

# Jeremy's War 1812

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## In memory of Grandma Boyd and Grandma Ibbitson

# 1

They were expecting me to cry. I had seen tears in Uncle Will's eyes and Aunt Amy had been crying since Tuesday.

I should have cried too. She was my mother. But I couldn't.

"Thou knowest, Lord, the secrets of our hearts ..."

Mr. Morrison was no minister — his farm was up the road. But he knew the service and there wasn't a minister for miles, so he said the words.

"We therefore commit her body to the ground — earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust ..."  
Dirt dribbled from his hand and rattled across the rough pine wood.

The women stepped away, took each other's arms, and began the walk back to Uncle Will's house. The rest of us reached for the spades that leaned against the elm. Uncle Will took my arm.

"You don't have to, son."

“I want to.”

No one spoke after that. We sank our shovels into the soft spring earth beside the grave and heaved the earth into the grave below. There were six of us, and it didn't take long. I never noticed when the last of the coffin disappeared.

When it was finished I stood over the two graves for a moment — the fresh, new one of my mother, the old grey earth beside it where my father was buried — and pretended to say a prayer. The wind tugged at my coat, and a fine drizzle began to darken the earth. I turned away and joined the men walking across the field to the house.

Most of the farmers along Yonge Street still lived in the log cabins they'd built the year they cleared the land. Our log cabin hadn't changed much in the fifteen years since I was born in it. But Uncle Will and Aunt Amy lived in a proper house, with two bedrooms and a stove inside and even lanterns at night. It was crowded now in the main room, but not too crowded to hold the dozen neighbours who stood uncomfortably and sipped on tea and tried not to show how long it had been since they'd tasted sugar cookies. People talked among themselves — about the late spring, the crops, the war we might have with the States, but not about death.

“You'll stay with us tonight, Jeremy.” Aunt Amy dabbed a handkerchief across her eyes.

“I think I'll stay at the farm.”

“Oh no.” She lowered her handkerchief. “You can't stay there all alone. Will ...” She pulled at his sleeve. “Jeremy wants to go back to the farm. To his — to his parents' farm. He mustn't do that.”

“Wouldn't you rather stay with us for a bit, son?” Uncle Will offered. “You know you're welcome.”

“Someone has to feed the animals. And I want to be alone tonight.” And I did.

“Well, he's fifteen, he can take care of himself.” Uncle Will smiled. “I'm sure he'll manage.”

“I don't know, I don't know.” Aunt Amy's handkerchief fluttered about her face. “It doesn't seem right.” But she began drifting toward the tray of cookies, which meant she'd given up.

“I don't blame you, son,” said Uncle Will, as I pulled on my coat. “I'd want to get away from all this, too. We've put cheese and some meat in the root cellar. Be sure you eat.”

“Thanks.” I wanted to leave, but he stepped forward and took my arm. Uncle Will was a big man — tall and broad and heavy. He always stood close to other men when he talked to them, as though he wanted to remind them of his strength. I didn't like it.

“We have to go to Richmond Hill tomorrow,” he said quietly. “There are ... some legal matters. Your mother gave Mr. Robinson the papers.”

I nodded. Legal matters. I hadn't thought about that. What were we going to do — about the farm, about me?

It was a muddy walk home. I wasn't used to wearing shoes. Boots were what you needed for open fields in May. But I ignored the mud. There were things to consider.

What were we going to do about the farm? I couldn't run it alone. And I didn't want to run it. I hated the farm.

I stopped in the field. *I hated the farm.* It echoed inside me. I'd never known that before. Oh, I'd said it every day. *I hate this farm,* I'd say to myself, as I struggled with the hay for the cows, or spread the manure across the fields, or fought with a chicken for her egg. *I hate this farm.* It was like part of breathing.

But I'd never really known it until now. Known it absolutely. I hated the farm. I hated farming. I'd always hated it. So had my father.

My family came to Upper Canada in 1784, after the American colonies rebelled against England. My father and my Uncle Will were the sons of a farmer in New York. The two brothers stayed loyal to the King when rebellion came, and because they were loyal the Yankees threatened to put them in jail as traitors. So they left, both still in their teens, and came to Upper Canada. The Americans who came north after the war were called Loyalists, and they got grants of land.

I don't know much about their first farm, but it must have been poor, because when the government

began opening the land north of York for settlement, they sold the farm and took land on Yonge Street, about twenty miles north of the town.

They each had two hundred acres, side by side. But you'd have thought their farms were on opposite ends of the earth. My Uncle Will was born to farm. His crops ripened faster, his cows were fatter, his children were fatter too.

