

THE HUNTER OF HERTHA

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(Chapter Sample)

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What a seven-year-old sees as magical, mysterious, or even frightening, an adult knows as hard reality: an eclipse is the paltry darkness of nature. Preachers point to sin, blaming the hardworking for their own diseases, leaving the bitter taste of hopeless despair. In those years of poverty and hunger when leaders promised a New Deal, people in Appalachia distrusted political recovery. Very little of it had come their way, and what good was in their lives came from scratching a living from absentee employers made wealthy through their toil—employers with names like Rockefeller, Delano, Morgan, Mellon, and Ford.

The Cumberland Mountains held its people in a bottomless cauldron; they were a barricade blocking the greater view. In an earlier age, these mighty bulwarks were thought to be gods, a sweet mother giving food from her crust to fill a belly, a passionate father raining down self-righteous anger in a moment of jealous folly. But neither ancient nor modern deities can match the true power of Nature when an infant ceases breathing for no reason, and only a child finds death curious.

Temperance Herne paced around the kitchen table looking at the body of her dead baby brother. The little girl's eyes, just above the level of the table, resisted blinking just in case something else awful might happen. She squeezed her hands until her knuckles cracked. Where was Mother? Empty rooms. Back door open wide. Night. She hated being left alone, and outside a monster was eating the full moon.

Maybe it was the end of the world like the traveling preacher had said. The image of the black-suited man on the street corner, preaching that Armageddon was at hand, festered in her imagination. Mother had pulled her along, and now she wished they'd stopped and listened.

Her brother's skin looked as gray as the lizards along the creek bank. She knew he was dead. She'd seen a dead man before. Ulysses Stark, who'd gotten shot in the head on the steps of the Crimson County courthouse. She and her father had watched men load the body on a bench and carry it away. Ulysses had been gray, too, just like her brother. She poked the baby's arm and jerked back from the cold, doughy feel.

Out the rear door, the moon was a sliver smaller and a blood-red color gripped the outer edges. She hadn't imagined it. The moon was disappearing. She wished they'd never come to Kentucky. Their house in Pennsylvania was bigger, and they had a yard with a tire swing. But Poppy had lost everything in the big flood and said they needed a new start in this patch called the Rhine, on the backside of a swamp named Quinntown. She hated this place, with its nightly gunfire and drunken people on the roads at all times of day. Pop had said if it didn't work out, he'd move them over to East Tennessee where the TVA was busy building dams and making 'lectricity. Temperance was tired of moving, so like her mother she held on and looked past the sins of her black-hearted neighbors.

A sob in the darkness caught her attention. Temperance hid in the shadows of the kitchen, every muscle tight, expecting the Grim Reaper to cut her down. If only her father were here. She studied the other houses. A few lanterns blew golden glows from their windows. No one else seemed worried about the fading moon. A violin played in the distance, a haunting, deep melody that wrapped a sense of safety around her.

Emboldened, Temperance stepped into the night. Following the crying voice, she paused at the canal bank. What was left of the moon created a white sheen on the stinky water where all the trash and sewage of the Rhine ended up.

Below, Mother was on her knees, sobbing. Temperance had never seen her mom cry before, not even when Poppy left for the old country to save Grandma from a mean man named Adolph Hitler. Before leaving, Poppy had sat her on his knee and told her about Hitler violating the Versailles Treaty. His words confused her as he recounted fighting a war in the old country when he was a young boy. He said another one was coming, so he had to rescue Grandmother. It would take a long time, but she'd promised to be strong and help with the baby. But now, Brother was dead.

The hilt of a shovel stuck in the dirt reflected a little piece of moon, and Temperance could see a deep hole in the ground. Now, she understood. This was where they'd bury Connor. This was where people from the Rhine tossed out things they didn't need anymore. And now baby Connor was one of them. Her mother stood straight and wiped her brow. Temperance wanted to run to her, but Mother's temper might snap to find she was out of bed.

Temperance hid underneath the porch as Mother started up the canal bank. The porch slats creaked and rained wood slivers on Temperance as Mother got Connor's body and took it back to the hole. Night filled with a creeping blackness, and Temperance shivered, afraid the whole world would be dark. Would the moon ever come back? Would the sun? Would the monster grab her? Would she vanish into the ghostly mist?

