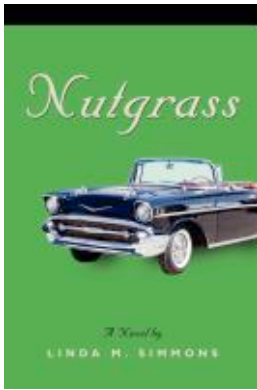


Nutgrass



A Novel by

LINDA M. SIMMONS



Fast cars, faster women, and revenge lead Jon Henri Tyler to con his way into "The Society", the largest moonshine operation in the foothills of North Carolina. He honed his skills, and relied on his wit and cunning, to out drive, out maneuver, and out think every moonshine rival in Murdock County. Poverty and money were two reasons he became involved with "shine". Now he wants out, but learns just how deadly "The Society" can be.

NUTGRASS

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Linda M. Simmons

DEDICATION

This novel is dedicated to my family

To Sammy R., my husband and my best friend, for his encouragement, his patience, and his belief in me; to David R., my son, for his optimism and enthusiasm in my ability; to Shirley, my daughter, who inspired me to persevere; to my son-in-law, Frank, who, fills me with confidence; to Nonnie, my mother-in-law, who reads everything I write and tells me how great it is.

CHAPTER

1

Fifteen-year-old Jon Henri Tyler knew exactly how many shotguns were aimed at his head. For the better part of an hour, he had sat hidden among the briar bushes above Drowning Creek scrutinizing these same men as they squatted around a campfire. When the firelight flickered, it lit up their faces and emphasized the shotguns lying across their knees.

Jon Henri now stood, his arms raised above his head, in a clearing surrounded on three sides by golden maple trees and on the south side by the dark waters of Drowning Creek. A leaf spiraled downward and he followed it until it passed his right hand. His eyes followed the streaks of dried blood that disappeared under the sleeve of his jacket. When Jon Henri had made up his mind to show himself, he pinched the stems of a briar bush and cautiously pulled them back. There were too many; one stem flipped back, and briars dug into the palm of his hand, carving straight lines from his fingertip to his wrist. At the time, he wondered if it was an omen.

Jon Henri's arms were getting heavy and he wanted to lower them, but was afraid if he moved one or more of the men might use it as an excuse to shoot him.

He forced a smile and nodded to make them think he was braver than he really was. He knew when he walked down into the camp he was taking a risk. He wanted to make money, and if looking down the barrels of eight shotguns was the way to do it then the risk was worth it. He knew money was brewing on the opposite creek bank the day he spotted Dirk Caldwell's black '58 Ford speeding down the old cow path.

His pa, Justin Tyler, had moved the family, again, to another tenant house, this time at the north end of Drowning Creek. Two days after they moved into the old farmhouse, Jon Henri created a fishing spot by throwing breadcrumbs into the water at daybreak for a week. Now the fish waited for him, churning the water as they anticipated the morsels coming their way. He sold

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the fish to Mr. Lewis, the manager at Murdock Grocery. Each morning while conditioning the fish, he noticed several cars using the old road beyond the line of trees and overgrown bushes. Dirk Caldwell owned one of these cars. Dirk bragged that he had the fastest car in the state. Jon Henri knew what that meant.

Jon Henri decided it was his business to see what was so interesting on the South end of the creek. The next morning he crept through the bushes and watched the men below.

“What’re you doing, Jon Henri?” He almost fell through the bushes. He was so intent on watching the action below, he did not see or hear Jinger, his eleven-year-old sister, until she squatted beside him.

“Damn, girl!” he whispered. “Stop following me! You’re gonna get us killed.”

“I ain’t getting you killed. Who are those men?”

“Be quiet”, he whispered. “They’re bootleggers.”

Her jaw dropped and Jon Henri saw her chest swell up and knew a scream was about to gush out of her mouth. He slammed his hand over her mouth until her eyes begin to roll. When he removed his hand, she gasped for breath.

“I’m scared,” she whispered. “Let’s go.”

“No. If you make one sound they’ll shoot us like they shot Grandpa.”

She had heard the same story from Pa as he had about how defensive bootleggers could be protecting the location of their stills. In fact, they were downright mean. His grandpa had the scars to prove it. He had been shot in the back of the legs when he stumbled on to a still on his land back in South Carolina. As soon as he saw the copper kettle, he knew he was doomed. He tore out of there as fast as he could but one of the bootleggers cut across his path.

When Grandpa zigzagged around him, pellets tore into his calves and thighs. He managed to run out of the woods, crawling the last fifty feet before he collapsed on the front steps. He never could bend his left knee after that.

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Jon Henri made Jinger swear she would not tell a soul because if she did, he might die. She believed him and ran home. That night he found her under the bed.

Now, two days later, he stood among another generation of bootleggers. He hoped he would get a chance to tell them what he had to offer before they pull the triggers.

The wind whipped around Jon Henri stinging his ears. It dipped into the campfire, stirring the burning embers. Jon Henri shivered and slowly wiggled his numbed fingers. The men did not seem to be bothered by the wind. They kept looking off toward the trees. Jon Henri glanced that way, too, wondering who was out there.

He smiled again at the man closest to him. "I just want to talk to the man in charge . . ."

"Hush up! The boss will take care of you."

Suddenly, a crack shattered the night. Two of the men pivoted on their heels, their shotguns raised. A figure emerged from the woods. A deep-throated laugh vibrated the air. The men turned their guns back toward him and grinned. Jon Henri's jaw dropped in disbelief. Mr. Costain, his high school principal, stepped into the clearing.

Costain looked at Jon Henri and stopped laughing. He hooked his thumbs under the galluses of his overall. He circled Jon Henri and stopped in front of him. He pushed his glasses to the top of his head.

"Boy, what the hell are you doing out here in these woods?"

Jon Henri swallowed. "Looking for a job."

"Say what?"

"It's like this here, Mr. Costain. My daddy's farm just on the other side of this here creek. For over a week I've been seeing all these cars drive by and I figured out what y'all were doing." He heard the double click of a rifle being cocked behind his left ear. "And Mr. Costain, I believe it would be in your best interest to hire me."

Costain tilted his head to the left. "My best interest?"

"Yes, sir. I can do well by you, sir."

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“Do tell. In what way, boy? Huh?”

“Well you see, sir, since I live right over there across the creek, it wouldn’t be no trouble at all for me to keep this mash going all night and I can tell you every day if I see any suspicious people hanging around. Ain’t nobody gonna to suspect a kid of knowing about a still. Also, Mr. Costain, I want to learn everything I can about moonshine because the day I turn sixteen— which by the way is only a month and a half off — I’m going to be the best driver you ever had.” He talked fast because he knew if he didn’t get the words out there would be no second chance. He turned his head slightly and looked at the guy holding a rifle six inches from his left ear. “Mr. Costain, this guy behind me, as you very well know, walks the same halls at school as I do even though he’s a senior and I’m just a sophomore.” He turned and smiled at Dirk Caldwell. “I really do admire him, Mr. Costain. If you allow it and Dirk allows it I could start training on the back roads with him, and when I do turn sixteen, which like I said is only a month and a half away, I could drive for you. And as I said, ain’t nobody gonna to suspect a kid of hauling shine because . . .”

“Boy, would you shut the hell up?” Costain rolled his eyes.

“Damn!” Costain motioned the others to lower their guns. “I think I’ll hire you just so you will shut up.” He shook his head and looked at Dirk. “What do you think, Dirk?”

