

"REVISITING THE YEARLING"
BY
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Chapter One

The well-dressed, four-year-old little blond boy clung tightly to his mother's hand as she entered the church on the evening of the Christmas doin's in the small town of Volusia, Florida. He gazed timidly around at the vast multitude of people, all of them bigger than he was. His mother led him to a bench and sat down, pulling him onto her lap. She sat and talked with the other women around her, and the boy rapidly lost interest in their chatter. He began to stare at the other people in the room with increasing boldness. The loudest, and therefore most interesting, group of adults was located at the far end of the church, opposite the door. The group consisted of a wizened, gray-haired old man, a much younger, black-haired man, a red-haired man of about the same age, and a dark-haired woman. She seemed as boisterous as any of the three men, and was not in the least bit hesitant about joining in, either on the noisy conversation or on drinking from the jug each time that it was passed. The other children, mostly older than he was, were more or less concentrated at the other end of the church, near the door. It was to this group in particular that the boy's attention was drawn. He recognized many of them, from having seen them before in town. But a group of strangers caught his eye. Six black-haired teenaged boys seemed to be dominating the gathering. Already muscular and clearly big for their age, they appeared to be dictating the games and having the most fun, although no one else seemed to mind. Or no one else had the nerve to speak up, more likely. The little four-year-old watched them with increasing fascination, until finally his curiosity overcame his shyness, and he slid from his mother's lap.

"Oliver," she responded immediately. "Now don't you wander off too fur."

"Yes'm," he said, taking a few hesitant steps closer to the other children. Oliver approached them with agonizing slowness, but at last he was close enough for them to take notice. And the first to become aware of his presence was one of the black-haired strangers.

"Well, looky here at this leetle feller," the older boy observed, grinning.

Everyone turned to look, and Oliver blushed hotly.

"Come 'ere," the teenager urged.

Instead, Oliver took a step backward, once again overcome with shyness.

The one who had spoken chuckled then, and walked over to Oliver, who was desperately torn between the desire to play with these older children, and the wish to retreat to the safety of his mother's lap. The decision was no longer his to make, as the older boy reached down and lifted him easily.

"Don't be scairt, leetle one. What's your name, anyways?" he asked as he carried Oliver back to the group.

"Oliver."

"Well howdy, Oliver. You wanta know my name?"

Oliver nodded, wide-eyed.

"My name's Buck."

"Hey," Oliver said softly.

"Hey, yourself," said another of the teenagers. "You don't need to be so shy. My name's Mill-wheel."

This time, Oliver couldn't even manage to choke out an answer, so he just stared.

"He sure is a puny leetle thing," spoke another. "He's as a tiny as a leetle skeeter. Mebbe that's what we should call him. Skeeter."

Oliver's lower lip pouted.

"Don't call him nothin' mean, Lem," Buck admonished, setting the little boy on his feet in the middle of the group.

They looked down at him.

Another one of the six grinned. "I reckon he is a cute leetle bugger."

"Now don't call him that neither, Arch," Buck defended him. Then he smiled. "Mebbe Oliver'd like to play with us."

Oliver managed a slight smile and a nod.

"I know what game we'll play," said still another. "That game we wanted to play afore. Oliver's small 'nough to use for it."

Buck shook his head. "Hit'd likely skeer him, Pack. He's a mite young."

"Nah, he'll like it. And he's a'most the only one small 'nough to use. Ceptin' *her*," he said with disdain, glaring at a girl about two years older than Oliver.

"I done told you, I ain't gonna do that!" she fussed back at him.

"Aw you're jest chicken," Lem taunted.

She stuck out her tongue at him. "Am not," she shot back defiantly. "You jest wanta use me 'cause you're hopin' my skirt'll fly up."

"Ugh." Lem pretended to be ill. "Who'd want that, Twink? And you stop stickin' that tongue out at me, or I'll yank it out."

"Stop it," Buck ordered. "You're skeerin' Oliver." He knelt beside the little four-year-old. "You wanta play that game with us? Hit's fun."

Oliver managed a barely perceptible nod. He was a little nervous not knowing what the game was all about, and intimidated by his role as the center of attention, but he went along with them. Saying yes was hard, but saying no would have been even harder.

"Okay." Buck straightened. "I'll ketch him the first time."

Little Oliver found that baffling. Did they want him to run? Did they mean to chase him? But then Mill-wheel went around behind Oliver and said, "Now put your hands up in the air, Oliver." When Oliver complied, Mill-wheel grasped his wrists from behind him. Lem bent and gripped his ankles. They lifted him off of his feet until he was suspended between them, like a hammock between two trees. They began to swing him from side to side as though the hammock were now blown by a strong breeze. The experience was slightly dizzying, but exhilarating. Then they began to count each swing, all chanting together, "One...two...three!" On three, little Oliver got the surprise of his life. Both boys released him at once, and he sailed through the air. The child shrieked. But before he could fear crashing to the floor, he was plucked from the air by strong arms. Oliver turned shocked eyes up to the grinning face of Buck, who had Oliver cradled in his arms like a baby. Oliver couldn't decide which was more startling: falling, ...or not falling. Buck set him down gently. A slow grin spread across the child's face, and he began to giggle.

"He likes it!" Pack declared. "My turn." Pack grabbed Oliver's wrists. "Gabby, git his feet."

The only one of the six who, up until now, had remained nameless, complied. Arch took up position to catch Oliver, and the game continued. They repeated it again and again, shifting positions, the other children enjoying watching almost as much as Oliver enjoyed being thrown. Oliver had just landed in the arms of one of the boys when he heard a familiar voice. Before the startled boy could set him down, Oliver's mother snatched her child from him.

"You leave Oliver be," Mrs. Hutto fussed. "You Forrester boys are too old and too rough to be playin' with him!"

"But Ma..." Oliver began timidly.

"Hit's your bedtime anyways. I'm takin' you home."

All the way to the door, she scolded Oliver. "Them boys is too big and rough and wild and dangerous for you. You keep away from 'em."

"But, Ma, they's fun. How kin they be dangerous?"

"You jest do as I say. You stay away from 'em, or sooner or later they'll hurt you."

Oliver thought about it, his tiny brows knitting together.

Mrs. Hutto paused at the door and looked back across the church. The children were still staring, but she barely gave them a glance. Her gaze went instead to the adult Forresters at the other end of the church: to the dark-haired couple: the parents of the six ruffians, the red-haired uncle, and the older, gray-haired patriarch of the clan.

"They call that grandfather 'Trouble' Forrester. An apt name. I jest wonder what 'trouble' that wild family will make for me after they hear from their hooligans what I done. They's not our kind o' people, Oliver," she explained to the still confused boy. She cast one more nervous glance toward the adult Forresters as she carried Oliver out of the church.

Chapter Two

Two years later, Oliver was pleased to be able to attend the Christmas doin's. He had been kept away the previous year by sickness. At least that was what his mother had told him. He had believed himself well enough recovered by Christmas time to go, but she had decided otherwise. Even more baffling, she did not seem nearly as pleased as he to be going this year. She kept muttering, "I ain't lettin' them roughnecks keep me home. Hit's my town, too."

Once inside, Mrs. Hutto was instantly approached by the old preacher, Mr. Baxter. The stern, aged minister was an irritant who never failed to plague Oliver's mother about her inattendance at church. She did not find church the comfort that many others did, but she endured the old man's harangue, glad that she did not encounter him often, and glad that his oldest son Ezra could be her friend without preaching at her.

Even less interested in the ramblings of the preacher, Oliver wandered off, his eyes drinking in the splendid sight of the many colored streamers above his head.

Oliver had grown somewhat taller in two years, but the group of boys still recognized him.

"Leetle runt!"

"Mama's boy!"

"Let's git him!"

Preoccupied with the decorations, Oliver was not aware of their approach until they were practically upon him. He chanced to look down from the ceiling, and saw them. He paused as he weighed his previous fun with them against his mother's admonitions, and turned abruptly to obediently retreat.

The Forrester boys hastened to overtake and surround him.

"Hey Skeeter," Lem taunted.

"Mama's boy," Buck teased nastily.

"Think you're too good for us?" Mill-wheel challenged him.

Oliver regarded them in dismay. "I...I ain't done nothin'. I thought you-all liked me."

"Well, we thought you liked *us*," Arch countered. "So why'd you walk away jest now?"

Oliver wasn't sure what to say. He only knew that he didn't want to admit the real reason. So he answered the question with one of his own. "Why'd you chase me?"

"'Cause," Pack said, "we know you think you're too good for us. Our ma said so. She said that's what ailed your ma the night she takened you outen here."

Only six years old, Oliver was at a loss to understand, let alone explain, adult motivations. He could only respond weakly, "'Tain't my fault. Leave me be."

"Not likely," Lem said. "This time we're gonna play a diff'rent game with you. See how you like *this*." Lem pushed Oliver, hard. The only thing that saved the younger child from falling was his proximity to Buck who caught him, but who followed with an immediate shove toward Mill-wheel, who in turn launched him back toward Lem.

Oliver's high thin wail drew the attention of his mother. She shrieked at the sight of her only child being viciously manhandled by three of the Forrester boys while the other three stood back and laughed. Mrs. Hutto pelted madly across the room at them, leaving the startled preacher to finish his most recently-begun sentence before a nonexistent audience. She pushed her way into the cruel circle, shoving Lem aside and ignoring his noisy protest, and gathered her boy into her arms. Then she turned to scold the young Forresters.

"How dare you hurt my young un? You keep your rough ways to yourselves. The very idea! You-all is more'n twice his age."

Her tirade was overheard. Mrs. Hutto was so caught up in her own rage that she was not immediately aware that Mrs. Forrester had materialized beside her.

"Mebbe you'd like to take me on, 'stead o' my boys," she said. "I'm ready for ya."

Mrs. Hutto started and stared at the intruder. "Surely you cain't mean...fight?"

"I been known to," Mrs. Forrester stated evenly. "When I got just cause."

Mrs. Hutto kept her voice steady. "I reckon I shoulda expected that, from a Forrester. Even a female one. But I prefer to quarrel more civilized."

"Well, you quarrel more mouthy, I'll say that."

"Now see here." She set Oliver down and pushed him behind her. "Whyn't you-all stay in the scrub where you belong and leave decent folk alone?"

"Decent?" Mrs. Forrester was amused. "Decent 'cause you wear all them fancy clothes? You think them lacy dresses makes you better'n ever'body else? 'Specially me and mine, 'cause we don't live in town? And 'cause we don't dress that-a-way? We kin afford it, but we got no need to. We got no need for showin' off."

Mrs. Hutto struggled to control her fury. "And we got no need for your violence. Stay in the scrub with the rest o' the animals."

"Your fancy leetle spoiled brat deserved the tormentin' he got from my boys, 'cause he scorned 'em. I'm jest sorry they ain't done more to him. Well, mebbe another time." She smiled coldly.

"You keep your savage hoodlums away from my baby!"

Mrs. Forrester smirked and enjoyed the point that she had just scored. She had hit a nerve and she knew it.

Meanwhile, the tiny subject of all of the discussion stared in disbelief at the boys who had just treated him so sadistically. He was struggling to understand both their abrupt cruelty and his own growing resentment and humiliation. At Mrs. Forrester's suggestion that they might do more to Oliver at a later date, Lem, seeing Oliver staring, made a fist and pounded it into the other palm, grinning wickedly. Buck and Mill-wheel, seeing that, and wearing evil smiles of their own, nudged each other and repeated the gesture. Oliver hovered between tears of panic and an anger like he had never known. The latter feeling won out, and he blatantly and savagely stuck out his tongue at them, as he'd seen that girl do, two years earlier.

Furious to the point of momentarily forgetting the presence of the two mothers, the three started toward him. Panic took over, and Oliver ducked behind his mother's skirt. The three Forrester boys hesitated. Two mothers were a bit of an obstacle. As they watched, two wide blue eyes peered at them from behind the skirt, beneath an alien shock of blond hair. Two tiny fists clutched at the skirt, above and below the eyes. The Forresters regarded him sullenly.

Lem spoke to his brothers quietly, but not so softly that Oliver couldn't hear. "We'll do somethin' 'bout the leetle prince someday. Not jest now, but someday."

Chapter Three

Mrs. Forrester was very battle-weary, and needed to spend some time away from her six quarrelsome and rapidly-growing sons. She decided that a visit with her nearest neighbor, the wife of Ezra Baxter, the preacher's son, would be a relief. In her current state of frustration, even that strange woman's companionship was desirable, and she was frankly curious to see the only Baxter baby that had survived.

Mrs. Baxter admitted Mrs. Forrester with a civil but brief greeting. Certainly the two women had nothing in common, other than the coincidence of being new mothers again simultaneously. She eyed her visitor suspiciously, but evidently supposed that, after being cooped up in the cabin with only Ezra's company for so long, even this guest was welcome.

Mrs. Forrester had brought her newest baby.

"What you gonna call him?" Mrs. Baxter asked politely, picking up her own infant and sitting beside the other woman.

"Fodder-wing."

Mrs. Forrester saw a brief smirk of disapproval cross Mrs. Baxter's severe features. She'd seen the look before, on people who'd found the Forresters' names peculiar. "And you?" she asked in return.

"Oh." Mrs. Baxter smiled proudly. "Jody."

That figgers, Mrs. Forrester thought; them puny Baxters would pick a sissy name. She eyed the other woman's child critically. The blond hair shocked her. She was so accustomed to the black hair of every one of her own brood.

Mrs. Baxter stole disapproving glances at the other baby in turn. She clearly saw only a typical dark Forrester, and doubtless expected him to grow up as black-hearted as she found all of the rest.

Her baby is healthy and normal, Mrs. Forrester thought resentfully. Why'd mine have to be born with a crooked spine?

She could see in Mrs. Baxter's eyes a similar resentment, undoubtedly due to the fact that Mrs. Forrester had so many healthy, surviving children before this one, whereas all of *her* previous infants had died.

The eyes of the two women happened to meet then, and they smiled politely at each other, and went on rocking in their chairs.

Chapter Four

Oliver Hutto, now twelve, was startled when he saw her. It was Twink Weatherby all right, but he hardly recognized her. Was this the silly little girl that he'd thrown the potato at only a few months ago, after she'd stuck out her tongue at him? She had exchanged long braided pigtails for long flowing waves down to her waist. She had replaced the drab, brown pinafore with a lacy pink dress. Twink felt his stare, and turned wide blue eyes to him. Oliver's heart missed a beat. Before he was even aware of it, he was moving toward her. He reached for her hand, and they danced along with the adults at the Christmas doin's.

Over an hour later, Mrs. Hutto and Oliver were talking pleasantly with her friend, Ezra Baxter, whom, strangely enough, people had in recent years begun to call Penny, due to his diminutive size. Oliver wondered how that had come about; he also wondered if Ezra minded. Oliver noted that his mother had not picked up the habit. In any event, they were discussing Ezra's imminent plans for going to fight in the war against the northerners. Mrs. Hutto was insisting that Ezra's wife Ora, and their two-year-old son Jody, should live with her and Oliver while he was gone.

The door of the church opened. Oliver turned to look. The six Forrester brothers, now in their twenties, entered in a noisy herd. They seemed as tall as the church itself. Five of the six now wore long black beards. Black beards to match their black hearts, Oliver thought. He gazed around the room, and observed that the entire town had stopped in its tracks to stare at the Forresters, the festivities literally grinding to a stand-still. The whole town was paralyzed with fear of those wild-men, Oliver realized resentfully. It disgusted him.

As he watched, the only one who had not grown a beard, Lem, broke from the rest and walked deliberately over to Twink Weatherby. She stared up at him with an obvious mixture of fear and fascination. A new resentment swept over Oliver. He's too old for her, he thought. Lem took Twink's hand and urged her to dance with him. She timidly submitted. Oliver's blood boiled. He took one step in their direction and stopped. What could he do? He was only twelve years old. Lem was at least ten years older than he. Oliver tore his eyes away from the two and turned to stare at Lem's five brothers, rambunctiously intimidating other young women to dance with them. If only they weren't older, if only they weren't so big, if only there weren't so many of them. To start something with Lem while all five of his brothers were there would be absurd, Oliver realized, even if he had been an adult. But, Oliver thought as he stared furiously back toward Lem and Twink again, I'll have to do somethin' 'bout that someday.

Chapter Five

Mrs. Baxter and Mrs. Hutto sat stiffly side by side at the doin's. In two years of living together, they had learned quite well how not to get along with each other.

Mrs. Baxter cast a critical eye at fourteen-year-old Oliver. "You indulge that boy too much. You leave him do whatever he wants."

"Well, why not?" Mrs. Hutto said. "He's the only one I got. Why cain't I treat him special?"

"And Jody's the only one I got, too. But you don't see me fawnin' over him all the time like you do over Oliver."

"That's jest it," Mrs. Hutto snapped. "You're so bitter over all them young uns you lost, you cain't seem to give Jody the love and attention he deserves and needs."

"Who's got a better right to be bitter? All them babies dyin'."

"I got jest as much right to be bitter as you. My husband dyin' when Oliver was nigh-'bout new-borned. But you don't see me takin' it out on Oliver. 'Tain't no-ways his fault. Jest like Jody ain't to blame for them young uns o' yourn afore him."

Mrs. Baxter fumed, "'Tis a pity Mr. Hutto ain't lived. He mighta been strict with Oliver jest as Oliver needs. You're spoilin' that child. And all them fancy clothes ain't necessary neither."

A new anger gripped Mrs. Hutto. That last accusation reminded her too much of her vicious battle with Mrs. Forrester years before, and the words still burned fresh in her mind. "You're jest jealous you cain't do that for Jody. But I'll be glad to; I done told you that."

"No! I don't want no charity."

"'Tain't charity. I love Jody, too."

Discussion of Jody caused Mrs. Hutto to wonder then, where the little four-year-old had wandered. Her eyes scanned the room. Fear gripped her coldly as she caught sight of him. She felt an old horror from her past being cruelly replayed for her. No, not the Forresters! Jody had been drawn by the same curiosity that had drawn Oliver ten years before to the spectacular noise and bluster. This time, however, the Forresters were completely oblivious to the tiny child's approach. They were standing in a group, laughing raucously together.

Jody toddled toward them, fascinated.

Mrs. Hutto leaped to her feet.

"What?" Mrs. Baxter wondered.

Mrs. Hutto started across the room, hoping to snatch the child and dart away before being noticed. Mrs. Baxter saw, then, the nature of Mrs. Hutto's concern, and gasped. Too late. Jody had reached his destination. He had wrapped tiny arms around the leg of one of the men. Mrs. Hutto stopped and watched helplessly.

"What the...?" Buck Forrester looked down and grinned. "Well, what have we here?" He bent and lifted the boy in his arms. "Now I reckon you're leetle Jody Baxter, ain't you?" He had not seen much of the child since the boy and his mother had been living in town.

"That's right." Lem laughed. "He's Penny's leetle half-penny!"

The Forresters roared.

Jody smiled and tugged at Buck's beard. Buck laughed and gently extricated the child's fingers.

"He ain't used to no beards," Mill-wheel commented. "He sure ain't gonna see one on Penny, nor on anyone else he's been livin' with lately."

They all laughed again.

Mrs. Hutto resumed her approach with desperate determination. But then another movement at the edge of her vision caught her attention. She looked, and with nightmarish horror saw Oliver

approaching as determinedly as she. He was much closer, and was going to get there sooner. "No!" she cried.

Oliver was not noticed immediately as he arrived beside them. Only fourteen, he still was nowhere near their height. Oliver drew a deep breath, and requested evenly, "Please give Jody to me."

All six Forresters turned to stare at him. He had come up behind Lem and Arch. When Oliver's eyes met Lem's, the savage hostility in Lem's eyes forced Oliver to step back a pace. But there he stood his ground and would retreat no farther.

"Please," Oliver repeated politely, reaching out both arms. "Give him here."

Buck made no move to surrender Jody, but merely watched Oliver in cold amusement. "Come git him," he challenged.

The devious cruelty of that suggestion was instantly apparent. Since Buck was on the opposite side of the circle from Oliver, the latter would have to enter the circle and be surrounded in order to comply. His eyes flicked down for a moment, and then back up to their faces. Oliver swallowed hard and took another deep breath. He walked into the gap between Lem and Arch and entered the circle. The gap closed behind him, and they all grinned. Oliver was now close enough to touch Jody, and he reached for him once again. Buck, however, made no cooperative move. He clearly had no intention of relinquishing the boy. It was clear now: Jody had been the bait in the trap. Oliver dropped his eyes in defeat, and Mrs. Hutto trembled at what she knew must be next.

"Mebbe we should push him 'round awhile, like we done afore," Mill-wheel said from his place to the left of Buck.

"Or mebbe we should do somethin' worse," Lem suggested ominously.

Oliver turned as Lem's fist rose.

"No!" Mrs. Hutto forced her way between Pack and Buck. "Stop it! You should be 'shamed o' yourselves. Oliver's only fourteen. And Jody's only four."

"We wa'n't gonna hurt Jody," Buck said quietly.

"How kin you figger that? How do you know what hurt would be done to Jody iffen you was to make him watch...." She bit her lip, unable or unwilling to finish the thought. "And Oliver's only a young un, too," she reminded them.

They hesitated.

At that moment, Jody turned in Buck's arms and looked at her. He smiled in delight and reached out to Mrs. Hutto, cooing, "Grandma."

"He calls you Grandma, eh?" Buck marveled.

"Yes," she whispered. She reached for the child.

Buck nodded and handed Jody to her. "All right," he said. "Take Jody."

Even as she accepted him, a suspicion crossed her mind. They meant to keep Oliver. Her eyes searched Buck's face, and could find no denial of her fears. She immediately shifted Jody to one arm, and turned and seized Oliver's wrist with her other hand. She met Buck's eyes again, silently questioning him. He hesitated. The Forresters exchanged glances.

"He's only a young un," she repeated softly.

Buck reached a decision. He nodded. "Okay. Take him."

"We'll not do nothin' now," Mill-wheel agreed.

Lem said, "There'll be another time."

Pack stood aside, and without a backward glance, Mrs. Hutto charged out of the circle, dragging Oliver behind her. Mrs. Baxter was staring in shock just outside of the group; Mrs. Hutto had not been aware of her nearness and was startled. She didn't even slow her pace enough to

transfer Jody to his mother, but just plunged ahead, and stopped only when she reached their bench on the opposite side of the church. She sat, then, in total exhaustion. Mrs. Baxter sat down next to her and relieved her of Jody. Mrs. Hutto made Oliver sit next to her, and insisted that he remain there.

"Thank you," Mrs. Baxter whispered emotionally.

Mrs. Hutto nodded, breathless.

They sat silently, for once in total agreement.

Chapter Six

Jody and Fodder-wing stared at each other in rapture. The two little boys, now six years old, had not seen each other during the four years that Penny had been away at the war. He'd thought that it was time that they got reacquainted. Mrs. Forrester left the two children to play in Fodder-wing's room while the adults talked in the main room. Penny had many tales to tell about the war. Fodder-wing had many tales to tell about his brothers.

"You kin really have as many pets as you want?" Jody said in awe.

"Sure," Fodder-wing replied, as if it were completely normal. "My brothers ketches 'em for me."

"And they built all them cages?"

"Uh huh."

"What else?"

"What else what?"

"What else do your brothers do?"

"They tease me a heap. Hit's fun."

"I reckon 'tis."

"And they swing me back and forth, so's hit's jest like flyin'. I love that!"

"Wow!"

"And whenever I wanta set on somebody's lap, or git picked up, they all near-'bout fight over me...." A strange haunted look came into his eyes just then but Jody missed it.

"You're so lucky!"

"Yes, but...."

"But what?"

"They fight a heap. They fight for real. Not over me; I jest said that. But they fight over...I don't know, stuff. And I git scairt when they do."

Jody's eyes grew wide. At first he didn't know what to say. "Have you told 'em? Have you told 'em it skeers you?"

"Don't need to. They know a'ready. At first, when I was jest leetle, I used to cry when they done that. And Ma would hold me and scold 'em. Now I jest leave the room."

Jody stared at his friend in wonder. He went to the door and peered out at the huge men in the main room, trying to picture the cataclysmic event. He glanced back at Fodder-wing. Jody couldn't help but feel pity for his troubled friend. But even so, he thought of all of the good things that Fodder-wing had just told him about them, and he wished that they were his brothers. He thought about Oliver, the wonderful "brother" whom he'd just been forced to leave after four years of living together, and he wished that he could have lived with Oliver forever. He couldn't help but envy his friend Fodder-wing his brothers, real brothers of his very own that he *could* live with forever. They could be frightening, perhaps, but he wished that they were his, just the same.

Jody stepped away from the door, and tried to decide how to put his feelings into words that his friend would understand.

A shadow fell on him from the doorway behind him. Jody turned and saw a large silhouette blocking the light coming from the main room fireplace. It was one of Fodder-wing's brothers. Jody let out a small gasp, which he heard Fodder-wing echo from behind him.

"What's this I hear?" the man demanded. His voice was deep and harsh. He stepped into the room. "What're you tellin' this boy? Our private business?"

"No, Lem," Fodder-wing stammered.

"'Cause that's what I figger I heered." The massive head turned to regard Jody coldly.

Jody scrambled to back up, out of reach.

Lem looked at him quizzically. "You know, you remind me o' somebody. There was a leetle blond brat who got on my nerves when I was younger. You look like him. I called him Skeeter. Cross me and I'll call you the same."

The dangerous face burned itself into Jody's consciousness. He saw a strong square jaw, flashing black eyes, and dark hair. His gaze descended to bulging arm muscles and huge hands that could surely break his neck without effort. Jody whimpered.

Fodder-wing said, "Lem, don't skeer Jody."

The black eyes swiveled back to Fodder-wing. "Then I'll skeer you. I don't like what I reckon I heered you tellin' him." Lem advanced on him.

Both boys let out piercing screams.

"What's goin' on in here?" a new bass voice demanded from the doorway.

Jody looked and saw a man as tall as Lem, and a bit bulkier. The newcomer had black hair and eyes, and a long black beard nearly to his waist. Powerful arms hung ready at his sides. Jody was afraid of him, until he heard him say, "Lem, are you skeerin' these boys?"

"Stay outen it, Buck. Fodder-wing was tellin' somethin' he had no business tellin'."

A third deep voice rumbled, "And you're doin' somethin' you got no business doin'. Git away from them boys. We ain't gonna leave you hurt 'em."

Jody followed the voice to a man who looked much like the second, but this man's beard did reach his waist. He put his hands on his hips, highlighting similarly muscular arms.

"Mill-wheel, did you hear what our boy was tellin'?"

"I don't keer. Out. Let's take this into the other room."

Jody saw Fodder-wing shiver, and he realized that the very thing that his friend feared was what was coming. He saw Buck notice the shiver, too, and he watched Buck give Fodder-wing a quick reassuring pat.

Lem glared at both bearded brothers and stalked out ahead of them.

They were right behind him.

Deathly pale, Fodder-wing tiptoed after the three. Jody stayed close at his heels.

Once in the main room, Lem immediately tried to garner support. "Fodder-wing was in there tellin' our personal business to an outsider."

"You ain't serious?" was the reply from a bearded man who was somewhat shorter than the rest. Even so, he still towered over Jody's father. He eyed the two scared little boys in an unfriendly manner.

"Gabby, please," Fodder-wing said timidly. "I didn't mean nothin' by it."

"Jest what did you tell?" demanded a man who was just as tall and muscular as the first three, and whose beard reached to the middle of his chest.

"I jest told 'bout you-all fightin', Arch."

"What'd you bring that up for?" boomed a sixth. He clenched a fist, flexing a thick arm muscle. His beard was the same length as that of Arch, and he was just as tall, but a bit thinner.

Fodder-wing sniffled. "I was jest sayin' how scairt I git, Pack."

Lem said nastily, "Well, mebbe we'll jest show him how scairt you git. You want him to know our business? No reason we should hold back now."

Jody shuddered in horror. And he'd actually wished that these men could be his brothers.

Their withered old father banged his cane angrily on the floor. "This ain't no way to treat a guest, even a leetle one," Mr. Forrester declared. "Prob'ly don't make Penny none too comfortable neither. Ain't no way to act in front o' comp'ny."

Penny took the opening. "Well, I've seed you-all quarrel afore, but Jody's a mite young."

"Mebbe he'll grow up a leetle tonight," Lem suggested, as he drew back his fist and struck Buck in the jaw. Instantly, Mill-wheel punched Lem in the nose. With a bellow, Gabby rushed at Mill-wheel. But before he could hit him, Arch spun him around and slugged him. Pack poked Mill-wheel in the eye.

"Stop it!" Mrs. Forrester shrielled.

The middle of the room was a battleground. Jody saw Penny gesture for the two boys to stay where they were, near the bedroom door. His father's face was anxious. Jody suspected that he probably wished that he could gather the two children up and try to protect them, but he'd been on the opposite side of the room when the fight had broken out, and simply had no way to get to them.

Mrs. Forrester looked over at the two small boys hovering not far from her. She saw the young visitor, little Jody, paralyzed with fear. She eased carefully toward the pair, narrowly missing a painful collision as Buck slammed Lem into the wall where she'd just been standing. She heard Mr. Forrester swear as he barely managed to sidestep Pack, knocked down by Arch. She saw Penny Baxter quickly duck, just in time, a punch from Mill-wheel thrown at Gabby.

A mere foot from the children, Mrs. Forrester extended inviting arms to them. Fodder-wing was slightly nearer; he hobbled to her. She looked at Jody and called to him, "Come 'ere, Punkin."

Jody ran to her, tears flooding his face. She bent down and gathered him into her arms, and he clung to her, sobbing loudly. Her hand reached up and stroked his hair. Jody's hair was beautifully blond and soft, the softest hair that she'd ever felt. The experience of cuddling this dear little angel was more precious than she could ever have imagined. She was reminded strongly of the other little blond that her sons had tormented years earlier. Perhaps Oliver really was innocent in that altercation. Maybe she should have comforted him, too. She looked at Fodder-wing, the only one of her brood who still wanted to be held. She began to realize just how much she missed that with her others. Mrs. Forrester watched her combative sons in disgust. Occasionally she suffered a moment of doubt, an instant of wondering if the opinions of other women like Mrs. Baxter and even Mrs. Hutto could be founded in some small measure of reality.

Chapter Seven

Eighteen-year-old Oliver Hutto watched Jody Baxter lead old Caesar along very carefully with his friend Fodder-wing on the horse's back. He knew that Fodder-wing was being allowed to spend the night with Jody tonight, and that Jody had promised to bring him here to the Glen to meet Oliver while daylight remained. Oliver had promised to show Fodder-wing how to build a flutter-mill, just as he had taught Jody while Jody had lived with him. Oliver smiled broadly and reached to help Fodder-wing down from the horse. He set him in the grass by the water's edge, and sat down next to him. Jody dropped beside them. Oliver set about constructing the flutter-mill. He cut two forked twigs into Ys and began to smooth a third, straight twig for the crossbar.

"You're the friend Jody lived with a couple years, ain't you?" Fodder-wing asked.

"That's right." Oliver smiled up at him from his work.

"You're Jody's brother, then."

Oliver smiled gently at Jody.

Jody blushed slightly. "I wish you was, I told him."

Oliver reached over and tousled Jody's hair. "I am iffen you want me to be, Jody."

"I do."

"Then I am."

Oliver went back to his work, trying to avoid blushing with pleasure, himself.

"You know my brothers, Oliver?" Fodder-wing wondered innocently.

Oliver didn't look up this time. "Yes," he answered evenly.

"How well you know 'em?"

Oliver searched his mind frantically for a suitable response. He could easily think of quite a few inappropriate ones, but he sought one that would be properly innocuous. Then, he had it.

"When I was jest a leetle thing, only four years old, and they was teenagers, they played with me real nice on Christmas at the doin's."

"What'd they play?"

"They played a game where one of 'em grabbed my hands, and one grabbed my feet, and they swung me back and forth. Then they both let go, and I flew through the air, and another one caught me."

"I know that game." Fodder-wing was starry-eyed with joy. "They play it with me. I love it. I wish I could fly. And that game lets me fly, jest a leetle."

Oliver carefully kept his eyes on his work, embarrassed. Jody had told him how Fodder-wing had added a few broken bones to his already crippled frame trying to fly off of the roof of the barn.

Oliver cut two palm fronds and put a slit in each, through which the smooth twig would pass.

"They play any other games with you?"

"No, that's it." Oliver made a mental note not to mention the rougher "games" that they had played with him later.

"You seed 'em much since?"

"Oh, now and agin."

"Mebbe now that you're older, like them, you'll git to be good friends."

Oliver hesitated. "Ain't too likely; I'm gonna be off sailorin' soon. I'm old 'nough now. So I'll not be 'round much to see 'em."

"I'll miss you turrible, Oliver," Jody mourned.

"I know, Jody, and I'll miss you, too. But I'll be home twice a year, and I'll allus visit you."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

"Visit me, too, Oliver," Fodder-wing begged.

Oliver smiled at him, not knowing what to say. So he changed the subject. "Jody, I'll expect you to look after my gal for me whilst I'm gone."