A whine interrupted her terror. Mother noticed it too. She watched as Mother peered into the darkness, looking for the sound. Temperance expected the world to explode any minute. She trotted toward Mother, who moved toward the shadows, looking for that whiny pitch. Then, Mother was gone, the moon as well. A hollow night surrounded the little girl. Her ears popped, and breathing in was like inhaling water.

"Momma?" She turned in a circle, having lost all sense of direction. Straggling curls fell onto her forehead, obscuring her sight. The dark swallowed her whole. "Momma, please." She pressed her knuckles, causing them to crack, and each snap released more fear. Tears streaked her cheeks and she collapsed. A hand clamped her shoulder. She screamed.

"Hush!" Mother scolded. "You'll wake the baby."

Temperance clasped her mother's legs. "I'm scared."

Mother pulled her along, back to the house, fussing that she was outside. Something in her arms whimpered. Inside the kitchen, Mother laid a baby on the table. She tossed out the brown-spotted, filthy cloth covering it and inspected its limbs, counted its toes, brushed dirt out of its blond hair. Temperance stood in the corner, every part of her shaking. Mother crossed her arms over her chest, one hand on her lips as if she was thinking deeply or maybe saying a prayer.

The little girl couldn't have known that this Daughter of the American Revolution was not of the starving Irish or indentured English who'd settled these fertile hollows in the last century. Wallis Herne's Pennsylvania Dutch ancestors had never known a debtor's prison, and she embraced her native ambition, despite these fallen circumstances. She found no pleasure in children or meaning in death rituals, she only knew the function of living. Her offspring would be raised Christian, work the good Lord's earth, and return to His glory in their time, not because she believed, but because in this world it was the expedient way to live. Her son was dead. Her husband would

grieve, but then he would want another. If Wallis doubted the wisdom of her Maker for taking her baby, she hid those thoughts as she observed the foundling that had fallen into her care. Its mother, lying dead on the creek bank, wouldn't be the first person to die on that stinking shore, but her child would be the luckiest soul to escape its fallow darkness.

“Get in bed, Tempy,” Mother said. “You’ve kept your brother awake long enough.”

“That’s not Connor,” Tempy said, pointing at the pretender.

Mother slapped her. Temperance ran to bed, pulling blankets over her head. The sting on her cheek faded as she fought back tears. When her sniffles disappeared, Temperance got up and tiptoed into the kitchen. The new baby was in her brother’s bassinet. He gazed up at her with blue moon eyes, and she looked away, a seed of distrust sprouting within her. Brother was dead and another had taken his place. Mother had struck her and told a lie. She squeezed her hands to keep them from trembling. Cracking her small knuckles was the only sensation that eased her worry.

Temperance pulled a chair to the window and climbed up. Down the embankment, Mother dug a larger hole. Temperance watched her drag a bundle toward the hole. A body! A woman whose long blond hair trailed in the dirt. Momma rolled the woman into the pit and dropped baby Brother on top of her, then covered them with dirt.

Temperance got down from the chair, wondering if what she’d seen was something she could believe, or if Mother would say it hadn’t happened. She peeked over the edge of the bassinet. The new baby’s pink skin contrasted with dark pupils peering at her. She stepped back, expecting its eyes might shoot out poison. What was this thing Mother had brought into their house? This creature born of a dead woman and the dark moon would surely bring them misfortune.

THE BLACK DAHLIA

August 1948

Connor Herne ran the uneven ground of Beans Fork Hollow. Out of breath, he pushed himself up the hill, protecting a sack under his arm, and hopped rocks across a snaky creek. At the peak of the next ridge, he looked west toward the setting sun to judge how much light he had, then, speeding up his pace, he jumped onto a dirt road and trotted toward a giant beech tree beside a stone bridge. Choir practice hummed from a Holiness Church on the far side. Connor ran around the beech tree and looked up at a red-lettered sign reading *Renegades Hide Out. No Girls Allowed.*

“Rusty, you up there?”

