

# The Devil's Highway

THE OUTLAW YEARS  
ON THE NATCHEZ TRACE



STAN APPLGATE

*The Devil's  
Highway*



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Stan Applegate

Illustrations by  
James Watling

  
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*For my wife, Marjorie*



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## *Pursuit*

*Franklin, Tennessee*  
*September 5, 1811*

Zeb pulled the sweaty horse to a stop at the edge of the forest. He turned in the saddle and stared down the steep meadow into the valley below, searching for any movement. In the distance he could just make out the house and barns of his family's farm, silent and abandoned in the moonlight.

About a half mile down the valley, lanterns still glowed in the windows of Tate McPhee's ramshackle cabin. "Must still be celebrating," he whispered to the horse. "They don't know we've gone."

The horse stomped his foot in the tall grass. Zeb leaned forward until his mouth was next to the horse's ear. "Hush, Christmas," he said. "We gotta be real quiet." He turned the big horse, moving into the dark forest at a slow, careful walk. Even with a full moon rising, he couldn't see more than a few feet ahead of him.

The horse skidded down the embankment onto the Natchez Road. The road was overgrown, just wide enough for one horse and rider or for men walking single file. Zeb grimaced. The

muffled plop plop of the horse's hooves on the leaf-covered dirt road seemed loud after the almost silent canter up through the meadow.

He hated to dismount now, but there was no other way. He stroked the horse's neck, talking quietly with him. "No point riding any farther, Christmas," he whispered. "Can't see a thing. Don't want you to step in a hole." He slipped off the horse and led him down the Natchez Road.

As they walked, the horse turned his head, looking down at him. Zeb prayed Christmas would keep quiet. It was not only Tate McPhee's men who worried him. Bands of outlaws hid in the forest waiting for people traveling alone. If they found him, they would take his horse and saddle and all of his belongings. He'd be lucky if they left him alive.

Zeb led Christmas for about an hour, trying to put distance between him and McPhee's men. He wondered what they would do to him if they found him.

He peered into the dark forest. The light from the rising moon was beginning to penetrate the dense canopy overhead. The road was easier to see, but it was still too risky to ride. He spotted a huge fallen oak not far from the trail. The long, moss-covered trunk was almost as wide as he was tall. A clump of river birches grew nearby. "We'll be able to hide over there and get some rest," Zeb whispered, stroking the horse. "We've got to be real quiet."

Zeb led him up onto the forest floor and around the fallen trunk. The moon was much brighter now. He could see a little clearing bordered on one side by the fallen tree and on the other by the clump of birches.

He stood the rifle and one of the old dueling pistols against the trunk of the big tree, leaving the other pistol in his belt, just

in case. He untied the bedroll from the back of the saddle. The canvas cover was wrapped around his cooking pots. He stretched the canvas on the ground and then unpacked the battered tin-ware pots, careful to make as little noise as possible.

A long, narrow loaf of bread fell out of the bedroll. He broke off a piece and bit through the hard crust, smiling at the familiar taste. His mama had made the bread the day before, filling the cabin with the smell of yeast as she kneaded the dough and then formed the bread into the long loaves his daddy had always liked.

