



JAN WATSON

Torrent
FALLS



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Torrent Falls

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For Terry L. Taylor

Proverbs 17:17



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Had I ten thousand, thousand tongues,
Not one should silent be;
Had I ten thousand, thousand hearts,
Lord, I'd give them all to thee.

—PRAISE SELECTION FROM THE BAPTIST HYMNAL, 1875

To Him be the glory.

Special thanks always to Jerry Jenkins and the Christian Writers Guild; Tyndale House Publishers, especially Jan Stob and Lorie Popp; Mark Sweeney, my agent; family: Charles, Catherine, Andrew, and Stephen Watson—plus Julie Ashcraft and Bob Taylor (I keep you close to my heart.); friends—you know why you are special to me; the Grassroots Writers Group; and *continual* gratitude to the outstanding staff of Bluegrass-Oakwood residential facility in Somerset, Kentucky.

To my dear and valued readers: thank you for taking Copper Brown into your hearts and loving her as much as I do.

To my eternal sweetheart, Chuck, who is just away for a brief moment in time: you are always on my mind.



PROLOGUE

1886

You'd have to be lost to find the place, set as it was up a holler overgrown with thorny locust, tangled devil's shoestring, and poison ivy as dense as mosquitoes on a riverbank. The sturdily built cabin was just one room with one door and two fair-sized windows looking out over a rough-sawed porch floor. In the mornings fog rose like smoke from the surrounding mountains, and at night panthers prowled the ridges screaming their lament.

Dance Shelton's thin hand parted tattered curtains as her husband, Ace, trekked across the yard. He paused in front of a rickety lean-to by the barn, rummaging around for the varmint Dance knew he would withdraw. Arms bowing from the weight of it, he strutted back to the house. As always on the mornings

he left her alone, he raised the trapdoor in the porch and leaned it against the wall. He caught her watching and so lifted the turtle high. Its head weaved about like a blind man's.

Jumping back, Dance let the curtain fall. She didn't have to look to know he'd lower it into the gap, then grunt as if he was working hard while he tacked a piece of window screen over the turtle's hole to keep other varmints away from his prize. One morning after Ace left, she'd watched with apprehension as a raccoon clawed at the screen, hoping for a tasty meal.

Absently, she rubbed the stump of her right index finger against her chin. The motion was enough to take her right back to her childhood and the day a snapper much like this one grabbed hold of her. She remembered screaming in fright and pain that day at the creek. Everybody knew a turtle wouldn't let go until it thundered, but there was not a cloud in sight. Her little brother Dimmert pulled the turtle one way while she pulled the other until the end of her finger snapped right off. It never did grow back.

Cold sweat broke out across her forehead and under her arms. Her old man knew she'd never cross that porch. Just the thought of the thing being so close gave her the shivers. Dance was purely terrified of snappers . . . and hoot owls. Hoot owls would steal your soul if you stared into their knowing yellow eyes.

Ace left by way of the flooded creek bed, and Dance sat as she did every day in a straight-backed chair by the window, wishing her life away. The raw place on her arm was scabbed over, but still she kept watch on the poker. She wouldn't try

sneaking out into the night again. Ace slept like a snake, with one eye open.

Maybe he'd be home before dark. If so, he'd take the turtle back to the lean-to and plug up the hole so she could cross the porch to chop weeds from the garden or kill a chicken for supper. Her stomach knotted at the thought of saving the entrails for the snapper. Seemed stupid to feed your tormentor. If she could have, she'd have turned that thought over. Once she was her mother's quickest young'un, always first to figure a riddle. But now it was easier if her mind drifted like a dandelion seed in the wind, never lighting for long.

Dance absently traced the mound of her belly and hoped seeing the turtle hadn't marked the baby. She remembered her mammaw Whitt and the Bible she kept close at hand. Mammaw always said, "Take your troubles to the Lord, Dance, and He will see you through."

She guessed it wouldn't hurt to try. Bowing her head like Mammaw did, Dance prayed, *Lord, if Ye see fit, I need for Ye to send me someone to help when it comes my time to birth this baby. It ain't a time I want to be alone, and Ace won't hear of me going to my family. I thank Ye. . . . And, Lord, since I'm asking, make sure whoever Ye send ain't afraid of turtles.*



CHAPTER I

Copper Brown Corbett held her skirts ever higher. Rushing water lapped first at her ankles and then her knees as she ventured farther into the creek. The flood was receding, but it was too late to save her garden. Might as well pull her feet out of the mud and go back to the house.

A baby's cry drew her attention. Lilly Gray was awake. Hands on hips, Copper took one last look at the muddy water. That was the price you paid, she reckoned, for living on Troublesome Creek.

