

**INVITATION TO LAKEHURST**

**BY**

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# BEFORE / Young Sparrow

## A New Name

Tsisgwaya nee tah, Young Sparrow, lay sprawled out upon the smooth granite that capped the peak of Whispering Hill, the welcoming warmth of the sun-baked rock radiating up through his bare chest, arms and legs. No whispers came to his ears, so either the spirits the medicine man had warned him about were asleep, or as his uncle, Jacob Longshadow, insisted, the spirits weren't really there at all. Young Sparrow didn't much care one way or the other. He respected the medicine man, as his mother, Morning Song, had taught him, but Uncle Jacob had also taught him the words of

Jesus, so Young Sparrow knew that his belief in the Savior gave him a shield of faith that would protect him, even if the Medicine Man *was* right—*especially since he was still a child*. One of Jesus' many promises was that a child's faith was unique—*stronger than any other kind*. Young Sparrow was counting on that. If there really were whispering spirits within the stone beneath him, let them come—they were no match for Jesus. His thoughts of spiritual matters were interrupted by a flash of white and brown feathers suddenly appearing from below the edge of Whispering Hill's rocky knob.

The eagle had finally returned, its mighty wings wide and beating as it continued to climb. Hundreds of feet of altitude were devoured in seconds until the great bird finally leveled off and began to circle its vast kingdom. Ever so slowly Young

Sparrow lifted his head, arching his neck, but mostly just following the eagle's flight with his eyes. The wind fallen pine tree he'd taken refuge behind was useless for masking his presence with the raptor flying so high overhead. The boy was under no illusions that the eagle's keen eyes would miss seeing his brown skinned body splayed out against the gray stone. The bird probably had a better view of him than Young Sparrow had of the red and black ant that was about to crawl up onto his left forefinger. His only hope was that the eagle wouldn't *care* that a human had invaded its aerie domain. Nor should it, Young Sparrow meant it no harm. Quite the opposite; he was there because he needed the eagle's help; and in return he was prepared to offer the majestic bird his full and undying friendship. Just what that might mean he hadn't bothered to work out, but that was only a matter of detail; the

important thing was that he would give his pledge to the eagle—*and that he would keep it!* But first he had to find a way to get close enough to the elusive raptor to make such a proposal.

*Please, just go back to your roost, Young Sparrow pleaded silently. I need a new name and I can't get it without your help.*

The next moment, as if in answer, a loud shriek rent the still air, followed a moment later by the eagle folding its wings to drop toward the stone buttress of Whispering Hill. With unbelieving eyes Young Sparrow watched it plummet toward the mountain top, only spreading its dark wings at the last second to arrest its fall. Then with absolute precision and grace the eagle righted itself, turning in the air and extending its sharp talons to settle gently onto its throne, a massive lightning struck pine tree whose charred bole rose up out of a wide fracture

in the granite not more than a dozen paces from where Young Sparrow lay. There, seated comfortably on its lofty perch, the great eagle held court. The bird's white head jerked left or right every few seconds, its wide eyes seeing everything, missing nothing; yet for the moment at least, his probing gaze did not turn in Young Sparrow's direction. Long minutes passed, each one an eternity to Young Sparrow. The bird, by its nature, was patient. That was far from true for the boy hiding behind the downed evergreen. A battle raged within him, part of him wanted to jump to his feet and rush the tree, while the more practical side of him knew that if he did the eagle would almost certainly take wing again.

What had he been thinking? Sure, he'd finally managed to find and make his way up to the eagle's roost. But so what? Lying there, he barely dared to take a breath for

fear of drawing the raptor's attention. And what did it matter that he was almost close enough to count the eagle's feathers, he might as well have stayed back at the cabin for all the likelihood he had of actually getting his hands on one of those cherished quills. Words could not describe the disappointment that gripped him at the realization that the thing he wanted most in life might be forever beyond his grasp.

*Ye have not because ye ask not.* The verse came unbidden to Young Sparrow's mind, burned there by his uncle's gentle chiding whenever he saw his nephew start letting life's frustrations get the better of him. Most recently that had been about Young Sparrow's dissatisfaction with his *baby* name. But he *had* asked—*prayed*, as fervently as he'd ever prayed about anything. That very morning as he'd rushed through his chores, he'd pleaded with the



Lord Jesus to help him finally find and meet up with the eagle. Surely, those prayers covered *all* the various stages and trials of his quest, anticipated or otherwise.

“A child’s faith is special,” he whispered to himself, more to help fend off his dark thoughts than anything. One thing was certain, there was no way he was going to get a new name by just laying around like a lizard on a hot rock. But thinking about his uncle also reminded him of one of the other things Jacob Longshadow had drilled into him, “The Bible speaks *truth*, but *faith* is required to bring it about. God will do his part, *if* we do ours.”

“And I *am* a child...with a *child’s faith*”, Young Sparrow spoke aloud and felt the unrest in his spirit wash away. “Truth is *truth*...and the *Lord* goes before me.”

The conviction that came over him was absolute. Somehow Young Sparrow just

knew that the only difference in the hope that was surging in his heart and the reality of obtaining it lay simply in whether or not he had the courage to act upon it. With a triumphant smile he climbed to his feet and began to walk by faith.

His sudden appearance from behind the tree instantly drew the raptor's attention. Its long neck craned around and down as one golden eye tracked Young Sparrow's progress, but all the while its wings stayed folded as it continued to hold its grip on the alabaster limb. Young Sparrow hardly noticed, believing with all his heart that the eagle would be there waiting for him when he got to it—*he just had to get to it*. With steady strides he crossed the short distance to the lightning scarred tree and planted himself in front of its wide base. Looking up he could see that the next leg of his journey was not going to be easy.

It really was amazing that the pine had somehow managed to grow to be so massive considering its roots were buried in a fissure carved into a solid slab of granite. But there was a price that came with living your life on top of a rocky mountain; while the tree was of average height, its bole was badly gnarled. The few limbs it possessed were just as twisted as its trunk, and growing at such odd angles, that if it weren't for the tree's green needles you'd hardly recognize it as a pine at all. If there was good news, it was that most of its limbs were as thick as Young Sparrow's thigh. So, *if* he could manage to navigate his way up into the tree, he was fairly confident the branches would bear up under his weight—*at least until he got to the halfway point*. That was where the bolt of lightning had ripped into the tree, leaving a dark scar and a deep split that ran nearly to the ground. But the problem

actually came *above* the strike point; from there on up the old pine and its branches resembled a barkless wooden skeleton.

“Well, I guess it’s holding you up,” Young Sparrow mused to the distant eagle. His eyes worked their way upward, tracing the path he intended to take until they eventually came to rest on the bird. “Big as you are, you can’t weigh *all* that much less than I do.”

If the raptor had an opinion on the subject, he kept it to himself. That didn’t keep Young Sparrow from feeling like he was being weighed and measured by the eagle as it shifted from side to side watching him. He’d seen Red-tailed hawks behave that same way—*right before pouncing on an unsuspecting mouse*. The grim thought furrowed Young Sparrow’s brow, but a moment later he shrugged it off and stepped under the pine’s lowest branch. He refused

to even consider the possibility that the noble bird would attack him. Even if somehow the eagle did consider him a threat—*or prey*, he held onto his belief that the Lord Jesus would protect him. *I will mount up on eagle's wings*, the boy reassured himself, calling upon his favorite Bible verse to bolster his confidence. Then he drew in a deep breath and leapt upwards with all his might.

The *low* branch had been more than a foot above his outstretched arms before he jumped, so it wasn't surprising that he missed grabbing it with both hands. His left came up short by a few inches, but his right palm managed to slap against the rough bark. Young Sparrow locked his fingers over the top of the branch and held on tight as his weight came upon it. Green as it was, the limb bobbed up and down like a pole with a big fish on the line. Once the motion

played out it was just a matter of kicking his legs to gain enough momentum to get his other hand on the branch, followed by a couple of scissor kicks to get a knee across the branch. All of that was done without much thought or effort. Young Sparrow, like most adolescent boys, was a seasoned tree climber. Moments later he was working his way up the old pine's branches with about as much ease as most people ascend the rungs of a ladder. That changed when he reached the charcoal scarred lightning mark.

He paused there on the only remaining branch with any life left in it to consider his options. Already more than twenty feet in the air, a slip—or *trusting the wrong branch to hold his weight*, would likely cost him much more than just a missed opportunity at an eagle feather. While that was worrisome, once his inspection of the tree was complete, he realized that he really had only two

options. There were less than a dozen branches remaining between him and the eagle. And while all of them looked sturdy enough—*from a distance at least*, they weren't exactly growing in a cluster either. If he was to have any hope of reaching his goal, he was going to have to *jump* from one limb to another...at least *twice*. And that wasn't the worst part. The really scary thing was that he'd be throwing all his weight and momentum at a *dead* branch *before* he had the chance to test out its strength. There'd be no repeat of the bobbing up and down he'd experienced with the first branch, going forward the limbs would either hold fast or snap in two, sending him tumbling to the ground below. It was a sobering realization; one that even an indestructible twelve year old couldn't shrug off lightly. That was option number one, the second—the *safe* option, was to give up and climb back down.