“We don’t need no snot-nose brat in this outfit and I sure don’t want to train no snot-nose brat.”

Costain nodded his head. “Dirk, he knows we’re here. Do you want me to shoot him?”

Jon Henri swallowed. “Mr. Costain? I ain’t gonna tell anybody. I honest to God want to work here.”

“Why, boy?”

Jon Henri grinned. “Money, Mr. Costain. I do love money. And moonshine is good money. The reason I know this is that I see that fancy car Dirk drives. As I said, I really do admire him.” Jon Henri looked back over his shoulder. “Dirk, all the kids in school look up to you. They say you sure are a snappy dresser.

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They call you Mr. It.” Dirk glanced down at his dark blue, silk shirt and the left corner of his mouth turned up slightly. Jon Henri continued to grin at him. They did call him “Mr. It” if he was in earshot, but behind his back, they called him “Dirk the Jerk.” Sitting in the back of History class, Dirk would pull out a roll of money and proceed to count it. Every once in a while he would look up to see who was sneaking a peek at this little exhibition.

Costain motioned for Dirk and two of the men to follow him.

They squatted beside the fire. Costain picked up a stick and stirred the embers. The logs flared and the flame illuminated his face and scalp. He pointed to the trees and several men disappeared into the dark. Before long, they were back lugging sacks that they stored in the shed.

“What are you going to do about him, Boss? Are you going to let him in “The Society?” Dirk asked. Jon Henri strained to hear what was being said.

“He makes a whole lot of sense.”

Dirk looked back at Jon Henri. “Do whatever you want with him, Mr. Costain. Hell, it’s your still.”

“Thank you, Dirk. I intend to.”

With his hands around Jon Henri’s throat, Costain growled, “I’m going to hire you, but if you ever breathe a word about “The Society” I personally will kill every member of your family. Do you understand, boy?” Jon Henri nodded. Costain hired him that day.

During that first month, Jon Henri studied the bootlegging industry more than he did history, algebra, or any other class he took. Costain’s voice hammered into his brain as he instructed him on the details of making mash. Jon Henri had to perform this act by himself after three nights of watching Costain go through the process of adding yeast and sugar to the cracked corn covered in warm water. It was amazing how fast the yeast multiplied in the warm water and how fast Jon Henri learned when money was involved.

“Now tell me what I said about this yeast,” Costain commanded.

Jon Henri recited each step word by word. “The yeast eats the sugar and excretes loose juice.” John Henri laughed the first time he heard that expression. Loose juice sounds like the juice should have been locked up.

Costain did not laugh. “Loose juice,” he said, “is a combination of carbon dioxide and alcohol.” The first time the odor of the vile mixture filled Jon Henri’s nostrils, he thought he was going to be sick. It smelled worse than a pigsty on a hot July afternoon.

Jon Henri continued. “The carbon dioxide bubbles off into the air. When the yeast here produces too much alcohol it starts killing itself faster than it can multiply and this process stops.”

“You learn fast boy.” Costain dipped a jar into the barrel and filled it a quarter ways full. “Drink this. It ain’t nothing but beer. To be good shine it has to age a while.” Jon Henri tasted the mixture and gagged. The men howled with laughter.

Dirk laughed and said, “You’re such a tender butt. Want me to put a nipple on that jar for you? Huh, baby?” Jon Henri turned the Mason jar up and downed the beer concoction. Later, on the way home, he threw up in the woods.

“These copper pots nestle down inside a hole which has been cut in the top of each one of these 55-gallon steel drums,” Costain said. “You’ll keep these drums stoked with wood by opening the hinged doors on their sides. This is a big operation. I supply moonshine to over five hundred customers in two states. It will be done right.”

For the next two weeks, Jon Henri learned every detail of distilling corn liquor. When he made a mistake, Costain cussed and yelled until Jon Henri could recite it backward. He realized that for Costain this business was as important as the bank was to its owner. He was a perfectionist. His shine was the best in the state and he planned to keep it that way.

A month later, Costain allowed Jon Henri to pour the alcohol into one of the pots. “Now listen up, boy. When this gauge on this

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copper pot reaches 173 degrees, vapors will rise inside a piece of copper tubing.” He turned around and glared at two men standing behind him. “And somebody here had better damn well make sure it’s welded proper this time.” He turned back to Jon Henri. “Two months ago this whole container blew sky high. I’m surprised the whole damn county didn’t ride out here to see the commotion. The reason I’m telling you this is I know I’m showing you the right way. If you screw up, boy, it’s because you ain’t paying attention.”

“Mr. Costain, I’ve been hanging on to your every word.”

“Don’t get smart with me, boy.”

“No, sir. I’m not. I want to learn.”

“Now this tubing here,” he said, pointing to a copper tube coming out of the pot, “conducts the vapors to the condenser barrel. That over there is the condenser barrel for this pot.” The tube entered the condenser and coiled around and around inside the barrel which was filled with constant circulating cold water. Now he knew why they were located next to Drowning Creek. “As the vapors cool, they’ll condense back into a liquid state and collect in those jugs. One of your jobs will be to collect that liquid and pour it into those Mason jars.”

He picked up a jar half full of clear liquid. “Sit down on the ground, boy.”

He sat down and Costain handed him the jar. Jon Henri sniffed the liquid. The smell and the fumes made his eyes smart and puckered his nostrils. “If it’s all the same to you, I just soon not drink any.”

“Boy, you can’t sell a product if you don’t know it inside out. Learning this process is one thing but getting it down inside will tell you its true nature. This is good corn likker. It ain’t aged yet, but I want you to be able to distinguish the fresh from the aged and the good from the bad. Now drink, damn it!”

Jon Henri took a deep breath. He turned the jar up, filled his mouth, and swallowed. He smacked his lips and smiled. “This ain’t as bad as that other stuff.” The guys grinned and some held their hands over their mouths. He took another big swallow.

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Suddenly, his stomach lurched. He dropped the jar and pounded his chest. The men roared with laughter. He fell backward and his eyes rolled back in his head. "Oh, Lord, I'm gonna die!" His chest felt like it was on fire.

"Now you know why I wanted you to sit down."

Jon Henri did taste the aged, the good, and the bad corn likker. He hated every drop. However, he was able to guarantee his customers that they were receiving the absolute best product ever distilled.

The first midnight ride with Dirk lasted to four in the morning. Backtracking took up half the night. Backtracking insured that no one followed them. Jon Henri unloaded a hundred gallons of moonshine at seven different honky-tonks and one grocery store, the County Line Grocery. At the County Line Grocery, he picked up ten twenty-pound bags of sugar and put them in the trunk. He smiled whenever he walked passed Dirk who was either smoking a cigarette or talking to the owner while, as he put it, "Jon Henri trained."

Jon Henri believed Dirk hit every dirt clod and every pothole on every road in the county. After that first ride, Jon Henri staggered home and fell into bed. The next morning he couldn't move. Every muscle in his back rebelled against his body. His ma made him stay home from school.

During those weeks of riding with Dirk, Jon Henri asked questions and Dirk mumbled "no" or "yeah" or said nothing at all. Jon Henri realized he wasn't getting anywhere by being inquisitive so he resorted back to flattery. Soon Dirk was explaining why he did this and why he did that. Jon Henri was disappointed that they did not take Dirk's '58 Ford. Dirk said his car was too well known by the deputies in the county. That's why Costain kept the black '55 Chevrolet hidden in the woods behind his house. It was void of all chrome. "Chrome," Dirk explained, "reflects headlights and moonlight."

