

Chapter One

Times Ain't Easy

Luke's ragged breaths seared his chest as he ran through the woods, weaving his way through the maze of trees and undergrowth, jumping over deadfalls and dodging thickets. The blackberry vines reached out with thorny tentacles to grab at his pants and shirt as he tore his way forward. His work boots dug against the movement of his weary legs, as if ten pounds of mud were caked to the bottom of each. He had to stop. He couldn't run any more. He was panting as he reached up to wipe the sweat from his brow, then stared at his hands that were blackened as if he had been working in the coal mines all day. He couldn't see what was after him; he didn't know why he was running. He turned to face his pursuer, as a man was wont to do. But with its approach, he again turned to flee, panting, running afraid of...

"Luke? Luke! Luke Smith, wake up. You're havin' that dream again. Luke! Wake Up!"

Mary shook her husband's shoulder, his nightshirt wet to her touch. Her patchwork quilt had been thrown askew, part of it kicked to the floor near the foot of the brass bed from Luke's flailing legs. Luke sat up in bed, wiping his hand through his sweat-soaked hair. The faint moonlight through the window was enough for Luke to see on the bedside clock that it was almost four a.m. He rose without a word to put on his work clothes.

"If you'd tell me the dream, may be that Granny could tell you what it means," said Mary softly as she rose to start her day, throwing the covers back to air the bed sheets dry.

Luke shook his head no. Mary knew the answer from experience and didn't bother trying to see through the darkness across the small bedroom for Luke's response.

"If she can tell you what it means, it would go away," she coaxed. But it was no use. Mary finished her morning routine and went to the kitchen to fix Luke his breakfast before she got her older children up for breakfast and their walk to school and before her youngest, Nathan, woke up from his crib.

As Mary worked in her kitchen over the wood-burning stove, she could hear the rhythmic echoes of Luke chopping wood, the sound pausing occasionally. She knew as if watching him that he stopped to stare off at the stars or gaze at the tree-strewn mountain where the sun would rise shortly over their part of the Appalachian range. Occasionally a voice could be heard coming from the main road that lead either to Harlan or to the coal mines past Verda. Miners walked in groups, finding something to laugh about even in these troubled times.

When Mary glanced out the kitchen window again, the sun was struggling in its daily climb over the mountains to chase away the night in the fall sky. But the darkness that hung over the small communities in the hills would stay, like gray clouds on the horizon, signaling the oncoming storm.

Mary took a good look at her husband as Luke brought a fresh bucket of spring water on his way back from the outhouse. He wasn't a tall man, maybe five feet eight inches in his sock feet. Mary was sure that not all women would think him a handsome man with his round face and straight brown hair and eyes. But he was her man, and she loved him beyond words or looks.

He took his coffee and the bacon and eggs Mary had fixed over her wood cook stove and ate standing by the well-used kitchen table. It was something Mary hated, but understood on mornings such as this.

"Remember to send one of the men back with some milk so's I can make butter today," reminded Mary as Luke started to leave. He paused, turned, and took his wife into his arms for a moment. Her head only came up under his chin, and her French ancestry could be seen in her

oval face and pretty brown eyes. Her hair was long and straight, and daily she braided it in two matching braids and wound them around her head. Luke rested his cheek on her halo, as he called it when he teased her. But some days he did think it was a halo around his angel whom he loved more than life itself.

Mary rested her head on his shoulder for a moment longer, willing some of her peace into him and saying a silent prayer that he would soon get over his dream and whatever was causing it.

With one last, small squeeze, Luke left Mary to tend to their children while he took care of the chores at the small dairy he operated on family land he owned that was across the main road from his home place. Then he would travel a few miles up Route 38 to open his general store for the day.

Sept. 12, 1941

I was sitting in my office with the windows open to get a breath of fresh air when a little bird flew in. He flitted around lost for a few minutes before finding its way back out the window, with my help. Then I got to thinking what they say, that if a little sparrow bird flies into your house that there will be a death in the family within a year. Some sayings I hold true to, and some I don't. With the trouble around here now, I believe there will be more deaths, so just in case, I am leaving a couple of lines blank below this so I can write in if anyone in the family dies in the next year.

