

# A Working Man's Moon

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*The Life of Bud Prather, from the Red Dirt of  
Georgia to the Last Launch on the Cape*

Space Coast Stories









# Chapter 1

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## *The Register Place*

### 1933–1939

Everyone who knew Bud Prather said he came into the world the way he'd go out of it. He was a quiet, watchful child who grew into a quiet, watchful man, happiest with his hands inside some broken thing, finding out what made it run. He loved the people around him by doing for them more than by saying so, and he understood machines a long time before he understood anything else.

He was born on the Register Place, outside Blackshear, in October of 1933, the second son of a turpentine man who rented his ground.

The farm carried his mother's family name, though the Registers hadn't owned it in thirty years. Ola Mae's people had worked that ground and then lost it, to the boll weevil and the banks, and Emmett rented it now from the man who'd bought it up afterward. So she had her babies on land that used to be her family's. There was a hardness in that she didn't talk about.

There was no electricity in the house and wouldn't be for years. Water came from a well, heat from the wood stove, light from a kerosene lamp she kept trimmed low to save oil. Bud came in the

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evening, a midwife attending, Emmett kept out of the room as fathers were in those days. He was the second boy. The first, Coy, was five.

What people remembered about Coy, even later, was how easy the world came to him. He could gentle a mule that wouldn't stand for anyone else. He could stand up in the meeting house and say his verse loud enough to reach the back bench, and the old men would nod at Emmett like the boy was money in the bank. Eyes went to Coy. They always had.

They named the new baby Vernon Earl, after Emmett's father. Old Vernon Prather was a turpentine man himself and a hard-shell Primitive Baptist, and the two things fit him from the same bolt of cloth. He held with a God who'd settled every soul before the first morning of the world, saved or not saved, the books closed and nothing to be done about it. It didn't make him cruel. It made him certain, and certain turned out to be a harder thing to live beside.

The baby had his name for about a week. Coy couldn't say Vernon, or wouldn't, and what came out instead was Bud. By the time the boy could walk, it was the only thing anyone called him.

Ola Mae's faith ran softer than the old man's. She sang the long lined-out hymns with her eyes shut, and prayed over the biscuits, over the fevers, over money that never came, and she raised her children toward mercy instead of away from it.

Bud came up the opposite of his brother. Where Coy filled a room, Bud took it apart in his head. He was the quiet one, the one found under the porch with a broken latch in his lap, or out at the woodpile working at a dead pocketwatch, trying to get inside a thing that didn't want to open. The family stories about him all ran the same direction. He'd taken the coffee grinder apart before he was four and put it back so it turned smoother than before. He'd gotten into the lock on the corn crib and caught a switching for it, because Emmett couldn't yet tell the difference between a boy breaking a thing and a boy learning it.

Coy was five years older, old enough to have run off with boys his own age and left the little brother behind, and mostly he did. But

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there was a soft spot in him for Bud that never wore off. When the older boys teased Bud for being odd, for sitting in the dirt with the guts of something spread out in front of him, it was Coy who ran them off. And when Bud got some dead thing running again, it was Coy who carried it up and down the road to show it off, prouder of his little brother's hands than Bud ever thought to be himself.

The country itself was flat and piney, hot most of the year, cut through with blackwater branches the color of strong tea. The dirt roads ran red. In summer the gnats came up off the fields in clouds and the mosquitoes owned the evenings, and over all of it hung the sharp resin smell of the turpentine woods, the smell of his childhood.

They farmed tobacco on shares, and Emmett worked the turpentine besides, chipping the slanted scars into the pines and hanging the cups to catch the gum. These were the bottom years of the Depression. Cotton had failed, the banks had failed, and a good part of the county was getting by on credit at the store and on prayer. The Prathers ate what they raised and wore what Ola Mae could cut down and make over. The children didn't know they were poor. Everyone they knew was poor the same way.

Sundays they went to the meeting house, a plain plank room with no steeple and no piano, because the old man's church held that neither one belonged between a person and God. The singing carried no instrument under it. One man lined out a phrase and the room gave it back, slow, and then the next. The preaching was all fire and foreordination and went straight over Bud's head. What held him was the working of the singing, the voices coming apart and closing back together, phrase after phrase, and every time coming out even.

A turpentine still stood off through the woods, where the dippers hauled the gum in barrels, and now and then Emmett had reason to go and would take the boys. Coy went for the mule and the men. Bud went for the still. It was the biggest machine he'd ever stood next to, a copper kettle set in brick with a fire going under it and a coil of pipe running down through a barrel of creek water. The raw gum went into it smelling like the pine woods on the hottest day of summer, and

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what came out the far end, a drop at a time, was turpentine as clear as rain. He'd get as close as they let him and watch it work and not say a word.

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But the story the family kept, the one they told and retold, was the story of the clock.

It was the one fine thing in the house, a walnut shelf clock that had been Ola Mae's mother's, a painted face and a brass works behind a little glass door. It had come with her into the marriage, one of the few things she'd carried in that hadn't since been worn down to use. It sat on the shelf above the fireplace, and the children knew without asking not to touch it. Its ticking was the sound the house made once everything else went still at night.

The winter Bud was five, it stopped.