When he was in school, Costain called him to the office two or three times a week. He gave him directions to new customers. He also insisted that Jon Henri take an economics class and a

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business math class. He wanted him to learn the business inside and out. For once, Jon Henri was enjoying school.

Jon Henri had learned a lot during the past five years hauling and selling bootleg whiskey for The Society, but now it was time to dissolve his association with Costain and The Society. He was ready to move on to his next goal. Goals he set when he was twelve years old, goals that would move his family out of poverty and into prosperity.

Jon Henri's Ma named him. She named all the children in the family. Pa said he never cared what she named them as long as he could spell it. She decided that children needed someone to look up to, someone to admire and with whom he or she could feel a kindred spirit. The song about John Henry, a steel-driving man reflected qualities she thought a boy should grow into. She also wanted her son to be unique, to be his own person, so she changed the spelling of the name to Jon Henri. Ginger Rogers, the movie star, had qualities that his ma thought a woman should have. Therefore, she named his sister Jinger spelled with a "J." His brother and sister, Wade and Dawn, acquired their names by the same method: Wade after a General Pa admired in the army and Dawn after reading a novel about a woman who's inspired other women to excel.

Up until the age of twelve, Jon Henri had never given much thought as to how the family lived. Run-down tenant houses, hand-me-down clothes, and outdoor toilets were normal everyday living for him and his friends. They all wore the same brand of jeans and brogans and carried their lunches in paper bags. They were picked up after school so they could help in the fields. During growing season, they left school at lunchtime. Jon Henri did not like being picked up at lunchtime. The town kids told him he was lucky not to have to listen to some old boring teacher. He rather had stayed in school because at least in school he was making money.

Jon Henri was not paid wages to help on the farm. He made his spending money in the boy's rest room before school began each morning and at lunchtime. He engaged the boys in a little

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game rather like the one he saw at the fair when he was eight years old. The hawker's slight-of-hand was with shells and a pea. Jon Henri did his with a fifty-cent piece wrapped in a thick wad of toilet paper and dropped into a bucket. The bucket contained thirty individual wrapped pennies. Each penny was wrapped in a piece of aluminum foil shaped like a fifty-cent piece and then wrapped in toilet paper. Jon Henri charged each boy a nickel to dip a hand into the bucket for five seconds. Of course, the fifty-cent piece was resting safely in his pocket. He palmed the wrapped fifty-cent piece and as he stood over the bucket and while the kids watched, he dropped another wrapped penny into the bucket. The boys fought to see who would be the first to cram their hand into the bucket.

He planned it so the bell would ring just as the last boy stuck in his hand. He promised them that the next day someone would win. Occasionally, he did drop the fifty-cent piece in the bucket, but even then, they didn't have much luck finding it.

Jon Henri learned early that money talked. After school, kids walked across the street to the mom 'n pop grocery store and bought soft drinks, candy or cookies, usually paying out a quarter. Until he started playing the bucket game, Jon Henri usually just watched as the kids wolfed down their goodies.

On his tenth birthday, Jon Henri became aware that others perceived his family's lifestyle as contemptible. It happened on the day he went with his pa to Murdock Bank. Justin, his pa, went there every three months to receive his share of the profits from Mr. Victor Murdock, whose lands he sharecropped. He planned to buy Jon Henri a brand new switchblade knife as soon as he picked up his money.

Jon Henri liked going to the bank. His pa made him and his sister, Jinger, put most of the money they earned into saving accounts. Jon Henri collected two-cents on every bottle he found on the shoulders of the highway from the farm into town. He usually collected these bottles on his way to and from school and after church on Sunday. He sold the bottles to Mr. Lewis as he did the fish. One afternoon, after dropping off a cotton sack full

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of bottles, he happened to be in the alley behind the store when he noticed Mr. Lewis placing the empties he just sold him into crates stacked up against the wall. From then on, he walked through the alley and added several more bottles to the ones he collected from the side of the highway.

He put all this money into a saving account. His pa told him he was proud of him, but it was all right to keep some out to spend.

What his pa did not know was that picking up empty bottles was not his only source of revenue.

He was excited about getting a switchblade knife. He had planned to buy it himself although he would have to hide it as he did the transistor radio and the new leather wallet he bought. He would have a hard time explaining where he got the money to pay for it since he was supposed to be putting it all in a savings account. Since his pa was buying the knife, he could proudly display it.

“You wait here, Jon Henri, while I talk to Mr. Murdock.” Jon Henri sat down on the maroon leather chair in the secretary’s office.

The intercom on the secretary’s desk buzzed. “Yes, Mr. Murdock?”

“Miss Jenkins, will you go get me a Pepsi, sweetheart? I’m dying of thirst.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll be back in a moment.” She walked to the door and opened it. “Don’t touch anything,” she snapped. “The office has just been cleaned.”

Jon Henri looked up at her and smiled. “No, ma’am, I’ll sit right here.” As soon as the door closed, he jumped up and stuck out his tongue at the door. He moved around the office, turned the lamps on and off, opened the file cabinet, and placed the “A” files in the back under the “W.” He opened the drawer on her desk, ran his hand inside, and scattered the pencils and pens. He sipped coffee from a cup that had a daisy painted on it.

The door to Murdock’s office was opened slightly and Jon Henri stood next to it. He peeped in and saw his pa standing

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before a huge desk. Murdock sat back in a leather chair with a cigar stuck in his mouth.

“Justin, if I allow you to improve the house then the other tenant farmers will be barging in here wanting the same thing. I promise that when the next house with indoor plumbing becomes available your family will be the next in line to move in.”

“Mr. Murdock, I’ll be willing to help pay for some of the work. I’ve saved a little money over the years and this is something I feel that my family needs.”

“Money isn’t the object, Justin,”

“I understand what you’re saying, Mr. Murdock, but I’ve worked for you since I came back from the war. I need a place to wash up and so does my family. I have never cared for outhouses and I just about can’t tolerate taking another bath in the barn in that tin tub. Lugging water to fill that tin tub every day takes more time than I got to spare.”

Justin leaned on the desk. “When I was in basic training, I took a shower twice a day. In Europe, where I fought, I would go for two, sometimes three weeks before I could shower. I swore that when I got home I’d get myself an indoor bath as soon as I could afford it.” Justin straightened up and cleared his throat. “Like I said, it’s hard staying clean using a tin tub.”

“Well, you look clean enough to me, Justin. You know how much I appreciate the work you do. You raise the best damn cotton anyone in these parts has ever seen. That’s why I’m saying instead of spending your money on this, save it, and as I said, the next place that comes available with indoor plumbing I’ll see to it that your family moves right in.”

Mr. Murdock stood and his chair scraped the floor. “I’m very busy, and I hope you and your family will spend some of that money you’ve earned on something you can use right now.”

“We can use a bathroom,” Justin snapped. “Mr. Murdock, I really must insist. We do need this bathroom. If you let me explain where I plan to put this . . .”

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“I’m sorry to interrupt, but I do have another appointment. Why don’t you buy your family a television set?”

“We have a television set. What we need is a bathroom.”

“Not in this house! I’m sorry, but that’s the way it is. Please, see yourself out.”

Jon Henri slid under the desk just as the door opened. “See you next growing season, Justin.” The door closed.

At first, Jon Henri didn’t hear anything. He peeked around the desk and saw Justin staring at the closed door of Murdock’s office. His pa raised his fist and shook it at the door. Jon Henri ducked back under the desk and listened as his pa’s shoes clomped over the wooden floor.

