

**The Land Knows**

by  
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## Prologue



*She kissed him, taking the cup of steaming, fragrant tea he brought her. She looked into his face, and it was like looking into a mirror. His dark, wide-spaced eyes gazed evenly into hers. His soft, full lips, youthful and ready to smile, caused the same gentle laugh lines as hers. She traced the delicate creases with a long, slender finger, before brushing the back of her hand across his temple. His dark hair, still damp from the shower, curled around his face and neck in the same way as hers, although he wore his a little longer. He smelled faintly of sandalwood soap. Dru could not remember life without Jon.*

*“Do you ever think about our parents?” she asked, sipping the tea, suddenly struck with how little she remembered.*

*“Sometimes.” Jon looked into her eyes in his probing way, stirring her where no one else ever had.*

*“I love you,” she said simply, pulling him against her.*

*Squeezing her into his body, Jon asked, “What made you ask?”*

*“I was just wondering what we would be like if they hadn’t died. Thinking how we probably wouldn’t be together like this had they lived.”*

*“Oh, Dru,” Jon whispered, “I don’t think it would have mattered.”*

*“Do you think Mama and Papa knew?”*

*“Probably.”*

*“Me too.”*

*“What could they have done?” Jon’s voice took on a tender tone when he spoke of their grandparents.*

*“Do you think they would approve?” Dru wondered why she and Jon had never had this conversation before.*

*“I think they would have thought it most natural,” Jon said, his voice husky with emotion. He pushed Dru’s legs apart with his own, sliding between them.*

## Jon and Dru



Time, in its silent procession, moved over, through, the middle-aged couple respectfully, not marking them as it marks leaf, blade, and petal distinctly, seasonally. The changes of life were subtly implied, more than defined, in Dru and Jon. Sunlight, spraying through the branches of the trees, fell on the wooden deck of the house, bathing the naked man and woman in its early morning sheen.

Their fathers being brothers, the cousins had been staying with Mama and Papa Castle, the same as every summer, the year their parents died in England. The car crash bewildered Jon, age six, and Dru, five. It devastated their grandparents, claiming their only sons and daughters-in-law. The aging couple and the saddened youngsters found solace in each other, and in the place they called Dogwood Harbor.

In time, grief subsided and Jon and Dru awoke again to the pleasure-filled days they had known before, to the carefree hours previously limited to summer vacations. Running wild and free, the former city children explored the woods, examined nature, and collapsed into sleep every night. They grew accustomed to a kind of autonomy they could not relinquish.

By the time Dru and Jon were in college, Mama and Papa were gone. The cousins came together at Dogwood Harbor when possible. When school ended, they returned permanently. Neither of them considered anything else.

"You're gonna be late again, Professor Castle," she murmured, pressing her bare body closer to his. He caressed her breasts, as his lips slid down her throat. Nearby, a woodpecker tapped. Ducks, like a group of gossipy old ladies, made gruff, throaty noises, as they gathered at the lake, its water shimmering like mercury.

"Dana will be here tonight," she reminded Jon thirty minutes later, as he was leaving for work.

"I know."

"You don't mind do you?" Dru heard the reluctance in his voice and understood his hesitation. She felt the same way about giving up some of the freedom of living in isolation.

"No," he said, getting into his car. "I know she needs us. This place."

Dru kissed his cheek through the window, and tugged on his sweater. "Looks great," she said softly. "Yellow's definitely our color." She watched the car disappear, taking Jon into the city where he taught history at the University.

## Dogwood



The densely wooded property cannot be seen from the road. The house, rustic and unpretentious, snuggles into the embrace of the hilly terrain as if it sprouted roots and grew there. Monitored security restricts access to its winding narrow driveway. No one drops in unexpectedly. While the guarded tranquility of the place serves to keep outside pressures at minimum, its serenity is often required to soothe life's inevitable pain.

A mutual spirit of protection blankets the place, and Jon and Dru live by the belief that the land, a living, breathing entity, protects them—that they, and it, share a kindred commitment, an uncommon guardianship. This inbred sense of naturalism, pantheism flows through their veins, and through the veins of everything upon and in the land.

In earlier times, the Hasinai Caddo Indians inhabited the place and the surrounding East Texas area. One of them—a beautiful woman named Dogwood Flower—was Dru and Jon's earliest known ancestor. Serenity and bliss reigned then, as it does now. However, in between then and now, there was a time when brutality and malice plagued the place.