"Sure, Oliver," Jody promised importantly. "I'll look out for Twink."

A frown seemed to cross Fodder-wing's features just then, as if from a memory of which he was unsure, but he said nothing.

The flutter-mill was completed. Oliver positioned the smooth twig carefully across the two Ys embedded in the shallow stream, and the motion of the fronds began, up and over, hypnotically. The water sparkled on the palm fronds as they turned.

"Look!" Jody demanded. "Look, Fodder-wing, hit's magic!"

As the boys watched the flutter-mill, transfixed, Oliver watched them. How wonderful it would be to still believe in magic. It might take magic, he knew, to save him from something that he only sensed distantly, a foreboding on the horizon that he couldn't quite grasp. He studied Fodder-wing and marveled at how different he was from his brothers. Oliver wondered how long the boy could stay that sweet, that innocent, under their influence. He feared that Fodder-wing's innocence couldn't last much longer. And what of Oliver's own future? What was this horror that loomed before him? It haunted his sleep with nightmares that he could never quite remember upon waking. When he looked at Fodder-wing, he could almost grasp the answer. But not quite. Oliver sighed and lay back into the soft grass. Only time would tell.

Chapter Eight

Penny and Oliver lay unmoving on the ground. Jody looked up in horror as Buck, Mill-wheel, and Lem surrounded him. They smiled evilly. They were in no hurry to dispose of him, Jody realized. With Penny and Oliver out of action, the Forresters could afford to take their time with him. They could have fun with him for a while. With torturing slowness, they came at him from three directions. With growing dread, Jody looked at each of them in turn, and saw unearthly malevolence in each face. But his worst fears focused on Lem. All of the cruelty and sadism in the world seemed to be centered in that wicked expression. His tears starting to flow, Jody began to back away from Lem, his eyes never leaving Lem's face now. His feet felt numb and would barely move; they weren't moving fast enough, he realized in agony; Lem was moving faster. Jody shook his head slowly back and forth, his cheeks now drenched with tears. Lem laughed.

"Please," Jody whimpered. "No. Don't."

Lem grinned savagely in reply.

Jody tried desperately to make his feet move faster. He nearly stumbled, and backed right into Mill-wheel. Realizing with terror what he had done, Jody attempted to fling himself forward again, but he was seized by strong hands on his shoulders and pulled back against the powerful man. Jody cried out in alarm. He twisted his head around to look up into Mill-wheel's face and was immediately sorry that he had done so. Mill-wheel's expression was one of unrelenting severity. Jody faced forward again, in time to see Lem and Buck closing in on him. His eyes searched Buck's expression for some iota of kindness, and found none. Slowly, Jody turned his eyes back to Lem, knowing that he wouldn't be able to bear what he would see, but unable to prevent himself from looking, all the same. Sure enough, Lem's vicious hostility hit him like a lightning bolt. Jody recoiled and writhed in Mill-wheel's grip. Lem smiled with immense enjoyment of Jody's torment. Jody began to tremble so violently that his bones and muscles ached.

"Let me go. Please," Jody begged.

The Forresters laughed harshly. Jody's sobs became spasms. He knew that he was reacting as they wanted, playing into their hands, but he was powerless to stop it, or to care. He leaned more heavily into Mill-wheel for support. He no longer wished to pull away; he knew that his legs would no longer hold him unassisted.

Between gasps of panic, Jody cried, "Pa...! Oliver...! He'p me!"

"You expect them to he'p you?" Lem sneered. "Look where they are."

Unable to endure what he knew that he would see if he complied, and incapable of breaking away from the hypnotic evil in Lem's eyes in any event, Jody whined, "I cain't!"

Buck reached out, seized Jody's chin, and forcibly turned his face toward Penny and Oliver. The still forms hadn't stirred. Jody gave a cry of total desolation. Buck turned him back toward Lem again. Slowly, ever so slowly, Lem made a fist. He drew it back with exquisite deliberation. Completely out of control, Jody fought to break free from Buck's vise-like grip on his chin, and Mill-wheel's hammerlock on his shoulders, but to no avail. His vision zeroed in on the fist, which now seemed to comprise his whole universe. Jody screamed as he never had before in his life....

...And sat up in bed. He was drenched with tears and sweat, and his breath was coming in ragged rasps. Penny appeared in the doorway and rushed to his side. He sat on the bed and took Jody into his arms.

"The same dream agin, son?"

Jody was crying too hard to reply, but the wracking sobs were answer enough.

"I'm sorry, boy, but we had to try to he'p Oliver, you know."

Jody nodded through the spasms.

"I reckon I was wrong to let you git into it. You was too young for that. I shoul'da made you stay with Grandma. Is your jaw still sore where Lem hit you?"

Jody nodded again.

"Hit'll mend. Only been two days since the fight. I jest wonder how long hit'll take to mend the hurt you got inside you."

Jody clung to his father, his sobs only slightly abated.

Penny stroked Jody's hair. "Hit's all right, young un. 'Twas jest a nightmare. Oliver and me ain't really dead. Oliver'll recover in time, and I'm near-'bout back to normal a'ready. And they ain't really surrounded you that-a-way; 'twas Oliver and me they done that to. But not so rough as you dreamed. You was jest dreamin' your worst fears, the worst things 'bout the fight you could imagine. That's all that's happenin'. But Jody, them things we fear like that, they don't come true, you know."

Jody had calmed somewhat; his father's words soothed him.

"Tell you what, Jody. I'm jest gonna crawl in here and sleep with you agin tonight." As Penny stretched out beside Jody, the boy snuggled gratefully closer. Penny drew Jody deeply into his embrace.

Long after Jody fell into an exhausted sleep, Penny lay awake worrying about his son.

Chapter Nine

"Ma!" Oliver shrieked, sitting up painfully in bed.

"Easy, Punkin, I'm here." Mrs. Hutto's warm, soothing voice balanced ever so well with her smooth, cooling hand caressing lightly and carefully on his heated forehead.

"Ma," he panted in overwhelming relief. He opened his eyes and saw that she really was there, by his side, and that the Forresters were not.

"You had a nightmare agin, didn't you, Baby?"

"Yes! They was here! In the room!"

"Nobody's here but me." She brushed a damp lock of hair back from his forehead.

"I can't even stand to go to sleep. Every time I do I see 'em. Ma, what time o' day is it?"

"Hit's evenin', Darlin'."

"You figger I could git outen this bed awhile? I'm miserable! And I kin sure 'nough walk. My legs ain't injured."

"Now that's prob'ly a good idea." She smiled encouragingly. "Whyn't you go set in the backyard awhile, and see the sunset? Likely the change o' scenery'll do you good anyways."

Oliver nodded. Mrs. Hutto helped him up, and encouraged him to lean on her. Despite his uninjured legs, he was weakened and grateful for the slight support that she could provide.

The setting sun hung in the deepening blue sky and touched the green grass with a crimson glitter, creating a fairyland of shimmering magic. Even the customary garden flowers seemed to take on a glow, as well as a new, more invigorating scent in the crisper evening air. It lifted his spirits, at least briefly.

An emotional shadow fell over Oliver momentarily as he recalled the details of one of his nightmares. It had been horrifying enough that in the actual fight he'd had to face three of the mountainous men. One nightmare, however, had preyed upon the unpleasant fact that three more existed. If Arch, Pack, and Gabby had also been present in town, doubtless they would've intruded on his fight with Lem, too, just as Buck and Mill-wheel had done in reality. Oliver would've had to face six. He breathed in the fragrance of the darkening night, and tried to let it dispel his fear and calm his trembling. He wondered what the six Forresters were saying to each other right now.

Chapter Ten

Buck Forrester wiped the sweat out of his eyes. "Fodder-wing!" he shouted for possibly the hundredth time. He simply couldn't believe that his poor, frail, crippled little brother had wandered off alone into the scrub, and had eluded his six older brothers for two entire days. Buck glared up at the sky. It, too, was being uncooperative. It was getting dark, and in more ways than one. The sun would be setting before long, and the clouds were rolling in ominously. Even as he watched, a raindrop struck him on the arm. "Fodder-wing!" he roared again, once more shoving his way through the thicket. "Hit's all my fault!" Buck muttered to himself. "I shoulda seed this comin' somehow." He thought through it all again as he searched for the boy, trying to think of some clue that could've helped him to prevent this crisis.

...Three angry men had come home that early afternoon two days ago: Lem, Buck, and Mill-wheel.

"How was Volusia?" an unsuspecting Arch asked conversationally.

Lem spat. "We got into a scrap."

Mrs. Forrester turned from the hearth. "You-all ain't had a fight in public? Cain't you confine your quarrels to-home? Don't show the world."

"Not with each other, we ain't," he explained. "We was all three on the same side. We beat hell outen Oliver Hutto."

She blinked. "Then I reckon he's a sight."

"Count on it."

Mr. Forrester chuckled. "That's my boys." He received a dirty look from Mrs. Forrester. "Aw come on, wife. You was known to git into a scrap or two in your younger days."

"Sure, but I don't know 'bout gangin' up on someone that-a-way."

"Well, iffen you'll recall, me and my brother Cotton used to go two-on-one with some other feller now and agin. Course, mebbe Oliver didn't mean to fight all three of 'em. Lem, was this 'bout Twink?"

"Yeah."

"Thought so. Did Oliver start up with you first?"

Lem nodded.

"Buck? Mill-wheel? Did Oliver go after you, or did you two go after Oliver?"

They exchanged a look.

"We did," Buck said.

"When we seed him hit Lem," Mill-wheel elaborated.

The old man nodded.

Mrs. Forrester inquired, "Did Oliver look a mite surprised or worried, when you two goed after him?"

Buck lowered his gaze.

Mill-wheel confessed, "Well, mebbe, yeah."

"Uh huh. And right there in town like that, folks'd be watchin', and he likely didn't figger he could back out in front of 'em, neither."

Buck hung his head.

Mill-wheel looked away, trying to hide his guilt.

"Well, that ain't the half of it," Lem told the others, unrepentant. "Penny and Jody was in town, too, and they tried to stop us."

All of the listeners gaped at him, and then Arch, Pack, and Gabby guffawed with gusto. "Them two?" Pack roared. "You ain't serious!"

But one look at the three fighters told him just how serious his brothers were. Still chuckling, Arch said, "Now iffen that ain't better'n two rabbits takin' on three bulls! What'd they do when they figgered out they couldn't stop you?"

Mill-wheel eyed him. "They got into it."

This time, the other three men were stunned momentarily into silence.

Then Gabby scratched his head. "But they couldn't be no more nuisance to any of us than a pair o' flies."

"And that's how we treated 'em," Lem agreed. "We squashed 'em like flies."

While he spoke, Fodder-wing went closer to him, and tugged on him. "Lem, no. Jody didn't...."

"Jody did," Lem confirmed.

"But...but...he cain't. He's jest leetle. Like me."

"And he don't know nothin' 'bout fightin', neither. He don't use his fists. He was jest kickin' and bitin' and clawin'." Lem shook his head. "'Twas like bein' attacked by a damn kitten."

Buck grinned slightly. "Well, kittens don't kick."

Lem waved it away as irrelevant. "Whatever."

Mill-wheel grinned, too. "Rabbits kick. They do all three o' them things. So you was jumped by a blasted bunny."

Arch, Pack, and Gabby were amused. Lem was not. "Fine. Anyways, I near-'bout made rabbit-stew outen him."

Fodder-wing was horrified. "No! You didn't hurt Jody!"

"I done so," Lem declared.

"You didn't hit him. I mean like...."

"Like this." Lem showed his fist. "I done so."

"No! Is he all right?"

"I don't know and I don't keer."

"Lem!" Fodder-wing yanked on his arm.

"Stop it." Lem jerked free.

"How kin you not know iffen he's all right?"

Buck put a big hand on the small shoulder. "Fodder-wing. We don't know 'cause Jody was still out cold when we left."

"Well." Fodder-wing struggled to understand. "Ain't nobody checked on him?"

"We was busy," Lem replied curtly. "And how would it look: us checkin' on one of our victims, in concern?"

"I don't keer how it'd look. I wanta know."

"Sorry." But Lem's tone was unrepentant.

"Was he out a long time whilst you was still there?"

"Yes," Mill-wheel acknowledged. "The fight goed on for at least another half-hour after Jody was knocked out."

"How'd it end? Did anybody he'p 'em?" Mrs. Forrester wondered.

Buck responded, "Hit ended with all three of 'em on the ground and no desire to git up. Oliver come to and looked at us, but the fight had goed outen his eyes. He didn't have to say a word; jest from his face we knowed he'd had 'nough, and we left him be. Penny was busy. He

crawled to Jody and tried to rouse him, but the boy was out cold. Penny was upset, and he ignored us, so we ignored him, and left.”

Mill-wheel addressed her second question. “The whole town was there watchin'. The three had he’p a’ready as we was leavin'. As we mounted up to ride out, a feller picked up Jody. The boy was limp as a rag. Two other fellers picked up Oliver and toted him. Penny could manage, but he was limp’in’.”

Gabby was still shaking his head. “I still cain't figger how them two Baxters thought they could stop any Forresters from nothin'.”

Lem said, "I don't know. But we'll think o' somethin' to punish 'em right good."

Mrs. Forrester stated pointedly, "Sounds like you a'ready done that."

"Not good 'nough," Lem answered tightly.

By this time, Fodder-wing's sniffles were becoming noticeable. The others looked at him.

"I'll never forgive you, Lem, never! Jody's my friend. My only friend, and you hurted him. You mighta kilt him! Iffen you did, I jest...I jest...!"

"Now look," Lem protested. "I ain't in no mood for this here."

But Fodder-wing wasn't finished. "And I met Oliver once, too. And he's nice. And you-all done that to him?"

Lem was enraged. "When you done met Oliver??"

"Years ago. Jody takened me to the Glen. Oliver met us there. I liked him. He was kind to me."

"That leetle varmint had no right. That's jest one more thing I'd like to beat Jody for."

"No! You leave off my friend!" With small fists, Fodder-wing pounded Lem's chest.

Lem caught Fodder-wing's wrists and fixed him with a menacing glare.

"Hold it, Lem," Buck said firmly.

"Don't even think it," Mill-wheel ordered.

Lem released the boy, but made a veiled threat. "Stay outen my way awhile."

Buck and Mill-wheel eyed Lem dangerously. But Fodder-wing was no happier with them. As he pulled clear of Lem, he turned on the other two accusingly. "And you two let him. You was there; you coulda stopped him from hurtin' Jody. Why'd you let it happen?"

"Fodder-wing, we was a mite busy," Buck reminded him.

"We had our hands full," Mill-wheel agreed.

"Yeah," the boy said bitterly. "Hurtin' Oliver. How could you?"

"Fodder-wing, I've heered jest 'bout 'nough," Mill-wheel said sternly.

But the child pressed on just the same. "The townsfolk call you-all evil. Mebbe they's right!"

"Fodder-wing, I'd not say no more, iffen I was you," Buck told him firmly.

The boy hobbled to the cabin door, and turned at the threshold. "You-all make me 'shamed to be a Forrester." He went out without another word or glance.

Taking a dangerous step in his direction, Lem called after him, "Git back here. Go to your room."

The child made no move to comply.

Buck put up a hand to Lem. "Leave him go cuddle his pets awhile; hit'll settle him down."

Mill-wheel nodded. "Jest leave him be. He'll be all right. And really, we shoulda expected this."

Lem grumbled.

Mrs. Forrester commented, "I'm wonderin' how much o' this is my fault."

"Yourn??" Buck was bewildered.

She nodded. "When Oliver was jest leetle, and he'd not play with you-all, and his ma and me quarreled, I urged you-all to go on and do more to him someday. Well, you sure goed and done it! How bad off is he really?"

"Right bad," Buck replied. "But I reckon he'll mend."

"I expect hit'll take awhile," Mill-wheel added.

Buck nodded.

Mrs. Forrester shook her head. "I kin hear his ma right now. You-all done proved her point, you know."

"'Bout what?" Lem demanded.

She observed him wryly. "She called you-all hoodlums, savages. She wanted me to keep you-all away from her 'baby'."

"'Baby?'" Lem snorted. "Sounds like you're with her. First Fodder-wing and now you. Ain't we gonna git no support in this family?"

Arch put a hand on Lem's shoulder. "We're with you, Lem," he stated as he cast a frosty look at their mother.

She sniffed in disgust.

Pack joined in with his brothers. "Count me in. Iffen you have another fight with any o' them, I'm hopin' I'll be there to git into it, too."

"And me," chimed in Gabby.

Lem nodded in satisfaction. Buck and Mill-wheel raised their eyebrows at their mother.

"Well fine," she retorted sarcastically. "I think you-all like it anyways: havin' the whole town afeered o' you."

"We do," Lem agreed with a smug grin.

His mother eyed him. "You worry me."

Hours later, she announced that it was dinner time. "Now where's that boy?" she asked. "He been out in the barn with his varmints all this time?"

"I'll go fetch him," Buck offered. "He could be a mite nervous 'bout comin' back, thinkin' we're turrible riled at him in here."

But Fodder-wing was not in the barn. Nor was there any sign that he had been....

And now, two days later, amid the pouring rain, Buck at last found the crumpled, still form of his baby brother. He rushed forward, dropped to his knees, and cradled the fragile body in his arms.

"Fodder-wing!" Buck begged for his attention, caressing the pale cheeks.

The eyes fluttered open, and tried to focus. "Buck?" The voice was weak.

"Why? Why'd you do it? Why'd you run away? Surely you wa'n't afeered we'd hurt you."

"No, I jest...wanted to git away from you-all for awhile. I...wanted to run away from home."

"Where'd you think you was goin'?"

"B...Baxters' Island."

"Four miles???"

"I...thought mebbe they'd keep me. And I wanted to be sure Jody was all right."

Buck sagged. "If 'twas that all-fired important to you, we'da goed and seed."

"No. You-all didn't keer 'bout him. And iffen you did go see Jody now, likely you'd skeer him." Fodder-wing coughed hard, and then kept on coughing.

Buck had been trying to shelter the boy with his body, against the driving rain. But the child had been thoroughly soaked long before Buck had reached him. Buck listened to the cough with growing dread, remembering a word that he didn't even want to think about just then: pneumonia. He looked into Fodder-wing's face as the coughing subsided. The boy was unconscious. Muttering to himself, Buck rose with his baby brother in his arms, and carried him home.

Chapter Eleven

One month after the fight in Volusia, Oliver's condition was a bit improved and he decided to go to Boyles' Store. He knew that the outing would do him good, and ease some of his restlessness. As he approached the store, he tried hard not to look at the dusty street in front of it, into whose dirt he had been propelled face first repeatedly a month earlier.

Boyles seemed pleased to see him. "Why, Oliver, howdy!"

"Hey, Mr. Boyles."

"Now I declare, Oliver, you're still right bruised, and you're limpin' a mite. You poor boy, what you done been through."

"I thank you for your sympathy, sir. I reckon I'll make it."

"No doubt, no doubt. What kin I do for you?"

"Jest some friendly talk'd be nice. I been cooped up so long, the boredom's near-'bout done me in."

"I kin sure understand that. How's your ma?"

"Sweet and feisty as ever. How's Eulalie?"

"I could say the same." Boyles laughed.

Oliver laughed with him, in good humor.

Their laughter was cut short. The pounding of horses' hooves was heard out front. Boyles maneuvered to look out of the window. He turned back to Oliver in consternation. "Oh dear Gus, hit's them wild Forresters agin! And all six of 'em this time! Right out front!"

Oliver paled beneath his bruises. "You ain't got a back door. I cain't git out."

Boyles agreed, "Ain't no back door, all right, but there's the storeroom. Git in there. You'll be stuck, but they got no reason to go back there."

Oliver slipped into the dark as he heard the six Forrester men troop into the store.

"Howdy, fellers." Oliver heard a slight tremble in the voice as Boyles tried to act normally.

"Hey, Boyles," various bearded men responded.

"First time we been in town since the fight," said Lem. He smirked. "How's Oliver?"

"Oh, uh..." Boyles managed a weak shrug.

"You seed him? Kin he stand up yit? How many diff'rent colors is his face?" Lem laughed nastily.

"Well, he'll mend good, I expect. How's your ma and pa? And dear leetle Fodder-wing?" The shopkeeper sounded eager to change the subject.

Lem's cocky expression vanished. He looked away, feigning nonchalance.

Buck said quietly, "Ma and Pa's fine."

Mill-wheel tried to sound offhand, but it didn't come across as casually as he would've liked. "Fodder-wing's ailin'."

"What's wrong? What's he got?"

"Ain't sure." Buck tried to dismiss the question.

"Might be pneumonia," Gabby blurted.

Buck glared at him, and there was a brief but tense silence.

Boyles was puzzled. "Hit's June. How'd he git pneumonia in summer?"

"I said we ain't sure," Buck insisted sharply. "Let's change the subject."

Sounding rattled, Boyles complied. "Things any better betwixt you-all and the Baxters?"

Buck's humor improved. "We punished 'em good."

Boyles' eyes widened. "You...beat 'em agin?" he asked hesitantly.

“Not yit.” Mill-wheel grinned. “But hit's comin'. We takened their hogs and hid 'em. Give it another two, three days. I figger they'll come to us, quarrelin' 'bout it. Then they'll git beat up agin.”

Boyles hesitated again. “Ain't Jody a mite young for all this here?”

“He ain't thought so on the day o' the fight,” Buck declared carelessly. “So hit's his own dang fault he got hurted.”

“But the one we really want is Oliver,” Lem stated flatly. “Jest wait'll the next time we come up on him.”

Oliver saw Boyles take a quick glance toward the storeroom door, where he leaned, heavily-shadowed, against the inner doorframe. Oliver's eyes winced shut, and his mouth set in a tight-lipped grimace at the mention of his name.

The storekeeper stammered, “Well, what iffen Oliver don't wanta fight you-all no more? I mean s'posin' he's had 'nough and he backs down?”

“That hot-head? Ain't likely,” Arch predicted.

“And we can allus goad him,” Lem said confidently.

Boyles persisted, “And what iffen leetle Jody ain't so brave no more?”

“When he sees us beat his pa? He'll git in it,” Pack stated with certainty.

“And Penny'll have to come after them hogs,” Lem said smugly.

Mill-wheel was perplexed. “Why you so full o' silly questions, all of a sudden? You askin' mighty unlikely things. You know somethin' we don't? You hidin' somethin'?”

Oliver saw Boyles' eyes almost return to the storeroom. Not quite, but almost. The shopkeeper shook his head vigorously. A little too vigorously.

The Forresters looked thoughtful. Then they proceeded with their business and headed for the door. Boyles tried to smother his sigh of relief.

In the doorway, Lem turned and glanced casually over his shoulder. “So long, Oliver.” He laughed raucously.

Boyles' jaw dropped. Oliver sagged against the doorframe, as he heard all six Forresters laugh the rest of the way out of the store.

The shaking storekeeper watched the men ride out of sight.

When they were completely gone, a blanching Oliver tip-toed out of the store and went home quietly. He entered his house and sat down in a chair without a word.

Mrs. Hutto entered the room and looked at his white face. “You had a close call, ain't you?”

Her son nodded silently.

“Ain't I warned you 'bout tanglin' with them devils?” she admonished. “Now you'll never have no peace, nor never be safe nowheres.”

Oliver sighed deeply.

Chapter Twelve

In mid-July, Penny and Jody visited Oliver and Mrs. Hutto, concerned about Oliver's recovery. The Huttos had been worried about the Baxters as well.

"How're you-all makin' out, only four miles away from them devils?" Mrs. Hutto asked. "I've been frettin' 'bout you, out in the middle o' nowheres with only them wild men near you."

"Oh, we're managin' all right," Penny said. "'Sides, you know I love it in the scrub, with nothin' but trees and swamp anywheres 'round us. I couldn't live in town, with property lines too close. Twelve miles from town suits me jest fine."

Oliver was dubious. "Still, I reckon hit's mighty uncomfortable for you-all now, with the Forresters bein' the only other folks 'round, and bein' riled at you. That reminds me. I wanted to warn you. The Forresters are aimin' to give you-all another beatin'."

"How do you know that?" Penny asked.

"I...heered it. They takened your hogs."

"Oh yes, but we've got 'em back now."

"How'd you manage that?"

"The hard way. We was on our way to confront the Forresters 'bout 'em, when I was snake-bit. Jody goed on to the Forresters' and told 'em, and they fetched Doc Wilson and takened me home. A few days later, they gave back the hogs."

Oliver blinked. "I cain't imagine Lem havin' an ounce o' kindness."

"He didn't. Buck and Mill-wheel did."

"The same two that he'ped Lem beat us??"

Penny nodded. "The very same. They also saved my life."

"So, you avoided another beatin', and you've made up with 'em." Oliver had a passing thought about how lucky the Baxters were. But then he said, "Even so, I'm powerful sorry I brung all this on you."

"That's all right, Oliver. I'm jest fretted 'bout you. It come out all right for us."

"And there's even a bright side," Jody added excitedly. "When Pa was snake-bit, he shot a doe and used the liver to draw out the poison. The doe had a fawn, and now I have the fawn for a pet. So you see, I'da not had the fawn, iffen 'tweren't for the fight."

"True 'nough," Penny admitted.

"And I wanta go show my fawn to Fodder-wing soon."

"Reckon you kin," Penny said amiably. "Now that we're gettin' on all right with the Forresters agin." To Oliver, he said, "We heered Twink runned off right after the fight."

"True, but I know where she goed." Oliver winked.

"Well, be keerful," Penny warned. "Iffen the Forresters ketch you with her...."

"I know. I'm keerful 'nough."

"You ain't keerful 'nough, and you're makin' me nervous," Mrs. Hutto fussed. "You've a'ready had one close call."

"That wa'n't when I sneaked to see Twink; hit was when I'd jest goed to visit Boyles." He told the Baxters of his near-miss with the six Forresters in the store.

Jody groaned at the obvious danger that Oliver had faced.

Penny wondered, "You really figger they knowed for sure you was in there?"

"I don't know, but iffen they did, they let me go; they ain't dragged me out and beat me agin. Would the Forresters really be that kind? Or was they jest teasin' Boyles, and not truly thinkin' I was there?"

"Hard to say."

"Anyways, that's how I knowed they was plannin' to beat you agin. They talked 'bout you whilst I was in the storeroom. They...talked 'bout me, too." He shifted uncomfortably.

"I kin guess what they said," Penny remarked sympathetically. "How safe is it for you to be sneakin' to see Twink?"

"I don't know."

"Do Lem know where she's hidin'?"

Oliver shook his head. "She told me he ain't found her."

"What're you gonna do? You cain't go on this-a-way."

"I figger we should leave the area. Run away."

"How you know she'll go 'long with that?"

"I ain't sure. We've talked 'bout it. We'll see." Oliver could see by his listeners' faces that they would miss him, and he was gratified.

Chapter Thirteen

In late July, Jody endured a most disturbing dream, a twisted version of an unfortunate reality.

"I come to see Fodder-wing. I come to show him my fawn," Jody said.

Buck smiled and stood aside for Fodder-wing to descend the stairs.

Fodder-wing smiled radiantly at him.

Jody felt a painful twinge, as of something unpleasant that he'd forgotten, but he dismissed it. This was no time for sorrow. He had a joy to share with Fodder-wing.

They sat down on either side of the fawn. Fodder-wing put out a twisted hand to caress the animal's head. It regarded him with wide brown glassy eyes, and raised its muzzle to sniff at his fingers. Jody watched, his heart bursting with pleasure as his friend took his baby into his arms and settled it into his lap. Jody had never doubted that Fodder-wing's way with animals would extend to his precious fawn, too. Fodder-wing held and petted the fawn for a long time without speaking. At last, he looked up at Jody and their eyes met.

"Flag," Fodder-wing said simply.

Jody tilted his head slightly in bewilderment, but didn't wish to break the spell by speaking. He had known that any pronouncements that his friend would make about the fawn would be beautiful and mysterious.

"That's what you should call him. A fawn carries his leetle flag of a tail so proud."

"Flag," Jody echoed, understanding. He stared deeper into Fodder-wing's eyes. Jody felt the distant echo of a dull pain begin again to throb within him, and he struggled futilely to resist its growing power. It seemed to Jody that, if he could only continue to hold onto Fodder-wing's gaze forever, he could hold the pain at bay indefinitely. He battled the oppressively growing weight, but despite his best efforts, Fodder-wing's eyes were becoming a blur. Jody brushed hastily at his own eyes, believing that if he could only drive away the tears, Fodder-wing's image would become clear again. But the gesture was to no avail. It came to Jody that the lack of focus was not in Jody's own eyes, but in reality. As Fodder-wing continued to blur before him, Jody reached out to him desperately. He tried in vain to embrace his friend and hold on, but it was too late. Fodder-wing was gone.

Jody awakened, crying convulsively. He was crushed to face once more the reality of his friend's death.

Chapter Fourteen

Penny, Jody, Buck, and Mill-wheel were out scouting the damage brought on by the flood. It was evening, and the four were busy gathering boughs for their bedding by the campfire.

The two Forresters, having finished their foraging before the two Baxters, had returned to the camp ahead of them.

Mill-wheel grinned conspiratorially at his brother. "Hey, wanta playa joke on them two?"

Buck smiled back in turn. "What you got in mind?"

"I got an idea when Penny said that wildcat liver'd make him brave 'nough to romp on us, and git the hell beat outen him agin. Well, when them two git back, let's pretend the liver's got us all wound up, and has made us wanta relive that fine fight. We'll say hit'll be even more fun without Lem and Oliver anyways."

Buck chuckled at the thought, but then hesitated. "We might skeer 'em."

Mill-wheel shrugged. "Jest for a minute. We'll not go too fur."

But Buck was gradually losing his smile. "I jest don't reckon I kin do that. I think hit'll skeer leetle Jody too much. Even for a minute."

"Now why you figger that? He was brave in Volusia."

"But that fight mighta done some damage. Whilst I was stayin' with 'em, after Penny's snake-bite, they put me in Jody's room. The boy slept beside me on a pallet on the floor. One night, the poor leetle thing had a nightmare 'bout us beatin' him. His cryin' woke me. He dreamed we was all six gangin' up on him, like we three done Oliver."

Mill-wheel sputtered with laughter.

"I know hit's right amusin' and silly," Buck admitted. "But hit makes me wonder iffen Jody didn't suffer some kinda troubles, more'n jest physical, after the fight, iffen he could still git that shook up. I jest don't have the heart to skeer him o' purpose."

"You ol' softee," Mill-wheel playfully admonished. "All right. We'll not."

The two Baxters returned, never knowing what they'd barely missed enduring. Although Jody intercepted a wink between the Forresters, and then caught them looking at him with peculiar expressions.

Chapter Fifteen

Mrs. Hutto was mildly enjoying dancing with her pathetic admirer, Easy Ozell, at the Christmas doin's, despite the unfortunate nearness of the raucous and rowdy Forresters, until the waltz was exchanged for a square-dance. Instantly realizing that partner-changing would be the rule, she surreptitiously eyed the black-beards.

She whispered to Easy, "Keerful who you hand me to."

"Oh my." He followed her gaze and realized her line of thought. "I'll do my best."

True to his word, when the change was called, he handed her to someone harmless. Who in turn handed her to someone else harmless. Who then brought her face-to-face with a bearded nightmare. It would have been hard to avoid, she knew; all but Lem were involved in the dance.

Mrs. Hutto automatically recoiled from him, her lips curling as if from something sour.

His face went through several rapid changes. Within seconds, he progressed from perplexed through resigned to amused. He reached and caught her hands more quickly than she could snatch them away again. "Oh, why not," he said. He grinned at her.

She made a futile effort to pull back from him, and then yielded with a sigh. "Which one are you, anyways?" she snapped. "I cain't tell one o' you devils from another."

Never losing his grin, he responded evenly, "I'm Buck, Mis' Hutto."

She gasped, enraged. "You're one o' the ones that tormented my Oliver! How could you, you savage!" She tried again to wrench free, and failed.

At her loud outburst, the two nearest of Buck's brothers turned to look. There was a faint flicker of fear in her eyes, which was instantly replaced by a hardened stubbornness.

Buck lost his grin, but still kept his polite tone. "Now don't be callin' me names, Mis' Hutto, or this'll git unpleasant."

"Hit's a'ready unpleasant!" Mrs. Hutto pulled against him uselessly again.

He eyed her. "Hit'll git worse."

"Oh, now you're threatenin' a ol' woman?"

"That's up to you."

She glared silently at him and tried to work a few fingers free from one of his big hands.

He restrained her easily. "You know, iffen you was to jest git down offen your high-and-mighty, and admit that you're scairt..."

"I'd never give you the satisfaction," she hissed, more loudly than she'd intended.

The same two Forresters, plus one more, were noticing the minor struggle and the argument, and had become steadily watchful of the pair. Mrs. Hutto worked to pretend that she wasn't rattled by their scrutiny. The newest watcher was sharp enough to recognize her brave front for what it was, and smirked at her.

She stormed at Buck, "That un thinks hit's funny!"

Buck followed her gaze and smiled. "Mill-wheel finds a heap o' things funny in life. I'd not fret 'bout it, iffen I was you."