A freckled face peered down at him from a tree house twenty feet above. “Hurry up.” Rusty Haskew motioned with a hand.

Connor anchored his feet onto square boards nailed into the tree and held the brown bag with his teeth as he climbed.

“Got it?” Rusty asked as Connor fell onto the floor.

Connor spit out the bag at Rusty’s feet. “Got yours?”

The auburn-haired boy fell on the sack and pulled out buttered biscuits that he stuffed in his mouth. Rusty nodded toward a tattered magazine.

Connor took the coverless journal to the door and held it toward the setting sun. He flipped through the pages until he found it. “Ugh,” he said, looking up at Rusty. “They cut her in two.”

“Told you,” he said with a jaw full of pork. “Look how they sliced her mouth.”

“Whooooa.” Connor traced the black-haired woman’s mouth, cut up each side like a clown. He glanced over at Rusty. “You get enough?”

Rusty nodded as he bit into the second biscuit and a piece of pork. “Sure your Mom ain’t noticed?”

“Naw, she just reckons I eat a lot.” He turned the page and looked at a half-page photo of a smiling dark-haired woman, a small cross on a cord around her neck, white flowers behind each ear. “The Black Dahlia,” he read. He turned back to the picture of

the woman's body, staring at the gap of open flesh that split her into two pieces, and he swallowed hard. "Who in the world would think to do such a thing?"

"A monster," Rusty said.

"Can you get this back without the other boys noticing?"

Rusty waved his hands. "Detective magazine's ours. I ain't afraid of them."

Connor's eyes widened at his friend. He had to be the bravest or the craziest boy in the world. Living in an orphan house with boys twice his size, he regularly stole from them: their dirty magazines, their hidden candy, sometimes even their clothes. He'd shown up at the tree house with a black eye more than once, but his stories told of how he'd given more than he got. Connor brought him food because he was always hungry, and sometimes when they swam in Big Creek his ribs showed under his skin.

"Herman seen this?" Connor asked.

"He's on watch." Rusty nodded and slowly punched his fist into his other hand.

"Tonight, Little Preacher Boy gets his."

"Without mercy," Connor laughed, rubbing his belly at the thought of what they had planned for their nemesis: a ten-year-old, self-righteous shortie that went door-to-door spreading his version of the word of God that had nothing to do with anything Connor had ever read in the Bible. More like whatever Preacher Boy wanted, people better do or he'd denounce them from the pulpit. One time he'd embarrassed Connor's parents into going to Wednesday night, Sunday morning, and Sunday evening services. Connor had thought he was going to fall over and die if he had to listen to one more hell-fire sermon from the white-shoed tyke. People came from all over the county to hear the Little Preacher Boy, who didn't have his own ministry but hired himself out as a non-denominational evangelist, and was currently leading a revival at the church across the bridge. Connor thought that little as he was, Bryson Pomeroy was still a punk worth whipping.

The trill of a whippoorwill caused both boys to head down the ladder. Next to the tree trunk stood the third renegade, Herman Cahill. He took off his glasses and pointed toward the bridge. "He's yonder down the road."

The boys hid on sloping support braces of the stone bridge and waited. Dusk washed out the outlines of trees, but glow from the church gave enough light for the boys

to watch their plan play out. And here he strutted, ten-year-old Master Pomeroy, dressed in his checkered suit with striped tie and his signature white shoes. Flattened against the rails, the boys raised their heads as he passed. Bryson slipped and waved his arms to keep from falling. An afternoon thunderstorm had made the bridge all the more slippery. He slid again and let out a shrill “Shit!”

The boys stifled their laughter. “More’n he knows,” Herman whispered.

A third step took Bryson to one knee. “Holy damnation!” he yelled, sliding in dog poop that the boys had collected for the last two days. He let out a string of cuss words. The boys giggled, unable to control themselves any longer. Bryson scraped his white shoes on the bridge rail, but they were hopelessly mired. “I see you heathens,” he yelled at them. “You’re going to burn in hell with Satan and his minions, and I’ll be there on the Day of Judgment to testify against you!”

