stop at then nother of them sticks with something stuck

to the bark. Didn't knowed what the sign said. The words seemed to tease me like a worm wiggling at a fish.

The trees and creek whistled to me like a boy searching for a lost pup. At a wide spot in the road wood planks lay scattered like a wild storm blow through. What happened here? Something made a peculiar noise behind me.

Tsch, tsch, tsch. Tiptoed round the hole where the sound come from. Maybe a coon fall in there, trapped hissself. Tsch, tsch, tsch. I near the hole quiet as baking bread, careful not to scare him. Half a arms-length from the hole, I stopped. Didn't smell like no coon.

"Boo."

Jumped a barrel high, landed on my behind.

A boy climbed out, rolled on the ground, laughed hissself daft. Law, if he ain't scrawny. My blood sizzled like bacon fat. Watching him hold his sides, I give in to the fun, chuckled a bit too.

He caught his breath. "Got'cha good, sure enough."

"Sure did. What'cha doin in that there hole to begin with?"

He looked me in the eye. "Playin outhouse inspector. Reckon this hole where they aim to build the privy." He winked. "Name's Joe. I oughta be cleanin chicken coops, not playin child games. But Jole get mad, push over them boards then go off somewhere. I stay here in case a girl happen by. Beat all scarin you, even if you ain't a gal. What bring you to Cedar Springs?"

Nobody ever showed that much interest to ask me nothing like that before.

"Roamin round close on a month."

"Your kin must miss you."

“Ma got too many in the roost to keep track. Knowed Pa ain’t missed me. If’n he shout out for a Rufus, onea my three cousins name Rufus likely pipe up. Pa don’t knowed one from tuther. Most times he don’t use no name, he grab the one standin handy.”

“Don’t sound like a nice fella.”

“Learn me to stay outta reach.”

Little Joe tell me to follow him way from the road, down a path lined with thick pine trees, to a homestead what looked over the creek. When we got in the yard, a hound-dog trotted up to sniff me, the sack in my hand too. “That there Tickle.” Little Joe patted the dog on the back. “That there my brother Jack.”

Some older boy set on the front porch, scraping taters and carrots. He tossed them in a pot with water. He ain’t no giant but he looked like a oak tree next to Little Joe.

What in that pot do my empty belly some good. “How bout I throw this here quail I snare in with them taters. We share?” I offered the bag with my good luck of the day inside.

"Be nice to eat somethin besides chicken or fish this one time." Little Joe said. "Rufus ain't good as a female, but he company. How bout he stay for supper?"

"Best ask Jole."

"Jole get in one a them moods. Not gonna come back soon, sure enough."

"There plenty then."

To help I fetched water, stuck kindling in the stove. Little Joe keep up our spirits by running his mouth bout the gals he knowed, lotta them. Big Jack put in a nod now and again. Little Joe didn’t seem to care if he hear or not. Them two seemed easy with each other like brothers oughta.

Glad to work in that kitchen. Never recollected spending time like that with nona my own kin. Then again ain't much I do remember bout my life as a young'un, least ways till I bout ten.

"You say you got lotta brothers, sisters, cousins. Sounds like a bushel fulla fun," Little Joe said.

"Things ain't always what folks think."

"Lotta aunts and uncles too, I reckon."

Ain't gonna bring to mind nona them.

"Smell like time to take the stew off the stove," I said.

The porch creaked. Door boomed open. Little Joe and Big Jack looked at one nother, Little Joe said, "Jole's back."

Jole stomped in the kitchen, snatched a cup off the sideboard. He pouring coffee before he laid eyes on me. Little Joe musta seen the chicken hawk stare cause he jumped to the quick. "Hey, Jole, meet Rufus. He visitin a spell."

"All I need, nother mouth to feed." Jole banged the coffeepot down on the stove. He a bit older than Big Jack, maybe a little stronger, more smooth-faced.

Big Jack and Little Joe like to melt into the wall. This place ain't atall like where I come from.

"I fend for myself. That there quail cookin what I put in."

Jole slammed down the cup, coffee splashed out. "I don't give a damn bout some quail. You not welcome here."

"Little Joe say I welcome." Used the name I called Joe in my head.

"Little Joe?" Jole planted fists on his hips. Muscles get tight under his union suit. He kicked a chair out from the table, plopped down. "That all I need after my trouble today. First

them no-tail-bears try to take over O'Hara land. Then I go up to the Grady place for some lonesome time, find some Clyde."

"What's a Clyde?" Little Joe said.

"Who knows? Claim he kin. Say his name O'Hara, but I never hear of a O'Haras cept us three." Jole rub his face with both hands. "I gotta set out for town tomorrow, stop them negres from building on my land."

I meet a Cherokee one time but only seen colored folk in pictures. Hoped I get to spy some in the flesh soon. Hoped I get to learn from somebody important like Jole.

"I snare nother critter for supper tomorrow, if'n you want."

"You let Rufus stay, Jole? That quail stew smell right nice, sure enough."

Jole pulled a what-I-gonna-do face. He slumped to one of the two rooms on tuther side of the house. Whapped the door shut behind him.

My mouth hang open so I said, "Your brother one prickly fella."

Big Jack nudged me, shaked his head.

Little Joe said, "Jolene ain't our brother. She our sister."