The name caught her attention. "That's...! He's...!"

"Yes," Buck replied patiently, "he's Mill-wheel; he's another one of us what tormented your Oliver." He borrowed her words with unconcealed amusement.

A furious Mrs. Hutto responded with a word that would've brought a horrified blush to Ory Baxter's cheeks, had she heard.

Buck all but guffawed in genuine good humor. "Now you learnt that word from Oliver. Sailors allus know how to cuss good. And that's one thing you two got in common with us, that neither of our families kin share with the Baxters."

Mrs. Hutto was incensed. "We got nothin' in common with you-all! Nothin'!"

"Iffen you say so," Buck allowed tolerantly. "But jest seems to me, you two ain't all prim and proper and hard-nosed, like them Baxters kin be, much as we like 'em. You got a mite o' spitfire in you. Like us."

She countered with a vicious yank on one hand, which did absolutely nothing to dislodge his iron grip on her, but which coaxed a minor "Ouch" from her. Then she quickly covered it with saying, "Well, at least the other two that's watchin' ain't laughin'."

Buck agreed, "Arch and Pack take things jest a mite more serious."

"Sich names you-all got," she commented in disgust.

Buck sighed tolerantly. "Whyn't you jest relax and make the best o' this?"

"Whyn't you jest leave me go?"

He answered easily, "'Cause then there'd be too few women for the number o' men, and hit'd ruin the dance."

At the end of her patience, Mrs. Hutto loudly bellowed, "I don't keer!!"

With that, the eyes of all five other Forresters were riveted on the pair.

Mill-wheel sidled close with his partner. "Is there a problem, Buck?"

Buck calculatingly replied, "I reckon I'll leave the lady answer that."

Mrs. Hutto hesitated. She returned the gaze of a now stern-faced Mill-wheel, glanced at a frowning Lem on the outskirts, and then let her eyes travel to the other three Forresters all too near and attentive on the dance floor. Doubt crossed her face as her eyes returned to Buck.

"Hit's all right," he reassured her kindly. "Ain't no disgrace for you to stop rebellin' and accept this peaceable. We know you got spunk, like your son, but jest as he learnt the hard way, there's limits on how fur to carry it. Finish this dance with me, and I'll leave you go."

"All right," she agreed grudgingly.

Mill-wheel nodded acceptance and pulled away from them.

Buck smiled at Mrs. Hutto. She pouted quietly at him. He laughed the superior laugh of one who is in complete control of another and knows it.

The moment that he released her, she retreated briskly to the far bench, to sit by Ory Baxter. Mrs. Hutto was quite relieved to gather that the Baxters clearly knew nothing of her brief altercation.

Shortly after, when the church door opened, admitting a cold draft and a stranger, Mrs. Hutto whirled, automatically assuming and fearing that the new arrival would instead be her Oliver. She contemplated what she would've done, had she still been unwillingly in Buck Forrester's arms, and turned to see Oliver walk into the church. She knew the answer. She would've instantly kicked and wrestled with Buck, in order to leave one less monster free to attack her son.

Hours later, as Mrs. Hutto watched her house burn to embers, she considered the irony of her casual dismissal of the importance of the stranger who'd entered the church. She had not realized that, while he was not Oliver, he would tell the Forresters that Oliver and Twink had returned, thereby enraging them enough to come and set this fire. In her mind, she could almost still feel Buck Forrester's unwanted arms around her. She marveled that, although she'd known that he was dangerous, both from his participation in the beating of Oliver and from his implied threats to her on the dance floor, she'd never imagined that he and his brothers would do this to her.

She also thought about the reactions of the Baxters to her having lied to Oliver, claiming that the Forresters had not been responsible for the fire. Clearly, Ory and Jody had assumed that Oliver should hear the truth. Only Ezra had understood her reasoning and supported her lie. But Mrs. Hutto knew that she was right. Despite all of her bravado that she didn't want two counties

covered with Forrester blood as well as her boy's bones, and despite Oliver's bluster that he wouldn't have left one Forrester alive if the men were guilty, Mrs. Hutto knew what the real outcome would've been if she'd told Oliver the truth. He'd have pursued the Forresters and been killed. One man, however hot-headed, was no match for six men, however drunk. She knew that she had to get Oliver out of Florida as quickly as possible, before those men regained their equilibrium or their fury, and came pursuing him again. She had to move to Boston herself to try to remove Oliver's reason to ever come here. She only hoped that Boston was far enough away to save him.

Chapter Sixteen

After Flag had destroyed the first two plantings of corn, and the Baxters had been compelled to destroy the fawn, Jody had run away from home. Desperate for more seed corn to plant, Ory Baxter had swallowed her pride and gone to the Forresters to trade for it, since Penny was temporarily incapacitated from a recent injury. Jody had returned first, and made his father proud through his newfound acceptance of the loss of his pet. When Ory came home, Penny told her of their boy's ambitious intention to run away to Boston. The significance of the destination hit her immediately.

"Boston. Where the Huttos goed. You figger Jody felt as betrayed by us as Oliver felt by the Forresters? Oh, Ezra, I never meant for Jody to take it that-a-way."

"I know," Penny said softly. "I also know you love the boy, Ory, even iffen you don't allus like to show it."

Chapter Seventeen

The May sky shone down brilliantly as Jody struggled to complete the third planting of the corn. Fortunately, Penny had been mending well the past few weeks since Doc Wilson's visit, but Jody had refused his every offer to help with the replanting. The destruction of the first two plantings had been his own fault, or rather that of the yearling, but it was one and the same. Jody's guilt would not permit him to accept assistance. Ory had been even more reticent than usual since her return from the Forresters. Her errand to trade with them for the seed corn that Jody was now planting had humiliated her beyond measure. Her only comfort was that few of the rough men had been there to witness her shame. Pack and Gabby had returned in April, as Mr. and Mrs. Forrester had promised, but Buck, Mill-wheel, Lem, and Arch weren't back from their horse-trading in Kentucky. Upon her return home, Ory had said simply, "'Twas a blessin' that Lem wa'n't there. He sure do make me nervous." Pack and Gabby had inquired after the health of Penny and Jody, and were concerned that Penny had strained himself and that Jody was missing. Jody was gratified to hear later that they had offered to search for him. His mother had discouraged the idea, however, since too many days had passed, and no one knew where to begin.

A sound in the distance distracted Jody from his planting. He paused to listen. It was the pounding of hoof-beats approaching the clearing. Jody ran back toward the cabin and into the front yard in time to see two horses bolt in at the same moment. The riders were Buck and Mill-wheel Forrester. They reined in and looked startled to see him.

Jody called, "Hey, Buck. Howdy, Mill-wheel."

"Hey, boy, we ain't figgered on seein' you," Buck said. "We expected you was still off some'eres."

Jody hung his head. "I shouldn'ta runned off. I'm 'shamed I done that."

"Ne' mind." Mill-wheel put a hand on his shoulder. "Let's go see your pa."

They were pleased to see Penny in such an improved condition. They themselves were in high spirits having just returned the day before from their trip to Kentucky.

"Like I told you," Buck explained, "I git so homesick on these horse-tradin' trips, I cain't stand it 'til I see home agin."

They sat and talked with the Baxters about their highly successful trading expedition.

Presently, Mill-wheel said, "When the rest of us got home yestiddy, Pack and Gabby told us you-all was havin' troubles, so we rode over today to see kin we he'p. But looks like you got it all straight."

"Let's have a frolic," suggested Buck. "Penny's well; Jody's found; and we-all is home at last. We'll have a fox-chase."

"Tomorrer," Mill-wheel agreed.

"Now I'd purely love that." Penny's face shone. "I'll swear, I been cooped up in this house so long, that's jest what I need."

They agreed to meet early the next morning with camping supplies, and to spend the night out under the stars wherever darkness found them.

Sure enough, the two Baxters and all six Forrester men made an epic adventure of the chase all the next day, and well into dusk. The bright campfire was a welcome sight, and Jody flopped down in front of it after supper, exhausted and happy. Penny and the Forresters sat down scattered around it. They talked about the hunt until they tired of it, then Buck casually turned to Jody beside him and asked, "Where was you figgerin' on runnin' to, when you runned off?"

Instantly, Jody's feeling of well-being and comfort vanished, and a hot redness crept up his neck into his face. The fever was accompanied by the sudden pounding of his heart. Jody looked

desperately at his father. Penny shifted uncomfortably and groaned. Jody, finding no reassurance there, lowered his eyes, avoiding Buck's now-penetrating stare, and squirmed.

"Jody?" Buck prompted. "What ails you?"

Hesitantly, Jody raised his eyes to meet Buck's, shied from his direct stare, and quickly lowered them again.

"Boston," he whispered almost inaudibly. "I aimed to go to Boston."

The stiffening of all six Forrester men was tangible enough for Jody to feel.

"Boston," Mill-wheel repeated.

"To find Oliver," Lem accused.

"Yes, sir," Jody mumbled miserably. "I reckon."

The painful silence that ensued seemed endless. When Jody could bear it no longer, he looked straight into Lem's eyes. The savage anger with which Lem looked back made Jody gasp and wince as if he had been struck.

"Skeeter," Lem hissed through lips drawn tight.

A despair flooded Jody that was worse than the nervousness before had been. He burst out, "Lem, please don't call me that no more."

Penny turned a puzzled expression to Lem. "What'd you call my son?"

Lem shot a challenging glare back at him. "I called him Skeeter."

"Pa," Jody explained in misery, "he called me that when he was riled at me before, after the fight."

Penny said slowly and carefully, "Hit's bad 'nough you named me. I don't reckon you need to put a name on my boy, too."

"Iffen I keep callin' him that, mebbe hit'll stick," Lem replied with a smirk. "Anyways, you wanta try to stop me?"

Penny looked around quickly at the other Forresters, but didn't find, in any of them, the support that he was seeking. There was a coldness in all of them; they were displeased with Jody, too. Sensing that Lem still watched him, Penny met his gaze. Lem dared Penny with his eyes. After a moment, overcome by hopelessness, Penny lowered his eyes in defeat. Lem turned a self-satisfied grin to Jody.

"Skeeter," he pronounced the word with relish.

A torrent of desperation welled up in Jody and burst from him in a flood of words.

"Lem! The only reason you call me that, is you figger I betrayed you. There's somethin' you don't know. And I been wantin' to tell you for a long time. There was only one reason why Pa and me interfered with you and Oliver in your fight. Hit was 'cause the fight wa'n't no-ways fair. Three agin one ain't never fair. You-all was bein' cruel to Oliver. If hit'd been the other way 'round: iffen hit'd been Oliver and – I don't know – some of his friends rompin' on you, and your brothers ain't been there, we'da been on your side instead. Or iffen hit'd been a fair fight, jest you and Oliver and nobody else, we'da not bothered you."

"You expect me to believe that?" Lem demanded tightly.

"Hit's the truth," Penny said quietly.

"Lem," Jody went on, "I don't love Oliver more'n you, but I was afeered you was killin' him. Iffen only you-all coulda felled out with anybody else but him! You gotta remember, when Pa was away at the war for four years, Ma and me goed to live with Grandma Hutto and Oliver. He wa'n't yit a sailor then, and we had a heap o' time together. You-all got each other. I'm an only child, and so is Oliver. We needed each other. And for awhile, hit was like we was brothers."

"Now I had forgot that," Arch said quietly.

"Four years," said Buck. "That's a right long whiles."

"I reckon you did git to be like brothers in that time," Mill-wheel acknowledged.

"That ain't all," Penny added. "Iffen Ezra Jr. had lived, he'd be 'bout Oliver's age. And Oliver's daddy has been dead so long, he don't rightly remember him. I didn't have Jody yit then, when Oliver was new-borned, and I wa'n't sure I'd ever have a young un o' my own, to raise."

"So he thinks o' you as a pa to him and you think o' him as a son," Pack realized.

"That's how it be," Penny said simply.

"That makes what you-all done a mite more natural," Gabby commented thoughtfully.

Jody and Penny looked hopefully at Lem. He gazed back sullenly.

"Lem, I..." Jody marshalled his courage and came to his feet. He looked quickly around at Buck, Mill-wheel, and Penny to his left, Arch to his right, and Pack and Gabby across the fire on either side of Lem. They all frowned back, cautioning him. He took one faltering step to the right. Arch put up a hand, warning him. Jody swallowed hard, and shook his head. Arch raised his eyebrows and shrugged. Jody took a few fearful steps around the fire toward Lem. Lem's eyes gleamed brightly in the firelight, watching him. Buck leaned forward worriedly. Jody hesitated. But it was too late now; he was committed. Lem watched him with an amused expression, enjoying his discomfort. Jody swallowed again and continued; the path around the fire seemed miles long with Lem's eyes locked unwaveringly on his. When at last he stood next to Lem, Jody dropped to his knees beside him and said, "You used to like me. Please like me agin. I ain't never stopped likin' you." Lem's black eyes continued to hold Jody's blue ones for a moment longer. Jody's eyes pleaded with him, his lip quivering. Then, trembling violently, Jody reached out and slipped tiny arms around Lem's neck and laid his head on the massive shoulder. For a moment, Jody's trembling was the only movement of anyone there. Then, Lem laid a big hand on Jody's back. Jody started abruptly, and then relaxed when he felt that the hand neither struck him nor crushed him.

"All right young un," was all that Lem said.

The other five Forresters and Penny sat back and breathed again, suddenly aware that they'd been holding their breaths.

"Oh lord," Gabby said. "Boy, you takened a chance."

Jody nodded weakly.

All were silent for a long moment, the tension slowly easing.

Then, Buck said, "Well, Oliver started the fight hisself. So I cain't feel too sorry for him, even though I reckon we was unfair to him." He stared into the fire. "But I do regret...." All of the other Forresters knew what it was that he regretted, and clearly shared his distress. They evidently felt the awkwardness of wondering how much the Baxters knew, and the tension returned. Jody also knew what they regretted, and a tremor passed through him. Lem felt it, and announced, "He knows." Jody whimpered softly as all Forrester eyes fixed on him again, and squeezed his eyes tightly shut. The dark men watched him for a moment, and then Buck turned to Penny.

"All right. So you know. We figgered as much. We wouldn'ta done it iffен we wa'n't drunk. We ain't wanted to hurt that poor ol' woman."

"I know." Penny sighed.

"She go to Boston, too?" Pack asked.

Penny nodded.

Arch suggested hopefully, "Well, she's obliged to like that, with Oliver shippin' out from there."

Penny shook his head. "I don't see how. She allus hated them Yankees." He hesitated.

"What I cain't figger is why you-all done it. Did you figger Oliver was in the house?"

"Course not," Mill-wheel replied. "We checked first. What we wanted was to find him."
"And beat him to death."

It was Mill-wheel's turn to hesitate. "Well, yes."

"So you was frustrated you ain't found him, and that's why you burnt the house."

Buck shook his head. "No. Hit was a trap."

Penny was confused. "What?"

Arch explained, "We knowed Oliver was hot-headed, and we figgered iffen we cain't find him, we'll leave him find us."

Pack continued, "The housefire was the bait in the trap. We was sure Oliver would be furious 'nough, and foolish 'nough, to foller us. Clare back to Forresters' Island. But I reckon he wa'n't as brave as we figgered. He ran."

Penny and Jody exchanged glances. Jody spoke for the first time in a while, hesitantly. "Hit a'most worked."

Instantly, all of the Forresters' eyes riveted on him. Jody squirmed uncomfortably.

"You seed him?" Buck hissed.

"Y...yes," Jody faltered. "I was the one found him." They stared at him in amazement. Jody continued. "He meant to foller you-all, jest like you said."

"What stopped him?" Mill-wheel demanded.

"Grandma stopped him."

"How?" Buck was bewildered.

"She lied to him. She told him you-all ain't done it. She lied to save him."

A solemn quiet descended. Finally Gabby spoke, "But she musta been riled. Hit was her house."

Jody replied quietly, "Not riled 'nough to sacrifice Oliver." They pondered that for a moment, then Jody proceeded, "He mighta kilt some o' you-all, though; he had a revolver."

Buck shook his head. "No. He'da not kilt none of us."

Lem broke the silence that he'd been keeping for a while, and said ominously, "We figgered on that. We was layin' for him. We was in the bushes all 'round our place with rifles. We'da shot the revolver right outen his hand, and then we'da been on him."

Jody, with his head still on Lem's chest, was stricken with a convulsive shivering, as the horror of the wicked scene that Lem described took hold of him. Lem looked at him curiously.

"You might as well relax, boy; hit ain't happened."

Instead, a new terror struck Jody, and he sobbed, "Hit woulda been my fault. Iffen it had happened, I woulda been to blame. I was the one told him you-all done it."

Lem grinned in ironic amusement. "Now wouldn't that've been somethin'? You he'pin' us git him."

Suddenly, Penny's face filled with horror. "My lord," he whispered. "Did you-all have the same motive when you was riled at us after the fight and stole our hogs?"

"In a way," Buck admitted matter-of-factly. "We wa'n't gonna kill you, but we was figgerin' on givin' you-all another beatin', and the hogs was the bait to lure you to our place."

"That a'most worked, too," Mill-wheel remarked. "Jody told me they was huntin' their hogs when Penny was snake-bit."

Penny stared at him. "From now on, I'll figger I got off light. I was better off with the snake."

They all laughed, and the tension eased once again.

Jody asked shyly, "Buck, there's somethin' I've allus wanted to know. After the fight, when you-all goed home and told the rest what happened, was Fodder-wing riled at me?"

Buck smiled gently at the memory. "No, Jody. He was never riled at you. In fact, he was riled at Lem for hittin' you."

Jody sat up straight and looked into Lem's face in wonderment.

Lem grinned wryly. "That's a fact. 'Specially when I had to admit that you was still out cold when we left at the end. He was afeered I'd hurted you too bad."

Mill-wheel asked, "How long was you knocked out, boy?"

Jody shook his head.

Penny answered softly, his voice thick with emotion. "Seven hours."

"What?" the Forresters thundered together.

Penny continued, "We was afeered he was gonna die."

The Forresters all looked stunned; even Lem looked a little repentant.

"I'm sorry, boy," he said. "Hit looks like you're even punier than I figgered."

Jody hung his head with embarrassment and shame.

Buck hastened to lighten the mood, and to relieve the child of his humiliation, saying, "Anyways, Jody, you gotta learn to fight good. Clawin' and bitin' and kickin' like you done jest ain't the way. You got to learn to use your fists."

Jody looked doubtful.

Mill-wheel took up the idea at once, with enthusiasm. "Tell you what, Jody, we'll learn you to fight."

"Oh, no," Jody blurted. "I'd jest as soon not."

The Forresters roared with laughter.

Chapter Eighteen

The corn was showing, green and beautiful, in June. Jody stood looking proudly at the fine job that he'd done, thinking that this time, nothing would happen to it.

He was startled from his reverie by a sound in the bushes at the edge of the cornfield. He approached cautiously. A figure detached itself from the bushes and rose straight and tall before him.

"Oliver!" Jody cried, and launched himself joyfully at him. Oliver caught Jody up in his arms and swung him. They laughed gleefully together. Oliver set Jody back on his feet, and looked around nervously. "Them Forresters ain't 'round?"

"No," Jody answered automatically, but looked over his shoulder in spite of himself. "But we best git you to the house."

Jody escorted Oliver to the cabin, and then went in search of his father. They hurried back to join Oliver in the main room.

"Where's Grandma?" Jody burst excitedly. "And Twink?"

"Boston," Oliver answered hastily. "I'd not be foolish 'nough to risk bringin' 'em back here."

"I'm surprised," Penny offered, grinning, "that they let you come here."

"They don't know I'm here," Oliver confessed. "Iffen they knowed, they'd rare for sure, 'specially Ma."

"Then how come you to be here, Oliver?" Jody inquired.

"The ship put in to port in Jacksonville, and I couldn't resist. I was keerful, though; I ain't come in through Volusia; I come through Sanford. And I ain't seed nobody I know 'til you-all. So hit's prob'bly all right."

They sat and chatted a while about Oliver's travels, and Jody asked endless questions about Mrs. Hutto and Twink. It was so thrilling to have Oliver back, to have him be a real part of Jody's life once more.

There was a sound of hoof-beats approaching the island. Oliver sat up straight and stared wordlessly at Penny.

Penny murmured, "Oh God." Jody leaped to his feet and raced for the window. He turned back from it, his face wild with panic. Oliver went white.

"Git to Jody's room!" Penny ordered. "And shut the door!"

Oliver bolted for the bedroom, but stopped in the doorway as Penny asked Jody, "Is it all six of 'em?"

Jody shook his head. "Jest Buck and Mill-wheel."

Oliver blurted in alarm, "They's the same two that he'ped Lem beat the daylights outen me!"

"I know," Penny acknowledged. "But they's the nicest two."

"Aw, great," Oliver shot back sarcastically, then added, "Penny, whatever happens, I don't want you and Jody hurted agin; I'll not be the cause o' that twice. You cain't stop 'em no-ways. So don't try. Iffen they must beat me or take me, let 'em."

Penny shrugged helplessly, at a loss for a reply.

Oliver slipped into the room and closed the door.

"Pa." Jody's voice was urgent. "You reckon they know?"

Penny's face was stricken. He didn't have an answer.

Buck and Mill-wheel were as friendly as usual, making it immediately obvious that their arrival was merely an unfortunate coincidence, and not the result of any knowledge of Oliver's

whereabouts. The conversation was trivial and casual, and Jody found that he was hard-pressed to pay attention.

Jody felt pity for the torment that Oliver must be suffering in his room. It seemed to Jody that he could feel his own heart-rate increasing with Oliver's, the panic rising. If Buck and Mill-wheel caught Oliver, they would beat him to death. Or more likely, they would take him back with them to Forresters' Island, back to Lem and the others. Oliver would be at their mercy. Jody began to feel what Oliver would feel, standing among them, the six surrounding him. He looked from one to another in his mind's eye, and saw them all vividly, as in a nightmare. He saw Lem's dark, evil face approaching, a vicious smile on his lips. Lem laughed and drew back his fist.... Jody shuddered involuntarily, breathing hard, his vision blurring, his palms sweating. He tried to swallow, but his throat was too dry. A memory coursed through him of the pain, his own pain, when Lem had struck him during the fight in Volusia. He was trembling, as he knew that Oliver was trembling, in the next room, so close.

A voice seemed to be trying to reach him from a great distance, intruding on his fear. Jody came to with a start. Mill-wheel had spoken to him. Everyone was staring. Jody stared back guiltily, wide-eyed, his heartbeat louder than ever in his ears.

"Why, what ails you, boy?" Mill-wheel asked.

"Nothin'," Jody blurted hastily, perhaps a bit too hastily. "Nothin'. I was jest thinkin' 'bout all the work I got to do, I ain't yit done."

Penny stared at him in disbelief. Jody shrugged sheepishly. Mill-wheel didn't seem quite convinced, but he shook his head and dropped the matter.

The visit seemed interminable, but at last the Forresters moved on down the road. When they had ridden out of sight, Jody called Oliver. The door opened slowly, and Oliver leaned against the doorframe, pale and shaking.

"That was a near thing," he breathed.

Penny turned to Jody. "Boy, for a minute there, I thought you was gonna give the game away."

"I'm sorry, Pa. I jest got to thinkin' what would happen to Oliver iffen they found him." He shook his head.

"That's all right, Jody," Oliver consoled him. "You wa'n't thinkin' nothin' I wa'n't thinkin' a'ready. I reckon 'twas a mistake for me to come here."

"Well," Penny offered lamely, "hit's prob'bly safe now, for awhile. They don't usually visit two days in a row. Now they been here, they likely'll not be back for a few days at least."

"I'd be proud to stay and visit a spell," Oliver agreed. "Iffen my nerves kin stand it."

Penny nodded his reluctant agreement.

Chapter Nineteen

July was alive with heat. Throughout the month, work seemed unbearable. The oppressive days weighed down upon their heads, one after another. When at last they could endure it no more, Penny and Jody left the fields and set out for Volusia, for a change of scenery. They returned somewhat refreshed, but with a new mystery. A letter from Oliver and Mrs. Hutto had been awaiting them there, and it had been cryptic and brief. It had requested simply that Penny and Jody meet the Huttos in Grahamsville at the end of the month. So that is how it happened that the two Baxters set out for Grahamsville the very next day.

The mystery deepened when the Baxters and the Huttos found each other. Oliver and his mother greeted the Baxters solemnly, with none of the rambunctious joy that they had come to expect. Although Mrs. Hutto hugged Jody close to her, the embrace seemed almost urgent.

They sat down to talk. Penny looked at Oliver expectantly.

"I'm sorry for draggin' you-all to Grahamsville," Oliver began, "but Ma was afeered to git any closer. You know." He raised his eyebrows meaningfully. Penny nodded. Oliver began again, "We got news...." His voice broke. He leaned a hand on his forehead, shielding his eyes. He was shaking.

His mother continued for him, "There was a train-wreck in Boston. Ever'body on that train was kilt. Twink was on it."

Automatically, Penny reached out a hand and laid it on Oliver's shoulder. Oliver covered it with his own, and buried his face against Penny's arm.

"I'm powerful sorry, Oliver," Penny said gravely.

Jody sat in stunned silence. A memory came to him of fragrant golden curls, deep blue eyes, and soft lips that brushed his forehead in a good-bye kiss last Christmas, so long ago. He turned and stared wide-eyed at Mrs. Hutto. She smiled faintly but reassuringly at him, and reached out and squeezed his hand.

After a while, Oliver composed himself and went on, "I've give up sailorin'. Hit was my fault. Iffen I'd been home...." He shook his head. "Mebbe Lem was right."

That startled Penny. "'Bout what?"

"Now that this has happened, I keep rememberin' what he done said that started the fight. He mighta been right 'bout it. His words keep tormentin' me."

"What'd he say? I've allus wondered."

"He said, 'I'm sure you got a gal in every port jest like every other sailor. You'll never be here for her.' Well, he was wrong 'bout the first part. But he was right 'bout the second. I wa'n't here for her. When she needed me, I wa'n't here."

"Now, Oliver." Penny tried to console him. "She knowed you was a sailor when she married you. She knowed how much you'd be away, and she accepted it. 'Sides, even iffen you ain't been a sailor, you couldn'ta watched her every minute."

Oliver just shook his head, refusing to forgive himself.

Penny asked quietly, "What you-all wanta do now?"

"Come home," Oliver said simply, "permanent."

"Well," Penny began awkwardly, "we'd love that. But hit's a mite difficult."

"I know." Oliver nodded. "But we got to try. Ma hates Boston. Allus has. So do I, now. Too many memories. And the way I feel now, I'll swear I don't much keer iffen I live nor die. So I might as well try to go home. Or die tryin'. Leave 'em git me. Hit'll be more merciful than grievin'."

“At first I tried to talk him outen it,” Mrs. Hutto said, “but my heart wa’n’t in it. He’s right: I do hate Boston fearful. I hate the Yankees and the dratted cold. I do wanta go home. And he insists on tryin’ it.”

“But Ma made me promise,” Oliver went on, “that we’d at least try to do it keerful. That’s why we asked you-all to meet us here.” He took a deep breath. “And that’s why we’re askin’ you to talk to the Forresters for us.”

Penny sat back thunderstruck. “And tell ‘em what?”

“Tell ‘em that iffen they’ll leave us come home, I’ll be humble, respectful, polite, whatever they want. Hit don’t matter no more. I’ll even be friendly iffen they want. Anythin’.”

Jody stared at him. Even after the fight, when Oliver was horribly beaten, his pride had remained intact. This was a new Oliver.

Penny was obviously impressed, too. After a stunned silence, he managed, “I’ll try.”

“That’s all I kin ask.”

“In the meantime,” his mother took over, “we best not stay here. We best hide elsewhere, so’s they cain’t force you to tell ‘em where we is. We’ll send you another letter in a week or two. By that time you’ll know the answer.”

Penny nodded. “And iffen hit works out, you’ll stay with us at our place. Seein’ as your place is gone.”

Mrs. Hutto shot him a warning look. Penny acknowledged with a quick nod.

He went on, “My, I do hope this’ll work out! I’d purely love to have you-all back with us.”

“And livin’ together agin.” Jody’s eyes glowed. “Like when I was leetle.”

Oliver managed a warm smile at Jody. Jody squeezed his hand.

“We got to try,” Mrs. Hutto affirmed. “We really don’t wanta live the rest of our lives exiled from our home.”

Chapter Twenty

It was a reluctant Penny that set out for Forresters' Island that first day of August, with Jody at his side.

"This here is gonna be right tricky," he stated the obvious.

"But worth it, iffen hit works," Jody insisted.

"Yes, *if*."

The Forresters were pleased to see the Baxters, and bade them sit down in the big room. After a brief exchange of small talk, Penny cleared his throat.

"I got somethin' to discuss with you-all, and hit's right serious."

They regarded him solemnly.

"But," he faltered, "hit's right awkward, too. Fact is, I'm turrible uneasy 'bout discussin' this here subject with you-all, but I got no choice." He looked unhappy.

Buck laid a hand on his arm. "Easy, Penny. Jest say it straight out."

Penny took a deep breath and plunged. "Hit's 'bout Oliver."

The Forresters stared at him, immobile. Lem's expression was unreadable. At last, Buck said, "Go on."

Penny fumbled for words. "There's been a tragedy."

They watched him. At length, Lem asked, "He dead?"

"No," Penny said slowly and carefully, "but..." He shifted in his chair.

Still expressionless, Lem guessed, "Twink."

"Uh huh," Penny mumbled.

"How?"

"Train-wreck."

"Well, Penny." Lem's expression was still unchanged. "You cain't expect me to git broke up 'bout it, after what-all happened."

"Oh no, no," Penny hastened. "Course not. And iffen that was all there was to it, I'da not bothered you with it. But Oliver wants me to ask you-all somethin'."

They all fixed their eyes on him again, eyebrows raised.

Penny shifted again, and then asked, "Now that this has happened, what iffen you was to see Oliver agin?"

The Forresters looked at one another. Lem started to shake his head.

Penny hastily added, "I mean, what iffen he was to be, well, diff'rent: polite, humble, respectful, mebbe friendly...?"

Lem grinned in disbelief. "Oliver? You kiddin' me?"

Penny persisted, "Well, what if?"

Lem stared penetratingly, and then asked meaningfully, "Are we likely to see him agin?"

"Well, mebbe," Penny said evasively.

Lem shook his head hard, and then sat back in his chair. "I jest don't know, Penny. But I still cain't see Oliver actin' polite and humble to us."

"I kin." Penny nodded. "I kin now. He's a changed man. This has completely changed him. I think I kin guarantee it."

"You've seed him?" Buck raised his eyebrows.

Penny hesitated. "Yes."

"Penny." Mill-wheel leaned forward, grinning, with a dangerous gleam in his eye. "Is Oliver at your place?"

"Oh no," Penny reassured him firmly. "We ain't that foolish. For him to be there whilst I'm here talkin' to you-all 'bout him this-a-way. Oh my no! He wrote and asked me to meet him someplace, and please don't ask where that was, for hit don't matter; he ain't there no more neither. And he ain't told me where he's hidin' now."

Buck grinned. "That was wise. But how you gonna give him our answer?"

"He'll write to me agin in a week or two."

Arch spoke for the first time. "Do he jest wanta come back for a visit?"

Penny looked uncomfortable again. "No. Oliver and Grandma wanta come home permanent."

Each man sat up in amazement at the shocking awkwardness, all too aware that the discomfort had two sources: the concept of having the Huttos permanently present to deal with again, and the fact that their home was literally gone, and that the Forresters were the reason.

After a pregnant pause, Pack asked, "Where they gonna live?"

Penny looked miserable and squirmed again, knowing that he was going to make everyone even more uneasy with his reply. "With us," he blurted.

A gasp of shock rang through the room at how close that move would put the Huttos to Forresters' Island.

Penny hastened to add, "Now please try to see this here from my point o' view. Even excusin' what I done told you 'bout thinkin' of Oliver as a son, and Jody thinkin' of him as a brother, there's a practical side, too. I ain't gittin' no younger. I've had all the work of our place to do near-'bout alone. And even with Jody growin' up, he's a he'p, but someday he'll be alone doin' it as I was. Hit'll be jest as hard on him as 'twas for me. But with Oliver to he'p him, hit'll be easier. And Oliver'll be home to do so, 'cause he's quit sailorin'. And Ory ain't gittin' no younger neither, and with Grandma to he'p her out a mite...." He spread his hands helplessly.

The Forresters were silent for a long time.

Then Buck asked quietly, "You really want this. Don't you, Penny?"

Penny's eyes met Buck's gentle gaze. "Yes," he whispered, his voice shaking with feeling.

Buck nodded firmly. "I kin handle it."

"And me," echoed Mill-wheel.

"Count me in," said Arch.

"Me too," said Pack.

"All right." Gabby nodded.

"But," Buck cautioned, "hit ain't our opinions matters most. Ain't ours to decide." He cast a significant look in Lem's direction.

Penny drew a deep breath and turned to Lem. "What you done fought over don't no longer exist. He's askin' your permission to come home; that's gotta impress you. I'm askin' for him. And I'm askin' for me. Please."