Elias Luke Smith sat in the small office that in the back of his general store and pulled out his pocketknife to sharpen the pencil he was using on his new ledger before he continued his entry. The brown leather-bound ledger was a foot long, three inches deep, and six inches wide. It had a small locking binder across the middle, and he had held the book closed tight and had written PRIVATE across the top of the book's pages so when it was closed it could be read, but when opened the word wasn't legible.

While one part of his mind was still caught in the foreboding of the dream, he looked around at the room as he shaved the wood from the pencil over his trashcan.

The room itself was small with rough-hewn lumber for walls and two doors. One door opened out to the back of the store where there was a wood pile and a coal pile, and one door led to the large single room that was the store proper. There were some extra canned and dry goods stacked on shelves that lined two of the walls of Luke's office, with a few crates and baskets set in the opposite corner. A couple of nails were driven in the back wall near the door for coats and hats, and filling most of the back corner of the room was the scarred wooden desk that had started its life at the Harlan County, Kentucky, courthouse many decades ago.

Luke closed and pocketed his knife as he leaned forward in a hand-made cane-bottom chair that once had been in his grandmother's house and turned his attention to writing in his journal.

Sept. 12, 1941

Times have not been easy here lately. Guess they've never been real easy, but they passed. Now I am wondering if these will ever pass. The depression has left us all hurting, some more than others. I thank the Lord that me and mine have a little land and this store and the will to work. There's some that don't have a little land, and some that don't have a job, and many that don't seem to have the will.

I hired me a new man last week to work with the dairy cattle. He's a negro man, but he said he will stick to the work. I never have cared much for what folks say about negroes. The ones that have worked for me before have been true men and have give me an honest day's work for the money. Toad rides his old mule in before daylight to get with the milking so I will have some for the store. He's good about getting the cream to the house so butter can be made. I don't think I will change my mind because of what they say.

Luke began the task of keeping the diary much as he did the other things in his life—once started, it would be done, and done to the best of his ability. The bird just made him get out the leather-bound book to begin. It wasn't a great character fault, it was just that Luke was the man of the house, and his job was to sustain his family, no matter the cost to himself. As he sat and stared out the back door, he reflected on where he'd come from and how he had ended up here on this cool, fall day.

Luke knew he wasn't a wealthy man based on worldly standards, but by the standards of the Appalachian hills of Eastern Kentucky, and specifically of Harlan, he was doing pretty well. No one begrudged him his position in the community. As a young boy he had worked hard for his father when their family had moved with his father's parents over the Cumberland Mountains in a wagon drawn by four Tennessee mules. Some of his kinfolk before them had settled in Harlan from Germany and France. His grandparents had said Tennessee wasn't doing them much good, so they decided to try their luck to the north, where there were still mountains to hunt in and streams that flowed out of hard rock.

Father had just said the wagon broke down in Harlan, and there they stayed.

That hard rock proved poor help when it came to digging a garden, and the black coal that grew deep in those hills was a blessing, and a curse. The coal gave Harlan a reason for being a town in the middle of the Appalachian Mountain range in Eastern Kentucky. The coal gave many men jobs who were no hands at farming or tinkering. The coal killed many of them, too. Some fast, in blasts and accidents and roof falls. Some slow by claustrophobic, lung-packing, back-breaking work six days a week.

Luke's father was a coal miner, and Luke remembered his brother, John, taking a job in the mine over near Black Hollow at age 10. He hadn't made it to 16.

The coal seam had been thin there, but the work wasn't so bad when John was just picking shale from the coal as a boy. But the men who owned the mine had been hard and greedy. When they found a new seam they made John and the other pickers crawl in first because they could work in places grown men could not, and they took less air. When the boys came out black except for their eyes, the older men were sent in to add their sweat to the mineral that would never be allowed to become diamonds.