She'd asked for her father's ramshackle farm, and he'd turned over the deed. Now all the work and worry belonged to her. She knew Daddy would be back one day. By that time she was sure to have the farm up and running again so that all he had to do

was sit on the porch and listen to the katydids and the whip-poor-wills. Longing for her family nearly dropped her to her knees right there in the spillover that drowned the green onions, what was left of the lettuce, and the cucumber vines no bigger than her little finger. A few more weeks and they'd have pickles. Copper had already scrubbed the crock.

Lilly Gray's cry escalated, gone from asking to demanding.

"Mama's coming, baby," Copper called as she mounted the stone steps. A dash of water over her feet sent a thin stream of mud off the side of the porch.

She entered her bedroom and smiled at her baby. Her pure pleasure. "Did you miss me?"

"Nursey!" Lilly Gray said, her cheeks still flushed from slumber, her eyes the dark gray color of a storm cloud. The contents of the crib were strewn about the room, flung as far as her chubby arms could make them go.

"You're still dry, Mama's good girl!"

After Lilly's quick trip to the wooden potty in the corner, Copper wrapped her daughter in a crib quilt and carried her and a cup of tea to the porch.

"Nursey?" Lilly asked plaintively as she snuggled against her mother's chest.

Copper settled into the wooden rocker that had been her father's favorite. Stroking her daughter's silky hair, she let the garden go. There was food to be found in abundance up the mountain-ramp and cress and mushrooms—and surely she hadn't forgotten how to hunt. Daddy's gun hung idly over the fireplace. Mam said he wouldn't need it where they were going:

Philadelphia. And there was an abundance of canned goods in the cellar. Her sister-in-law, Alice, had sent enough to feed an army, sure Copper would let Lilly starve without her help. A furrow formed between her eyebrows. Oh, that Alice.

The tea was just right, hot and sweetened with a teaspoon tip of honey. Tension melted from Copper's shoulders as she rocked. There was nothing more relaxing than nursing a baby. *I'll miss this. Lilly Gray's a big girl now. She'll turn two in November. I'll have to think about weaning her before fall.*

Could it have been just a month since she'd left Lexington and her life in that fair city to return to her mountain home? As the baby lay in the crook of her arm, Copper examined her palms. Calluses were forming where blisters had popped across her soft, tender skin. A little more time with the rake and the hoe, a few more wash days, a few more floor scrubblings and she'd have working hands again. Hands she could be proud of.

Shifting Lilly Gray to the other side, Copper let her mind wander—a dangerous distraction. Sometimes she wished she could go back in time to when she was a girl, innocent of pain and sorrow, happy to run wild up the mountain in search of whatever suited her fancy on any given day. She leaned her head back and laughed to herself remembering how her step-mam's desires, yanking her hair ribbons out and losing her store-bought shoes. Poor Mam, she tried so hard.

It turned out that Copper had needed every one of the lessons her stepmother so diligently taught, for she married a doctor and left her mountain home, ever grateful for Mam's foresight.

“Still, I had much to learn,” she said as if Lilly could understand.

“A hillbilly girl set down in the city, I was a sight. I don’t know how your father stood me.”

Lilly Gray glanced up. She looked so much like Simon. Copper didn’t know if she’d ever get used to seeing him there, locked in his daughter’s eyes. A little heartache started up, but she pushed it back down. She was tired of grieving. “Let’s climb the mountain, baby. Let Mama get her shoes, and we’ll go find some wild onions for dinner.”

Testing the path with a walking stick, Copper steadied herself as she climbed. It was difficult going with the weight of the child nestled in a sling pulling her backward. She’d lost her sturdiness since Simon died. Between that and nursing Lilly, she was as stringy as an old squirrel, no meat on her bones.

She pushed aside a leafy branch and peered into a quiet meadow lined on three sides by towering oak, beech, and ash. It had probably been a hundred years since they were acorn and seed. The early morning sun streamed through their leafy limbs, piercing the shadows. She could barely see a smallish tumble of water on the far rocky hillside. Even from a distance, the splash of falling water played a pretty song.

“Cow?” Lilly Gray asked.

Copper reached behind, her arms cupping Lilly’s bottom, taking the strain from her shoulders. “Shh. Mama deer and baby fawns, Lilly. They’re having breakfast.”

“Shh,” Lilly whispered in Copper’s ear. “Nursey?”

“Yes, nursey.”

They watched as the doe nibbled delicately on a patch of

clover while the twins took turns with her milk, knocking heads in their impatience. Suddenly, the doe's ears perked. She froze for an instant before turning to leap into the darkness of the forest, her twins close behind, white tails bobbing. Their crashing run reverberated across the meadow.