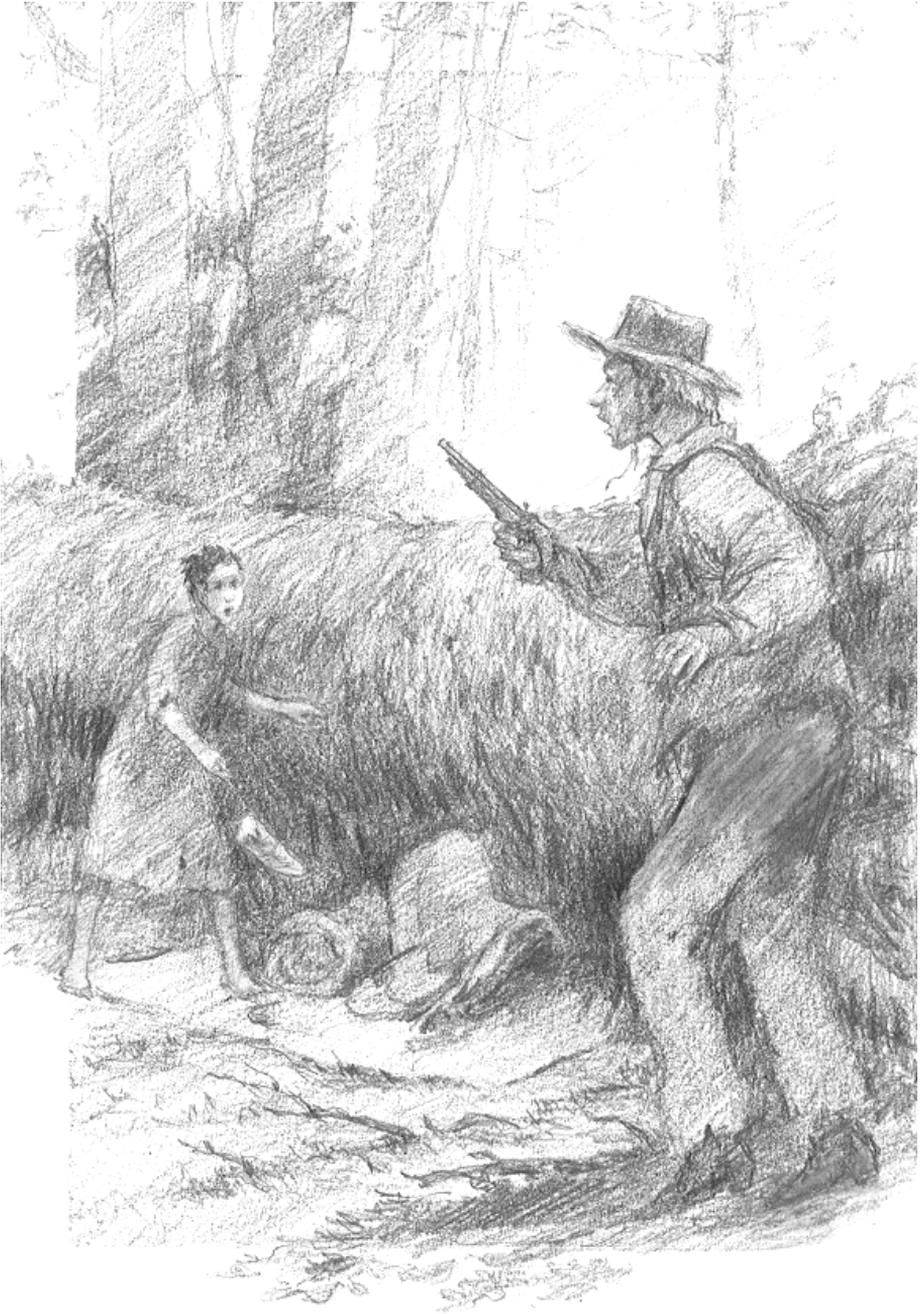
He was tempted to eat more, but he had a long way to go, maybe a month of riding if he were lucky. Better just to eat a little now and save the rest.

He left the bedroll, the saddle, and his two saddlebags on the canvas sheet and walked the horse through the blanket of last year's dead leaves to the grove of birches. His grampa had always told him that these little birch clumps were the only places in the deep forest where there was enough grass for grazing. He squinched his eyes closed. *Please let Grampa be alive*, he prayed.

The horse lowered his head over Zeb's shoulder. He reached up and stroked the soft muzzle. "I'll give you some grain tomorrow morning, Christmas. Gotta leave at first light."

As he tied Christmas to a low branch, he heard a metallic clang. It sounded like his pots and pans banging together! Had McPhee's men caught up with him already? He pulled the old dueling pistol out of his belt, ready to climb back on Christmas and ride away from there. He stood still, listening.... Not a sound.... He crept back to where he had left his gear.

