

## COON CREEK – Chapter 1

More than two years after little Elias was born, Japheth Bunt still watched his infant son with a half-cocked, suspicious eye. To Japheth, the child seemed slow, perhaps peculiar.

“Too soon,” his wife assured him. “Too soon to tell.”

Yet, Hannah Bunt was concerned as well. Not so much for the little boy’s slowness – for there were some others who lived along Coon Creek that might be considered slow – but rather for her husband’s edgy temper and lack of patience.

“I’ll not abide an *idjit* child in the house,” Japheth had told her more than once. And she feared that in a whiskey fit of anger, he just might stuff the little boy in a sack and drown him as if he were nothing more than an unwanted batch of kittens.

For weeks after every threat, Hannah Bunt would watch her child carefully, searching for any outward sign of peculiarity. To her, the boy just seemed quiet – rather than slow in the head. Many a mother, Hannah was certain, would be thankful for such a quiet and well-mannered little toddler around the house.

It wasn’t long after she was wed that Hannah realized her husband was what her dead father would have called *no account*. Japheth Bunt went to Methodist services every Sunday, and took the Lord to heart with fervor, but he just as easily turned a blind eye to much that was written in the Good Book. Hannah once received a sound thump to her head when Japheth came home drunk one afternoon, only to hear his wife indignantly quote from Isaiah – “*Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink.*”

Japheth Bunt seemed to turn a blind eye to work as well. As a new bride, Hannah quickly learned that rather than farm a living from his modest piece of bottomland, her husband preferred to just rent out his quarter section to an industrious neighbor to farm. Japheth made a few extra dollars shoeing horses and sharpening knives, but more than anything else he’d just as leave call up his dogs and roam the woods to hunt.

At first, she shrugged and accepted what the Good Lord had seen fit to provide. Japheth’s old army Springfield could knock down an occasional deer, she reasoned, and hunting the bottoms with his smoothbore would bring game home to the table as well – a sack of plump squirrels, a possum or a turkey, enough cottontails to feed them for a few nights. As long as Japheth’s credit held, and he could keep himself in powder and shot, she expected they wouldn’t be starved out.

Then she thought of a better plan. “If you favor hunting so much,” she asked him. “Why not shoot for the markets?”

These were modern times, Hannah knew. Western Illinois was no longer the harsh frontier it once had been, and these days fewer and fewer people hunted for themselves. In Dallas City, and other surrounding towns, the markets were eager to have a steady supply of game, and the woods of Hancock County were rich with it.

Along with a healthy population of whitetail deer, the country held wild turkey and prairie chickens; quail in the fields, cottontail rabbits and golden plover in the thickets, mallards and other puddle ducks in the river bottoms. In the small towns, woodcock fed in the yards and coveys of quail could often be seen in the streets. More than once, Hannah had used her broom to chase wandering grouse out of the cabin.

“Might I’ll just do that,” Japheth told her. But he never did. As far as he could see, market hunting was too much like ordinary work. If he took his gun and dogs into the woods, it would be for the pleasure of it, with a jug along, and not for the profit of some pasty-faced butcher in town.

But even at that, Hannah soon learned that often as not, when Japheth went hunting, he might just decide to tie up his dogs out front of Sud’s Store on the outskirts of Dallas City, and spend the better part of the day sitting by the woodstove, drinking Euley Sud’s popskull whiskey.

“I still make her the old way, by God,” Euley told anyone who’d listen. “Bark juice, tar-water, a little bit of turpentine, brown sugar, lamp oil, and alky.”

Hannah Bunt occasionally wondered if she might be happier in a proper house in town, rather than in their own poor cabin on Coon Creek. But whether or not this might be true, Hannah knew that such expense was far beyond their reach.

Although many of its buildings were much older, she’d once been told by her father-in-law that Dallas City was given a charter only thirty-three years earlier.

By special act, the Illinois Legislature separated the settlement from nearby Pontoosuc Township, and its residents named the little city after Vice President George Mifflin Dallas – a Philadelphia lawyer who’d served under President Polk.

“We was right here on Coon Creek when it all happened,” old Simon Bunt told her. “But then they up and named the place after a goddamned Democrat.”

Aside from cuts, scrapes, fevers, and other assorted childhood ailments, young Elias managed to turn a healthy six years old before his father finally pronounced the boy fit to live under their roof. Although it was a great load off Hannah’s mind, knowing

finally that her only child's fate was at least not to be drowned, she still had a shiftless husband with whom to deal.