After the turbulent years of the early Republic, the land itself seemed bent on revenge, seeking retribution for the injustice, which had rained down like a curse upon it and its people under the name of the European divinity. Some believed the place held a vendetta against the very concept of ownership. It seemed the native spirits, rising up against the intrusion, unified for the restoration of the natural balance of things, and enabled the land to repossess itself. A heritage of calamity and death trickled down through clueless generations, through family bloodlines like the ink in the scribbled words upon their property deeds.

Finally, under Dru and Jon's great grandmother's guardianship, amity returned to the place, reestablishing the kinship between her native blood and the land. Janie Rose Freeman Castle recounted the saga and the story of her family's sacred trust to her grandchildren when they were old enough to understand, just as it had been related it to her.



### Dru And Jon's Family Tree

**Dogwood Flower** born 1820 near present day Silverton, Texas, the child of Caddo Indians

Married in 1836 to Georg Friedel, surveyor/explorer/farmer

**Running Doe Friedel**, born 1842

Married Franklin Dobson, Farmer

**Whitedove "Dovie" Dobson**, born 1862

Married in 1878 to Hollie Camper, Blacksmith

**Linda Rose Camper**, born 1882  
Married Grayson Freeman, Blacksmith, born 1879  
**Jayne Rose Freeman**, born 1903  
Married John Woodson Castle, Pharmacist  
**Randall Andrew Castle**, Chemist,  
born 1925  
Married Anna Susan Watson, Teacher  
**Jon Grayson Castle**, Professor,  
born 1956  
**Daniel Gray Castle**, Physician,  
born 1927  
Janet Druscilla Overton, Physician  
**Druscilla Rose Castle**, author,  
born 1957



***Dogwood Flower*** lived with her clan along the Sabine River in East Texas in the early 1800's. During the infancy of the Republic of Texas—which derived its very name from the Hasinai word *tejas*—the roots of its indigenous population were as deeply entwined with its soil as those of its gigantic ancient hardwood trees. The day the militiamen came to remove her people, Dogwood Flower was away from her lodge, a circular hut covered with cane, which housed eight other families of her clan.

The sixteen-year-old girl had wandered into the woods searching for the beautyberries used for painting the tattoos the women of their lodge found so attractive. From high in a tree, she heard sounds of the approaching horses, the shouts of the riders besieging her village. She froze at the screams of her people—her parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, her brothers and sisters—as they were whipped, then roped and bound, herded like animals toward the river. She crouched there watching until they all disappeared, then waited for darkness in the hollow of a tree. After that first night, she waited through the next day until the second darkness came. With a heavy heart, she grieved in silence for her family, for all the people who had been murdered or driven away, making room for droves of European settlers pouring into the region. She dared not return to the lodge if she were to survive.

Out of necessity, she climbed down from the safety of the oak tree on the second night and crept into the shadows of the giant cedars and pines. The crowded timber blocked the moonlight considerably, offering cover from any watching eye. Her beaded moccasins made no noise as she flitted, invisible as the wind spirit and swift as an arrow, over the floor of the forest toward the eternal natural spring that had served her people for as long as there was memory. There she drank water cupped in her hands, and found persimmons, plump and mushy ripe, for the frost had already come and winter approached.

Dogwood Flower found a small clearing in the moonlight, and carefully crawled inside the opening where a mother deer and her fawn rested. The

*young girl nestled into a bed of leaves next to the animals, which remained undisturbed beside her, sensing somehow that she meant them no harm and needed the warmth of their bodies. Without fear, the doe brushed Dogwood Flower's arm gently with her black nose.*

*Georg Friedel, a young German from North Carolina, had come alone to the wilderness of East Texas in search of a new life and adventure. An independent surveyor and student of the Caddoan culture, the twenty-five year old had taken it upon himself to explore the Indian habitat along the Sabine River near Dogwood Flower's family farmland and hunting grounds.*

*Discovering the little clearing, he glimpsed briefly the girl's buckskin dress from the corner of his eye and mistook her for a deer. The sun had scarcely risen, its light spreading only a dim glow throughout the woods. Startled by the man, Dogwood Flower drew back, gasping in terror. His eyes locked onto her large black ones, and he saw her fear before he saw her beauty.*

