

GREEN EYES AT DAWN

by

Bob Ciarrocchi

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Matthew 12:11

*And he said unto them, what man shall there be among you,
that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit on the Sabbath day,
will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out?*

Chapter 1

His mother didn't care that Ethan Harris had been slaughtering livestock since before the war—a mountain lion was a different animal entirely.

"And your brothers were around to help with the butchering, Ethan," she said, leaning against the cabin door. "I won't hear anything more about it. If you want to help, find your sister and tell her that we'll be staying indoors until morning."

The boy stomped off towards the juniper tree that his sister Sophronia liked the best with a Winchester 1897 shotgun over his shoulder. He found her sitting six feet off the ground on the gnarled, arching trunk, her gingham dress caked with red earth.

"Come on, Soph—Ma said you got to come indoors now," Ethan said, shielding his eyes from the pale Autumn sun as he squinted upward. At fourteen, he was five years older than his youngest sister.

"I'm looking at something," the girl said.

When he asked what she was looking at the girl said that she was looking at a dead sheep.

"What dead sheep?" the boy asked. "There's another one?"

"I don't know. There's a dead sheep over there," the girl said, pointing beyond the fence to somewhere in the valley that her brother couldn't see.

"Soph, if you don't come down from that tree this instant, I'm gonna grab you by your ankles and drag you out, you hear me?" Ethan said.

The girl said that no, he wasn't going to do that, and she climbed a few inches higher in the juniper.

Before the situation could escalate further, the children's mother yelled sharply from the cabin. At a hundred yards, the words were indistinct, but the tone was not.

That night, the three members of the Harris family that hadn't left the ranch for either work in the city or war on the Western Front said a prayer and then tucked into their meal of biscuits and gravy. A few cuts of gamy mutton were also stacked on the serving dish.

"So," Ethan started, "do you want me to go by Uncle Daniel's place tomorrow morning, then?"

"Why would I ever want you to do that?" Polly Harris asked her son, sharply.

"So that him and the gang can get together and find that mountain lion," the boy said, in between mouthfuls of floury biscuit.

"I haven't seen a mountain lion, have you?" Polly said. "Don't talk with your mouth full. And no, I don't want you to go to see Daniel. We're going to wait here."

Ethan asked for how long and his mother didn't answer. Other than the sound of knives scraping on plates and the growing rush of wind outside the cabin, the rest of the meal was eaten in silence.

That night, in the children's room, Ethan looked at the empty cot that he'd slept on until that Spring. In July, after Belleau Wood, his oldest brother Heber had joined the Marine Corps. In March, Daniel had left to build naval shells in the city and Ethan's sister Susannah became a clerk before that. They all sent money back to his mother but apparently the bills kept piling up.

"Ethan?" Sophronia asked, from across the room. "What's that noise?"

"It's wind. Just go to sleep," the boy said.

"The other noise..." the girl said.

Ethan listened. He didn't hear anything.

"There is no other noise. Just go to sleep and stop talking, I'm thinking about things," the boy said.

For a few moments there was just the sound of the storm outside and noise of the livestock.

"Momma cries at night," Sophronia finally said.

"What?" her brother asked.

"Ma cries. At night," the girl said again. "I hear it sometimes when the wind isn't blowing."

The next morning, the children woke up late. As the sun rose over the mountains the wind died down and Sophronia asked her brother how they were supposed to do their chores if they couldn't go outside.

"I'll ask Ma what she wants us to do," the boy said, tying his shoes on the bed. In his head he wondered how many more animals were dead that morning but then thought better of doubting his mother in front of Sophronia—at least any more than he already had. As ornery as the girl could be, the boy knew that it was important for Sophronia to not doubt their mother's intuition. The boy's mother was his mother and it was the right thing to do to listen to her, even if he didn't understand her decisions. Still, he felt the need to act churning inside of him. Faith was good but faith without works was dead.

"Here, do you need help with your hair?" he asked his sister.

Sophronia's hair was dark and thick and, when left to her own devices, the girl would spend half the morning brushing it in the mirror.

After a brief back and forth, the girl handed her brother the boar bristle brush and he began to pull it through her hair. Once or twice the girl punched him for pulling too hard, but she generally seemed to appreciate his help. When her brother brushed her hair, it saved time and kept her mother from yelling at her for her idleness.

"There!" Ethan said, handing the girl the brush. "Done! We did something!"

After washing his face and running a rag over his cropped black hair, the skinny boy went out to the kitchen and began making breakfast since, oddly, nothing was ready yet.