Feeling his thirst one morning, Japheth mounted their old dun and rode over to Sud's. While there, he bought a jug on credit. When he returned home, Hannah told him: "There's a note on the table from that fallen-away rascal, Hesketh Ballard."

Japheth grunted. Hesk Ballard was widely known throughout Hancock County as a deeply fallen man. Once, he'd been the county judge and a devout Baptist. At meeting, no one could raise their voice louder in singing the hymns, and after those were sung, Hesk Ballard would often gird himself with a towel, and carrying a tin wash basin full of water, go around and wash the feet of the brethren and the sisters.

Yet one hot July day, Hesk got roaring drunk and out of a clear blue sky, pronounced himself an infidel – letting it be known to all within earshot that he no longer believed in God, Heaven, or Hell.

Japheth and Hesk had run together as boys, and since his fall, it was widely known that Hesk had become not only overly fond of the jug, but also a fervent gambler and card-player. And as far as anyone knew, since severing his faith in both the Lord and the Devil, the only things on earth Hesk feared were what he called his "fractious bowels," and his wife, Althea.

Althea Crawford Ballard was a stout woman, steely-eyed and big-boned, with a faint trace of black hair covering her upper lip. Growing up a rock-ribbed Baptist, she brooked no nonsense and had little patience with her husband and his fallen ways.

Along with a milk cow, a few hens and a rooster, Althea's pa had brought the family up from Obion County, Tennessee, soon after Lee's surrender at Appomattox. Hobe Crawford had lost a leg at Chancellorsville, dozing near the side of the road as a heavy gun caisson rolled over it. Once the short-tempered, overworked surgeon was finished with him, Hobe mustered out and made his way home on crutches.

But after a cold, hard winter and a poor crop, he decided that storekeeping up north might be a far easier way for a one-legged man to earn his living.

As far as Japheth was concerned, even though Hesk Ballard's faith had been that of a different denomination, his untimely break from religion was serious enough, and certainly nothing to ignore. But Japheth also believed in *Judge not, lest ye be judged*, and had long ago accepted his friend's shortcomings.

He read the note that told him to come south to Niota on the river, where there were two fellows from Iowa looking to play some poker. Hesk Ballard wrote that he thought these two might be ripe for skinning.

“Going down to Niota,” Japheth told Hannah matter-of-fact. “Might be gone a day or more.”

Fearing he might get dry before skinning the Iowans, Japheth took his jug along. Just north of the lively and growing settlement of Pontoosuc, riding easily along the river bottoms he decided that he'd best hide the whiskey. Like as not, he suspected Hesk and the two Iowa men would drink it up right off, and he'd be left with nothing.

In a thick tangle of deadfalls near a place called Turkey Fork, Japheth dismounted, took a long pull, and then hid his jug under a soft, rotting log.

The town of Niota didn't amount to much – a small dry goods store, a blacksmith, and two or three riverfront taverns.

In the back room of one of these, a shabby little place called the White Goose, Japheth Bunt, Hesk Ballard, and the two Iowans played poker for two days and two nights. The Iowa men were generous, more than once buying jugs of whiskey for the entire table. One of them, a fellow named Tarley Shurtleff, stated that during the late War Between the States, he'd been a corporal in the 10th Iowa Infantry, and fought under Colonel Perczel at the siege of Corinth.

“A rebel ball went clean through my hat,” he bragged. “But I never did suffer even a durned scratch.”

Japheth never heard of Colonel Perczel, and suspected that not many others had, but he surely knew of Corinth and the terrible fighting there, and if Tarley Shurtleff came through it without a wound, it spoke well for either the man's ability or his great good fortune.

The other gambler was a thin, pasty-faced looking fellow with a raspy, hollow cough. He told them his name was Clement Jakes and he maintained to all who'd listen that he was far from being a well man.

“Clement had a shake of the ague,” Tarley announced. “Just before we left Keokuk to come up here.”

Clement Jakes was certain there was more to come. “I believe I'm still in for a smart grip of the *agy*,” he maintained, telling them that he and Tarley Shurtleff crossed the river by ferry, and then stayed over at a settlement on the Illinois side called Montebello, so that he could have another shake.

“He did, too,” Tarley offered. “And after he was quit of it, we rode on some further – but old Clem come to feeling poorly again, so we holed up in a empty farmer's shed and waited so's he could have another of his shakes.”

“And I did,” Clement Jakes said.

“He did right enough,” Tarley agreed with a grin. “Beat all the shakes I ever seen. Shuck the whole damned shed.”

