



JAN WATSON

Troublesome
CREEK



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Troublesome Creek

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For my son Stephen C. Watson.

Truly, I could not have written this without your help.

And to the memory of my husband,

Charles C. Watson (1940–2005). You were precious to me.



FOREWORD

Jan Watson's *Troublesome Creek* rose quickly to number one from more than 280 submissions in our Christian Writers Guild First Novel contest for unpublished authors. Having just completed my part in the editing of this stellar work, I'm reminded anew what a masterpiece Jan has wrought.

This is a settle-in-and-savor type of a read, set in the exotic mountains of the South and evoking a period decades ago. With rich texture and detail and unforgettable characters that lodge themselves in your heart, Jan transports us to a world without modern convenience where we live with the people of the land.

Danger, tragedy, faith, romance—it's all here in spades.

Though I was working on it, still I found it a great, great read and know you're in for a treat. I look forward to seeing more from this talented author.

Prepare to be captured by the denizens of *Troublesome Creek*. . . .

Jerry B. Jenkins

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Lord, dost Thou show a cornerstone for us to build our hopes upon,
That the fair edifice may rise sublime in light beyond the skies?

—“CORNERSTONE” BY PHILIP DODDRIDGE (1702–1751)

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CHAPTER I

1881

“Girl! You’d better get to the house. If your mam catches you in that creek again she’ll skin you alive!”

Copper Brown jumped. The jar slicked through her hands and fell into the swiftly flowing water of Troublesome Creek.

“Caught again,” she muttered under her breath. “I’m sorry, Daddy. I’ll be home directly.”

“You’d best be!” he boomed from the ridge above.

She shaded her eyes from the hot summer sun and saw him stride away, his tall shadow bumping along behind. She should have seined farther upstream where the willows wept upon the bank, the perfect hiding place; her father wouldn’t have found her.

Then again, she shouldn’t have left the breakfast dishes

soaking in the pan, and she should have scrubbed the floor like she was supposed to, but the day had called to her from beyond the kitchen door and she couldn't resist. Without a moment's thought to Mam's wrath she was out the door and into the creek, assuming that Mam was too busy ironing to notice her missing anyway.

Now, from her perch on the footbridge, she watched a dozen bug-eyed tadpoles dart out of the canning jar and into the riffle beneath her dangling feet. The creek was as clear as the window glass she'd polished just this morning. She dipped her big toe in the cool water. A minnow-sized, muddy-green newt slid out from under a ledge and cautiously nibbled the offering then flitted away, disappointed.

Copper had meant to keep the tadpoles on her windowsill and watch as they turned into long-legged jumpers. Last spring she'd garnered eight frogs from her collections. The secret was creek water. You couldn't use well water or water from the rain barrel: only creek water, adding a little fresh each day. It had been such fun to watch the tadpoles develop—fun until they got loose and hopped all over Mam's clean kitchen. Copper liked to have never heard the end of the one that got in the lard bucket. Mam screamed and dashed at the poor thing with a broom until it jumped out the door and slid right off the porch. Copper hoped he made it back to the creek. Maybe these were some of his children. . . .

It seemed to Copper that everything fun last year was just confusing now. She used to play in the creek every day, once she finished her chores. It was her favorite place. But things had changed somehow, and she didn't know why. It seemed Mam

was always watching her, just like the red-tailed hawk circling the chicken yard, ever vigilant. “Laura Grace, act like a lady” was her constant refrain. Copper didn’t like being called such a stuffy name. It asked too much somehow, like she was supposed to act all straitlaced and buttoned-up.

Mam didn’t understand that a lady was the last thing Copper wanted to be. Ladies didn’t have any fun. Ladies wore their hair up and never lost their ribbons. They wore confining undergarments and shoes. Shoes even in the summertime!

Daddy was on her side, though. She’d been about to open the screen door just yesterday, coming in with a basket of sundried laundry on her hip, when she heard him tell Mam that Copper did not need to grow up so fast, that Mam was too strict with her. But then, as she snuck a peek through the fly-specked screen, she also heard Mam’s stern reply: “Will Brown—” she’d shaken her long-handled, wooden spoon in his frowning face—“my sister was a lady, and if it takes the last breath in my body, I will raise her daughter to be a lady too.”

