

Towanna's desperate search for a way to escape the poverty and despair of Mississippi's cotton fields leads him into World War 2, where he must face death, loss, and his deepest fears to find his way home.

Second Son: A Novel of the Deep South

By Herman Willis Logan and Kathleen R. Parrish

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SECOND SON

SMALL TOWN SINS AND
SECRETS CAN BE DEADLY.

A Novel of the Deep South

HERMAN WILLIS LOGAN

continued by Kathleen Parrish

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Chapter 1:

A Penny a Pound

September 1938

BLACK THUNDERHEADS spewed white lightning and a rumbling tirade across the field where Angus Whitaker kept watch over his cotton field, his hired pickers, and the weather. The cotton was a bumper crop this year, and his pickers were eager to make some money, but his fields had barely dried enough to start the harvest, and already another deluge was on its way. The brawny sharecropper glared at the sky in impotent fury.

“Ain’t fair, you bitch.” He sucked at the cud of mule tobacco in his left cheek and spat in frustration. The spittle landed on a fire ant mound, and the ants burst from their underground burrow in wild disorder. “Drown, you bastard pissants, you.”

He stepped away from the raging insects and stole another glance at the roiling sky. He could rage all he wanted. It made no difference to the weather.

The next bolt crackled through the air, but the thunder sounded a bit farther away. Harvest season in the Delta was always a chancy business. A man couldn’t win against Mississippi weather—the best he could do was survive. A dollop of warm rain pelted him on the nose. Angus reckoned this skirmish a draw and turned his attention back to his crew.

They were a motley assortment, mostly settlement folk, and offspring of local families, typical of farming communities in Sunflower County, Mississippi. Not much raising, little

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education, and of no specific breeding. Still, he reckoned he'd got the best of the lot, no matter the color of their skin. Angus judged his pickers by the weight of their tar sacks.

Whitaker's eldest son moved steadily among them. Clifford Lee was far from his best picker, but Angus believed having his boy in the crew spurred the paid workers to a better picking average. Besides, it was past time to put more responsibility for the farm on younger shoulders.

Today, Angus suspected Cliff had more than farming on his mind. His seventeenth birthday had passed, and being large and overdeveloped for his age, wild rushes of emotion gripped him in such a state of confusion he seemed blind to the fact rain was imminent. Right now, the boy seemed blind to everything but Joreen Anderson's lush, swinging hips about twenty feet ahead of him.

Angus hid a grudging smile. He'll change, damn it, I know he will.

His gaze moved on to the Anderson sisters. Both girls plucked the soft white bolls and stuffed them expertly into long, tar-bottomed sacks strapped across their shoulders. Both were good, steady workers, but Kathy, who'd turned fourteen last month, still wanted to attend the settlement school. Joreen, at a ripe sixteen, just plain didn't *want* to learn.

He felt reluctant sympathy for the older girl. Picking cotton gained her nothing but scratched and sunburned hands. The money he paid her bought food for the younger kids at home. With thirteen children to help feed, Joreen wouldn't see a penny of it. Why the hell, Angus wondered, did PeeTee Anderson make all them kids if he couldn't feed and take care of them?

But in the end, it wasn't his business. PeeTee had a wandering eye, a restless pecker, and likely had bastards scattered halfway across Sunflower County.

A sudden, sharp wind rippled over his crop, and a fine mist fell over the field. Angus, his shoulders hunched, walked quickly to the cotton shed at the side of the field. Once there, he raised his arms and shouted for the pickers to come forward and weigh up.

Krane Edwards and Krane's wife, Tincy, reached him first. Angus hooked their tar sacks to the hanging scales and carefully moved the scale pea forward. Ninety-nine pounds. Knocking off four pounds for the tar sacks left a net balance of ninety-five. Whittaker paid a penny a pound.

Angus pulled the worn tobacco sack containing his seed money from his hip pocket. "Seeing as how you had to quit early, I'd say that's pretty good picking, Krane."

"Me and Tincy, we'll do better tomorrow." Krane glanced nervously at the roiling sky. "We'll get an early start if the cotton ain't too wet. We got to get it while we can."

He counted out the money, and then counted it again into Krane's hand. The Anderson girls came next. He weighed their sacks and handed the coins to Joreen as Kathy, the younger sister, looked on.

Angus was forty-seven, but he could not help but notice the full breasts swelling above the neckline of Joreen's blouse. "See you girls tomorrow, eh?"

"If it don't rain too much, Mr. Angus." Joreen's pink, sensuous lips broke into an impish grin.

His gaze dropped to Joreen's hips as the two barefoot girls sauntered down the turn row toward the Anderson house.

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----***Damn if that don't look like two hog shoats in a tater sack.* Angus tried to ignore the throbbing in his groin. Perhaps all his vigor was not yet gone, and what had lain dormant for weeks might yet rise, yearning for the heat of passion. But the sensation slowly faded. Angus shivered and looked away.

The remaining pickers were paid as fast as Angus could manipulate his scale, his arithmetic, and his seed money. Cliff came last, but Angus didn't bother to weigh his son's sack. It always helped to have a little overage in the bale.

A distant movement caught his eye, and Angus stared down the turn row. He could just make out the thin form of his second son, Towanna, hurrying home from school. The boy's lean body hunched over his schoolbooks, and he slipped and almost fell.

Angus frowned. Towanna's books belonged to the county, and Angus was liable if they were damaged. Anything owed would come out of his seed money. Towanna had turned a scrawny fifteen in June. It was past time to pull him out of Miss Rosa's one-room schoolhouse and set him to work the fields next to Cliff. The boy had almost finished eighth grade. That ought to be enough.

Looking closely at his figuring, Angus calculated he had enough for a full bale that could be ginned, come morning. The sale would provide the cash to hire another bale picked and still set some aside for his land fund. He tucked his seed money away and headed for the house. Behind him, Cliff tossed his sack into the cotton shed. The rain fell harder, and whips of lightning licked the distant trees. Knowing his boy, Angus yelled for Cliff to close and latch the shed door.

With his last burst of energy, Angus leaped onto the front porch of the faded, white tenant's house that served as the

Whitaker family home. He took a moment to catch his breath, then stooped to untie his shoes, forcing them off, toe to heel, flexing his bare feet against the smooth, worn boards.

“That you, Angus?” called his wife, Klara, from inside the house.

“Yep. We made the first bale.” Some of the tension eased out of him with that statement. “Hate to see it rain, though.”

Slipping through the screened door, Klara settled herself into the porch’s cane-bottom chair. Angus sat on the edge of the porch, swinging his bare feet through the streams of warm water pouring off the weathered tin roof.