My father worked from dawn to dark and it never seemed to do any good. I heard someone whisper once that the only luck he ever had was getting mama as his wife.

He met her in York. She was the daughter of a miller, and people thought she was too good for him (I heard Aunt Amy say that once), but she married him anyway.

I don't know if she knew what she was getting into. We lived in a one-room cabin. The stone fireplace gave us light and heat for food — and smoke to choke us until our eyes watered. She kept the house clean, and looked after the cow and the chickens and the pig while my father fought with the land and lost.

One day he was working in the field when suddenly he grabbed his chest and fell down and didn't get up. That was seven years ago. I don't have much of a memory of him. All I remember is a man sitting at the table at night, his face shadowy in the firelight, staring silently at his hands.

Mama should have given up the farm and gone back to York, but she stayed. This was where God had put her, she said. She worked from before the sun was up till after it set. She worked in the field and in the house and in the barn until the lines on her face seemed to deepen as you watched her. She didn't talk much when she worked, and she never sang, but I sometimes heard her humming to herself, some song I didn't know.

I worked too. At first there wasn't much I was good for, except bringing in the eggs and sweeping the floor. But I was always big for my age — I had my Uncle Will's shoulders, mama used to say — and by the time I was ten I was doing a man's work.

Uncle Will would lend a hand when he could, or send his son Seth. We'd help each other with the harvest, mama working in the fields beside the men while Aunt Amy shook her head and muttered that it wasn't right.

There was no school I could go to, so mama taught me to read and write and do sums. We had only the Bible to read, but we read it every night. I guess there wasn't much laughter on the farm — mama didn't think much of people who cackled like hens, as she said. But it was comfortable at night, the two of us together, me reading the Bible out loud, or writing out sentences with chalk on an old slate, mama correcting my mistakes.

I'd noticed her getting thinner, and she held her side sometimes and set her face against showing

the pain, but she never said anything about it, and I never asked. Then last Thursday, we'd just finished getting the field ready for the spring planting when she leaned on her hoe and said she felt dizzy. I helped her to the house, then ran to get Aunt Amy. Mama lasted less than a week, getting weaker and weaker. She was hurting inside, but there was nothing we could do. By the end we were just hoping she'd stop being in pain.

So they were both gone now, buried on their own land, at the foot of a hill beneath an elm tree. And I was alone.

I stood in the yard between the house and the barn. The low grey clouds had created an early twilight. The tree beside the house creaked in the wind that curled around me and made me shiver. The drizzle had turned to rain, a thin, cutting rain that stung my cheeks. I turned away from the wind and rain and walked to the house.

Inside it was dark, and that was fine. I stoked the fire and pulled a chair up beside it, then wrapped a blanket around me and sat in the chair, waiting for the warmth from the fire to reach inside me. The grey light from the window outlined the shadow of the table. I looked at the table and thought of my mother and cried.

## 2

The light from the morning sun woke me. I uncurled myself from the chair and stretched stiffly. There were chores to do — the cow had to be milked, the chickens and the pig fed. I was still in my good clothes; the wool trousers scratched against my legs and I was anxious to get out of them. But Uncle Will had said we were going to Richmond Hill for some business, so I left them on.

I was just coming out of the barn with the milk when Uncle Will's cart trundled down the twin ruts of our path, pulled by a dapple-grey mare Uncle Will owned and everybody envied.

"Are you ready, son?" He seemed impatient, restless.

"Right there." I hurried to the root cellar with the milk, slopping half of it over the sides of the pail and some of it onto me. I ran to the house, where my cheese and bread sat waiting on the table. No matter how restless Uncle Will was I needed that cheese and bread — I hadn't eaten properly in days.

It was the first good morning after a week of bitter weather. The air was moist and fresh, the rain from the night before glinting off the grass and fences in the cool May sun. I munched on my bread and breathed in the scented air. It seemed hard to believe there'd been a yesterday, with a funeral and rain and cold tears.

But Uncle Will seemed gloomier today than ever. Worse — at the grave, he had tried to comfort me. Now he just made me feel uncomfortable. He gripped the reins tight in his hands and stared silently at the back of the horse's head.

"Why are we going to Richmond Hill, Uncle Will?" I asked finally, more to break the silence than anything.

"I told you yesterday, there are some legal things to settle." Uncle Will glanced at me quickly, then back at the horse. "Your parents left a will with Mr. Robinson."

The Robinson mill was the only mill for miles. People brought the grain they grew in their fields there, sometimes in carts, sometimes on their backs. They went away with ground flour — the only real reward for a season of work. James Robinson built the mill in the nineties, and grinding people's grain for them had made him the richest man in the township. What's more, he could read and write and do sums, which most people couldn't, so he took care of a lot of personal business, too.

