

The Rose Quartz
ARROWHEAD

The Land Beneath Our Feet

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 ARCHWAY
PUBLISHING

The Girl Who Inherited the Rose Quartz Arrowhead

Land is the only thing in the world that amounts to anything for it's the only thing in this world that lasts. Tis the only thing worth working for, worth fighting for, worth dying for.

—MARGARET MITCHELL, *GONE WITH THE WIND*, 1936

Determined to watch the searchers dig for the remaining body parts, Francie climbed Arrowhead Mountain.

Yesterday all construction on the new highway halted when a piece of road machinery raised its metal claws, unexpectedly claiming two human legs amid the jumble of dirt and rocks it removed while clearing to lay culverts.

The road crew contractors told folks at the Gillivray and Gillery Feed 'n Seed store in Littafuchee that without a doubt the two severed legs did not belong to the same person. One was thin and hairy with a Western boot on the foot. The other leg, dark-skinned and muscular, was shoeless.

Fourteen-year-old Francie Kirwin had felt disappointed something newsworthy had happened in quiet Dixie County on a boring school day.

Enough of the mystery remained unanswered that she had felt drawn to the site on Saturday morning in early June 1985.

Search and recovery crew, working with hand shovels and large sieves, carefully hunted for human remains.

Laurice, Francie's mother, was away at work. Rory, her adopted father, and her Aunt Carmen had forbidden the four first cousins from going to the dig site near their home, Merrifield Farm.

No one had said specifically that she, as the oldest and most responsible, couldn't

go alone and watch from Arrowhead's steep cliff directly above where the body parts had been unearthed.

A recreational hiker would have moved in a switchback pattern along the jutting rocks and thorny underbrush instead of straight up the steep incline. Not Francie. The thrill to the athletic girl was to tackle majestic Arrowhead Mountain straight on.

She had made frequent trips to watch the heavy road machinery's progress on the new wide four-lane highway.

Long stretches of it had opened years ago; but like an overlooked stepchild, sparsely populated Dixie County had been put off until last.

This was the last stretch.

Meanwhile, deep rumbling like distant thunder sounded from the excavators and crawlers that dug and pushed relentlessly at the earth's seams of granite, quartz, limestone, and shale.

As a youngster, Francie had been allowed to explore the mountains, foothills, and valley of her family's ranch with her oldest first cousin, Vincent.

Emigrating from Ireland to Georgia then Alabama, five generations of Kirwin children had lived in Dixie County. Their agrarian hamlet of three dozen families, some miles apart, had made scant attempts to modernize for that would bring attention to their all-white enclave in Littafuchee.

Today with the morning sun in her face, Francie dug the toes of her ragged tennis shoes into tight eroded crevices and moved her feet up higher and higher.

She adjusted her orientation for the eye bandage she had to wear over her right eye.

As her thin arms pulled the weight of her body over a lichen-encrusted boulder, her footing slipped and sent rocks plummeting toward Talwa Creek at the base of the mountain.

Like a scared squirrel hanging perilously from a weak tree branch, she dangled from a long kudzu vine. She held firmly onto it and watched loosened rocks roll down.

They bounced off the embankment in rapid succession and landed *plunkety plunk* in the creek below.

Francie wiped perspiration from her face with the front placket of her plaid cotton shirt.

She knew her father would complain again this evening about the road

construction muddying the livestock's drinking water. She didn't want to contribute to the water problem and promised herself to be more sure-footed.

Near the peak of the mountain, she worked around to the bald west rim, which overlooked the construction. Here she slid to the middle of the topmost ledge in the mountain's recently blasted stairstep cutaways.

The excavation of Arrowhead Mountain began three years earlier. It was the final extension of the north-south highway and was cussed at by Dixie County farmers like an unwelcomed intruder.

The girl's adopted grandmother, Anne Beatrice Kirwin, a retired Alabama history teacher, had told her proudly of Dixie County's rich local history. She had filled her granddaughter's imagination with lively stories from the Native Americans on to the earliest explorers from Spain, whose interests were in the coastal areas, and fur traders from France.

Granny Bea took her to visit Horseshoe Bend and to Civil War battle sites.

