

LORI BENTON

AUTHOR OF BURNING SKY

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The
PURSUIT
of TAMSEN
LITTLEJOHN

A NOVEL

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ALSO BY LORI BENTON

Burning Sky

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WATERBROOK
P R E S S

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And I said, Oh that I had wings like a dove!
for then would I fly away, and be at rest.
Lo, then would I wander far off, and remain
in the wilderness. Selah.
I would hasten my escape from the windy
storm and tempest.

Psalm 55:6–8

For Brian



*And for those of my maternal ancestors who
pioneered—Puryears, Hites, and Amises—at least
one of whom became an Overmountain Man.*

FOR RICHER,
for POORER



Western North Carolina
September 1787

To Jesse Bird's reckoning, any man charged with driving forty head of Overmountain cattle to market best have three things in his possession—a primed rifle, a steady horse, and a heap of staying power.

Jesse had the first two, one balanced across his thighs; the other tired, fly bitten, and dusty between them. As for staying power...with miles to go before he'd be shed of those forty beeves, he was making a studied effort to let patience have its perfect work in him.

Looking back across their brown and brindled ranks, he spotted Cade and the packhorses rounding a bend in the river trace, where sunlight still speared the hazy air in moted streaks of gold. Riding behind the drove at the mercy of its dust, Cade had a kerchief tied across his mouth and nose, hat pulled low to shield his eyes. Though Jesse hadn't ridden rear guard since midday, the choke of that same dust gritted his throat. Grime coated the foot drovers too, spread out through the summer-fattened herd, armed with rifles and staves, eyes darting glances at the crowding wooded slopes.

Grasshoppers whirred beside the trace, leaping clear of trampling hooves that crackled the weeds. The sun hung to westward, its warmth fading, leaving rivulets of sweat drying on Jesse's neck, sticking his shirt where the straps of bullet-bag and knapsack crossed. He was thinking they'd reach their next camp a nip ahead of dark, with time to pen the cattle before swimming the dust off his hide, when something with the

force of a slung stone clipped his hat brim. Thinking a deer fly had marked him for a meal, he reached for the hat, meaning to swat the pest.

The hat was gone clean off his head. It dangled from a nearby tulip poplar, pinned by a feathered arrow.

Jesse gave a whoop, then was out of the saddle and ducking behind a clump of rhododendron, putting his horse crosswise between himself and the beeves. From across the river came a spotty rain of arrows, pinging off rocks, thunking into trees along the bank. The drovers ducked behind the cattle on the hill-slope side of the trace, rifles shouldered.

Jesse's mind raced. Was it Creeks or Chickamaugas? Either held an everlasting grudge against the Overmountain settlers. Hang it all, it could be Shawnees. With a wordless prayer that it wasn't, Jesse aimed his rifle at a tawny flash across the river and fired. Powder smoke plumed out white from the barrel. On the tail edge of the report, he heard Cade's war whoop. An answering ululation came shrill and defiant from across the water, raising the hairs on Jesse's arms.

The cattle milled and bunched, kicking up a dust blind. One took an arrow in the flank and went down in the middle of the trace, bawling in pain but thwarting the bulk of the herd's bolting.

Rifle shot cracked. Powder smoke hung on both sides of the river now, sharp and sulfurous. For the moment they had the water for a buffer. The attacking warriors wouldn't risk exposing themselves to cross unless sure of taking them down. Surprise was a weapon spent.

A brindled cow broke from the jostling herd. It plunged down the riverbank and crumpled in the shallows, shot through the neck. The front of the herd not blocked by the downed cow pressed up against the hillside and then shifted in Jesse's direction, threatening to stampede off down the trace. More broke for the river. Busy reloading, Jesse could do little but pray his horse stood its ground.

A musket ball ripped through rhody leaves near his head. Back down the trace Cade's rifle fired. A warrior across the river fell through brush, lay

thrashing, and was dragged back into cover. Another such loss and the warriors would likely break and run. If they could hold them off a few more seconds...

New voices shattered a lull in the firing. Tremolo cries like the warble of crazed turkey cocks sounded up the slope behind them.