*Georg Friedel had a profound attraction for the magnificent Hasinai and he understood their kinship with the proud and sacred land. He was utterly mortified by the predatory horror inflicted upon these peaceful, highly civilized people, and was dreadfully ashamed of the vileness that caused this exquisite little person to shrink from him. Reaching into his shoulder bag, he produced some dried venison. The girl's eyes fell immediately to the food being offered her, and hesitantly reached out to take it. She pushed herself backward, further into the clearing, and chewed on the meat.*

*He stood his ground, watching her but not moving. His blue eyes sparkled and crinkled at the corners, as a gentle smile smoothed his face. He stood there—arms crossed, legs spread, his rifle strapped over one shoulder, his supply bag hanging from the other—for a good fifteen minutes. He knew a few Hasinai words, and after a few more minutes of quiet scrutiny, he attempted a greeting. "Kúha?ahat?"*

*She studied him, as the strange sounding words played around inside her head. "Kúha?ahat?" He repeated. "Hello," he said, deciding to alternate the greeting, hoping for a response. "Kúha?ahat?" He touched his chest with his forefinger and then turned his finger toward her, saying, "Hello." "Kúha?ahat?"*

*"Hello," she said cautiously, baffled by this man's sudden appearance, and his awkward attempt at Hasinai language. What did he want and where had he come from? He was dressed in buckskin, like a hunter, with his pant legs worn inside heavy boots that were laced to his knees. His blonde hair was long and curly, and he was hatless. The sun had bronzed his amber-toned skin. His gentle manner and easy composure calmed her, and relaxing a bit, she lost some of the tension between her shoulders.*

*Slowly, he sat down on the ground opposite her, in the opening to the clearing, his hands resting on both knees. He laid his flintlock rifle on the ground in front of him, and continued to speak to her in kindness with his eyes. Georg attempted the few Hasinai phrases he knew, repeating them alternately with the English translation. He grinned broadly, his white teeth flashing, when she repeated some of the words, nodding her head slightly when he offered the English meaning, at times attempting to mimic him in her response.*

*“Kúmbak’ihah Georg. My name is Georg.” He pointed to his chest, and repeated the phrases several times.*

*Finally, a smile tugged at one corner of her mouth. “Georg,” she said timidly, pointing at him.*

*“Sisímbak’ihah? What is your name?” He asked.*

*The story goes that they sat there for hours, observing each other, getting acquainted. When the sun had reached the middle of the sky, shining down into the clearing upon them, he offered his hand to her. She hesitated, her face searching his, her heart pounding in a combination of fear and curiosity. In the back of her mind, as legend relates it, she wondered if he might be a great white xinesi priest sent by Caddi Ayo to reunite her with her people. In her confused state, she did not comprehend that life as she had known it had ended, or that her clan had vanished forever. That heart wrenching realization would come soon enough, to remain a shadowy cloak of sorrow over all the days of her life..*

*That day Georg led her toward the river path, and they walked for almost a mile, heading into the sun, which was beginning its slow descent into the westward sky. When they reached the river, he took her into his canoe, and carried her upstream to his campsite where she became his wife. In time, they built a cabin, and planted crops, and Dogwood Flower had many children.*

*One of her daughters she named **Running Doe** Friedel. When Doe was old enough, she married Franklin Dobson, a farmer whose family had been granted a large tract near Silverton. When **Dovey Rose**, Doe and Franklin’s only child, was eighteen years old, she married Big Hollie Camper, producing four daughters. The oldest, **Linda Rose**, kept the memories alive.*

## Chapter Three



### Grayson Freeman

It was late afternoon, November 1894. Buck Freeman pulled back on the reins. He sprang from the wagon seat with as much vigor as his teenage son, Grayson, who had ridden beside him on the buckboard the entire trip. Nearly two months back, they had harnessed their pair of plow horses, Luke and Lucy, and pulled out of Grove Hill, Alabama. Mary Jane, Gray's mother, had ridden with her three other children in the back of the canvas-covered wagon. They had made good time, had good weather. "Had good luck," Buck said.

Standing now on Texas soil, Gray remembered the faces of the Alabama loved ones they had left behind. His aging grandparents', aunts and uncles, and cousins had kept tight upper lips during the departure. Not a tear had fallen as each of them kissed the travelers good-bye, but their eyes could not hide the sadness. Everyone knew it was a last farewell.