Nobody heard it stop. They noticed the quiet where it had been. Ola Mae's mother was three years in the ground by then, and the clock had been the last of her still speaking in the house. Emmett took it down and shook it and held it to his ear. There was no money to carry it into town, and none to fix it if he had, so he set it back on the shelf, stopped, its hands at ten past four, and that was meant to be the end of it.

Bud couldn't let it be. For days he'd stand under the shelf and look up at it, a machine that had died with no one coming to save it. He knew he wasn't to touch it. He knew the feel of the switch from the corn crib. But one wash day, with his mother out at the pot in the yard and Coy off being Coy, he dragged a stool over, got the clock down, and carried it out to the shed.

Out there he opened the little glass door and took the works apart, laying each piece on the bench in the order it came off, careful the way he was with everything. The trouble turned out to be small. A single pin, no bigger than a splinter, had worked out of its seat and stopped the train of gears. He studied how it must have sat before it

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slipped. Then he set it back where it belonged and built the clock up again in reverse of how he'd laid it out, every wheel finding its teeth, and he wound it. In the quiet of the shed, it started to tick.

He carried it in and set it on the shelf and pushed the stool back where it went and said nothing about it.

That evening Ola Mae was drying the last of the supper dishes when she heard it. The tick, back in the house after the better part of a month. She went and stood under the shelf and looked up at the hands moving again, keeping near enough to the right time, and it was a moment before she let herself believe it. Coy swore he hadn't touched it. That left the one boy nobody had thought to ask.

Emmett Prather was not a man who said things out loud. He showed what he felt in what he did, when he showed it at all. He took the clock down and turned it over in his big hands, checking it for the trick of it, and there wasn't one. It simply ran. When it came clear that his five-year-old had opened a thing he couldn't have opened himself and set it right, he didn't say he was proud. Pride wasn't a word that lived in him. What he did, and what Bud kept with him the rest of his life, was reach over and lay a hand on the top of the boy's head, and leave it there a moment longer than he needed to.

The family would make a good deal of that clock in the years after, once they knew what the boy was. But at the time it was a small thing on a poor farm, a quiet child and a dead clock and an afternoon no one was watching. The gift was in him before anyone had a name for it. It came up on its own, the same as his height or the color of his eyes, and it asked nothing of the world but something to take apart.

His mother told that story until she died. In her telling it stayed simple. Her boy had taken down a dead clock and made it go, and he'd been five years old.

That night it ticked on the shelf where it had always ticked and struck the hours as it was built to, and the house slept around the sound of it. Bud had given that back to them. Nobody had had to teach him how.





## Chapter 2

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### *War Sounds on the Radio*

#### 1941–1943

**I**t was a Sunday when the news came, December of 1941, and it came the only way news ever reached them, over a radio in a neighbor's front room.

The Prathers didn't own a radio. Not many families out that way did. But a household down the road kept a big battery set in the parlor, and when something happened in the world, folks found a reason to be nearby. That afternoon the music on it stopped and a man's voice broke in to say the Japanese had bombed a place called Pearl Harbor, out in the Pacific, and that a lot of American boys were dead.

Bud was eight. He didn't take in the geography of it, or the weight, not yet. What he took in were the faces. The grown men went quiet and still. The women's hands stopped moving in their laps. Something came into that room that hadn't been in it a minute before, and Bud never forgot the feel of it. He remembered, too, wondering even then how the voice of a man that far off could come out of a wooden box in a stranger's parlor.

After that the war was always on. It lived in the radio, and in the newspaper Emmett brought home when he had a nickel to spare for



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one, in the maps with their arrows and the names nobody could say right. They followed it the same as they'd follow a bad storm season, close and helpless. North Africa, and then the names moved to Sicily, and by the time the leaves turned in 1943 the voices were reading out towns in Italy. It was all just sound from a long way off. None of it had yet reached in and taken anything that was theirs.

For Bud the war had another face, one the grown-ups didn't seem to see. It was the greatest gathering of machines the world had ever put together. The newsreel talk and the magazine pictures were full of them, bombers, aircraft carriers, tanks that could ford a river, engines past anything that had ever come down a Georgia road. He was old enough to be scared for Coy, and young enough still to lie awake wondering how a thing that heavy got up into the air and stayed there. Both were true in him at once.

It came into the house in smaller ways too. Sugar went onto a ration book first. Then coffee, gasoline, tires, shoes. Ola Mae kept the little stamps in an envelope behind the clock and counted them like money, because that was what they'd become.

The war found the children as well. At school they bought savings stamps for a dime and licked them into books toward a bond, and they hauled in scrap for the drives, old tin cans, baling wire, broken-down implements, all of it meant to come back someday as tanks and ships. Blue stars went up in front windows for the boys who'd gone, and here and there a gold star for one who wouldn't be coming home, and children learned fast enough what a gold star meant.

In a way the war asked less of the Prathers than it asked of richer people. They'd been rationing themselves their whole lives. They already grew their own food, wore things past wearing out, and made do. What was new was that the whole country was doing it now, and there was a name for it, and a flag over it.