Copper was sorry for disturbing the mother deer. But the beauty of the place could not be ignored; the forest creatures would have to share with her and Lilly Gray.

The sun hitched higher in the morning sky and graced a line of pear trees with its light. A breeze kicked up, and a drift of fragrant white blossoms showered Copper and her baby.

Untying the sling, Copper slid Lilly from her back and let her dance in the midst of their sudden good fortune. Lilly grabbed handfuls of the silky petals and flung them in the air.

"Looks like snow, doesn't it, Lilly? You were just a baby last winter when we made snowmen with Auntie Alice and cousin Dodie." *Another thing I've probably done wrong, taking Lilly Gray from her family.*

Help me know I made the right decision in coming back, Lord, she prayed. Please help me.

Copper picked up Lilly, then settled her on her skinny hip. "Let's go find the waterfall." As they traversed the field, she took note of the small orchard, just a line of a couple dozen or so trees actually, as if someone had intended to farm this patch of land and then left for one reason or another. She and Lilly would come back to check on the fruit. Pear butter was good on biscuits.

They entered the forest gloom and popped out again before

a sparkling waterfall revealed itself. It tumbled from a high rock outcropping and was as pretty as a gemstone.

Oh, Copper wished she'd brought a bar of soap and a towel, but no matter, she and Lilly Gray would bathe anyway; her linen petticoat would serve to dry them. Lilly shivered in the needlelike spray. Copper could have stood there all day. The sluicing water, the moss-covered rock, the sycamore tree bent forward over the brook . . . peace, that's what it was. Peace as strong as communion and also sacred. It seemed God had designed this place and this moment just for her. An answer to spoken prayer.

Back in the meadow, Copper picked a bright patch of sunlight and sat with Lilly to dry her hair. She'd rest just a moment before starting home, although there was so much to do she couldn't afford the time. Eggs needed gathering, the milk from the morning needed straining, and she needed to see what she could salvage from the garden. How could she get everything done alone? Of course there was her neighbor John Pelfrey. John had been so good already, planting the garden and bringing her a cow and some chickens, but Copper didn't want to rely on that goodness. John had his own work to do, and the last thing she wanted was to be beholden.

Things sure had changed since she'd been gone. There used to be a houseful of Pelfreys right across the creek, but they'd moved away, leaving only John. Copper wondered why he hadn't gone with them. She felt a smile tugging the corner of her mouth as she remembered how she and John had once been sweethearts—at least they'd played at being sweethearts, children

that they were. Well, that was in the past. She was through with all that. She'd never risk that kind of pain again.

Lilly was down for a nap, and Copper took the churn out to the porch. Up and down, up and down, the smooth wooden dasher slid through her fingers. Come supper, there would be butter on their corn bread to go with the soup beans that simmered on the cookstove. She'd make a wilted salad with the ramps and cress she'd gathered this morning. Her hands sensed the change in the milk as it formed soft lumps. Lifting the lid, she saw that it was nearly finished. Soon she could pour off the whey and put the solid in the molds. Lilly loved the butterfly that formed atop the butter from the mold.

A horse and two riders appeared from around the corner of the barn.

The dasher fell back into the churn as Copper stood. "Who in the world could that be?"

The old tomcat who lay beside the chair didn't answer, busy as he was licking a splash of whey from his foot.

The horse ambled across the yard, taking his own sweet time. The riders, a girl of about fifteen and an older boy, stared at Copper. The girl smiled.

"May I help you?" Copper asked.

The boy reached out an arm. His muscles stood up like knots on an apple tree limb.

The girl grasped it and swung herself down. "Mammaw says you need some help."

"Do I know your mammaw?"

“Everybody knows Fairy Mae Whitt. She’s lived up Crook-Neck Holler for seventy-five years, give or take.” The girl marched up on the porch and settled her ample hips in the chair at the churn, taking over the dasher.

Copper knew of Fairy Mae Whitt. She’d visited up Crook-Neck with her daddy on occasion when she was a girl. Daddy would go checking on neighbors after a storm or some such thing. Fairy Mae was a good woman, widowed as long as Copper could remember. Copper reckoned Fairy Mae wouldn’t send trouble to her door. Besides, her daddy taught her to never turn away a stranger. “We might be entertaining angels unaware,” she’d heard him say at least a dozen times.

“Come on up,” Copper said to the boy. “Rest a spell and have a glass of water.”

The young man stayed on his horse; his Adam’s apple bobbed in time to the churn.

The girl beckoned, so the boy slid off the horse, looping its reins around the porch rail. The horse was a fine-looking animal. Its coat, brushed to a shine, glinted red in the sunlight. Oddly its hooves shone too.

“Stove blacking and sheep tallow,” the girl said as if Copper had asked. “Dimmert polishes them every night.”