The boys hopped the creek, holding up middle fingers toward Little Preacher Boy, who continued to cuss them. Downstream, they climbed onto a castle-shaped rock protruding in the middle of the water. Herman flicked on his USA Lite Mickey Mouse flashlight as they fell to their backs, holding their sides from hard laughter. “Reckon he went to pray for our salvation,” Connor joked.

“He didn’t get a good ’nuf look at our faces.” Herman smacked his own cheeks. “God won’t know who he’s talking about.”

“Anyways, the Lord don’t listen to people who cuss worse than a drunk soldier,” Rusty chortled.

“But we have to figure a way,” Connor sat up and emphasized each word, “to get rid of him for good.” He cocked an ear upstream. “What’s that?”

The boys listened. Sounds of the early night faded into a gentle roar. They looked at each other, alarm overtaking their features. “Water from the mines!” Herman yelled.

The boys jumped rock to rock to get on high ground. Herman held the flashlight while Connor grabbed onto wild honeysuckle vines and pulled himself up the creek bank. Behind them Rusty slipped into ankle-deep water. “Come on!” Connor yelled, and Rusty, again, started up the slope. The roar upstream grew louder as Connor and Herman stretched out their hands toward their friend, who had frozen in place.

“Yonder it is!” Herman yelled, pointing at a wall of water barreling toward them.

The wave hit Rusty, sweeping him from their sight. Connor and Herman stared at their empty hands. “We’ll catch him at Big Creek,” Connor said and began running.

The two friends sprinted through the dark. Herman lit a path through backyards, gardens of cornstalks, and both boys jumped a beehive as they raced through the woods lining the creek bank. Out of breath, they’d beat the flood to Big Creek, a large tributary where Little Creek emptied. Huffing for air, Connor looked upstream where the bank of water would emerge. He turned in a circle, looking for something to hold on to. “There!” he yelled, and jumped on a low-hanging branch of a young birch tree. “Hold it down, Herman. After I catch Rusty, let loose.”

Herman anchored the flashlight between two rocks and pointed it upstream, then put his weight on the tree limb as Connor crawled out over the water. The rush of wind over the water grew stronger. “It’ll get you, too,” Herman yelled.

“Yonder he is!” Connor pointed upstream at a bobbing head and flailing arms. He circled his legs into the branches. “Get me down low!”

Herman leaned on the branch with all his strength. The crest of the water hit Connor, and he struggled to hold on while reaching out into the flood. He snagged Rusty by the hair and one shoulder, holding him tight. Herman released the branch, and it sprang upward, taking the boys out of the waves.

Rusty coughed and wheezed as Connor held him. Slowly they made their way along the branch to dry ground. The boys collapsed on the shoreline, Rusty spitting water, and Herman patting his back. “Damn coal mines,” Rusty said, his shoulders trembling from exertion. “Their dams break every hard rain, and everything floods.”

“I thought you two were goners,” Herman said.

“Take more’en mine water to get shed of me.” Rusty shot out his middle finger at the flooded stream. “I swear, one day I’m gonna break a window in a mine owner’s house.”

“I’ll help,” Connor agreed.

“Me, too.” Herman shook a fist.

“Think we lost our big rock?” Herman wondered.

The boys sat quietly, watching smaller stones tumble into Big Creek. In a few seconds, their castle-rock hiding place crashed into the larger stream.

While Connor and Rusty dipped themselves naked in an upstream pool to clean off coal slurry, far away two men inspected the break in the coal mine's holding pond. They were unconcerned that their flood had claimed a dog, three chickens, half a dozen gardens, swamped the backyards of every creek-side home, and washed away a boy. It didn't matter that the poison in the coal ash would stunt the growth of every tree whose buried roots now withered, or that the toxic sludge would contaminate the well water of all the homes in the hollow. There was no concern that the fish were dead. It'd been an accident, after all, an act of God. The men couldn't be held responsible . . . that is, if anyone found out, if anyone could prove it was their fault. People didn't know what to do when these things happened, people didn't know whom to call or even if there was anyone to call, and the men . . . they liked it that way. Acts of God always worked in their favor.