While his mind waded through the unfamiliar territory of his own mortality, Young Sparrow wrapped one arm around the bole of the tree and let his eyes drift outward and downward. The view was magnificent, breathtaking in both scope and beauty. His high perch removed the drab gray rock that was Whispering Hill completely from his line of sight, letting his eyes feast upon the vibrant colors of the wide and lush valley below. *His valley, his home*; it spread out and away from the granite mountain's base, running east as far as his eyes could see, all the way to the fork of Willow Creek and Big River, where the mission lay. All of it so familiar, and yet brand new. He'd spent his whole life in the valley, but he'd never seen it the way he could now, would never have imagined its splendor or the size of the place he called home. But home it was indeed. From a



thousand feet above the valley floor he couldn't make out a lot of detail, but by letting his eyes trace the familiar curve of Half-Moon Lake and following it all the way down to its southernmost point, he was able to pick out the bright green rectangle of his mother's cornfield. And beside it, the little brown blob that had to be the cozy little two room cabin where he was born. Even without seeing her, Young Sparrow knew that Morning Song would be in one of those two places; either busy tending the corn, or inside the cabin, possibly starting to prepare the evening meal. It was somehow comforting just knowing she was down there going about her life, doing everyday ordinary things. Young Sparrow didn't even want think about what she would say about his very *unordinary* day. Uncle Jacob felt his sister was overprotective of her Young Sparrow, that if she had her way he would

never learn to *fly*. Well, he was *flying* now, or about as close to it as you could get without having actual wings. And that thought brought him back to the pressing reality of the moment.

“You didn’t come here to *perch* did you?” Young Sparrow chided himself, forcing his eyes and mind back to the business at hand. Or at least *close at hand*. The next leg of his journey was going to require a *leap of faith*. And rather than give doubt time to eat away at his renewed resolve, Young Sparrow looked up, locked his eyes on the sun bleached wood of his next target, and jumped high into the air. This time, thankfully, both hands found their mark. And better yet, no sound of splintering wood came to his ears. He had to perform another leg over and twist up move, but seconds later he was standing on the new branch and reaching for the next without even bothering

to pause for breath. And so it went; branch to branch, climb or jump, mostly climbing, but lunging or leaping when he had no other option.

Somewhere along the way he realized that getting down might prove even more challenging than going up, but he quickly blocked that thought from his mind. *One problem at a time, child*, Uncle Jacob's voice spoke silently to him. Then suddenly he found himself at the top of the world—at least the top of *his* world, since he was sitting on the uppermost branch, of the tallest tree, growing out of the biggest mountain Young Sparrow had ever known. It was an exhilarating and somewhat terrifying experience given that the base of the old pine was growing out of the rock only a dozen yards from Whispering Hill's nearly vertical west face. Add to that the fact that the tree had grown up with a decidedly

easterly lean to it, and you ended up with Young Sparrow feeling like he really had mounted up on eagle's wings. He'd always wondered what a bird's eye view of things would look like. Well, now he thought he had a pretty good idea. And while he'd never been afraid of heights, the sheer magnitude of the view; having nothing but a thousand feet of empty air between himself and the lake's blue water below, left him feeling a little dizzy, forcing him to look away and cling tightly to the bole of the tree until the world stopped spinning.

“I suppose you get used to it?” Young Sparrow said without conviction, speaking more to himself than anything, but the eagle cocked its head to give him a sideways look. “Maybe not for you, but I was born without feathers. It's not quite what I expected.”

But that was a true enough statement for the entire day. Never in his wildest dreams

would he have thought he'd find himself sitting in the top of pine tree having a conversation—*of sorts*, with a full-grown bald eagle. And yet, there they sat—*perched*, boy and bird, sharing a limb and an experience that no one could have predicted—*except God Himself*. At least that's what Young Sparrow told himself as he tried to steal his nerves for what needed to happen next. God *did* expect it. And not only did the Lord Jesus *know* it was going to happen, but he had *made* it happen. Young Sparrow wanted to believe that—*needed* to believe that. Because if that was true, then surely the Lord Jesus wouldn't have brought him all the way up to the top of this tree just to fail at the last moment? No, that wasn't fair. Not if he was being honest. At this point he *couldn't* fail. His specific prayer had been to finally *meet up* with an eagle and that had certainly already come to pass.

But without some kind of *proof*, who would believe his story? Young Sparrow was having a hard time believing it himself.

“I know it’s a lot to ask,” Young Sparrow said softly, speaking to the eagle but hoping God was listening too. He was still holding onto the bole of the tree with his left hand, but as the words came out of his mouth, his right hand slid slowly along the branch toward the eagle. “But I *really* need one of your feathers...a white one preferably, but any one will do.”

Young Sparrow’s heart was pounding in his chest, partly in fear—*fear of falling out of the tree, fear that the eagle would finally decide it had had enough and fly away, and even fear of just what that great hooked yellow beak might do to a boy’s exposed fingers*, but even more than any of those fears there was anticipation; a breathless eagerness to reach a goal he’d dreamed

about for as long as he could remember. Ever so deliberately, inch by inch, he began to shift his weight along the branch, creeping toward the golden eyed raptor. And the mighty bird watched him come; warily, but it held its ground. A small eternity passed before the anxious boy finally found himself with barely more than a hand span separating himself from the eagle. But from there, unless he released his white-knuckled grip on the tree bole he wasn't going to close that last narrow gap between them.

*The Lord goes before me!* Young Sparrow chided himself, frustrated that doubt had snuck up on him once again. Taking a deep breath and gritting his teeth, he let go of the tree and leaned toward the eagle. It was his first *abrupt* movement since reaching the tree top. The eagle held steady but the tree didn't. He felt a sudden, sickening shudder within the branch under his legs, followed a

moment later by the terrifying sound of splintering wood.

*Oh no!* He thought. *The limb's breaking!*

But he was wrong. And that became obvious as he lunged back and threw his arms around the bole of the tree only to realize that he—and *the tree*, were still moving. A frightened glance downward told him why. That last shift of his body weight had finally finished what a lightning strike had begun. Fracturing in two, the ancient tree folded in half, coming apart at the scarred charcoal junction that divided live wood from dead, and began to topple toward the earth.

It happened slowly at first. So slowly, that Young Sparrow held out hope that the tree's collapse would arrest itself; if only long enough to allow him time to climb down. Doing his part to make that happen, he frantically scrambled around to the far side



of the tree. But it was too little, too late. More screeching of tearing wood came to his ears, and to his horror, the ground started to rush up at him...closer and closer—*until suddenly it wasn't!* As the severed upper section of the tree lost its battle with gravity, its arched trajectory took it directly toward the abrupt cliff edge that was drawing closer by the second. Long before the toppling tree even reached the halfway point in its descent, the uppermost portion—*with Young Sparrow clinging desperately to it*, was already hanging out into the open expanse of air beyond the rocky face.

*I have to let go*, Young Sparrow thought, pushing himself away from the tree and kicking his feet against it to gain separation. In the back of his mind he knew it was foolishness. What difference would it make whether he fell to the valley below with or

without a tree under him—the outcome was going to be the same either way.

*I'm going to die!* The realization shocked him to his core, leaving him so numb that even the rushing wind in his ears, and the fact that he was plummeting a thousand feet to the earth below, were momentarily forgotten. But even with his mind paralyzed with fear, something within him stirred, becoming a force too strong to be denied, bringing with it a single, undeniable word...*Pray!* Young Sparrow felt the truth behind the command; but what should he pray? *Lord take my soul...? Take care of my mother...? I'm sorry for being so foolish...?* In the end, all he managed was, “Please, God...”

That was as far as he got. Out of nowhere, pain like nothing he'd ever experienced in his life wracked through his upper body, radiating out from his right shoulder as a

four bladed dagger dug into his flesh. Letting out an anguished cry, Young Sparrow reached up blindly for the thing assaulting his shoulder, but all his fingers found was something too soft and pliable to be causing such agony. Confused, he pulled his hand back and looked down with wonder at his clenched fist.

*I got my eagle feather,* Young Sparrow realized with astonishment—then everything went black.

# Part I

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## ----- Lost and Alone

For the Son of Man came to seek and  
to save the lost.”