"Texas is too far," Grandpa Greer had said. "Way too far." So, he and Grandma Lillian bid painful adieus to their beloved Mary Jane, to their grandchildren. Gray would never forget them all standing there in the middle of the red dusty road, waving, their images swallowed up almost immediately in the pre-dawn darkness. On that early September morning, now only a memory, Buck had turned all their faces toward Texas.

Gray watched his parents climb down from the wagon. At forty-three, older than Buck by five years, Mary Jane had accepted the dream that had altered their lives, and she looked now to the future. As far back as Gray could remember he had heard about this piece of East Texas soil. How it pulled at Buck, like a magnet.

"This is it, Janie Girl," Buck said in his deep, rich voice. His uncommonly handsome face, streaked with grime and seasoned by the wind and sun, smiled up at his wife as he helped her from the wagon. Gray had never seen him look at her in quite that way. Watching them, just hearing the thrill in his father's voice, squeezed some of the sadness from Gray, some of the sorrow that had settled over him when he remembered his mother's family left behind in Alabama.

Holding Mary Jane's hands in his rough, calloused ones, Buck threw back his head and shouted loudly, "Didn't I tell ya, Grayson? Breathe the air!"

Gray took a deep breath, then let out an obliging yell, which reverberated through the pre-dusk stillness, rattling the leaves. Some of them fell, shimmering and golden, as they floated on the evening air, coming to rest on the ground. His little brother and baby sister chased each other around the trees, between the sweet gum, and the ancient oaks. Their restless feet, rustled the dried leaves, kicking them about like scraps of brown parchment. They raced about, free at last from the tiresome confines of the crowded wagon.

Mary Jane embraced her husband. "Thank God, we're home at last. Oh, Buck, you're finally home," she said, trying to hold onto him for a minute. But she could not. He ran toward the children.

"Kiddoes, you're Texans, you hear me? We're all Texans," he whooped, scooping three-year-old Eva into his arms, tossing the giggling child high into the air.

"Am I a Texan, Papa?" Four-year-old Griff climbed his father's leg, pulling and straining, eyes wide with question.

"You betcha," Buck said, reaching down to lift his younger son to his shoulder. With both babies clinging to his neck, Buck threw back his head, letting his laughter ring aloud and clear.

Gray stood off a little to himself, and watched his father drop the children back to the ground, watched Buck scurry about giving everyone orders. He hoped his father's happiness was contagious, for Gray yearned for the same euphoria. It will come, he told himself. For, above all, he was his father's son.

Cautious by nature, the fifteen-year-old sniffed the air. His senses had never been sharper. He could smell night approaching. There was something in the wind, something intangible, unsettling Gray a bit. It's just strange to me. That's all it is, he thought. I'll get used to it. The evening air became crisper by the minute, hinting at an early frost.

"Y'all hop to it," Buck said. "Give your Ma and Ellie a hand in the wagon. Me and Grayson's gonna make camp, and wash up." Gray was already running toward Buck. When his father slapped him on the back, Gray felt ten feet tall. He wanted nothing more than to please his father. The boy unhitched the Lucy and Luke from the wagon, leading them over to the nearby creek for watering. He left their bridles on and tied them to nearby tree branches.

Soon, they had the fire burning, its glow lighting the campsite. Gray's older sister, Ellie, helped their mother prepare the usual supper, beans and corn fritters. Nobody complained.

Later, four pairs of glowing eyes reflected the dancing flames, as the children waited expectantly. Their papa was a storyteller, and his tales fascinated them all. Especially Gray. The boy usually tried to separate himself from his brother and sisters, but when Buck had a story to tell, he settled in with the rest of them.

Buck always began the same way. He'd pull off his old sweat-circled hat, and shake out his long curly hair. Then, taking out his tobacco pouch, he would slowly proceed to make his smoke, licking the paper just enough so that he could roll it the way he liked it. With a burning stick from the fire, he lit the cigarette. Taking a deep drag, he exhaled loudly, blowing perfect little circles.

But that night, Buck did something he had never done before. He handed the lit cigarette to Gray. "Have a smoke, Grayson," he said, his face serious, his pride showing plainly in his eyes.