Rusty's clothes were mud-caked, and Herman snuck into the backyard of a nearby house and stole a pair of overalls off the clothesline. They hung loose on Rusty, but they were good enough. Connor's clothes were more splashed than covered and he figured he could blame it on playing in the creek beside his house. "Gotta get home before the folks notice I'm not in my room," he said.

Herman shined his flashlight as far as Beans Fork where he turned off. They made their secret handshake and promised to meet at the tree house the following day. House lights lit a path down Notown Road. When they came upon the orphan house, Rusty motioned for Connor to give him a lift. Connor fell to all fours underneath an open window, and Rusty stood on his back to get inside.

A screen door slammed. The wooden porch creaked with heavy footsteps. The boys held in place. Rusty's fingertips dug into the window ledge, toes balanced on Connor's back. "What in tarnation!" a high-pitched voiced yelled.

Both boys crumbled to the ground. Whirling around the side of the house, Judge Rounder swung a razor strop through the air. He caught Rusty by the arm and thrashed him. Rusty trotted a circle around the guardian of the orphan house, but was unable to get free of the grip. Connor sprinted away. At the main road, he turned and watched as Judge Rounder beat Rusty to the ground, then jerked him inside. When the door slammed, all went silent.

Connor stared, teeth clenched, perched on the balls of his feet as if ready to pounce. In his mind he could see himself beating the tar out of Judge Rounder. But Mr. Rounder was a respected jurist who took in orphan boys for the good of the community. Connor hated him for the bruises he saw on his friend. Beatings and an empty belly were hardly worth the bed Rusty got, and Connor wished Rusty could move in with him, but Mom had already said no. Sadly, he left, knowing there was nothing he could do, but as he walked, he calculated . . . first, Preacher Boy; second, the mines; and then Judge Rounder. One day, he'd get them good.

Connor continued up Notown Road and cut through his neighbor's backyard to jump the fence over to his house. He didn't need a lift to the open window. Earlier, he'd left a ladder against the wall. As he dropped into his room, he saw his father sitting on the bed, arms folded.

"Thought I saw a bear," Connor said. "Went to check it out."

Pop pointed at the dirt on his shoes. "No fibbin', young man." He handed Connor a set of pajamas. "Mom finds you sneaking out, and we will never hear the end of it. Now, where were you?"

"With Rusty and Herman," he said, and looked at the floor.

His father sighed and glanced at the ceiling. "You've got the rest of summer to play, but promise me you'll stay inside after dark."

"Promise, Pop," he said, and crossed his fingers behind his back.

"Okay, get in your pjs," Pop said. "I told Mom I'd make sure you said your prayers."

Later on, lying in bed, looking out the window at the moon, Connor mused on the difference between his and Rusty's lives. He was lucky to have a father who never hit him and a mother who only occasionally hollered. Could have done without the bossy sister, he thought, and closed his eyes. But he didn't sleep easily. His rage at Judge Rounder overtook any annoyance he felt toward Bryson Pomeroy or some nameless mine owner, and merged with images of the murdered Black Dahlia. Ghosts of the monster who tore her up hid in the shadows of his dreams. He jerked awake more than once as the dead woman clawed to be part of his landscape, to live behind his closed eyes.

Connor thought he was going to die from boredom as he waited for his parents in front of a Quinntown grocery store they were thinking of buying. Sitting in the suffocating midday heat drenched his armpits with sweat. It didn't help that his hair had been shaved to the scalp because of a lice infestation. The sun crackled his noggin like it was melting through a layer of wax, and he slipped on a gray work cap his mother had let him buy after losing his blond locks. He wished he were out in the cool woods with Rusty and Herman. It'd been a week since they'd pooped ole Pomeroy, and they needed to stage another attack if they were going to get rid of him for good.

Flies circled a browning apple core that a policeman had tossed in the gutter. Along the three blocks of Quinntown, men, women, and children strolled up and down the street, pausing for Saturday gossip when they saw someone they knew or joining a discussion already in progress.

Connor knocked his head against the back of the bench. Beside him, his sister Tempy had no trouble sitting still reading a library book. She'd graduated high school last May, and Connor couldn't help being envious because he had to return to school in a couple days. If he'd already graduated, he'd never read another book. The novel, *Bedelia*, had his sister entranced, and he made faces to see if he could get her to look up. She didn't, and he groaned, "How much longer?"