“Towanna get home before it started pouring?”

“Yes, he’s in the kitchen doing his homework.” Klara’s pride in Towanna was evident in her voice.

“He’d be a damn sight better off if he cared more about learning to farm,” Angus told her. “That much book learning ain’t never gonna do him any good. He can read and cipher well enough.” *Hell, the boy can read and cipher better’n me.*

He could feel Klara’s frown against the back of his head. She believed him unjust in his attitude about Towanna’s hunger for an education, proud her boy wanted to read and write and figure more than simple math. Miss Rosa had even mentioned college and a scholarship as a possibility.

Angus knew better. Scholarships only went to those that didn’t need ‘em. A sharecropper’s boy from the Delta stood no chance, no matter how deserving.

Staring at the rain puddles under his feet, Angus considered the prospects of his two sons. Towanna was slender and “delicate,” unfit for heavy field work. Cliff was far more inclined to be manly. Angus still hoped his boys had inherited his drive

to work hard and get ahead, to be more than poor rental farmers, but sometimes he feared his ambitions for them would never be realized.

There was nothing to do now but farm. What with little learning and being tied down to a family—*hell, I'm doing damn good to be alive.*

Eighteen years he and Klara had been married. They started out with big ideas on how they would earn their stake and become landowners. They moved their dreams and hopes into this house, but the years rolled by, and their dreams faded like the whitewash on the weather-beaten slat siding.

Tucker, who owned and leased over 1900 acres of prime cotton land in Sunflower County, had given them their choice of tenant houses. The one Klara settled on boasted three rooms, a kitchen with a woodburning stove and hand pump, a small bedroom off the side of the kitchen, and a generous front room that could also serve as a bedroom as the family grew.

The house sat about forty feet back from the turn row on a generous half-acre. It included a good well, an outhouse near the back door, and a barn large enough to house their two mules, a milk cow, some chickens, and the work wagon.

Tucker made no objection when Angus added a shed behind the house with a rooftop tank for wash water or the cotton shed next to the field across the turn row. Tucker paid for the wood, while Angus supplied the labor. Angus had no qualms about improving another man's property. Someday, they would own this house and the two hundred acres that came with it.

In their second year, Klara added the garden. Cliff had been born that same year, and Towanna two years later. But Klara never seemed to regain her health after the second baby.

Repeated miscarriages sapped her strength, and Angus struggled to keep everything going by himself.

Klara seemed to have recovered some these last two years, but at forty-seven, Angus mostly came home from the fields too exhausted to “piddle.” Lately, he’d taken to sleeping on a pallet on the floor to avoid the restless demands of his wife. Now he wondered—did age have anything to do with his lack of vigor?

“Cliff needs to hurry,” Klara murmured. “He’s just poking along.”

Angus looked across the turn row. He knew his oldest son was well-built, but Cliff’s rain-soaked, faded blue shirt and coveralls revealed every muscle. Angus sighed. He couldn’t help but envy Cliff’s strong young body, the taut, flat belly, the muscular arms, and broad shoulders.

“Take your tail ‘round to the back and shuck them wet clothes,” he bellowed. “You’ll catch your death, and we got no time for sickness.”



Clifford paused, then sprinted around to the rear of the house and the shed Angus had built for summer bathing. It contained a bench, a homemade stove, a stack of towels, and a number three washtub. The tank on the roof captured rain to provide wash water. He and Towanna took turns keeping it full when the rain didn’t oblige.

Pulling off his rain-soaked coveralls, Cliff shed his shirt and dried off. Standing in the damp warmth of the room, he took stock of the recent changes to his body. The black hair under his arms and on his chest was expected, for he’d seen his pa naked from the waist up many times. Now, a rich, black crop of it grew

on his belly and down around his groin. He fondled himself, and his pecker promptly rose to attention.

Cliff grinned, then grabbed a towel, wrapped it around his waist, and dashed for the back door. When he entered the kitchen, he found Towanna seated at the table.

“Hey, Wanna, whatcha doing?”

“Homework for tomorrow’s lessons.”

“You keep your head in them books too much,” Cliff chided, making his way to the small room he and Towanna shared.

Towanna resented Cliff’s scoffing remark, but when he turned to watch him disappear into their room, he couldn’t help but notice the older boy’s swagger. It made him uncomfortable—not with Cliff, but with himself. His thin, pale body was lean and bare as a slug. His only redeeming qualities were an agile mind and a passion for learning everything Miss Rosa, the teacher at the county settlement school, had to offer.

His ma entered the kitchen and went to the stove to check the evening meal.

“Best clear away your books, Towanna. Help me get supper on the table.”

“Alright, Ma.” Towanna stacked his books and set them carefully against the kitchen wall like some fragile, precious treasure. He quickly placed glasses, plates, and utensils on the table. His ma smiled, as always, appreciating his help.

His ma placed bowls of garden-grown vegetables, beans cooked with salted bacon, and a platter of cornbread on the table. Moments later, Angus and Cliff came in and took their seats. Except for the short “Grace” Angus offered, the meal was consumed in silence.



Angus filled his belly and brooded over the oddity that was his youngest son. Towanna was a fine-looking boy, even better looking than Cliff, but he was thin and scrawny and looked about twelve instead of fifteen. He never sopped his plate as Angus did, never came to the table bare-chested. Angus glanced at Cliff, who wolfed down his food, clad only in a pair of worn jeans.

Towanna showed little interest in the fields and balked at plowing with the mule team. Angus doubted if the boy even knew which end of a mule to put the bridle on. And Towanna was too damn close to his mother. *She keeps coddling him, soon he'll have to squat to pee.*

Still, Angus struggled to be fair. Klara had been sickly these past ten years. Four miscarriages had sapped her strength, and dust and pollen made it harder for her to breathe. Towanna needed to help around the house in those times. Each time Angus brooded on the boy's peculiarities, he had dismissed them, thinking Towanna would outgrow them as he matured. Except he hadn't.

Angus finally scraped back his chair and padded barefoot to the front porch. There he sat, letting his feet dangle over the edge. The rain had eased to a drizzle, and dusk blanketed the moist cotton fields. He took out a stingy portion of mule tobacco and tucked it into his mouth.



Towanna watched Cliff leave the kitchen through the back door to make his way to the small barn behind the house, where the few farm animals they owned waited patiently for their

evening feed. Cliff would feed and water the mules and their milch cow and scatter cracked corn for the chickens. It was the one chore Towanna envied his brother. A few minutes later, Cliff returned.