Fear jarred through Jesse. Faster than thought, he yanked free his belt ax and whirled to throw it—and almost too late recognized the two Cherokee warriors. He shouted to the drovers to stop them firing on the blue-shirted figures leaping down the rocky slope, dodging frightened cattle. The Cherokees took cover on the bank, both with rifles, and commenced to putting them to use.

Jesse blazed a grin of welcome at the younger of the two now at his side, rammed patch and ball to powder, and fired across the river.

A final arrow sailed over the cattle's backs. Then stillness fell, with smoke and dust drifting high on the river breeze.



The drovers moved among the beeves, soothing them with staves and words, settling their own nerves with rapid glances toward the river. The warriors had melted back into the forest, taking their wounded with them. It had been a hunting party, taking their chances on an unplanned raid. If it had been a tracking party out for scalps, there were far better spots to stage an ambush along their steep and winding route from Sycamore Shoals. A second attempt was unlikely. Jesse knew the thinking of such men as well as he did his own.

After sliding his rifle into its saddle sling, he mounted and wheeled his horse after the few cows that had bolted up the trace. By the time Jesse had them headed back, Cade had sorted the herd and ridden up through their ranks, leading the packhorses. His gaze raked Jesse head to heel, relief deepening the creases beside his eyes. He took in the cow with the arrow

in its flank, then the dead one reddening the river shallows, and yanked down his kerchief to show a mouth narrowed in regret. "That dead one looks like Tate's."

"Fraid so," Jesse said. It was always a risk, pushing beeves down the mountains under the noses of Chickamauga warriors eager to cripple the Watauga settlers who depended on the sale of their stock. Jesse and Cade had hired on for this drove each September since the war with the British ended, tracing the Watauga River east to its mountain headwaters, then down to the Catawba River and the Carolina piedmont. The beeves were bound for the market cow pens, Jesse and Cade for Morganton to barter furs and hides for supplies and then hire on as guides for any settlers heading back Overmountain before snow fell.

"We'd have lost more'n cows had these wild turkeys not flushed from hiding." Jesse nodded at the late arrivals to the fray, both Overhill Cherokees. While the drovers cast half-wary looks at the two, Cade and Jesse slid off their horses to greet them.

"Friends of yours, Cade?" asked the white drover, owner of ten head of cattle and the two slaves helping drive them.

"Yours too, I'd say." Cade looped his mare's reins around a sapling and grasped the arm of the elder Indian, a stocky man with gray threading the hair flowing from under his turban. "Whatever brings you across our path, brothers, you've our thanks."

Despite Cade's half-breed Delaware blood, little distinguished his looks from the men he greeted, save that his black hair was tailed back, not plucked to a scalplock, as was the younger Cherokee's. Cade's hat brim, pinned with a hawk's feather, shaded eyes one expected to be as dark as the battered felt but were instead as golden brown as Jesse's—nothing to remark upon for a man of Jesse's coloring. In Cade's tawny face, they often drew a second look.

"Thunder-Going-Away," Cade said, naming the elder Cherokee first, by way of introduction. "And Catches Bears, his son."

The drover gave a wary nod. "Elijah Rhodes."

"Jabez and Billy," Jesse added, with a nod at Rhodes's slaves.

Billy, fourteen and on his first drive, was shaking in the wake of the attack—with excitement as much from shock, Jesse thought. "Think one them Injuns was Dragging Canoe? Them bad Injuns, I mean," Billy added with a sidelong look at the Cherokees.

"Doubt it." Jesse grinned at the boy, who'd prattled on about the infamous Chickamauga war chief since starting from Sycamore Shoals. "Dragging Canoe would've crossed right over that river and lifted our scalps. Ain't you heard? He can swim like a fish and fly like a raven."

The boy's eyes whitened around the rims.

Jabez, an old hand at droving, slapped Billy's back, raising dust. "He pulling yo' leg, boy. Canoe ain't no demon-bird. Just a man like me and you."

"Huh," Billy said, looking unconvinced.

