



BUTTERMILK SKY
—
JAN WATSON



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BOOKLIST

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“*Still House Pond* spins a charming tale. There were moments where I could not wait to turn the page and discover where the story went next.”

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“Watson brings forth intimate characters with a strong sense of family, obligation, and faith and evokes sensitive and realistic issues. Readers will enjoy the latest journey set in the mountains of Kentucky.”

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“Jan Watson has a true gift for weaving in details that make the mountains of Kentucky almost like another character in the story.”

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LIBRARY JOURNAL ON WILLOW SPRINGS

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“This first-time novelist captures the reader’s heart as pages quickly turn to reveal plot twists and a story of real-life family love.”

CHRISTIAN BOOK PREVIEWS ON *TROUBLESOME CREEK*

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PROLOGUE



CINNAMON SPICER ducked when the tin can sailed her way. The jagged lid just missed her ear. “You oughtn’t do that,” she said. “A body can get lockjaw off them old cans.”

The old lady who’d pitched it brandished a hoe as if it were a weapon. A thin stream of tobacco juice leaked from the corner of her mouth and disappeared among the wrinkles of her chin. “You go somewhere else. I staked this spot this morning.”

“You never did anything of the sort, Santy. I was here before the rooster crowed and you weren’t anywhere about.” Cinnamon pointed at a sturdy stick protruding from the rubble. The stick sported a stained white flag. “That’s my

marker, and you know it. That gives me eight feet in any direction.”

The woman spit her chaw at Cinnamon’s feet. “Hog,” she said before stumping away, her steps as slow as Christmas. Her sack bumped along behind her like Santa Claus’s pack full of coal.

A warm summer sun beat down on the garbage dump. Small fires dotted the landscape, releasing fusty-smelling ribbons of smoke.

Cinnamon blotted sweat from her forehead with the crook of her elbow. “You have to obey the rules just like ever’body else, Santy.”

“Heifer!”

“Don’t be cross. There’s more than enough for all.”

The old woman called her animal names. The other pickers called her Little Bit. Nobody shared their real names here. Cinnamon didn’t know why. It wasn’t like they were doing anything shameful by earning a living—such as it was. Besides, everybody here knew most everybody else. It was a small kingdom.

For as long as she could remember, Cinnamon had been picking. When just a child, she’d followed behind her father, searching for play pretties: cracked saucers, cups without handles, lids with no pots, and the like. “Mind the broken glass, girl,” he would say. “You don’t want to be stepping over there.”

One time she’d found a string of pearls lacking only a clasp. Pap had tied the pearls around her neck and let her

wear them for the rest of the day. She had fancied herself a proper princess. She didn't get to keep the necklace, but she didn't mind. She wore her father's praise instead. Those pearls fed her family for weeks.

She flicked the chew to one side with the blade of the hoe and began to grub around. Just one time she'd tried tobacco. Pap said chewing it would cut the smell of rotting garbage and the decomposing bodies of the poor dead animals cast off here. He'd cut her a nugget from the twist he carried in his pocket. But she couldn't stomach the pungent taste or the way the brown juice backed up in her mouth like thin vomit. Besides, Ma said it would rot her teeth, and Cinnamon had nice teeth. Pap said her smile put him in mind of corn on the cob, the way her teeth were so square and even.

It was lonesome working without Pap. She would like to pray for him like the preacher said to do, but she didn't think the Lord would appreciate being called on from here in the smelly dump. Prayer was for Saturday mornings after she'd finished cleaning the sanctuary. That was the easiest job ever. Way easier than picking trash—though maybe not as interesting.

She liked when the church smelled of soft soap and Old English furniture polish. She even liked the momentary discomfort of the kneeling bench because it kept her mind from wandering instead of praying. It took a lot of concentration to pray a good prayer.

Cinnamon leaned on the hoe. Lately she'd been thinking about the girls who lived at Mrs. Pearl's while they attended secretarial school. One of her favorite things to do was to

watch the girls as they went about town. They traveled in a flock like birds. She liked how they seemed so happy and industrious, and she liked their clothes, especially that one girl with the golden hair.

She had been picking since early this morning, earlier than all the others by a good fifteen minutes. The trashmen collected on Mondays and Thursdays and dumped their loads before sunrise. Cinnamon had slept lightly last night and sprung from her cot at the first sound of the garbage wagons rumbling toward the dump. Her youth gave her a drop on the others. She could run faster, and she had a knack for selecting good sites. She knew which wagon picked up from the posh houses along North Broadway and which banged the bins in the narrow alleys behind the pricey downtown hotels. Her favorite, though, was wagon number three, which carried its load from the saloons dotting Easy Street. She was allowed to stake three sites, and that was what she'd done this morning. She dubbed her sites Park, Broadway, and Easy. Right now she was working Broadway.