Emmett didn't go. He was past the age they were taking, and there was a farm and a family that needed him on the land. And the turpentine he'd worked his whole life had turned, without his doing

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anything different, into war work. The Navy ran on naval stores. The rosin and the spirits that came out of those Georgia pines went off to the war by the barrel. It gave a man like Emmett a strange, quiet standing, doing something that counted now in the only way he knew, with his back and his hands, the same as he'd always done it. He never said a word about being proud of it. But he carried himself a little different those years.

The other new thing was the leaving. One by one the young men went. Cousins, the hired hands, the big boys from the church. They'd be at the meeting house one Sunday in their overalls and gone the next in a uniform, and the county began to feel thinner, stripped of its strongest hands right when the crops still had to come out of the ground.

Bud went to a two-room school a couple of miles off, walked to in all weather. He wasn't a poor student, but book learning didn't light him up. He'd sit through the reciting and the sums with his mind out the window on something mechanical, and the teacher took his quiet for slowness, which it wasn't. Coy had gone through that same school and left a shine behind him, quick with his letters and quicker with his mouth, a boy the teachers still asked after. Bud left no shine. He left behind a boy who could tell you why the school's pump had quit drawing and then fix it on his dinner break.

Where Bud shined was the one place nobody thinks to look for it in a child. That was how he came to the tractor.

A farmer two places over had a Farmall that wouldn't start, no son left at home to look at it, and the nearest mechanic gone off to the Navy. It sat dead in his lot the better part of a week, in the middle of planting, and a dead tractor in the middle of planting in 1942 was close to a disaster.

Bud was nine, and he'd come along with Emmett to help however a nine-year-old can, which is mostly to hand things over and stay out from underfoot. The men had already given up on it. But Bud climbed up on the thing and worked backward from the trouble to

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the cause, slow and careful as he was with everything, and the cause was the magneto. It wasn't throwing a spark.

He got it off and opened it up on a feed sack spread on the ground, the same hands that had brought the clock back. The points were burned and fouled, one of them knocked out of true. He cleaned them, set the gap by eye, and put the magneto back together. When they cranked the tractor it caught on the second pull and ran.

The farmer looked at Bud like he'd dropped out of the sky. He tried to press money on Emmett, and Emmett wouldn't have it, because a Prather didn't take pay for helping a neighbor. But the man got a dollar into Bud's hand when Emmett's back was turned, and Bud kept that dollar a long time and never did spend it.

It wasn't the dollar. On that tractor Bud had felt a thing the school-house and the meeting house had never once given him. He'd been needed, for the very thing he could do better than any grown man standing there. He was nine years old, and he knew what that was worth.

After the Farmall, the neighbors knew where to send. A cultivator that jammed, a well pump gone dry, a truck that wouldn't turn over. Bud was small for the field, but at anything with a moving part he was worth three grown hands, and in those short-handed years that counted for a lot. It was a strange thing to watch. A war on the far side of the world had made a poor, quiet, odd little boy into someone grown men came looking for.

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By 1943 Coy was wild to go.

He'd stood at the meeting house and watched a dozen older boys leave ahead of him, and every one that left made it harder for him to stay behind. Part of it was the flag. More of it was that the war was the biggest thing that had ever come near a place like Blackshear, and Coy had never once in his life been able to stand at the edge of something big and only watch.

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He'd changed in the waiting. He'd filled out and gone restless, like a dog on a chain, and he spent that last stretch working the farm harder than he had to, as if he could wear the wait down with his hands. Some evenings he'd sit out on the step and take apart whatever Bud was working on and hand him the pieces one at a time. He had no real interest in how any of it went together. It was a way to sit next to his brother without having to say much.

Emmett didn't try to stop him. Maybe he knew he couldn't. Maybe some part of him was proud, the fragile Prather pride that never had many places to stand. Ola Mae was harder to read. She took her worrying into the bedroom and shut the door, and came out with her face washed and calm, and said nothing about what she'd asked God for in there.

Coy went into town, signed the papers, and came home a soldier in everything but the uniform. Before he shipped out they had his picture made in it, as families did then. In the photograph he looked older than his years, and more solemn than anybody had ever managed to make him in life. It was the picture Ola Mae would keep on the dresser.

The morning he left, they walked him out to the road to wait for the bus that would carry him to the train. Bud was ten. He stood a little apart and watched his brother go, the same brother who'd run off the boys that teased him and carried his fixed-up junk up and down the road like it was made of gold. Coy shook his daddy's hand. He held his mother a long while. Then he climbed onto the bus, and it pulled away north up the road and out of sight, and the dust hung a long time over the red dirt after it was gone.

That evening the war news came on down at the neighbor's, as it did every night, the far-off voices reading out the names of the places where the fighting was. Bud listened to it different now. His brother was going to be somewhere out on the far end of all that distance. One of the boys those voices had started to count.



## Chapter 3

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### *The Telegram*

#### 1944

A car came up the road one warm afternoon in the spring of 1944, and it didn't belong to anybody they knew.

The day had been an ordinary one until then, and that was the cruelty of it. Chores, heat, the tobacco coming along in the field. Out that far, a family knew every vehicle that had any cause to come down its road, and a strange one meant something. By that point in the war, everybody in the county had learned what a strange car slowing at a farm gate could mean, learned to feel it in the stomach before the mind caught up. Ola Mae was on the porch when it turned in. She stood, put her hand on the rail, and didn't say a word, and she was still standing like that when the man came up the path with the envelope in his hand.