The outer door opened. “Mr. Tyler, you’re still here.”

“I’m leaving. Have you seen my boy?”

“He was here when I left. Maybe he went outside.”

The door closed and Jon Henri moved to the front of the desk curling into a ball. The intercom buzzed. “Miss Jenkins, bring your pad and pencil and did you get my Pepsi?”

“Yes, sir.”

She moved to the back of the desk and pulled open a drawer. He heard things rattling inside and then she closed it with a bang.

Jon Henri waited a few seconds and then crawled out from under the desk. He tiptoed to the door and pressed his ear against it.

“Justin’s the best farmer around these parts and I’ll do anything he says when it comes to growing cotton. But, I am not spending one red cent on any farmer that I don’t have to. I told him I’d give him the next house that came available that has indoor plumbing. I mean it too. Of course, I don’t have such a house.” He laughed and so did Miss Jenkins. “If he doesn’t have a pot to piss in, he’ll just have to use the woods like his mules do.”

Jon Henri raised his fist at the door and shook it. He went back to Miss Jenkins’ desk and opened the drawer. He picked up the coffee cup and poured the contents inside.

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Later, sitting in the outhouse, Jon Henri pretended he owned all the land in the county, and that he was the king. He imagined commanding Miss Jenkins to rub mule manure in Murdock's face and hair.

That dream was one of the reasons why, at the age of seventeen, he took the clerk job at Murdock Grocery. Murdock owned the store, but Mr. Samuel Lewis ran it. Jon Henri's Ma liked Mr. Lewis. She said he was an honest man and he kept his store reasonably clean. Jon Henri's plan was to learn all he could from Mr. Lewis because he planned to buy his own store someday.

In the meantime, he learned the proper way to scrub the butcher block, the floor, and the counter. He mastered the art of cutting and trimming meat, stocking shelves and constructing displays. Mr. Lewis allowed him to write newspaper ads after he wrote a caption for selling cans of peaches that he had overstocked:

*“Movie stars who dine
on peaches have
peach Complexions”*

Jon Henri also had the newspaper invert their weekly ad. Folks came in all week commenting that the ad was upside down. They also bought the items featured in the ad.

Mr. Lewis knew the whims of each customer and always commented on the ladies' outfits and hairdos, and he asked the men questions regarding their jobs or whatever sport that held their interest.

Soon, Jon Henri would be ready financially to buy his own business. His dream was to own several gas station combination grocery stores. He had already picked out the first store he wanted to buy. It was at a crossroad five miles from town on the county line. Farmers, mill-workers, housewives, and salesmen patronized this business. In his mind, he renovated the store to entice even more customers and keep them coming back. The

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dream that followed showed him grinning as he rubbed Murdock's face in mule manure. These dreams helped him fight off the desire to sleep in, gave him the motivation to show up on days when snow covered the hills and the weather was so cold he had to wear two sweaters and a coat to walk to work. That dream was the main reason he hauled moonshine on nights when rain fell like a giant waterfall or when headlights barely penetrated the dense fog.

Murdock, money, and moonshine.

He could not seem to separate the three.

CHAPTER

2

Cold air seeped under Jon Henri's bedroom door. He zipped his jacket, pressed his ear flat against the door, and listened. He always listened at the door since the night he walked outside and surprised his pa who was in his underwear sitting on the porch steps smoking a cigarette. His pa jumped up, balled up his fist, and almost hit Jon Henri in the face. He demanded to know what he was doing up so late and Jon Henri lied and said he thought he heard a noise and had slipped on his clothes just in case he had to chase someone.

That was a long time ago in another house. He had been cautious ever since.

He looked at his watch and eased the door open. Cold air penetrated his jeans as he stood inside the door and studied the silhouettes and shadows under the glow of the moonlight. He was thankful that all the rooms had outside doors that opened on to the wrap-a-round porch. Satisfied that nothing was about, he tiptoed to the steps. As soon as he stepped on the boards, he drew up. The sound, similar to a rusty hinge, echoed in the still night. He meant to nail the boards down, but until he stepped on them, the thought never entered his mind. He held his breath and listened. No one stirred in the house. He scurried down the steps and when he reached the grove of pecan trees, he paused and watched for signs of anyone near the house or barns.

At the highway, Jon Henri jumped the drainage ditch. He glanced at his watch again and ran to the abandoned tobacco barn at the end of the field. He opened the door and stepped inside. He waited inside until his eyes adjusted to the darkness. Cautiously, he stepped over an iron burner on the dirt floor. He touched the chrome gas tank of his motorcycle. He wished he didn't have to hide this toy. His pa and everyone else knew Murdock Grocery didn't pay that kind of money. At least in the tobacco barn no one would ever see it. No one grew tobacco in this county. Murdock saw to that.

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He pushed the motorcycle out of the barn and across the hard furrowed field onto the dirt road.

He bought the motorcycle seven months ago when he and Link Rogers drove to Raleigh. Link, his friend and customer, kidded him about holding onto his money until it rusted. Link spotted the ad in the classified section of the paper, circled it, and shoved the paper under his nose.

“A man needs his own transportation.” Usually, Jon Henri borrowed his pa’s pickup after everyone went to bed. A few times, he barely made it back before his pa crawled out of bed. Many times, he ran the five miles to town.

Jon Henri mounted the bike and settled his rear down on the leather seat. He inserted the key and clicked the heel of his boot against the starter. He stomped it hard, twisted the handle to give it gas, and the motor roared.

“Good girl,” he said, pressing the foot button, switching it from neutral to first. Dirt shot out behind the rear tire. He jerked back on the handlebar and the motorcycle reared up like a trained horse. He spun around and around in the road creating donut-shape ruts. The dirt fanned out behind him as he turned toward town.

He laughed as the force of the air pressed the skin tight against his cheekbones.

Once in town he drove through the back alleys, stopping behind Link’s Grill. He switched off the motor, removed the key, and propped the motorcycle up on its stand.

This alley was used as a parking lot for people who did not want to pay the nickel to park on Main Street. Their cars stirred up the dust and it settled back down on the bricks, the doors, and the windows.

Four times a week Jon Henri tapped the same spot on the back door of the Grill. Four times a week he spat on the glass and used his handkerchief to rub away the grime. Four times a week the same face peered out at him, the screen door opened and he walked inside.

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Link Rogers settled back down on the barstool. "I was beginning to worry about you. You're twenty minutes late."

"Since we got that color television set, Pa sits up until it signs off."

"Come on over here and have a drink."

"Link, you know I don't drink that rot gut."

"This ain't rot gut. This is the real stuff." He poured whiskey into two glasses and handed one to Jon Henri. Link turned the glass up and swallowed the contents in one gulf. He rubbed his sleeve across his lips. "Whew, good stuff. Go ahead, boy, drink up. I ain't going to give you nothing lethal." Jon Henri turned the glass up and swallowed fast. The liquid burned the back of his throat and he forced back a gag. Although Link was his friend he was also his customer, and to stay on his good side, he forced himself to take a drink now and then.

Sergeant Lincoln Rogers stood five feet, seven inches tall and was solid muscle. He use to wrestle in the Army and had won the bulk of his matches. A display of his trophies sat on a shelf above the mirrors behind the bar. That display and his intolerance for rudeness stymied most aggression in the Grill, which he opened after he came back from the war in 1945

The county had been dry since prohibition and stayed that way because the wives and mothers of the town banned together when it came up for a vote. Link obliged the men by opening up the back room and installing pool tables, a jukebox and a false wall that when lowered revealed rows and rows of booze including moonshine, whiskey, and various mixers, although few of the guys drank mixers. The various law enforcement officers visited his place regularly as customers, but once a year the officers officially raided the back room. They did this whenever too many wives complained about their husbands staying out too late. Link allowed prostitutes to use his Grill and they paid dearly for the right to occupy a barstool.