"What's in the will?" I'd never seen a will before.

"I don't know. Nobody knows what's in a will, until it's opened." He shrugged. "Though of course, everything will have been left to you."

I knew that shrug. It was the shrug a farmer gave just before he tried to steal your cow from you. It was the shrug everyone gave when they wanted you to believe they didn't care, but they did. I knew that shrug — something was going on.

"Have you thought about what you're going to do, Jeremy?" Uncle Will asked, gazing ahead down the road.

I gazed down the road too. "Nope. Not really."

"Well, you're fifteen, now. And you're full grown. You're big for your age, and strong, and ready to work."

I nodded. Around here, as soon you were big enough to work you worked. Maybe on your own farm, maybe on someone else's. There wasn't any other choice, unless you left and went to work in a village.

And what would I do in a village? What was I good for? I could get work as an apprentice, maybe, at a blacksmith's or merchant's. None of it sounded better than farming.

"... and of course there's the question of the farm." I blinked. I hadn't been listening.

"Sorry?"

"I said —" Uncle Will gripped the reins tighter. "I said, there is the question of the farm. I mean, it's yours now ..."

I nodded. It was mine. Only I didn't want it.

"But ..." Uncle Will rubbed his forehead. "I'm not sure what you're going to do with it."

"Whatcha mean?" I gave him a swift look. He'd been thinking about this.

"Well, you're a strong boy of course, no doubt about it." Uncle Will slapped my knee. "You've got your grandfather's build — you must be near six feet, now — and his eyes."

I grimaced to myself. Why did people always talk about your eyes? My mother said I had her father's eyes. My father'd said I had *his* father's eyes. They were just eyes — sort of grey and too wide apart, if you ask me.

"Though you remind me of your mother, too." Uncle Will continued. I groaned. Another adult comparing me to other adults.

"You have her hair of course. Fair, like hers, and wild — do you ever get a comb through it?" I ran my hand through my hair, which I did a hundred times a day, though it never did any good. "And you've got her cheekbones and her nose." He chuckled. "Your father always said the thing he loved most about your mother was her nose. I told him — well, never mind." He blushed slightly.

“About the farm ...”

“I was saying you’re big for your age, and strong, but you can’t run a farm, now can you?” Uncle Will raised a sceptical eyebrow. “I mean, you’re too young. And you’re all alone.”

The question was back again. What was I going to do? I waited for Uncle Will to go on, but he didn’t have anything more to say.

“What should I do?”

He shrugged again. “I’m not sure. I’ve been thinking about it, but I’m not sure.” He shook the reins. “Let’s wait until we see Mr. Robinson.”

We didn’t speak after that. Uncle Will went back to staring at the road, and I stared at my hands. I’d always known what was going to happen to me — I was going to work on the farm I hated until mama was too old, then I would take it over. Now she was gone, and I didn’t know what my future held.

It was only a few miles from the farm to the mill, but Yonge Street was never easy to get along, especially in the spring. We probably would have got there faster walking, but Uncle Will was over fifty now, and men over fifty liked to sit, even if it meant taking longer to get someplace.

But we reached the mill finally. It was a wooden building, two storeys high and narrow, with a large wheel on one side. We climbed out, and walked inside.

We were in a storeroom full of great bags of oats and flour, and air full of dust that drifted in the sunlight streaming through the window.

“Hello!” Uncle Will shouted, and in a moment Mr. Robinson came out — a thin, grey little man in a black coat.

“Hello, Mr. Fields.” He shook Uncle Will’s hand. “A pleasure as always.”

“This is my nephew, Jeremy,” said Uncle Will. “Thelma’s boy.”

“I’m so very sorry to hear of your loss.” Robinson tilted his head to one side. “Your mother’s father and my father were the best of friends. She was a brave woman.”

“I told Jeremy that his parents entrusted you with their will.” Uncle Will seemed restless.

“Yes, it’s in the office. Follow me.”

Robinson disappeared through a door near the back, and we followed. Just as we were about to go in Uncle Will stopped, and gripped my arm.

“Jeremy ...” He swallowed. “I want you to know — I loved your father and your mother. They were part of our family, and my family means more to me than anything in the world.”

I nodded to show I understood, but I didn’t. It seemed to me such a strange thing to say.

We went in, and found Robinson sitting at a desk piled with papers, most of them rolled up and tied

with red string. He motioned Uncle Will to sit, but my uncle went over to the small window, and looked out. This room was too small for him.

Robinson pulled one of the pieces of paper from the pile, and cleared his throat.

"Your mother left a will, Jeremy, and asked me to take possession of it. I'll open it now, if you wish." I nodded.