"Ma, what do you want for breakfast?" he yelled, taking some leftover rye out of the breadbox and filling the pitcher with water.

There was no reply.

"Mother?" he called again, went to her bedroom door, and knocked. There was no reply. Immediately bloody thoughts filled Ethan's head as the hair on his arm stood up. Was she dead? Had a mountain lion leapt through his mother's window and torn her to pieces? He imagined his sister, pointing towards the bedroom as she had pointed at the sheep from the Juniper tree, and immediately went to grab his father's Winchester 1897 shotgun from over the fireplace.

"Sophronia, get out here!" he yelled.

When his younger sister got out of the bedroom, she asked what he wanted and the boy told her to go into his mother's room to see if she was inside.

"Why can't you do it?" the girl asked.

"It's mother's room!" the boy said. "You have to do it! Just crack the door and peek if she's inside!"

The girl opened the door slightly and pressed her face against the jamb to look into the room. Outside, the gusts of the storm blew down the valley and wailed like a lost lamb.

“Ma?” Ethan called over his sister’s shoulder, loading the shotgun’s magazine tube with short, fat paper shotshells.

“She’s not in there,” Sophronia said, opening the bedroom door. Inside, the bed was made and the floor was swept. The oil lamp had been cleaned. Ethan looked around the room and again called out for his mother.

“There she is,” Sophronia said from the bedroom window.

Outside, Ethan could see his mother making her way around the shed back toward the house.

“Oh, I almost jumped out of my skin!” the boy said, lowering his father’s shotgun. “Come on, let’s get out of her room!”

When Polly Harris finally got inside, breakfast was on the table and she thanked her children for preparing the meal.

Upon sitting down at the breakfast table, though, Ethan noticed that his mother’s right hand was wrapped in linen.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full, Ethan,” Polly Harris said, pouring herself a glass of water from the pitcher. “I don’t know how many times I’m going to have to tell you.”

“There’s blood,” Sophronia said, her hazel eyes widening.

When Ethan looked closer at the wrapping on his mother’s hand, he could make out a tinge of scarlet soaking into the fabric.

Chapter 2

"It's nothing," Polly Harris said to her children. "It's nothing. We're not losing any more of the flock."

"What do you mean, mother?" Ethan asked.

Polly explained how, that morning, she had risen early, long before sun up, to cut hydatid parasites from two of the sheep. While trying to open the cysts with a needle, in the light of a lantern, the second sheep had spooked, bowled her over, and driven the needle through the woman's palm.

"I closed the animal back up with thread," Polly Harris said. "We're not losing any more sheep this week."

Sophronia stared.

"Well, we've got to get Doc Eversman from town!" Ethan said, standing from the table. "We've got to get him out here right now!"

"No!" Polly Harris shouted, her facade cracking as she rose from the table to meet her son. Since the previous summer she no longer stood taller than Ethan, but the woman still managed to look down at the boy. "I will not have this!"

The woman raised a bandaged hand to slap the boy but stayed her palm when he shrunk back.

"I don't want you going out there!" she yelled. "It's not going to be my fault that the last boy in my care gets his guts ripped out by some filthy mountain cat! It will not be my doing!"

Sophronia sobbed once and ran to the bedroom and Ethan insisted, again, that he bring Doctor Eversman to the ranch.

"I'll take the shotgun, Ma! Please, that hand's going to get infected!" he said. "Please, Ma!"

"Ethan Harris, I know exactly what you're thinking!" Polly said, brushing the grayed curls out of her face. "You'll take the shotgun, will you? To go find that mountain lion no doubt. I was not born yesterday!"

Ethan spent the next twenty minutes convincing his mother that he'd ride to town for Doctor Eversman and would never once consider pursuing the mountain lion. After all, as she said, he hadn't even seen a cat, only the tracks his mother had shown him, herself—maybe she was right and there was no cat. He'd get to town, inform Eversman of the situation, and head straight home before the lamp on the kitchen table had burned two fingers of oil.

Eventually, Polly relented, and her son galloped off to get the doctor.

It was twelve miles to the town of Constancy, and along the way the boy didn't see a single creature, no mountain lion, stray dog, head of livestock, or otherwise. Admittedly, his thoughts distracted him.

Other than Tess, the brown mare that he rode, the Central Utah high desert seemed cold and devoid of living creatures. As he pounded forward, the boy leaned forward into the wind to put his left arm across the horse's neck, then the right, to try to warm himself.