She laid her hoe aside and picked up the rake, which she ran lightly over the mound of refuse, careful not to nick or scratch what she expected to find. She scraped away layer after layer of newspapers, kitchen refuse, and receipts of all kinds, then bent to pinch one bill of sale out of the muck. The printed letters and numbers darted like minnows in and out of her vision. She blotted sweat from her forehead. The print lined up. Mrs. Harry Hopewell had paid \$3.50 for a velvet cloche at Suzanne Millinery. Imagine that—\$3.50 for a hat!

Tossing the receipt, she watched it sail away on the swell of a welcome breeze, then returned to her work. The dry rattle of newsprint and the squish of vegetable waste gave way to the *clink, clink* of shifting glass. Pay dirt! Two cobalt bottles, stoppers intact, nestled like bluebirds in a scoop of potato peels. They would fetch a pretty penny at the druggist.

She moved on to Easy, which turned out to be a gold mine. Soon she had a gunnysack full of beer, pop, and whiskey bottles, which she'd cushioned with newspaper. One more whisk of the rake and she'd call it a day.

Park had been a disappointment. Usually she found at least half a dollar in change in the trash picked up from the hotels, and often perfectly fine dry goods—linens with a tear or a cigarette burn, shirts missing a button, shoelaces, and once a pair of gold cuff links. But no such luck this time. All she'd come up with worth haggling over was a box of poker chips.

After pulling up her stakes, Cinnamon organized her carryalls—dirty stuff in one, middling stuff in another, fragile stuff in the third, wrapped and separated with squares of cardboard. The day was wasting; she needed to get on home, sort her goods, and start peddling. June's rent was on her head. Pap hadn't been able to pick since the middle of May. Thankfully she had a little more time before it was officially due. Their landlord had said, "No more leeway." One more late payment and he'd have the sheriff put their stuff out on the street. Then what would she do?

Pulling the red metal wagon that Pap had fitted with slatted wooden sides, she skirted the dump. Santy shook her fist as Cinnamon's wagon rolled past.

Cinnamon smiled to herself. Santy was like a tired old bulldog: she still had the desire to snap and bite but didn't have the wherewithal to carry it off.



CHAPTER I



1913

The blast hit Sheriff Chanis Clay square in the chest. He lost his balance, tumbled down the cellar steps, and landed hard against a rough rock wall. His head bounced twice before he slumped forward, his chin planted on his collarbone.

His last conscious thoughts were of his father. The badge on Chanis's chest was the one handed to him at his father's funeral, then proudly pinned there by his mother after the general election made it official. As darkness swirled, he wondered if his fate would be the same as his father's—killed in the line of duty. Dead before he could even serve out his term. Dead and leaving too much undone.

His own strangled breath awoke him. How long he'd been out, he didn't know. Probably not long, for a thin shaft of daylight filtered from the half-open door at the top of the stairs. What in the world had happened up there? Last he remembered, he'd eased open the door to check the cellar, but he hadn't drawn his gun. Who would have thought he needed it? Obviously he was wrong about that.

Wincing, he leaned his head back. It felt like there was a pumpknot big as a goose egg on the back of his skull. His hands and feet tingled like a cracked crazy bone—circulation kick-starting. And his shirt stuck to his chest—with blood? His face and chest stung, but they seemed to be peppered with glass, not buckshot. Looked like it wasn't his time after all, and he was thankful. What would happen to his mother and the kids if he died at twenty-three?

Not to mention Mazy. They'd never even had a real kiss yet. He was decidedly unwilling to leave Mazy and all their plans behind. Well, maybe they were more his plans than hers right now, but she'd come around. He just needed to get the house he'd bought readied up. He wouldn't chance a proposal until he had a home ready for her, a home fit for a girl like Mazy Pelfrey. Just this morning he'd stopped by the general store to look at wallpaper samples. His throbbing head spun with images of cabbage roses, lilacs in bloom, ivy climbing trellises, and men on horseback chasing foxes.

Chanis rubbed the sore spot on his head, trying to put together what had happened. He'd come up here to check on Oney, who nobody had seen for days. It was known about

town that Oney Evers had been ill for some time, ever since getting the sugar. The sugar was making him waste away. In six months' time he was half the man he used to be. The doc brought Oney to Chanis's attention when the old man missed an appointment with her. He was more than glad to come up here this morning to check on Oney. Now here he was blown against the cellar wall, about as useless as the sack of withered seed potatoes his elbow rested on.

Everybody who knew the Everses said Oney's wife was crazy as a jar of crickets, but he never figured she'd shoot him. But maybe she didn't—maybe Oney did. That would be out of character for him, but really, what did he know about Ina Evers? Whenever there was violence of any sort, folks were quick to blame whoever was most different. Now he'd done the same.