Copper nearly dropped her basket. She’d learned not to ask about her long-dead natural mother, because when she did Mam got all pinch-faced and turned away, and Daddy looked funny and talked about something else. Most times she didn’t even remember that Mam was not her real mother, for she was the only one Copper had ever known.

She gathered her supplies—a dented tin dipper, three green Mason jars, four zinc lids she’d punched air holes in, and the seine she had fashioned from an old window screen—then placed them in the woven willow basket Mam had given her for her fifteenth birthday a few months before. She grabbed a dead

sycamore limb, snagged the jar she'd dropped in the creek, and dragged it to the bank. She dried it with the hem of her faded feed-sack dress, nearly dropping it again when two little boys suddenly appeared in front of her.

Usually she heard the five-year-old twins well before she saw them, for they were rarely quiet. If they weren't talking or singing they were whistling, a trick Copper was sorry she had encouraged them to learn. It wouldn't be so bad if either of them could actually pucker up to a tune, but generally they just made loud blowing noises. Then it was, "Sissy, Sissy, we forgot how to whistle. Show us again."

And that's another thing: I've got way too many names. The boys call me Sissy; Mam calls me Laura Grace; Daddy calls me Copper; and John Pelfrey calls me Pest. . . . How could anyone keep it all straight?

"Guess what, Sissy," Willy demanded, right in her face. "We tracked you here! We're better'n Mr. Lincoln's soldiers. Don't you reckon so?"

"I expect Mr. Lincoln would have been in a heap of trouble if he'd had you two jabbering jays in his army," she replied, grinning.

"Mam's getting mad, Sissy," Willy said, his smile turned upside down.

"Yeah, Mam's getting real mad," Daniel echoed, pulling his face into a frown, trying to match his brother's. "She sent us to find you and bring you home lickety-split. An' I think Daddy's gone to cut a switch."

She hung her basket on her arm. "Then we'd best get started, boys."

"But I don't want Daddy to whip you." Daniel grabbed a

fistful of Copper's dress as tears welled up in his big green eyes. "Let's just stay here tonight."

"Yeah, great idea!" Willy agreed. "We can make camp just like soldiers, and we'll have a bonfire and go hunting. Sissy, you can fry us up some squirrel for supper. But first we'll have to go see if Daddy will let us have his gun."

Daniel looked thoughtful. "We could get the slingshot, Willy?"

"Boy howdy, Daniel," Willy responded as he hitched up his britches. "Don't you know soldiers don't use slingshots?"

Copper pulled both little boys into an embrace. "Boys, you know you're way too young to use the gun or the slingshot. We'll make camp another time. Right now it's time for me to face the music."

"Music? We sure like music. Don't we, Daniel? Let's go see if Daddy will play his fiddle after supper."

"Oh yeah," Daniel replied, "then Mam will forget to be mad at Sissy. Hey, Willy! Race you to the barn. . . . Last one in's a rotten egg!"

Copper slowly trailed them, wondering if this whipping would be like all the others. And wondering too why Mam was so hard on her all of a sudden.



Will Brown folded his muscular arms and leaned against the rough wooden siding of the barn. A fit of coughing had left him suddenly tired. He stirred the dust at his feet with the switch he'd cut to please his wife. She and his daughter were always at odds lately. He knew Grace was a good wife and a good mother to Copper and the twins, but she was way too strict,

bent on citifying country children. It was just her way. Once a schoolmarm always a schoolmarm.

Will himself was not much of a disciplinarian. He dreaded the whipping Grace deemed appropriate punishment for Copper's misdeed. His problem was that he didn't want to see his little girl grow up. He had been shocked when Grace told him of Copper's recent physical development, shocked even more to learn of her desire to send Copper away to boarding school.