Gray reached for the smoke his father offered. No one existed around the campfire at that moment but the two men. "Don't mind if I do," Gray said, praying his voice wouldn't crack. At first, his lungs rebelled against the noxious fumes. He suppressed a cough, and inhaled deeper, exhaling like a seasoned

smoker. His eyes gazed into Buck's, evenly, self-satisfied. Gray knew that in a few years he'd look just like his father. Everyone told Gray he favored Buck, had the same deep set eyes the color of turquoise, the thick, blonde curls they had both inherited from Grandpa Freeman.

"Man," Griff whispered, admiring the way his brother smoked that cigarette. "Man." The little boy's green eyes sparkled with envy. He took after the Greer side, his hair deep auburn, like his mother's.

Buck and Gray smoked while they waited for Mary Jane to put the last tin cup away. Buck would never begin without her. Finally, she sat down on the blanket and snuggled inside the circle of his arm. "You are a wizard, Buck," she whispered into his shoulder. "Enchanted us all, you have."

Buck cleared his throat, and his eyes glistened suddenly with unshed tears as he stared out into the universe. "Only in Texas are stars so bright," he said. Tiny pinpoints of light, countless numbers, splattered the pitch-black sky in a glittering exhibition. "Look at the Big Dipper." Buck pointed at the constellation. "Looks so close to us, don't it?" All eyes swept the sky. Just then, a star fell, a streak of shooting light. "Make your wishes!" Buck instructed. "It'll come true if you make it before the star's gone."

Gray couldn't shake the uneasy feeling. He watched the star with undefined apprehension. Could it be an omen? He wondered. Therein lay the fundamental difference between the father and son. One, the eternal optimist, the other, less so.

Gray shrugged off his obscure sensitivity, and attempted his wish anyway. Too late, he thought. The star had vanished. He returned his attention to his father.

"This story really happened." Buck always said that. His mysterious glance slid over the eager faces gathered around him. There was something unique, though, in the way Buck peered into Gray's eyes now. And Gray knew Buck really meant it this time, that the story they were about to hear was true.

"This piece of land's been in the Freeman family since it was a Mexican grant," he began, his arms stretching wide as though trying to encircle the land, embracing it. "My Papa, with Uncle Martin and Uncle James, settled it first, in '50, when statehood was still new to Texas, over six hundred acres between the three of 'em.

"Then," he hugged Mary Jane, but stared right into Gray's eyes, "when the War broke out, Martin and James went off to fight and never came back. Both of 'em killed in Mississippi, at Vicksburg. That just left Papa. Of course, bein' the oldest brother, he'd always been the one to pretty much run things, so runnin' three farms wadn't the problem.

"No sir, it was tryin' to take care of ever'body, doin' all the work by hisself. Not to mention protectin' all of 'em from the outlaw element that thrived 'round here in them days. Martin and James both left families, young wives and little babies."

"Now, Papa's biggest problem was with the Cain brothers, just a bunch of murderin' horse thieves who happened to be his neighbors. Why, they owned about two thousand acres. Between the six brothers." Buck paused for a

minute. Then, letting his eyes rest squarely on Gray's again, he said, "Of course, that may've all changed by now.

"Anyway, the Cain brothers treated ever'body that settled the adjoining land grants like they's trespassin'. Why, them Cains'd just help themselves to ever'body's horses like they's runnin' wild and eligible for the takin'. And shoot anybody who tried to stop 'em.

"'Bout all you could do 'bout it, was try to be ready for 'em. Ever' man for hisself, mostly. It was Reconstruction days, not much law. Well, Papa's nerves got real bad, tryin' to watch out for all the women and kids. He decided it'd be best if he bought out his sisters-in-laws' tracts, and send them and their babies back home to Tennessee, where they'd all come from." Buck shook his head, a shadow of sadness crossing his face, obviously touched by the memory of the long, lost relatives.

"The back part of Papa's land connected with the Cains'. Now, ever'body knew them Cains was stealin' horses and runnin' 'em way out to West Texas to sell. Out there, they'd steal more and bring 'em back here. Had a real racket goin'. Anyway, Papa put up with 'em for 'bout three years, just tried to keep outta their way. The bad trouble started when Papa discovered they's hidin' a bunch of stolen horses on his back hundred acres."