The door at the top of the stairs swung all the way open. Miz Evers waved a long-barreled six-shooter in front of her like a divining rod. Chanis scabbled out of the line of fire, huddling behind the wooden steps.

"Who's down there?"

"Miz Evers? It's Chanis Clay—the sheriff."

He heard the gun cock.

"I'll blow you all to pieces," she said with a voice high and reedy.

"Where's Oney? I just came to check on Oney."

"And you figured to help yourself to some canned goods whilst you were looking around? Likely story."

Blam! The gun fired. A row of glass jars went up in pieces. Vegetables rained down. He tasted green beans.

“Did I get you? Good enough for you, you scoundrel! Your daddy will be turning over in his grave. Now there was a good man.”

“I swear I meant no harm. Miz Evers? Where is Oney?”

“That’s for me to know. Now get over where I can see you! I ain’t wasting the one bullet I’ve got left.”

Feeling around in the dusky dark, Chanis found a bushel basket. “All right, I’m coming out. Don’t shoot!” He pitched the basket toward the bottom of the steps.

A shot drowned out her laugh. The basket was done for. Chanis thought of drawing his own pistol, but he couldn’t see shooting a woman. His daddy always said, “Don’t take your weapon out if you don’t aim to use it.” Besides, her gun was no threat without bullets. She was just confused. He’d talk sense into her.

Chanis eased out from under the stairs, brushing cobwebs from his clothes. Raising his hands above his head, he looked up at Miz Evers. She was a tall, gaunt woman with a jutting jaw and long, bony arms. She put Chanis in mind of a praying mantis.

“I’m coming up.”

With a whine like a thousand angry hornets, a bullet parted his hair. Stunned, he dropped backward to the floor.

“Huh,” she said. “I guess I miscounted. Are you dead?”

Her voice echoed against the ringing in his ears. Chanis lay still, playing possum. He could feel blood trickling down

his face, but he couldn't be hurt too bad. He could still think and sort of hear.

She sighed—like he had really put her out. “How am I supposed to get a dead body outen the cellar?” She took the steps slowly like a toddler, bringing both feet together on each one before tackling the next.

Chanis held his breath until she prodded his chest with the business end of the gun. With one quick motion he grabbed the barrel and rolled away from her, taking the fire-arm with him.

“La,” she yelled, collapsing on the bottom step and clutching her chest. “You just about scared me to death.”

He pointed the gun at her. “Get back upstairs.”

“What? Are you aiming to shoot me now? Scaring an old lady out of her wits wasn't enough for you?”

“Miz Evers, I'm arresting you. You tried to kill me.”

“Well, you was stealing my canned goods. Was I supposed to help you carry them to your vehicle?”

“I wasn't taking anything. Like I said, I was looking for Oney.”

“Then how come you smell like sauerkraut?”

“Sauerkraut?” That's what smelled so bad; he was dripping in fermented cabbage.

Miz Evers lumbered up the steps, pausing by a set of narrow shelves just this side of the doorway. “Yep, there's a jar missing. Reckon it exploded on you.”

Chanis felt twice the fool. He could see the headline in

the *Skip Rock Tattler*: “Exploding Sauerkraut Fells Sheriff Clay. See details page 2.”

“Well, come on. I ain’t got all day,” Miz Evers said.

He hurried past the remaining jars of cabbage, glad to put the root cellar behind him. Miz Evers was waiting at the kitchen table with a jar of iodine and a pair of tweezers. “Take off your shirt,” she said.

Chanis eyed the outside door. He could leave . . . but instead he spun the revolver’s cylinder, assuring himself there were no bullets in the chamber, and put it on the table. He’d play along with her for a minute. Maybe she’d tell him what he needed to know about Oney if he got on her good side. Unbuttoning the top three buttons of his shirt, he pulled it and his undershirt over his head. It hurt more than he would have imagined each time she fished another piece of glass from his chest. And it was even worse when she started on his face. He couldn’t help but wince when she prodded the new part in his hair and poured on the iodine.

“Too bad I ain’t got a bullet for you to bite on,” she said.

“Miz Evers, don’t you want me to check on Oney? He might be ill.”

“It doesn’t matter no more,” she said, sniffing as she stuck the cork back in the iodine bottle. One fat tear formed in the corner of her eye. “We don’t need nobody’s help.”

The shirt he’d ironed just that morning was ruined, so Chanis eased his undershirt back on to cover himself. Tucking his chin, he secured his badge to the proper spot directly over his heart. There. Now he was the sheriff again.

“Miz Evers, you might just as well save me some time and tell me where your husband is,” he said through gritted teeth.

Something in the old woman gave way. Her hand trembled when she raised her arm and pointed in the direction of the barn. “He’s yonder—just a-laying there with his toes turned up.”