Lem watched him for a moment that stretched into an eternity. Then he asked suspiciously, "You'd figger on carryin' him 'long on our hunts?"

Penny shook his head hastily. "Not without your say-so."

Lem nodded. Then he said, "Iffen he makes one mistake, says one wrong thing to me...."

"I know. He knows that, too, but I'll tell him agin. And I'll vouch for him. You kin hold me responsible."

Jody shot a dismayed glance at his father, wishing that he hadn't added that last part.

Lem nodded again. "All right. We'll give it a try."

Chapter Twenty-One

"Oliver, please set down," Penny begged, watching him.

"I cain't he'p it." Oliver paced past him. "How would you feel iffen you was me?"

"I don't have to be you to be powerful nervous 'bout this," Penny replied. "But you makin' me crazy ain't gonna he'p none."

It was now barely an hour until the Forresters were due to arrive. It had been decided that the first awkward meeting should be under controlled, planned conditions, and not left to the hazards of chance. Oliver and his mother had had a week to settle in with the Baxters. It was the beginning of September.

"Remember when I said I don't keer iffen I live nor die?" Oliver reminded him. "Well, I'm beginnin' to reconsider that."

"Jest don't reconsider this whole thing. Hit's a mite late for that now."

He stopped pacing. "No," he began thoughtfully, "but I'd like to make one change. Ma? Ory?"

"What you want?"

"Git in the wagon. Go to Volusia for the day."

"Oliver." His mother approached him. "I know what you're tryin' to do. There ain't no way I'm leavin' you."

"Please, Ma." He took hold of her shoulders. "I'll be right keerful. But do things go wrong, you cain't stop 'em no-ways. I need to know you're safe."

"Well, I sure don't see why I should go," Ory protested.

"Ory," Penny said quietly. "I agree with him."

"But...."

"Jest in case."

"Ezra," Mrs. Hutto began.

"I'm sorry, Grandma. I think you should go."

"Mebbe Jody should go with 'em," Oliver suggested.

"Pa," Jody protested. "Leave me stay and he'p."

"Jody's stayin'," Penny confirmed. "We might need him."

Oliver shot Penny a distressed look.

"Whilst we're talkin' with 'em," Penny emphasized testily. "Will you calm down, Oliver?"

The two women got into the wagon and set out for town. The men stood in front of the cabin and watched them go.

Oliver turned to Penny. "I meant what I said in June. Iffen the Forresters betray us, you and Jody git outen the way. Iffen I have to die, I ain't takin' you two with me."

Penny laid a hand on his shoulder. "Hit'll not come to that, Oliver." He hoped that he sounded convincing.

Oliver and Penny both heard the hoof-beats at the same moment. They looked at each other.

"Iffen my heart was poundin' any louder," Oliver said shakily, "hit'd drown out them hoof-beats."

"Mebbe you should wait inside the house," Penny decided. "Jody and me'll greet 'em when they ride in. You shouldn't have to face 'em that-a-way."

"You don't need to talk me into that one," Oliver said, disappearing into the cabin.

Jody watched him go, and then turned to his father. "Pa," he began.

"Don't ask, son. I don't know no more'n you."

Six horses galloped into the clearing. The Forresters nodded their greeting.

Buck asked, "Is he here?"

"Yes," Penny admitted, almost reluctantly.

The Forresters looked at one another, then dismounted.

Mill-wheel walked straight to Penny. "Iffen you was any whiter, I'd think I was talkin' to a ghost."

Penny smiled weakly at him.

Mill-wheel laid a hand on his shoulder. "Hit'll be all right, Penny."

"Hit'll be all right iffен Oliver behaves hisself," declared Lem.

"Oh, he'll behave hisself," Penny assured him. "You think I'm white, wait'll you see him."

The Forresters grinned at each other.

Oliver sat in the big room in the chair farthest from the door, with his elbows on his knees and his hands clasped together in front of him, suffering silently. He listened to the conversation outside, and wondered for the hundredth time whether the Forresters were capable of sincerity and mercy, or whether these few moments now upon him were his last. From what he'd heard Penny say to them, they knew that he was afraid. Perhaps that would help to arouse their pity. Oliver continued to stare fixedly at his folded hands as the Forresters entered the room, one by one. The sunlight streaming through the door made their shadows fall across him. He felt six pairs of black eyes upon him, but he couldn't bear to raise his eyes and face them. Oliver closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He let it out in short little gasps. He shivered.

"You right," Mill-wheel said. "He's whiter."

Oliver opened his eyes, but he was paralyzed with fear and couldn't look up at them. At least the Forresters were standing still, he tried to console himself; no one had made any move toward him. With his direct gaze on his hands, he could see only their legs with his peripheral vision. He attempted to gauge possible hostility from their stance. But all that came back to him instead was a cruel reminder of how massive these men were. A torturing memory shot through Oliver of Lem and Buck and Mill-wheel surrounding him, coming at him from three directions, with fists drawn back to hit. He'd wanted to cry out, or drop to the ground: anything to make them stop. But no, his reckless foolishness of those days had won out against his better sense. He had taken them on willingly, and a tremor had passed through him each time, just before the blows had connected. He shuddered now again in reality, almost believing that he could see those fists coming at him again.

"Penny," Buck said, "I'm afeered he's gonna faint."

Penny hastened to Oliver's side and reached out a steadying hand to his shoulder. He pulled a chair close to Oliver's and sat. "Don't you collapse on me," Penny admonished. "Come on, now. You got to handle this."

At the sound of the concern in Buck's voice, Oliver involuntarily raised his eyes to meet Buck's. The no-nonsense relentlessness that he'd seen in Buck's face during the fight had now been replaced by pity, tentative conditional pity, perhaps, but undeniable just the same. Oliver followed Buck's gaze to his own still-clasped hands, and recognized his pose as the pleading gesture that it was. He realized that he should feel ashamed and sheepish, but he didn't. The pleading was real in his heart, and he accepted the evidence of the gesture without denial. Oliver raised his eyes to meet Buck's gaze once again; it was easier this time. One fact was obvious now: Buck was genuinely sorry that Oliver was frightened. Slightly encouraged by this, Oliver shifted his gaze to Mill-wheel's eyes. He saw similar sympathy, mixed with ever-so-slight amusement; it wasn't cruel amusement, but it was clear that Mill-wheel knew what vivid images were tormenting Oliver.

Oliver winced slightly in acknowledgement, causing Mill-wheel's smile to widen. Oliver then transferred his eyes first to Arch, then to Pack, then to Gabby, and read a corresponding amused concern in each. His fright now somewhat decreased, Oliver steeled himself for the most difficult task. He took a deep breath and turned his eyes abruptly to Lem. He was met with a look of stern severity; it wouldn't take much, as Penny had warned him. There was no mercy here. There was even a slight edge of sadism. A low moan escaped Oliver's throat.

Penny hastened to cover it. "Please set down fellers," he requested abruptly. They took seats around the room.

Jody sat at Oliver's other side. He slipped a hand inside Oliver's, and tried to smile encouragingly. Oliver attempted a feeble smile in return.

Buck observed, "Hit's hard to believe this here's the same feller was so brave with us afore."

Oliver took another deep breath. "Foolish," he corrected. "I was a hot-headed fool." He leaned forward with his forehead on his hand and his elbow on his knee. "I'm sorry; I'm nervous."

"Jest relax, Oliver," Pack encouraged him.

"Terrified, is more like it," Lem pointed out harshly. His brothers looked at him in mild annoyance.

"You didn't need to say that," Penny said flatly.

"No, it's all right, Penny," Oliver said hastily. "He's right. I admit it." He knew that no one could deny that his demeanor was one of pure fear, and he suspected that the only way to garner any support from Lem was to own up to his humble helplessness. Sure enough, at his confession, the highest eyebrows in the room were Lem's.

Hastily, Buck changed the subject. "Where's your ma? And Miss Ory?"

Penny and Oliver exchanged glances. "They goed to Volusia for awhile," Penny answered simply.

"Why now?" Mill-wheel was curious.

Lem laughed. "Ain't it obvious? To keep 'em safe from us do things go wrong."

Oliver nodded reluctantly. "We sent 'em away o' purpose."

"Jest in case," Penny added offhandedly, trying to downplay the precaution.

"But was that a kindness?" Lem suggested sadistically. "And then they come home to find the three o' you massacred."

Oliver winced. "No. Jest me. Not Penny and Jody. Not agin. I done made 'em promise to keep outen it, and stay safe. I don't want 'em hurted agin on my account. And I don't figger you'd harm 'em, iffen they don't provoke you."

"Really?" Lem said with a challenging tone. "Them two stay outen it once? Hit don't sound possible. But tell me, Oliver." He leaned forward in his seat. "Iffen we *was* to start in on you. What would you do? 'Sides panic." Lem grinned.

"Stop tryin' to rile him, Lem," Buck ordered.

"Iffen he's ever gonna rile agin, I want we should find it out now."

Oliver smiled gratefully at Buck. "Hit's all right; I ain' t never gonna rile agin, no matter what he says. I ain' t that reckless no more." He tensed a bit more as he turned back to Lem, and spoke exaggeratedly evenly, "To answer your question, Lem: I'd refuse to fight back. Iffen you must kill me, hit'll have to be murder. I ain't gonna cooperate in my own execution."

Lem sat back, frowning, but his brothers looked impressed.

"Could be this will work," Buck speculated.

“I truly wanta try,” Oliver suggested hopefully. “There's somethin' I shoul'da thought of afore, and didn't. There must be a heap o' good in you-all for the Baxters to like you so much. And in partic'lar, there must be somethin' very special for Jody to make you into heroes like he done.”

Jody blushed and stared at his lap.

“He done that?” Mill-wheel said wonderingly.

“All his life.”

“Oliver, you're embarrassin' me.” The boy squirmed.

Buck rose and walked over to Jody and tousled his blond hair. “So that's how you really feel 'bout us, eh?” He looked at his brothers, and then put out a hand to Oliver. Oliver grasped it gratefully and shook it.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The sounds of hammering and sawing proceeded steadily. To Jody, they were comforting noises, for they made it official that Oliver and Mrs. Hutto were here to stay. The building of an addition on the Baxter house was the only logical course. Temporarily, Jody had given his room to Mrs. Hutto, and he and Oliver had been sleeping on pallets on the main room floor. But now that Oliver had passed his nerve-wracking test with the Forresters, a more permanent solution had to be found.

Jody ascended the ladder to where Penny and Oliver were completing work on the rafters. Noticing him, they both turned and bade him be careful. He reassured them, but smiled at their concern.

In her temporary quarters, Mrs. Hutto tsked to herself. Ory heard her and went to the doorway.

"Somethin' wrong?"

"Oh this dratted rheumatism," she fussed. "My fingers jest don't wanta do their job right these days."

"Here. Let me." Ory went to finish fastening her new housemate's dress for her.

"I s'pose," Mrs. Hutto said, eyeing her, "you figger I don't need to be wearin' lace this fancy, here in the mornin', and us not goin' nowheres."

Ory realized that she was being tested. "Well. What you wear is your business. I ain't gonna try to tell you what to do. Never shoulda. Here, let me he'p you with your hair, Grandma."

The latter smiled at her in gratitude. "Ory, ain't it 'bout time you call me Olivia?"

"Now I'd like that. I ain't done so when we lived with you-all in town, 'cause Jody was so young, and we wanted him callin' you Grandma. That's why Ezra and I both've allus done so."

"I know. But I reckon Jody's old 'nough by now to know the diff'rence. You kin first-name me now, and he'll not pick it up. Jest like you and me's the only ones who don't mis-name Ezra."

Ory made a sound of disgust. "That's for sure. The very idea, folks callin' him Penny! Ever'body but us, as you said. I reckon you know how he come by that there name."

Olivia snorted. "I know. Them black-beards named him." She smiled wryly. "Actually, that's the main reason I refuse to pick up the habit. I wish my Oliver'd not call him that. I said so one time, but he said he don't think Ezra really minds."

Ory shrugged. "I reckon he's used to it by now. Didn't like it at first, but he don't talk 'bout it no more. When them devils decide to call you somethin' you cain't stop 'em."

"Mebbe they jest want ever'body else to have names as peculiar as theirs." Olivia chuckled. Then she grew more serious. "My, I hope they don't try to rename Oliver."

"I don't know 'bout that, but they're tryin' it with my Jody. Hope hit'll not stick. Lem keeps callin' him Skeeter."

Olivia made a face. "Now that's jest plain nasty."

"That's Lem."

Olivia eyed her. "You know I had right smart of a run-in with their ma, when Oliver was jest leetle. And some of it was a mite similar to quarrels you and me had later. 'Bout fancy dresses and spoilin' Oliver. Mebbe that's why I reacted so sensitive to you, when you said things."

Ory turned the older woman to face her. "Now I'm right glad you told me that, Olivia. I'd never've said sich things, did I know I was agreein' with that rough woman. Her and me got nothin' in common."

Olivia smiled at her.

The men came in for lunch, pleased with themselves and with their progress. Oliver in particular was in high spirits.

"Ma, I jest thought. Mebbe we should let my leetle cousin know we're back in Floridy."

"We-all had sich fun when I was leetle," Jody said, beaming at the idea.

Mrs. Hutto looked at her son sharply. "Go see her iffen you want, but don't bring her here. I don't want her nowheres near them wild Forresters. An innocent young gal like her."

Penny was forced to agree. "She's right, Oliver. Even Mr. Forrester admitted to me one time that any woman who wants to git away from 'em has got to run like a doe."

"Now that's piteeful, that their own pa has to admit that 'bout 'em," Ory declared.

Oliver nodded reluctant agreement.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The storm that had drenched the last few September days was finally over, and October entered joyously, as if it were the excitement of spring. A hunt was organized as the antidote to the resulting frisky spirits. Oliver was apprehensive but gratified that he was to be included.

They set out with a tumult, a clamor of booming voices calling back and forth from their horses. Oliver was quickly put at ease, and fell into the wild spirit.

Early in the day, one of the Forresters slipped a rifle into Oliver's hand and suggested that he bring down one deer of the herd being stalked.

"I ain't used to a rifle," he said dubiously. "I've only ever fired a revolver."

Behind his back, the Forresters exchanged slight grins over the private memory that that comment evoked.

Patience, Mill-wheel moved to Oliver's side, showing him how to brace the gun against his shoulder and how to sight along its barrel. Oliver did a fair job of concealing the nervousness that the nearness engendered.

Each Forrester took up his own rifle, as did the Baxters. The booming report of so many guns in concert reminded Oliver of the crashing of waves against a boat in a stormy sea. He was gratified to see that the animal that had been assigned to him had indeed fallen to his bullet; he would suffer no embarrassment in front of these men from that source.

As one deer carcass was slung across the broad back of old Caesar, Lem observed, "At least this time I'll not have to wonder how you come by that there deer."

"And at least this time," Penny agreed amiably, "I'll not have to fret that you'll wonder. For when you wonder somethin', you don't ask. You jest set in beatin' the starch outen somebody."

"Well, at least you had sense 'nough to back down and take it, so's you ain't got much that time."

"Why sure." Penny smiled. "You don't have to beat sense into me twice. And with Buck and Mill-wheel right there beside you, like in the fight, I done thought, oh lord, not agin!"

Oliver looked puzzled, but dared not ask.

"Like you told Buck and me," Mill-wheel suggested innocently to Penny, trying not to smile, "you'd have to eat wild-cat liver to git brave 'nough to take on us Forresters agin."

Buck chuckled at the memory.

Penny grinned and shook his head. "Now I don't know as even that'd do it. Lem, I trust you'll not be tormentin' no bear-cub this year, and puttin' me to the test."

"Not as long as you don't try to trade me no bear-dog."

The Forresters thundered their laughter. Jody saw Oliver's bewilderment and smiled an I'll-tell-you-later look.

"Well," Penny pointed out, "leastways I was smart 'nough to git you to promise afore witnesses not to come beat the puddin' outen me after you'd hunted him."

"And that's all that saved you," Lem agreed. "But you takened a chance, 'cause the witnesses was my brothers, and they's sworn to loyalty."

Oliver finally found the nerve to participate. "The Baxters is right; you-all is a heap o' fun. Even iffen I don't foller half o' what you're talkin' 'bout." He smiled.

"Stick with us long 'nough, Oliver," Buck said with a grin, "and you will."

Penny regarded Oliver, as he said to the Forresters, "Really though, fellers, Oliver and me do have one private joke of our own, we kin let you-all in on."

"Now what's that?" Buck asked.

Never taking his eyes off of Oliver, Penny went on, "Buck, Mill-wheel, remember last June when you two dropped in for a quick visit one day?"

"Oh lord." Oliver groaned.

"Well," Penny finished, "Oliver was there."

"What?" They stared at the tall blond.

The former sailor shrugged sheepishly. "I had sneaked back, right quiet-like, for a leetle visit. I thought I was bein' so keerful comin' down through Sanford, not seein' nobody in Volusia, who might tell you-all I was back. And there you two chose that day to visit and scairt the very devil outen me. You had me afeered that somehow, you had done found out anyways."

Buck and Mill-wheel looked at one another.

"Well where was you?" Buck demanded.

"In Jody's room. Hidin'."

"And prayin'," Arch quipped.

Buck snorted. "Well I be dogged."

Mill-wheel said, "Pity we ain't takened a leetle tour that day."

"You mighta still not seed me. I was hidin' good."

"Ain't much place to hide in there," Buck said, and then he realized the only possibility. He stared, incredulous. "You was under the bed?"

Oliver shrugged. "Where else?"

Mill-wheel said, "I'da jest figgered you'd be right inside the door, listenin'."

"Like you was in Boyles' Store," Lem understated quietly.

Oliver's eyes grew wide as he realized to what event Lem referred. Lem smirked in enjoyment.

Oliver whispered, "Then you-all truly knowed I was in that storeroom. I was only half sure."

Much later, as the others slept by the campfire, Jody was still awake and giggling quietly over the joys of the day. He finally fell comfortably asleep, thinking that now there would never again be any more trouble between Oliver and the Forresters.

Chapter Twenty-Four

"I cain't believe it," Jody muttered furiously to himself on the way home from Volusia in mid-November. "All I done was go to town for a few supplies we needed, and look what I'm into. How kin this here have happened?"

Carefully, Jody felt his eye. There was definite swelling. It would be black by now for sure. Buck Forrester had predicted this. He had said that this would happen to Jody, too, someday, once he began courting.

"Courtin'." Jody spat in disgust. "I ain't no-ways courtin'." Although he knew that the facts would indicate otherwise. Still, it wasn't his fault that he couldn't stand the boy who often ran the ferry. That silly boy never spoke, and made Jody ache for Fodder-wing by his mere presence, by the extreme contrast between them. For Jody, a comparison was inevitable, since Fodder-wing and the ferry boy were the only two boys Jody's age that he had ever met. This had nothing to do with Eulalie Boyles, he told himself angrily. This was about Fodder-wing. Even as he thought it, Jody knew how ridiculous that sounded. Fodder-wing and the ferry boy had never even met, and Fodder-wing's memory could never be sullied by anything that anyone else ever did or didn't do. Jody tried to tell himself that he didn't really like Eulalie all that much. He'd just liked the way that she had looked, all dressed up, at the doin's last Christmas.

"Kin I he'p it iffen I'm sick o' seein' them two hold hands?" he demanded out loud. "I could let it go last Christmas; they was dancin'. But today...!"

Well, what was done was done. Now the problem was going home. The mere thought of facing Penny and Oliver like this was intolerable. Ory would rare; that was to be expected. But Penny and Oliver would never be able to resist the opportunity to laugh and tease him. Especially after the way that they had tormented him about Eulalie before, a year and a half earlier. Mrs. Hutto had defended him then and made them stop. Jody wondered if she would rise to his defense this time. Oliver and Penny wouldn't be able to resist the urge to laugh every time that they looked at him, as long as he looked like this. And that could take days.

"Well," he resolved, "leastways my torment'll end there. I'll sure not go see the Forresters 'til I look normal agin. And iffen they come visit us, I'll be the one hidin' in my room. I'll not see 'em, and that's sure."

Now all that he needed to do was to convince Oliver and Penny not to tell them. The opportunity would be too good for them to resist. It would make such a good tale to tell. Especially for Oliver, strange as it might seem. The friendship between him and the Forresters had grown better than anyone might have hoped. And Jody's current situation would make for a good joke between them. In addition, the relationship between Jody and Oliver had grown until they were truly brothers in every sense that mattered. And brothers teased each other unmercifully. Oliver would not see telling the Forresters as a cruelty to Jody, but merely as one more moment of rollicking fun for them all to share.

"Well, best to git it over with." Jody nudged old Caesar into a trot. Lost in thought, the boy almost ran down the six horses tethered in front of the cabin.

"Jody," Oliver called, stepping outside promptly. Oliver looked at him. "Are you all right? What happened?"

"What's wrong? He all right?" Buck came out behind Oliver.

Jody felt all of his plans shatter and fall around him. In desperation, he tried to cover his eye with his hand. All that he succeeded in doing was drawing attention to it.

"Oh, lord." Buck grinned broadly.

"I...run into a door," Jody tried lamely.

"Uh-huh." Buck nodded. "And I reckon the same door done dirtied up your clothes that-a-way, too."

"Please," Jody begged, casting a mute glance at the open doorway.

"Come on, boy." Buck reached up and pulled Jody off of the horse. "Let's go tell the others."

"No," Jody continued to protest as they each grabbed him by a hand and dragged him to the door. The commotion drew the attention of everyone inside.

"What in tarnation?" demanded Lem.

"What's goin' on?" Mill-wheel asked.

"Jody! What...?" Penny began.

They all stared at him. Jody fought to break free from Oliver and Buck. He pulled hard against Buck, who tightened his grip and restrained him.

"Ow! " Jody cried.

"Now stop it," Buck said.

Jody gave up struggling, and hung his head.

"Well, I'll be blasted." Penny spoke first. "My boy's done been in a fight."

Mill-wheel went close to Jody, reached out, and took Jody's chin in his hand. He tilted the boy's face up, and grinned hugely.

"No." Jody squirmed and tried to pull away from him.

"Not bad," Mill-wheel observed, still grinning and holding him firmly, "but I hope the other feller looks worse."

"He do!" Jody said savagely, and wrenched hard, trying again to break loose. He failed.

"Ouch! Pa, they's hurtin' me."

"Well, stop fightin'," Penny said unsympathetically. "Seems to me you done 'nough o' that for one day a'ready. What possessed you to git yourself into a fight?"

"I'm bettin' 'twas a gal," Pack speculated.

Lem and Oliver turned to each other in shock.

Jody said nothing.

"That true, Jody?" his father asked quietly.

Still Jody made no reply.

Becoming slightly annoyed at Jody's sullenness, Mill-wheel lifted Jody's face just a little higher and tightened his grip minutely, while Buck squeezed his hand just that much harder.

"Owww!" Jody whimpered. "Yes! Yes, Pa. Hit's true. Please!" he begged the big men.

Buck and Mill-wheel relaxed their hold slightly.

Jody sighed his relief. "Don't hurt me no more," he implored.

"Then do as you're told," Buck warned.

"Yes, sir," Jody murmured timidly.

The men proceeded with questions about who and why and where. Jody answered them all promptly. When Eulalie Boyles was mentioned, Penny and Oliver looked at each other and had a hard time keeping a straight face. But they made a valiant effort, because everyone was trying to be strict with the boy. When at last all questions were answered, Buck, Mill-wheel, and Oliver released Jody. He sighed with relief and began to calm down a bit.

He turned to Oliver and guessed, "I reckon when 'twas you, Grandma ain't treated you this bad."

"You wanta bet?" Oliver grinned wryly. The Forresters received that news with some amusement.

"Well, Jody." Mill-wheel was once again easy-going. "Have you learnt now to fight right, 'stead o' clawin' and bitin' and kickin'?"

"Course." Jody stared at the floor and shuffled his feet, his embarrassment fully restored.

"So." Buck winked at Mill-wheel. "You don't need us to learn you to use your fists after all."

"No." Jody sighed his misery. "Kin I go now?"

"Go where?" Penny asked.

"My room," Jody whined. "I wanta stay in there 'bout a week."

Chapter Twenty-Five

"Ain't you excited hit's Christmas, Grandma?" Jody's own excitement was readily apparent in his face, his voice, and his manner. Despite her apprehension, she couldn't help but find his mood at least a little endearing. She smiled tightly and put her hand on his head affectionately. However, she withdrew it immediately and hurried to Penny when she saw him enter the kitchen.

"Ezra," she said tensely, "we got to find some way to call this off."

Penny took her by the shoulders. "Now what excuse could we give that Oliver would believe?"

"I don't know. But we can't go through with it, even iffen hit mean we gotta knock Oliver down and tie him up."

"Now that's ridiculous."

"I'm with her." Ory straightened from the hearth. "Hit's too dangerous."

"Well what do you suggest?" Penny asked.

"Has anybody told the Forresters?" Olivia wanted to know.

"I ain't," Penny replied. "Ory?"

"Nor me. I ain't tellin' them jaybirds nothin'."

"I'd be afeered to tell 'em this. Even now." Penny stared distantly.

"We got no choice." Olivia gathered her strength. "When is they due?"

"Any minute now."

"When they git here, tell Buck I wanta talk to him. Keep the others outside. And for lord's sake, keep Oliver outen here."

"I don't see what good hit'll do. Hit's got to happen sooner or later."

"I prefer later," she snapped.

When Buck entered the kitchen, it was plain that he was consumed with curiosity, and more than a little amused.

"You wanted to see me, Mis' Hutto?"

"We got to call off goin' to the doin's in Volusia," she announced without preliminary.

Buck was taken aback. "But we're all ready to go. We'll be leavin' in minutes."

"I don't keer 'bout that. We can't take Oliver to Volusia."

"Then leave him here." Buck was bewildered regarding her problem.

"What reason would I give?"

"What reason have you got?"

Olivia sighed and put a hand to her forehead. She leaned against the wall.

Concerned, Buck went to her. "I'm sorry, Mis' Hutto. I ain't meant to upset you. What's this all 'bout?"

"Since we been back," she began, barely holding back the tears, "I've managed to keep Oliver away from Volusia. And now. . .!" She fought for control, and began again. "I'm afeered for Oliver to go. I'm scairt some busybody'll tell him. He don't *know*," she stressed significantly.

Buck was slow to catch onto her meaning. "He don't know what, Mis' Hutto?"

"He don't know 'bout last Christmas!" she exploded. "He don't know the truth 'bout the fire! 'Bout you-all!" She turned away from him, sobbing.

"Oh." Buck stared at the floor uncomfortably for a while. Then he asked slowly, "How'll he react iffen he finds out now? After all this time? And all the changes betwixt him and us?"

"I don't know." She turned back to him impatiently. "Let's not find out, shall we?"

"Mis' Hutto," Buck began, reluctantly but firmly, "I don't know what you want I should do. Beat him and knock him out so's he'll sleep through the doin's? That'll do a heap o' good."

She stormed silently at him for an instant, and then fought for calm. She took a deep breath and said slowly, "Iffen you cain't think o' no good reason to keep him here...." She rushed toward him suddenly. "Promise me you'll he'p protect him do things go wrong."

Buck stared in disbelief. "Protect him agin my brothers? Iffen Oliver starts it? You gotta be kiddin' me."

She sobbed, "Please. You know he's hot-headed."

"I know." Buck nodded emphatically.

"Please," she begged. "He's the only one I got."

Resenting her appeal for pity, Buck drew himself up imposingly to his full height.

Olivia drew back instinctively.

Buck stared at her ominously. "Mis' Hutto, that ain't the way we Forresters do things; we stick together. Now you and Oliver knowed our conditions when you come back here. They still stand. Iffen Oliver don't start nothin' he'll be safe. But iffen he do...." Buck deliberately left the thought unfinished. With that, he turned and stalked out, leaving her crying softly.

When Ory saw Buck leave the kitchen, she went in immediately, and wasn't surprised at what she saw. The outcome was as she had expected. Without a word, she put her arms around Olivia and held her. When at last they were called to leave, they straightened themselves hurriedly.

The first half of the evening was relatively uneventful, and passed pleasantly enough for most of the participants. There was, however, a fairly obvious tension between Olivia and Buck that made Penny uneasy.

It finally happened about halfway through the evening. No one found out until much later who it was who had actually told Oliver. But it didn't matter.

Oliver raced up to the group formed by his mother, the Baxters, and the Forresters. He was red-faced and livid. He descended on Olivia. "You lied to me," he breathed. He turned on the Forresters ferociously. "You burnt that house."

The Forresters looked at one another solemnly and drew themselves up menacingly. They waited.

Oliver turned back to his mother and fairly screamed, "You lied to me!"

Casting a fearful glance over her shoulder at the Forresters, she approached her son carefully. "I done it to protect you. I didn't want you should git yourself kilt. I still don't. I love you. You mean more to me than any house. Please, Oliver." She reached for him.

He turned away, ignoring her. He flared at Penny. "You lied to me, too. You said they ain't done it, too."

"Well, well, well." Lem stood over Penny and looked down at him. "You never lie, eh?"

"I done so that time, to save a life," Penny admitted. "Wa'n't that a good 'nough reason?"

Lem loomed even closer over him. "Well, mebbe you lied to me 'bout that deer that other time, too. To save another life. Your *own*."

"Now don't start that agin," Penny retorted.

"Shut up!" Oliver bellowed. "This ain't 'bout no deer!" He glared at the Forresters in a barely-controlled rage.

They watched him ominously, with hands on hips, openly challenging him now with their eyes.

Lem dared Oliver softly, "Come on."

Jody panicked and pushed between them. He faced Oliver. "No, Oliver, please. Don't!"

Oliver looked down at Jody sadly. "You told me the truth that night. I shoulda listened."

Jody shook his head desperately. "I'm glad you didn't. They was layin' for you. They...." He glanced fearfully at the Forresters, wondering how they felt about him revealing what they had admitted to him privately. The hostility that he saw in their eyes as they looked back silenced him.

Oliver pushed Jody gently aside, and faced the Forresters. They regarded him with dangerous eyes, like wild animals thirsting for blood.

Lem stepped closer, his expression haunted. "Come on!" he taunted savagely, loudly this time, his eyes trying to tempt Oliver. The tall blond clenched and unclenched his fists spasmodically, an unreasoning fury lighting his eyes. Jody cried out in terror. Lem's brothers moved to surround Oliver, cutting him off from his mother and the Baxters. The men exchanged coldly murderous glances. Oliver took one step closer to Lem, and raised his fist. The corners of Lem's mouth curled upward viciously in a cruel smile. "Now we have you," he whispered. His own fist rose.

Oliver stared deeply into Lem's black eyes. Through them, he saw a vision of the outcome that would only be minutes away, a vision of his own body, broken and bleeding on the church floor. He gave a strangled cry and lurched backward; he had practically fallen into Lem's arms. Lem stared at him, stunned. Oliver dropped his fist. "No!" he sobbed. He turned to run, but Lem's brothers were blocking his path, still surrounding him. Oliver desperately met each man's eyes. With Lem now directly behind him, he saw Arch and Pack to his left, Gabby to his right, and Buck and Mill-wheel directly between him and the church door. Oliver searched the eyes of the last two for a modicum of the kindness that he knew to be in their hearts, but found none. Even so, he reached out to them beseechingly and begged, "Please." The two exchanged a long, considering look. Wordlessly, they parted to create a gap. Without a backward glance, Oliver shot through the opening and fled the church.

Ory gave a short gasp. The Forresters turned to see her lowering Olivia gently to the floor. She had fainted. Penny hurried over and knelt by her side. Jody followed, crying.

"She'll be all right, boy," Penny reassured him, and then turned to look up at the Forresters. They looked back down at him with hardened expressions. "My God," Penny whispered, shaking his head. It wasn't that often that he witnessed the full force of their potential cruelty, but each time that he did, he suffered the shock of it all over again.

"Pa." Jody sniffed. "You want I should go find Oliver?"

"No, Jody, leave him be."

"But he might be missin' all night."

"Leave him be."

Olivia's eyes fluttered open. "Oliver!" she cried.

"Easy," Penny soothed her. "He's run off."

She looked over his shoulder at the Forresters. "You-all ain't goin' after him?" Her eyes met Buck's. He shook his head almost imperceptibly. She smiled tearfully. "Oh, Ezra, hold me!"

Mrs. Forrester heard a sound out in the bushes outside of the cabin. She glanced at Mr. Forrester, asleep in his chair, grabbed a gun, and went out to check. She approached the crouching figure.

"What you want here?"

Oliver Hutto looked up in shock, clearly not even having heard her coming.

"You'd better answer me."

It was then that Oliver saw the shotgun that she brandished. "Do you know what your sons done to my ma?" His voice shook with anger.

Worry flickered momentarily in her eyes, but she continued to hold the gun unwaveringly on him.

"They burnt down my ma's house a year ago."

"Oh that. Yes, I know. They talked 'bout it and I heered 'em. Hit's turrible. But hit don't explain why you're here now."

Oliver didn't answer. He looked away from her.

"You settin' here tryin' to git up the nerve to return the favor???"