The quiet fellow eased over to stand behind the girl. His own bare feet could have used some attention. Taking the water Copper offered, he drank it down in one gulp.

“Thank ye,” the girl answered for both of them. “Darcy Whitt,” she said, releasing the dasher and sticking out her hand.

Copper’s face colored. Why, this girl had better manners

than she did. “Pleased to meet you, Darcy.” She shook the proffered hand. “And you too, Dimmert, is it? I’m Mrs. Corbett, but please call me Copper.”

“My brother don’t waste words,” Darcy said as Dimmert stood with downcast eyes.

“Well, now,” Copper said, trying to take charge of her own porch. She wished she had some spectacles to adjust. That’s what Mam would have done, pushed her glasses up on her nose and made everything fall into place with that one motion. “I’ve got leftover cold breakfast pie. Who’d like some?”

Dimmert raised his hand as if he were in school.

“Is it blackberry?” Darcy asked. “I like blackberry, but I’d say no to rhubarb.”

“You’re in luck then. I’ll just dish up a couple of bowls.” The screen door squeaked as Copper opened it. A little grease would fix that, but she loved the sound of a screen door. She slid the pan of cold biscuit from the pie safe, nearly dropping it when she turned back around. Darcy stood at the table pouring whey from the churn into a stoneware bowl. These two were quiet; she’d give them that.

“Where do you want this butter, Miz Copper?” Darcy asked.

Copper put two molds on the table. “These should do it. We’ll make two so you can take one home to your mammaw.”

“We weren’t figuring to go home for a right long spell.” Darcy patted the butter neatly into the copper molds, pressing out air bubbles. “These here sure are pretty.”

“I thank your grandmother for thinking of me,” Copper replied, “but I’m not sure—”

“We won’t be no trouble. Dimm will sleep in the barn, and I’ll be fine right there in front of the fireplace if you can spare a quilt.”

“I’ll have to think about this. I can’t promise you anything right now.”

“Can you think right fast?” Darcy screwed up her freckled face. She was a spunky, brown-haired girl and charming with a ready smile. The opposite of her lanky brother, she was short and stout. “Mammaw cain’t afford to feed us all.”

“How many are there?” Copper asked.

“Well, let’s see. There’s me and Dimmert; that’s two. Then there’s Dance, but she don’t live at home, so that’s minus one. How many’s that?” She counted off her fingers, holding up three and dropping one. “Huh, still two. Dilly’s the baby and next is Dory, Dawn, Delia, and Dean.” Her tongue poked out the corner of her mouth, and she knit her brow as she counted. “I’m leaving someone out.” She tapped her toe as she stared at the floor. “Ezra,” she crowed triumphantly. “I almost left out Ezra. How many’s that? A bunch, I reckon.”

Copper’s head swam. Ezra? Wonder why they hadn’t named him Dezra. “That’s a bunch, all right. I don’t remember Fairy Mae having but one girl living with her.”

“Oh, we ain’t been here long. We’re from Virginia.”

Adding a little water to the beans, Copper gave them a quick stir, then hung her apron on a peg behind the door. “Darcy, will you listen for my baby? She’s sleeping in the next room. I won’t be long.”

Copper needed to think. Truth was she did need help, and

there was something about Darcy she liked. She paused to mull it over. Dimmert could be a help for sure. Every farm needed a man's strength. She wished she could talk to John. She wandered down to the creek. There was Dimmert, a ring of blackberry stain around his mouth, shovel in hand. The trench he was digging had already begun to divert the muddy water from the garden. He held up the shovel, a guilty look across his face.

Copper couldn't have been more surprised if the tomcat had hitched a team of mice to the plow. "You've saved the cucumbers. Thank you." She could have hugged him. Not only was he smart, but he had the decency to know he should have asked to use the shovel.

It looked as if she had a couple of hired hands. Darcy could have her old room, and with just a little fixing, the tack room in the barn would work for Dimmert. "Thank You, Lord," she whispered, tears in her eyes. God was good.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A retired registered nurse of twenty-five years, Jan Watson specialized in the care of newborns and their mothers. She is a charter member of Southern Acres Christian Church and lives in Lexington, Kentucky. Jan has three grown sons and a daughter-in-law.

Jan's awards include the 2004 Christian Writers Guild Operation First Novel contest and second place in the 2006 Inspirational Readers Choice Contest sponsored by the Faith, Hope, and Love Chapter of the Romance Writers of America. *Troublesome Creek* was also a nominee for the Kentucky Literary Awards in 2006. *Torrent Falls* is the sequel to *Troublesome Creek* and *Willow Springs*.

Jan's hobbies are reading, antiquing, and taking long walks with her Jack Russell terrier, Maggie.

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