“Just three berries today, Ma.” Cliff handed the eggs to Ma.

“Thank you, Cliff.” Ma put the eggs into the brown wicker basket on the sideboard and sighed. “Not enough for fried eggs for breakfast. We’ll have to eat grits again with the last of tonight’s beans.”

“That’s okay, Ma,” Towanna told her. “You make good beans.”

Cliff nodded in agreement. His chores done, Cliff headed for the small room next to the kitchen that he shared with Towanna. His ma wiped her hands on the dishcloth and headed for the front porch.

Towanna was left to finish up in the kitchen. He washed the plates and pans, dried them, and put them away. He wiped the table clean and emptied the dirty wash water. At last, he placed his books back on the table, opened his algebra book, and turned to the day’s lesson.

The equations were hard. If only he had someone at home who could help, but no one else in the Whitaker house understood the arcane nature of algebra. That lack had kept him after school for a few precious minutes of Miss Rosa’s tutelage. He’d barely made it home before the rain fell, hunched over the books that were his lifeline to a profession, or at least a decent job—anything to escape the grueling poverty of a sharecropper’s life.



Angus was surprised when Klara joined him on the porch. She seldom came to sit outside after dark. She was a beautiful woman, even at thirty-eight. Her eyes were a clear, brilliant blue, her hair a soft, glossy red, her skin fine and firm. He sometimes wondered if she regretted marrying him.

Klara finally broke the silence. “Been meaning to talk to you about Towanna. It’s cool out tonight. Seems like a good time.”

“Towanna?” Angus hedged. “What about him?”

“Well, he’s fifteen now. I’m thinking maybe he could help a little more with the farm. I appreciate his help around the house, but I don’t want him to get too set in his ways. Be good if he could plow, do more to help you. Like Cliff.”

Some of the tension eased out of Angus’ shoulders. “I’ve been thinking the same. Just today, I thought, if Klara don’t watch out, soon that boy is gonna have to squat to pee.”

Klara’s eyes narrowed, and her lips thinned.

Angus hurried on. “Still, I don’t know what else we could have done, you being sick for so long.” He spewed tobacco juice into the yard. “We couldn’t hire anyone to mind the house, so it only made sense for Towanna to help out.”

His wife eased back in her chair, looking thoughtful. “Maybe come Saturday? He won’t have school. He could help with the cotton, and I might pick a little. Do us both good to get out of the house.”

“Be fine with me. Be better if he worked the fields through the harvest, though.” Every pound picked meant more food on the table and a little extra for their land fund. The Depression had brought land prices down, and he’d been figuring what it would take to buy that first hundred acres. Angus pulled his feet

back onto the porch and pivoted a half-turn, the better to view his wife.

She frowned. "His schooling's important."

"He can go back after the harvest festival," Angus countered. "He needs to be a man, Klara, not some sissified schoolboy." But he thought the boy had enough schooling. Only eight years of it, but that Miss Rosa already had him doing high school math. If he weaned the boy off book learning, maybe Angus could make a real man of him. One less picker to hire meant one more acre bought. Mebbe two.

Klara raised the hem of her dress above her knees, fanning her thighs, and Angus couldn't help comparing her with Joreen Anderson. Joreen's image blended with his memories of a younger Klara. His thoughts turned carnal, and his pulse pounded just a little faster.

Klara must have sensed his change of mood. "These black gnats sure are bad tonight," she murmured, her voice slow, and sly, and lazy.

"Might as well go inside," Angus said, rising. He thought of how Joreen had swung her hips and wrapped an arm around his wife's waist. He paused just inside the screen door and looked toward the kitchen. The kerosene lamp had gone dark. Towanna, he reckoned, must have gone to bed.

Angus tugged Klara toward their bed, and she slipped off her dress and lay down in the dark. Now she looked at him, lying supine in the moonlight streaming through the front window, and his hunger stirred. His body was lean and strong, with narrow hips and thighs that still possessed the strength to bring a woman satisfaction. Only the man inside had changed, worn

to exhaustion by his efforts to wrest a future from the cotton fields. By God, he wasn't exhausted tonight.

He laid down beside her. Klara let her right hand find its way to his chest, stroking the wiry dark hair. He listened hard, but no sound came from the boys' room. Both of their boys were hard sleepers. Her hand lingered on his chest, absorbing the rhythmic beat of his heart.

"Angus, you asleep?" she whispered.

"Just sort of dozed off," but his eyes shifted sideways.

Klara's hand drifted slowly down his belly. Angus' breath came faster. When Klara touched her goal, Angus rolled toward her and gathered her close, nuzzling at her neck. With a sudden shiver, Klara pulled his head to her breast, stifling her moans as he suckled, losing himself in the fiery moments that followed.



Towanna stared, unseeing, at the textbook laid out before him in the dark. Every word his pa had spoken on the porch gouged his heart. Ever since he remembered, he needed to be in the house. Either Ma was sick, and he needed to sit with her, or he'd taken over her chores to spare her the effort. Over time he'd taken most of the harder work. The cleaning. The laundry. Sometimes, the cooking, unless he was in school.

He'd overheard his pa complain about him 'staying home too much' until it wore like a canker on his soul. Was it wrong to want more than a poor sharecropper's life? His pa had no learning, and Cottondale had scant respect for a rental farmer with little to show for his labor.

Chapter 2:

Youthful Explorations

September 1938

SLEEP ELUDED HIM. Towanna lay on the double bed he shared with Cliff and thought of those times the night was so black a body could punch a hole in it. Tonight, at least, a bit of moonlight streamed through the cracked, four-paned window in the north wall. He'd spent hours crouched under that window, looking up the turn row and across the fields toward the lights of Cottondale, planning what he'd do when he was grown.

Clifford groaned in his sleep, changed positions, and began grinding his teeth.

Why couldn't he be more like his brother? Cliff could drive the mule team all day, and there wasn't a plow in the barn he couldn't handle. Cliff fixed things when they broke just as good as Pa. Cliff's hands were large and powerful, like Pa's. Just a regular outdoor boy, Pa called him. Pa complained Cliff wouldn't be worth a damn if somebody didn't prod him, but Towanna never thought of Cliff as lazy. He was just his big brother, somebody he longed to be like. He wanted to learn everything Cliff knew—but not at the cost of his education.

Low, moaning sounds coming from the front room interrupted his thoughts. He held his breath for a few seconds and waited. The sounds came again, accompanied by the faint squeak of bedsprings.

At first, he figured his ma was sick, and he should get up and light the lamp, but uncertainty held him back. His anxiety rose,

and his breath quickened. Cliff shifted in his sleep and turned to rest flat on his back.