Granny Bea talked about folks from long ago. To many children, they were easily dismissed shadows belonging to their parents and grandparents only. However, Francie could visualize the details of starving, wounded wartime soldiers who wrote home at night by firelight about kissing girlfriends, holding their children, and dreaming of filled bellies from kettles of home cooking. She could feel their homesickness.

Granny Bea recalled odd things that had happened to folks, impossible situations that often sent Francie into giggling fits.

Granny Bea laughed at her own stories but cautioned her granddaughter to speak kindly about others, especially the disadvantaged and eccentrics.

"The poorer someone is, the more pride matters to them," she had whispered to the little girl.

All Granny Bea's stories were wonderfully spun, and Francie had remembered most of them.

She missed her grandmother.

Years ago, Granny Bea was displeased when the official announcement of a new highway was made. It was the same reason local folks were upset. Neither the preservation of the area's scenic beauty nor significant local history seemed to have been taken into consideration.

"Anne Bea has a bee in her bonnet," the county commissioner had warned the director of the State Highway Department.

All efforts to register opposition failed.

Francie shuddered now, remembering how she and Granny Bea would sit on their front porch and listen to dynamite blasts sounding like sky-shattering lightning throughout Littafuchee's valley area.

The windows rattled and the mortar cracked in her family's brick ranch house.

To tear into formidable Arrowhead Mountain, powerful compressors had drilled rods down through many feet of rock. Dozens of dynamite charges went off daily.

After a series of blasts, mighty scrapers and excavators moved in to dig up the rubble while monstrous trucks hauled the heart of Dixie County's most distinguished landmark away, load by load.

The gaping wound was ready for paving. And then yesterday, everything stopped. That attested to the importance of the find.

Sitting cross-legged on the ledge, Francie tried to listen to the muffled voices three hundred feet below.

Tension swirled into the breeze and swept through the gorge:

"... careful, men"

"... rope this section"

"... stand back, please"

"... crime scene. Authorized personnel only."

"Francie."

"... relief crew moving in"

"Francie?"

Caw-caw-caw screamed a fat crow hovering overhead, jolting Francie into recognition of her aunt's voice calling her name.

"Francie, are you available?" asked the soft, Southern voice to her left side. "I need you to babysit while I go buy some more canning jars."

The girl was startled. She blushed, caught in an act of defiance of Kirwin rules.

"I didn't know you could get up here so fast, Auntie Carmen."

She noticed Auntie wasn't sweating at all.

Carmen said, "I tried stopping you when I saw you cross the creek. But I guess you didn't hear me then either. I have eight gallons of soup mix ready to put up, and I need more quart canning jars with lids. I tried to catch you as you passed," her aunt finished.

She wrapped her long, turquoise-colored skirt around her bare ankles and sat down next to her niece.

“Besides, I must admit, my curiosity’s piqued too. What’s going on now?”

“Dad’s down there,” said Francie, pointing him out in the crowd of workers gathered below. “The sheriff’s deputy just went over and told him something, but I couldn’t hear what.”

Carmen rubbed tender longleaf pine needles back and forth in her hands as she watched the scene. She held her hands to Francie’s face for her to breathe in the clean, woody scent.

Next, she stuck one hand into the pocket of her gathered skirt and retrieved prescription eye drops.

“It’s time.”

Francie tipped her head backward so Carmen could lift the eye bandage enough to drop in the medicine. She had not been able to see what her eye looked like since the accident except for the small border of bruises on her cheek.

“Auntie, what do you think happened? I mean, nobody in Dixie County’s missing.”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe it’s the bodies of those two bootleggers they’ve been hunting for years. The ones who disappeared from one of those coal mining towns. Or maybe some bumbling mortician just had two extra legs and dumped them in the rubble.”

“That’s not it! Even so, I think it’s exciting. I mean I’m sad somebody’s dead and all, but just figuring out the whys makes a kid’s imagination take off,” exclaimed Francie.

Caw-caw-caw, the fat black crow continued to warn the twosome of the dangers below.

Carmen got up. She shook her head no as she glanced at her gold pocket watch necklace.