Outside the family circle, the night hesitated. Buck's words touched every ear, Gray's in a special way, then drifted away to mingle with the leaves, the wind, and the stars. The fire's brownish yellow flames snatched greedily at the air for nourishment. At the center, the big log split, and groaned in its agony, spitting sparks and embers at the sky, and at the people cuddled around its warmth. Griff and Eva snuggled against Gray, nudging their way under each of his arms. Gray definitely could smell frost in the air. He pulled a blanket over himself and his little brother and sister, not missing a word Buck said.

"I's twelve years old by that time. Papa didn't tell none of us, not even Mama what he's gonna do. He snuck down there one night." Buck lowered his voice. "He cut the ropes the Cains had stretched from tree to tree, fencing the animal in, and drove the horses out. He said they's probably over three hunerd of 'em. Set 'em all free. He knew the Cains'd be comin' for him." His voice rose a level, but still carried its conspiratory tone.

"I remember he woke us all up, put us in the wagon and took us over to Ben Cook's place. Then, he went back to the house to wait.

"Papa took both his rifles, them ol' Beals revolvers we still got out there in the wagon, with him out to the barn. He even took my Grandpa Harris' Colt Walker pistol. He crawled up in the hayloft where he could see 'em comin'. The barn wadn't more'n seventy-five yards from the house. Right at daybreak, all six of 'em rode up.

"Now, they's a bunch of ruthless rascals. Especially Ezekiel, the oldest. He had a real unnatural habit. Ever'where he went in the daytime, he took his youngun with him. I mean, just a little bitty ol' boy, now, not more'n five years old, riding behind his daddy, squeezed into the same saddle. Ezekiel counted on nobody shootin' at him with the kiddo coverin' his back. Papa said he remembered one time, they all rode into the cemetery, during a burial, and

started shootin' up the crowd of mourners. Said Ezekiel had that little boy with him then. He'd always be the last to ride off, following the others, usin' that little'un for protection. Real cowardly bunch.

"So, that mornin'," Buck paused, rolling a fresh smoke, "Papa said Ezekiel fired first, then they all started shootin' through the windows of our house. Bullet holes riddled the wood, splintering the door, and shattered all the glass. They didn't intend for any of us to get up that mornin'. Papa waited. When they's finished shootin' up the place, they got off their horses. Papa watched as they set fire to the curtains through all the broken windows. Ezekiel's little boy stayed on the horse.

"That's when Papa poked his rifle through the opening of the hay loft, and started squeezin' the trigger. He got Ezekiel first, right through the head. Then, before the others knew what had happened, Papa shot 'em all. Said he didn't waste a shot, either. Then he picked up the other rifle and shot each one of 'em again, just to make sure. Papa never forgot the look on the face of that little boy, before the horses bolted and ran. He said the little fellar rode off, bouncin' in that saddle like a rag doll.

"Papa couldn't save the house. It burned clean to the ground. We all stayed with the Cooks for a while, they's real good neighbors. The Cain family, all the wives and younguns, cleared out. Ever'body said the women later became Mormons. That they moved out to California, or Arizona, somewhere to live, taking every last drop of Cain blood with 'em. Nobody was sorry to see 'em go. Anyway, after that, things quieted down. Ever'body forgot about bein' scared, and life got real peaceful around here. But Papa never forgot.

"We finally had to go back to Alabama, where Mama's people were at that time. Papa just couldn't get over all the killin' he had to do. But, he kept the land, and paid the taxes. He always said, 'It's all yours, Buchanon, when you think you're man enough.'

"So," Buck crunched out the butt of the cigarette into the ground, "here we sit, boys and girls, right smack dab in the middle of it." He jumped to his feet, rubbing his hands together briskly. "B-r-r-r," he said, his voice sounding hoarse. He added wood to the flickering fire.

So engrossed in Buck's story, Gray had not even noticed the fire had died down. "We better turn in, hit the ol' sack," Buck said, looking around at each of them still sitting, mesmerized, in his or her place. "Grayson, me 'n you'll ride over in the mornin' early, so you can see where Papa cut that rope." Buck stoked the red-hot embers until the fire roared again, melting the chill. "We'll look for the old home site, all grown over with briars, I 'magine. It's been over twenty-five years. See what's left of the barn. Then, later on, we can go check out the neighbors." Buck smiled down at Mary Jane. "Let folks know the Freemans are back."