A girl who looked to be about ten years old was crouching near his bedroll, motionless, wary, ready to run at the slightest movement.



*When she saw the pistol in his hand, she dropped the bread.*

She had been eating his loaf of bread. She clutched the bread against her chest as if she were afraid he would take it from her. When he moved, she turned to run, but the fallen tree was in her way.

He ran toward her, waving his pistol. "Hey! You there!" he said in a loud whisper. "What do you think you're doing?"

The girl cringed. She held one arm in front of her as if she thought he would hit her. When she saw the pistol in his hand, she dropped the bread and spat out what she was eating. "Please don't shoot me, mister," she whispered. "I won't eat any more."

Zeb stood taller, looking down at the girl. No one had ever called him "mister" before.

The girl put her finger to her lips. She pleaded with her eyes for him to be quiet. He nodded and turned his head slowly, looking for any movement in the shadows. He turned back to the girl.

She looked like some wild creature of the forest. Her short black hair stuck out from her head in every direction. She was wearing a homespun dress, torn in places and caked with dried mud, the coarse, loose weave stretched longer on one side. It was hard to see in the dark, but it seemed to him that her spindly arms and legs were gray with dirt.

He lowered the pistol. "I ain't gonna shoot you," he whispered. "Go ahead and eat. Looks like you're starving. What're you doing here anyway?"

Zeb suddenly remembered what his uncle Ira had said about children being used as bait on the Natchez Road. He put his back to the tree, waving his pistol slowly back and forth. His mouth was dry. He could hardly speak. "Where's your gang?" he whispered.

She shifted a wad of bread to one side of her mouth. "I don't know," she said, swallowing. Her eyes darted around the forest. "I hope I never see them again."

"So you do belong to a gang." He stooped to pick up the other pistol.

"I did, but I don't now," she said, sitting down on the blanket. "I ran away." She stuffed another piece of the bread in her mouth.

"You ran away? How do I know you're telling the truth? Why were you with a gang?"

"They stole me down at Yowani to work the Natchez Road."

He didn't believe anything she was saying. He kept looking around, expecting outlaws to appear from behind every tree. He was sure that he had caught her in a lie. "You were living at Yowani? That's Choctaw country. That's only for Indians."

"Not only for Indians," she said. "There are Indians and whites there. Most of us are Indian, though."

"You don't look like an Indian. What's your name, anyway?"

"My name is Hannah McAllister."

"But that's not Indian!"

"Well, I'm half Indian," she said. "My mama's Choctaw. My father's a white man, a doctor. He works with the Choctaw medicine men at Yowani, learnin' from them and sharin' what he knows."

She looked down at the clothes she was wearing. "When I'm in Yowani, I feel Choctaw. I dress like a Choctaw. The outlaws made me wear this dress. They stole it from some farmer's clothesline. Said it made me look more like a white child." She pulled the hem of the dress down toward her ankles. "Too small for me now."

She ran her fingers through the wild mess on her head. “The outlaws didn’t like Indians,” she said. “That’s why they cut off my hair. I had kept it in a beautiful long braid down my back.”

Zeb couldn’t help but smile. This tough little person had tears in her eyes because they had cut her hair.

“They said nobody was gonna stop if I was nothin’ but an Indian,” she said. “I was s’posed to look like a white child, lost in the woods. Is it true? Do you think nobody would stop for a lost Indian child?”

“I think nobody stops at all anymore,” he said. “Everybody’s heard about luring travelers on the Natchez Road with women or little children.”

She seemed to be weighing what he said. She nodded as if she didn’t notice that he had evaded her question.

“Why did they kidnap you? What happened?” he insisted.

She sighed. “Mama warned me not to go near the woods.”

“And?...”

She yawned and rubbed her eyes. “And I did. I thought I heard a baby crying. But it was a man. An outlaw. He grabbed me and covered my mouth. He carried me into the woods. I bit his hand as hard as I could. He just held me tighter until I couldn’t breathe.”