After finally tying his horse at the Constancy meetinghouse, Ethan ran across the thoroughfare to the offices, shotgun in hand, and told the doctor what had happened. Eversman was an older man whose joints ached in the cold—he couldn't manage more than a canter

getting out to the ranch, but he promised Ethan that he'd be out as soon as possible with a bag full of tinctures and poultices.

Ethan sighed a little easier as he mounted the mare and galloped off to find the mountain lion and kill it. There was only half a day's worth of light left before he wouldn't be able to see the cat at all, even if it was on top of him.

The boy had only taken a small loaf of bread and some cheese on the trip, so as not to further arouse his mother's suspicions. Although the 1897 held six shells of buckshot, that was the only ammunition he'd brought for the hunt.

Despite the twinge of shame he felt at disobeying his mother, if anything there was a sense of relief in the boy's mind as he peeled off the trail which led back to the ranch and headed Eastward to the mountains.

He was doing it. He was doing something. He was going to kill the lion. Maybe the big cat would kill him, maybe it would have his guts for garters, but he wouldn't be at home watching the livestock die anymore.

His mother couldn't stop him now, the way she'd dragged him by the ear from the recruiting table at the Constancy Fairgrounds. During the Independence Day of the previous year, Ethan had wandered off from the family, trying to join the war as a thirteen year-old, still too young to bless the Sacrament. Polly had found him and pulled him back to the funnel cake cart by his right ear, to the guffaws of the smartly dressed Sergeant at the recruiting table. The same Sergeant had recruited Ethan's father in 1917, six months before Mr. Harris was killed at Belleau Wood.

That beast in the mountains wasn't going to sniff out his mother by her bleeding hand or pull little Sophronia down from her Juniper tree by the ankle because Ethan was going to kill it.

Or it was going to kill him. Yes, he was dishonoring his mother by lying but wasn't he honoring her by defending the family? His mother had also cried when her husband and eldest son went to war—was this any different?

The boy's thoughts raced as he galloped towards his fantasized destiny but all he needed to do right now was find somewhere dry, out of the wind and off the ground, to sleep that night. As he gained elevation, sparse patches of snow turned to fields of white powder and the brush grew thicker, taller, and greener.

Ethan had played in these mountains with his brothers as a boy, so it really seemed more like a return to simpler times, rather than a deadly game of pursuit. Eventually the boy found a clearing that he had camped at summers before and dismounted for his supper. Through a clearing in the pines, he could see the valley below. There was the ranch, with smoke billowing out of its chimney like a grinning sailor's pipe from the cover of Ethan's favorite boy's magazine, 'Amazing Adventures.'

Smiling, he ate half his bread and cheese, tended to the mare, and then built a fire. Very responsibly, Ethan thought, he'd save the rest of his food for tomorrow's hunt. That night, after praying for the chance to repent for his lies, the boy cradled his father's shotgun under the blanket, his hunting cap pulled down over his eyes. Lying beside the fire, Ethan eventually drifted off to sleep on a pile of pine boughs. It would be many days before he fell asleep so peaceably again.

Chapter 3

Although he fell asleep quickly that first night on the mountain, cold eventually got the best of the boy and he woke up with a start, sometime deep in the night. The wool blanket just wasn't thick enough and soon Ethan went through most of the firewood that he'd piled up only a few hours before. He tried opening the blanket to pull in more of the fire's warmth but over the miserable hours, the blaze dwindled along with the wood and the fire eventually went out.

"Oh, what a night, Tess!" the boy said aloud to his mare in the darkness. He didn't hear a snort, or whinny, or any other reply.

With the fire only embers, he pulled some of the scorching hot stones from the firepit under his blanket with a stick, but they barely warmed him at all and left burns on the wool. Curled up into a ball, his breath built up under the blanket and kept him warm but eventually it became too stifling to breathe under the cover and he had to bare his face to the air, losing all his warmth in the process.

It went on like that for hours, Ethan trying to balance cold and hot, waiting for the sun to come up.

"Surely it must be sunrise soon," the boy repeated to himself, but the night stretched on interminably, no glow of dawn rising over the mountains.

Eventually, the boy felt the need to relieve himself. He stove off the urge to get out from under the blankets and find a tree in the cold and the dark but eventually pressure got the best of him and he threw off the covers to find a place to go to the bathroom.

He stumbled a few feet in the dark and then took care of his business in a random direction. While finishing, an ungodly sound suddenly broke the stillness of the night and the boy froze, waiting for another scream—that was what it sounded like. Without exaggeration, the boy thought that the animal call sounded like the scream of a burning witch, cursing any witness in the agony of her own demise.