“Cliff,” Towanna whispered and poked his brother. “Cliff, wake up.”

“Wha’s the matter?” Cliff muttered.

“I heard a noise in the front room. Maybe I should get up? Listen.”

Cliff raised his head, listening. The noise came louder. Cliff turned to Towanna, and Towanna could hear the grin in his brother’s voice. “Don’t you go messing, Towanna. It’s just Pa making love to Ma.”

“Oh ... well, that’s the first time I heard ‘em.” Towanna considered for a moment. “Does it happen often?”

“Depends on how Pa’s feeling. I’ve heard them lots of times. You just sleep too damn hard.”

“Not so loud,” Towanna hissed. “They might hear us.” The two boys lay in silence for a moment, the bedsprings in the other room squeaking in a steady, rhythmic pattern.

“Towanna, you got hair on your belly?” Cliff whispered.

“No,” Towanna answered, his cheeks flushing in the darkness.

“You should see mine,” Cliff bragged.

“Hair on your belly?”

“Further down, too,” Cliff’s voice was smug. “You wanna feel, Wanna?”

“No!” Towanna’s blush burned down to his toes.

“Hell, come on and feel. I got lots of it,” Cliff offered.

“No, that wouldn’t—” Before he could finish, Cliff grabbed Towanna’s hand and planted it directly on his belly. Thick hair sprouted beneath Towanna’s fingers. The hair would be dark,

Towanna knew, like the heavy curls on Cliff's head and the manly sprinkling of hair across Cliff's chest.

"See, I told you," Cliff chuckled. "Your time will come, Wanna, just you wait."

Towanna jerked his hand away. No doubt about it, Cliff was very manly. "Cliff, ain't you ashamed?" he choked out, mortified. He couldn't quite picture just how Cliff looked, but from his sense of touch, everything in him longed to be exactly like his brother.

The noise from the front room grew louder. Out of the blackness came a short squall, followed by several long, low moans. The rhythmic squeaking of the bedsprings faded away.

"What's happening?" Towanna whispered.

"It's over now. Finished, that's all." Cliff yawned. A few minutes later, Cliff began to snore.

Curiosity ate at Towanna. He rubbed his belly and let his fingers trail down to explore his pecker. His belly was still bare as a slug, but now his own flesh had swelled to the bursting point, and his breath came in short gasps. Then his innards seemed to burst open, and the first seeds of adolescence spilled into the night. Towanna clamped a hand over his mouth to muffle his astonishment. Slowly, the tremors in his belly eased.

Crickets chirped under the tiny windowsill. Frogs, in the dampness of the night air, trebled their lonely call for more rain. Towanna wondered what it all meant. Maybe he *was* changing, becoming more manly. Maybe it was like Cliff said, and some boys just got hair on their bodies later than others. Towanna finally drifted off, dreaming of the things he would do when he was educated and worked in town. A druggist, or maybe a banker, when he was Mr. Towanna Whitaker.

Chapter 3:

Cliff Goes to Cottondale

September 1938

TINCY EDWARDS wanted a baby so badly that it leeches the joy out of life. Other women in the area had no trouble getting babies, so why couldn't she? Just look at Ma Anderson. *Got more kids than she knows what to do with, and that lazy, no good PeeTee don't work half the time.* Maybe that was the problem. Maybe Krane worked too hard, and it weakened his seed.

She considered the idea from the shade of the small chinaberry tree in front of the two-room house she shared with her husband. Five fruitless years and no baby to show for it. Tincy tried to push the renegade thoughts she'd been thinking all morning from her mind. The sun was about three hours high, with no rain clouds in sight. Maybe the fields would be dry enough to pick by midday.

She was studying the lush, white field beyond the turn row, figuring how many sacks she and Krane might fill, when she spotted a team of familiar mules. Angus Whitaker's bale, bound for the cotton gin. Angus usually hauled the cotton, but today, the driver didn't look like Angus.

Likely Cliff, she reckoned. *Now, there's a man for you.* He'd only just turned seventeen, but he looked older. Strong, with curly black hair and sharp green eyes.

From the first of the five years Tincy and Krane worked for Angus, she had noticed the difference between Whitaker's sons.

Big, brawny Cliff worked the cotton beside his pa like he was born to it, but Towanna was seldom in the fields. The younger boy was hellbent on getting his education so he could “be somebody.”

Getting above himself, that Towanna, Tincy thought sadly. No good would come of it. The wagon drew nearer, and the team halted about thirty feet away.

“Morning, Miss Tincy,” Cliff called.

“Morning, Cliff.” Despite her twenty-five years, Tincy’s color rose. “So, Angus let you drive the bale?” She smiled slyly at him. “He gonna trust you with the seed money?”

Cliff shook his head. “Pa says I’m old enough to drive, but I’m to bring him the receipt. He’ll pick up the money when he takes the next bale in.”

“He’s a tight old cuss,” Tincy murmured.

Cliff’s lips quirked up. “Aw, Miss Tincy, Pa’s all right.”

Tincy’s heart beat just a little faster. *Cliff would do,* she thought suddenly. *If I can just figure out how...*

“Could I bring you anything from town, Miss Tincy?” Cliff offered.

She nodded slowly, her mind racing. *Cliff might bring the items to my door. I could ask him in for a glass of water or tea.* “Matter of fact, I need two spools of white patching thread and a box of kitchen matches. Please tell Mr. Buddy to put it on our account.”

“I’ll just take care of that, Miss Tincy.” Cliff whistled to the team and slapped the reins, startling the mules forward.

Tincy watched until he was well around the bend of the turn row, her thoughts turning carnal, thinking desperate things. *So long as no one knew ... that pretty boy.* She began to plot.



Julie May sat on her front porch, baking her old bones in the morning sun, when Cliff Whitaker brought his pa's wagon up the turn row. Cliff waved, his face lighting with genuine pleasure at the sight of her while the wagon rolled past.

My, how that boy has grown. It seems just yesterday I helped to birth him. She still remembered spanking Clifford Lee Whitaker's tiny pink rump, bringing the good, fresh air into his lungs. How proud Angus and Miss Klara were when she told them they had a boy, and a healthy one, too. The old midwife still assisted most of the ladies in the area with birthing their babies. She smiled to herself, thinking how sure she had been Miss Klara's second baby would be a girl, and it turned out to be Towanna.

Come to think, she hadn't seen Towanna or Miss Klara in some time. She would stop and visit them on her way to see Ma Anderson. It was about time for Ma to need her again, and Julie May could use the money she would receive for her midwife's fee.