"Oh, Will," she'd pleaded the day before. "Do you want Laura Grace to live here forever? Do you want her to marry some coal miner and spend the rest of her life scrubbing floors and having babies?"

He still lamented his stern reply. "Would that be so terrible, Grace?" He had caught her arms in his calloused hands and pulled her to him so he could look into her eyes. "Do you regret the day I took you away from the life you so want for Copper and made you a coal miner's wife?"

She had turned away, and he'd seen her back stiffen. She'd fiddled in her apron pocket for the starched and ironed handkerchief she always kept there. He could tell she was dabbing tears.

He'd touched her shoulder. "Ah, Grace, I'm sorry. Don't cry."

She'd folded and refolded the handkerchief. "I just want Laura Grace to get the education I can't give her here. How can you deny her that?"

How indeed? he wondered now on this hot, humid day as he waited for his daughter. *How indeed?*

Over the crest of a hill, two dust devils raced toward him, whirling this way and that until the minitornadoes became instead his mischievous sons.

“Whoa, boys.” Will laughed as he caught one twin under each arm and let them dangle there. “You’ll scare Molly into making buttermilk. You’ll make the hens lay green eggs. Why, with all your noise, you’ll turn Paw-paw into a cat.”

Wiggling, Willy cried out, “Let us down, Daddy. Let us down! Come on, Daniel. Let’s go find Paw-paw and see if he can meow.”

As the boys tore around the side of the barn to find the dog, Will spied his daughter coming slowly over the wooded ridge that separated their cabin from the creek. Her hair flared as bright as fire in the sunlight. His heart caught. Grace was right—Copper was growing up.

“Hello, Daddy,” she said. “I’m here to claim my punishment.”

“Copper, you know Mam just wants what’s best for you. You need to be more responsible. Let’s get this over with.”

Copper turned her back to her father. Her shoulders shook.

“Be quiet,” he cautioned as he raised the supple willow branch over his head. “It wouldn’t do for your mother to hear you laughing.” Forcefully, he brought the switch down once, twice, and then again—three smacks to the barn door, then one more for good measure.

“Do you want me to cry?” Copper teased.

“No, I want you to stay out of the creek. Now go apologize to your mother.”

Will watched his daughter cross the barnyard and step up onto the porch. The main part of the cabin was the original log structure built by his grandfather for his young family on their arrival from Maryland in the late 1700s. Many a night of Will’s young life was spent listening to his father tell of the arduous

journey through the Cumberland Gap and the hardship endured by his grandparents' homesteading the dark and bloody ground of Kentucky.

His ancestors were of English, Scotch, and Irish descent—a stoic, courageous, dark-humored bunch of renegades seeking freedom from the tyranny of their governments. They didn't want or need much—a rough-hewn cabin, a pipe of homegrown tobacco, sweet clean water. Rather, they sought a place of tolerance, where folks not unlike themselves could worship unopposed and live as they chose, unfettered by the rules of other men. They found that place on the banks of the creek they called Troublesome for its unpredictable nature.

Will had done well with the land inherited from his father. She centered him, helping him to focus his energy on the needs of his growing family. He rarely thought of that other time, that other wife, unless Grace herself caused him to. She seemed to cling to the memories of her sister, while he just wanted to forget. He had loved Julie fiercely, but the pain of her untimely death made him disremember the joyous times he had had with her.

Unbidden, his mind sought recollections that caused his gut to clench and a heaviness to settle in his heart. While a rapidly forming storm stirred the humid air and a sudden gust of wind stripped leaves from the sugar maple, Will's attention drifted. Memories long stifled became as real as the warm rain that dampened his shirt.

As he stepped into the shelter of the barn, he closed his eyes and gave in to what he could no longer keep at bay. Julie came to him then, as young and beautiful as ever. His mind's eye reflected

on the first time he ever saw her, a yellow-haired girl with flashing eyes who had captured his heart with a rooster's crow. *Julie . . . Julie . . . Julie*. The August heat faded away. Twenty years dissolved as if they had never been, and Will was transported to a time gone by. A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth as he became the man he used to be. . . .