For whole useless minutes the boy fumbled in the dark, trying to find his bedroll only a few feet from where he'd relieved himself and the shotgun that he'd cradled all night. Blessedly, the first rays of sunlight soon began to show over the alpine peak and his eyes began to adjust to the darkness.

"We made it, Tess!" he shouted to the silhouette of the mare. She shook her heavy brown head at him and went back to sleep.

As the sun rose, Ethan did calisthenics to keep warm. He ran in place, did jumping jacks, and lifted the shotgun over his head like he'd seen in the boys' magazines to keep warm and to build up his courage for the day.

Once it was light enough, he tended to Tess, washed himself with a damp rag, and ate some more of the bread and cheese. He yearned for something warm to drink but just packed some snow into his canteen, knowing it would melt to a very small amount of water that would chill him as he drank it. He'd wear the canteen under his coat, refill it several times a day, and that would be that.

It hadn't been a bad Autumn for wildfires and the first snows were already falling. Still, getting to water would be Ethan's best bet—not only could he refill his canteen but animals would also be looking for a watering hole and, in the snow, he'd be able to spot mountain lion tracks without much trouble.

And so, the boy followed the erosion the runoff had cut into the mountain, guiding Tess over the trail's switchbacks, until he found a small pond, ringed with ice and snow but not yet frozen. Indeed, there were tracks all over the area, but nothing that looked like it had been left by a big cat.

"Well, Tess, what do we do?" the boy asked aloud. "Wait here 'til nightfall or track down a mule deer and hope the cat crosses its track?"

The horse sniffed the ground and flicked its tail. She was a skittish animal and past her prime, but Ethan had grown up with Tess and had often gone to her for company as a younger boy, especially after losing a fight with his older brothers.

"Yeah, let's get after the deer," Ethan said. "Good call, Tess."

Picking the largest set of tracks, Ethan followed the path while mounted until the trail became too rough and then proceeded on foot, with the horse behind him.

He drank some water that he'd collected from the pond but, the more the boy walked, the hungrier he got, and before long he went into his roll for more bread and cheese.

For some time, he tracked the mule deer in silence, his breath billowing through his scarf as if he were a very small, very slow-moving locomotive.

Hours passed without sign of the deer or the cat but the boy kept moving forward, further down into the valley and then back up the mountain again, over brush and through the snow, trying to stave off the doubts that had begun to encircle his thoughts.

Had Doc Eversman gotten back to his mother? Had she developed a fever and was Sophronia holding up alright? Friday was already halfway gone, and Ethan had to be back soon, not only because he was running low on food but because church was fast approaching. No matter what, he'd hold onto a last little bit of bread in case he had to bless it himself, Sunday morning, for the Sacrament.

Then, breaking his distraction, just as the horrid animal call had startled him that morning, an unexpected shot rang out.

Someone else was on this mountain—nearby at that.

There were no more shots so the boy couldn't figure the exact location of the hunter but the roar of the gun had been loud enough that its shooter must have been within a couple hundred yards and somewhere to his north, further up the deer trail.

Within minutes, Ethan saw a figure moving through the trees on foot. Strangely, the man seemed to be carrying a pistol rather than a long gun. He was covered in furs and for a moment Ethan wondered, with a thrill, if the man was a long-lost Comanche, living, unnoticed, a day's ride from the Harris ranch.

As the man turned, though, Ethan saw a beard and his hopes faded.

"Hello, there!" the man called out, waving a hand over his head. Both hands, in fact, held a pistol.

Ethan smiled and waved back.

"Was it a deer?" the boy asked.

"Big buck!" the man said. "He's probably across the mountain by now. Didn't even wing him. Oh, I'm so hungry! You don't have any food do ya?"

Ethan said that he didn't have much but the strange man persisted.

"Oh, please—you look like a good God-fearing boy," he said. "Ain't ya? I'm Silas, Silas Hastings. What might your name be, lad?"

Ethan told the man his name and the man stuck both pistols in his belt, extended a hand, and again introduced himself.

“Say, lad, why don’t we make camp. By the time we find a spot and get the fire going there’ll be just enough time to tell a few stories, eh?” Silas Hastings said. “Oh, tell me what food you have again.”

“Just a little bread and cheese,” Ethan said.

“Here, you find us a spot and make us some supper and I’ll tell you tall tales to make your dreams spin. Deal? Deal,” the man said.

Silas Hastings ended up taking so much of the bread for himself that Ethan had to hide a nub of crust to save for the Sacrament. The man told stories and drank from his flask through the evening, the stories getting ever more depraved and detailed, until he finally passed out. Ethan, on the other hand, smiled and nodded throughout the evening but stayed up all night, the shotgun cradled in his arms, in case Silas Hastings tried to slit his throat or sneak off with Tess, leaving the boy stranded on the mountain.