Cliff hurried the team along until the wagon rolled into Cottdale. Once they reached the edge of the town proper, he let them slow. On his left rose Munson's, the combination grocery, hardware, and what-have-you store, the biggest building in town except for Tucker's cotton gin. Most all the farmers near Cottdale traded there on credit. After the cotton was picked, ginned, and sold, the farmers paid their bills.

To Cliff's right stood Andy's Auto Service Station, boasting a red sign with the words "FREE AIR." Farther down on the left

rose the Weaver Variety Store, owned by the old-maid Weaver sisters. When Cliff and Towanna earned a nickel, they could buy marbles and even hard candy there for just a few pennies.



Silas Morgan, the town gossip and gadfly, shuffled along the edge of the street in front of the variety store. He didn't have his head full of gossip today, and it felt woefully empty. He quickened his pace, leaning on the blackthorn shillelagh he'd brought back from the Great War. Making his way past the variety store, he headed for the vacant lot between the variety store and Munson's General Store and Grocery.

It was a favorite loitering place for old cronies like Silas, with nothing better to do. Five large chinaberry trees afforded shade, and some thoughtful soul had placed two benches under them. Silas eased onto a bench and had just settled into a comfortable position when Fred Shattles, the local justice, joined him.

"Hello, Silas. Cooling your fanny, or just resting?"

"Just sitting, thinking about things. Ain't heard nothing new." Silas' voice held a petulant whine. "You come to sit a spell?"

"I did, indeed." Shattles looked at the day and sighed. "It's gonna be hot enough to fry eggs."

"You'd think it'd be cooler after the rain yesterday," Silas complained. Both men turned at the sound of clopping hooves and squeaking wagon wheels.

"I was about to say..." Fred's voice trailed off.

"Say what?" Silas asked, and Fred grinned.

"There goes someone to talk about."

"You mean Cliff? Angus Whitaker's boy?"

"I do indeed," Shattles opined.

“Huh.” Silas studied the team, the wagon, and the boy. “Guess I could stir up a thing or two about old Angus and his doings.”

“That Cliff, he’s a handsome fellow. Well-nigh on to seventeen, but you’d think he was older.” Shattles scratched his chin. “I’m surprised Angus let him bring the bale in alone.” Both men studied the husky youth.

“He must get his looks from Klara,” Silas offered. “Angus was ugly as homemade sin when we was younger. I wonder if the boy’s hung like Angus back when we used to run around together.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Fred smirked, “but if I were a girl about his age, I wouldn’t waste no time finding out.”

They both waved to the husky youth, and Cliff raised a hand in friendly greeting. They watched the wagon roll past, each dwelling on the days when they were both young and “sporting,” like Cliff Whitaker.

Such a damn, dirty shame to grow old. Silas considered Fred’s remark about Cliff’s pecker. He reached inside his coveralls, his hand moving slowly below his large, fat belly, but found only that which would likely never rise again. Then his thoughts turned to the younger Whitaker boy, blonde and delicate and blue-eyed, so much like Klara, and he felt a sudden quickening.

A smile crossed the old man’s face, and a hunger rose in him that he’d not felt in months. The younger boy only came to town with Angus. He’d never had a chance to get that sweet, young flesh alone, to discover if the boy’s slender beauty went more than skin deep. Likely, he was still young enough to be introduced to Silas’ peculiar, secret preferences for pleasuring.

Catch 'em young, and they never talked, never dared tell their folks.



Cliff turned the mules down the side street leading to the cotton gin. Three wagons had already staked their claim under the gin's long canopy. Cliff hoped there was room enough for one more. The day was overcast, the wind restless. Should it rain, he had no way to protect the cotton. He slowed the team and studied the space available. With a little luck, he could squeeze the wagon inside. Cliff urged the team forward until the nose of each mule was almost touching the rear of the wagon in front. It would do.

Cliff wrapped the reins around the top slat of the wagon bed and dropped to the ground. He waved to Willie Gibson, the colored boy who worked the gin hose. Willie moved the long metal tube inside each wagon bed, sucking up the cotton.

Climbing the metal steps that led to the gin's upper decking, Cliff stood above the wagon row and peered inside. Below him, cotton fell rapidly into the combing machines. The fibers were stripped from the seeds and sucked into the bale compressor while the seeds poured into a separate, smaller bin, and he marveled at the machine's operation.

He ambled out to the tar-covered ramp where the bales were loaded into boxcars and looked up. The clouds were thicker and heavier than when he'd first pulled the wagon under the shed, but the cotton would stay dry. He felt safe from his pa's wrath.

Cliff wandered down the stairs, climbed back into his wagon, and stretched out on the cotton, flat on his belly. He drifted into sleep with the smiling face of Tincy Edwards on his mind.

A bump on his leg startled Cliff awake, and he looked up into Willie's grinning face. "That sure was some sound sleeping, Mr. Cliff," the boy said. "You gotta get down, 'less you wanna get sucked up by the gin."

"Dang, didn't think I slept that long. Must be near dinner time," Cliff scrambled to his feet and moved to the far end of the wagon. He watched until the last clump of cotton was sucked up.

"That's it, Mr. Cliff. Want me to pull the team around for you?"

Cliff nodded and handed the boy a penny. "I'll just get the receipt."

Mr. Tucker had the figures down on a piece of paper when Cliff walked into his office. The cotton buyer started to count out the money, but Cliff told him he didn't need it, just the receipt. His pa would pick up the cash when he brought in the next bale.

Mr. Tucker made a note of it and handed Cliff the small pink slip. "And how's Miss Klara?"

"Oh, she's doing fine, Mr. Tucker."

Tucker smiled broadly. "Please tell Miss Klara I remember her kindly, and I hope she saves a dance for me at the harvest festival."

Cliff nodded uncertainly, took the receipt, and left Tucker's office. He bounded down the steps to where Willie had tied his team. The clouds had thinned. Maybe the rain would hold off, and they could pick another bale this afternoon. He climbed into the wagon and took up the reins.

"Whoa, boss." He pulled the mules to a stop when he reached the general store. The mules were not pleased. It took a firm hand to stop them and tie them to the store's front rail.

Second Son

“Hello, Cliff,” Buddy called out when the youth entered the store. “Where’s your pa?”

“Pa let me bring the first bale in, Mr. Buddy. Said I was old enough. And Miss Tincy asked me to get her two spools of white thread and a box of matches.”

“Sure thing, son, but first tell me about your ma. Is she in good health?”

“Yes, sir, she’s doing fine. Ain’t been sick for quite a spell.”