Luke's brother died with two other men when a roof fell in that hadn't been shored up properly. John had been considered a man in the mines at 15, doing a man's work. He was the oldest of the two boys in the Smith family, and Luke's mother had taken it hard. As a young child, Luke had never quite understood his brother's death or his mother's anger, but he knew that the mines had killed John, and he held a grim regard for them to his adulthood.

Luke's mother had made their father promise at John's grave that he wouldn't let any more of her children be taken by the mountains, or the men who dug into them. He had given his word, but he had continued on as a miner since that was how he made his living and supported his family.

Luke was the youngest of the five kids. With John gone and his sisters Sarah, Rebecca, and Mary being the next born, he was the only boy left. Because of that, his mama and sisters doted on him, and his father let him be most of the time, letting him go to school nearly all the time.

Father had been a man of few words, as Luke had grown to be. His father worked from sunup to sundown—better known as working from can to can’t—in the mines every day but Sunday. On that day he walked with his family to the Baptist church near the river. Then Father ate lunch with his parents and his kin before going to work on the family farm his brother tended. (Working the farm wasn’t really how he made his living, so Luke’s father didn’t think the Lord would mind very much him helping out on Sundays.)

Whenever Luke thought of the mines and his brother, he wondered about his father, a man he really never got to know. A man who had coughed himself into an early grave.

Luke took to farming by selling the extra vegetables from the family garden to families in the coal camps. When his mama had extra butter or eggs, she would let him take those, too. His grandma would let him haul apples from her trees to the camps and sell them in the fall, but made him give her half of the money.

The job was not easy because not only was the little wooden wagon he and his father had built heavy when it was loaded down with vegetables or fruit, but the mine’s “company men” didn’t want anyone selling truck—brought-in food—in the camps. That kept the womenfolk from buying in the company store and kept the mining company from making the money back it paid the miners. Many times Luke had dodged rocks or chunks of coal hurled in his direction. But Luke learned quickly how to avoid the company men. He also learned how to make deals with those miners’ wives who didn’t have the money to pay cash, and how to find a few people who could.

A coal camp is a little town unto itself. There is housing for the miners and their families—most of it cold in the winter and poorly ventilated in the summer—the mine, and a company store that sometimes doubled as the office of the mine. Everything bought at the company store was either put on a credit against the miner’s pay, or paid for with script coin stamped by the mine and good only in trade at that one store.

When Luke got older, he also would sell socks on weekends in downtown Harlan once a month in the winter. A salesman with his stock in his car would pick Luke up early Saturday morning and take him into town to peddle on South Street. Having Luke with him helped sales, so the man didn’t begrudge the change he paid Luke. And Luke liked to earn the money, and he loved riding in the car. He was the first in his family ever to accomplish such a feat.

When the work was over and the profits split, Luke would go to J. J. Newberry’s and buy a nickel’s worth of candy (for his sisters) and a nickel’s worth of tobacco (for himself, unless his father caught him).

His father would always look at the money Luke made when the boy returned from one of his trips to town or the camps and shake his head slowly. Luke never failed to be afraid that his father had somehow been displeased, but then the man Luke looked up to almost as God would put out one of his work-scarred hands for Luke to shake. Luke would tremble as he put his small, callused hand in the larger version, but his was a serious face when he met his father’s proud eyes.

Luke’s memory skipped over the years. He started his store, married the much-younger Mary, and moved his new bride onto the land and into the home he had gotten from his family. He lived in the house that originally had been his grandparents’ home. His father’s father had

died years ago from breathing too much coal dust in too few years, and his grandmother and mother, Edna, now lived in a small frame house closer to the road on his property.

The front door of the store squeaked open and Luke slid the diary into his desk drawer to serve his first customer of the day.

That evening, with the day's work behind him, Luke rode his horse up the rutted, switchback lane leading up to his white-painted, two-story wood house. He thought about the rocks he and the horse had hauled in a wagon from the river to make that road. Once to the yard, the hill gave way to a small, nearly level clearing; something unusual in the narrow hollows that ran through the heavily wooded mountains. The house of locally milled lumber had been added onto considerably over the years to accommodate a growing family. The location afforded a wonderful view over the little valley facing the road to Verda and Harlan, and Luke loved to wake up to the view over the misty mountains that changed daily, but were constant as life.