Luke 19:10 ESV

# Chapter One

## NOW / Elijah

### The Invitation

Elijah Jericho Jackson leaned against the narrow metal railing separating him from a thousand feet of open air and contemplated nothingness. At least that's what he hoped awaited him—*if he could only be sure, things would be so much easier*. It was an old argument, and standing before the rail, he argued it again; and since by some weird happenstance he found himself alone, he wasn't shy about voicing his self-loathing out loud either.

“You are worthless Elijah Jackson...a no good nothing. And since you *are* nothing, then you *have* nothing to lose. So, why not

just get it over with? Why drag out the misery?”

There was really no refuting that logic, but, as always, his fear did. A foolish—*superstitious* fear, built on things he’d stopped believing in long before Santa quit leaving presents under the tree. But what if? What if the rantings of his crazy, Bible-thumping mother turned out to be true? Oh, irony of ironies...what if Millie Jackson-Hughes actually had this one thing, this one silly thing in her whole miserable, mixed up life, right? *What then?* Not nothingness. *Somethingness*. And an eternal somethingness at that. And lest we forget, eternity only came in two flavors, “Smoking or non-smoking, Eli,” Millie would tell him with a happy little smile, as if she was letting him in on one of the best-kept secrets in the world. “That’s what it comes down to, sweetie, plain and simple. It’s just one

way...” Insert finger pointing upwards, then hold for a beat before executing a dramatic downward spiral. “...or the other!”

Simple as that, easy peasy. Think coin flip. Heads—hallelujah, tails—hellfire and damnation. Except there would be no coin flip involved. Elijah had no delusions about that. If the crazy lady who had birthed him was right, then there was no possibility of “heads” waiting for him on the other side of the rail he was clutching with a white-knuckled grip. No, not a chance in Hell of that. But when it came down to it, *that* was the real question wasn’t it? Could “*tails*” really be any worse than the hell his current existence had become?

Past experience told him that he wouldn’t find the answer to that within himself, but standing there looking over the rail at the Arkansas River a thousand feet below, he did come to one conclusion. He was just too

tired to think about it anymore. Too tired of breathing and figuring out ways to keep on breathing. Too tired of begging from friends and then begging from strangers after friends got so sick of being used that they were no longer friends. Too tired of digging through garbage cans and dumpsters. Too tired of sleeping on benches and in boxes. Too tired of fear and being afraid. And too tired of just being tired. But maybe not too tired to jump a four foot barrier and see what was on the other side. Because maybe—*hopefully*, Millie was wrong about this one last thing too.

Elijah's grip on the rail loosened slightly as he leaned back and prepared to hoist himself up and over. As he did, a hand clamped down heavily on his shoulder, arresting his momentum and locking him in place. Startled, he jerked his head around to find himself looking into the eyes of a total



stranger. Oddly, the man was smiling at him like they were long lost friends.

“Not today, son,” the voice matched the kindly look in the stranger’s eyes, but the hand clasp on Elijah’s shoulder was a vise.

He tried to shrug it off but failed, managing only to rotate himself around under the man’s grip until they were standing face to face. Pale blue eyes regarded him from beneath a wide brow and a full head of close-cropped salt and pepper hair—though there wasn’t all that much pepper left to see. Early to mid-fifties was Elijah’s best guess. *Too old not to be minding his own business*, was his next thought. *And I’ve got a good three inches on him too, height wise, at least. So what if his arms and shoulders look like they could bench press a rhino—I could take him. Yeah, you bet I could...if I had a baseball bat, and he was taking a nap.* And that led to

a sad realization. *‘Wow, I’m actually afraid of somebody twice my own age...I don’t think that’s happened since before I started shaving—this has to be a new low!’*

“Don’t worry, I wasn’t gonna do anything,” He was aiming for indignant but even to his own ears his voice came out sounding like a child who’d been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. “Maybe you should go help an old lady cross the street or something?”

“I already checked that off my list today,” the other man replied affably, but he did release his hold to give Elijah a gentle pat on the arm. “You’re sure you’re okay...I’ve seen that look before?”

“Never better...happiest day of my life,” Elijah quipped, emboldened by his newfound freedom. It occurred to him that he could probably make a break for it, get a running start and hop the barrier before his

would be rescuer even knew what was happening. That would show the old geezer just what a waste of time it was to butt your nose into other people's business. But before the thought was even out of his head it was interrupted by the sound of approaching voices. Looking back toward the parking lot over *'Mr. Good Sam's'* shoulder, he saw a young family fast approaching; dad, mom and their two little girls were practically jogging in their hurry to reach the famous gorge spanning bridge with its spectacular view. Elijah blew out a long breath. Their arrival meant the old man had been right after all—*not today*. Not in front of those innocent little eyes. No relief came with that realization, only acceptance that the emptiness he called life would have to continue for a little while longer—and that it was time to leave. He had no idea where, he rarely did—nor did it matter. He only got a

few steps before the stranger stopped him again, this time with his voice.

“Hold up a minute, son, I think you dropped something.” Elijah turned around to look at the speaker who was still standing right where he’d left him, but holding something out in his hand.

It only took a glance for Elijah to shake his head and say, “That’s not mine.”

The older man flipped the yellow envelope around and held it up so Elijah could read it, “You’re not Elijah Jackson?”

The space between them was only a couple of yards, making the word ***INVITATION*** printed in bold italicized script impossible to miss. Below it, handwritten in cramped but still quite legible letters, Elijah did indeed see his name.

“What in the world...?” He murmured with disbelief and stepped forward to take the envelope. “Where did you get this?”

“It was just lying on the ground where you were standing,” the answer came with a shrug. “You must have dropped it. I’m just glad I noticed it before you got too far, these old legs aren’t what they used to be. I would have hated to have had to chase you down.” With that he stepped past Elijah and headed back toward the parking lot, adding, “You take care now, son.”

Elijah watched him go, noticing that his steps were so light and easy, you’d think he didn’t have a care in the world. There were probably a few times in his life when Elijah had felt that way, but he wasn’t about to try and dredge any of them up; memories were something he avoided at all costs these days. Eventually, he let his eyes fall away from the stranger’s retreating back, down to the yellow envelope in his hand. *How weird is this?* He thought. *There’s not a soul left on*

*the planet who will still take my phone call, but I get this? Whatever ‘this’ was.*

“My money’s on a FBI sting,” he told the empty air around him as he began to tear the envelope open. “You’ve just won a box seat to the next Rockies versus Dodgers game...all expenses paid. Nah, that can’t be it, I’m way too small time these days. They wouldn’t even waste a jail cell on me.”

As he pulled the matching piece of cardstock free, he found out he was right—not a sting. Not unless one of the MLB teams had changed its stadium name to something called “Lakehurst Manor”.

INVITATION TO

LAKEHURST

*You are cordially invited  
for an unlimited stay at  
Lakehurst Manor. You'll  
find what you're looking  
for when you get here.  
Stay as long as you need—  
you'll know when it's time  
to leave. If you're hesitant  
to accept this invitation,  
ask yourself one  
question...  
“What have I got to lose?”*

35.4172° N by 82.8413° W

Elijah stood on the bridge reading and rereading the invitation, trying to make sense out of what it might mean. In the end he decided the actual words printed on it were as bizarre as its sudden appearance.

“Well, one thing’s for sure, whoever sent this, they got that last part right...,” he said to himself, still looking down in dismay at the flowery script, “...*what do I have to lose?*”

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“Well, would you look at that?” Jesús’ voice drifted over from the driver’s seat, making Elijah jerk his head up to look out the windshield. Just ahead on the side of the blacktop was a green and white road sign like countless others they’d passed in the last week, but this one had the words “*Grays Landing, 1/4 mile*” painted on it, with an arrow pointing off to the right. According to the map that had come up when he’d typed the Lat-Long coordinates from the invitation into a Denver Public Library



computer, Grays Landing was the place he needed to go if he wanted to accept it's bizarre offer.

"I'll try to contain my enthusiasm," Elijah mumbled through a yawn, stretching his arms high and rolling his head around to work the kinks out of his neck.

"You really do need to work on that," Jesús said, his smile wide and white against his caramel skin. "Your over exuberance can be a little annoying at times, you know?"

"Yeah, whatever you say, boss," Elijah answered, refusing to take the bait as he finished his stretch and settled back into the seat cushions.

The '*over exuberance*' comment was actually a semi-quote he'd gotten from Elijah. One he'd made the very first day Jesús and his moving van had come into his life.