Still, Oliver made no reply.

"Why, you...!!"

Oliver turned all of his hatred on her. "Well, why not? They done it to us!"

"Now you listen to me, Oliver Hutto. I ain't excusin' what my boys done, but at least they knowed your ma wa'n't in it; they knowed where she was. They seen her at the doin's, so they knowed she was safe. But Pa and me's in our house. Don't that make you worse'n my boys?"

"I woulda got you out first."

"Oh sure." She snorted. "And have witnesses. So's you'd not have a prayer o' gittin' away with it. And then my boys'd really whop you."

"They a'most done so tonight," he whispered.

She watched him curiously.

"I jest tonight found out the truth 'bout the fire. I was real riled. Lem tried to goad me to fight 'em. All six of 'em surrounded me. . . ." He shivered hard.

"How'd you git out of it?" she asked quietly.

Oliver hesitated. "I...I got scairt." He lowered his eyes. "I had to beg Buck and Mill-wheel to git outen my way. They let me go. I run out."

Mrs. Forrester's features softened. Her heart went out to him. This was not her child, but his anguish brought out her maternal instincts just the same. She regarded him pityingly. He was younger than her sons. Young, reckless, foolish, but not evil. She laid down the gun and slipped an arm around his shoulders.

Oliver looked up, startled. Then he saw the pity in her eyes, and accepted her willingness to mother him for a moment. He buried his face in her side.

"After what three o' mine done to you once, I ain't surprised you didn't wanta try it with six." She brushed his hair with her fingers. It was soft and blond like Jody's. So different from the thick black thatch of her own sons. "All right, young un. I'll keep this a secret in the name o' peace."

He looked up at her, his eyes brimming with tearful gratitude.

"'Cause iffen I tell it, they'll have their fight with you whether you want it or not."

He nodded.

"You best git outen here. Hit's late. They'll be home soon. I don't think you want 'em to ketch you here."

Oliver rose quickly. He took her face in his hands and pressed his cheek to hers, whispering, "Thank you." He turned and disappeared into the scrub.

Oliver stayed away from home all night. He returned to Baxters' Island the next morning, but sullen, wordless, and still in shock.

Chapter Twenty-Six

January brought little improvement in Oliver's disposition. He had offered no information on where he'd spent his night away from home, and no one had dared ask. He was bitter. He barely spoke to Ory and Jody, and had nothing at all to say to Olivia and Penny.

The Forresters were once again avoiding Baxters' Island. The old awkwardness had returned, the coolness between the two households which Penny had already endured one time too many. He found that he no longer had the patience to sit idly by and let it go on week after week. He resolved to do something.

Penny found Oliver sitting at the table with his head in his hands.

"Oliver." Penny stood over him. "I know you don't wanta hear this, but you're gonna listen anyways. I told Jody once that no man could live on Baxters' Island without the Forresters was his friends. I meant it. They make good friends, as well as fearsome enemies. Now you knowed when you come to live with us that this here situation would be right hard on you at times. But you made me certain promises, and I'm expectin' you to live up to 'em. Now you done made a mess agin betwixt us and the Forresters over somethin' that happened a year ago, and is done and over. I'm orderin' you to fix it. Seems to me things was best betwixt you and them when we all goed on that there hunt together. Mebbe we need another one. Mebbe hit's jest the thing to git us all goin' right agin. Now I done told you I think of you as a son. And I'm orderin' you like a pa. I'm settin' it up, and you're goin'."

Oliver went, but the result was far from that enjoyed on the October hunt. The Forresters weren't in a joking mood either. Between their distant coldness and Oliver's sulking, the tenseness throughout the day was almost more than Penny and Jody could bear.

Finally, dusk arrived, and with it, time to make camp.

Lem idly remarked, "We best build a fire."

Oliver blurted bitterly, "Well you-all oughta know 'bout that."

Instantly, Lem lost his resolve to goad Oliver into dealing the first blow. He walked straight to him and knocked him flat. Oliver was on the ground almost before he knew it. He felt as if he'd been struck by lightning. The blow echoed in his ears.

"Come on!" Lem ordered, fists ready, his eyes alive with hate.

The other Forresters surrounded Oliver. The giant men towered over him, waiting like vultures for him to rise, and render himself vulnerable. Oliver recognized the formation for the psychological torture that it was meant to be. He tried not to be rattled by it, or by their predatory stares, and started up anyway.

Buck gave him a warning. "Iffen you do...."

Alarmed, Jody tried to run straight to Oliver, but Lem and Mill-wheel were in his way. He squeezed between them, tears streaming down his face. "Oliver!" he cried. "Stay down."

Enraged, Lem moved to backhand Jody.

Jody saw it coming, screamed, and dropped to the ground. Following his own advice, he stayed down, and crawled straight to Oliver. "Stay down, Oliver," he begged. "They can't beat you iffен you don't git back up."

Oliver nodded slowly at him, and obediently lounged back onto the ground.

Momentarily thwarted, Lem turned on Penny behind him. "I recollect somethin' 'bout I could hold you responsible," he snarled.

Penny, caught off guard by the abrupt change in tactics, didn't have time to respond before he too was knocked to the ground.

"No," Oliver flared and sat up abruptly.

"Oliver." Penny made no attempt to rise. "Hit's all right; don't do nothin'. Cain't you see what he's tryin' to do? Oliver, for lord's sake, you got to control your temper or you'll git us all kilt."

Oliver's eyes darted back and forth between Penny and the Forresters; fear and fury were at war in his face.

At last, Oliver lay back and regarded the Forresters with apparent utter calm. "As I told you afore," he said, "I'll not be willin' to he'p with my own execution. You kin see I speak for Jody and Penny as well. Iffen you aim to kill us, hit'll have to be murder."

Lem turned to Penny. "You gonna play coward, too?"

Penny forced himself to appear relaxed. "I'll jest lie here whilst you make your decision."

In a rage, Lem turned to Jody. "I'll not be stopped that easy." He took one long stride, and reached for the child. Jody cringed away from him with a little cry. In a panic, Oliver sat up, gathered Jody into his arms, and pulled the boy tightly to him. Lem grabbed Jody by the back of his neck and squeezed. Jody screamed in pain.

"Lem, stop," Mill-wheel ordered.

"No, Lem!" Buck yelled, then added more quietly, "You ain't gonna do it that-a-way."

Without releasing his grip, Lem turned his rage on his protesting brothers. "I noticed you two squeezed him right good once."

"That was diff'rent." Buck was affronted by the comparison. "We was mostly teasin' him."

"And we didn't hurt him none, for real," Mill-wheel said. "Now leave off him."

Gabby suggested, "Mebbe we should jest run Oliver off agin. Boston, or someplace."

Lem spat. "I'll run him off, all right; I'll run him off to kingdom come."

Jody whimpered unsteadily, still in Lem's vise-like, agonizing grip.

Oliver, still embracing Jody, said, "I'll do anythin' iffen you'll spare him. Lem, please."

Lem grinned nastily. "Mebbe you'll git up and fight us, then."

"Iffen I have to. Iffen hit's the only way to save Jody."

Buck told Lem, "You kin see your victim ain't in a fightin' mood."

Mill-wheel reminded him, "You know we ain't never forced a fight on nobody."

"Let him go, Lem," Arch ordered quietly.

"We ain't with you on this here," Pack added.

Lem released Jody and turned away in disgust. Jody collapsed onto Oliver's shoulder, in tears. Oliver soothed him and rubbed his abused neck, on which angry red marks were already apparent. Penny stood up shakily and went to comfort his son. Buck and Mill-wheel approached from opposite directions, and knelt on either side of Jody and Oliver. After a while, Jody sat back and looked from Buck to Mill-wheel, eyes brimming with wordless tears of gratitude.

At last, Buck nodded. "I'll go start the campfire."

"I'll he'p you," Oliver said.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

One fine night in March, Jody drifted into a sweet dream. He stood in a bright sunny clearing in the middle of an otherwise dark forest. A figure stepped out of the gloom and into the golden air and came to him. It was Fodder-wing. He smiled at Jody.

He spoke, "Jody, I come to tell you, I'm so happy for you that now you got yourself a brother, too. I been watchin' you and Oliver, and I like him. Jody, don't be upset when Oliver teases you; the happiest memories I have of my time with my brothers is when they teased me. It means Oliver loves you, like my brothers loved me. That's how big brothers show their love to leetle brothers. And I'm pleased when you and Oliver try to git along with my brothers; I know they kin be a mite rough, but I love 'em and they was good to me. Jody, when you-all buried me, your pa asked that I be allowed to have a few pets in heaven like I had on Earth. They let me have Flag, Jody. I know you miss him, but I hope hit pleasures you to know I'm takin' keer of him now. And I love him, too, Jody. Someday you'll be here with me, and I'll still have him here waitin' for you. And then we'll all be together forever. And Jody," he added with a serene smile, "now I kin fly."

Jody shivered at the revelations.

"I got to go now. I love you."

"Fodder-wing...." Jody reached out to him.

But Fodder-wing's image was lost in the impossible glow all around him. The clearing was alive with light. Jody opened his eyes and stared directly into the face of the rising sun through his window. He blinked. It was morning. He sat up and saw his familiar room around him. He knew that it had just been a dream, but he could wish, couldn't he? Jody cried softly to himself, unsure whether his tears were of joy or of sorrow.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Such a precious little thing. So tiny. So fragile-looking; she must be made of glass, and the least breeze might shatter her. Those were Arch's impressions as he gazed upon her. Long blonde hair to her waist, pale blue eyes, and dainty pink lips washed out by the embarrassed flush in her cheeks. He stood directly in front of her, but she wouldn't look up at him. She appeared to be standing motionless, but he sensed the silent tremors within her. He brought his hand gently under her chin, and raised her face to his. Her eyes grew wide.

"Don't be afeered, Missy," he urged kindly.

"I'm sorry, sir," she fumbled awkwardly. "I...I shouldn'ta been starin'. 'Tain't right for a lady to do."

"I ain't objectin'." He smiled. "Iffen I'd seed you first, I'da stared first."

Her eyes dropped again.

"No," he soothed. "Look at me."

She raised her eyes slowly, hesitantly.

He smiled again, pleased at his obvious effect on her. "I could stare at them purty eyes all day," he said. "Let's go for a walk." He took her small hand in his.

She followed mutely through the door of the store, into the bright sunny main street of Fort Gates, Florida in May.

They crossed the street and entered the pleasant little grove of old trees.

He slid his hand under her jaw to the back of her neck, and turned her to him again. He leaned to kiss her, but the wonderment in her eyes turned to panic.

"Too soon?"

"Y...yes," she faltered.

"I'm sorry, Missy." He changed the subject. He hinted, "I don't s'pose I should keep callin' you Missy."

"I rather like it." She smiled shyly.

"Even so, I'd like another name I kin call you. Jest in case we git tired o' that un."

"Emma," she said, smiling.

"Now that's lovely."

"Thank you, but now you really have me at a disadvantage. You have two names for me, but I don't have even one for you."

"Arch."

"I like it," she said simply.

They walked hand in hand for a long time through the grove, neither speaking. Words seemed unnecessary.

At length, Arch took her by the shoulders, and turned her to him once again. "I got to go," he muttered regretfully. "I got to meet my brother; hit's time to go home."

"I hate to see you go," she murmured fretfully, "but I do understand."

Arch led Emma back to the entrance to the grove.

"Will I see you agin?" He made it sound more like an order than a request.

"Iffen you wanta."

"I'll be back."

Their eyes locked. Slowly, Arch leaned toward Emma. This time, her panic didn't come. He kissed her. She gripped his arms to keep from falling. As he withdrew, he saw the disorientation in her face, and grinned. "I'll be back," he guaranteed with a nod. He turned to go.

"I don't even know your last name."

He turned back to her. "Forrester."

Her knees buckled, and she started to fall. Arch rushed over and gathered her into his arms, easing her gently to the soft grass.

"No," she sobbed weakly.

"What's wrong? I only told you my name."

"Don't hurt me," she pleaded. "I'm afeered o' you!"

"Emma," Arch said in disbelief. "Missy. No, I'd never."

"You're one of 'em. You're one o' Lem's brothers. Tell me he ain't here, please."

"He ain't here," he reassured her hastily. "Jest me and Pack come today. But why're you afeered o' Lem? You met him?"

"No." She shuddered, and began to cry.

"Emma, please. Tell me."

"I can't tell you. I'm scairt."

"I ain't leavin' 'til you tell me."

"Don't hurt me," she begged. "Don't leave the others hurt me."

"I promise." He stared intently into her eyes.

"I...I'm...." She took a deep breath and tried again. "I'm Emma Hutto."

Arch's eyebrows climbed into his hair. "Oliver."

"My cousin." She turned away, wracked by sobs.

"Oh my gawd." Arch's shoulders drooped. He shook his head. "Emma, honey, hit's all right. We've done made peace with him."

"I know," she gasped. "But you-all hurted him so bad that time, and you come so close to hurtin' him several other times since. You might hurt me. You're dangerous."

"Emma." He leaned closer to her. "Don't say this to me. I think I love you."

"And I think I love you," she replied tearfully. "But I'm too scairt." She was crying pitifully now.

Arch watched her, wishing for some magical reply that would calm her. He looked up and was startled to see Pack coming down the street, his business concluded. Arch realized that he dared not allow Pack to see them here and come over to them; it would frighten the poor girl beyond measure. Arch took her face in his hands, ignoring her small resistance.

"I'll be back," he insisted firmly. "And we'll work this out." He bent, and kissed her on the forehead. With that, he hastily got to his feet and hurried to meet Pack, who had already reached the horses.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Emma watched Arch's approach with trepidation. "Did you tell 'em 'bout me?" She braced herself, trembling.

"No," Arch stated flatly. "They knowed I was bothered 'bout somethin'. I admitted 'twas a gal, but told 'em I ain't wanted to talk 'bout it."

"I knowed you'd come back," she said, uncertain of whether she should be thrilled or horrified.

"I come alone," Arch offered. "I ain't wanted 'em to skeer you."

"Thank you," Emma said. "But you cain't keep me a secret forever."

"I don't want to. I know they could like you. And I know you could like them."

She shook her head in despair.

"We could bring our families closer together."

"We'll bring 'em closer, all right; Lem and Oliver'll gang up and kill *us*."

"O' course they'll not!"

"You wanta guarantee that?"

"You wanta tell me our love ain't worth a risk?"

She studied him for a long time before replying, then finally said, "No."

"Come home with me," he urged, "right now. Afore you lose your nerve."

"Lose it? I ain't sure I ever had it."

Arch looked resigned. "I'll not force you. Iffen you want me to walk away right now and never come back, you jest say so."

The tears welled up as she stared at him. "Don't leave me," she gasped and sobbed and fell into his arms.

Arch held her and soothed her. At last Emma drew back and tried to look brave.

"You ready?"

"You really want I should answer that?" she said shakily.

Arch smiled adoringly at her brave attempt at humor, and slipped an arm around Emma's waist. He led her slowly to his horse.

"We'll jest not tell 'em your last name for awhile," Arch said over his shoulder to Emma, seated on the horse's rump. "And give 'em a chance to like you as a person, like I done, 'stead of as Oliver's cousin."

"And hope they don't ask my last name."

They rode the rest of the way in silence. Arch stopped just short of Forresters' Island, eased Emma down, and climbed down after her. Her tears were flowing freely once more.

Arch tried to be light-hearted about it. "You got to stop that now."

Emma sobbed once and leaned her head against his chest.

Arch took hold of her shoulders, and held her firmly out at arm's length. "Do you trust me?"

"Y...yes. Iffen I didn't, I'd not be here."

Clearly gratified, Arch went on, "I promised you I'd not leave 'em hurt you. No matter what. I meant it; I'll protect you. Let's go."

They walked hand in hand, Arch leading his horse with his other hand. As they entered the clearing, Emma recognized the man that she'd seen meet Arch at his horse in Fort Gates that day in May. What had Arch called him? Pack that was it. He looked up and approached them curiously. Emma started trembling again. Arch, with her hand still in his, felt it. He squeezed her hand gently, and when she turned toward him, he smiled reassuringly at her and winked. Emma returned his

smile gratefully. When she turned back toward Pack, he stood directly before them. Emma was struck by the incredible resemblance between the brothers. They were not twins. But any general description of one would have fit the other. Differences there were, but they were subtle. Arch's beard might have been just a bit longer, and Pack was slightly thinner.

"Well, well." Pack grinned down at her. "Is this the leetle gal you been frettin' 'bout? I kin see why." He gave a low whistle.

Emma blushed crimson, and wondered if they would all come on like this.

"This here's Emma." Arch nodded, as if that explained everything.

"Well now, howdy, Emma." Pack reached for her other hand. He gave it a squeeze and grinned suggestively.

"Howdy, sir." There was almost a curtsy in Emma's voice, even though she didn't execute one physically.

Pack released her and turned toward the corral. "Hey fellers! Come 'ere!"

Emma turned wide eyes of amazement to Arch.

He grinned. "They'll all act that-a-way. Hit don't mean nothin'."

Before Emma could think of a suitable reply, she saw two more approaching from the corral. She blinked. Almost twins? Almost quadruplets. And they came with grins that matched those of their brothers. Emma decided that no one else could look as colossally astonishing as these four well-matched men. The two new arrivals had longer beards than the previous two, and were maybe an inch taller.

"Emma." Arch introduced her. "This here's Buck and that's Mill-wheel."

Emma's blush drained instantly from her cheeks. She grew deathly white. She knew those two names. They were the two who had helped Lem beat Oliver so horribly. She struggled to keep her face neutral. "Hey," she murmured faintly.

"Howdy, leetle gal." Their eyes twinkled as they looked down at her.

"You done all right for yourself, Arch," Buck stated his approval.

"Not bad," Mill-wheel agreed with a grin.

Their penetrating stares seemed to go right through her. Emma lowered her eyes uncomfortably and sidled even closer to Arch.

Buck laughed. "I think we've done made your leetle gal nervous, Arch."

"Well, what'd you expect?" Arch said playfully, grinning. "You-all come on so strong." He slipped an arm around her. "Where's Gabby? And Lem?"

At the mention of that dreaded name, Emma stiffened. Arch gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

"Finishin' a few chores; they'll be back directly," Mill-wheel predicted.

"Let's take her in to meet Ma and Pa," Arch suggested.

What a sweet old couple, Emma thought delightedly. Her heart warmed to them instantly. She was especially drawn to Mrs. Forrester, who hugged her and called her an angel. Somehow, they were not at all as she had expected. She had assumed that they would be hardened and rough, but instead, they were open, easy-going, and friendly. But how thin and frail they were to have raised such huge sons.

Emma sat by Arch's side; everyone was talking in a casual, friendly manner, and she was almost beginning to relax. Just then, two more men appeared in the doorway. Emma gasped, knowing who one of them had to be. Both men paused in the doorway, and looked surprised to see her. Emma's heart pounded. Her mind raced: which one? Surely, not the shorter one. He resembled

the first four in everything but height. No. The other one. He was as tall as any of them, but clean-shaven. He stared Emma directly in the eyes just then, and she knew instantly. His eyes were cold and evil. They repelled her and held her all at the same time. Oh no, she thought, poor Oliver.

Arch was making introductions. "Gabby, Lem, this is Emma."

"Hi-yuh!" Gabby smiled.

"You had Arch right fretted," Lem said, instead of greeting her. "I'm glad you got it all settled."

Emma fought the ridiculous urge to apologize and could think of no sensible reply.

Arch put a comforting arm around her, and she leaned into him. "Ever'thin's fine now," Arch assured him.

The two recent arrivals sat, and the trivial banter resumed. Emma found herself liking them, all except Lem. He never took his eyes off of her, and his gaze chilled her until she was forced to wonder how Oliver could ever have faced it. She eyed him with controlled dread. Then she looked from him to Buck to Mill-wheel and mentally shook her head. It seemed incredible that Oliver had actually taken on the three of them. She knew that her cousin was hot-headed, but his recklessness had now been raised to new heights in her mind.

The afternoon passed pleasantly enough, and at last Arch nudged her almost imperceptibly. Emma looked up, dreading the question that she knew that she would see in his eyes. Sure enough, there it was: is it time to tell them? Emma winced and sniffed, and leaned on his arm. Arch fondled her hair and murmured, "Hmmm?"

She nodded slightly, resignedly.

"Fellers." Arch cleared his throat. "I got somethin' to tell you-all."

His brothers looked at him expectantly.

"There's one thing we ain't told you 'bout Emma. It was real important to us you-all like her, and we ain't wanted to tell somethin' right off that might, well...."

"Turn you agin me," Emma finished for him.

"Now what could be bad 'bout this leetle thing?" Buck wondered.

"Not bad." Arch chose his words carefully. "Jest a mite awkward."

Lem stared at Emma penetratingly, as if he wished to look through her for the answer. She was suddenly seized by the irrational fear that he would somehow guess. She whimpered and hid her face in Arch's arm.

"Aw now," he soothed. He gave her a warm gentle squeeze. "I'm sorry, Missy, but I done started it now; hit's too late to drop it. You wanta tell 'em, or you want I should?"

"Missy?" Mill-wheel inquired, when it became obvious that Emma was in no condition to reply.

"My nickname for her." Arch looked down at her with great affection. He hugged her sweetly and stroked her hair tenderly.

Buck was moved. "Iffen you like her that much, we'll put up with whatever it is."

Mrs. Forrester eyed the girl compassionately. "She's afeered o' you-all. See? That rough reputation you want has its drawbacks."

Mr. Forrester agreed with his wife. "Makin' folks fear you works too good with gals."

"Hit ain't that," Arch said. "I best tell it; hit don't look like she's goin' to. Uh.... Hit's her last name."

"Her last name?" Pack clearly found that hard to believe.

Suddenly, Emma raised her head and gazed desperately into Arch's face. "Please," she sobbed. "Tell 'em not to hurt me; make 'em promise!"

"Hurt her?" Buck was bewildered. "Why would we do that?"

"Please promise her, fellers," Arch prompted. "Hit would he'p."

They all complied, and Emma seemed to feel a little better.

Arch said, "Let's git it over with. Her name is Emma Hutto."

"What?" Buck asked.

"Hutto," Lem hissed.

"You kiddin' me?" Mill-wheel demanded.

Instantly, Emma turned away from them and buried her face in Arch's shoulder again, issuing tiny sobs.

"Shhh," Arch soothed her.

Pack asked, "You mean, she's...?"

"His cousin," Arch finished for him.

"I'll be blasted," Lem fumed.

Emma sobbed loudly, and turned to face them in despair. "Please, we ain't done this o' purpose. We ain't wanted to upset nobody. We fell in love afore we knowed who each other was. Even then we a'most broke up 'cause of it. But we jest couldn't."

"So that's why you was so fretted 'bout her," Pack realized. "Hit was 'cause you was considerin' breakin' up over this."

Arch nodded.

Gabby grinned. "I'd sure like to've been there when you done found out."

Emma groaned. "Hit was awful. Arch told me his last name, and I fainted."

"Fainted?" Pack was compassionately amused.

"Well this ain't so bad, Arch," Buck decided. "A mite awkward, like you said."

"But nothin' to break up over," Mill-wheel declared.

"And hit sure ain't a reason for us to hurt her," Pack stressed, giving her a kind-hearted smile.

Buck speculated, "I think I kin guess, though, why you was so scairt of us. You musta heered an awful lot bad 'bout us from Oliver, back when we was first fallin' out with him."

Emma nodded. "When they runned off to Boston, he tried to make me go with 'em. He was afeered I'd be in danger here."

Buck was stunned. "He thought we'd hurt you jest 'cause you was related?"

"He was sure iffen you found out 'bout me, you'd harm me, too. I refused to go. So he made me promise to stay outen your way." She looked around the room meaningfully. "I sure done a great job o' that, ain't I?" she said ironically.

"Well, that's Oliver all over," Mill-wheel declared in mild amusement. "Bein' too keerful 'bout some things, and not keerful 'nough 'bout others."

Gabby smiled. "And hit looks like his leetle cousin here has his courage and his cowardice."

"Courage?" she said dubiously, not believing that she had any.

"You're here, ain't you?" Pack grinned.

"That ain't all they share," Lem stated flatly. "She looks a mite like Oliver, too."

"That don't matter, Lem," Arch said quietly.

"She's a Hutto," Lem pronounced with distaste.

"When I look at her, I don't think of Oliver."

"I hope not," Emma dared to joke, with an anxious smile.

Arch laughed and hugged her.

"I'm curious," Mill-wheel wondered. "Are you and Oliver close?"

Emma hesitated, but only for an instant. "Yes," she admitted. "We're more like brother and sister than cousins. We played together as young uns. And when Jody Baxter lived with Oliver and my aunt, Oliver and Jody and me all played together. And Oliver learnt Jody and me to swim, and to build a flutter-mill." She was smiling fondly at the memories.

"Iffen you was so close," Lem said nastily, "how come you wa'n't there the day we give Oliver his beatin'? I ain't seed you there."

Immediately Emma's smile faded; she dropped her eyes to her lap, and her lower lip quivered. "I was in Fort Gates that day."

"Lem..." Arch warned.

Lem persisted, "Did you go see him after you heered?"

Emma buried her face in her hands. "Four days later."

"Lem, so he'p me."

"We done a good job on him, ain't we?" Lem grinned.

She looked at Lem in horror. "How could you? To do that, that bad, to another human bein'." She couldn't resist a quick accusatory glance toward Buck and Mill-wheel, also. They looked back at her solemnly. Lem looked smug.

"Damn it, Lem!" Arch stormed.

Emma realized then how she'd been manipulated. She turned back toward Buck and Mill-wheel. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"That's all right." They both nodded.

"Lem," Buck announced formally, "here's how it be. When Oliver was your concern, we stood by you. But now, he's more Arch's business. So now, we'll stand by Arch."

Lem made no reply.

Buck attempted to lighten the mood. "So you-all really fell in love without knowin' each other's last name, eh? That's right funny."

Arch shook his head. "I reckon. But we ain't laughin'."

Mill-wheel grinned. "Have you told Oliver yit?"

Emma groaned. "Oh, no. I dread that."

"I'm sure." Pack chuckled. "Be sure to duck when you do."

"When you gonna tell him?" Buck asked.

Emma was reluctant. "Soon, I reckon."

"Might as well git it over with," Mill-wheel suggested.

"I s'pose." Emma turned to Arch. "Will you go with me?"

"Sure," Arch promised. "I got to make sure he don't lay a hand on you."

"And as for us," Buck offered, "I reckon we kin forgive you for bein' Oliver's cousin."

Chapter Thirty

Baxters' Island rose before them. They stopped just short of the clearing.

Arch hesitated. "You said you ain't seed 'em in awhiles. Mebbe you'd prefer to greet 'em alone a minute afore I intrude."

"Intrude?" Emma stared.

"Well," he said, "you got a right to have a happy moment with 'em afore I ruin it. Oliver ain't gonna like this."

"He'll like it," she insisted stubbornly. "He loves me."

"That's jest why he won't," Arch said quietly. "Go on now."

She shook her head, but urged her horse forward. Arch watched her from the thick cover of the scrub. As Emma drew up in front of the cabin, she called, "Oliver," and slid down from the horse. Almost immediately came his answering yell, "Emma," as he bolted from the doorway. In one long stride, Oliver was upon her, scooping her up in his arms. He swung her and they both laughed excitedly. He set her back on her feet, and they hugged. Arch felt an irrational stab of jealousy, and looked away from them. He knew that it was absurd; Oliver was not his rival, not in the conventional sense. But perhaps in another sense he was. Was this how Lem had felt when he saw Oliver greet Twink that day, the day of the fight?

Arch looked up again at the sound of another voice, that of Mrs. Hutto. She had hurried out to join them, and was taking her turn at embracing Emma now. The three talked excitedly for a few moments, and then Emma said, "I've brought someone," and looked toward the brush.

Arch stepped out into the open and nodded politely.

Oliver's smile froze on his face. He stood motionless. His mother raised her eyebrows in shock, and looked from Arch to her son.

Arch slowly continued his approach. Oliver came to and tried to resume smiling, but his effort was weak and forced.

"Sis? What...?" he began. "I didn't know you even knowed them."

"Them?" Emma corrected in mild annoyance. "You mean him."

Also annoyed, Arch said, "You hid her from us. Even now."

Oliver hastened to defend his actions. "Oh, well, not o' purpose. I mean, not no more."

Mrs. Hutto said, "Let's go inside."

Oliver made a gesture to usher Emma ahead of him, but she turned her back and deliberately reached out a hand to Arch. He hesitated for just a moment, and then took it. She led him through the door. Oliver and his mother stared at the pair, and then stared at each other.

Inside, Penny Baxter greeted the newcomers.

"Where's that Jody?" Emma called loudly.

"Emma," came the excited reply. Jody charged from his room and straight into her arms. She giggled and squeezed him. Jody laughed, and then drew back and saw Arch beside her. His jaw dropped, and then he burst into an amazed grin. "Howdy!"

"Hey, boy." Arch smiled pleasantly.

Jody looked from Arch to Emma, his amusement growing. But then he caught sight of Oliver's expression, and his grin faded. Oliver's displeasure was not lost on Penny either, and he suggested hastily, "Set down, please."

The conversation was awkward and forced, with Emma sitting quite close to Arch, and with Oliver sitting stiff and tight-lipped watching them. Oliver spoke with icy politeness, which somehow managed to sound more hostile than shouting would have. "How did you two meet?"

"I was in Fort Gates in May, tradin'," Arch said, "when I met her. Hit was a long time afore we even told each other our last names. So there we was in love afore we knowed. We realized hit'd be right smart of a problem, so we a'most walked away from each other."

"What stopped you?" Oliver asked tightly.

"Arch told you," Emma said. "We're in love."

Arch reached out a hand and caressed her cheek.

Oliver said, "You ain't knowed each other long enough for that. You said you met in May. Hit's only July." He even smiled.

"Don't you believe in love at first sight, Oliver?" Arch inquired pleasantly.

"Only when it's my own."

"You know, I believe Lem feels the same way," Arch remarked evenly. "Mebbe I should ask him 'bout that."

The color drained from Oliver's face, although he did not so much as twitch.

Bull's eye, Arch thought.

Jody hastened to relieve the awkwardness. He asked, "Arch? Where's Buck and Mill-wheel and Pack and the rest?"

Arch turned to him. "Pack and Gabby has chores to do at home today." He shifted his eyes back to Oliver. "But Buck and Mill-wheel and Lem goed to Volusia. Them three often go there together."

Once more, Oliver sat absolutely rigid, with only a flicker in his eyes betraying his thoughts.

Double bull's eye, thought Arch. He paused, then said, "Well, I got chores o' my own to-home. I reckon I best be doin' 'em." He rose and stretched. He kissed Emma and headed for the door. "So long."

"Bye, Arch," Jody hastened at the abrupt departure.

"See you," Penny called after him.

Oliver made no sound.

"Wait," Emma called after Arch. "I'll walk you out." She raced out to him and found him waiting patiently by his horse.

"I told you," Arch said simply.

"Oh." Emma shook her head. "He was jest scairt."

"No. I've seed fear in Oliver afore. This wa'n't it. This was anger."

"Well, he jest needs time to git used to it."

"No. He'll not git used to it. He'll never accept this. You're his leetle 'Sis.' He feels protective. He ain't gonna leave a Forrester have you. Hit's one thing for him to put up with us hisself. But you? That's diff'rent."

"He ain't ranted nor raved," she tried lamely.

"That'll be after I leave. He's still 'nough afeered of us to behave hisself in front o' me."

"Arch," she said. "Please. Don't git your brothers riled at him 'bout this. I cain't be the cause o' that."

"They'll ask. Hit'll be their first question: how did Oliver take it? I cain't lie to my brothers."

Emma shivered. "You're skeerin' me. You know how they'll react."

Arch thought for a moment, and then found a compromise. "I'll tell 'em as leetle as possible." He swung into the saddle. He glanced toward the cabin. "You're in for it now, though. He'll yell, for sure. But iffen he hurts you, I'll not hold back."

She shook her head.

"Be keerful." He turned and rode away from her.

Emma walked reluctantly back to the house. When she entered, Oliver looked at her, glanced at the door, and asked simply, "He gone?"

"Yes."

Oliver leapt to his feet. "Are you crazy?"

"We ain't done it o' purpose," she retorted. "We told you how it happened."

"And when you found out he was a Forrester, you shoulda run as far away from him as you could git."

"I love him."

"Don't say that."

"How come you ain't yelled at me this-a-way whilst he was here?"

"'Cause he's got five brothers his size, and all of 'em waitin' for me to do somethin' they don't like so's they kin beat hell outen me agin and likely kill me! Wait 'til you stand amongst 'em some day and see how hit makes you feel. And the way you're goin', that day'll come soon."

"A'ready has come. And they was nice to me."

"You met 'em? You goed over there and they knowed who you was?"

"Yes."

"And they was nice?"

"All 'cept Lem."

"You sure gittin' us into it, gal!"

"He'll not do nothin'. The others sided with Arch and me."

Oliver looked to the ceiling. "You are crazy."