"Where are the keys to your car?" Jon Henri asked.

"Man, can't you be sociable? You've got time. It's still dark."

Nutgrass

“It is never dark enough for me. Too many black and whites prowling around.” He held out his hand. “Keys, please.”

Jon Henri had one fear: serving time. Not because he was afraid of going to jail, even with all its horror stories, but to him it was such a waste of his time. “Jail time would cut into my plans for the future,” he said. Link reached behind the bar and held up the keys.

“You are the only person I trust with my automobile.”

Jon Henri laughed. “Now I wonder if you’d be so trusting if I charged you full cost for shine.”

“Sure I would.” Link dropped the keys into Jon Henri’s hand.

“By the way, Costain will be here Saturday night. He has heard a rumor of another still operating in the county.”

Jon Henri smiled. “Tell old sack face I’ve located that still.”

Link slapped him on the back. “Hell, I knew you’d be the one. The last four stills the revenuers busted up were from anonymous tips.”

“Why should we risk our necks when the revenuers are being paid to do the job?”

“Where’s this still?”

Jon Henri winked. “Never mind, old buddy. Just relay the message.”

“Don’t trust nobody, do you?”

“That’s how I survive.” He moved toward the door. “Don’t let anyone touch my bike.”

He stepped outside, stopping long enough for his eyes to adjust to the dark. A light shone in the second floor window in the building at the end of the alley. Two silhouettes danced on the yellow shade. Frowning, he looked away. He couldn’t let himself think about what was taking place in the apartment.

He quickly crossed the alley and opened the door to Link’s ‘57 Chevrolet.

Three miles outside of town, he opened her up. Jon Henri had put a four-barrel carburetor and dual exhaust on Link’s car. He had learned some things about motors from helping his pa work on the pickup and the tractor. He learned more from Dirk and he

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pestered the other drivers to show him how they souped up their cars. For a long time, Dirk had the car most envied by everyone in the county, but not anymore. That honor now belonged to Link's automobile, which was driven by Jon Henri.

Jon Henri first spotted the black '57 Chevrolet one morning just as the sun peeked over the hill. Link had pulled up to the stop sign across from the County Line Grocery. Jon Henri stopped beside him and raced the motor of Costain's '55 Chevy. Link raced his motor. The car seemed to rear back like a racehorse.

"Who'd you steal that car from, Link?"

"Didn't steal it. I bought it. That's a mighty fine automobile you're sitting in, Jon Henri."

"That it is. That it is."

"Dirk Caldwell told me that there car could beat anything on the road,"

"Dirk? I thought he was in jail."

"I heard you helped put him there. Did you?" Link asked.

Jon Henri ignored the question. "Is he out?"

"He got out a week ago." Jon Henri nodded his head. He was glad Link mentioned that. He knew now to be on the lookout for Dirk. "Wanta drag, Jon Henri?" Link shouted.

"How far and for what?"

"It ain't for pinks that's for sure. One mile and all the booze you can drink for a month."

Jon Henri shook his head. "You know I don't drink that much."

"What then?"

"You'll let me drive that car sometimes."

"What'll I get when I win?"

"Name it." Jon Henri raced the motor again.

"Some free shine."

"Deal."

They pulled up to the edge of the road. Link said, "We'll drive straight ahead until we hit the first curve." The curve was a

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hairpin turn that posted a twenty-mile an hour speed limit sign. “You see that car over there by the gas pumps?”

Jon Henri looked over at the store. “Yeah.”

“When his front tires touch the road we floor it.”

Jon Henri watched as the driver pumped gas into his car. The driver went inside and two minutes later came out and climbed into his car. Jon Henri had one foot on the brake and the other on the accelerator. The driver of the car pulled to within one foot of the pavement. He looked to his right and then to his left. Slowly, he rolled toward the highway. Jon Henri watched the section of the pavement right where it met the dirt. When the front tires touched the tar, Jon Henri floored the accelerator. His rear tires screeched as they spun on the black asphalt. He was a car length ahead before Link even moved his car. Jon Henri shifted into second and then third. The speedometer needle climbed to seventy before Link pulled up beside him. Jon Henri held the steering wheel tight in his hands. He didn't turn his head to look at Link. His eyes were on the curve two hundred yards ahead. Jon Henri was on the inside and he knew he had the advantage. He knew if he slammed on the brake in the curve, his car would flip over. If he didn't, he would slam into the trees and down the ravine. Either way he would die. He chose the curve. He slammed down the brakes and turned the steering wheel sharp to the left. The rear end spun toward the ravine. Jon Henri floored the accelerator, straightened the wheel, and then quickly turned the steering wheel to the left again. He raced down the hill stopping a hundred yards beyond the curve.

He got out and leaned against the hood, his heart beating so fast he felt his blood pounding in his ears. He propped his heel on the bumper and lit a cigarette.

Link passed him, turned around, and stopped beside him.

“You're a smart one, Jon Henri, “Being on the inside was damn smart.”

Jon Henri took a long draw on the cigarette and blew the smoke over his car. His heartbeat slowed. “Link, I got a proposition for you. That's a mighty fine automobile. If you let

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me drive it to deliver shine, I'll talk to my boss about giving you that free shine.

Costain was happy to give Link extra quarts of moonshine. He figured that was cheaper than paying out a lot of cash to keep his car in good condition.

When Jon Henri told Link he had to remove the chrome bumpers and mirrors, he protested. He said it would pain his soul to see someone destroying such a fine piece of artwork like his machine. Costain gave him extra jars of shine. Link made enough off the liquor to ease the pain in his soul.

Costain had paid for all the parts and Jon Henri poured his sweat into making it the fastest car on the road.

It was a fine machine.

Jon Henri turned left onto an unmarked paved road. Five minutes later, he drove into the dirt parking lot of the County Line Grocery and switched off the motor. He checked his rearview and side mirrors before he climbed out of the car. He tapped on the screen door three times, paused, and tapped once. It opened and two men stepped from the house.

"It's out here," Mr. Jacobs, the shortest of the two said. Jon Henri followed them to a shed connected to a garage. Mr. Jacobs inserted a key into the padlock and they stepped inside. Within minutes, the trunk was loaded with twenty-five, ten-pound bags of sugar.

"How much?" Jon Henri asked.

"Same as last week," Jacobs said. Jon Henri handed him the money; he counted it. He nodded his head and Jon Henri closed the trunk of the car.

Jon Henri drove cautiously through the back road and crisscrossed the main highway several times. On the crossing, he switched off the headlights. If anyone were following him: the law, or rival moonshiner -- they would have a hard time finding the still since he'd also crossed the county line three times.

He followed a narrow road that wound through water oaks and pines until he came to Running Creek. He turned left and followed it to a high thicket made up of pines, sycamores, and

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thick vines. He stopped, switched the headlight on three times, paused, and switched it on and off once more. A single light flashed the same signal from the thicket. He waited ten minutes before he opened the car doors. He climbed out of the car, checked behind him and beside him before he headed for the bushes.

He parted the briars near the water and pushed his way to a clearing. A man in overalls held a shotgun level against his shoulder. He lowered it when he saw it was Jon Henri and motioned him through.