It was a telegram. It carried the War Department's deep regret, in the stark run-together capitals of the wire, that their son Coy had been killed in action in Italy. At a place called Anzio. A beachhead none of them had ever heard of until it took him.

Bud was eleven. He was out in the yard, close enough to see, and it was the faces again, the same as the neighbor's parlor three years

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before. Only this time the face was his mother's, and the news wasn't about somebody else's boys.

News like that didn't stay in one house long, not out there. By evening the road had cars on it again, the kind everybody did know. The women came with food they couldn't spare, and the men stood in the yard with their hats in their hands and didn't say much, because there wasn't anything to say that would touch it. The church folded in around the Prathers as it always did around its own. It was what a hard, plain faith and a hard, plain people were good for. They had no soft words to offer. But they showed up, and they kept showing up.

The worst of it came a week or so later, when a letter arrived in Coy's own hand.

He'd written it before, of course. Mail from over there took its time, and this one had been crossing the ocean while the telegram was already on its way, so that their son was speaking to them out of an envelope after they'd already been told he was gone. Ola Mae read it and put it away and didn't let anyone else read it for a long while. Whatever Coy had written, cheerful or homesick or full of the plans boys make, it was the last of his voice they would ever have, and it had come too late to be anything but a wound.

Emmett came in from the woods and read the telegram and didn't say anything. He'd never been a man with many words, but this was a different kind of quiet, and it came into the house and stayed. He went back to work the next morning, because there was nothing else to do with his hands, and he worked that whole summer like a man trying to outrun something on foot. The one place anybody ever saw it get to him was the woods. A cousin came upon him once out among the pines, standing dead still with his hack in his hand, not working, just standing. The cousin backed away and never spoke of it. Emmett never once, that anyone ever heard, said his boy's name out loud again.

They held a service for Coy at the meeting house, though there was



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no coffin at the front of it, only the plank room, the lined-out hymns, the preacher speaking over an absence. Ola Mae sat through it. She'd been raised to believe God had laid out everything before the first day of the world, every road and every ending, and she'd taken a hard comfort in that her whole life. There was supposed to be a reason, even when it stayed hidden. But there is a difference between believing God set the shape of the world and believing God had meant, from the beginning and on purpose, to take her boy onto a beach in Italy and leave him there. Something in her couldn't get around it. She kept going to the meeting house. She kept bowing her head. But the singing went out of her, and it stayed gone a long time, and some of it never did come back.

Bud took the doctrine differently than his mother did, though he was too young to say how. He'd spent his whole short life learning that things happened for reasons that could be found by looking, a pin backed out, a spark gone missing, a cause a person could lay a hand on and put right. The preacher said Coy's death had a reason too, set down before the world was made. But that kind of reason explained nothing, and fixed nothing. It left a boy who trusted causes with a hole where the cause should have been. He didn't lose his religion over it. He just filed it, quiet, among the things in the world that didn't add up.

The house had to learn him gone. For a while Ola Mae would catch herself setting a place at the table that didn't need setting, then take the plate back down without a word. Coy's things stayed where they were longer than they should have, because moving them was its own kind of admitting. The clock on the shelf kept its time through all of it, ticking in the front room as steadily as ever, and that steadiness, which had once been a comfort, was a hard thing to sit with now.

Bud lost more than a brother. He lost the one person who had ever looked at his oddness and been proud of it. Coy had run the bullies off him and carried his fixed-up junk up and down the road like it was worth something, and nobody was stepping into that place now, and nobody ever would.



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He didn't have the words for what he felt, so it came out sideways, in his hands. In the days after, he went to his broken things, the dead pocketwatch, a busted radio a neighbor had handed him for parts, whatever was lying around with its insides showing. He worked on them the same as always. But it didn't do what it had always done for him. For the first time in his life he'd come up against a thing that had quit and could not be started again. No loose pin to find. No gap to set. Nothing his hands could reach. His brother was gone, and Bud couldn't fix it, and some part of him understood right then that this was a different order of broken than anything he had ever met.

That summer he worked alongside his father more than he ever had. Neither of them was any good at talking, and grief made them worse at it, so they did the thing the Prather men did instead. They worked. They'd be out in the field or the woods for hours and hardly pass a word, and there was something in that shared quiet that came near to comfort, two people missing the same person in the same wordless way. For all their silence, it was about as close as Bud and Emmett ever came to understanding each other.

He was too young to make sense of it and old enough to draw the wrong lesson from it, which was that the world had a way of reaching past the ordinary ones to take the best. Coy had been the best of them. Everybody knew it. And the war had come all the way to Georgia and picked him out of a whole county of boys.

The war didn't stop for their grief. It couldn't. Within weeks of the telegram the radio down the road was full of the invasion of France, the beaches at Normandy, thousands more boys going ashore, and other strange cars were turning up other farm roads all over the country with other envelopes. What had happened to the Prathers was happening to families everywhere. That was no comfort at all. But it was the truth of the time, and they lived inside it.