Cade was eyeing Thunder-Going, a question in his eyes. "You're a long way from Chota."

Thunder-Going raised his chin, nodding back toward the northwest. "Tate Allard said we missed you by three sleeps. We trailed you."

"Not hard to do," Bears said, nostrils flaring wide, "with the stink these cows leave."

Thunder-Going hid a smile in the lines carved beside his mouth. "We meant to catch you coming back from Morganton, to invite you to a feast. My daughter is to join blankets with a husband."

"White Shell? 'Bout time." Three pairs of eyes turned to Jesse when he spoke. The Cherokees and even Cade were looking at him as if he ought to say more on the matter. "What?"

Bears snorted. "You see? He does not know."

Jesse frowned. "What don't I know?"

"My sister wanted you," Bears said. "But you had no eyes to see her, so she chose one who does."

"My daughter was not the one for you," Thunder-Going said and shrugged away what looked to Jesse like mild disappointment. Then the Cherokee inquired of Cade, though he still eyed Jesse, "Is it to be Allard's girl, who follows this one like a puppy?"

Jesse cut in before Cade could answer that. "I have not found *the one*. I will know when I have, and maybe then I will tell you about it." They'd fallen into *Tsalagi*, the Cherokee tongue. Switching to English, he said, "Oughtn't we to be pushing on?"

Rhodes was in agreement. "How far to the next camp?"

"Mile or two," Cade said. "Have to tend the downed cows first."

Bears and his father exchanged a look. Thunder-Going said, "You go on with the herd. We will skin out the dead one. Better the hide than nothing, eh? For a share of the meat, we will bring that along as well. As much as we can carry."

The plan agreed to, Jesse mounted up. Behind him Cade said, "Where's your hat got to, Jesse?"

It still hung from the poplar, neat as on a cabin wall. Cade reached it first. He wrenched out the arrow, his face gone a shade like greened copper. In his eyes a heap of words clamored to be said, but he handed Jesse the hat and went to deal with the wounded cow on the trace. Fingering the hole in the hat's brim, Jesse watched Cade snap the arrow nearer the wound, leaving enough to grasp. Cade urged the cow to its feet. If the cow made camp, he would take the arrow out there.

Thunder-Going descended the bank toward the cow lying dead at the river's edge. With a wolfish grin, Bears drew the hunting knife from his belt. "If the other cow does not make it, leave it lying. We will see to it as well. Then you can tell Allard and the rest you got every one of their stinking cowhides to market."



Jesse came up from the river in darkness, rid of trail dust, hair dripping. Thunder-Going-Away and Catches Bears, having delivered the promised hide and meat—and having told them to come for the wedding after the corn harvest—had started the long trek back over the mountains to Chota, the Overhill's principal town. Billy slept, rolled in a blanket. Cade sat cross-legged on his bedroll, head wreathed in pipe smoke and the familiar smell of his blend of tobacco and *kinnikinnick*—red-willow bark and sumac. The sunken fire cast barely a glow but enough for Jesse to see the object lying across Cade's lap. The arrow that had pierced Jesse's hat.

"You only smoke that pipe when you've deep thinking to do." Or praying, Jesse didn't add. He unrolled his blanket, sat, and tied on his buckskin leggings. "You celebrating or brooding?"

Over by the brush pen, a cow bawled. An owl hooted in the distance, and the river chattered in its bed. Jesse rummaged out the cleanest of his shirts, then poked a stick at a slab of seared beef left on a stone in the embers. He glanced sidelong at a brief blaze in the pipe bowl. Cade blew a ring of smoke that rose and drifted, blending into the dark.

"I'm pondering the brevity of life."

Brooding, right enough. Jesse quit his poking and thrust the stick aside. "Look, what happened back on the trace, that was nothing compared to King's Mountain." He and Cade both bore the marks to prove they had fought in that frontier battle, late in the war with the Crown. Along with the rest of the Overmountain militia, they'd whupped the Redcoats under the command of an arrogant major called Ferguson, who'd dared threaten to come whup *them*. "We've nary a scratch between us to show for today."