Japheth didn't feel he needed to witness the man shake again, and he hoped that Clement Jakes was through with his unfortunate ailment for awhile.

Out front, in a corner off the bar, the White Goose boasted a toothless fiddler whose repertoire seemed to encompass just two tunes – “Old Dan Tucker” and “Sweet Betsy from Pike.” In the back, along with draw poker, the men played two-card monte or blackjack, and by the morning of the third day, Hesk Ballard had lost twenty dollars, while Japheth was shy fifteen.

After the Iowans left to go back across the river, Hesk seemed nervous. “Japh, we'll have to go to your house for supper. I swore to Althea that I wouldn't gamble no more, and if I come home too late she'll know I broke my word.”

“Well, I expect that would be all right,” Japheth answered, his own big hands stuck in empty pockets. “My Hannah can rustle up something for us to eat.”

Riding back east along the river, they were in mid-afternoon when Hesk Ballard reined up his horse and slumped in the saddle with a great heave and sigh. “Durn, I've gone about as far as I can go without a drink, Japh,” he said. “I'm so damned thirsty I'd give five dollars for a pull of whiskey – was I still to have five dollars.”

“Well, we ain't far from Pontoosuc,” Japheth said. “I believe the town's got a number of taverns.”

“Don't neither of us have credit there,” Hesk pointed out.

Japheth suddenly thought of the jug he'd earlier hidden, not a half-mile distant from where they stood. A plan formed itself in his head – a clever little scheme that just might save his old friend's soul from the eternal hellfire of perdition.

They rode through Pontoosuc, nodding to folks they saw in the street. Before it was a town, Japheth remembered his father telling him, the area had been settled by Hezekiah Spillman, who built a small fort there during the Blackhawk War in 1832.

“They called it Spillman's Landing then,” Simon Bunt told his son. “Hez Spillman had him a woodyard where all the riverboats stopped to refuel.”

During the fighting with the Sac and Fox tribes, Spillman met a young Sangamon County militia captain named Abe Lincoln, and after Lincoln was elected president, Hez never could stop bragging about it. “Why, tall as a young tree the fellow was,” he told anyone who'd listen. “And homely as a cow pie, too.”

Pontoosuc had grown some since Blackhawk's time – with a good share of thriving business. Along with its lively taverns stood two or three grocery stores, hardware stores, a flourmill, dry goods

stores, a cooperage and blacksmith shop, brick yard, saw mill and a brewery.

With Hesk still grumbling about his great thirst, they made their way a bit farther, passing through Pontoosuc to Turkey Fork, where Japheth suddenly reined up the dun. Wiping his forehead with a handkerchief, he slid down from the saddle and sat himself down on the rotten log.

“Well, I reckon your thirst just slipped up on me, too,” he told Hesk Ballard, who was confused as to why they’d stopped. “I don’t believe I can go any further without a drink of whiskey.”

“Well, goddamn. What’ll we do?” Hesk asked.

Japheth made it a point to look as if he were studying hard on the matter. Then he looked up and shook his head. “Hesk, if you was still a God-fearing man, and if you still believed in the power of prayer – I’d just fall down on my knees and ask the Good Lord to send us something to drink.”

“Are you gone crazy?” Hesk asked. “Why, even did I believe, I surely wouldn’t ask for airy such thing.”

Japheth reached down and felt the jug, still hidden beneath the log. “Don’t never doubt the Lord’s generous nature,” he told his friend, falling to his knees and beginning to pray in his best Methodist manner.

“Oh Master, the protector of the weak and the stay of widows and orphans, thou hast told your children in thy Holy Writ that when two or more are gathered together in thy name, that thou will surely be in their midst.”

Japheth took a deep breath and went on. “Thou hast promised that whosoever knocketh at the door it shall be opened to him, and whosoever seeketh he shall find. Let thy abounding mercy rest on us, oh Lord, and send us something to quench our thirst. This we ask in the name of thy crucified son. Amen.”

Japheth then gave a yelp and threw himself backward over the log, as if he’d suddenly been touched by the Almighty. Standing up again, he produced the jug. “Why lookee here – praise God.”

“Jesus of Nazareth,” Hesk Ballard gasped. “King of the Jews! Is it whiskey, Japh?”

“It rightly is, I reckon.”

“Sweet Lord,” Hesk said excitedly, taking two long pulls on the jug before handing it back. “Why, I’ll be scrubbed clean as a whistle and back to meeting this Sunday for sure – and we’ll take supper at my house, Japh, for the Good Lord has touched me and I ain’t feared of airy woman that ever lived.”