"Well mebbe I am," she shot back at him. "They said I was a lot like *you*, with your courage and your cowardice."

"They said that, huh?"

"Yes. And hit's true. I was turrible scairt, but I goed to meet 'em anyways."

"Well, let me tell you somethin'," he spoke ominously. "The day may come when the six of 'em surround you in anger, and we'll see how you feel then. Mebbe hit's a pity you wa'n't there the day o' the fight. Then you'da seed. I used to be glad you was spared that. But now I don't know. Hit had an effect on Twink, right 'nough. Let me tell you what she admitted to me once, after we was married. At first, she was torn betwixt Lem and me. She loved me, but she loved him, too. She'd not decided who to pick. Then the fight happened. Hit made her decision for her. Hit learnt her two things, that I loved her a heap to go through that for her, and that the Forresters is cruel."

"No!"

"She seed what they done to me, and she wondered how long hit'd be afore they'd do it to her. Lem would beat her in a quarrel one night. Or all of 'em would jest involve her in one o' them wild family fights they have so often. And there she'd be. So the fight made her afeered of 'em, and she picked me. Don't you see, Emma? I'm fretted 'bout you. I don't want you should make the same mistake Twink a'most made. I'm afeered Arch, and mebbe the others, will beat you, too."

Emma stared at Oliver resentfully for a moment. Then she said quietly, "Arch and the others was afeered to leave me alone here with you now. They was afeered you'd beat me."

Oliver stared at her bitterly. "Well mebbe I should." He turned without another word, went into his room, and closed the door.

Chapter Thirty-One

"Now where'd that boy git to?" Ory muttered to herself. "I left him right here with Caesar whilst I goed into Boyles' Store, and now he's gone. I wanta git home afore hit gits dark. Jody?" she called. August heat did nothing for her mood, and now this. "Jody." She wandered farther out into the street and looked both up and down it. There was no sign of him. She walked around to the side of the store. Still no Jody. She decided to circle the building. As she rounded the corner that led to the back of Boyles' Store, she stopped short. There was Jody with a girl in his arms. They were kissing.

"Jody!"

The embrace broke abruptly as the two stumbled away from each other. They turned and stared guiltily at the intruder. The girl was Eulalie Boyles. She looked anxiously from Ory to Jody.

"Uh, afternoon, Mis' Baxter," she stammered. Ory made no reply; she regarded the child coldly. Eulalie turned and fled.

Ory descended on Jody. "Now I reckon I know why you wa'n't int'rested in goin' in with me."

"Ma," Jody began.

"You're too young for this here stuff." She cut him off instantly. "The idea! You're only thirteen. And kissin'..." She made a face as though she detested the word. "Ain't we got 'nough o' that goin' on now with Arch Forrester and Emma Hutto?" She raised her eyes to heaven in mute appeal. "What a pair! And now you been watchin' 'em and you wanta be doin' it, too."

"But, Ma..."

"Oh hush. You jest be glad I'm the one caught you, and not that there boy runs the ferry. Else you'da got yourself another beatin'. You're lucky I don't take a brush to you. Git in the wagon."

Jody hung his head and went ahead of her.

Ory followed, muttering, "Jest wait 'til I tell your pa and grandma."

Chapter Thirty-Two

"What're you doin' here?" Emma asked.

"I wanta talk to you," Oliver said.

"Funny, you didn't seem int'rested in talkin' to me when I was visitin' you. After you got done shoutin' at me, you ignored me."

"Set down, Emma."

"I'd rather stand."

"I said set down." Oliver grabbed her arms firmly and planted her in a chair. She glared up at him but said nothing.

"You still seein' him?"

"Yes." Her chin rose defiantly.

"That's gonna stop."

Instead of replying to his challenge, she said, "I'm surprised you wa'n't afeered to come to Fort Gates. You had to pass Forrester's Island to git here."

Oliver struggled with the biting comment. This was his sweet little angel; he wasn't used to feeling this kind of anger toward her.

She watched him.

Oliver got himself under control. When he spoke again, his tone was icy. "You think the danger to me is funny? You heered the leetle threats Arch made to me in July, the leetle references to his brothers. Tellin' 'bout the three that beat me goin' agin to town where it happened. Sayin' he'll ask Lem how he feels 'bout love, knowin' we was rivals over Twink."

"You're imaginin' things; that wa'n't threats."

"Am I? Well as far as I'm concerned, you're in worse danger than I am. I'm doin' this to save you. Now I'll tell you how it's gonna be. You're gonna leave Floridy afore September's over and not come back. Go to Boston mebbe, nice and far away. Start packin'." With that, Oliver turned and went to the door. Without a backward glance, he walked out on her.

Emma burst into tears. She cried and shook and rocked herself for long moments. Then she rose and went to the window, to be sure that Oliver had truly gone. Once certain, she ran outside and saddled her horse. Emma flung herself onto his back, and raced away at full speed. Her tears blinded her so badly that she could hardly see. It seemed like forever until she reached Forrester's Island.

Pack looked up in surprise as Emma's horse bolted into the yard.

"Pack," she sobbed. "Where's Arch?"

"Hey, hey, hey, easy." He rushed over to her. Pack reached up and eased her down from the horse. "What's wrong?"

Emma began to cry harder than ever, in choked sobs.

Pack gathered her close to him and comforted her. "Easy, honey."

Gabby appeared from the barn and stopped short in amazement at the unusual sight of Emma in Pack's arms.

"Gabby," Pack called to him. "Go git Arch, quick."

Gabby returned with Arch in short order. Pack handed her over and she clung to him. Arch held her and soothed her, but his eyes were somber. It wasn't hard to guess the source of Emma's torment. He exchanged glances with Pack and Gabby. They had clearly come to the same conclusion. At last, Emma quieted a little. Arch held her out from him, and looked into her face.

"Hit's Oliver, ain't it?"

Emma nodded, sniffing.

"Did he hurt you?"

"No."

"He ain't laid a hand on you?"

"Well, uh, yes. He grabbed me by my arms and slammed me into a chair."

Arch looked at his brothers with a murderous fury in his eyes.

"But, but, it ain't that. He said...he said...." Uncontrollable sobs wracked her again.

Arch gathered her up in his arms. "Leave me talk to her alone," he requested. "Hit might be easier on her."

Pack and Gabby nodded.

Arch carried Emma to the barn, and sat down with her cradled in his lap. He consoled her until her spasms eased.

"Now tell me."

"I wish he had jest hit me. It woulda been better'n what he said, both in July and today."

"Tell it."

"In July, he said I'm in danger from you. And from your brothers. I tried not to believe it. But he said it's only a matter o' time afore you and me quarrel, and then you'll beat me. He said you and your brothers fight amongst yourselves, and that sooner or later you-all will involve me. Please say it ain't so, Arch. Please tell me you'll never do that."

"I thought you trusted me."

"I do, but he skeered me."

"All right. I ain't surprised. I figgered he'd work on you." He took her face between his hands and looked into her eyes. "I'll never hurt you. We do fight amongst ourselves, jest like he said, but we'll never involve you. The most would happen, is sometimes you'd see us fight. But that's all. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Did he say anythin' else?"

Her face clouded over again. "Yes. Today, he said he's gonna try to make me leave Floridy and never come back. Mebbe go to Boston." The tears returned at full force.

Arch's fury reached new heights. "Listen to me," he insisted almost savagely. "He cain't force you." But he crushed her to him desperately. He rose, lifting Emma with him, and walked to the cabin. His five brothers were all inside, and looked at him questioningly as he entered with the whimpering Emma in his arms. But he went first to his mother.

"Ma," he said, "leave me put her to bed in Fodder-wing's room. Will you set with her?"

"Course." She followed him. "Poor leetle thing."

Arch returned immediately, and turned to his brothers. "Oliver's been talkin' to her. Hit seems it's jest a matter o' time 'til we beat her. She and I'll quarrel and I'll whop her. Or the bunch of us'll have one of our fights and we'll drag her into it."

"Oh is that so?"

"And Oliver has it all figgered out that she's s'posed to leave Floridy permanent and go to Boston."

"Aw that's it," Lem declared. "Let's go beat him."

"Now wait a minute." Buck held up a hand. "That won't he'p Arch."

"Hit'll jest make things worse," Mill-wheel agreed. "Hit'll break up Arch and Emma for sure."

"You jest want a ruckus, Lem," Gabby concluded.

"This here's tricky," Arch said. "I know we'd all like nothin' better'n to go give Oliver a beatin', but hit's the one thing we cain't do. But," he added, "we don't have to be friendly."

Chapter Thirty-Three

A crisp October afternoon saw Penny, Jody, and Oliver on their way to Forresters' Island.

"Oliver," Jody said, "you best hope they don't know what you done to Emma two weeks ago."

"She'd not be foolish 'nough to tell 'em, would she?"

Penny and Jody exchanged a dubious look.

"'Sides," he went on, "I had to try. She's my baby cousin. I owe her that much. I got to protect her."

"But she refused to go anyways," Jody reminded him.

"Well, do you think I should force her?"

"No," Penny insisted firmly.

"She called my bluff," Oliver admitted. "Now what?"

"Now you accept it."

"I cain't. I jest cain't." At Penny's expression, Oliver added hastily, "Don't fret; I'll behave today."

"I still ain't convinced you should be goin' with us."

"Hit'll look funnier iffen I don't."

"I reckon."

"'Sides, iffen she'da told 'em, they'da come after me by now."

Penny and Jody exchanged worried looks, but said nothing.

Forresters' Island loomed before them.

"Last chance to change your mind, Oliver," Penny suggested.

"No. They'll think I don't wanta try to be friends no more."

"Well, do you?"

"I have to. Like you said, 'No man couldn't live on Baxters' Island without the Forresters was his friends.' You right, and I ain't forgot that."

"Well, be keerful."

The Forresters greeted the visitors politely, but with none of the usual clamor. They slapped Penny and Jody on the back, but regarded Oliver coolly and kept their distance.

Everyone went inside and sat. Oliver deliberately sat nearest to Buck, the one with whom he'd felt most comfortable since he and the Forresters had made peace. But Buck's usual warm smile wasn't forthcoming. Even when Oliver smiled first, encouraging him, Buck looked back at him coldly.

As the afternoon wore on, Oliver grew increasingly tired of keeping a pretense of friendliness when he was receiving no encouragement from anyone. It was obvious that the Forresters' attitude toward the Baxters hadn't changed. It was only Oliver who was being ostracized. Oliver's growing resentment began to cloud his own face, and his judgment. Their coldness was becoming his coldness.

As Penny and Jody became aware of the gradual transformation of Oliver, their own nervousness increased. Oliver's developing resentment wasn't lost on the Forresters either, but they regarded it, and him, with indifference. All except for one. Mrs. Forrester approached Oliver from behind and touched his shoulder on her way to the door. Oliver turned and regarded her in surprise. She beckoned subtly to him. Bewildered, he rose and followed her outside.

Mrs. Forrester led Oliver to the barn. She never even looked back to be sure that he was following her; she just assumed it. Once inside, she turned on him.

"You best git over this, and fast."

"They's the ones bein' cold now. You seed."

"Well, why do you s'pose?"

Oliver hesitated. "Emma?"

"Yes, Emma. You best make up your mind real quick to accept her and Arch bein' together, or you'll have a heap more to worry 'bout than your cousin."

Oliver swallowed. "You threatenin' me?"

"Not me. Do you have any idea what my boys'll do to you iffen you rile 'em agin?"

Oliver nodded emphatically. "I reckon I got some idea."

She snorted. "You ain't got nothin' yit of what they's capable of."

Oliver's eyes grew wide, and he stared at her, speechless.

"Now you best make up your mind to stop upsettin' things 'round here, or I swear I'll git riled 'nough to tell 'em our leetle secret."

Oliver went white. "They'll kill me."

"Most likely. Or you'll jest wish you was dead."

There was a sound behind him. Oliver whirled, panicked. Jody stepped into the doorway.

"What secret?" Jody demanded.

Oliver shook his head. "Jody...."

"I'm your brother now, remember? Tell me."

Mrs. Forrester nodded. "We best tell him."

Oliver looked at her in dismay.

"You wanta keep him quiet, don't you? Then satisfy him."

Oliver nodded reluctantly. "Jody, remember the night I found out the Forresters really had burnt Ma's house? How I a'most fought 'em agin, but I ran out? Well, I never told you-all where I goed that night; I never even told Ma."

Jody stared, wide-eyed.

Together, Oliver and Mrs. Forrester filled him in on the rest of it. She even admitted to the compassion that she'd felt for Oliver. But now she was angry. "You think your cousin's too good for my boy?"

Oliver sulked and said nothing.

"Well, we best be gittin' back, afore they come after us," Mrs. Forrester suggested. "You remember what I said, Oliver. Git over this 'bout Emma right quick. Or I'll git riled 'nough and I'll tell 'em."

The three trooped back to the house without further comment.

Penny and the Forresters looked up as they entered. Jody was wide-eyed and scared. He slipped into the chair next to his father without a word. He looked around at the men in horror, realizing what would happen to Oliver if they knew. Mrs. Forrester looked at no one, and went about her business as if she had never been gone. Oliver came as far as the doorway, but didn't enter the cabin. He leaned against the doorframe. His face was pale.

"Penny, kin we go home please?" he requested.

Penny and the Forresters were stunned. Penny looked at Jody. It was clear that Jody, too, wouldn't mind leaving.

Penny rose hastily. "Iffen you-all will excuse us."

Brief farewells were made all around, and the visitors departed.

Chapter Thirty-Four

One chilly November morning, when Jody entered the barn to milk Trixie, he heard a sound in the corner behind the bales of hay. He approached cautiously to investigate, and leaned over to look.

“Eulalie!” he exclaimed.

“Shhh.” She rose and came around to him.

“How long you been back there?”

“Awhiles. I was waitin' for you.”

They stared at each other shyly.

“I hope you ain't got in too much trouble that day behind the store,” Eulalie said.

“Nah, 'tweren't bad.”

“I'm glad....”

Jody watched her. “Since you're here, do that mean you ain't minded what we done that day?”

She shook her head.

“Do that mean...?” Jody looked at her questioningly.

Eulalie smiled.

Jody smiled back and went close to her. He reached out and took her hands in his. He kissed her very gently.

The barn door opened behind them. Mrs. Hutto stood in the entrance, trying very hard not to laugh.

“Grandma....”

She waved away his protest. “Hit's all right Jody.” She smiled broadly.

“You ain't gonna tell Ma?”

“I should say not. Don't you think your pa and I want no peace?”

Chapter Thirty-Five

"Why're you so quiet?" Arch asked.

Emma shook her head. "I don't know, Arch. Mebbe we are makin' a mistake. We keep gittin' ever'body so upset all the time."

Arch's brothers and parents tried very hard to pretend to be busy with various small jobs, but they were listening.

"Ever'body. You mean Oliver."

"Well, I jest feel so sorry for him. For what I'm puttin' him through."

"Has he done somethin' to you agin?"

Mrs. Forrester looked up and paid special attention.

"No. Nothin' like that. In fact, he's really changed. And hit's made me feel diff'rent toward him."

"What you mean?"

"When he was yellin' at me, and givin' orders, and makin' threats, I got so riled at him, I near-'bout wanted to bust him one, myself. All I wanted was to defy him. But now, he's bein' so sad. Hit makes me feel sorry for him. He jest sets there, lookin' hurt. He don't say nothin' wrong to me no more. He jest don't say nothin'. And I can't believe I've done this to him."

"I cain't believe what he's doin' to *you*," Mrs. Forrester declared.

They looked at her in surprise.

"All right, I was listenin'. But he's doin' this o' purpose, too. Makin' her feel guilty. Not yellin' at her so's she'll stop fightin' him. Makin' her feel sorry for him like he done me."

All of her sons stared at her.

"He'll never accept this," she told herself bitterly. "He'll jest find new ways o' gittin' to her. And I told him...." She stopped herself.

Lem rose. "Jest what did you tell Oliver?"

Her voice was shaking with anger and indecision. "I told him to git over it and accept it and git nice quick. Or I'd tell you-all...."

"Tell us what?" Buck stood up as well.

"I ain't told you afore, 'cause he made me feel so sorry for him."

Mill-wheel got to his feet. "Let's have it, Ma."

She came to her decision and nodded. "A year ago, Christmas, Oliver found out the truth 'bout the fire. He a'most fought you-all agin. But then he got scairt and runned out."

"So?" Arch prompted, rising from his chair.

"So, he come here. And I caught him hidin' out there in the bushes."

"Well, whyn't you tell us?" Lem demanded.

She shook her head. "'Cause I felt sorry for him. He cried. I held him like as if he was my own. He was scairt o' you-all."

"But why'd he come here, Ma?" Mill-wheel insisted.

She bit her lip. "He was tryin' to git up the nerve to do to us what you-all done to his ma."

"Start a fire?" Buck's voice boomed.

She nodded.

Pack and Gabby rose from their seats.

The six Forrester men looked at each other and started for the door.

Emma screamed shrilly and ran ahead of them. She turned in the doorway, blocking their path, gripping the doorframe on both sides.

They stopped and looked at her.

"No, please don't hurt Oliver. He didn't do nothin'. He mighta thought it, but he ain't done it." Emma sobbed desperately.

"Out o' the way, gal," Buck ordered quietly.

"No. Arch he'p me."

"Emma. Stand aside," Arch ordered softly.

"Arch, I thought you'd never be part of it. You'd never hurt my cousin."

"Why? 'Cause I wa'n't in it afore? Any of us woulda he'ped Lem beat Oliver that day. Pack and Gabby and me jest wa'n't there, that's all."

"Well, thank God for that much," she snapped sarcastically.

Anger flared in Arch's eyes. "Out o' my way."

"Arch, I have faith in you not to hurt me or to leave them hurt me. You promised. And they promised. And I ain't movin'."

The Forresters looked at one another. They started forward.

Lem and Mill-wheel reached for her from opposite sides. Emma let out a piercing scream.

"Leave me handle this," Arch said. He stepped forward and reached for Emma. He seized her by the shoulders. Emma wailed and beat tiny fists against his chest. Arch caught her wrists in one large hand and held her chin in the other.

"We'll discuss this here scene when I git back," Arch hissed at her. "You stay here and wait for me."

"I'll not be here," she dared to say.

Arch transferred his grip back to her shoulders, and flung her into the corner.

"You better be," he threatened her in a low voice. "You don't want me to have to come after you."

The Forresters walked out determinedly, in force.

Mrs. Forrester approached Emma uncertainly. When she touched the girl's shoulder, Emma jumped in alarm. Then Emma saw who it was and relaxed. But she glared bitterly at the older woman. "Hit's your fault." Then her face fell. "And mine." She struggled to her feet.

"You best stay here."

"Never. I gotta git outta here."

"He'll come after you. He meant it."

"I'll not be in Fort Gates neither."

Mrs. Forrester was bewildered. "Where you goin'?"

"Boston." She added bitterly, "That's where Huttos go to git away from Forresters, ain't it?" With that, she fled.

Mrs. Forrester watched Emma ride away, and then bolted out the door in turn.

"Where you goin'?" Mr. Forrester called after her.

Six horses galloped up to Penny as he worked in the field. He looked up at the Forresters. Surprise crossed his face when he caught sight of their expressions.

"Where's Oliver?" Lem demanded.

"He ain't here. Somethin' wrong?"

"Ask Oliver."

"Oh no. Not agin. Wait!"

They were gone.

Penny raced to the house and told Jody, finishing with, "They was headed deeper into the scrub when they left, toward the Glen. Mebbe when they ain't seed you neither, they figgered you

and him goed there." He shook his head. "Somethin' in their eyes made me not tell 'em he was in Volusia. I'm glad I listened."

"But Pa, he's all alone there. And he don't even know they's after him. What're we gonna do?"

Just then, there was the clatter of a horse and wagon out front. Penny and Jody ran outside. It was the Forrester wagon, and Mrs. Forrester was at the reins. Penny ran up to help her descend.

"Hit's all my fault," she wailed. "They's gonna kill Oliver and hit's all my fault."

Jody looked at her with a sinking expression. "You told 'em."

"Told 'em what?" Penny asked.

"Jest git the others and git in," Mrs. Forrester urged. "We got to hurry."

Everyone piled into the Forrester wagon and set out as fast as the horse could manage. Mrs. Forrester explained what had happened as they barrelled toward Volusia.

"Iffen the Forresters search the scrub first, includin' the Glen, we'll likely git there ahead of 'em," Penny said.

Talk and plans were frantic throughout the ride.

The Forrester wagon roared into Volusia. Everybody piled out of it. The five immediately scattered to try to find Oliver.

Jody wasn't having much luck. No one that he'd talked to had seen Oliver. He hoped that one of the others had found him by now.

A clatter of hooves sounded from behind him. He turned slowly and saw all six of the Forrester men reining in directly behind him. It was too late to run. He looked into their eyes, and terror overcame him. He had known that he'd have to stand up to the Forresters. He hadn't known that he'd have to do it alone.

Lem said, "Penny and Jody musta panicked after we asked for Oliver. Iffen Jody's in Volusia, Oliver must be."

"Looks like we come to the right place," Arch agreed.

They dismounted. Jody backed slowly toward the building behind him. The Forresters followed. Jody would've liked to back away forever, but the building stopped him. The Forresters stopped, too, but much closer than he would have preferred. He eyed each one with saddened dread. Dizziness born of fright swept through him.

"All right, Skeeter," Lem demanded. "Where is he?"

Jody shook his head slowly back and forth. Then he looked up to his left, to Buck. Jody ran to Buck instantly and tried to throw his arms around him. He didn't even have a chance to complete the hug. Buck seized his arms roughly and squeezed and shook him.

"Where's Oliver?" Buck asked.

"Are you gonna hurt me, Buck?" he asked softly.

In reply, Buck lifted Jody by the arms that he still held, and handed him to Lem. "I'll not he'p nor hinder. I'll jest watch."

Lem accepted Jody and smiled sadistically. A harsh spasm of shuddering wracked Jody where he hung suspended in Lem's cruel hands. In one final act of desperation, Jody looked to the right, toward Mill-wheel.

"Mill-wheel, please. Git me away from him. Don't leave him have me."

Mill-wheel's eyes were cold. "Where's Oliver?"

Grief-stricken and terrified, Jody only managed a slight shake of his head. His horrified eyes returned to Lem.

Lem smirked at the long-awaited solidarity of his brothers against Jody. He shoved the boy hard against the wall and pinned him. Jody gasped.

Mill-wheel said, "You're scairt. Give in."

"No!"

Buck shook his head.

Lem reached out and made a fist in front of Jody's face, inches from him. Jody squeezed his eyes tightly shut and waited.

"Wait, Lem," Buck said.

Jody opened his eyes quickly and saw that Lem had indeed drawn back the fist to hit.

Lem turned angrily. "I thought you wa'n't gonna he'p nor hinder?"

"I ain't," Buck declared. "But you remember what Penny said happened to Jody after you hit him that-a-way in the fight? He was out cold for seven hours. You wanta wait seven hours for the answer?"

Lem looked contrite. "No." Then he regarded Jody nastily. "But there's many other places I kin hit you, won't knock you out."

Jody looked at Buck in despair. "You shoulda left him knock me out."

Buck's expression remained unchanged. Jody's face hardened bitterly.

"Where's Oliver?" Mill-wheel demanded again.

"I'll never tell." Jody's voice shook.

Lem made a fist, and punched Jody in the stomach. Jody cried out and doubled over, clutching himself.

"Better tell us where he is, boy," Arch advised. "Ain't no point in you gittin' hurt. Oliver kin take it better'n you; he's older."

"No." Jody struggled to straighten, without much success. "Better me than him; at least you ain't gonna kill me."

"Don't be too sure o' that," Pack said ominously.

Jody fought to control his resulting panic, and said, "Iffen you kill me, you'll not git your answer."

"Don't be too sure o' that, neither," Gabby said. "A dyin' man tells plenty."

"You cain't make me tell."

Arch said, "We'll see."

He and Pack moved in on Jody from opposite directions and hit him with their fists in his sides. Jody screeched and dropped to his knees. One lone sob escaped before he got control. I refuse to cry, Jody thought. Lem reached down and grabbed Jody, dragging him to his feet, and bringing agony to his tortured sides. He slammed the boy painfully into the wall again. Jody looked desperately at Buck, his resolve slipping. "Buck," he pleaded. Buck's face was a wall as unyielding as the one against which he was shoved.

"Where's Oliver?" Lem shouted.

"No!"

Lem hauled back and slapped Jody. Jody turned his face away, as far to the side as he could, to avoid letting them see the automatic stinging tears, and to try to avoid another blow.

"Look at me," Lem demanded.

"I cain't," Jody whined, and then screamed, "Pa!"

Mill-wheel grabbed Jody's chin and turned his head to make him face Lem. Jody moaned and closed his eyes. Lem slapped him again. The blow was immediately followed by another slap on the other side of his face from someone else. Jody opened his eyes. Arch had delivered the

second blow. In a futile display of frustration, Jody kicked out at them. He connected with Lem's shin. Lem swore and moved in on him. In a fury, he began slapping Jody's face back and forth repeatedly. Jody began to feel dizzy; his vision was a blur; his ears were ringing. He felt like he should almost faint, but not quite. Lem stopped and gripped his shoulders. Jody's head rolled from side to side in disorientation.

"Where's Oliver?"

Jody struggled unsuccessfully to focus on the face that floated in front of him. "The church," he mumbled.

The voice laughed. Jody was no longer being held. He leaned his head back against the wall for support. The Forresters came back into focus. Jody groaned.

"Let's go," Lem said.

They mounted their horses, and galloped away toward the church.

Jody watched them go, sank to the ground, curled into a ball, and cried.

In the church, Oliver faced the three women, tension obvious in his face. "How kin we let Penny and Jody know you found me?"

"We can't," Mrs. Baxter stated flatly. "We'll jest have to wait 'til they check back here."

"I'm worried 'bout 'em," he protested. "Hit's been too long. They might be in trouble. And on my account."

"It ain't very likely," Mrs. Hutto consoled him. "Hit's you they's after. Why would the Forresters hurt Ezra or Jody?"

Mrs. Forrester put in reluctantly, "Unless they figgered them two knowed where Oliver was."

"That's it," Oliver said with finality. "I say we go out after 'em." He walked toward the church door.

"No, Oliver," Mrs. Forrester ordered.

Oliver turned toward the women again. He opened his mouth to retort.

The church door crashed open behind him. Oliver wheeled. They were on him instantly. The first four through the door rushed him together. Arch and Pack came at him from opposite directions and punched him in the sides as they had done Jody. Mill-wheel hit him in the stomach, and Gabby got him in the small of the back. Oliver doubled over with a strangled moan and fell to his knees. Buck grabbed Oliver, dragged him forcibly to his feet, and struck him in the eye. Oliver staggered backward into the wall. Lem followed, drew back his fist, and hit Oliver in the jaw. Oliver crumpled into a heap in the corner and lay still.

To this point, the three women had gone unnoticed, so intent were the men on beating Oliver to death. Now they rushed forward, pushing past the startled Forresters, fighting their way to Oliver's side. When they reached him, they formed a semicircle in the corner with their backs to Oliver, facing the Forresters.

"I ain't raised my sons to be no murderers," Mrs. Forrester declared. "I made a mistake when I told you-all 'bout what Oliver a'most done a year ago, and Oliver ain't gonna pay for my mistake with his life."

Mrs. Hutto pleaded for their understanding, "My boy was upset and confused that night. How kin you blame him? He was feelin' the same anger you're feelin' now, and for the same reason. But there's one big diff'rence: he didn't do it. He ain't burnt your house like you-all burnt mine."

"Hit's allus violence with you-all," Mrs. Baxter criticized. "That's your answer for ever'thin'. You allus got to be hurtin' somebody: Oliver, Jody, Ezra. Where do it stop?"

At the mention of Jody, the Forresters exchanged glances. The look wasn't missed by Mrs. Baxter.

"Have you done somethin' to my boy?"

None of the men spoke, but the guilt in their eyes told the tale.

Their mother accused, "That's how you knowed Oliver was here, wa'n't it? From Jody. And he wouldn'ta jest told you."

Lem was smug. "We had to persuade him a leetle."

Mrs. Forrester trembled with rage. She stepped forward deliberately and slapped Lem in the face as hard as she could.

Lem stared at her murderously; his fingers twitched. His fist clenched and unclenched.

"Go on," Mrs. Forrester said softly, "hit me. We'll see how low you've sunk."

Behind her, Oliver groaned and stirred. Mrs. Hutto looked over her shoulder at him. "Stay down," she ordered.

Mrs. Baxter's tone was almost pleading. "How bad did you hurt my son?"

Buck nodded curtly. "He'll be all right."

Oliver raised his head and glared at the Forresters. "You hurted Jody? You hurted my leetle brother?" He struggled to rise.

The church door opened, and everyone looked. Jody entered, yelling, "Oliver!" He almost collided with the Forresters and stopped short. Both of his cheeks were reddened from the impacts that they'd received.

Lem regarded him evilly. "You want more?"

Jody backed out of reach, but forced himself to look defiant.

"Jody?" Mrs. Baxter's voice was shaky. "You all right?"

"Yes, Ma."

"Lucky for you," Mrs. Forrester snapped at her sons.

"We kin move you three, easy enough," Lem threatened.

"Go 'head," his mother told him. "You kin kill Oliver. But you'll have to kill the three of us first, 'cause we're gonna fight."

"Aw, Ma." Buck looked disgusted. "We ain't gonna beat up three old women."

"Your choice," she declared.

"Move," Mill-wheel ordered.

"Move us," Mrs. Hutto shot back at him. "But be prepared to git rough 'cause we will be."

The Forresters stared in disbelief.

The church door opened again. Penny entered and took in the situation instantly. "Oh lord," he said.

"Stay back, Ezra," his wife told him. She bit her lip to stop its quivering. "Leave us handle it."

"Ma," Buck said tiredly, "you cain't be serious."

"Try me."

Her sons looked at one another.

She went on, "Jest as Oliver had to accept his ma's decision 'bout her house a year ago, now you-all have to accept mine. Hit was my house, and your pa's, long afore hit was yourn. And I say we'll jest forgit 'bout this. And iffen you cain't, iffen you want Oliver, you'll have to go through the three of us to git him."

They hesitated.

Arch pointed out lamely, "Well, this here fight is also 'bout Emma."

"No 'tain't," his mother announced firmly. "Not no more. She's gone."

"What?" Oliver asked in a shocked voice from the floor.

"I'll go after her," Arch decided.

"You'll not find her," Mrs. Forrester informed him. "She ain't in Fort Gates, neither. She goed to Boston."

"That ain't my doin'," Oliver assured him, peering between the women. "When I told her to go, she'd not listen."

"That's right." Mrs. Forrester looked at Arch. "'Twas your doin'. You drove her off. With your violence."

"Did they hurt her?" Oliver asked worriedly.

"Not really." She smiled wryly over her shoulder at him. "No worse'n you done," she told him pointedly. She regarded her sons. "Well boys? What's it gonna be?"

They exchanged long looks, their resolve failing.

Buck shrugged. "Aw, what the hell."

The Forrester men broke formation and casually went to sit or stand around the room. None of the intended victims moved immediately.

It was then that Jody noticed the brightly colored streamers hanging above him. Christmas, he thought dully. In all of the trauma, he'd actually forgotten.

"The townsfolk'll start arrivin' soon for the doin's," Penny said. "We-all managed to create quite a scene here last year. And the year afore. You-all think mebbe we could jest be part o' the fun this year? If not," he went on, "I think we should jest git outen here right quick, afore the whole blasted town starts thinkin' of us as the Christmas curse."

Oliver swayed to his feet on uncertain legs. Penny hurried to help him. Olivia embraced her son urgently. Ory took Oliver's hand in hers.

Mrs. Forrester looked at her sons and said, "Don't try nothin'. Or we'll be on you, right fierce."

They stared at her in amusement. She turned and went to Oliver. She reached up and gently brushed back a lock of his soft hair. He smiled at her.

When they released him, Oliver walked straight to Jody. The two said nothing. Oliver pulled Jody into a close hug. They held it for long moments.

Townspople started to filter into the church. Soon the entire town was there and the party was in full swing.

Partway through the evening, Penny noticed Buck and Mill-wheel standing together and saw his chance. He approached them soberly.

"Why'd you-all have to torture Jody?"

Buck shrugged and said simply, "'Cause we couldn't find you."

Penny stared.

Mill-wheel grinned. "We'da settled for you instead."

Penny shook his head. "I wish you had."

Buck laid a hand on Penny's shoulder. "You kin be proud, Penny. He was a man."

Penny stared at him in wonderment.

A little later, Buck approached Jody. "You all right?"

Jody began to nod slightly, and then stopped himself. "What do you keer?"

"I keer."

"I'm all right," the boy admitted almost grudgingly.

"Do it still hurt?"

"What do you think?" Jody asked bitterly. Then he accused, "You let 'em. You even hurted me some, yourself."

"You coulda got yourself out of it at any time."

"No. He's my brother now, remember? We got loyalty, too. 'Sides, how could you jest hand me to Lem like that? You know he's been itchin' to hurt me agin ever since the first fight. That was cruel of you, Buck."