"How many neighbors we got, Pa?" Gray asked.

"Don't know. We didn't any of us keep in touch, after Papa died." Buck squeezed Gray's shoulder affectionately. "But talk had it, last Papa heard, that the Cains just abandoned their land. Don't know if they still own it, though. Guess they could've kept up the taxes." Then slapping his hands together playfully at Eva and Griff, he said, "Now, to bed with ya, ya two little monkeys."

Gray's head jerked towards the woods behind them. "Did you hear that, Pa?" His eyes searched the darkness, but saw nothing. "Sounded like something rustlin' 'round in the leaves."

"Ain't nothin' out there, Son. You's spooked by my tale, that's all. Might be a critter or two, though," Buck added with an amused chuckle. He ruffled Gray's hair.

Not convinced, Gray's ears, too in tuned to the darkness to break the connection with the unseen, remained alert to night sounds outside the camp. "That tale true?" he asked, still looking into the trees. "Grandpa Freeman really killed them Cains?" Perhaps he had read more into the way Buck had looked at him earlier, maybe smoking the cigarette had given him a false sense of importance, maybe the story wasn't true at all. Just another one of Pa's tales.

"Had to Gray. He just had to." Buck was helping Mary Jane lay out the bedrolls. "Don't worry 'bout it. 'S been a long time since then. This's a diff'rent place now. It's our home, Son."

Taking his bedroll out to a clearing in the woods, Gray busied himself, getting his bed ready. He knew it would get cold so far from the fire, but he wanted to be alone, away from the others, with his thoughts. He could hear Griff pleading with their mother.

"Please, Mama, let me go sleep with Gray, out in the woods. Please," his baby voice begged.

"Well, come on, Griff," Gray hollered, "but I ain't puttin' up with your squirmin' 'round all night." His voice sounded peculiar to his own ears, seemed to jump back at him from behind the trees. Come to think of, he thought, it might be nice having Griff next to him tonight.

Soon, everyone slept. Except Gray. He kept thinking about Grandpa Greer back in Alabama, about Grandpa Freeman, who died before Gray was born. The wind had shifted more from the north, and somewhere a pack of coyotes howled. Sparks flew from the fire, swirling for a moment, before they were gone. Just like the Cain's in Pa's tale, Gray thought. Gone. The horses snorted restlessly, their bridles jingling. Gray snuggled down in his blankets. Griff lay perfectly still. Fearful I'm gonna send him back, Gray thought, circling his arm around his brother's warm body.

Soon, Griff snored quietly beside him in the bedroll. Just before Gray drifted off to sleep, he thought he saw the blackness move. But it had been a long day, and he was too tired to worry about it any longer. Come mornin', things'll look different, he thought. In that last split second, just before his consciousness slipped over the edge, at that point when there's no turning back, Gray imagined stealthy shadows creeping among the trees. Then he slept.

The sound of gunfire tore into Gray's unconscious mind without warning, jerking him awake. In a surreal stupor, his dumbfounded eyes finally focused on two ghost-like figures, guns drawn. But only one of them was discharging bullets, spraying them into the bedrolls scattered around the dying fire. The steel of the weapons glinted in the moonlight. Gray's first impulse was to bolt, toward his family. But some sense of basic survival penetrated his befuddled mind. Enough anyway to keep him huddled under the covers, horrified. He pinned Griff

beneath him, clamping his hand tightly over the little boy's mouth. He heard Ellie scream once. No one else had made a sound. Finally, the blasting stopped. He thought he was dreaming.

From under the covers, Gray watched the murdering shadow kick dirt on the fire, smothering any warmth. The other, mounted, ready to ride, waited for the hesitating gunman, as he lingered over the silent bedrolls. The rider held the reins of Buck's horses behind him. "Hey, Zeke!" his voice called out. "Let's git."

This was no dream.

Gray struggled with Griff, and knew with crystal clarity that the rest of the family was dead. Shot! Numbed by that knowledge more than by fear, he held on to Griff. He wanted to scream out, to run for a rifle, to blow their heads away, but he couldn't risk Griff's life.