"Keep hitting your head like that," Tempy said without a smile, "you'll crack your skull and your brains will leak out."

"Will not." Connor hawked in his throat and spit on the sidewalk.

"Vulgar." Tempy shuddered and went back to her book.

Connor tapped his toes on the sidewalk around his spit, and the dance seemed to amuse his grandmother, parked in a wheelchair beside the bench. "Quinntown smells like rotten eggs," he said, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"It's surrounded by sulfur springs," his sister murmured.

"Don't want to live where it stinks."

“Notown was always for the short term.”

“Why didn’t we stay in Sevierville? Tennessee had good fishing.”

“We don’t talk about that,” Tempy snapped and looked over at their grandmother. Grammy’s head was weaving in a figure eight and her tongue lolled around her lips.

“Give Grammy a drink.”

Connor picked up the soda they’d bought earlier and held the paper straw to his grandmother’s lips, hoping she wouldn’t squish it. As she sucked in cola, he squinted and held a hand over his eyes, looking down the sidewalk. “Holy damnation.”

“Mom hears you cuss, and you’ll not see the light of day—”

“Little Preacher Boy!”

“Horsefeathers!” Tempy gasped, and slammed shut her book. “Quick, inside, maybe he’ll walk past.”

Brother and sister ran into the store and flattened themselves against the far wall. An outside thermometer embedded in a metal tin reflected the street and Little Preacher Boy strutting down the sidewalk, Bible in both hands and nose in the air like he was looking for Heaven to anoint him. He’d cleaned his white shoes and wore casual short pants and a buttoned-up white shirt with sweat stains around the armpits.

“We forgot Grammy,” Connor whispered to Tempy.

“No time to get her,” Tempy said.

As Bryson Pomeroy approached, Connor held his breath. Preacher Boy said hello to everyone he passed, inviting them to church or chastising anyone who didn’t attend his revival meetings.

“Praise Lord,” Grammy hollered out.

Connor and Tempy cringed.

“Praise Lord to you as well, Sister.” Bryson took her hand. “What has you out on the Lord’s sizzling day?”

“Devil’s tickling my toes.”

Bryson cocked his head to one side. “World’s full of temptation,” he said. “I’ll pray for ye.”

From behind them, Connor heard his mother's footsteps and poked Tempy on the arm. "Gotta do something," he said. "We leave her out there, Mom'll holler at us for sure." Tempy's face scrunched up, unsure what to do.

Connor bolted out the front door. "Bryson Pomeroy, what are you doing haranguing my grandmother?"

"I was just a-praying for her. She's got the Devil on her."

"She's an old lady and don't need your caterwauling. Get on down the road."

Bryson gave a girly gasp of insult. "You're going to Hell," he charged.

Connor stamped his foot, causing the runt to jump back.

"Connor Herne!" His mother jerked him by the arm. Her cheeks colored beet-red, and Connor knew this was going to be a talkin'-to. Mom turned toward Preacher Boy and smiled her best penance. "Master Pomeroy, enjoyed your June revival so much. Come back to our church again soon."

Connor swallowed his ire and wanted to spit. "He was bothering Grammy," he tried to explain.

"Preaching at Calvary Baptist for the next month," Bryson started in on Connor's mother. "Not that far out of your way."

Connor shot a look at Tempy in the doorway, and she rolled her eyes as they listened to their mother promise to make both services on Sunday. Only Grammy seemed to absorb the gist of the pledge. "Demons dancing in your aisles. I saw 'em lick your privates." She cackled a laugh that made Connor join in, and Tempy covered her mouth with both hands.

"What's wrong with that woman?" Bryson clutched his Bible to his chest.

Grammy let out a string of German words Connor didn't know the meaning of, but Preacher Boy's expression looked like he had swallowed throw-up.

"We'll come Wednesday, too," Connor said. "I'll push Grammy to the front row."