Men stood around a fire keeping close watch on a copper kettle that hung above it.

“Is that all you fellows got to do, warm your back sides?” The men jumped and four scrambled for shotguns that had been placed against a pine tree.

“That’s good.” Jon Henri smiled. “That means I’m doing my job.”

“That means you’re going to sneak up on a fellow one night and be blown to bits.”

Jon Henri walked over to the fire and warmed his hands. “I got the sweets in the trunk, if anyone’s interested.” Several men walked back the way he had arrived. “The boss wouldn’t happen to be around, would he Craig?”

Craig was squatting by the fire, and when he stood, Jon Henri had to lean backwards to see his face. Jon Henri didn’t know Craig’s last name and he didn’t know how he had hooked up with the moonshiners. He did know that he was loyal to whoever treated him with respect. He picked up a piece of wood and tossed it on the fire. His left hand had two fingers missing; the direct results of miscalculating the amount of dynamite needed to blow up a rival’s still.

“He’s over there in the shack. He came down because he’s worried about that there still he can’t find.” The firelight lit up Craig’s smiling face. The tip of his tongue stuck out the gap between his missing two front teeth. He leaned over and

whispered into Jon Henri's ear. "Say, my friend, you wouldn't happen to have a ten spot on ya would you?"

"Craig, you old nigger you. What'd you do with the ten I loaned you two days ago?"

"Well, it's like this here, Jon Henri. I got me this here woman, if you know what I mean."

"She charges a lot, don't you think?"

"Now you know I only wants the best. You and I's been around a long time and I'm just like you except I'm a whole heap older and a whole heap wiser."

"I don't spend my money on whores."

"No, but you sure are keeping company with a pretty one."

Jon Henri clenched his teeth. If it had been anyone besides Craig, Jon Henri might have taken offense at what he said. "She might work in a bar and she might charge other people but not me." Jon Henri took out his wallet and gave Craig a ten-dollar bill.

"Thanks, Jon Henri. You're good to me and I's going to pay you back. In fact, I's going to pay you back in something better than money."

"What's better than money?"

"It's a warning." Craig whispered into Jon Henri's ear again. "Mean Dean's after you."

Jon Henri stepped back and glared up at Craig. "Where'd you hear that?"

"I's gets around. I go to his diner and I hears things. They don't know you and me works for the same boss. I hears things. When you deliver the moonshine tomorrow night, you just watch yourself. You watch yourself twice."

"What do you mean, twice?"

"I's can't tell you the other one. The other one is part of The Society. I's don't snitch on The Society. I's can only warn when it's The Society. You just watch out."

Mean Dean was a black, black man. He wore white sleeveless tee shirts that showed off his bulging muscles. Jon Henri had seen him lift a man clear over his head, carry him out to the

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parking lot behind the dance hall, spin him around and around, and toss him thirty feet down the alley.

Mean Dean owned a combination restaurant/ dance hall across the railroad tracks patronized only by blacks. Friday and Saturday nights his place was jammed with folks laughing, dancing, and fighting that lasted way into the night. He filled all the brown bottles on the hidden shelves under the counter with watered down moonshine. Few blacks complained since it was the only place they could buy a drink. Several black men who were customers of Mean Dean had asked Jon Henri to supply them with moonshine and let them sell it from their houses. Jon Henri had told them he would think about it. His boss said no. He was scared of Mean Dean, too.

“Thanks. Consider the loan paid.”

Jon Henri walked to the shack. Costain opened the door. He had on denim overalls that were too big for his slim frame.

“Jon Henri Tyler, my boy. Didn’t hear you drive up.” He laughed. “Best damn driver I’ve ever had.”

“Yes sir, I am.” Jon Henri propped his foot up on the top step. “This here creek is smaller than Drowning Creek. Are you sure it’s safe?”

“Yeah. No one uses it much because it’s small. Drowning Creek was beginning to look like downtown on Saturday night. I’m a cautious man, that’s why we’re here.”

“I haven’t seen you since my folks moved.”

“Yeah, well I’ve been busy. Your sister told me about the move.”

“Pa bought a small farm on the other side of the county. I did some exploring in the woods and guess what I found?”

Costain’s eyes lit up. “You found our rival. Am I right, boy?”

“Yes, sir. Would you like for me to call the revenuers?”

“It’s your patriotic duty.”

“Maybe this time I should let my Pa call the revenuers. It is his land after all.”

CHAPTER

3

Jon Henri delivered moonshine four nights a week: Sunday or rather early Monday morning through Thursday. Costain believed it was safer than weekends. He was glad it was Thursday. By Thursday, the lack of sleep played havoc on his thinking.

He opened the door and stepped outside. Gently, he closed the door, took a step and groaned. As soon as his shoe touched the boards, a loud squeak echoed through the night. Again, he had meant to nail them down that morning but out of sight out of mind. He knew when he lifted his foot the boards would squeak again. Slowly, he raised his foot. Sure enough, that annoying squeak jarred his mind.

His foot poised in midair, Jon Henri breathed deeply. The full moon illuminated this side of the porch and outlined the barns and pecan trees, their long shadows reached as far as the fence. It was then that he heard the rocker and the porch swing moving on the other side of the porch. He closed his eyes and concentrated on the noise. Was someone standing on the porch or was it the wind? He stared at the dark shape of the tree limbs for movement. They did not move. There was no wind. He clinched his teeth and slowly lowered his foot. His heart pounded, and he held his breath. Quietly he moved to the side of the house and peeked around the corner.

“Damn,” he muttered. Jinger sat in the porch swing bundled in a quilt with her legs tucked under her. Knowing her moods, she would probably sit there until she fell asleep. He leaned against the wall to wait her out.

This was his second favorite time of the year. The work on the farm slowed and he had more time to work at Murdock Grocery and haul moonshine. He looked out over the fields and smiled. In the moonlight, the furrows looked endless. At least this year his pa would not have to split the profits with the owner of the land.

Nutgrass

He was the owner of the land. For twenty- one years, he had been a sharecropper's son.

Not anymore.

He was surprised and profoundly shocked when his pa announced that he had bought a farm. Jon Henri wondered where he got the down payment. Jon Henri's dream had been to buy them a house in town. Now, he decided that after he paid off his store he would buy the family a cottage at the lake. That way he would still be improving his family's status in the county.

Two weeks ago, Jinger had told him she wanted to name the farm. She came up with "Tyler Farm", but decided that was too plain. Earlier she had discarded "Tyler's Acres" because it reminded her of God's Little Acre. She settled on "Tyler Plantation." He wished he hadn't laughed at her. Now she was waiting to pounce on him. He smiled. In a way, he was glad she knew what he was doing. Sometimes when he gave Ma and the rest of the family nice presents, she would nod her head as if this made it all right. Of course, this could also be wishful thinking on his part.

He saw her reach out and run her fingers along the railing of the porch. There were no nicks or grooves. She had painted all the rails herself; filling each hole with so much paint, that Pa had threatened to take away the paintbrush. She wanted folks to see that they now lived in a painted house, not some bare- wood tenant shack.

The crisp January air stung Jon Henri's nose and ears as he watched her rock back and forth. She looked like she was settling in for the night. He shook his head and decided to walk around the corner. He did not have a whole lot of time to waste. He had a schedule to keep.

He moved out into the open. She froze and stared at the corner of the porch.

"Jon Henri?" she whispered.