Elijah had just finished eating breakfast at the Denver homeless shelter he'd taken refuge in the night before when he looked up to see a bright purple eighteen wheeler pull up to the curb outside the window. He wasn't the only one to take notice either. In a flash half of the cafeteria was vacated as men dumped their trays and rushed for the door. Elijah had never seen such a flurry of activity amongst his brethren. Curiosity alone was enough to prompt him to climb to his feet and tag along behind the others to see what was up. By the time he arrived outside, the driver had already shut down the truck and was leaning out the open door of the cab surveying the crowd, who for their part, were waving their arms and calling out to get his attention. Elijah still couldn't see what all the fuss was about so he shouldered his way forward to get a clearer view. The first thing to get his attention was the

company logo printed on the semi's door. There was nothing too extravagant about it, just three words stenciled in italicized gold lettering. *'THE WAY hOME'*; the lettering stood out well against the truck's metallic purple background, but what caught Elijah's attention was the two letters that weren't really letters at all. The "t" in "the" was a rustic wooden cross, and the "h" in "home" was made out of a hand with its index finger pointing upward. After a bit of reflection, Elijah had to wonder if he might be looking at the world's biggest—and *purplest* hearse. Then the driver spoke up and gave him a clue about what was really going on.

"I need one man. Someone with a willing spirit and a strong back to help me on a local move," the trucker called out in a heavy Latino accent. "The job is about eight hours all told. Not so bad on the front side, but there's two flights of stairs on the drop off.

And I'm on a tight schedule, so we won't get many breaks either. But I do pay minimum wage...cash, with a hot lunch thrown in to boot. And you'll get a ride back here when we're all through. Do I have any takers?"

Hands were dropping down all through the driver's spiel. The majority had fallen off at the mention of an eight hour day, and the stairs had taken out most of the rest. The three men who still had an arm in the air probably shouldn't have. The first was an old codger with rheumy eyes; he was shaking so badly that Elijah was ready to step over and catch him if his legs gave out. The next may not have even been volunteering. He was a husky black haired young man, and while he certainly looked strong and healthy enough to move furniture—*or a piano all by himself*, he also had *both* of his arms raised high in the air

while he stared vacantly out into space, swaying back and forth to a song that only he could hear. And just beyond him was the last fellow, who...well, he was just so overweight that Elijah seriously doubted he'd be able to lift himself up a flight of stairs. The driver had a problem, but Elijah certainly didn't feel compelled to step up and fill the void. Still, old habits die hard, so his one-time accountant's brain started working through the variables he'd try *tweaking* if he were in the driver's shoes. Kicking up the dollars per hour might do it. More likely you needed to make the job easier; so more bodies or less hours—*or both*. Elijah figured the driver would probably end up having to do some or all of that to get his workers, but it turned out he was wrong.

Jesús didn't have an MBA from Berkeley; all he had was a GED he'd earned while

being a *guest* of the State of Louisiana, *and* something else his time at Angola had given him, an understanding that when you ran into a problem that you couldn't solve on your own—you *had to ask for help*. Like Elijah, he looked at the crowd and watched the hands fall and the eyes drop, but that's where the similarities between the two of them stopped. A small grimace pursed his lips, but only for a moment before being replaced by a serene smile as he lifted his eyes upwards and began to speak.

It wasn't done for show, or to lay a guilt trip on his already thinning audience. That had been Elijah's first thought when he realized what was happening. But if that were true the driver wouldn't have *dropped* his voice, he would have raised it up like a hawker at a carnival. Instead his words came out so low that if Elijah had not been standing so close he wouldn't have been

able to hear them; and even so he had to lean in and listen carefully to make them out.

“Lord, I need a hand here,” Jesús prayed. “*Your* hand...to provide me with what I need to help a couple of old ladies move into their new home. Lord, I don’t want to let them down. Please...show me the way.”

As he finished, the moving van driver dropped his gaze back down, and inexplicably, his eyes went right to Elijah. Feeling a flush of embarrassment wash over him, Elijah looked quickly away. Which was silly; it wasn’t as if he’d just been caught eavesdropping on the driver. Well, maybe sort of, but it wasn’t something he’d planned to do, and hey, God hears silent prayers too...right? So if the trucker had an issue with his spiritual whine session being overheard, too bad, that wasn’t Elijah’s problem. As a matter of fact, he was sure he had more important things to do than stand

around listening to someone complain about their lack of good business planning.

“Hey there, what about you?” the driver called out.

*He’s probably talking to some other sucker,* Elijah told himself, but he couldn’t help glancing back up at the driver, who, sure enough, was locked right on him. He opened his mouth, expecting an appropriately sarcastic comment to come out, but instead he heard himself ask, “Can we have pizza for lunch?”

“You read my mind,” Jesús told him with an ear-to-ear smile that Elijah would quickly learn almost never left his face. Not even after a *ten hour* day of lugging every piece of furniture ever collected by Flo and Gertie Gains, the oldest living twin sisters on earth—*their words—possibly said in jest, but Elijah wouldn’t bet against it.* Elijah must have heard, “*Careful with that one,*



*dearie, it's awfully heavy, but it's as precious as gold to these old bones,*" a hundred times. Each time Jesús would flash his signature smile and assure the old biddies that they'd handle their *treasures* with as much care as if it were the Holy Grail itself—*whatever that meant*. It was in the moving van on their way to unload—the *two flights of stairs part of the move*, that an already exhausted Elijah had made the now infamous quote.

“Man, I just can't get over how awesome those two ladies are,” Jesús effused, continuing a monologue of the sisters' virtues that had started the moment the two of them were alone in the van. “I mean, they've got to be in their nineties, and to be so alert and full of life...I just hope I'm half that sharp when I'm in my *fifties*...you know what I'm saying, Elijah?”

Elijah considered stuffing his fingers in his ears. He'd once owned a nice pair of Bose noise cancelling earphones that would have done the trick—a double shot of whiskey would have *really* done the trick. In the world Elijah had drifted into over the past two years, long-running conversations were few and far between. On those rare occasions when he did find himself in the company of a chatterbox, he usually just turned his back and walked away. The homeless were used to being ignored and shunned, even by their own. Miss Manners might not approve, but as far as Elijah was concerned, it was one of the few perks of his new lifestyle. Unfortunately, under the circumstances, escaping from Jesús using his normal tactics would have required leaping from a moving semi during the height of rush hour.

“Dude, you in there?” Jesús had asked. Apparently his last question hadn’t been rhetorical. “You’re looking a little down in the dumps for someone who just did rock star work filling up this old van.”

That would have been nice to hear if he’d needed a pick me up instead of a *‘leave me alone’*. On his side of the *conversation*, Elijah hadn’t spoken since getting into the truck, but he found himself biting back two words that wanted to come out of his mouth. Instead of shouting, “*Shut up!*” he drew in a deep breath and spoke in a carefully controlled voice, “Sorry, I’m just not used to being around people who are so...*exuberant.*”

Jesús had looked like he’d been slapped—*but only for a moment*. Then he just shook his head and laughed as he told Elijah, “Sorry, bro, but you’re just going to have to get used to it...the good Lord has blessed

me way too much for me to be quiet about it.”

“So you’re not going to fire me for saying that?” Elijah asked morosely.

“No way!” Jesús shook his head. “Didn’t you hear what I said about you being a moving rock star?”

“Fine,” Elijah growled. “I guess I’ll just have to quit then.”

“Your call,” Jesús said with a shrug. “Before or after lunch?”

“After I guess,” Elijah decided once he’d given it some consideration. “I’m hoping you won’t talk so much with your mouth full of pizza.”

“Maybe,” Jesús smiled. “But I wouldn’t get my hopes up if I were you.”

So they went to lunch and Jesús proved he really could talk and eat at the same time, leaving Elijah to gobble up most of the pizza by himself while listening to the truck driver

prattle on about various aspects of his life, all of them with one central point of focus—*God*. Elijah actually engaged at one juncture, pointing out that Jesús might not be such an eternal optimist if God *hadn't* blessed him so much. That's when he learned about Jesús' whole '*homeless teenager turns gangbanger, goes to prison and finds Jesus*' background. Incredibly, Jesús counted that string of events as the *greatest* blessings he'd ever been given. Elijah had no comeback for that, and decided it was time to tell *himself* to shut up. But he couldn't help mulling over the fact that the man sitting across the table from him had built a life out of nothing, while Elijah Jackson had the American dream handed to him on a silver platter, only to flush it down the toilet. It was almost enough to spoil his appetite—*almost*. Fortunately, being no stranger to self-

loathing, he was able to shrug it off and finish mucking down his pizza. Then lunch was over and it was time for them to go their separate ways—*except they didn't*.

To Elijah's own surprise he'd gotten back in the truck and they drove across town for the unload. And six hours later, after making ninety-four trips up and down the two flights of stairs, Elijah amazed himself even more by accepting Jesús' offer to stay on since they were both headed east.