"God be thanked." Cade looked away from Jesse, features glossed like beaten bronze in the fire glow.

"Sides," Jesse added, "you seen enough wounds to know they heal."

"And you've seen enough men fall beside you to know wounds aren't

all we'll ever get. A bullet might've ended either one of us today. Or an arrow." Cade snatched the one off his lap and tossed it at Jesse, as if to underscore his point.

Jesse tossed it back. "Didn't though."

Cade thrust the arrow into the fire, where it charred and smoked. "Tomorrow maybe, or next year—if we go on like this. You ready for it?"

The night was cooling. Jesse pulled on his moccasins. "Ready for it? You fretting over the state of my soul or something, Cade?"

"Or something."

Jesse tried to quell a grin. "What for? Long as I do enough good to outweigh the bad, I'll wind up singing with the heavenly hosts. I don't aim to do nothing truly sinful, like steal my neighbor's wife or covet his rifle or—"

"Jesse!" Cade's brows were strongly marked, black and slanted as crows' wings. Even in the dark they glowered thunder.

Jesse kept his face innocent of mirth. "What?"

"Be serious about this." Cade was in no frame of mind for teasing, though Jesse couldn't hold back a chuckle.

"All right then. Can't figure why you're fretting, though. You mind that day at the blue hole when the preacher put me under? I might've been all of twelve, but I meant every word I owned to. And aren't you the one always saying the Almighty has a plan for me? That's why you took me from—"

Behind them in the dark, a stick cracked. Cade and Jesse reached for their rifles but checked when Jabez came out of the dark, face glistening from his river dip.

"All well?" Cade asked.

"Even the shot one." Jabez towed off with a shirt, then wadded it for a pillow and lay down next to Billy, who was still snoring like a hibernating bear. "Left Mast' Rhodes watching 'em."

"I'll stay up," Cade said. "Spell him in a bit."

In seconds Jabez was snoring in chorus with Billy.

Jesse tugged on his shirt and lay back on his blanket, enjoying the cool, and being clean, and the blaze of stars overhead. Turning, he watched Cade tap out the pipe and stow it in a knapsack. "I'm glad you still worry for me, Pa," he said, knowing Cade liked it when he called him so, though he'd never once asked Jesse to do so.

This time Cade didn't soften right off. Whatever was eating at him, it'd bit down hard.

Jesse stifled the urge to sigh. One would think he was still twelve years old, struggling to hold his first rifle steady and making up his mind about heaven and hell. Best Jesse could figure, he was nearly twice twelve now. Cade ought to know he could manage this life and the next besides, having been the one to teach him the ways of both.

He waited, pondering if he ought to say more. Then Cade's big hand came down warm on the crown of his damp head, as it had most every night when Jesse was a boy and it'd been just the two of them alone in the world. Which it pretty much still was, all things considered.

"I do worry for you, Jesse Bird. Reckon I got my reasons."

Jesse half-smiled in the dark, but as Cade's hand lifted away, something he said before came back to niggle. *If we go on like this. What this?* Taking beeves to market each fall, or something else?

It couldn't be Cade was dissatisfied with the life they'd made for themselves—fur trapping half the year, deer hunting and a bit of farming the other half, living by the grace of neighbors on land they didn't own, accountable mainly to themselves. A good enough life. Maybe the best two rootless hunters could hope for, one a half-breed, the other half red on the inside. 'Course, such hadn't always been his life, nor Cade's. Sometimes it was possible to forget that. But not lying on the edge of sleep with the fire crackling by. Never then.

Like most nights since he could recall, Jesse Bird closed his eyes, putting off sleep, and tried to conjure up a face, a voice, a place—anything—from that time before when he'd had another life, another name, another man to call Pa. And like every night before this night, he fell asleep still conjuring, staring into a void blacker than a starless sky.



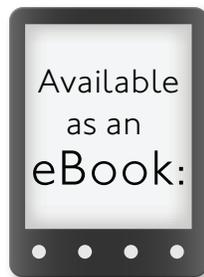
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