The hill at the back of the house gave shelter from the winter winds and snow. A bonus was the ever-flowing spring that poured cold, strong-tasting water from the mountain into a trough in the springhouse. Many a watermelon had been chilled there, and many a crawdad had been caught for fishing trips to the river. The house had a well in the yard, but Mary much preferred the strong, cold spring water for her cooking.

A chicken house had been built on the near side of the clearing, closer to the road than the garden spot. The shed and pen for the horse was back behind the chicken house nearer the woods. There were apple and pear trees on the other side of the house, where the yard gave way to the woods after a short battleground.

Across a steep ravine there were more trees. One could take a well-worn shortcut path down that gully to the little house where his mother and grandmother lived. Luke had put in stone steps in the steepest part of the path to make it easier to climb up or down, especially if it had rained or snowed.

The apple tree nearest the house was deformed from production, branches drooping even when fruit was not weighing the limbs down to earth where kids could reach the ripe ones. That tree had been Luke's favorite as a boy. It was the first he climbed. The first he had fallen out of. The one in which he had hidden from his angry grandfather. It was the first under which he had kissed Mary, his wife, after one Sunday dinner with the family.

As Luke finished putting the horse and saddle away, he studied his woodpile. There was a good stack beside the porch between two trees, ready for the long cold nights ahead. Luke had already gone into the mountains and snaked down plenty of wood to cut for the winter, but he thought that if business didn't pick up tomorrow, he might just close the store early and take his horse and the axe and ring a few trees to kill them for future wood. He liked to get up and chop wood early to get his circulation going and clear the sleep from his head, and Mary preferred wood instead of coal for cooking.

The coal pile was beside the wood pile, and most of the fireplaces in the house burned coal. It made a sooty mess and a lot of ashes to clean up, but coal was cheap and easy to come by.

Most mornings were like this day had started, except for the dream. After breakfast, he would either ride the horse or drive his truck (well, his and the banks, but it truly would be his in another year, Lord be willing) to his store near the railroad depot in Verde. His truck was one of the few non-company-owned ones in the area.

The train ran up the hollow in front of his home along Route 38 to the mines, then the train had to back down because there was no place to turn around. It was kind of like the Greyhound

bus. Harlan was the only place Luke knew of that the Greyhound didn't pass through—it had to turn around and go back the way it had come.

Luke often wished as he drove to the store that it could be closer to his home so he would not have to take the truck and waste gas that was getting harder to come by. And the times he rode his horse over, he seldom failed to have to go back home for the truck for one reason or another. He might have a chance to make a few dollars above gas cost by hauling something from his store or the depot into town or up the holler to a coal camp, or he might just need to get something for his store, or buy and sell some cattle or hogs and haul them.

That money made the truck his just that much faster, and Mary understood the nights he came home so late. She always had a pot of hot coffee sitting on the stove and his supper in the warmer.

Two days after the dream, Luke pleaded and prodded the truck into life on the cold autumn morning. The coffee and hot breakfast following his wood chopping had warmed him, and Mary was tending their four children. The dairy was running smoothly, and business at the store was slow this morning, so Luke had time to write.

Sept. 14, 1941

My babies are fine, and my woman is a good mother to them and a good wife to me. The store is quiet this morning. I wish I had ridden the sorrel. Doesn't look like I'll be doing any hauling today. I thought I might get to haul some cows today, but doesn't seem so as Jenks Hankins said he would come first thing this morning if he wanted the deal. The clouds is wispy and they say that means weather coming in three days. I've never seen them wrong on that one. But with the cold getting worse, I would have thought more people would have been buying in case we got an early snow. Maybe with the strikes and problems at the mines the people are just staying home. The coal companies are hard on my business because my prices are as fair as those in town, and a whole lot closer to the mines than town, and their stores don't make as much money because of me.

Lord knows I hate winter. But it is early yet, and the bad snows and ice storms usually don't come until after the New Year promises us something better than the year before. Then the ice comes, freezing us all in place and reminding us that it is, after all, just another day after another day.