Thankfully, the gruff mountain man didn’t wake up when the boy made his escape in the morning, leaving camp at first light.

Things were beginning to look desperate. Ethan’s food was gone. There was no sign of the mountain lion. Worst of all, he had now been up without any real rest for two nights and Saturday looked to be already lost, given his exhaustion. The boy kept nodding off as he put miles between himself and the campsite.

He needed to sleep, imminently. Nothing else particularly mattered.

Chapter 4

That morning, the boy eventually found a crevice in the canyon wall big enough for himself and Tess to conceal themselves within, in case Silas Hastings somehow followed their trail. He rolled out his blanket on top of the charred, rotting corpse of a Juniper, culled in the last wildfire. He had Tess walk over the whole mess to soften it a bit, said a prayer for forgiveness, and fell asleep.

When Ethan awoke, countless hours later, the sun was shining. It was still cold but not as cold as that morning and, at that altitude, dry as the day was, Ethan felt warm for the first time in days. He was thankful for the sun and, although peace had come to his mind, he still regretted the Silas Hastings incident.

"We'll make it better, today, Tess," Ethan said, rubbing the horse's muzzle. He let her graze while there was still light, built a fire in the crevice, and stacked plenty of dry branches to keep the blaze going all night.

"Did you eat enough, Tessie? Is your belly full? Oh, I'm hungry, girl," Ethan said. "Maybe a babe in the woods will wander into my camp and I'll take all of his food tonight. Oh, I don't mean that—never mind I said it, Tess."

With the prospect of hours awake, in the dark, ahead of him Ethan posted up with his shotgun at the edge of the fire's glow and kept an ear out for prey. He had to eat. With the storm days past, the skies had cleared, and it was a full moon that night. This high on the mountain there were few trees and the boy could actually make out the silhouettes of an occasional game animal. Mostly he saw birds small enough to pass between the pellets of his buckshot and, should a big double-ought buck pellet actually hit the pheasant or partridge or grouse, it wouldn't leave much meat behind.

"What am I doing? What am I doing out here?" Ethan eventually said, the campfire flickering shadows across his skinny, freckled face. This time he wasn't talking to Tess.

"Father in heaven, what am I doing here? I don't...I don't think that this is going to work, is it?" the boy said. "Please look after my mother and my sister if this doesn't work. And Susannah and the boys, too. Let Daniel find his faith in you, again...and, uh, let my father know that I tried. I tried to do what I thought he'd do. Let Ma know that I'm sorry. If you think it's fit, let me find some food but, if you don't, please forgive me for lying to my Ma and coming out here. And let me be of some use to you up there, when I see you, Father. I say this in the name of my savior, Jesus Christ. Amen."

Within a couple hours, the large, fat silhouette of a turkey darkened a spot on the horizon. Ethan could tell that it was a Tom bird from the way it flew in short bursts.

"Lord, I'm not going to ask you for that bird to come closer. Whatever's your will is my will, Lord," the boy whispered.

In fact, that bird never got any closer but the next turkey, a fair-sized Jake, did. It got close enough for Ethan to see its feather burst out, as if from a ripped pillow, against the sky. The shot startled Tess, though, and he had to chase her down, falling into a frozen-over puddle as he did.

Ethan's knees got wet, along with the shotgun, but after getting back to the campfire the boy went over the Winchester. Ejecting the spent paper shell and loading another, he held its

blue steel receiver up in the fire's light and it all seemed in fine shape, despite the submersion. The boy would oil the gun and give it a proper disassembly if he got home—once he got home. After plucking the bird and dressing it, he roasted its legs over the fire and ate his fill, then fell into a state somewhere between sleep and consciousness.

In a dream, he saw pirates sailing galleons over the mountain, the keels of their boats parting the snow. Ethan had a boat of his own and Liahona Bright, the freckled girl from the general store in Constancy was on his arm, laughing merrily as cannonballs flew through the trees.

Ethan's galleon sailed on, into the forests, but the trees weren't trees anymore—they were wooden statues of his father now, lined in rows and columns like tombstones. The forest of statues grew so dense that the ship began to crash through statues until it finally came to rest and Liahona Bright asked him what he had done. What had Ethan done to his family?

As the older red-haired girl stared at him, unblinking, the light faded around them until there were only eyes, staring at him in the darkness. No ship or pirates, no laughing or monuments—there were only the green eyes staring at him as the boy was alone in the dark.