He moved toward her. "I knew somebody was lurking out here," he snapped. "You made enough noise to wake the dead."

She exhaled. "Me?"

“Yeah, you. What are you doing out here?”

“I could ask the same thing of you. It is after one o’clock.”

“I asked first, Little Sister.” He emerged into the moonlight and leaned against the post next to her chair. He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket and thumped it against his hand. He pulled the cigarette from the pack with his lips as he flipped the lid of his Zippo lighter. The flame warmed his face. He squinted as the smoke drifted toward his eyes. “Couldn’t sleep?” he asked, exhaling a thin line of smoke.

“Why are you acting so nonchalant, trying to pretend you’re just out for a smoke? I know you’re still in that . . . that business.”

He nodded his head. “Moonshine! Bootleg whiskey! Say it Jinger. That’s my business.”

“You’re going to hurt all of us.”

“How?”

“You know someday your luck’s gonna run out.”

“I’m too fast and too smart to get caught.”

“Someone could shoot you just like they shot Grandpa.”

“He didn’t die,” he snapped. “I could be killed falling off this porch.”

Jinger jerked the quilt tighter around her body. “I might push you myself. What’s your reason for continuing in this business?”

“What?”

“All this time you said you were doing it to help us better ourselves. At least that’s what you told me. You said you wanted folks to respect this family. We got the farm; we can hold our heads up a little higher. So, why are you still hauling?”

“I ain’t through yet. There’s more to be done.” Jon Henri flipped ashes over the porch rail. Enough of this, he thought. “What’s this business I hear about you and Rita?”

“What?” She dropped her right foot to the floor and pushed. The swing moved back and forth. “You change directions faster than a rabbit running from a fox,” she said. The swing swayed faster. “What did you hear?”

Nutgrass

Another line of smoke shot out from between his lips. "Nothing good, that's for sure. I heard you two are double dating tomorrow night."

"So?"

"With Quint Murdock, right?"

"Who told you?" she asked.

"Doesn't matter," he said tapping ashes from his cigarette. "You're not going."

"And who's going to stop me? You?"

"Maybe." He turned toward her. "I know what you're up to."

"And just what am I up to?" She rocked harder.

"Snatching a rich boy."

She laughed. "You've got it all wrong, brother dear. Caleb's my date for the evening. I've never wanted to date Quint. He's too quiet, too shy."

"Shy ain't exactly the word I'd use," he said. "No, you just want to be counted in his circle."

"What's wrong with that?"

"I don't want any sister of mine near him. There are things about him that you don't know."

"Oh, for crying out loud! You're just blowing wind."

He blew out another puff of smoke. He wasn't blowing wind. He knew exactly the type of girl Quint Murdock craved. Two years back, while on a run, Jon Henri had circled back to Drowning Creek. Craig told everyone at the still he had spotted a car sitting under a grove of trees next to the creek bank. He said it wasn't the first time he saw it there. This grove of trees was just under a mile from the still and Jon Henri decided to drive by and see if maybe some rival was spying on them.

He parked the '55 Chevy on the turn off just above the bank. He took out his pistol and brass knuckles and slipped them into his jacket pockets. He walked through the trees to the creek. Sure enough, the car sat just where Craig said it would be.

Jon Henri moved quickly but quietly through the trees. The night was clear and there was a half-moon in the sky. It was just enough light for him to recognize the make of the car: a '56

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Thunderbird. It belonged to Quint Murdock. The windows of the car were fogged up and Jon Henri crouched down as he approached the rear of the car. Someone in the back seat groaned. Jon Henri smiled. He moved back behind a tree, lit a cigarette, and waited to see with whom Quint was fooling around.

Quint was a year older than Jon Henri was and for the most part Jon Henri ignored him. Quint had his circle of friends: the doctors and lawyers' kids in the county and Jon Henri had his. Jon Henri saw him hanging out at the drugstore drinking cherry coke and eating club sandwiches and sitting in the bleachers at ballgames, but he never saw him date any of these girls. The rumor was that he was gay. However, John Henri did not think that was it. Jon Henri did not date any of the girls he hung around with either. The reason being he had known them since first grade and he knew too much about them. Anyway, he liked older women.

JonHenri finished smoking the cigarette before the door opened. The lights from the dash and overhead illuminated the area around the car. Quint stepped out and adjusted his pants.

He offered his hand to someone inside. A lovely shaped leg emerged and then another. The girl stood up and Jon Henri gasped. It was Lola Mae Thompson. She was the daughter of Murdock's housekeeper.

She was black.

Quint pulled her to him. He kissed her, and wrapped his arm around her waist and led her to the creek. JonHenri followed them, keeping the car and trees between them and himself.

“ . . . and when I finish college you and I are leaving this county and we're going to get married,” Quint said. “I have enough money from a trust to live anywhere we want. You name the place.”

“Let's move to some exotic place, some place a million mile from here.”

“I love you so much.” They kissed for a long time.

Nutgrass

“I’ve saved some money, too, Quint. I cleaned two houses just last week.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I ain’t coming into this marriage with my hand out. I like saving my money. I’m going to use it to help us leave this place.” She touched his face. “Are you going to tell your ma and pa?”

“Hell no! I’ll miss Mama, but she can take care of herself. As for Daddy, he can rot in hell,” he snapped. “Daddy thinks he can control me like he does everyone in this county. I hate banking and all the rest of his damn businesses. I want to teach.” He grunted. “You know what he said about teaching? He said teaching was for weaklings, for people who can’t cut it.”

“Teachers aren’t weaklings. I like most of them.”

He stood and pulled her to her feet. “All I want is to live a peaceful life, a simple life. I’m sick and tired of all Daddy’s wheeling and dealing and his boasting how he snared another piece of land or another business.”

“I know you do, Quint and I hate this hiding. I wish our folks would understand. I know we are supposed to be working toward equality for everyone, but Gran ain’t going to accept me loving a white man.”

Jon Henri backed away, and when he got into his car, he sat there for several minutes.

Quint Murdock and Lola Mae Thompson.

If someone had told him, he would have called that person a liar. As he thought about it, it bothered him and then it didn’t. He had black friends but none of them women. He couldn’t imagine dating any either. He wondered how the black community would feel if they found out one of their own was dating Quint Murdock. Maybe black girls were the only girls who would go out with him. He shook his head. No, Quint was serious about her. He told Lola Mae he loved her and wanted to take her away. Jon Henri started the car. At least he wasn’t gay. If anyone in the county found out, he might wish he were gay. He looked back toward the couple standing on the bank of the creek. He smiled. This information might come in handy someday. He

would just keep it under his hat. What they were doing wasn't hurting him any.

Until now.

"What makes you think Quint will notice you? He ain't never paid any attention to you."

"Dear brother, things have changed a lot since Pa bought this place. I'm not a sharecropper's daughter no more and further more we don't work for Quint's daddy anymore."

Jon Henri shook his head. "Things ain't changed that much. I know you think we've moved up a notch, Little Sister, but it is a long way to the top rung of that ladder."

Jinger stood and sniffed his clothing. "When are you going to find another way to earn money?"

He smiled. "When you marry a Quint Murdock."

"You're so funny. Do you want to know what I found in the barn between two bales of hay?"

"I suppose I can guess." Again, he flicked the ashes from his cigarette.

"Don't bother. I'm going to tell you something, Jon Henri Tyler, and you better listen and listen well." Her voice rose as she talked. "When we lived on other people's farm, I didn't give a hoot what you stored between the hay. I have never told anyone about that day beside the creek. I have never told anyone where you go at night. Now things are different. This place belongs to us, and you better find another farm and another barn to hide your moonshine."