There was no funeral with a body that summer, and there wouldn't be. Coy was in the Italian ground where he'd fallen, an ocean and half a world from the red dirt he'd grown up in, and there

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was no bringing him home to it. The rosin still went off to the war by the barrel from Emmett's pines, and Emmett worked it no differently. If he had thoughts about what the war had handed him back in return, he kept them to himself.

What came back to them, in time, was a flag.

It came folded into a hard triangle, the blue field and its white stars on the outside. Ola Mae kept it in the front room, and she kept Coy's photograph on the dresser beside it, the serious young man in the uniform who had looked older than his years. Between the two of them, that was what the war returned for a boy of nineteen. A triangle of cloth, and a picture in a frame. That was the shape Coy came home in.



## Chapter 4

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### *Leaving*

1945–1952

**B**y the time he was sixteen, Bud Prather could take apart and rebuild just about any engine that came down the road, and around Blackshear that was starting to be worth something.

The years after Coy had made him older than his age. He'd come out of that grief the same as he came out of most things, quietly and through his hands. He couldn't fix what had happened to his brother, but there was no end of other things in the world that were broken and could be put right, and he threw himself at all of them. By his teens he was less a boy than a serious young man who happened to be a few years short of it, and everybody who knew him felt the difference.

He'd hired on at a garage in town, part-time at first and then most of his waking hours. The man who owned it was named Roy Tanner, and he ran the only real garage between Blackshear and Waycross, with hands like a catcher's mitt and forty years of engines behind him. It took Tanner about a month to stop checking Bud's work. Inside a year he was handing the boy the jobs nobody else could crack, the intermittent misses, the phantom noises, the troubles that only showed themselves on the road and hid the second you lifted the

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hood. Bud found them. He'd take a car out and drive it with his hand flat on the fender and his head cocked, and come back knowing. He'd been doing a version of that since he was five and a dead clock. The difference now was that people paid him for it.

The garage was also a window. Cars came through it from everywhere, and the men driving them carried talk of everywhere, of work in Jacksonville and Detroit, of money to be made where the country was busy building itself back bigger than before. Bud pumped their gas and fixed their fan belts and listened. Blackshear was all he'd ever seen of the world, and it was starting to feel very small.

The garage was the good work. The other work was the woods.

Bud still went out to the turpentine with his daddy when the garage was slow, chipping the pines and dipping the gum the same as Emmett had all his life, the same as old Vernon before him. But the turpentine was dying by then. After the war the world had found cheaper ways to get what it used to take from a Georgia pine, and the price kept sliding, and the camps kept closing, and a trade that had fed the Prathers for three generations was quietly going under. Bud could see it going. He could see something else too, out there working beside his father. He watched Emmett give that work everything a man had, year on year, on land he didn't own, for a return that never once got out ahead of what they owed at the commissary. What got into Bud wasn't the hardness of it. He'd never minded hard work. It was the arithmetic. A man could do everything right, work himself half to death, and the books were still rigged so he came out behind.

There was a morning that stuck with him. They'd worked since before light and stopped to rest, and Bud looked over at his father on a stump with his hat off, gray coming into his hair, a man who had never in his life owned the ground under his own feet or gotten a single season ahead. Emmett caught the boy looking and said nothing, and Bud said nothing back. But Bud thought he saw, just for a second, that his father knew exactly what he was thinking and didn't hold it against him. Maybe even hoped it.

The house had changed in those years, and it hadn't. There were

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little ones in it again. Wynelle had come along before the war, and after Coy there were two more, Dent and then Faye, so that Ola Mae was raising babies at the age some women are getting free of them. Bud was near enough grown to be a second father to the youngest. He'd pack Dent around on his hip while he worked and let the boy hand him wrenches, and if it ever crossed his mind that this was exactly what Coy had once done with him, he kept it to himself, the same as this family kept most things.

He wasn't a boy who ran the roads at night or chased much of anything. He'd go to the singings and the socials at the church because his mother wanted him there, and he'd stand off at the edge of them, polite and quiet, and the girls found him about as easy to read as a shut door. He noticed them fine. He'd just never felt as certain of anything in his life as he felt with a machine in front of him, and people weren't machines. A carburetor would tell you what was wrong with it if you listened. A girl at a church social would not.

Coy's flag was still folded in the front room, and his picture still stood on the dresser, and the boy in the picture never got any older while everybody around him did. Bud passed that photograph every day. It struck him differently than it struck his mother. Hers was grief. His was closer to restlessness. His brother had gotten exactly one life, cut off at nineteen on a beach on the far side of the world, and here Bud was fixing to spend his own chipping pines nobody wanted anymore, going nowhere, on ground that wasn't his. It started to feel like a waste he couldn't sit still inside of.

The country around him was changing too, and fast. The paved roads reached further out every year, and the power lines came behind them, so that houses which had burned kerosene since the day they were built suddenly had a bulb hanging from the ceiling. Tractors were doing the work of the mules and the hired men both, which meant the farms needed fewer hands right when the young men were hunting reasons to leave. The old order Bud had been born into was coming apart, quietly, all around him, and he could feel which side of it he wanted to be standing on.

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And then there was the war. By 1950 there was fighting in Korea, the draft was running again, and every young man Bud's age knew it was only a matter of time before the Army came looking for him.