He untied the string and opened the letter. Quickly he scanned the lines, then passed it to me.

"It was drawn up in York, and of course it's all in legal language, but briefly, your mother willed her estate — that is, the farm and all her worldly possessions — to you."

He offered me a thin smile. "The will also provides that, in the event of her death before you reach the age of twenty-one, I am to act as trustee for the estate."

Uncle Will stepped toward the desk. "Jeremy and I were talking on the ride in. We agreed that it would be quite impossible for him to manage the farm on his own."

I looked sharply at Uncle Will. I may have thought that, but I'd never said it.

"Quite so, quite so," Robinson agreed. "We have a dilemma, in this regard."

Uncle Will cleared his throat. "Jeremy, I would be willing to purchase the farm from you. With the money, you could get a start of your own in life.

You could help me farm, if you liked, or learn a trade, or ..." His voice trailed off.

"As your trustee, Jeremy, I must say I think this would be for the best." Robinson smiled. "Selling the farm would surely be the wisest thing to do."

"I think ... twenty pounds would be a fair price, don't you?" Uncle Will looked to Robinson.

"Yes," Robinson nodded. "Twenty pounds would be fair indeed."

Twenty pounds! The farm was worth five times that. On bad days Mama would talk about selling — she'd say she was tempted to take the hundred pounds some man had offered her and go back to York.

"Twenty pounds is too low." I glared at Uncle Will. He turned away and looked out the window again. I swivelled around to Robinson. "It's too low."

Robinson rubbed the side of his nose. "Under normal circumstances, I would say yes. But," he smiled apologetically, "the farm is not in prime condition. Your parents were unable to clear much of the land. And it would not be easy to find anyone with the capital to purchase a farm in the middle of spring planting."

"I think it's quite reasonable, Jeremy." Uncle Will moved and reached out a hand, but I shrank back. "It's quite reasonable under the circumstances."

"You must also understand, these are difficult times." Robinson stepped from behind his desk.

"You know there is talk of war. The British and French are at each other's throats. And now the Americans are involved. If hostilities should break out, we could be invaded, our villages torched, our farms burned by Yankee troops."

"You'd do all right," I shot back. Anger flushed my face. I could hardly breathe. I could hardly think. I hated the farm. I didn't want it. That's what I'd said to myself. But this ... this was wrong. They were stealing the farm from me. They were *stealing* my mother's farm.

"I won't do it. I won't sell." I swung from one to the other. "You can't do this to my mother. You're taking her land from her."

"Jeremy ..." Uncle Will reached out his hand again, but I shrunk back. "Your mother's dead. I wish that weren't so, but it is. This is the best thing now."

"No! I won't let you do it!" My shout echoed against the bare walls of the empty room. The two men stared at me, shocked.

Robinson cast a quick glance at Uncle Will, who nodded. Robinson walked back to his desk and held up the will.

"Jeremy, under the terms of this will, I have full power of attorney as your trustee. That means I can do whatever I feel is best for you, with or without your consent. I'm sorry you don't agree, but I feel your uncle's solution is in your best interest."

Uncle Will took a leather pouch from his coat and walked over to Robinson's desk.

"I took the liberty of bringing money with me. I believe you'll find twenty pounds there." He dropped the pouch quickly on the desk as though the leather were burning his hand.

"Oh excellent! I've drawn up the necessary papers. If you'll just sign ..." Robinson held out a sheet of paper to Uncle Will. He paused for a moment, his eyes closed, his face tight. Then he grabbed a quill from Robinson's desk, dipped it in a bottle of ink, and scrawled his name across the bottom. Robinson handed him a worn-looking slip of paper.

"Here is the deed to the farm. I'll have the contract witnessed later. The property is yours."

Robinson picked up the pouch, removed several coins, and slipped them into his vest pocket. Then he turned to me. "And here, Jeremy, is fifteen pounds. My services in this matter entitle me to a small commission, but the rest is your inheritance."

"I don't want your money!" I backed toward the door. The room seemed to be tilting. I was just standing there watching as they took away mama's farm. I was so helpless, so useless ...

"Jeremy, let's go home." Uncle Will reached for his coat. "We can talk about this on the way back."

"No, not with you. I hate you!" My hand, groping behind me, found the door knob. I flung the door open.

"You thieves!" I screamed. "You stole our farm! Damn you, you dirty thieves!"

I ran through the storeroom and out into the morning sunshine. The light was blinding. I shielded my eyes, and stumbled along the road toward my home. I cried out curses against Uncle Will, against Robinson, against the world. I swore revenge against them, swore I'd kill them, swore I'd win back my farm.

But I knew the words were empty. There was nothing I could do.