Then there was a scream, the screaming of a witch, burning in the fire, cursing all who watched her die. Tess began to jump and panic and Ethan was no longer dreaming. The mare must have winded a predator since she wouldn't calm down, wouldn't stop thrashing about. Eventually, Ethan saw them.

There, beyond the crevice in the canyon wall, maybe twenty yards past the light of the fire, were two eyes—two green, unblinking eyes a couple of feet off the ground. And there, at Ethan's feet, were the bloody remains of the gutted turkey, its leg bones still clinging to scraps of cooked meat, its feathers blown to the wind.

Tess was in between the boy and the eyes, so, very slowly, Ethan crawled forward, loosening the mare's bridle from where he'd tied it to a Juniper at the mouth of the crevice. As the horse bolted, the green eyes stayed still—until they didn't.

With his first shot, the charging mountain lion crumpled on itself, flexed and then got back up into a low, fast, limping crawl towards the boy all within a single breath.

Holding the trigger down, ready to slam fire a second load of buckshot, and then a third and then a fourth if necessary, Ethan racked the wooden slide. The paper shell ejected but the slide wouldn't return forward for another salvo. The shell wouldn't feed.

Spinning the gun around in his hands so that he could swing it by the barrel, like a ballplayer, Ethan yelled at the mountain lion.

Swinging the gun didn't work and soon the cat was on top of him, crawling up his body, its claws scratching at the boy's leg.

Suddenly, Ethan's dream had become distinctly real.

Chapter 5

It wasn't all over instantly, as Ethan expected. The cat had wrapped its mouth around his wrist as he'd tried to defend his face and throat and the animal was now just holding on. The boy couldn't tell if it was flexing its claws in and out of his leg or if that was just the throb of the pain.

Other than that, though, the cat wasn't doing much, just staring at him as he staggered to the ground under its weight, unbalanced from the attack.

Despite his condition, the boy did have enough of his wits about him to realize that he couldn't let the cat get him on his back—Ethan had to be on top. As they wriggled on the ground, Ethan ineffectually yelling at the mountain lion to get off of him, the boy clawed at the dirt with his free hand and eventually found a rock. The cat was already bleeding from its face and side where the first wave of buckshot had made contact and it was making an eerie, moaning noise as it stared at him.

The boy began to beat the cat with the rock. After several blows to its head, the big cat finally began to loosen its jaws and, slowly, over more hits Ethan Harris won the fight. It took many, many strikes with the rock before the cat stopped moving or making noise.

Then there was stillness, except for the boy's heavy breathing, which came like sobs. Well, what was Ethan supposed to do now?

The boy stood and looked down at the cat. With the fight done, Ethan could tell that the cat wasn't as large as it had first seemed—a juvenile, it probably weighed about thirty pounds. Ethan, himself, didn't seem to be bleeding very badly. The veins on his wrist hadn't been cut and what seemed to hurt the most was his leg, where it had clawed him. There was one scratch in his thigh that ran several inches but for whatever reason it didn't seem to be bleeding much.

It was done.

Ethan had killed the mountain lion and he was still alive. The boy stood shaking in the dawn snow and wiped some smeared blood from his pale, freckled face.

It was Sunday morning now.

As he instinctively began to dress the dead cat, he repeated the words 'Thank you, Father,' over and over again. It must have taken an hour for the boy to skin the cat and, when he finished, he was still praying.

The boy took the skin, with the head still attached, over to the puddle he'd fallen in that morning to wash the blood from the hide. As it soaked, Ethan remembered the shotgun and went back to it, trying to figure out why the gun had jammed.

Inside the action he could see that a paper shotshell had swollen with moisture and would no longer fit in the chamber. Although the gun had made it through its fall into the puddle unscathed, the paper shotshell ammunition had not fared so well. One round had already been in the chamber so that shell had gone off and staggered the cat, but the rest of the ammunition was ruined.

"Next time we'll buy brass shells," Ethan said, aloud. Looking around, he realized that Tess was nowhere to be found.

After breaking the shotgun down to wrap in his bedroll, the boy found his last piece of bread, the crust that he'd been saving, and remembered that it was Sunday morning. Reciting

blessings over the crust and his canteen, he took the sacrament and gathered up his bedroll and the hide, then headed out into the valley to find Tess.

His leg hurt where he'd gotten clawed and, as the day went on, his wrist turned dark and began to ache. The boy made his way, though, until he eventually found the mare grazing by a fallen tree.

"Please, Tess," Ethan said. "Just please don't fight me right now."