So Bud made up his mind to go before going got decided for him. And he made up his mind about how. He would not go into the Army, and he would not go down the road Coy went. He'd seen what the infantry did with country boys. The Navy took a man with a head for machines and made something of him, taught him a trade the modern world was going to want more and more of, and did it, God willing, on a ship instead of in a foxhole. In the spring of 1952 Bud went into town and enlisted in the United States Navy. He was eighteen years old.

He had a few weeks yet before he had to report. He worked them out at the garage and in the woods, and the ordinary days felt strange now that they were numbered, everything he'd always done getting done for the last time without anybody saying so out loud. Roy Tanner told him there'd be a job waiting if the Navy didn't ruin him first, which was Tanner's way of saying he'd miss him.

Telling his mother was the hardest thing he had done in his life up to then. Ola Mae had already given one son to a uniform. She didn't rage and she didn't beg, she'd been raised not to, but something closed in her face when he told her, and she went quiet, the same quiet as 1944, and for a few days the house was heavy with it. Then she got up one morning and started getting his things together, mending and washing and folding, because a mother did for her children even when the thing they were doing was leaving. That was her way of saying what she couldn't say.

Emmett said even less, which surprised nobody. But the night before Bud left, his father came and found him and set a hand on his shoulder and left it there a second longer than he had to. Bud understood it perfectly. It was the same thing Emmett had put on his head once, over a mended clock, when he was five. It was all Emmett had. It was enough.

He left on a bus, the same as Coy had, out the same road north.

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But it wasn't the same at all. Coy had left waving, a golden boy off to the biggest thing in the world, certain he'd be back. Bud left quiet, and he wasn't sure of anything except that he couldn't stay. The family came out to the road to see him off, Wynelle nearly grown, Dent and Faye small enough that they'd never remember it. Ola Mae held onto him hard. Emmett shook his hand. Then Bud climbed on the bus, and it pulled away north up the road, and this time it was his mother's face he watched go small in the dust behind him, standing at the same gate where she'd once stood and watched a strange car come.

He faced forward after that. Behind him were the pines, the red dirt, the graves, everybody he loved. Ahead was everything he didn't know yet. He was getting out at last, and God help him, under the ache of leaving there was something in him that lifted.





## Chapter 5

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### *Blue Water, Bright Wire*

1952–1954

**T**he train took Bud north for the better part of two days, up out of the pines and the heat into country he had no pictures for.

Somewhere past the Ohio the land went flat and gray and industrial, cities standing shoulder to shoulder, more people in one train window than in all of Pierce County. By the time he got where he was going, the Navy's boot camp at Great Lakes, north of Chicago on the edge of a lake so big he took it at first for the sea, it was cold in a way a Georgia boy has no defense against. That was the Navy's first lesson. The world was a great deal bigger, and colder, than Blackshear had ever let on.

Boot camp was a machine for taking farm boys, city boys, and mill-town kids and stamping them all into sailors, and it did not care where any of them had come from. For a lot of the recruits it was the hardest thing they had ever done. For Bud, who'd been doing hard physical work since he was big enough to hold a tool, the labor of it came almost as a relief. He could march, he could scrub, he could go without sleep. What was strange to him was the rest of it, the shouting, the crowding, the constant company of eighty other men, when

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he'd grown up quiet in a quiet house and liked it that way. He kept his head down, did what he was told, and didn't make himself known, which suited him fine.

The Navy threw him in with men from everywhere and every kind, Northern, city, foreign-sounding, men he'd have had no cause to meet in a whole life in Pierce County. Out in the world, it turned out, a man got measured more by what he could do than by where he was from. That was news to a boy raised where the opposite was mostly the rule.

The food, whatever the other men said about it, was more than he'd grown up on. Three meals set in front of him every day, meat at most of them, as much bread as a man could eat. A boy raised on what a hard year would spare doesn't complain about Navy chow. He put on fifteen pounds and an inch of height that first year, as though his body had only been waiting for somebody to feed it.

His gift found him even there. A washing machine in the laundry would give out, or a piece of gear on the rifle range wouldn't work, and word got around that the quiet Southern kid could fix things, and the petty officers started pulling him to do it. It was the same thing that had happened at the Farmall and the school pump, only now it was the United States Navy doing the noticing.

But the real turn came with the testing. Early on, the Navy ran every recruit through a battery of tests, hours of them, to sort out what each man was fit for. Bud had never been much of a test-taker in the Blackshear sense, the reciting and the spelling Coy had shone at and he hadn't. These were something else. These asked how a mind worked, whether it could see how parts moved together, whether it could reason a path through a mechanical or an electrical problem it had never laid eyes on. Bud sat down with those, and something in him woke all the way up. When the scores came back, his marks on the mechanical and electrical aptitudes were about the highest that base had ever run.

An officer called him in about it. Bud stood in that office certain he was in some kind of trouble, because in his experience getting

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called in by a man in charge meant trouble. Instead the officer wanted to know why a boy with a mind like that had a ninth-grade education and had been chipping turpentine six months before. He told Bud, in so many words, that he had one of the finest natural aptitudes for machinery the man had seen come through, and that the Navy meant to make full use of it.