“Still pretty as ever, I bet. Ain’t seen your ma since the spring.” Buddy ducked below the counter to retrieve two fat spools of white thread and the matches. He placed the items in a small brown bag and handed it to Cliff.

“Miss Tincy said to put this on their bill, Mr. Buddy.”

“Yes, Cliff, I’ll do that ... and say, how about taking this to your ma? No charge.” He handed Cliff a pack of chewing gum.

“Yes, sir, I’ll give it to her.”

Cliff returned to the wagon, puzzled and a bit unsettled. *First, Mr. Tucker asks Ma for a dance, then Mr. Buddy sends her a pack of gum.* Cliff climbed into the wagon and started the team off at a quick walk. He was anxious to relieve himself of the messages and the gum, and his stomach was growling.

It seemed the turn row would never come into view. Cliff finally reached it and drove the team past Julie May’s house, but the old midwife was no longer on the porch. Moments later, Cliff pulled the reins tight, stopping the team at Miss Tincy’s. She appeared in the doorway, smiling that same odd smile she’d given him this morning.

When he didn’t climb down, she came out to the wagon, put a foot on the wagon’s front axle, and pulled herself up so that

she faced him. Her appearance had changed, he noted. She was all neat and clean now.

“I was afraid you might forget, Cliff.”

“No, ma’am.” Cliff offered her the little bag. When her fingers brushed his hand, it made him shiver.

“I’m much obliged, Cliff.” Tincy took the bag and jumped down.

Mighty frisky. Cliff drove the team on, but the back of his neck prickled. He turned to look back. Miss Tincy stood under the chinaberry tree, her grey eyes bright, her smile fierce. He waved once, not knowing what else to do, and she promptly waved back.

Cliff hurried the mule team past the Anderson house to his own, bringing them around to the wagon shed. He unhitched the team, took off their harnesses, and turned them into the small paddock beside the barn. He would let them cool while he ate, then bring them water.

The food was still on the kitchen table, good and warm. Two dirty plates waited for Towanna to clean when he came in from school. Cliff found a clean plate and piled it high with beans and cornbread.

Chapter 4:

No One Needs to Know

September 1938

TOWANNA CLEARED THE table and put the kettle on to heat wash water for the soiled plates and utensils. He hadn't seen Cliff since he'd come in from school. He could tell Cliff had made it home for a late dinner because there was still wet potlikker on one of the plates. The other two were crusted and dry. All three went into the roasting pan to be washed. He hurried through the rest of his kitchen chores and wiped and dried the table. Finally, he spread his books out. He might finish his algebra homework, at least, before it was time for supper.

Cliff was waiting in the front yard when Angus returned home after a day of cutting firewood.

"How'd you make out at the gin," his pa asked.

"Fine." Cliff pulled out the receipt and handed it to his pa. "The amount looked about right to me, Pa."

Angus peered a little closer at his eldest son. "They get all the cotton out of the wagon?"

"Yessir. I stood in the wagon bed and watched Willie suck it clean. Gave him a penny for pulling the team around while I went in to see Tucker."

Angus grunted his approval. "How 'bout the team?"

"Let 'em cool down, watered 'em, and put 'em away." Cliff cocked his head to one side. "Gave 'em both a good brushing, too. I know better than to put 'em up hot, Pa."

Angus fingered the receipt and seemed pleased with the amount penciled on the crumpled paper. "Reckon you can drive the bales in from now on."

Cliff flushed at the praise. In time, Pa might even trust him to fetch home the bale money.

Angus tucked the receipt away and studied the sky. Cliff stuck his hands in his pockets and did the same. The heavy clouds were shifting north, and no additional rain had fallen.

Angus grunted in satisfaction. "Cotton should be dry enough to pick, come morning."

Cliff watched his pa stride away. Evening dusk covered the fields like a blanket, and Cliff hoped his pa was headed to the barn to tend the stock. It would further his pa's good mood when he discovered Cliff had also cleaned and oiled the mule harnesses and swept the wagon clean.

He reached into his pocket and touched the packet of gum. He hadn't found a chance to give it to his ma and wasn't sure he should do so in his pa's presence. Hard to tell what would rile the old man. He was still undecided when the front screen door creaked, and his ma stepped outside and settled into the old, cane-bottom chair. Cliff climbed onto the porch.

"You make out all right today, son?"

"Fine, Ma. I wasn't scared a bit, and I did everything like Pa said." He couldn't hide the pride in his voice, his awareness that his pa saw him as a man.

"See anyone we know?" Klara's face grew wistful.

"Yes'um. Mr. Tucker at the gin. He asked about you. Asked for you to save him a dance at the harvest festival."

A smile broke across Klara's face.

"Ma..." Cliff paused.

“Yes?”

“Well, I stopped by Mr. Buddy’s and got some things for Miss Tincy. And Mr. Buddy, he asked about you.”

“Did he now?” Klara gave a throaty laugh.

“Yes’um, he did. And he sent you this.” Cliff held out the gum.

“Well now, wasn’t that nice of Mr. Buddy,” Klara took the gum and smelled it as though it was a delicate perfume.

Cliff shoved his hands into his pockets. “Mr. Buddy also said he bet you was pretty as ever.”

“Did he now?” Klara repeated.

“Yes’um, but I figured I better not tell you in front of Pa. I didn’t think anything of it, but Pa, he’s got a temper. Didn’t want to get him riled up.”

“Oh, your pa wouldn’t mind about Mr. Buddy. He’s not the jealous type. When we were young, we were all pals together, went to dances and everything.”

Cliff cocked his head, considering. “Was Mr. Buddy ever your beau, Ma?”

Klara’s smile turned mysterious. “I had lots of them back then, but I married up with your pa.”

This explanation settled Cliff’s nascent guilt. Bringing the gum to his ma no longer seemed wrong.

Klara opened the packet and offered Cliff a stick. She slipped a piece between her lips and chewed slowly, savoring the treat. She tucked the rest into her apron pocket.

Cliff broke his piece of gum in half, tucked both pieces into his pocket, and went to find Towanna. His brother was in the kitchen, pouring over his books.

“Guess what, Wanna?”

Towanna laid a hand on the page to mark his place and sighed. "I don't know. I give up."

"Pa, he let me take the bale into town by myself."

"Really?" Towanna straightened in his chair, an odd mix of delight and envy on his face.

"He sure did ... and he seemed right pleased how I handled everything."

Towanna deflated. "Don't suppose I'll ever get old enough to do something like that, and anyway, Pa wouldn't—"

"Towanna," Cliff interrupted. "You think Ma's pretty?"