He wanted to cry, but he was afraid they might still be lurking nearby. He wanted to go to his family. Could I be dreamin'? Buck's resonant voice banged around inside his head. Me 'n Grayson's gonna make camp, make camp, make camp—The words would fade into laughter, his mother laughing, all of them laughing. They can't be dead, Gray's thoughts cried out. How can this be? Ever'body'll be gettin' up soon. Mama'll be fixin' breakfast. They can't be dead. No, no, no. He buried his face into his brother's smoke-filled hair.

"Please, Griff, be quiet, please be quiet," Gray whispered, still afraid to take his hand from the little boy's mouth. He had stopped struggling, but Gray could feel his hot breath on his hand, his heart pounding. Grayson, me 'n you'll ride over in the mornin' early, so you can see where Papa cut that rope, that rope—Hey, Zeke, the other man had said. Zeke! Gray knew. Zeke! Ezekiel's little boy, he thought. His heart hesitated, and his blood froze at the realization.

The night hung on, but the wind calmed. Frost formed on the leaves, on the bedroll where the brothers crouched. On the lifeless bundles not far away. On the cold gray ashes of the snuffed-out campfire. *Oh, Mama. Pa.* Gray clung to their names. *Please, don't be dead. Don't be dead! Eva. Ellie. No, no, no. Not all of you!* He sobbed into Griff's hair, silently, stricken with the overwhelming loss, with an indescribable dread.

Then, the darkness lightened. Sunlight filtered through the trees. Most of them had been stripped bare from the night's norther, but the bark was blanketed with a fuzzy coating of frost. The woods were silent, except for the sound of Gray's shovel. Digging, digging, digging. The soft earth underneath the glistening leaves offered little resistance.

Griff, voiceless and shivering uncontrollably under his blanket, was overcome with shock. Gray could feel his bewildered eyes watching him carry the blood-soaked bedrolls, one after another, until every grave was filled. Gray felt numb, detached.

Finally, Gray climbed into the wagon. He took the little metal cash box containing all the money Buck and Mary Jane had in the world. Two hundred dollars. That's what Buck had gotten for the little farm back in Alabama. Gray took a deep breath, then, scooping a handful of bullets from the wooden ammunition box, he shoved them into his pocket. He tried not to look around the

inside of the wagon, at his family's belongings. Fighting to keep his composure, he stuck the old Colt Walker pistol inside his belt.

Gray buried the cash box next to Buck, for safekeeping. He'd come back for it later. Somehow, Gray knew no one would be back, not for a while anyway. He knew it with as much certainty as he knew the identity of the killer. Ezekiel Cain's little boy. Zeke. A grown man now, not that much younger than Buck. Had to be him, getting his revenge. Gray knew it!

What Gray couldn't know was why Buck had not been more cautious, more guarded. Had he not considered the kind of man the son of Ezekiel Cain would grow up to be? Grandpa Freeman had left them twin legacies: the home place, and its bent-on-revenge neighbors. How could Buck have overlooked that?

I'll git that bastard Zeke, Gray vowed silently. And the rest of his wretched kin, if he has any. Make 'em wish they'd never seen Texas, or heard the Freeman name. That's what I'll do, he mutely promised the four mounds of leaf and sand at his feet. "He'll pay, Pa," he whispered to his father's grave, "if it's the last thing I ever do, he'll pay."

Strengthened by his deadly resolve, Gray cradled his brother in his bloodstained arms, and set out for Benjamin Cook's place. Buck's words were as clear as they had been the night before. We all stayed with the Cooks for a while, they's real good neighbors.

"Griffin?" Gray asked, more to himself than to his brother. His throat ached from dryness and sorrow, his voice cracked with the first words to be spoken aloud since he couldn't remember how long. "Reck'n Benjamin Cook's still alive?" The words sounded unfamiliar, as foreign as the place itself.

The four-year-old only whimpered, like a scared puppy, as he clung to his brother. "Huh?" Gray asked, not expecting an answer. Griff's little body shook uncontrollably, and Gray hugged him closer to his breast.

"Doncha worry 'bout a thing, Griffin," he soothed. "I'm gonna take care of ya. Grayson's gonna take care of ever'thing." He watched his own blood-spattered boots take one step after the other in the only direction he knew to take.

"Gray?" Griff's muffled voice surprised Gray, "Don't like Texas," the little boy's voice shook the words loose. "I wanna go home," he said, starting to moan. He buried his face deeper into Gray's chest, as they approached the assumed Cook Place. Grayson Freeman tightened his upper lip.