It took him another hour to calm the horse down enough to mount her with his bad leg but, once he did, Ethan realized that he could go home now. Slowly the scenery changed as he lost elevation, the red rock swirled with white stone and the snow faded. Patches of grass returned as the town came into sight.

Ethan kept on through the night, walking Tess toward the lights of Constancy as night fell and then again as dawn arose, stopping them both to rest for thirty minutes out of every hour. Eventually he got to the main road and then into the town itself.

At the outskirts of Constancy, an older gentleman in overalls flagged Ethan to stop. "Well, boy, what happened to you?" the man asked. Ethan recognized him as Brother Haines, from church.

Ethan nodded to the hide on Tess' saddle.

"Well what's that?" Brother Haines asked. "You sure you're alright, Ethan?"

Ethan said that it was the mountain lion that had been killing livestock throughout the valley.

"Weren't no mountain lion killing those animals," Brother Haines said. "Were a man."

"It was a man?" the boy asked. "What do you mean it was a man?"

"More dog than man, perhaps. Poacher. Big fella, with furs all over him and a pair of pistols in his belt," Brother Haines said. "Doc Eversman got a pretty good look at him when the fella held him up the other day."

"What day?" Ethan asked. For the first time since he killed the cat, Ethan jumped with fear. Had Doc Eversman not made it to the farm after all? Would his mother lose her hand to infection or die of fever? Had Ethan fed the man who'd killed his own mother?

"Sorry?" Brother Haines said.

"What day did Silas Hastings rob Doc Eversman?" the boy asked, stammering.

"Oh, that were just yesterday," Brother Haines said. "Your Uncle Daniel's getting some brethren together to go find the rascal, bring him back for justice. You know the feller?"

Ethan started to tell the story when Brother Haines shushed him and told the boy to finish his story as they made their way to the Doctor's office.

"Big fella?" Doc Eversman asked as he fed the boy a tonic in the second-floor study. "Runs like a dog? Big scruffy beard?"

"Yeah, that's him," Ethan said.

"Well, how do you know him?" Doc Eversman asked, taking a sip of the tonic himself, for his joints.

Ethan said that he gave Silas Hastings the last of his bread and the doctor moved on with the conversation.

"Your mother was fine when I saw her last," Doc Eversman said. "Just worried sick. Sophronia, too—she's fine, too. Just keep an eye on your ma and make sure she drinks plenty

of good, clean water. Between that derelict's busy hands and this plague coming to the city, I don't know how much tending I'll be able to provide any of you these next months."

"What plague?" Ethan asked.

"It's an influenza, making its way around just about everywhere I think," Doc Eversman said. "Anyway, the war looks just about won so I imagine your brother Heber could be home before Christmas. That's good news, isn't it, son?"

Ethan nodded.

"You've got some blood caked in your hair," the doctor said, handing the boy a rag. "Clean it out."

Ethan ran the rag over his cropped scalp and then over his smooth face.

"Killed himself a mountain lion," Doc Eversman said, smiling. "I knew you were a good one. Maybe a little rough for a boy but a good one."

Brother Haines agreed and Doc Eversman asked the man to make sure that Ethan got back to the ranch.

"Go on, son. Your ma will want to see you, I'm sure," Brother Haines said as he left Ethan at the gate to the Harris ranch. It was a large wooden gate with two weathervanes nailed to its lintel. Ethan's father had hung them there after the blizzard of '08.

When Polly's brother Daniel saw Ethan come through the kitchen door, he excused himself for some air.

Chapter 6

The greeting was kinder than Ethan had expected, his mother covering his face with kisses and Sophronia running out from the bedroom to hug him.

“Uncle Daniel,” Ethan said to his mother, “how long’s he been here?”

“Oh, just since this morning. He’s taking some men...” Polly said, and then stopped. She slapped her son without saying anything else. “And here we’d had such a pleasant reunion, me so happy to simply see you alive again.”

Ethan explained that he’d seen the thief, heard his name and his stories, knew where he might be headed, too, given the saloons he talked about at such length that night.

“If you tell me to stay, I’ll stay, Ma. I will. And if Uncle Daniel tells me to stay, I will, too. But I can be useful, Ma. I can,” Ethan said.

“You know, I already counted you for dead, Ethan,” Polly Harris said. “More because you lied to me than anything else. Where was your faith?”

“I’ve heard that faith without works is death,” the boy said.

“And look at you, you can barely keep your eyes open,” Polly said. “Trying to run into the fire from the frying pan you just hopped out of.”

Ethan met his mother’s eyes but didn’t say anything.