Towanna blinked. "Sure. Why'd you ask?"

Cliff shrugged. "I stopped by the big store to get some things for Miss Tincy and Mr. Buddy, he asked about Ma. He sent her a pack of gum. Said he bet she was still pretty as ever. I didn't know if I should tell her."

Towanna considered his brother's words. "Naw, I don't see anything wrong with that, Cliff."

"Well, I wondered." Cliff furrowed his brow. "Reckon Pa would be mad if he knew?"

"I don't think so. The way I figure, Pa wouldn't be jealous of just words." A hint of bitterness crept over Towanna's thin face. "Don't seem much really matters to him, 'cept the cotton."

"You best not let Pa hear you say that," Cliff warned. "The cotton feeds us. Pa looks out for us, growing cotton."

"I don't mean no harm, it's just—" Towanna's shoulders drooped a bit more. "It's just how things are."

Cliff pulled the gum from his pocket and offered half of it to his brother.

"Thanks." Towanna unwrapped it and tucked it into his mouth.

Cliff did the same. He dismissed the gum from his mind now that he, Towanna, and Ma had all shared in the treat. He sat at the table and described his trip to the gin. The errand for Miss Tincy. The way the mules pulled harder against the bits once they headed home.

One thing Cliff didn't share was how strange he'd felt when he stopped at Miss Tincy's house on the way home. The way she'd stared at him, hungry-like. He needed to chew on that, figure it out for himself before he shared it with his brother.

Klara came into the kitchen and held her hands against the pots. "Better clear away, boys. Let's get supper on the table."

Towanna and Cliff got up from their chairs. Cliff left by the back door to scrub down in the bathshed while Towanna removed his books and set the table.



Towanna scowled when his pa came in and went to the roasting pan they used as a sink to wash his face and hands. Pa dabbed a little water on his face, rubbed three fingers together, and vigorously wiped his face and hands with the snow-white towel hanging from the sideboard.

Towanna's resentment at his pa's behavior soured his anticipation of the meal. When Towanna cleaned the towels, he always found them streaked with grime and dirt from his pa's half-washed hands and face.

Pa seated himself at the table and yelled for Cliff so loud the window rattled. Towanna resisted the impulse to cover his ears. Cliff hurried into the kitchen and slid into his seat. Pa muttered a short grace which, Towanna felt, surely reached no higher than the ceiling.

Pa finished his meal before he spoke again. "Towanna." His voice was oddly calm and measured, his tone mild, even soft. "Your ma and I think you should help pick, come Saturday."

Towanna blinked. "Yes, sir."

Angus eased back in his seat. "Fact is, I want you picking through the harvest. You can go back to school when the cotton's in, come November. It's time you got out of the house and learned more about making a living. You're of a good age now, and all that book learning ... well, it ain't going to do you no good when you get grown."

"But Pa!" The words blurted out. "I don't want to farm when I get grown. I want to get educated and grow up—" *to be somebody*. "To be like Miss Rosa. A teacher, or maybe a druggist." He thought harder. What would his pa respect? "Or even a deputy."

His pa chuckled, but there was a mean edge to it. "All them pretty words ain't gonna make the cotton grow, and they won't fill your belly. And anyway, you're too close to your ma." Angus's brows lowered, the first sign of a rising temper, "You need to be more like Cliff. Now you just look at him. Already, he could farm a forty alone."

Cliff looked up, startled, his beans momentarily forgotten. Towanna ignored him.

"Sure, Pa." A frisson of fear rose in him. He attended school on Pa's sufferance. "I know there's a difference. We're just made different, I guess. I like learning, and he's just the opposite. But I'll be glad to pick Saturday if I can still help Ma with the washing." Towanna chanced a hopeful glance at his ma.

"It's all right, Towanna. I'll manage," his ma said.

Towanna lowered his head, his heart pounding. He clenched his hands in his lap to hide the shaking. No school until late November, with a bumper crop in the field.

“I have to go to school tomorrow.” He forced himself to meet Pa’s eyes and to keep his tone respectful. “I need to return Miss Rosa’s books.”

Pa nodded, pleased with Towanna’s acceptance. He began to hold forth on the advantages of farming, that as far back as he could remember, the Whitakers had been farmers and good farmers at that.

Not this Whitaker... but Towanna buried that thought deep.

Cliff left the kitchen with Pa while Towanna and Ma cleared the table.

“Don’t feel so bad about not being like Cliff, Towanna,” Ma said. “Maybe if I hadn’t needed you so much when I was sick, you wouldn’t be such a houseboy. Still, I’m proud you can do as good as me.” A wistful smile ghosted across her face. “When you’re grown with a family of your own, it’s good to know such things.”

“I suppose you’re right, Ma, but I’d still like to be more like Cliff ... sometimes I think Pa’s partial to Cliff.” There. He’d said it. And Ma said nothing to refute it.



On Friday afternoon, Miss Rosa was surprised when Towanna waited until all the students left the schoolhouse, except for Kathy Anderson. They usually walked home together.

“Miss Rosa, Pa says I have to help with the harvest.” Towanna refused to look at her. “Pa let me come today to return the books.” He set them on the corner of her desk, his fingers clenched on the top book as if he could absorb one more lesson,

one more bit of knowledge, through the faded cover. “He says I can come back after harvest, same as last year.”

Rosa Johnson stared up at her prize pupil, her dark eyes narrowed in anger.

“I can speak to your pa,” she said gently. “You need your education, Towanna.”

He ducked his head. “Pa says—”

“I know what your pa says,” she interrupted. “I know what all the farmers hereabout say when their boys get old enough to pick.” She stood up, put her hands on the edge of the second-hand desk the county allotted her and leaned forward. “Don’t you want better?”

“You know I do,” he mumbled. “I just don’t—”

“You don’t think.” All her frustration, her anger at losing so many of these children just as they started to shine, piled up behind her teeth and spilled out. “If you keep doing what your pa says, you’re going to end up just like him. A sharecropper, slaving over another man’s fields until all the life is sucked out of you.” She sorted through his books and removed all but the history and math books, and then went to the shelf behind her desk and rummaged for more.

“Here.” She added English, math, and science books to his stack. “Tenth-grade textbooks. You take ’em home. Start at the front and do one lesson a day. You tell your pa I said you’re to keep the books ’til you finish them and that he’s to give you two hours a day to study.”

She looked over his shoulder at a wide-eyed Kathy Anderson. “Miss Kathy, you come up here.”

Kathy came.

“You live near the Whitakers. You take assignments home for Towanna, and you pick up his homework and bring it to me every morning. Understand?”