"She's possessed by the Devil." Bryson stepped back and pointed at Grammy, who mocked the gesture and hissed. He held up his Bible. "Don't you bring the Devil to my church! The Lord'll strike you down."

"Nnnn . . . no." Connor's mother scrambled to explain. "She's ill."

Preacher Boy backed away, holding his Bible like a shield, praying as he went. Connor bent over in laughter, but when he looked up, his mother's glare closed him down. He might have to listen to her fuss, but down the block, approaching, as Preacher Boy walked on, was the most beautiful gal he'd ever seen. For an instant, he wondered if she was an angel, with a pale blue dress that drifted in the breeze, even though there was no wind. Her walk seemed to make her and the dress float. Strawberry red hair, loosely twisted atop her head, with ringlets drifting down her neck, and skin so whitely pale that Connor wondered if she ever got in the sun.

"*Excusez-moi*," she said, then bit her lip, blinking eyes so blue they were almost lavender. "I . . . mean to say . . . excuse me."

The four of them turned toward her, and even Grammy seemed mesmerized by her beauty. Connor's mother's exasperated expression ripened as she looked the girl up and down.

"I . . . look for zee *Lune Sur le Rhine*?" She read from a folded clip of paper.

"She's speaking French, Mom," Tempy said.

"Rhine girls belong on Marcescent Street," Mom whispered in an aside.

"*Oui, s'il vous plaît*, zee Rhine." She smiled, nodding her head and pointing at her paper. "Moonuver . . . zee Rhine."

"Good Lord," Mom huffed in frustration. "Every speakeasy in the county is on that street." She pointed toward the west and said, "That way, that way."

Connor offered the beautiful girl his hand and helped her around Grammy. He escorted her to the corner until his mother hollered for him. The vision turned to him and said, "Thank you." Then, slipping her hand under his chin: "*Beau garçon, vous êtes mon sauveur*."

Connor repeated the strange words in a whisper as he returned. Her soft fingers on his skin left a memory, and he closed his eyes and imagined them still there. His daydream abruptly ended as his mother collapsed on the bench and buried her face in her hands. "I can't believe this," she said. "We get run out of Sevierville 'cause my mother trots down the road butt naked, end up in Notown, and now, even Quinntown'll know we're harboring an insane person. How can I live here, where even the floosies walk up and down the main street?"

“Grammy’s not crazy,” Tempy said. “She’s sick.”

“What’s a floozy?” Connor asked.

“Hush,” his mom growled, “all of you be still so I can think.”

They sat quietly, only his grandmother’s occasional nonsensical words breaking the tension. Connor rubbed Grammy’s shoulders. He felt sorry for her. The last few years, she’d begun to do crazy things, put on her clothes backwards, eat food with her fingers, talk about the old country and, sometimes, believe she was still there. Mom took her to doctors who could only come up with a lame diagnosis that occasionally old people lose their minds. Connor thought she just had a unique way of looking at life. He’d been the one to find her when she disappeared in Sevierville. He led her home . . . naked, while people turned their heads away. Some boys laughed, pointing their fingers and calling out names that upset Grammy, but Connor calmed her down, covering her as best he could with a blanket one of the merchants had handed him. He’d made a mental note of every person who’d laughed, and if his family hadn’t moved so soon afterwards, he would have egged a few houses but good.

Pop came from the store holding a black metal tube and handed it to Connor.

“Found a telescope in back, needs cleaning.”

“Wow, Pop,” Connor said, peering through the eyepiece.

Mom stood up and clapped her hands. “Not this place, Pop,” she said. “It’s all wrong. Better we move to Contrary, bigger store, better living space.”

“But honey, that store won’t be up for sale ’til next year.”

“This one’s too close to the Rhine. I hate the Rhine.”

“Now, Wallis, ain’t much to the Rhine anymore, not since the fire of ’42 and the flood of ’46.”

“I hate the Rhine,” she said again and wheezed out a breath. “Asa,” she mouthed sternly, pointing toward the store. “Inside.” She clamped onto Pop’s arm and pulled him along.

Connor wiped the telescope lens with the hem of his shirt. “I’ll be able to see the moon,” he said, and aimed the scope toward the sky.