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That had been six days ago. Long days, but at the same time they seemed to fly by. The green and white road marker in front of them was announcing that those days were about to come to an end, leaving Elijah to struggle with the realization that a part of him he'd considered long dead was

mourning the thought. As annoying as Jesús' hyper-bubbly personality could be, in some ways Elijah felt closer to him than he had to anyone in a very long time—maybe ever. *And that's as good of a reason as any to part ways now*, Elijah told himself. *Get out while the gettin's good.* That was the only way he'd ever found to stay ahead of the disgust and disappointment curve.

Somehow, to this point, he'd managed to hold it together enough to keep Jesús from looking at him like something that needed scraped off the bottom of his shoe, but seriously, how long could that last?

The reverberating protest of the big rig's diesel engine downshifting pulled Elijah back to the moment. Jesús dropped another gear and maneuvered the semi over and down the off ramp, taking the curve with such practiced ease that Elijah barely moved in his seat. But a moment later he raised a

hand in protest when Jesús flicked the blinker back on, signaling his intent to turn onto the state highway instead of crossing it to climb back onto the interstate after dropping Elijah off.

“Thanks anyway, amigo,” Elijah said, reaching down to grab his backpack where it lay on the floorboard at his feet. “But this is plenty good, I’ll get off here.”

“Are you loco?” Jesús asked, pointing at the dashboard GPS and then out the windshield. It’s still thirty-three miles to Grays Landing and that’s a pretty nasty looking storm brewing out there.”

“I probably am,” Elijah allowed. “But it won’t be the first time I’ve had to walk a few miles. Besides, before you came along and spoiled me, a good rain was about my only chance at a shower.”



“Even so” Jesús laughed. “I think I’ll take you a little closer anyway. It’s the least I can do for all the help you’ve given me.”

“Jesús...*no!* Thank you, but no,” Elijah snapped, letting some of the recent emotion from his thoughts leak into his voice. “You don’t owe me anything but the fifty bucks from the last unload. You’re already behind schedule for the Knoxville job as it is. Drop me off and get going.”

“Like you said, I’m already behind,” Jesús said with a shrug. “Another hour won’t matter.”

“It could,” Elijah retorted. “Who knows how long it’ll take you to find another sucker who’ll work for minimum wage and junk food?”

“The Lord will provide,” Jesús laughed, but seeing the unyielding look on Elijah’s face he let out a sigh and pulled the big rig over to the side of the road.

“Here you go, compadre,” Jesús pulled some folded money out of his shirt pocket and held it out to Elijah as he was opening the truck door.

“Thanks,” Elijah said, then did a double take as he realized the thickness of the wad of bills between his fingers didn’t jibe with the fifty dollar amount he was expecting. Unfolding them, he counted out ten twenty dollar bills. But instead of feeling elated, a wave of anger started to rise up within him; which was just insane. A week before he’d have snatched up the money and run—*after* doing his best to weasel even more out of the ‘*soft-touch*’ trucker. And that might have still been the case if he didn’t have the security of knowing he had a fifth of whiskey waiting in his backpack.

“Did I mention that I gave you a raise a while back?” Jesús asked lightly.

“Nooo...” Elijah answered in a tight voice. “But you *did* say something about having three kids you need to put through college...and that you still owe about a gazillion dollars on this truck.”

“The Lord will provide,” Jesús smiled. “He always does.”

Elijah ignored the comment as he peeled the top three bills off the stack then held the rest back out to Jesús. “I’ll keep sixty of this. I probably deserve a ten dollar bonus just for putting up with you flapping your gums all the time.”

“Well, if we’re going to take that into consideration, I didn’t give you nearly enough,” Jesús laughed. “You keep it. Who knows how long it’ll be before you find another cush job like this one. Besides, I don’t want to have to worry about my brother Elijah going hungry.”

“No need to worry about that, amigo...*The Lord will provide*,” Elijah said, doing his best Jesús imitation. But the effort was lost on the other man who was too caught up in the moment.

“*He just did!*” Jesús exhorted, raising his hands for emphasis. Elijah half expected him to finish with a fervent ‘*Alleluia*’ or ‘*Amen*’, but he just sat there with an expectant look on his face.

“I’m sorry,” Elijah said, giving him an incredulous look. “I didn’t realize you were *that* Jesús.”

This time his remark did hit home and Elijah immediately regretted it when he saw the hurt in Jesús’ eyes. “Look, I know you’re just trying to help, man, and I do appreciate it. But, truthfully, Jesús, without you being around to badger me, this isn’t going to be spent on food, or clothes, or haircuts, or...let’s just be real here. I’ve told

you enough about my past for you to know that the first bartender or back alley dealer I run into is going to get every last red cent I own, and I'm pretty sure the Lord didn't provide *this...*" he held up the extra twenties, "...for *that.*"

"I have faith you won't let that happen," Jesús said gently.

"You're right...I won't," Elijah agreed as he tossed the excess bills up on the dashboard and finished opening the door to climb down from the truck. On the ground he hesitated, wanting to say something but not finding the words. Finally, he just looked up and said, "Thank you...for everything."

"I'll be praying for you, Elijah," Jesús promised, his voice somehow managing to convey both sadness and hope at the same time.

“Then I’m afraid you’re as bad at managing your time as your money,” Elijah laughed, but he nodded in appreciation as he swung the truck door closed and turned to start walking down the highway.

# Chapter Two

## THEN / Jedidiah

### Fort Cass

The smell of open latrines, sickness and death assaulted Jedidiah Cooke's nostrils long before his eyes or ears had any evidence that he was nearing his destination. The buckskin gelding he sat astride noticed it too, tossing its head harshly against the reins and letting out a loud snort of protest as it lurched to a sudden stop. His mount's rebellion led Jedidiah to reflect, not for the first time, that maybe he should have just stayed back in Georgia. Of course if he had, chances were good that he'd be in prison by now, or maybe even dead. But still, when your *horse* knows you're headed down a bad

road, well, that had to count for something, didn't it?

“What have you gotten yourself into, son?” he asked himself aloud, leaning back and wrapping his legs tight around the gelding's belly just in case the animal decided to continue its objection in a more forceful manner. It was a foolish question really. Jedidiah knew *exactly* what he was getting into. He'd been in it from the very beginning; months before, when the government had sent the first troops in to *help* the Georgia Cherokees *resettle*. Foolishly, when he'd signed up, he'd been naive enough to actually believe he and the others *were* helping. That lasted right up to the moment he'd been ordered to escort a family out of their cabin—*at gunpoint*, while their youngest child, a little girl, too young to talk but old enough to realize her whole life was being torn apart, cried



hysterically. The girl's mother, who was fighting back her own tears, promised her daughter everything was going to be alright. It was a lie. Jedidiah had come upon that same family a week later in the internment camp. They and a number of other *renegades* were huddle in a clump around a smoky campfire. By then there were no tears to be seen, or even sadness in any of their eyes...not even the little girl's. All he saw were vacant stares; an emptiness born of the loss of home and hope. It was a look Jedidiah recognized well, he'd seen it often enough in his shaving mirror. But that didn't keep their faces from haunting his dreams at night. That in itself was a little odd; he'd done worse things in his life than uproot a family from their home—*far worse*.

“Say, hoss, I know we ain't known each other all that long,” Jedidiah drawled, leaning down to give its neck a friendly pat.

The horse still wasn't moving—other than to lower its head to start eating on a patch of clover. “But the way this is supposed to work...I'm the one that says what's what...and you're the one that gets to it. Now I reckon you'd be content to stop right here and nibble the day away. But you have to understand something. Me, I'm hungry too, but on the other hand, I'm partial to meat...and I have to be honest with you, my belly's so empty that I'm not feeling *too* particular about just what *kind* of meat I put in it. You give that some thought, maybe it'll help you remember that you're a horse, not a mule.”

Pleased that he'd managed to pass on such heartfelt and *sage* advice, Jedidiah flicked the reins and gave the buckskin's flanks a gentle kick. The gelding nickered and shuffled its hooves a bit, but if anything it backed up a few inches. Jedidiah sighed,

wishing he still had his spurs...and a saddle would have been helpful too. Nothing made a horse more uppity than thinking it could buck you off anytime it wanted to. In his opinion bareback riding was just asking for trouble, but it wasn't like he had any choice in the matter. Times were hard and he was fortunate he wasn't walking to his next post—well actually, make that the *horse's* next post—he was just along to make sure it got there.