Buck nodded. "I know. But I was tryin' to use your fear of him. I figgered you'd be so scairt, you'd back down right off. I had no idea you'd try to hold out like that."

Just then, all of the others: Mill-wheel, Arch, Pack, Gabby, and Lem, seeing Buck and Jody together, came over, curious to hear their conversation.

Jody saw them and automatically flinched, stepping back a pace.

Mill-wheel gave him a reassuring smile. "Hit's okay. We ain't gonna hurt you."

"I ain't scairt," Jody lied.

Buck smiled knowingly. "Sure you ain't."

Chapter Thirty-Six

Jody looked up uncertainly as the Forresters rode into Baxters' Island. This was the first time that he'd seen them since the Christmas crisis. He hadn't expected them to show up in January, things being a trifle awkward.

"Howdy," he said evenly.

"Hey, boy."

"Pa ain't here." He hesitated. "Nor Oliver neither."

"That's all right," Buck replied casually. "We come to see you."

They dismounted.

"Why?" he blurted without thinking.

"We gonna learn you to fight." Mill-wheel grinned.

Jody was flustered. "'Tain't necessary. I told you I done all right with the ferry boy when we fought over Eulalie last winter."

"Well." Buck smiled. "We only got your word on that."

"And you done wrong with us agin," Mill-wheel reminded him.

"You goed back to kickin'." Arch grinned.

"Oh, yeah." Jody involuntarily glanced at Lem, who looked back with an amused expression.

"I...I got chores to do."

"Whatever you gotta do, hit kin wait," Pack declared. He turned to his brothers. "You-all figger the barn's the best place?"

Gabby answered, "Yeah, the barn."

Jody protested, "But, but..."

"Come on, boy." Buck took his arm.

"Well why you-all gotta do it?"

"We figger your pa won't; he's too peaceable," Buck explained.

"And Oliver won't, most likely." Mill-wheel grinned. "Not after what he's jest been through."

Jody struggled uselessly. "Oh, leave me go."

"Come on, Jody," Gabby encouraged. "Hit'll be fun."

"Ain't we had 'nough o' this?"

"Aw this here's diff'rent," Mill-wheel told him. "We ain't gonna hit you; we gonna learn you to do the hittin'."

"You mean I gotta hit you-all? Aw, no!"

Buck shrugged it off nonchalantly. "You cain't do no damage."

Now inside the barn, they shut the door.

Buck began, "Now Jody, the first thing is, you gotta forgit this kickin' and bitin' and clawin' business."

"Okay," Jody assured him hastily. "I'll not do that no more. Kin I go now?" He started for the door.

Buck stated, "Now this here's serious."

Mill-wheel's misplaced laugh belied that.

Buck glared at him. "You're a big he'p." To Jody he said sternly, "Git back here."

Jody returned meekly to his side.

"Now," Buck went on, "you right-handed or left?"

"Right, I reckon."

“Gimme your right hand.”

Jody complied.

“Now make a fist.”

Jody did so, with a sigh.

Lem looked disgusted. “You ain't got that right.” He grabbed Jody's hand and rearranged his thumb position. “Piteeful, but I reckon hit's the best you kin do.”

“All right, now hit me,” Buck instructed.

“No.” Jody pulled back from him.

“Now, boy,” Buck spoke with exaggerated patience, “you cain't hurt me, so don't fret.”

“Could be he'd mind less with me,” Lem offered. “Come on, Skeeter.”

Jody gave Lem a half-hearted poke in the stomach.

Lem looked at him. “Now that weren't 'nough to knock out a rabbit.”

“I don't wanta do this no more,” Jody whined.

Arch grabbed Jody's elbow from behind and pulled it back farther. “You gotta draw back your fist first, boy; that's what you're doin' wrong.”

“Now hit him,” Pack urged.

“Really, I don't...”

Lem spoke with calculated viciousness, “I'm glad we got to beat Oliver agin; I'm only sorry we ain't hit him even harder.”

Without thinking, Jody drew back and struck Lem as hard as he could. Instantly regretting it, he looked up at Lem, filled with dread of retaliation.

Lem grinned down at him. “Not bad.” He turned to his brothers. “I knowed that'd do it, iffen I said that.”

They laughed.

“Cut loose with that on that boy runs the ferry, Jody, and you'll do jest fine,” Buck praised him.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

In March, the Baxters and the Forresters planned to go on a hunt together.

"You sure they mean to include me?" Oliver asked Penny.

"That 's what they said. You want I should make some excuse?"

"No," Oliver answered hastily. "No, I'll go."

Jody watched the uneasy byplay between Oliver and the Forresters. Oliver kept his eyes down, never quite meeting theirs. He also never went within striking distance of any of the men, deftly managing to be wherever they weren't. For their part, the Forresters looked at Oliver only surreptitiously as well, not trying to catch his eye, and pretending not to notice how well he was dodging them. No one found a way to dispel the uneasiness until they all sat around the campfire that evening.

Buck turned to Oliver. "You wa'n't worried 'bout comin' with us today, was you, Oliver?"

"I was," Penny interrupted, before Oliver could feel compelled to admit it. "I was right fretted 'bout bringin' Oliver. So much so, I considered bringin' the women along to protect him. Course," Penny went on, "out here we'd be hard-put to find a church to hide him in."

Jody smiled as the others seemed to lighten up a bit. "Well iffen you ever gotta hide him someplace agin, Pa, don't tell me where you're gonna put him. I break under pressure."

"Aw, now." Buck reached out and tousled Jody's hair. "The way we see it, you done right good, holdin' out. We was impressed. And we're proud o' you the way you're learnin' to fight."

"In fact, Jody, " Mill-wheel suggested, "I think we should demonstrate for Penny and Oliver."

"What?" Penny asked, obviously confused.

"Why, ain't you told 'em, Jody?" Arch feigned surprise.

"We was sure you'd be proud to tell 'em how good you done," Pack agreed.

"Git up, boy," Gabby prodded.

"We'll let you use me agin," Lem offered generously.

"Oh no," Jody groaned.

Buck lifted Jody from behind and set him on his feet.

"What's goin' on?" Penny wanted to know.

"We goed over to your place in January, and learnt Jody to fight," Buck told him.

"Well where was we?" asked Oliver.

"In Grahamsville," Jody said miserably. "I shoulda goed with you."

Jody and Lem proceeded with a repeat of their fight practice.

Buck smiled his approval. "I think you'll fight us much better next time."

"Next time?" Jody clearly didn't like the sound of that.

"I think next time," Buck said, trying to keep a straight face, "you should hide Oliver in the cemetery."

"Behind a tombstone," Mill-wheel added.

"That'd make sense." Lem nodded. "After we finished with him, nobody'd have to tote him too fur."

"Oh I don't know," Arch countered. "I found the church right sensible."

"Sure," Pack agreed. "He could say his prayers whilst we was beatin' on him."

"Are you-all quite through?" Oliver asked good-naturedly.

They grinned at him.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

"This is a purty place," Buck said. "We're proud to've come here with you today."

The Glen always looked loveliest in April. The magic of spring filled its every flower and leaf and droplet of water. Even the sky seemed bluer.

"I 'specially like to come here in April," Jody agreed. "I do every year." A vague memory of why stirred him, and was almost within his grasp, but it eluded him. No matter, he was here now, with so many friends, and he was happy.

The Forresters watched as Jody and Oliver worked together on the flutter-mill. At last it was ready, and they set it into motion, up and over, and over again. Everyone watched, transfixed for a moment.

Arch said, "I've wondered 'bout this, ever since Emma told us...." He trailed off into silence.

Oliver laid a hand on his arm. Arch's eyes showed their pain for a moment, but then he turned to the flutter-mill and smiled.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

One day in May, two horses arrived at Baxters' Island. Two of the Forresters dismounted. "Howdy fellers," Penny said.

Buck and Mill-wheel returned his greeting, and went in to sit with him in the main room.

"We got a leetle proposition for you, Penny," Buck told him. "We figger on makin' a trip to Kentucky, horse-tradin'. We'll be leavin' in a few days, and we'll be back in late October. We think you should leave Jody and Oliver go with us."

Penny blinked at him in astonishment. "Why?"

Buck and Mill-wheel exchanged glances. Buck continued, "Penny, you told us once, you wish life could be easier for your boys than 'twas for you. Well, horse-tradin' is a lot simpler than farmin', and we make a heap more doin' it. Iffen Jody and Oliver was to learn the trade from us, they could git into it, too, iffen they wanted."

"And now's a good time," Mill-wheel added, "since you're still able to handle the place alone whilst they's gone."

Penny's eyebrows rose. "Well now that's a right generous offer. I'll have to ask 'em how they feel 'bout it. All six o' you-all goin'?"

"Sure. Ain't nobody wants to be left out."

"Iffen they go," Penny said carefully, "jest please be sure to bring Oliver back in one piece; you-all seem to wanta take him apart reg'lar."

They grinned. Mill-wheel said, "Well, as long as he don't have no more deep dark secrets we ain't found out 'bout yit, he'll be fine."

"I don't think so," Penny replied, "but then I didn't know 'bout the last one. And then Jody, now, he's still a mite young, and never made a trip that long afore."

"Don't worry, Penny." Buck smiled understandingly. "Don't fret 'bout neither one. We'll take good keer of 'em."

Chapter Forty

The campfire burned brightly in the night. The six Forresters and Oliver sat around it, talking quietly. Jody was already asleep. It was June.

"We should git there by early August," Buck was saying.

"That is, iffen there ain't no hold-ups 'long the way," Lem added.

Jody stirred and moaned and rolled over in his sleep, not for the first time.

They looked at him. "He's a restless leetle thing, ain't he?" Mill-wheel commented.

"Anyways," Buck went on, "we might as well deal with the Slaters agin; we allus have."

"The Slaters?" Oliver inquired.

"Yes," Arch answered. "They's a rough bunch, but we git a good deal from 'em."

Oliver had to smile. "Rough?"

"Yes, Oliver, even rougher'n us," Pack said with a grin, clearly following his line of thought.

Jody groaned and squirmed.

"What ails him?" Lem wondered.

"I'd say he's dreamin'," Buck assumed.

Jody whimpered.

"More likely hit's a nightmare," Mill-wheel suggested.

Jody writhed. "No," he whispered, "please."

"Uh oh," Oliver mumbled.

The Forresters glanced at Oliver, puzzled.

"Don't hit me," Jody muttered fretfully. "Please. Lem."

Lem looked at Oliver. "You knowed what he was dreamin' 'bout, afore he said that."

Oliver nodded.

"He's had these nightmares 'bout us afore?" Pack asked.

"Yes. Right often. Ever since...."

"Ever since we beat him to make him tell where you was," Arch finished for him.

Oliver nodded again. "Leave me wake him." He started to rise.

"No." Lem put up a hand. "I wanta hear."

"But he's tormented," Oliver protested.

"Well, how fast do you git to him at home when this happens?"

"Not 'til he starts screamin'," Oliver admitted.

"Then let it go."

"No," Jody murmured tearfully. "Don't hurt me. Pa.... Oliver.... He'p me. I'm scairt...."

"I cain't stand it," Oliver declared.

"Quiet," Lem ordered.

Just then, Oliver was spared making the awful decision of whether to defy Lem. Jody screamed piercingly, as only a child can do, and sat bolt upright. He saw the Forresters watching him, gasped in fear of them, and instantly lay back down in shock. Jody stared, wide-eyed, starting to realize now that it had been a dream, and momentarily stunned by their presence. He struggled to slow his panting.

"Do you know what you was dreamin'?" Buck asked.

"Yes," Jody answered guardedly. "Do *you* know what I was dreamin'?"

"Oh yeah," he replied softly.

"Oh." Jody lowered his eyes in shame. "You-all riled at me?"

"Course not," Buck reassured him. "You cain't he'p what you dream." He rose and went to kneel by Jody's side. He gathered the boy up into big strong arms. Jody fell into Buck's embrace and clung, as a drowning victim would to a log. Buck spoke comfortingly, "Go 'head and let it out, young un; don't hold back. You'll feel better iffen you cry it out. The whole trouble is, we shoulda talked this thing out serious, after it happened, 'stead o' jest jokin' 'round later."

Jody buried his face in Buck's chest and cried softly. Buck patted his back reassuringly.

Buck said quietly, "Ain't a day goes by, Jody, without I regret what we done to you that day."

Jody asked haltingly, "You know how much I wanted you to hold me like this then?"

Buck responded, "You know how much I wanted to?"

"I tried to hug you; you'd not let me."

"I know." Buck sighed in evident guilt. After a moment, he went on, "When you yelled my name, and then yelled for your pa, hit near-'bout broke my heart."

"The scariest part was when you-all said you might kill me."

Buck hugged Jody tighter.

Mill-wheel admitted, "We jest said that."

"We'da not done it," Arch agreed.

"And we was tryin' to be keerful, whether you knowed it or not," Pack added.

"I reckon," Jody said slowly. "Buck made Lem not hit me in a way woulda knocked me out. But you said that was jest 'cause then you'd not git your answer iffen I was knocked out."

"That was only part o' the reason," Buck reassured him. "I was also rememberin' your pa sayin' he and Mis' Hutto had been afeered you'd die after Lem had hit you that-a-way in the first fight."

"You keered 'bout me?"

"What do you think?" Buck smiled.

"I'm right sorry you been havin' these nightmares, Jody," Mill-wheel offered.

"Did you have bad dreams after the first fight, too?" Arch asked.

"Yes," Jody admitted. Fresh wet tears came to join the dried streaks. "Afore the first fight, I never thought you-all would really hurt us. And then when you...done it, to Oliver and Pa and me, hit was so scary. And I kept havin' nightmares a heap o' nights, after that."

"He wa'n't the only one," Oliver confessed.

The Forresters looked at Oliver, startled.

"Now that surprises me," Lem stated. "Not that you had nightmares, but that you'd admit it."

"Why not?" Oliver shrugged. "'Sides, I want Jody to see that he don't need to be 'shamed of his nightmares."

"Now, I admire you for that, Oliver," declared Mill-wheel.

Jody sniffled. "I 'ppreciate that, Oliver."

"I have 'em agin now, too."

Jody turned in Buck's arms to look at Oliver more directly. "I ain't heered you scream in the night."

Oliver smiled gently. "I may be a mite quieter 'bout it, Jody, but it happens." He considered his next statement for a moment, and then went ahead with it. "Although, one night, Ma heered me." He looked down into his lap.

The Forresters shifted uncomfortably, and then Lem decided to rescue the moment by making a joke of it. "One thing's sure. Iffen you two lived with us all the time, we'd have to stop beatin' on you. Iffen for no other reason 'cause we couldn't stand the noise."

The others chuckled a bit.

Buck said, "Well, Jody, I agree with Oliver in not wantin' you to be 'shamed o' this here, 'cause we're proud o' you. We was proud o' you that day last Christmas. For bein' a man and standin' up to us like you done. We figgered you'd back down right quick. We was impressed with you in the first fight, too."

"And much as I hate to admit it," Mill-wheel went on, "you impressed us, too, Oliver. Both times. 'Specially last Christmas. 'Cause when you found out we had beat Jody, you looked ready to take on all six of us."

"Really?" Jody was surprised. "But hit woulda been foolish."

Oliver grinned and shrugged.

"That's right," Mill-wheel declared, "foolish and reckless, jest like the first fight. But that's Oliver. Or, I dunno, mebbe we jest beat the brains outen him in the first fight, so's he was even more senseless in the second."

"The point is," Buck stressed, "ain't many folks has ever been brave with us. You two's amongst the very few. So we kin admire you for that. Even iffen 'tis foolish," he added with a gentle smile.

Chapter Forty-One

"Lord, this has been a hard day's ridin'," Buck declared. "I'm ready for a snort."

Mill-wheel passed him the jug. "I mean," he agreed.

The length of the trip was beginning to weigh heavily upon the travelers. It was only July; another month lay ahead before they would reach their destination. The entire herd of horses that they would be selling had been carefully tethered. It was time to unwind a bit.

The six Forresters passed around the jug. When Gabby handed it to Oliver, he didn't refuse.

"I ain't never done so much ridin'," Oliver complained.

Jody flopped down with a sigh.

Lem offered the whiskey to Jody.

"No," Jody refused automatically.

"Now why not?" Mill-wheel decided to challenge that ruling for the first time.

"You know. Pa says I ain't old 'nough."

"That was three years ago, he said that. 'Sides, you're old 'nough to be out here in the middle o' nowheres, makin' this trip with us. Learnin' to be a horse-trader, and learnin' to be a man. Now here." He took it from Lem and tried to hand it to the boy.

Jody shook his head. "Pa'd not like it."

"He ain't here," Buck pointed out meaningfully.

"Go 'head, Jody, try it," Oliver encouraged. "They's right; you got to grow up sometime."

"Hear that?" Arch grinned. "From your own brother."

Jody still hesitated.

"Do we got to pour it down you?" Pack took the jug and started toward Jody, grinning.

"All right, all right!" Jody hastened. He sipped at it, and made a face.

"You'll git used to it," Lem predicted.

As the evening wore on and the bottles went around again and again, Jody continued to judge cooperation safer than tempting them to playfully force him. And the drunker and rowdier they got, the more likely they would be to carry out their threat. As the Forresters and Oliver became louder and sillier, Jody became increasingly dizzy, light-headed, and confused. Even if their conversation still made any sense to them, which was doubtful, Jody was now finding it impossible to follow. Sometime after he had lost the thread of it entirely, Jody became aware that it was no longer the friendly banter that it had been; it had turned nasty. Jody struggled to concentrate. The argument appeared to be primarily between Arch and Pack, but with the others throwing in comments: Buck siding with Arch, and Mill-wheel and Lem agreeing with Pack. Jody remembered the family fights that he'd seen the Forresters indulge in before, and he began to look around for something large behind which to hide. Sure enough, within minutes the fight came to blows. Pack began by slugging Arch in the jaw. Lem and Mill-wheel moved in on Buck. Gabby stared at his brothers, as if trying to make up his mind which side to join. He swayed drunkenly for a moment, and then lurched toward Pack and Arch, immediately becoming more of a hindrance to both of them than a help to either one. Oliver stood and gaped at the Forresters in disbelief. He was none too steady either, but was still able to recognize a dangerous sight when he saw one. Not surprisingly, Buck was losing badly to Mill-wheel and Lem. Drunk as they all were, their timing was off and their blows were weakened, but it was still two against one. As Jody watched, Lem drew back his fist and knocked Buck into a tree.

"No," Jody mumbled thickly, "don't you hit Buck!" Jody struggled to his feet, and swayed, disoriented. He staggered forward into Lem, drew back his fist, and struck him in the stomach. Lem looked down at him in shock.

"Interferin' leetle...." Lem never finished his complaint, but punctuated it with his fist in Jody's eye.

Jody lay on the ground, trying to puzzle out why he was still conscious. Lem's blow should have knocked him out, as it had in the Volusia fight. His thinking was fuzzy and disjointed, but at last he had the reason. Drunken men couldn't hit nearly as hard.

In the meantime, Pack hit Arch in the nose, and as Arch staggered backward, he blundered heavily into Oliver. In annoyance, Oliver hit Arch, knocking him back toward Pack. This inspired Gabby, who at long last found a cause for which to fight. He tore into Oliver, as much as a drunk is capable of tearing into anyone, and the two of them began slugging it out in earnest.

Eventually, the fighters began to pass out, one by one, more from the alcohol than from the punches. Fortunately, they were never too battered when they fought drunk. They collapsed, scattered randomly around the campsite.

The next morning, it was difficult to tell which individuals had awakened earliest, but the groans of the first of them had roused the last.

"Oh no," Buck muttered. "I don't know which hurts worse, the bruises or the hangover."

"I know," Mill-wheel answered from a few feet away from him. "The hangover."

"Oh no," Jody murmured. "I'll never drink that stuff agin. I don't keer what they say. Oh my head."

"Oh no," Oliver mumbled. "I done fought the Forresters agin. Am I in trouble agin? Should I start runnin'? I don't know as I kin anyways."

"Hell no, Oliver," Lem remarked. "I don't even remember whose side you was on; prob'bly nobody knows, not that it matters. And I don't think none of us feel like chasin' you anyhow."

"Good," Oliver said wearily. "But still, I can't believe we done this."

"I kin," Pack replied. "We do it all the time."

"Not with me you don't," Oliver protested.

"Oh I don't know." Arch laughed, and then remembered that laughing was a bad idea in this condition.

The travelers got off to a late start that day.

Chapter Forty-Two

Jody did not like the Slaters. He couldn't have explained the source of his instinctive dislike, but there was no doubt in his mind. They were not quite as large as the Forresters, but there were more of them, seven in all. The leader, Gus Slater, sported a dark little moustache and spoke with a sneer. His face was pock-marked, and his arms were scarred. Jody decided that Gus Slater made Lem Forrester look like an angel by comparison.

To make matters worse, negotiations were going badly. Apparently, the Slaters were no longer satisfied with the price that had been established years earlier and honored ever since. They wanted to pay less per horse, and were trying to claim that these horses weren't of the same quality that the Forresters had brought them in the past. The Forresters were refusing to budge on the price.

Within minutes, the two parties had reached a stalemate and the shouts were becoming threats. The threats became reality as Lem struck Gus in the jaw. The other five Forresters immediately descended on five of the remaining Slaters. Without a moment's hesitation, Oliver went after the other Slater. At first, Jody stood motionless and horrified, watching the fray. But then, Gabby fell near him, knocked out cold. With a yell, Jody charged the Slater who had struck Gabby. He began pounding the man furiously in the stomach and chest with his fists. Jody felt his arms seized roughly, and looked up into the man's face. The man laughed evilly, announcing, "I'll take care of this little pipsqueak!" He struck Jody squarely in the nose. After the initial stabbing pain, Jody felt nothing.

Oliver saw Jody fall and lie still. He panicked and yelled, "Jody!" Up to this point, Oliver had been winning his battle. But while he was distracted, his opponent dealt him a severe blow, and Oliver went down hard. Meanwhile, beside him, Lem had just finished with Gus Slater. Seeing Oliver fall, Lem turned on his attacker. When Buck and Mill-wheel heard Oliver's outcry, they turned toward Jody and saw the child lying helpless and unconscious. Their eyes lit dangerously. They attacked their enemies with renewed vigor and disposed of them quickly. Then they both advanced toward Jody's attacker from opposite sides, with a ferocity that made the man regret hurting the boy. He looked from one to the other, panic growing in his face. He began to back away, and they were on him. They pummelled him mercilessly, hitting so hard and so rapidly that they weren't permitting him to fall. But when his head drooped and his knees buckled, they finally let him drop.

When Jody opened his eyes, he stared up into Buck's worried face. His head was cradled in Buck's lap, and Mill-wheel and Oliver were watching anxiously from either side of the two.

Jody moaned.

"You all right?" Buck asked, strain showing in his face.

"Mmm...."

"Jody, say somethin'." Jody felt Oliver take his hand in his.

"How long?" Jody managed to ask.

"Only six hours." Buck smiled tenderly. "You're gittin' better."

"And fightin' better, too," Mill-wheel said. "You used your fists real good."

"And at least your nose ain't broke," Oliver reassured him.

Jody smiled feebly and asked, "You-all okay?"

"Oh sure." Buck grinned. "We're fine."

"But Gabby.... I saw...."

"I'm fine, boy," came the reply from directly behind Mill-wheel.

"What 'bout the Slaters?"

"Oh, they learnt to see things our way." Lem grinned smugly. "We got our usual price, and I don't reckon they'll be tryin' to change it agin soon."

"Then, we won?"

"Sure." Mill-wheel grinned. "Don't we always?"

"I'll swear," Oliver went on, "this was the first time I've ever been grateful you-all's so strong."

Buck smiled. "Nice to be on the same side once, wa'n't it, Oliver?"

"And Jody, you shoulda seed Buck and Mill-wheel go to your rescue. When you got hit, they destroyed the ones they was fightin', and tore into the one hit you, and near-'bout kilt him. I ain't never seed 'em so riled, even at me."

"Thank you," Jody said, "but I don't git it; you-all has hit me afore, yourselves."

"Well," Buck said gruffly. "Ain't nobody allowed to hit you but us."

Jody smiled at him.

Mill-wheel joked, "But now this time when you go home beat up, you kin tell your pa hit wa'n't us that done it."

Jody giggled. "He'll be glad o' that."

Buck said, "Now I hope you'll not have nightmares from this."

"Prob'bly not," Jody replied. "This is diff'rent. The Slaters ain't nobody I keer 'bout."

Chapter Forty-Three

The Tennessee River was wide and rapid. It had been made even more violent by the September storm that had swollen its banks. Jody wasn't sure that anyone had seen him fall in, and he was fighting for his life. He was losing, he realized. The current was too swift. Jody began to feel his muscles weakening, his resistance failing, his consciousness slipping. But then he felt strong arms enveloping him, holding his head up, pulling him through the water. Jody felt himself being dragged onto dry land. He was close to passing out from the physical and emotional strain. But he struggled against the onrushing darkness because he longed to see the face of his rescuer. Jody twisted his head around, and just before he fainted, he saw that it was Lem.

Oliver and Lem clasped hands in a firm, heartfelt handshake. Oliver clapped Lem on the shoulder; there were tears in his eyes.

"You saved my leetle brother; ain't no way I kin ever repay that."

"Well, Oliver, we keer for him, too." Lem seemed embarrassed to admit it.

"I know," Oliver said. "But now that's two I owe you."

"Two? What else?"

"In the fight agin the Slaters, I seed how you clobbered the one that hit me. And I ain't forgot."

"Lem," Jody murmured.

They turned, startled and thrilled that he was awake. Lem and Oliver rushed to Jody and knelt on either side of him.

"You all right?" Lem asked.

"Yes. Thank you." Jody reached and took Lem's hand. Lem didn't pull it away from him.

"I knowed it." Jody smiled. "You are my friend."

"Yeah. I reckon I am."

Chapter Forty-Four

"Did you see her?" Buck asked Jody when the latter walked into the Baxter cabin.

"Yeah. I seed her."

"You don't sound too happy 'bout it," Mill-wheel commented.

Throughout October, Jody had been annoying all of them with talk of how anxious he was to get home and see Eulalie. He had been so anxious, and so annoying, in fact, that the Forresters and Oliver had insisted that Jody rush to Volusia immediately, upon their arrival home. He had returned all too soon, to find them chatting with Penny about the trip.

"Why, boy, what ails you?" his father asked.

"Whilst I been gone, she's been messin' up agin with that boy runs the ferry."

"Uh oh," Buck said, resisting a grin.

"Well, boy," Lem asked, "did you fight him agin?"

"Hit don't look like he did." Mill-wheel grinned.

Jody shook his head. "Eulalie and me had a turrible quarrel, though."

"Well, you *gonna* fight him agin?" Lem seemed to be urging him.

"I reckon not."

"Thank the lord," Penny said.

"Well why not?" Buck wondered.

"Eulalie asked me not to; she said hit upset her last time."

"Well she don't seem to keer much 'bout upsettin' you," Mill-wheel said pointedly.

"I know," Jody answered quietly. Then he exploded. "But I don't know iffen I keer no more, neither! 'Tain't fair!" With that, Jody ran into his room and slammed the door.

"Oh my," Penny said.

"Leave me go to him," Oliver offered. He entered Jody's room, and shut the door a great deal more quietly.

Jody was sprawled face down on the bed. Oliver sat down next to him and rubbed his back.

"Leave me tell you somethin', Jody," Oliver said softly. "This here is jest like what I goed through with Twink. You bein' away six months was like me bein' a sailor. The poor gal cain't jest set and wait all that time. So I never knowed what I was gonna come home and find, neither. I think you kin see now why I got so riled and desperate 'nough to fight Lem. Hit's turrible frustratin'. But you also know I won her in the end."

Jody rolled over and faced Oliver then, hope filling his face.

Oliver went on, "You done the right thing by not upsettin' her with another fight. The Forresters upset Twink awful by beatin' me so bad, and Lem lost her. After that first fight with them, I stayed outen their way, but I kept after her, and I won her. I think you'll win, too."

Chapter Forty-Five

The Christmas doin's at the church in Volusia were in full swing by the time that the Baxters, the Forresters, and the Huttos arrived. All of the townspeople stopped whatever they were involved in to turn and stare, more or less openly, as the three families entered together.

Within a short time, the newcomers were made to feel quite welcome, and very much a part of the frolic.

At one point in the evening, Buck approached Mrs. Hutto. "Would you keer to dance with me, Mis' Hutto? I promise I'll not hold you prisoner this time. Iffen you dance with me tonight, hit'll be 'cause you choose to." He waited, studying her.

Her eyes had widened at the initial invitation, but then she smiled ruefully in remembrance of the night to which he referred. "Well now, I'd jest be honored. Buck." She tried out his name for the very first time.

Her son and the Baxters were a bit surprised at the odd dance floor pairing, but his brothers understood.

Oliver watched thoughtfully for a moment, and then approached Mrs. Forrester. "Ma'am, would you keer to dance?"

Her eyes traveled from Buck and Mrs. Hutto, to Mr. Forrester asleep in a chair, and back to Oliver. She grinned at him. "Yes, I would."

Buck and his brothers looked over at the new dance floor couple, and grinned.

At the conclusion of the dance, Mrs. Hutto curtsied, so Buck even bowed, causing a titter of humor through the crowd. Not to be outdone, Oliver kissed Mrs. Forrester's hand.

Trying not to grin too broadly, the two women came together briefly to smile about their sons.

"Now that was right fun," Mrs. Forrester said.

"Yes, 'twas." Mrs. Hutto happened to notice that not far away, Mill-wheel was trying to hand a liquor jug to Jody. As she watched, Jody made a face, backed off, and looked around quickly at his father, on the other side of the dance floor, to see if he'd noticed. Mrs. Hutto followed his gaze, and saw that Penny was looking in another direction. "Now what was that all 'bout?" she asked the other woman.

Mrs. Forrester tried not to smirk. "On that trip to Kentucky, my boys got Jody drunk."

Mrs. Hutto's mouth flew open. "You don't mean. Jody??" Then she grinned wryly. "You sure my Oliver ain' t had nothin' to do with that?"

"Well, I hear he encouraged Jody. But 'twas my boys, started it. And 'twas my boys, teased they'd pour it down him iffen he didn't give in."

"Oh poor Jody." But she laughed.

Chapter Forty-Six

With February, came a restlessness in Jody's heart, a determination to resolve and settle everything with his girl.

When he arrived in Volusia, he was filled with apprehension. He remembered their fond kiss in the barn over a year before; it hardly seemed possible that she could be the same girl who had betrayed him while he was in Kentucky.

When he found her, they stood before each other uneasily for a moment. All of his fears melted away as she burst into tears and fell into his arms.

"Oh Jody, I'm so sorry. I was jest lonely. Forgive me."

Upon his return to the little cabin on Baxters' Island, Jody raced straight for Oliver's room. He had something thrilling to share with his brother.

When Jody told Oliver what Eulalie had said to him, Oliver smiled.

"That's jest 'bout what Twink said to me 'bout her messin' with Lem. Now I know you'll win her."

Chapter Forty-Seven

The three-family hunt was held in April. Jody looked forward to the fun around the campfire in the evening, every bit as much as the hunt itself. He was not disappointed.

"Well, Oliver," Penny asked. "Did you need to look for a church or a cemetery on that trip to Kentucky?"

"Not really. Now they only beat me when they's drunk. And then they cain't hit too hard, praise be."

Buck commented, "But poor leetle Jody prob'bly felt ready for the cemetery."

Penny misunderstood. "You mean you-all beat Jody, too?"

"No," Oliver clarified. "They beat each other. Jody and me jest got in the way."

"Oh. One o' them family fights. So then why'd Jody feel ready for the cemetery? Somebody hit him too hard agin?"

"No, not from the hittin'," Mill-wheel replied. "From somethin' else we done to him."

"Now what?"

Lem chuckled. "We got the young un drunk."

"It ain't my fault, Pa," Jody wailed.

"No, 'tain't," Arch agreed. "We threatened to pour it down him iffен he didn't go 'long."

"So you kin blame us, Penny," Pack offered.

"Well, I reckon iffен I'd thought it through, I'da figgered you-all'd do that sooner or later, and 'specially since you had him out there alone all that time. And he is a mite older now. So, Jody, you felt ready for the cemetery?"

Jody nodded. "I hated it, Pa. I ain't never gonna do it agin."

"That sounds like a challenge," Lem declared.

"Let's do it to him now." Arch pulled out a bottle.

Jody recoiled.

Penny said, "Uh, I ain't too riled, now. But let's not push this too fur."

Pack reassured him, "We're jest teasin' the young un, Penny."

"All right. Jest so I know. Now we'll not tell his ma 'bout this here."

"Lord no," Buck agreed emphatically. "The woman'd lock Jody in the house and never leave us near him agin."

"Jest so Grandma don't leave it slip," Jody said a trifle worriedly.

"We'll not tell her, neither," Penny decided.

"She knows a'ready! She was teasin' me 'bout it a few weeks ago."

"Oliver!" Lem accused.

"I ain't told her," Oliver protested.