Bud was nineteen years old, and it was the first time in his life anybody had ever called him smart.

He didn't quite know what to do with it. At home the smart one had been Coy, the quick one, the one with the mouth and the letters. Bud had been the odd quiet boy who was good with his hands, and everybody, himself included, had left it at that. Nobody had ever put it to him that the thing his hands did was a kind of intelligence, that it had a name, that the country's Navy would go to trouble to train it. It rearranged something in him, quietly, and it stayed rearranged.

He wrote home about it, or tried to. It was hard to put in a letter to people who didn't have the words for pride any more than he did. He told his mother the Navy was sending him to school to be trained on machinery, that they thought he had a knack for it. Ola Mae wrote back that she was proud and that she prayed for him every night, and underneath the plain words Bud could feel the size of what it meant to her, that after everything, one of her boys was going to make something of himself in the world. She didn't say the other part, that this was a son in a uniform in a time of war, and that she'd already lain awake over that once. She didn't have to. He knew it was there.

There was a thing Bud never quite said out loud in those years, even to himself. It was a uniform and a war that had taken Coy. It was a uniform and a war that were making Bud. The same great machinery of the country that had swallowed his brother whole was now feeding him, schooling him, turning him into somebody. He didn't know what to do with that either. He carried it quiet, the same as he carried the rest, and let the two facts sit side by side in him without forcing them to agree.

They sent him to school, one of the Navy's technical courses, and

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for the better part of a year Bud did little but learn. Machinery, and the electrical systems that ran it, and past that the beginnings of the electronics that were just then starting to change everything. He learned to read a schematic the same as he'd once read a jammed clock, following the flow of it, tracing back to where the trouble had to be. Wire and current had always been a mystery to him, invisible, where an engine was at least a thing a man could put his hands on. Now somebody stood at a board and laid out the rules the invisible thing obeyed, and it turned out it obeyed rules, the same as everything else. It was as if a second world had been running alongside the one he knew all his life, and he'd just been handed the key to it.

He finished near the top of the class, which nobody was more surprised by than Bud. The instructors, hard-bitten chiefs most of them, came to hand him the problems that stumped the room. A boy who'd spent his school years being talked clean past was now the one the teacher turned to. He didn't say much about it. But he carried himself a little straighter that year, and the difference showed. For the first time in his life he was somewhere that ran on exactly the thing he was made of.

On liberty he saw things a Pierce County boy had only heard about. A real city after dark, lit up end to end, the electricity he'd grown up without running now in rivers over a hundred storefronts. Trains that went underground. More cars in one intersection than in his whole county. He'd stand on a corner and take it in, not spending much, because he'd never had spending money and old habits held, but looking his fill. The world he'd first suspected was out there from behind the counter at Roy Tanner's garage turned out to be real, and bigger even than the talk.

When the training was done they made him a rated man and sent him out to the fleet, and that was how a boy from the inland pines finally came to the sea.

The ship was the biggest and most complicated machine Bud had ever set foot on, a small steel town that made its own power and water and drove itself across the ocean, all of it run by men in the spaces

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below where the daylight never reached. That was where they put him, down in the heat and the noise among the pumps, the generators, the miles of wire, and he took to it like he'd been pointed there his whole life. He knew that world. It was the clock and the magneto and the Farmall grown enormous, and it answered to the same hands.

He never forgot the first time he saw the ocean for what it was. Not the lake up north, big as that had been, but the real Atlantic, salt and moving, running out past the curve of the earth with nothing on it at all. He'd grown up where the biggest water was a blackwater branch a boy could throw a rock across. Now he stood at a rail with all of it in front of him, more world than he'd ever known was out there, and some part of the Blackshear in him understood, for the first time and for good, just how far he had come. And how far a man could still go.





## Chapter 6

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### *Discharge and Drift*

#### 1954–1957

I n the fall of 1956 the Navy turned Bud loose. Four years, and just like that he was a civilian again, with an honorable discharge, a rating he was proud of, a trade in his hands, and no clear idea in the world what to do with any of it.

That was the strange part nobody warned a man about. Going in had been simple. A man showed up and they told him where to stand. Coming out, he was on his own again, and the wide-open freedom Bud had spent four years dreaming about turned out to have a hollow place right in the middle of it, shaped exactly like a plan he didn't have.

The back half of his hitch had been good to him. By the end he was a different article than the boy who'd shipped out. He'd stood watches in the dead of night with a whole engineering plant answering to him. He'd seen foreign ports and walked streets where nobody spoke English and gotten a look at how big and various the world really was. Somewhere in those four years the quiet Blackshear boy had quietly become a capable man, sure of his hands and his head if of nothing else. He didn't brag on it. He just knew now, in a way he hadn't before, what he was worth on a job.



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The Navy would gladly have kept him. They made it plain there'd be a career in it if he wanted one. But Bud didn't want to spend his life being told where to stand, even at good pay. He'd joined to get out of one kind of trap, and a twenty-year hitch, for all its security, was starting to look like another kind. He wanted something that was his. So when his time came, he took the discharge.

He went home to Georgia first, because he didn't know where else to go.