Jedidiah let out another sigh, swung down off the back of the gelding, and reached out to give its neck a reassuring rub. He could feel a slight quiver in the muscle's underneath, affirming what he'd already suspected. It wasn't the putrid smell that was bothering the horse—at least not exactly. It was what was *behind* the odor. Somewhere up ahead, and not too far away, there was death—probably a lot of it, and the poor

horse wanted no part of going anywhere near it. Jedidiah knew that a number of the soldiers *and horses* that General Floyd had brought with him when he assumed command of Fort Wool were also *veterans* of the Florida Seminole war—*humans weren't the only ones who could be scarred by battle*. No doubt that's why the gelding had been picked for the transfer to Fort Cass in the first place. Everyone expected the Tennessee phase of the Cherokee Relocation to go peaceably, and from what he'd heard, so far that was true—yet for some unknown reason the place still smelled like a battlefield. Hopefully, with time, the gelding would work through its fear. In truth the horse wasn't in all that bad of shape, Jedidiah had shot a rabbit while still mounted the day before and the buckskin hadn't twitched an ear.

“Alright then, I guess you got us this far,” Jedidiah acknowledged. “I suppose it’s only fair I shoulder some of the burden.” Holding the reins with his left hand, he continued to caress the gelding’s neck with his right hand while he took a slow step up the road. The buckskin held back at the first pull, but Jedidiah kept gentle pressure on the reins and whispered some words of encouragement in the mount’s ear. It took a bit, but eventually the gelding took a halting step forward, then another and another. Relieved, but not wanting to risk a setback, Jedidiah stayed on the ground and continued to lead the way, speaking soothing words as he went. A short time later they crested a small rise and Jedidiah got his first view of Fort Cass, which from what he could see consisted of a mishmash of newly erected log structures and dozens of canvas tents of various shapes and sizes.

“There you see,” Jedidiah said, pausing to look down at the encampment. “Nothing to worry about, it’s not so different from what we left behind in Echota. I’ll bet they even have a nice stable where you can make a bunch of new horse friends.”

The gelding shook its head as if unconvinced and Jedidiah found himself in silent agreement. True, physically, the fort, or what he could see of it, did resemble the Relocation Center at New Echota; but Georgia hadn’t stunk of death and decay, nor did it have a full score of black winged vultures circling above it. Jedidiah found himself wondering just what could have happened to bring about such a state, but the only way he was ever going to find out was to keep walking down the road, so that’s what he did. As it turned out he got his answer before he’d even crossed into the

fort proper, and without having to ask a single question.

The south entrance of the fort wasn't guarded by a wall or any other type of barrier. In fact a lone soldier standing beneath a sagging canvas lean-to was the only military presence to be seen. But just beyond him was indisputable proof that Jedidiah had indeed finally reached his destination. There, flanking either side of the rutted road were a pair of wooden latticed stockades crudely, but effectively, built from pine poles and partially covered with dingy sheets of white canvas. They weren't empty either. Well before he reached the sentry post, Jedidiah picked up the sound of deep, dry wracking coughs coming from the hunched figures gathered inside the cages, all of them huddled around campfires that seemed much better at putting out clouds of smoke than any appreciable amount of heat.

As he drew nearer, the faces, young and old, behind those coughs took on detail, showing him just how starkly drawn and pale they were. As if life wasn't hard enough, the Cherokee at Fort Cass were fighting off a sickness that looked to have grown to epidemic proportions.

“Seems like you've got a lot of sick people here,” Jedidiah commented as he came abreast of the sentry. The man had laid his musket against the lean-to framework and was busy whittling away on a weathered pine stub, carving out what seemed to be a horse with a hog's snout—or maybe just an extremely long legged pig. In either case the fellow hardly noticed his approach.

“Nah...just a few,” the soldier disagreed absently, scratching away with his knife. “Mostly it's just the Injuns. They've been hit with both whoopin' cough and dysentery...so I'd keep my distance if I



were you. We've been losing 'bout a dozen of 'em a day. Too many fer us to keep up with buryin'...that's what's causing all the stink."

Jedidiah let the man's words sink in. It wasn't a pleasant picture; adding the devastation of two horrible sicknesses on top of what he already knew life in the internment camps to be like, he couldn't imagine a more miserable state. Not that the sentry seemed too tore up about it.

"Well, I best keep going, I've used up enough of your valuable time," Jedidiah said, forcing his voice to remain light. That drew a grunt from the soldier that may or may not have been a response, but he didn't even look up as Jedidiah led the gelding away.

"Oh, and hey, that's a fine job you're doing on that camel," Jedidiah threw back

over his shoulder. “Looks just like one I saw at a circus one time.”

He would’ve loved to have turned around to see the look on the sentry’s face, but that would have spoiled it. Instead he just kept on walking, following the road northward while keeping his eyes focused straight ahead. That prevented him from seeing all the misery that surrounded him on both sides. Was that any different from what the sentry was doing? Maybe not, but for the moment it was the best that he could manage. Eventually, a mile or so later, he rounded a bend and found himself at the end of the road as it butted up against the south bank of the Hiwassee River. A half dozen buildings—the same ones he’d seen when he’d first topped the rise, lay scattered about, most of them pushed right up against the river itself. That included the oldest and largest of the group, a squat two story

structure crafted from milled lumber. Many years spent under the Tennessee sun had weathered its timbers, turning them a dark burnt brown in stark contrast to the freshly peeled white logs of those that flanked it. Jedidiah had no idea what the building was originally intended for, but from all the soldier's milling around it now, he was fairly certain he'd found the fort's headquarters—and hopefully General Winfield Scott, Commanding General of the Cherokee Removal, with it.

Weaving his way through the crowd, he made his way up to the building's covered porch. There were already a handful of other horses tied there, and he paused to loop the gelding's reins around its top rail to join theirs. Despite the fact that his uniform was a slightly different style and shade of blue than theirs, none of the soldiers gave him more than a glance. But that wasn't too

surprising; there was a good chance he wasn't the only Georgia Militia soldier wandering around Fort Cass. Normally, being overlooked would have been just fine with Jedidiah, he usually preferred to remain in the background. But under the circumstances, the sooner he found the general, the sooner he was likely to get something to eat. He started searching the crowd, looking for officer's insignia; not that he expected to find the fort's commander amidst the assembled soldiers, but locating a junior officer was his best bet for gaining an audience with the general. He'd barely begun his survey when the building's front door flew open and another blue-suited soldier came storming out, shoving a wide brimmed cavalryman's hat down over a wild mop of coal black hair. Jedidiah noted the yellow captain's bars on the man's shoulders, but before he could

even think of approaching him, the fellow was gone. In two long strides he hit the end of the porch, leaping down to jerk the reins of a dappled gray mare free while throwing himself up into the saddle in one fluid motion.

“Everything alright, Cap?” one of the other soldiers called out.

If the question was heard, it was ignored by the dark-haired officer who wheeled his horse around to lock angry blue eyes on a different soldier, this one with a pair of chevrons sewn to his sleeve. “Gather the men, Corporal Stewart,” he snarled. “We’re headed back out. Meet me at the west gate...we leave within the hour.”

That set off a flurry of movement amongst the soldiers—along with a good bit of swearing, as the obviously unexpected and unwelcome news sank in. The exception was the corporal himself. Other than a

disapproving frown, the man seemed unfazed, merely nodding his acknowledgement and throwing up a hasty salute. The salute went unnoticed by the captain who had already dug his spurs into the mare's flanks and was rapidly disappearing down the road in a cloud of dust.

“You heard what the man said,” Corporal Stewart barked. “F-A-L-L I-N! We're heading back to the barracks...I want everyone packed up and ready for muster call in half an hour...don't be even a minute late if you know what's good for you!”

Apparently the men did know what was good for them—and in contrast what wasn't, because in short order the soldiers—all wearing cavalry uniforms, had themselves formed up as neatly as any seasoned infantry unit could want. The corporal marched them away, heading down the lane in the direction

their irate leader had taken. Jedidiah found himself alone, if you discounted the horses and a couple of stray chickens that were scratching their way around the side of the Headquarters building. He was about to climb up on the porch and venture inside when the front door banged open again. This time it wasn't a soldier who came sauntering out onto the porch. A battered coonskin cap and matching buckskin shirt and trousers made Jedidiah think '*trapper*', but he quickly revised that to '*scout*' given the whole purpose behind Fort Cass's existence. The scout pulled the door closed behind him with a bang, pausing long enough to collect a well-used Kentucky rifle from where it had been propped against the side of the building, before continuing on toward Jedidiah.

“If you're looking for ol' Fuss and Feathers,” the scout growled, hooking a

thumb up over his shoulder. “You’ll find him inside. He’ll be the one picking Captain Baxter’s hide out of his teeth.”

Jedidiah was familiar with General Scott’s nickname, but he’d never heard it delivered with quite so much disdain. That led him to speculate that maybe the cavalry officer hadn’t been the only one the general had *‘chewed on’*. Jedidiah nodded without bothering to keep the frown of disapproval off his face. Not that he was above name calling himself, but being a soldier, it grated on him to hear a civilian being disrespectful to someone in uniform, even if it was a different uniform than the one he had on. The scout, picking up on Jedidiah’s sour expression, mutterer something about *uppity soldier boys* as he brushed past him on his way down the steps. Jedidiah chose to ignore the comment—and the shoulder nudge, and climbed up onto the porch as



soon as the other man cleared out of his path.