Zeb shook his head. There was a good possibility that she was telling the truth, but that just made things more complicated. What was he going to do with her? It might be nice to have someone to travel with, but if Tate McPhee’s men got him, they’d get her too. They couldn’t afford to leave anybody alive. He looked down at her upturned face. She seemed to be trying to read his thoughts. “And then what happened?” he asked more gently.

“He took me to a place in the forest. There was a gang of outlaws. Not only men. Four of the men had women with them, and there were three little children, just babies. They said I had to help them work the Natchez Road.”

“They wanted you to stand on the Natchez Road and cry and try to stop travelers.” He shook his head. “Isn’t anyone looking for you?”

“I’m sure that Father and some of the *tushka*, the Choctaw warriors, came lookin’ for me right away, but the gang moved up here into Chickasaw territory. The Choctaw won’t come up here.”

“You think your daddy gave up?”

Hannah turned her face away from him. “It’s been almost six months,” she said. “They stole me last March. When you get kidnapped by the outlaws, you’re never seen again. That’s just the way it is. Everybody knows that.”

“But somehow you got away.”

“Been plannin’ it for a long time,” she whispered, about to push another piece of bread into her mouth. “I heard them makin’ plans to go up to a place just north of Franklin to wait for somebody important coming down from Nashville with a lot of money. They said they’d have to stay up there for a while, so I figured that would give me a chance to get away. They’ll go north and I’ll go south. If I can walk about twenty miles a day, I can get to Yowani in maybe two or three weeks.”

Zeb sat down next to her on the canvas. “Doubt you could make twenty miles a day,” he said. “Hafta spend half of your time just looking for food. How long you been running from them?”

“Just started,” she said, looking over her shoulder into the deep woods around them. “If you’d a’ come along a few hours sooner you’d a’ met the gang right here,” she said. “They were

packin' up, gettin' ready to leave, and I just slipped away. I could hear them huntin' for me all over the place. Said they'd skin me alive if they caught me."

Zeb peered again into the dark forest, searching for movements in the shadows. He looked down at the bread in the girl's hand. "You were eating that bread like you hadn't eaten in a week."

Hannah nodded. "We were runnin' out of food. The men eat first and give what's left to the women and children. There hasn't been much. I hope you don't hold it against me, mister. I was hungry."

"Now what are you going to do?"

"Can I come with you? I can ride just about anything. That plow horse of yours looks big enough to hold us both."

Zeb looked at her, not at all sure what to do.

Hannah moved to grab his arm, then pulled back, as if she were not sure she should touch him. She dropped her hand to her lap. "Please, mister," she said, "I don't want that gang of outlaws to find me. If they catch me, they'll near kill me." She turned her head away from him.

Zeb could see that she was trying to keep from crying. *Can't leave her, he thought, but taking her with me is really going to slow me down. She probably can't ride at all.*

"Listen," he said in a low voice, "I'll take you as far as the first stand. You can stay there. They'll take care of you."

She looked back at him with a sharp intake of breath, almost a sob.

"I can't take you all the way down to Yowani," he said, scowling at her. "I just can't lose any more time. With two people it'll take a lot longer. I've got to get to Natchez in a hurry, and I'm only a few hours ahead of real trouble."

She shrank away from him. "You an outlaw?" she whispered.

Zeb shook his head. "No. I'm not. I'll tell you all about it later."

She handed him the last piece of bread. "We better get going."

He stuck the bread in his pocket. "We can't go tonight," he whispered. "Too dark for Christmas. Grampa says they haven't cleared that trail in almost ten years. We'll sleep here and leave at first light in the morning."

She smiled. "You call that big nag *Christmas*?"

Zeb nodded. "Got him for Christmas almost four years ago. Fastest horse in Franklin, Tennessee. Nobody's ever beat him."

Hannah cut her eyes up at Zeb as if he were a teller of tall tales. A gust of wind rustled the leaves above them. She looked around the forest, the smile disappearing from her face. "I don't even know your name," she said.

"My name is Zebulon D'Evereux," he said. "Everybody calls me Zeb."