Kathy bobbed her head, her hazel eyes huge. Miss Rosa watched the two leave, still fuming. It was the best she could do for Towanna. He’d have to do the rest himself.



Towanna snuck into the house through the kitchen door and made it into his room with no one the wiser. Once there, he stared at the books before hiding them under his bed. *Dear God and baby Jesus, how will I find the time?* And yet, a wicked excitement blazed through him. It was a chance. It was more than he’d had when he woke this morning. It was not—quite—disobedience to his pa’s word. He could study at night after he picked cotton, and the family was asleep.

That evening, Towanna crept out to the bath shed and cleared away one corner, rigged up a saw-horse table, and brought in the second-best milk bucket to use as a stool. He could use the kerosene lamp from the kitchen once everyone else had gone to bed. With any luck, he’d finish his lessons and be asleep before Cliff got up to make water and noticed he was gone.



Tincy Edwards twisted and turned in the double bed she shared with her husband. She had planned and schemed all day, had worked herself into such a frenzy that her nerves scrabbled under her skin like nails on a chalkboard. She wanted a child, and Krane couldn’t give it to her.

Tincy wasn't sure if her womb or her husband was at fault, but shortly after they'd married and moved to Cottondale, Krane went down to New Orleans to see his brother. When he returned, he seemed tuckered out and uneasy. She hadn't thought much about it until she went out to the chicken house, searching for eggs, and heard an odd noise.

She peeked through the cracks and saw Krane, holding his pecker, groaning something terrible. He was trying to make water. Krane finally got himself straight and went about his business. Tincy returned to the house, eggs in hand, a silent witness to his troubles. For several weeks, Krane stayed on his side of the bed and didn't pester her.

It all added up to something bad wrong with him.

All day, she'd thought about Cliff Whitaker. Was it a sin to want a child so badly?

That night, Krane said that as soon as the first cotton field was picked, he needed to go down to New Orleans to visit his brother. This time, he wouldn't be gone but for a couple of days, and there was no need for her to go to her mother's for such a short time. Tincy insisted that she couldn't stay home all alone, so far from town. Too many buggars roamed the roads during harvest, and migrant workers looking for jobs or handouts.

Krane could ask Angus Whitaker to let Cliff stay with her, Tincy suggested. By now, she'd convinced herself there was nothing wrong with what she planned to do. No one would know except her and Cliff, and Cliff wouldn't dare tell.

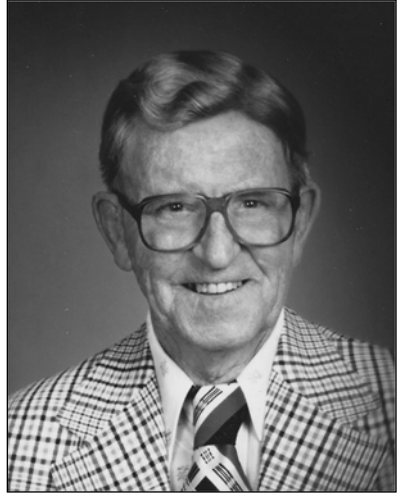
Thoughts of Cliff's young, vigorous strength made Tincy so restless she finally nudged Krane awake. He was a heavy sleeper, but grudgingly or not, he could be persuaded. The act completed, Tincy lay spent and relaxed. Krane fell back into a

Second Son

sound sleep. Tincy ran a restless hand over her belly, but she knew in her heart that she had not conceived.

About the Authors

Herman Willis Logan was a sharecropper's son, a WW2 veteran, a father, a husband, and my uncle. Towanna's story is a work of fiction, but like Towanna, my uncle had to drop out of school to help raise his two tiny sisters, my mother and aunt, while his father and brothers worked the cotton fields. Uncle Willis finished the original manuscript in 1963. He entered into discussions with a publisher but withdrew his submission when asked to revise the story and reduce it from 610 to 320 pages.



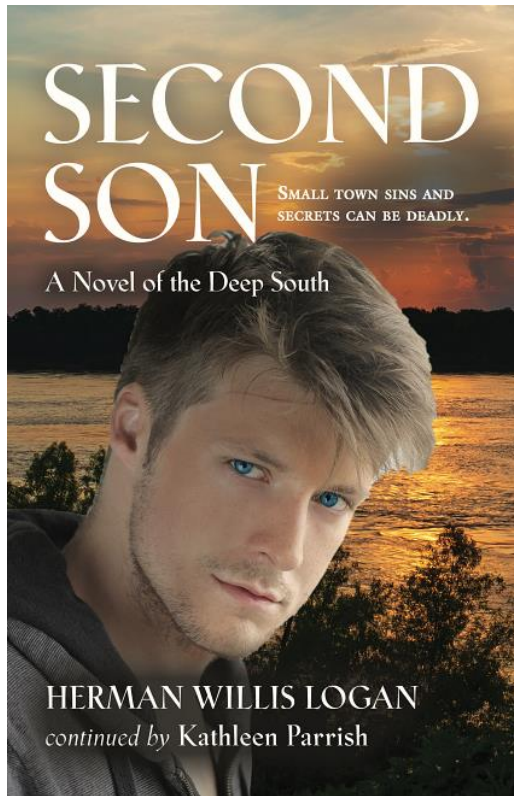
In 1989, Uncle Willis packed up the manuscript and the publisher's notes and shipped everything to my mom with a request that she revise the story and try to get it published someday. Uncle Willis passed away in 1994. Mom felt overwhelmed by the prospect of attempting a revision and passed the manuscript and my uncle's request to me.

The story was immense, beginning near the end of the Great Depression and continuing through WW2. Revising it became a collaboration across time and generations. The final manuscript is 366 pages, down from the original 610 pages. Given the extensive nature of the changes, any errors or omissions are mine alone.



After completing the revisions to my uncle's manuscript, I became caught up in the inevitable question—what happens next? This led to the creation of a sequel, *Southern Woman*, which continues the story of Towanna and Kathy into the next chapter of their lives. Excerpts from *Southern Woman* are posted on my author's website at www.kathleen-parrish.com.

These days I'm a wife, the mother of two grown sons, a grandmother, a gleefully retired nuclear engineer, and a full-time writer. Like my uncle, I was born in Mississippi and grew up with a determination to succeed, a love of reading, and a compulsion to write about the grand scheme of things.



Towanna's desperate search for a way to escape the poverty and despair of Mississippi's cotton fields leads him into World War 2, where he must face death, loss, and his deepest fears to find his way home.

Second Son: A Novel of the Deep South

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