It was good to see them. Emmett was grayer, still working the same woods for a trade closer to dead than ever. Ola Mae had aged in a way that had begun with a telegram in 1944. The little ones weren't so little, Wynelle nearly a woman, Dent big enough now to trail Bud around the yard asking about the Navy. For a few days it was fine, the homecoming, the fussing, his mother cooking everything he had ever liked.

Then the days piled up, and Bud began to feel it. He'd outgrown the place, or it had held still while he got bigger, and there was no undoing that. Roy Tanner heard he was back and offered him his old job at the garage, a real kindness, and meant every bit of it. Bud thanked him and turned him down. The garage that had once felt to a teenager like a window onto the whole world now looked like exactly what it was, a small shop in a small town, a ceiling a man could touch with his hand. He'd been to sea. He'd taken apart machines the size of houses. He couldn't go back to being the boy who fixed the neighbors' cultivators, and they both knew it before Bud ever said a word.

So he left again, and for a while he drifted.

He tried a few things. There was factory work up in the industrial North for a stretch, good money on paper, but it was one small piece of one machine, the same motion ten thousand times a day, mind-numbing to a man whose gift was seeing how the whole thing fit together. He tried this and that. Nothing held. He had the GI Bill in his pocket, enough to put himself through college, and he thought hard about it, an engineering degree, the real credential that would unlock the work he was built for. But he was a grown man with

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nothing behind him, and the notion of four years earning nothing and living on nothing, when he'd only just started eating regular, was more than he could make himself do. Not yet.

It wasn't only the work that had come loose. Bud was a single man with no fixed address, sleeping in rooming houses and off buddies' couches, keeping to himself the same as always. He was twenty-three and had never once been in love, never had a girl he'd have called his own, because he'd spent his whole life either working or in a uniform and had never learned the trick of it. Out in the drift, with no routine to cover it over, that started to weigh on him too. A man can feel the shape of the thing he's missing without being able to name it. Bud felt it. He just didn't have a word for home yet.

The men he'd served with were settling into lives. Getting married, taking the GI loan on a little house, hiring on somewhere steady and staying put. That was the deal the country was holding out to a returning serviceman in those years, and most of them took it and were glad. Bud watched them do it and felt, under the restlessness, a low current of worry that something might be wrong with him, that he couldn't just take the good ordinary thing and be content with it. He didn't want the little house on the quiet street. Or he did, but not at the price of settling for less than what he was.

That was the low stretch. Months of it, running on toward the better part of a year, a man the Navy had called one of the finest natural aptitudes it had seen, drifting town to town doing work that wasted him, feeling the thing that had come awake in him at boot camp start to go quiet again for want of anywhere to put it. He'd gotten out to build his own life, and so far he'd built nothing, and the old fear out of the turpentine woods started creeping back on him. The fear of doing everything right and still coming out behind.

And then he heard about Florida.

It came the same as things came to men like Bud, through the grapevine of the trade, from another ex-Navy man who'd caught wind of it. Down on the east coast of Florida, at a place called Cape Canaveral, the government was shooting rockets out over the ocean,

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and the business was booming. It was the Cold War driving it, the race with the Russians to build rockets that could throw a warhead across the world, and before long to carry a man clean off it. The country was pouring money into that race, and the sharp end of it was a spit of Florida sand where they lit the things off over the Atlantic to see whether they'd fly. Around it, a county that had been mosquitoes and citrus groves and not much else was turning into a boomtown overnight, the population multiplying, contractors hiring just about anybody who could hold a wrench and think straight. Men who understood machinery and electrical systems and could keep complicated things running under pressure. Men exactly like him.

Bud listened to that the same as he'd once listened to the men passing through Tanner's garage, except this time it wasn't somebody else's open road being described to him. It was one that would take him, and pay him, for the very thing he had that the rest of the world kept having trouble placing.

And there was the thing itself. Bud had loved machines his whole life, the bigger and more complicated the better, and here was word of the biggest and most complicated machines anybody had ever dreamed up, being built at the edge of the country by men who were half making it up as they went. Rockets. Engines with more power packed into them than a whole county's worth of tractors. A boy who'd once stood transfixed by a turpentine still, and later by a warship's engine room, could not hear a thing like that and go on standing where he was. Even if the money had been poor, some part of him would have wanted to go just to get his hands on them.

Part of the pull, though he might not have put it this way, was that the place had no past. It was being built new, out of nothing, by people who'd all just gotten there. Nobody down in Florida would know him as the poor Prather boy, or the second son, or the one whose brother didn't come home from Italy. Down there a man would be exactly what he could do and not one thing more, which for Bud was about the best offer anybody had ever made him. He'd spent his whole life being underestimated by people who'd known him

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since the day he was born. A place full of strangers who'd take him at the worth of his work sounded a great deal like freedom.

He didn't have much to weigh. A duffel bag, a discharge, a trade nobody around him seemed to need, and a year's worth of proof that drifting wasn't going to fix itself. Florida was a rumor and a gamble, a long way off, sight unseen. But a rumor and a gamble beat what he had, which was nothing, going nowhere.

So Bud pointed himself south. He was twenty-three years old, and for the second time in his life he was leaving on the strength of a feeling that whatever waited out there had to be bigger than what was behind him. The first time it had been the Navy, and the feeling had been right. He was betting it would be right again.