"No," Jody agreed. "Your ma told her."

"Oops." Mill-wheel looked sheepish.

"Which means you-all bragged to your ma 'bout doin' that to me." Jody sounded only slightly resentful.

Buck looked contrite, and echoed Mill-wheel's "Oops."

"Yes, I'd say so," Penny agreed. "Let's jest hope it don't go no further, or there'll be no peace in our house never agin. But now, Oliver, what I wanta know is, where was you whilst the Forresters was doin' this to my boy? Why wa'n't you protectin' him?"

Oliver turned red. "Oh my."

All of the Forresters looked at Oliver expectantly.

"Yes?" Penny prompted.

"I confess," Oliver blurted. "I was on their side. I encouraged him."

Penny looked at Oliver silently for a long time, watching him squirm. At length, Penny said slowly, "Oliver, I never thought I'd say this. You been hangin' 'round the Forresters too long."

Everyone laughed heartily.

Buck remarked, "The liquor done Jody some good, Penny; hit made him fearless, the way wild-cat liver makes you. He wa'n't scairt to git in our fight."

"Hit had an int'restin' effect on Oliver, too," Mill-wheel commented. "I recollect seein' him go down, more 'cause o' bein' drunk, than 'cause o' the hittin'. Not too used to it, are you, Oliver?"

Gabby joked, "Naw, 'tain't that. Oliver's jest so used to us hittin' him and knockin' him down, that now he don't even wait to see iffen he'll git hit. He jest falls by hisself."

Penny said, "Jest so nobody ain't gonna tell me that Jody and Oliver was rompin' on each other."

"Oh no," Buck assured him. "They ain't done that."

"That's good. Or else I'd sure say Jody and Oliver both been hangin' 'round with you Forresters too long."

"Now that Jody and Oliver's been doin' more fightin' lately," suggested Arch, "agin us and agin the Slaters, mebbe Pack and Gabby and me kin persuade the rest o' you-all to act out that first fight agin."

"Good idea," Pack agreed enthusiastically. "'Twas bad 'nough that we didn't git to be in it, we didn't even git to see it."

Penny said, "Mebbe them two will, since they's sich fighters now. But leave me outen it; I'm gittin' a mite too old for this here stuff."

Jody and Oliver stared.

"Penny's gettin' even!" Gabby was tickled. "You two has handed him a heap o' surprises tonight, and he's gittin even."

"Let's not disappoint him," Lem said, rising. "Jody? Oliver? Up."

"Oliver," Jody said shakily.

"You wanta run for it?" Oliver watched as Buck and Mill-wheel rose, grinning.

"We'd never make it."

"Why, Lem, I believe they's afeered of us," Mill-wheel said in mock astonishment. "We'll have to make 'em fearless. Arch, hand me that there bottle."

"I'll git the wild-cat liver," Buck offered.

"Now Jody," Oliver reminded him. "Jest remember, stay down."

Jody nodded. "Don't worry."

With a laugh, Mill-wheel went after Jody and Buck turned on Oliver. Mill-wheel lifted Jody easily to his feet, and Buck raised Oliver almost as easily, Oliver was disconcerted to note. As Lem, Buck, and Mill-wheel surrounded and crowded Oliver and Jody, Oliver said to Jody nervously, "Now I know what we done forgot to bring from home."

"What?"

"Our three mothers."

Buck, Mill-wheel, and Lem broke up so badly that they could no longer keep up the pretense. Arch, Pack, and Gabby were laughing out loud. Even Penny couldn't keep a straight face.

Jody chuckled softly to himself, long into the night. No matter who got teased, nor by whom, the good-natured fun on these trips was always one of his greatest pleasures.

Chapter Forty-Eight

One day in May, at Baxters' Island, there came a knock at the door. Oliver opened it to find his cousin standing there.

"Emma," he cried, and moved to embrace her.

She hugged him urgently. "Oh, Oliver, I'm so glad you're all right."

He ushered her inside of the cabin. Jody came out of his room and greeted her enthusiastically as well. The three sat in the main room.

Emma told Oliver, "I'm so sorry for the trouble I caused you, with the Forresters. And for the trouble betwixt you and me." She lowered her eyes.

Oliver squeezed her shoulder and smiled.

"I was so happy when Aunt Olivia answered my letter and assured me you was all right, that they ain't kilt you that day."

Oliver nodded, grinning. "I was right pleased at that, myself."

"But I was overwhelmed when you wrote to me, and told me that you and Jody goed off with 'em, horse-tradin', and that everythin' was fine."

Oliver nodded. "They really have gone out o' their way to make it up to us since, not only takin' us with 'em to Kentucky, but many other things, too. They comforted Jody real kind after he had a nightmare 'bout 'em; I didn't know Buck had it in him to be so sweet to the boy. They really felt guilty 'bout beatin' him that day; that was clear."

Jody commented, "I realize now that that's why they come over the very next month to learn me to fight; they was tryin' to be playful and friendly, even though they wa'n't yit ready to talk 'bout what they done to me. And did Oliver tell you? Lem saved my life on the trip."

"Yes, you a'most drowned, right?"

"A'most."

Oliver added, "And in the fight with the Slaters, Lem hit the feller that had hit me. Seein' that felt good, I kin tell you."

She smiled at him. "Then tell me, now, iffen Arch and me was to be together agin, how you'd feel 'bout it? Tell me honest; don't hold back. Iffen 'twould bother you, I'll go right back to Boston, and you'll not hear no more 'bout it. I ain't gonna make no more trouble for you."

Oliver studied her. At length, he asked softly, "You still love him?"

Emma's eyes welled with tears. "Yes. I don't think I'll never love nobody else like that."

"Don't cry." He hugged her. "I jest wanted to be sure. I'd be proud to see you marry Arch."

"But," Jody reminded them reluctantly, "now comes the hard part. Findin' out how Arch feels."

Emma looked up at Oliver apprehensively.

"I'll find out," Oliver promised her. "You stay here. I'll go over and see 'em."

When Oliver rode into Forresters' Island, Lem heard him and came to the door.

"Howdy, Lem." Oliver smiled.

Lem returned his smile. "Howdy, Oliver."

"Kin I talk to you-all? Hit's right important."

Lem ushered Oliver inside the cabin. He sat with the men in the big room.

"This is a mite awkward. Arch, please forgive me for talkin' 'bout this subject, but I got a good reason, okay?"

Arch was bewildered and blank-faced. "Okay."

"Do you still love my cousin?"

Arch's eyebrows rose. "I s'pose I do, but hit don't matter now."

Oliver leaned forward anxiously. "Do you want her back?"

Arch mirrored his posture. "You've heered from her?"

"Yes."

Arch straightened and stared at Oliver.

"Jest promise me," Oliver pleaded, "that none o' you-all'll punish her for her part in what happened the day she left. I know you-all was turrible riled at her."

"Oliver." Arch waved it away as unimportant. "Hit's forgot, I promise."

Oliver nodded. "She still loves you, too. She wants you back, too."

Arch's eyes lit, but then he cautioned Oliver. "I aim to marry her, Oliver. I woulda done so then."

Oliver extended his hand to Arch. "I'll be honored to have you for a cousin."

"Likewise. Now, Oliver, you and me got to go to Boston together to fetch Emma, so she'll see we stand together on this. And 'cause I don't want she should come all the way back down here alone."

Oliver's eyes twinkled. "That's my other surprise. She's a'ready here. At our place."

Arch stared. He said simply, "Let's go."

When Arch and Oliver arrived at Baxters' Island, Arch stepped through the door and looked around tentatively. Emma rose from where she was seated, her tears filling her eyes. He reached out his arms to her. With a little cry, Emma raced into his embrace.

Arch held her for long moments, and then spoke softly, "Will you marry me?"

"Yes," she whispered. "Oh yes."

Chapter Forty-Nine

The wedding was held in June, in Volusia. All of Volusia attended; no one in town wanted to miss the sight of a Hutto marrying a Forrester.

Oliver was nervous but proud that he had been asked to give away the bride. Pack was smiling tensely in his role as best man. Buck, Mill-wheel, Lem, and Gabby were ushers. As such, they drew more stares from the prim and proper townsfolk whom they escorted to their seats, than the bride would later receive, walking down the aisle.

Behind the scenes, Emma gingerly approached Mrs. Forrester.

"I...I'm so sorry for the way I talked to you when I left, that awful day."

"Don't be. You was right. 'Twas my fault."

"You forgive me then?"

"There's nothin' to forgive. And I'm right glad you come back, and that you and Arch'll jest stay at our place in his room. I wouldn't want he should move out. And hit'll be so fine havin' another woman livin' there for a change. I'll be jest a leetle less outnumbered, for once."

Emma hugged the older woman fondly.

After the wedding, the families clustered outside the church. Everyone hugged the bride, and then she went home with her new family.

Chapter Fifty

There was rejoicing at Forresters' Island in April. Emma and Arch had a baby boy. The black-haired infant made a startling appearance in the arms of the blonde.

"Typical Forrester," she teased her husband.

"We kin hope so," he quipped in return.

"Arch," Emma said earnestly, "I wanta name him after you."

"Now that's right sweet," Arch said. "But two fellers in the same house with the same name is a mite confusin'."

"Then, how 'bout a name is similar?"

"Sich as?"

She thought, and then said, "How 'bout Art?"

"I'd be right pleased," he said.

Chapter Fifty-One

April of the following year saw the arrival of Emma's and Arch's second son.

"This here is a real good thing," Arch assured Emma. "Now Art'll have him a brother to fight with."

"Oh good," she answered sarcastically. "I kin think o' lots o' reasons why I'm happy with this baby, but that ain't one of 'em."

"What're we gonna call him?"

"You say. I said last time."

"All right, I'd like to name him for one o' my brothers. Similar, but not exact, like we done with Art."

"Okay. What?"

"How 'bout Pete, for Pack?"

"That sounds mighty fine."

As the years went by, one by one, Emma and Arch added to their family each spring, always naming the sons after Arch's brothers, who didn't marry and therefore had no children of their own. They added Bart, Marty, Les, and Garth. Regrettably, Mr. and Mrs. Forrester didn't live to see all of the babies. But Emma and Arch had plenty of help in raising them from five doting and surprisingly affectionate uncles, not to mention "Uncle" Oliver and "Uncle" Jody, who never seemed to get enough of the boys. Needless to say, an addition had to be built onto the house, but there was no lack of able-bodied men to do so.

Emma found that she had only one real frustration. "Don't you know how to make gals?" she said to Arch.

He grinned in response. "Family tradition."

Chapter Fifty-Two

At the Forresters' next invitation for a hunt, Jody was the only one from his household who could make it. Penny was far too stiff and sore with an attack of rheumatism, and Oliver just didn't feel that he could neglect the plowing. Jody wasn't truly interested in going once he heard the refusals of his other family members, but both of them, and the Forresters, encouraged him.

Jody tried to cooperate, tried not to appear too reluctant, and attempted to get into the spirit of the hunt as best he could. Although he acutely felt the absence of Penny in particular, and knew how much his father would've enjoyed being there.

All went relatively smoothly, until, with an alarming sense of *deja-vu*, Jody saw Lem go back to his old habit of tormenting an animal, an event that had sparked fury between Penny and Lem on one long-gone occasion. This time, Lem had taken to beating one of the dogs, because it had displeased him. Like Penny, Jody felt compelled to step in and object on the creature's behalf.

"Lem, stop it. That's cruel."

Lem turned on him. "Jest like your pa. Interferin' busybody. Then I'll treat you like Penny." He showed him his fist, and advanced on him.

Jody meant to stand his ground, but when he saw the brutal fist come up, he lost his nerve and backed off hastily.

Lem grinned slyly. "Mebbe you *ain't* like your pa." He still advanced experimentally on Jody, to see how far he could push him.

Jody backed the rest of the way to where Buck stood. "Don't let him," Jody whispered to Buck.

Buck and Mill-wheel both defended Jody, as well as the wayward dog, but then they regarded Jody severely and quietly told him, "We wanta talk to you later."

The next day, the two dropped by Baxters' Island. Jody timidly and obediently followed them out to sit beneath a tree.

"You made a serious mistake yestiddy," Buck told him. "Jody, you can't continue to challenge Lem, and then back down that-a-way. You got to stand up to him."

"But he'll kill me!"

"Then don't interfere with him," Mill-wheel said flatly.

"Either foller through with what you've started, like your pa do, or leave Lem be. 'Cause the way you're settin' it up, he'll walk all over you, all your life," Buck said bluntly.

Jody's eyes widened at the harshness. "Do you-all realize that I'm near-'bout the same age now, that Oliver was when you-all beat him so bad?"

"You've thought o' that a'ready, have you?" Buck clearly acknowledged his own prior awareness of the fact as well.

Jody nodded.

"Seems like you think too much on that," he observed.

"I can't he'p it."

"Well, you gotta stop thinkin' of us that-a-way. Stop lettin' Lem know you're terrified. He knows what you're fearin'. He'll take advantage o' you. He'll skeer you o' purpose to git his own way," Buck told him firmly.

"I see your point, but the damage is done."

"Mebbe not. Mill-wheel and me got a plan. A plan to save your pride, and keep Lem from makin' your life a livin' hell. A plan that won't put you in no real danger, neither."

Jody squirmed. "I ain't gonna like this."

"No, you ain't," Buck confirmed. "But you'll do it."

"What do I gotta do?" he asked softly.

"We'll set up another hunt, right soon. On it, we'll fake a quarrel betwixt you, Jody, and the two of us. With Lem watchin', you'll stand up to us. We'll hit you right easy, and you'll not back down. He'll be impressed. But your quarrel won't be with Lem, so there'll not be no risk of him hittin' you, full force or otherwise."

Jody said miserably, "He'll know you're holdin' back."

"That's all right," Buck reassured him. "Hit's natural that we would, long as we ain't in a murderous rage. But we'll still have hit you. And you'll not have backed down, nor cried," he added pointedly.

Jody objected, "What iffen Arch and Pack and Gabby git in it and hurt me? I know you-all love to gang up on outsiders," he finished bitterly.

"We'll let them three know what's goin' on. They'll say the right things, but they'll not git in it."

Mill-wheel agreed enthusiastically, "Their presence'll make it even more convincin'. Lem'll expect you to be afeered o' them, too. But you'll not be."

"Yes, sir."

They discussed with him the details, and planned the hunt for the next week.

One week later, Jody set out with the six of them. The frantic beating of his heart, pumping loudly in time with the adrenalin-rush of his panic, rendered him almost dizzy. He knew that Buck and Mill-wheel wouldn't hurt him, but he was still scared almost witless.

Buck delivered his opening pre-planned line. "I think we should wipe out the whole blasted herd."

Jody obediently replied, "Oh now, Buck, we don't need all that meat."

Mill-wheel said, "So what? Hit's good sport."

Jody turned on them, trying to keep his teeth from chattering. "Hit's wrong to kill more'n we need. And there's nothin' sportin' 'bout a massacre."

Buck took a step toward him. "Fine, then we'll leave you outen it. You kin wait right here."

"No. I ain't gonna stand by whilst you kill them."

Mill-wheel advanced from the other side. "Now jest how do you aim to stop us?"

"Any way I have to."

"Fine." Buck nodded. "We'll handle you proper." He made a fist.

Jody raised one of his own.

Mill-wheel grinned. "Ready to take us on now, are you?" He zestfully exhibited his own fist.

Jody averted his eyes. "W...whenever you're ready," he said, and held very still.

Buck planted his fist in Jody's stomach, while Mill-wheel bumped his into the small of Jody's back. Jody managed to get by with a single grunt, instead of an outcry, and as he dropped to his knees, he rapidly blinked back the inevitable tears that welled in his eyes. From the ground, he raised his head to look, as defiantly as possible, at each man in turn.

A short time later, Gabby thoughtfully contrived to involve Lem with him to ride ahead, leaving his other four brothers alone to talk to Jody.

Mill-wheel put his arm around Jody's shoulders. "We're right proud o' you."

Jody tried to smile, but then admitted, "I couldn't look you in the eye, neither o' you. I a'most lost my nerve when I tried, knowin' you were gonna hit me."

"I know. But that don't matter."

Buck smiled down at Jody. "You done right good, actin' brave."

"I was fakin'."

"I know. But Lem thinks 'twas real, and that's all that matters."

Chapter Fifty-Three

Jody kept remembering, over and over, how Buck had said to him after Fodder-wing's death that there hadn't even been time to fetch old Doc Wilson. So it was with Ory Baxter. Her heart attack was swift and fatal, with Penny, Jody, Olivia, and Oliver barely able to make it even to her bedside, let alone ride for help. She had had a hard life, everyone realized, and it had taken its toll at last. But knowing that didn't make it any less devastating for the family.

It was the January after the birth of Garth Forrester. Ezra Baxter, often called Penny, spent most of the subsequent spring and summer withdrawn and forlorn, despite the best efforts of his family around him.

Chapter Fifty-Four

At the doin's in Volusia the following Christmas, Jody held Eulalie Boyles in his arms as he sailed around the dance floor. Oliver recognized the sparkle in Jody's eyes as he watched. He knew that he'd shown the same sparkle as he'd danced with Twink, so long ago. Although his time with her had been brief, it had been intense, and Oliver was gratified that at last his little brother would know such feelings.

Penny Baxter had been more his normal cheerful self throughout the fall, but he still exuded a basic loneliness that nothing seemed able to ease. Oliver's eyes traveled from him to his mother, Olivia. She had just completed her traditional annual dance with Buck Forrester, and the two had parted, chuckling. Oliver smiled fondly and shook his head.

"Penny," Oliver said. "Why don't you ask Ma to dance?"

Penny looked uneasy. "I...I'd like to, Oliver. I was afeered you'd resent it. Or Jody would."

Oliver put a hand on Penny's shoulder. "I'd be pleased. And I'm sure Jody would, too. That is, iffen Jody even looks up from Eulalie and notices."

"Iffen you're sure. I reckon I will."

Oliver nodded back reassuringly. He watched as his mother agreed to Penny's request. Watching them dance together, he didn't hear the Forresters' approach, until they were all around him.

"Now that's right nice, Oliver," Buck told him. "That's jest what Penny needs. I've allus thought there's been feelin's betwixt him and your ma."

"Penny needed to be nudged," Oliver explained. "He was afeered o' my reaction, and Jody's. He ain't wanted us to resent it."

"Frankly, Oliver," Lem began hesitantly, "I've allus wondered why your ma and Penny wa'n't together in the first place. They've allus had feelin's like Buck said, ain't they? Course, iffen you don't wanta answer that, you don't have to."

"I don't mind. Hit's true 'nough."

Mill-wheel urged, "So why didn't they marry, long ago?"

"Her pa didn't approve o' her acceptin' a suitor that much younger'n her. So Ma married Pa, with Grandpa's approval. Then Pa died young when I was jest a baby. But by that time, Penny'd a'ready long since married Ory. He knowed he still loved Ma; Ma knowed it, too. But they behaved honorable; there wa'n't nothin' improper."

Lem nodded slowly. "But there ain't no reason why they shouldn't git together now."

"I know. That's why I encouraged him."

Meanwhile, the young man whose job it was to ferry passengers across the St. John's River, between the scrub side and Volusia, entered. He glared venomously at Jody and Eulalie where they danced together. Jody was so wrapped up in Eulalie, that he was at first oblivious to the other fellow's presence.

Jody glanced and saw him. He stopped dancing and stood glaring back at the newcomer.

Eulalie instantly caught Jody's sleeve and tugged at it. "Don't," she pleaded fearfully.

"Well, Baxter?" demanded the intruder.

Before Jody could reply, Eulalie spun toward the ferry boy with hostility in her eyes. "I done told you, I made my choice. I want you to leave me be. Now go 'way."

Disgraced, the interloper backed off sullenly. After a moment, Jody and Eulalie recommenced dancing.

About a half-hour later, visibly gathering his courage, Penny approached his son with very special news.

Jody smiled and suggested, "Pa, I'd be right honored, iffen we'd have a double weddin'."

Chapter Fifty-Five

They lost Penny two years after that wedding.

Jody, a married, responsible adult, was reduced to a child again, as he fled the house screaming.

Oliver was beginning to think that Jody's hysteria might never abate. But at last it gave way to exhaustion. Oliver realized that the best way that he might help Jody was to keep him exhausted. He kept him busy, working on a task that Jody could accept as worthwhile, and appropriate.

“Listen to me,” he whispered insistently. “Your pa allus talked ‘bout how we should one day dig a well. Near the house, so no woman’d never agin have to tote water from the sinkhole. Let’s do it. Let’s do it right now. Hit’ll he’p Ma and Eulalie.”

Jody nodded his tear-stained face. “Hit’s what Pa wanted. Let’s do it.”

Chapter Fifty-Six

The next spring, Baxters' Island saw the arrival of a child. But there wasn't the level of rejoicing that their neighbors the Forresters had known with their six boys.

Jody turned to Oliver in misery. "Why, Oliver? Why'd Eulalie have to die?" He knew that old Doc Wilson had done his best to save her, but that it just hadn't been possible. Jody had actually felt sorry for Doc, who had left the house sorely depressed at his failure.

"I don't know, Jody." Oliver put a sympathetic arm around his shoulders.

"You know, Oliver, I jest don't git it. All them babies died on Ma, afore she had me. The babies died and she lived. But with me, my wife died and the baby lived."

"That's right, Jody. And that's what you got to hang on to. Your baby's alive. Leetle Julie is alive. And we'll raise her together, you and me."

Jody nodded.

They both knew that they would be grateful for noise in the house again. The cabin had grown entirely too quiet with the loss of the last of their three parents.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

It was a glum Jody that sat staring at the cabin walls.

"Are you sure you'll not go with us, Jody?" Oliver encouraged. "I really think hit'd do you good." Oliver and Emma had promised to take one-year-old Julie and Emma's six sons to the circus. While not an ideal outing for a moody irritable man, it could at least get Jody out of the house. Oliver supposed that having lost his father, his stepmother with whom he'd always been close, and his wife, all within the space of a year, had just been too much for the young man. Oliver himself was having difficulty enough with the losses, especially in regard to his own mother.

"I know, I know, you're tryin' to git me out o' the house."

"Well, hit's jest, I think hit's a good idea," Oliver said lamely.

"All right. How 'bout iffen I ride along to the Forresters' and visit with them a spell. But I don't think I kin deal with no circus."

"Sure, great," Oliver said. "Hit might do you a world o' good."

Jody wasn't so sure, but he let the matter ride. However, he hadn't been at the Forresters' all that long before it became evident that he wasn't the only one who was out of sorts and restless. Lem had never had much difficulty working himself into a bad mood, and he'd been particularly successful at it today. Six rough-housing little boys, especially excitable over the impending circus, had been enough to make all six of the grown men short-tempered. But five of the adults were of an even-enough disposition to resist letting it render them gloomy. The sixth was not.

It was like old times. An otherwise reasonably pleasant visit with them was being spoiled by Lem's verbal meanness, and by Jody's own over-eager willingness to back down to him. Jody glanced up again at Lem in annoyance, and read the self-satisfied smugness in the bully's face. Sometimes it seemed to Jody as if Lem deliberately initiated a quarrel with him, only to watch the younger fellow, whom all of the Forresters still insisted on calling "boy," back down in fright. Intimidation had always been Lem's hobby, and Jody's smallness, like that of his late father, made him a favorite victim.

Jody sighed loudly, and scuffed his foot on the floor.

Buck gave him a well-intentioned nudge. "Don't fret, boy, cheer up. Ain't so bad as all that."

Mill-wheel encouraged, "Let it go. Hit's over. Lem ain't still riled."

"No, but I am." Jody kicked at the chair leg.

Lem looked at him in genuine surprise, and then frowned.

"Jody," Buck said in a warning tone.

"Easy, boy," Mill-wheel cautioned.

"I'm riled at myself," Jody said impatiently. "He allus does this. And then I allus back down. He's satisfied, and I'm left feelin' 'shamed. I'm tired o' bein' a coward."

Buck said evenly, "Now we all understand why you can't stand up to him for jest every leetle thing. We all remember how you was a'most kilt in the fight in Volusia by Lem hittin' you full strength only once. Nobody blames you for not bein' able or willin' to risk goin' at it full-out with none of us, never agin."

Jody dropped some of his sulkiness, and faced Buck in earnest. "Do you ever wonder iffен that's still true? Iffen 'twould be that bad, I mean, iffен I was hit full-out? I was eleven years old in that fight. I'm growed up now, even iffен I ain't much bigger. Mebbe my life'd not be in danger now; mebbe I don't have to be sich a baby."

Buck raised his brows and said meaningfully, "There's only one way to find out. You wanta test it? Is that what you're after?"

Jody felt all of the Forresters' eyes on him, and he struggled not to swallow hard in fright. It would be all too easy to backslide into old habits. The new rebellious impulse inside of him didn't want to let that happen. The resulting inner turmoil was etched in his face.

Seeing it, Mill-wheel smiled slightly. "Are you proposin' an experiment, boy?"

Jody's temper snapped. "And do you have to call me 'boy'? Cain't you jest use my name?"

Mill-wheel frowned at him.

Arch demanded, "What is this, growin' pains?"

"Stop treatin' me like a young un," Jody retorted.

Lem smirked and taunted him, "Now I don't need to call you 'boy'; I prefer the name I give you after you first betrayed us. Skeeter. Reckon I'll go back to it."

"Bad 'nough you named my pa, and he put up with it the rest of his life; now you gotta name me, too?" His face filled with resentment.

Buck put a firm hand on Jody's leg. "Hey. Settle down. You keep provokin' ever'body, and you'll have that experiment whether you want it or not, and I ain't even sure from who."

Even at Buck, Jody fumed, "But ever'body treats me like a baby. Even you! You're treatin' me like a child you got to discipline. I *have* a child. I *had* a wife. You *cain't* treat me like a young un no more."

Pack predicted, "Here it comes."

Buck struggled visibly to hold his temper. He spoke very quietly, "No, Pack, I'd rather not be the one to experiment on the boy, iffen I kin he'p it."

"'Boy' agin," Jody muttered.

Buck shot him a poisonous look.

Pack remarked, "I think the experiment is a good idea. And I think that deep down, that's why Jody's tryin' to provoke us."

Arch agreed, "He's tryin' to git hit. He's curious, wonderin' iffen he's rememberin' it worse than 'tis. And he's tryin' to finish growin' up, and feelin' his oats. What better way to test hisself than to challenge us, jest like Oliver done."

"He knows he's gotta rile us for real, so's we'll not let him out of it," Pack said insightfully.

Buck studied Jody. "Is that what's goin' on, Jody?"

Jody blinked at Buck. "I honestly don't know."

Mill-wheel asked, "Well, Jody, iffen hit's true, who do you want to lay you out?"

A wide-eyed Jody looked at each Forrester in turn. Each man looked quite willing to offer his services.

Jody felt his heart rate go up in alarm. "I ain't ready for this."

Buck said sternly, "You don't want us thinkin' o' you as a boy no more, you gotta be able to handle bein' growed up instead."

Mill-wheel agreed, "You wanta be treated like a man now, you'll have to act like it."

Jody looked crestfallen. "You-all're jest sayin' that to git even for them things I said."

Buck whispered softly, "No, we ain't."

For a moment, Jody tensed up almost painfully and stopped all effort to hide the fear in his eyes.

"Jody. You kin handle this," Buck said firmly.

"You kin take it," Mill-wheel agreed.

"Let's face up to it now." Buck rose. Taking Jody by the upper arms, he pulled him to his feet.

Jody swallowed hard, and nearly choked on the dryness of his throat. "Are you gonna?" he managed to ask Buck.

"No," Buck replied gently. "I know it has to be done, but I don't wanta be the one."

"Then who?" He kept his tone even, with effort.

"You wanta choose, Jody?" Mill-wheel offered.

Jody made eye contact with each of them. "No. I don't."

Lem stood. "Should be me. I'm the only one that'll not mind doin' it."

Jody kept his eyes steadily on Lem. "And yit, you said you really are my friend. Years ago, when you saved me from drownin'."

He nodded. "I am."

"I cain't figger you out."

"Don't try." Lem took one step closer.

"I don't wanta do this."

"Yes you do," Pack said. "Deep down."

Buck gave him a nudge toward Lem.

"Don't do this to me."

"Jest relax, Jody," Arch urged. "Hit'll be over right quick."

He took a step sideways from Buck and Lem. Mill-wheel stood up beside him, cutting off that route. Jody looked resentfully at Mill-wheel's physical intrusion, and then it came to him like a thunderclap that he was surrounded by the three, just as he'd been in his many nightmares about the original ancient fight in Volusia. He quickly looked at each man in the triangle.

"He'p me."

"We are," Buck declared meaningfully.

Jody realized, then, that they really were right, that in the long run they were helping. He remembered Oliver's need to test himself against them many years before, and he recognized the same urge within himself. He glanced at Buck and Mill-wheel and said, "Wait, I don't wanta be forced." He took a deep breath, turned, and faced Lem squarely. "All right, Lem," he said. "Let's do it." He made a fist and went to him.

Lem's brows rose, impressed. They went up a notch farther as Jody managed to watch without flinching as Lem's own fist clenched and drew back threateningly.

Lem allowed Jody to throw the first punch, and then Lem let Jody feel his own power full strength.

Two hours later, Jody awoke to see them all around him, watching him with interest. He murmured and moaned and ouches.

Buck smiled at him. "Only two hours. Much better."

Mill-wheel reached down to help him sit up again. "You're all right."

"You done good, Jody," Lem said.

"Thank you. 'Specially thank you for usin' my name."

Oliver walked in just then, and saw Jody on the floor with the Forresters around him. "Now what in hell goed on here?"

Mill-wheel's eyes twinkled at him. "Remember when you needed to challenge us, so many years ago? Well, hit was Jody's turn."

Oliver sagged momentarily, and then straightened. "And I don't reckon I need but one guess who hit him."

Lem's eyes mildly acknowledged.

Jody pulled himself the rest of the way to his feet on his own. He eyed Lem boldly. "Jest wait'll next time." He smiled at him.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

Jody wasn't worried about eleven-year-old Julie. He knew where she had gone. He had no doubt of it. Because he knew where he had gone on such a perfect day in April, when he was eleven years old. He had slipped away to the Glen to build a flutter-mill, as Oliver had taught him, so many years earlier. And he was absolutely certain that Julie was now building one, as her father and her "Uncle" Oliver had taught her.

Jody decided that when she returned, he would give her the surprise that he had waiting for her. It was another pet, a rabbit. He hoped that it would manage to get along well with her cat.

He said to Oliver, "I got to give her pets we'll be able to control, and not have to destroy. I shoulda taken a lesson from Fodder-wing when I was a boy. He never kept nothin' would have to be kilt."

When his lovely daughter came home later in the day, Jody gave her the present, saying, "I know your pets ease the loneliness for you a mite."

When her little eyes lit up at the sight of the bunny, Jody was filled with an overwhelming joy. It was at moments such as this that he almost dared to hope that he was fulfilling his primary ambition with his daughter: to be the kind of father that Penny had been to him.

Chapter Fifty-Nine

The following Christmas, Jody and Oliver took Julie to the doin's in Volusia, as usual. She wandered off in pursuit of her own fun with other children, and Oliver and Jody swapped hunting tales with other men.

Presently, Jody decided to glance around for Julie, curious to see if she were well-amused. He was stunned to see her and the teenage Forrester boys engaged in some strange sort of game. As he watched, Marty gripped her wrists, Les grabbed her feet, and they suspended her between them. They began to swing her back and forth. Suddenly, they both released their hold, and she flew through the air, squealing excitedly. Just as Jody was about to panic, Bart caught her. Only slightly reassured, Jody tugged at Oliver's arm and pointed. As Oliver watched, Pete replaced Marty, Garth took Les' position, and Art caught her.

Jody asked Oliver, "You think we should stop 'em?"

"No," Oliver replied thoughtfully. "No, I don't."

Jody stared quizzically at Oliver's knowing look, but didn't press him further.

Chapter Sixty

In June of Julie's sixteenth year, Volusia experienced another remarkable wedding. The marriage of Julie Baxter to Pete Forrester. The town turned out in force again; no one was going to miss it.

Jody's nervousness in anticipating his role of giving the bride away was not helped by Oliver's nudging him and teasing, "Now hit's your turn." Art wasn't in much better shape in his capacity as best man. Bart, Marty, Les, and Garth were ushers.

Despite Jody's tension, he managed to pause a moment and reflect at the perfect appropriateness of this marriage. Now, all three families would be intertwined. Jody was only sorry that Penny and Ory weren't there to see it. But he eagerly looked forward to his grandchildren. Somehow, though, he never doubted for a moment that they would all be dark-haired boys.

"How many young uns you figger they'll have?" Oliver asked.

Without a pause, Jody replied, "Six'd be nice."

Chapter Sixty-One

In April of Julie's seventeenth year, Forresters' Island rejoiced. Julie and Pete had a son, Carver. He was a very special child indeed, because he was a Baxter-Hutto-Forrester.

There was rejoicing at Baxters' Island, too. Jody and Oliver were planning eagerly for the day when they could take the boy to the Glen to build a flutter-mill.