“What happened, boy...you lose your saddle?” the scout’s voice quipped from behind him loud and grating. Jedidiah felt his jaws clench, but he didn’t break stride. Unfortunately, the scout mistook his reticence to get mixed up in trouble on his first day in camp for a baser kind of fear.

“Your mama must not have taught you any manners, son,” this time the taunt was almost shouted. “Twice now I’ve spoken to you and you haven’t even had the decency to look me in the eye.”

Jedidiah let out a sigh and slowly turned around, putting a smile on his face, but not a particularly warm and welcoming one.

“Sorry, I thought you were talking to the horse...*I* don’t even own a saddle.”

The buckskin clad man glared all the harder. “Am I supposed find humor in that?”

he demanded, drifting the barrel of his rifle over in Jedidiah's direction.

“I don't know,” Jedidiah answered easily, smiling even wider. Then he looked pointedly down at where the scout's hands held a white-knuckled grip on the rifle stock. “Am I supposed to be *worried* about...*that?*”

The sudden change of atmosphere wasn't lost on the scout and he blinked in surprise. Then his eyes went a little wide as Jedidiah brought his right hand up to scratch absently at his midsection—only an inch or two above one of the pair of wooden pistol butts strapped to his waist.

*So much for staying out of trouble,* Jedidiah thought, watching the scout and waiting for him to make the next move—*or not*. Granted, he'd barely laid eyes on the fellow, but he knew the type. He might fire his mouth off again, but it was doubtful he

had the stomach to start throwing lead around. Oddly, Jedidiah found he really didn't much care one way or the other. But apparently the scout did.

“That’s what I get for trying to be friendly,” he grumbled indignantly, but the gun barrel took a noticeable drop downward as he turned around to stomp off down the road.

The threat—*if there ever really was one*, was over. But just to be sure, Jedidiah stayed where he was for a while, watching the retreating figure long enough to assure himself he needn't worry about taking a musket ball between his shoulder blades. Once he did, he turned to find that the door he'd intended to knock on was already open—*and filled*, by a pair of broad blue-suited shoulders and a very distinctive set of heavy jowled muttonchops. The muttonchops were even more renowned than

the owner's derisive nickname, so Jedidiah didn't even bother looking for the general insignia on the shoulders blocking his path. Snapping to attention, he threw up a quick salute, wondering as he did just how long Winfield Scott had been standing in the doorway watching him.

“Private Cooke, reporting as ordered, sir,” Jedidiah called out, holding his salute while his mind churned, seeking to formulate a plausible explanation for why he'd come within a hair of shooting one of the general's men.

“Where's the rest of them?” the general barked, ignoring the salute and catching Jedidiah completely off guard.

“Sir...? The rest...of *who*?” Jedidiah stammered.

The general's scowl deepened as he crossed the porch to give Jedidiah his full attention. Up close, Jedidiah got a new sense

of the term *Commanding General*. True to his reputation, General Scott was a large and imposing man. While he didn't exactly *tower* over Jedidiah who stood nearly six feet himself, his dark eyes bore down with such intensity that the younger soldier had to force himself to stand fast even though his every instinct told him to leap off the porch and chase after the general's earlier victims.

"You're obviously one of General Floyd's boys," General Scott said, reaching up a thick finger to tap the bill of Jedidiah's Georgia Militia cap. "Which means you're no doubt here in response to the correspondence I sent him requesting men, horses and supplies...am I right?"

"Ah...yes sir, general, that's true," Jedidiah sputtered, not liking the general's tone or the direction he was heading.

"So private...I'll ask you again," the general leaned in close enough for Jedidiah

to worry they might bump noses.

“Where...are...the...rest...of...them? I see *a* man, *a* horse, and *no* supplies. And the horse I do see doesn’t even have a saddle. Would you care to explain all that to me?”

Actually he wouldn’t, but rather than allow the general to get any more worked up, Jedidiah decided to take matters in hand—*literally*. Dropping his arm down from his unacknowledged salute, he reached into his right trouser pocket and pulled out a folded envelope which he held up between them.

Winfield Scott was so wrapped up in his tirade that it took a moment for him to notice, but once he did he snatched the envelope away from Jedidiah and ripped it open. Jedidiah watched him read and prepared for the coming storm. General Floyd hadn’t bothered to seal the letter, so Jedidiah hadn’t bothered *not* to read it. As correspondences tended to be, it was filled

with well wishes and other such polite sentiments, but the gist of the letter was that *regrettably*, the Georgia Militia was unable to *fully* meet the needs of General Scott's request. General Floyd had just received a new appointment to lead a campaign against renegade Indians sequestered in the Okefenokee Swamp, and the bulk of said men, horses and supplies would be accompanying him. Jedidiah watched the general's face grow darker and darker and found himself wishing he was one of those soldiers following General Floyd into the Okefenokee. Somehow a swamp teeming with alligators and hostiles seemed preferable to the hornet's nest he'd just stumbled into.

Then to Jedidiah's surprise, General Scott finally finished scrutinizing the letter and simply folded it back up and calmly returned it to its envelope. His walrus-like features

took on a thoughtful cast as his eyes seemed to look through and beyond Jedidiah, out at the empty road, as if seeking an answer to the dilemma that General Floyd had just handed him. General Scott couldn't be happy about the situation, but there was no sign of the rage that Jedidiah had been bracing himself for. Jedidiah wondered if maybe Old Fuss and Feathers had just run out of fuss, for the moment at least—*he certainly hoped so.*

The two soldiers held their respective places for a small eternity, the general not speaking a word and Jedidiah not daring too. Then, finally, General Scott took a short stroll around the porch before turning once more to Jedidiah, giving him a dubious look, “I don't suppose you're a tracker, are you?”

“No...no sir, I'm not,” Jedidiah managed after a moment as he struggled to keep up.



“Well then, do you happen to speak Cherokee?” there was an edge building in the general’s tone, leaving Jedidiah desperate to say yes, especially since he was worried his answer could have serious consequences on his time—or lack thereof, at Fort Cass, but he also realized that a lie would die a quick and possibly *violent* death. Sadly, that left the truth as his only option.

“No sir, general, I don’t...at least nothing more than hello and thank you anyway,” he answered weakly, then hurriedly added. “But I’m a good hand at plenty of other things...and you won’t find any man more willing to give you a good day’s work.”

The general cut him off with a wave and a shake of his gray head. “I’ve got more *good hands* than I can use, private. Most of them idle at the moment; and every set of them come with a mouth wanting food to eat that

I don't have. The request I sent to General Floyd was for very specific things...seasoned trackers, mountain ponies and food to help keep all of us...soldiers, civilians and Cherokee from starving.”

The general paused long enough to point at the buckskin tied to the porch rail. “Now that horse looks a bit on the gangly side to me for mountain work, but I'll give him a try,” General Scott said grudgingly before turning to face Jedidiah once more. “But why on earth would Floyd send you...that is beyond my comprehension. A horse without a saddle is bad enough, but what good are you to me? Not only do you *not* have the skills I need...but for goodness sakes, son...*you don't even have a weapon!* What good is a soldier without a weapon...answer me that?

Jedidiah realized that the general's question had been rhetorical—really more of

a statement, but the mere mention of food made Jedidiah's belly rumble, loud enough that he feared the general might have heard it. So to cover the sound he cleared his throat and held up a hand in silent protest. It was obvious that the general was in the camp that didn't even consider a soldier *to be* a soldier unless he had a *musket* in his hand. Jedidiah had run across that same bias many times in the last few years—but that didn't stop him from taking offense at the general's attitude. General Scott ignored his raised hand for a good minute or two while he continued to deride General Floyd's *short-sighted* lack of support, but eventually he did stop his *fussing* long enough to frown in Jedidiah's direction. "You have something you want to say, private?"

"Well, sir," Jedidiah began cautiously. "I understand what you were saying a moment

ago, general. And while admittedly I don't have a musket...I *do* have *two* weapons.”

Just in case the general had somehow managed to overlook them, Jedidiah pointed down at the twin pistol butts tucked behind his leather uniform belt

“Pfff...worse than useless,” General snorted with disgust. “You'd be better off trading those pathetic things for a rusty bayonet. You wouldn't lose a bit of accuracy and it would save you having to reload. The only thing pistols are good for is making noise.”