“Baby-sitting awaits you, my nice niece Frances.”

“May we stay for a few more minutes, please? Nothing this exciting has ever happened before.”

Carmen waved both arms until she got her brother’s attention. He waved back.

“Who’s watching the little ones?” Rory shouted to her.

“The TV and Arlo,” Carmen shouted back.

He shook his head before turning his attention to the trench in the roadbed that got wider and deeper as the searchers dug.

Francie's attention wandered across the wide span to the other part of Arrowhead Mountain.

There arose the matching notched cutaway that, although it had been part of the same mass for eons, now faced them like an intimidating opponent.

The old Florida Short Route had served as the main thoroughfare for decades. It blended unobtrusively with the natural terrain. The two-lane road twisted dangerously in and out of the tree-lined scenic elevations of Dixie County parallel to railroad tracks, meandering streams, and long white fence lines.

Whenever the Kirwin cousins were in Auntie's van, they pumped their arms at the conductor and shouted to their own driver, "Hurry, race 'em. Beat 'em."

Rolling foothills of the Appalachian Mountain range and fertile fields in the floodplains near rivers and streams made up much of Dixie County. But it was primarily a forest of pines, oaks, hickories, and maples.

Littafuchee had been hidden by the steep mountain range that had proven difficult to traverse by horse-drawn wagon or by foot. The few Anglo-American pioneers who settled in the hamlet lived lives isolated from mainstream society until the early twentieth century when railroad tracks were laid.

For decades thereafter, teenage boys hitched hobo rides south to get off as far away as Columbus, Georgia, or Mobile, Alabama. It was their first exposure to modern cities.

Locally they were known as "elbow boys," clinging by their wits to open boxcars until they could wiggle inside.

As a teenager, Francie's father, Rory Kirwin, had been one of that fun-loving group of teenaged rabble-rousers who typically disregarded the law.

Clustered in Littafuchee were a few lapboard stores, two churches, a gasoline station, and the spacious pristine homesteads.

That was the extent of civilization in a place whose indigenous inhabitants were once known honorably as "those who make straight arrows."

Francie had lived in the little hamlet since she was three years old when her mother married into the Kirwin family. The pleasant view of the farms was all she remembered.

The folks across the new four-lane highway were now like a separate geographic entity.

This separation filled her with loneliness. Her best friend, Kimberlee Gillivray, lived on the other side. She felt stuck on the east side with three younger, bothersome siblings and cousin.

The naïve adolescent longed for everything to be just as it had been during the wonderful years before the terrible road machinery cut a wide divide separating the best friends and the community.

She couldn't figure out why the change had made older folks act so peculiar. They talked about the highway endlessly. Some liked it. Some didn't. Nobody agreed.

Land ownership didn't offer those who'd inherited it a vision of prosperity. Just backbreaking toil. They struggled to make the land profitable enough to hold on to their inheritances.

There were few industries in the impoverished county—a mobile home manufacturer, a poultry-processing plant, and a lumber company.

Locals continued to debate the highway construction's purpose and effect. Most were cynics. Most resented the influx of strange men who came to work on the road construction. For wary farmers and ranchers, there had been a rush to purchase locks for homes and pasture gates.

Francie wished that the crews and machines would work faster, finish, and go away forever so that folks could get back to normal. The tightness in her stomach warned her of what she suspected already: those things will get worse before they get better.

A staccato truck horn sounded. *Shave-and-a-haircut-two-bits.*

She recognized the distinctive sound of her dad's old truck horn. Inside it, one of the investigators sat with Rory. They poured hot coffee from a thermos.

Rory beckoned Francie to come down.

As Francie hurried downhill, her dark brown ponytail flopped against the nape of her neck. Gravity accelerated her descent. She bent deeply at the knees to counterbalance its pull and concentrated on keeping her feet moving rhythmically.

Auntie would be right behind her.

"We're coming, Dad," Francie yelled.

She jumped from the last cutaway to the dirt embankment, then she turned to give her aunt a hand.

She wasn't there.

Shading her good eye against the glare of the sun, Francie spotted Auntie Carmen's turquoise skirt disappearing beyond the pine trees along Talwa Creek.