“Of course, I suppose I’m one to talk—it was my own pride that ruined this hand,” Polly said, holding up the bandaged palm.

There was quiet for a moment, except for Sophronia nervously kicking her legs in a chair.

“I suppose I haven’t done very well since your father left us,” Polly said. Her lip began to quiver, and a brace of tears fell down her cheeks. “I don’t think that you understand just what it’s like, Ethan, to be left alone—to watch your family leave one by one and know that all your earthly work is almost behind you, that it’s just a matter of waiting to be joined again once all of you are dead.”

Sophronia went over to her mother and hugged the woman. The girl’s hair was a tangled mess and obviously hadn’t been brushed for days.

Ethan just told his mother that he loved her, and she pulled him down to her shoulder and cried into his neck for a while, the three members of the family held together. After a few minutes Polly told her son that he was old enough to use his agency and that it was up to him to figure out how to be a man and a son of God.

“Can I still ask you for advice?” Ethan asked.

Polly smiled crookedly, touched her son’s face with a bandaged hand, and kissed him.

“Thank you, Ethan,” she said.

“Thanks for being my mother, Ma,” the boy said.

Ethan walked out on the porch to find his Uncle Daniel sitting in a rocking chair, whittling at a piece of hardwood.

“Hail the conquering hero,” Uncle Daniel started. “Of course, you also scared your mother near to death right at the time she needed you most. You know how hard this year’s been on her already.”

“I can be useful, Uncle Daniel,” Ethan said. “Maybe just let me get some rest before we head out.”

“Head out? Stay home, son. You did your part. You should thank God that everyone’s still alive and look after Sophronia and your mother,” Daniel said. “You did your part.”

Ethan nodded, his brow rumped.

“Hey,” Daniel said, standing up and putting his hand on the boy’s shoulder. “There’s gonna be more thieves and there’s gonna be more mountain lions and there’s gonna be more wars to go around. More than you’re gonna want, before too long. Get some rest...because you’re gonna need it, I promise you that.”

“Yes, Uncle Daniel,” the boy said, turning to head back inside the cabin.

“Hey, one more thing,” Daniel said. “You want to be useful? You do know the state pays a fifty-dollar bounty for that pelt, right?”

The man pointed to the mountain lion skin that still hung on Tess’ saddle, where the mare was tied to a post.

“I’m pretty sure your mother could use that money,” Uncle Daniel said. “Fifty dollars would be real useful.”

After getting some more details about Silas Hastings, his Uncle Daniel headed out and Ethan went to sleep. Rising early on Tuesday morning, he woke his mother and sister so that they could all go into town together.

Polly Harris was happy enough that the boy hadn’t snuck out to join his Uncle Daniel and the other men tracking Silas Hastings but the forty dollars nearly made her cry. Forty dollars was flour and butter to carry them all through the winter.

As the Harris family stood in the empty Constancy fairgrounds, Sophronia held her brother’s hand and counted the horses outside of the livery.

“I’ll take it to the bank right away,” Polly said, pulling her son close. “No, Doctor Eversman first. Well, no, I’ll tithe first. Oh, it’s a blessing. Oh, it was all a blessing!”

Between his mother’s kisses, Ethan hesitated.

“I already tithed, Ma,” he said. “I gave Bishop Hall five dollars right away, while you and Soph were checking in with Doc Eversman. It was the first thing I did.”

“Five dollars?” Polly asked, tilting her head as she looked up at her son. “A five-dollar tithe on forty dollars, Ethan?”

“Well, brass shells for the Winchester were two dollars from the general store—we can’t use paper shells anymore,” Ethan said. “And I bought a new brush for Soph—that was a dollar.” He took the brush out of the paper bag at his side and handed it to his sister.

“That’s still only forty-nine dollars,” Polly said.

“There was ‘Amazing Adventures,’ too,” Ethan said, lifting a bundle of magazines as thick as his fist. “Three cents apiece. And maybe you could lend me a few dimes, too. I showed my scratches to Liahona Bright from the General Store and she said she wants me to be in the choir with her. And I mean I’m awful—I mean just an awful singer, you’ve heard me, Ma. I need to get some singing lessons this week, professional ones before I meet up with Liahona at Church, or...or do something...”

Instead of grabbing him by the ear, Polly Harris put her bandaged hand around her son’s arm, held little Sophronia’s hand in the other, and told the children that they’d both be fine and to have faith.

As the three of them walked to the flour mill across the fairgrounds, the mother told her children that they would have enough flour for the winter, no matter how cold it got that year.