“Well sir, respectfully...that depends,” Realizing that there was far more at stake than a disagreement over firearms, Jedidiah fought to keep his tone polite. “You see, general, these here are the latest Harpers Ferry pistols. They have grooved barrels, just like a Kentucky Rifle...” Jedidiah twirled his finger around in a circle to

illustrate his point, but broke off when the general's muttonchops drooped into a deep frown.

“I'm quite familiar with the concept of rifled barrels, private,” General Scott snapped. “It doesn't change the fact that those *grooved barrels* of yours are only *ten inches* long. Or that their sights are so worthless half the time they get filed off just to get them out of the way.”

“Also valid points, sir,” Jedidiah acknowledged, but he wasn't about to let up on making his case, not when the general was attacking one of the few things in life he was still passionate about. “But again, it depends...”

Jedidiah got cut off again before he could go any further, but this time it wasn't the general who interrupted him. Another soldier, a private like Jedidiah, but several years younger and wearing a US Infantry

uniform, rounded the corner of the building. Scurrying forward on bent knees with outstretched arms, the fellow was in frantic pursuit of one of the chickens Jedidiah had spotted when he'd first arrived at the headquarters.

“Here chick, chick, chick...” the private called out in a shrill voice. If his intent was to actually persuade the chicken to jump into his waiting arms, he was going to be sadly disappointed. Before he could get anywhere near it the speckled hen let out a cackle and bolted, flapping her wings madly to escape. Not to be outdone, the young man let out a cackle of his own, dropping down to scurry forward almost on all fours as he chased after the fleeing chicken. Jedidiah had to hold back a laugh, but General Scott wasn't so amused.

“*PRIVATE...!*” the general bellowed, “*What do you think you're doing?*”

The poor soldier nearly did a nose dive into the dirt, but Jedidiah was impressed with how quickly he recovered, jumping to attention and throwing his arm up to salute the general. “S-S-Sorry, general,” he stuttered. Incredibly, his voice came out a full octave higher still than when he’d been trying to woo the chicken. “I didn’t see you there, sir. Mr. Weatherly...he sent me to collect the chickens for tonight’s dinner...but they all escaped from the pen, sir, and...”

That was as far as he got. General Scott shut him off with a tired wave of his hand and turned back to finish his debate with Jedidiah. Only Jedidiah wasn’t standing there anymore. Sensing that the private’s dilemma gave him a chance to prove his point—*and worth* to General Scott, Jedidiah had abandoned the porch to rush to the aid of the hapless chicken chaser.

“Here, let me give you a hand,” Jedidiah offered, drawing up to the private and reaching for one of his pistols. When the other soldier saw what he was about to do his eyes went wide.

“Oh...no thank you,” the private replied, waving Jedidiah off. “Mr. Weatherly’s planning on serving *roast* chicken tonight...if you put a fifty-four caliber bullet through that bird there won’t be enough left of it to make a decent soup.”

A gruff laugh sounded from the porch behind him, but Jedidiah ignored it to address the skeptical private. “I understand your concern,” Jedidiah said calmly. “But it really depends on...

“No sir...*it does not*,” the younger man shook his head adamantly. “Mr. Weatherly, he told me...Private Kelly, you go get me my chickens, and then get back here quick...no dallying, boy...or *you’ll* be the



one to end up on a spit. So again...thanks anyway, but there's no way I'm going back there with barely more than a fist full of feathers!"

"Don't worry, Private Kelly," General Scott called out with a laugh. "He'd have to actually *hit* the thing to ruin it."

Maybe it was seeing all the hopelessness and misery on his way into the fort. Or maybe he was just worn out with disappointment after disappointment, all of it going back as far as he could remember. Most likely it was nothing more than foolish pride. But whatever the reason, the general's jibe set something off deep inside Jedidiah, something dark and uncontrollable. His mother, before she passed, used to call them his '*Just Jeddy*' moments. It wasn't a term Elizabeth Cooke used fondly. She had never had a completely selfish moment in her entire life, so it was hard for her to

understand how her youngest son could suddenly seem to forget about everyone and everything else in the world but himself. Sadly, such times had come to define Jedidiah's life.

An all too familiar rushing sound come into Jedidiah's ears as the world around him seemed to slow and go dim. He was still mildly aware of General Scott somewhere in the background laughing, and of Private Kelly just starting to turn away to resume his pursuit of the elusive chicken, and even of the speckled bird itself, which realizing the soldier's intent, was starting to lift its wings to make another dash for freedom around the corner of building. But all of it seemed so, so far away; almost as if it was happening to someone else. And then suddenly, in the blink of an eye, and without thought or planning, Jedidiah held a cool pistol butt in his hand and simultaneously

the loud crack of a gunshot echoed throughout the camp.

That broke the spell. When the smoke cleared the speckled hen lay lifeless on the ground—or most of her anyway—of her head there was no sign. Jedidiah sighed and slipped the pistol back into his belt. Private Kelly was frozen in place, a shocked look on his face as he stared in disbelief at the dead chicken.

“As I was saying,” Jedidiah finished. “It *depends...on where* you hit the chicken.”

The soldier’s head tilted up and down in absent agreement but Jedidiah wasn’t sure he was really even listening. Meanwhile, behind him, the sound of the headquarters door banging open and the drumming of running boots reminded Jedidiah that he had unfinished business up on the porch. Casting a longing glance back up the road he’d so recently come down, Jedidiah turned around

to face the general. Amazingly, Winfield Scott was looking back at him with a wry smile creasing his whiskered face. And while it didn't really suit him, Jedidiah was quite relieved to see it there. If only the rest of the faces who had gathered around the general were as inviting.

A couple of the soldiers even had their weapons out and leveled on him. As disconcerting as that was, Jedidiah was fairly confident that they wouldn't actually shoot him—*not unless the general ordered them too*. Given what Jedidiah knew about the general's infamous temper—*smile or no smile*, that part of the equation was still in doubt. Every fiber within him knew it was the perfect time to keep his mouth shut, but somehow Jedidiah still found himself opening his lips to speak.

“And as far as the rest goes, sir,” Jedidiah said, lifting his chin to look the general

square in the eyes. “It depends on who’s holding onto that ten inch barrel...and whether or not they even need to use sights to hit what they’re aiming at.”

“Uh huh...well, lucky shot, I say,” the general growled, but Jedidiah had the impression the old soldier knew better, even if he wasn’t going to let anyone else get in the last word on the matter. *That* rankled Jedidiah to no end, but for once he somehow managed to restrain his unruly tongue. General Scott turned his attention to the porch, surveying the newly assembled soldiers until his eyes latched onto one in particular, a thin faced, mustached fellow standing at the rail who was still gaping at Jedidiah with astonishment.

“Lieutenant Wilks,” the general barked, snapping the young officer back to reality and making him pivot around to face the general with fear-filled eyes.

“Yes sir, general?” the lieutenant answered in a tight voice. The poor fellow’s right arm danced at his side for a moment, before eventually settling back into place as he apparently concluded that the situation didn’t require a salute.

“This is Private, ah...?” General Scott began, pointing in Jedidiah’s direction.

“Cooke, sir,” Jedidiah supplied, “Jedidiah Cooke, of the Georgia Militia.”

“Right,” General Scott nodded, looking back at the lieutenant. “Private Cooke here will be joining your North Carolina contingent. Show him where to stable his horse. And after that make sure he gets settled into the bunkhouse.”

“Yes sir, general,” Lieutenant Wilks answered with sudden vigor, this time executing a full salute with gusto. Jedidiah doubted his newfound enthusiasm was truly in response to acquiring a new recruit, more

likely it was in anticipation of escaping the general's foreboding presence. That was just fine with Jedidiah. What had been in doubt a few minutes before seemed to be settled, at least for the time being. He had no idea what being assigned to '*the North Carolina contingent*' might mean, but for the moment he could look forward to sleeping with a roof over his head. And he had high hopes that even with what the general had said about rations being scarce, there would come a time in the not too distant future when he could put some food into his empty belly.

"I'll see right to it, sir," the lieutenant promised, dropping his salute to leap off the porch and hurry toward Jedidiah in a loping run.

"Lieutenant, sir..." a familiar voice off to Jedidiah's left called out, interrupting

Lieutenant Wilks just as he was taking Jedidiah by the arm.

“Yes, what is it, soldier?” Wilks asked impatiently, deepening his voice as he turned to frown in Private Kelly’s direction. Jedidiah bit back a laugh, thinking to himself that the lieutenant had a long ways to go before anyone was going to start calling him ‘*Old Fuss and Feathers Junior*’.

“Well, I hate to have to ask, sir, but....” Kelly said sheepishly. “...before you take him away, sir...*I need two more chickens!*”

Jedidiah and Lieutenant Wilks both looked back at him in astonishment, but up on the porch, General Scott started roaring with laughter.