Jon Henri grabbed her by the arm and pressed his hand against her mouth. "Lower your voice! Someone could be awake." He dropped his hand. "I know what I'm doing. I make more money in a month than Pa does in a year farming."

"If you have all this money, why don't you leave?"

"Leave? Leave the county? No, sir. Not me. I'm never leaving." He chuckled. "Someday I'm going to own a chain of gas station combination grocery stores, one in every small town in this county. I've got my eye on a country store right now. As soon

Nutgrass

as I have enough money I'm going to buy it." He waved his hand in the air. "Why, someday I'm going to own this county."

"My goodness! What big plans we have!"

He flicked ashes over the rail. "My dreams will come true because I have a plan and a reason. Yours are nothing but pipe dreams. I bet you don't even know what you're going to do after college or for that matter what you are going to major in."

"That's where you're wrong. I know where I'm headed. After college I'm going to travel."

"Oh? With what? Money? Where's it coming from?"

"I'm going to get a job that involves traveling. Then I'm coming back here. I'll be well known by then."

Jon Henri laughed. "You better be glad you're almost through high school. Hell, on a farm that's all the education a girl needs. It don't take no education to raise babies and put up vegetables and preserves. It only takes doing."

"You must have been drinking some of that stump water you haul. You sound just like Ma."

"I think she makes sense. You'd better stick with Caleb Richards. He'll carry you further than you'll ever go on your own."

"Caleb? You have to be kidding. Caleb isn't ambitious enough to suit me. If I had plans to be a farmer's wife, it would be a wealthy farmer's wife. Caleb thinks he knows so much just because he went to college."

"You'll probably be the same way when you come back, too."

"When I come back I'll be able to hold my head up no matter what I choose to do."

"Dream on, Jinger." He thumped the cigarette beyond the porch railing.

They both watched the red glow of the stub as it sailed up, up and then arched its way to the ground. He walked to the steps, looked over his shoulder at her, and shook his head. He turned, and walked toward the pecan grove lining the dirt road. At the pecan tree, he looked back. She was still sitting on the porch swing, still watching him.

Linda M. Simmons

He remembered the first time he saw this house. The family had piled into the pickup and he, Jinger and Dawn sat in the back, and his ma and pa sat in front with Wade. Jon Henri tossed an old quilt onto the metal truck bed, crawled on it, rolled over onto his back, and within minutes was asleep. It didn't bother him that they were moving again. He didn't care where they lived as long as it didn't interfere with his business.

However, Jinger was different. She wanted, and needed to experience the world, to try new things, to meet new people. She was forever reading him articles from magazines that described exotic places and people.

He was jostled awake when the pickup turned off the highway onto a one-lane dirt road. The rear end slid until its wheels fell into ice-covered ruts. Sand swirled around the rusty bed of the pickup and struck Jon Henri in the face.

They passed under a grove of pecan trees; their bared branches had formed a tunnel and appeared to reach for them barring their escape. He saw Jinger shiver. Beyond the trees in a stand of weeds the pickup stopped.

Pa bounced from the truck. "Everybody out!" he shouted. "Here's your new home."

Jon Henri rolled over, planted his feet on the ground, and yawned. Jinger stood, stretched, and ran her fingers through her hair to remove some of the tangles. Pa moved around the truck and lowered the tailgate. He opened his jacket and hooked his thumbs in the straps of his overalls. He turned around and his shadow stretched out in front of him. He grinned. He always grins when we move to a new place, Jon Henri thought.

Jinger jumped down beside him. She slapped at the weeds that brushed the hem of her dress. Jon Henri turned and looked at the house. It looked like all the others: big, ugly, and drab, speckled with white paint that clung to weatherworn boards. If it were not for the support of the dead vines twisted around the posts, the wrap-a-rod porch would tilt more than it already did. The whole place looked faded like an old newspaper picture, a house for temporary use and temporary abandonment. Jon

Nutgrass

Henri jumped when a limb crashed down through the branches of a pecan tree. It sounded like gunshots as it struck one branch after another. It hit the hard-packed earth with a boom.

“Well, kids, what do you think of your new home?” Ma asked. She held onto the door as she lowered her plump legs down to the ground. She lifted her dress up out of the weeds and waddled over to stand beside Pa.

“It ain’t exactly new, Mom,” Jinger said. She rubbed her arms. “I’m cold.”

Ma clasped Pa’s hand. “Honey, you better tell them the news before they run.”

“Tell us what?” Wade asked as he jumped from the truck.

“Well, youngins,” Pa began, grinning. “This farm’s different from the others.” Jon Henri looked at Jinger and then at the house. It didn’t look different. His pa extended his arm and took in the whole place with one sweep. “You want to know why it’s different. Well, I will tell you why. Because” his grin widened, “it’s ours! This place is mine! It’s Mom’s, Jinger’s, Jon Henri’s, Wade’s, and Dawn’s. All seventy-two acres!” He danced around in a tight circle chanting. “It’s ours! It’s ours!”

Jon Henri looked at him and then turned toward his ma. Her smile spread clear across her face. He could see the top of her false teeth.

“It’s true?” He swallowed. “This place is really ours?”

“Yes, Jon Henri. It’s really ours,” she said.

“When? You never said a word.”

“We wanted to make sure the loan went through before we said anything.”

“I can’t believe it.” Dawn grabbed Jinger’s hands and danced around and around, singing, “It’s ours! It’s ours!” Jinger wrapped her arms around her ma and squeezed. Then she ran to her pa and kissed him on both cheeks. “This is the happiest day of my life!”

Jon Henri crammed his hands into his pockets. A wave of jealousy washed over him. He didn’t even know his pa had the

Linda M. Simmons

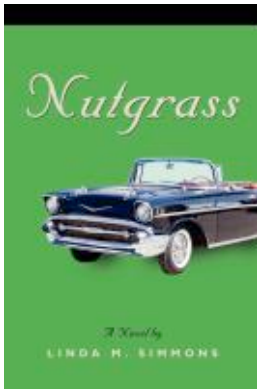
money to pay down on a farm. This was not the way he planned it. He wanted to give his family a place but not on a farm.

“Well, boy, what do you think?”

Jon Henri pulled his hands from his pockets and managed to smile at his pa. “I’m . . . I’m proud of you, Pa.”

Wade shouted from the steps of the porch, and they all ran to the house, everyone except Jon Henri.

Jon Henri turned, his eyes suddenly catching a glimpse of the barns, the mule lot, the fields, the woods, and the pecan grove. He saw the boxwoods, the dangling forsythia bushes, and the spiny crepe myrtle bushes that bordered the house. He observed the maze of a thorny rosebush that clung to the rails on the porch. He studied the small fruit trees, and the grapevines that twisted around a rusty wire trellis supported by railroad ties. He walked beneath the trees; the bared branches seemed to embrace him, as if to protect the family. It was the most beautiful place he had ever seen. He vowed that day to do everything in his power to make sure no one ever took it away from his pa.



Fast cars, faster women, and revenge lead Jon Henri Tyler to con his way into "The Society", the largest moonshine operation in the foothills of North Carolina. He honed his skills, and relied on his wit and cunning, to out drive, out maneuver, and out think every moonshine rival in Murdock County. Poverty and money were two reasons he became involved with "shine". Now he wants out, but learns just how deadly "The Society" can be.

NUTGRASS

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