“Man in the moon,” Grammy whined, “has relations with the stars.”

“What’s a speakeasy?” he asked Tempy.

“Don’t ask questions right now, Connor.” Tempy watched after her parents, anxiously cracking her knuckles.

“Why doesn’t Mom like the Rhine?”

“We used to live there.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“You were born there. Most of it burned down. Now it’s full of . . . places where men go.” She glanced at him but was distracted by their parents’ exchange.

“Rats in the bread,” Grammy whispered.

“Why does Mom hate it?”

Tempy shot him a nervous glance. With one hand she checked her hair tied in a topknot. She bit her bottom lip, looking like she was about to tell him a secret. “ ‘Cause there’s floosies there,” she said.

“What’s a floozy?”

“Connor, be quiet for two minutes, okay?” Tempy studied Connor and cracked her knuckles.

Connor rolled his eyes and smiled when Grammy rolled hers, too. Before Grammy went crazy, she’d told him stories about the great German hero Siegfried, who killed a dragon and drank its blood, and then afterwards, he could talk to birds. Connor wished he could find some dragon blood. It’d be fun to speak to a woodpecker.

“You always wind up with a present,” Tempy smirked, pointing at the telescope.

“I’ll let you look at the moon,” he said.

His sister stared at him oddly. “I know what the moon looks like.”

“But up close you’ll be able to see mountains and lakes. Maybe we’ll even see some moon floosies.”

“That’s not funny.”

Connor aimed the telescope down the street. Maybe he’d see the pretty red-haired girl. He suspected floosies were bad. It was okay that Tempy wouldn’t tell him about them, he’d just ask Rusty. Rusty knew all kinds of things. He focused the telescope and settled on a blond-haired man running from store to store.

The man wore brown alligator boots, and Connor looked up as the shoes ran past him. The man’s short-sleeved khaki shirt overhung moleskin work pants that looked

well-lived in. “Hey,” he called out and jogged back toward them. “You seen a girl, ’bout that tall?” He held out his hand. “Red-headed.”

“She went to Marcescent Street,” Connor said dutifully.

“Marcescent Street,” that man repeated, wiping his brow. “Who in God’s name would send a child there?”

“My mom,” Connor volunteered, pointing inside the store.

The man looked inside the store, studying Connor’s mother. “Why?” he said, almost a whisper.

“ ’Cause she’s a floozy,” Connor said helpfully.

The man cocked his head and stared at Mom, then sprinted down the street, no longer stopping at the stores. Grammy looked after him, raised a finger to her throat and sliced across it, making a zip sound.

Soon his parents came out of the store. Pop looked exhausted from arguing with Mom. He pushed Grammy’s wheelchair, and as they strolled to the car his father put a positive spin on staying in Notown for another year. Connor was just as happy in Notown. He had made friends, and Herman had said the Notown School wasn’t too hard. “Pop,” he asked. “Did we have a big house when we lived in the Rhine?”

His father explained that they’d only lived there a couple years, but it was his mother’s reaction that he noticed. Her shoulders hunched up into her neck as she shot a swift glare at Tempy. His sister clutched her hands and rubbed her knuckles with a thumb. He’d have to ask Rusty about the Rhine.

As Connor climbed into the backseat of the Chrysler, across the street he noticed a glistening restaurant sign, *Moon Over The Rhine*. He wondered if that was what the red-haired girl was looking for. The sign’s moon was full and tinged a bluish color. Would the real moon be blue through a telescope?

On the corner, Little Preacher Boy stood on a vegetable crate, Bible raised and shouting about the Devil. Most people walked past him, but the ones who stopped and listened nodded their heads, held their palms to the sky, and occasionally shouted “Praise the Lord” and “Amen, brother.” Connor looked back at the blue moon. It was sheer, inviting, and otherworldly, almost like the beautiful red-haired girl. The blue moon had a face and one of the eyes winked. Connor smiled. He knew how to scare Bryson Pomeroy

out of the mountains forever. Preacher Boy was about to meet the Devil head-on. Connor knew Rusty and Herman would help him, but they'd need one other person. They needed a Blue Fred.

END OF CHAPTER SAMPLE