

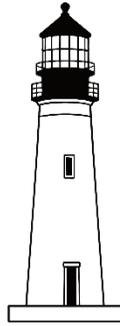
By the Light of the Bluff

A Historical Fiction Novel of a Woman's Courage, Buried
Secrets, and Finding Home in Post-Civil War Georgia

Blake Gunnels

By the Light of the Bluff

A Novel by:
Blake Gunnels



**BLUFFLIGHT
BOOKS**

“A lighthouse does not warn with fear, nor guide with force. It simply stands in the storm, steady as memory, certain as grace.”
— *From the journal of a keeper, Saint Simons Island, 1871*



☆2005 *International Firebird Award Winner for Southern Fiction* ☆

*Thank you for downloading this free preview of
By the Light of the Bluff. I hope you enjoy your first visit to Saint
Simons Island and the story of BluffLight.*

CHAPTER ONE

Arrival at the Edge of the World
Marsh Cottage, Saint Simons Island — April 12, 1873

The skiff rocked gently as it cut through the gray-green waters of Buttermilk Sound, carrying Jessica Whitmore—Jesse to the few who had known her well—and her two children toward an uncertainty she had chosen over a certainty she could no longer bear. The boatman, an elderly freedman with hands like gnarled driftwood, guided them with practiced ease through the tidal creeks separating the mainland from Saint Simons Island, his experience a comforting presence amid their upheaval.

“Not much further now, ma’am,” the boatman reassured, nodding toward the approaching shoreline where the maritime forest rose like a wall of green. “Hampton Point’s just around that bend.”

Jesse nodded, one arm wrapped protectively around six-year-old Eliza, who dozed against her side, exhausted from the journey that had begun three days earlier on a train from Savannah. Jesse gripped the boat’s edge with her free hand, her knuckles white beneath her gloves. Across from them, nearly eleven-year-old Daniel sat upright, his spine held in the solemn posture of a boy pretending to be a man, his innocence a stark contrast to the weight of the situation.

“Will there be other children there, Mama?” he asked, his voice barely audible above the gentle lapping of water against the boat’s wooden hull.

“Yes, darling,” Jesse replied, forcing confidence into her voice. “The letter said there’s a small school. And there will be plenty of shores to explore.” She did not add what she was thinking—that on an island, there were fewer directions in which a man might approach undetected.

The April sunlight filtered through live oak branches draped with Spanish moss as they rounded the bend. The distinctive, slightly acrid scent of the marsh filled Jesse's nostrils—a living smell of mud and salt and things growing and dying all at once. Somewhere, a heron's haunting call echoed across the marshes, breaking the silence of the moment. The pungent tang of oyster beds exposed by the retreating tide mingled with the sweetness of wild jasmine blooming along the shoreline. Jesse caught her first real glimpse of Saint Simons Island—her refuge, her hiding place, her fresh start. The shoreline was a tapestry of salt marsh grasses in myriad shades of green and gold, dotted with the occasional splash of color from early spring wildflowers. Beyond the marsh rose the trees—towering pines, spreading live oaks, and the occasional magnolia with its waxy, dark leaves and promise of creamy blossoms to come. The wind shifted as they neared, carrying the scent of salt, wet earth, and something wild—perhaps honeysuckle or crushed wax myrtle leaves. The water slapped gently at the skiff, a rhythm that sounded like welcome or warning.

Above them, osprey circled lazily in a sky the color of bleached linen, their cries sharp as flint. Jesse inhaled deeply, the air cool against her throat. It smelled unlike anything from Richmond—less soot, more soul.

“You can see Christ Church steeple from here on a clear day,” the boatman offered, gesturing toward the southern part of the island. “Been standing since before the war. Yankees didn't burn it down, praise the Lord.”

Jesse followed his gaze but saw only the undulating line of the tree canopy against the sky. She had chosen Saint Simons for its seclusion. Tucked away from the main thoroughfares, it offered a kind of protection no city ever could. She had conducted correspondence with the island's solicitor through her late mother's cousin in Charleston—a careful arrangement to ensure no trail led directly to her. The cottage she had leased sight unseen was supposedly at the island's north end, away from the main settlement, backing up to a stretch of forest with the ocean just beyond the dunes.

The skiff eased toward a modest wooden dock that extended into the sound. Two figures stood waiting—a tall, broad-shouldered man

with a full beard and a slender woman in a simple gray dress, her hair tucked beneath a white cap.

“That’ll be Mr. Lawrence, the solicitor,” the boatman informed. “And Miss Haskins, I expect. She looks after properties for folks.”

Jesse straightened her spine and adjusted her bonnet, conscious of the impression she must make. Her traveling dress, once fine but now showing wear at the cuffs and hem, had been hastily mended before their departure. The carpetbag at her feet contained almost everything she had dared to take—a few changes of clothes for herself and the children, her mother’s Bible, a small box of keepsakes, and nearly all the money she had managed to conceal over the past year.

“Daniel, wake your sister,” she said softly. “We’ve arrived.”

Daniel shook Eliza’s shoulder as the boat bumped gently against the dock. The little girl stirred, blinking sleepily, her blonde curls tumbling from beneath her bonnet.

“Are we home now?” Eliza murmured, her voice filled with a child’s innocent hope.

Jesse swallowed hard. “Yes, darling. We’re home now.”

The boatman secured the skiff and offered his hand to help Jesse onto the dock. Her legs, stiff from hours in the small boat, trembled slightly as she found her footing on the weathered planks. Daniel followed, solemn and careful, then turned to lift Eliza up beside them.

“Mrs. Whitmore, I presume?” The solicitor stepped forward, hat in hand. His voice carried the smooth cadence of coastal Georgia, warm but formal. “Walter Lawrence, at your service. And this is Miss Amelia Haskins, who has been seeing to the preparation of Marsh Cottage for your arrival.”

Jesse extended her gloved hand. “Mr. Lawrence. Thank you for meeting us. Yes, I am Mrs. Jessica Whitmore, and these are my children, Daniel and Eliza.”

Miss Haskins, a woman perhaps fifteen years Jesse’s senior, with sharp, observant eyes and a mouth that looked as though it rarely smiled, gave a precise nod. “The cottage is modest but sound. I’ve stocked the pantry with essentials to tide you over until you can make arrangements with the mercantile.”

“That’s very kind, thank you.” Jesse reached for her purse, but Miss Haskins waved her off.

“Already settled in your arrangement with Mr. Lawrence. No need to concern yourself.”

Mr. Lawrence gestured toward a waiting wagon. “I’ve brought transportation. It’s a fair distance to Marsh Cottage, especially with your trunks.”

Jesse hesitated. “There’s only the one trunk, actually. And these bags.” She nodded toward the carpetbag and small valise the boatman was now lifting onto the dock.

Something flickered in Miss Haskins’ eyes—a question, perhaps, or simple observation—but she made no comment. Mr. Lawrence merely nodded and instructed the boatman to load the meager luggage onto the wagon.

Jesse took her first deep breath of island air as they settled onto the wooden bench. It was rich with the scent of salt marsh and pine, sun-warmed earth, and distant sea—so different from the coal smoke and closed rooms that had defined her life in recent years. Beside her, Eliza’s small face had come alive with curiosity, her eyes wide as she took in the unfamiliar landscape.

“Look, Mama! Birds!” she exclaimed, pointing toward a group of white egrets wading in the shallows of the marsh, their slender necks curved like question marks.

“Great egrets,” Miss Haskins supplied. “They nest in the tall cypress trees in the marshes. You’ll see them everywhere once you know where to look.”

The wagon jerked into motion, its wheels crunching on the packed-earth road cutting through the maritime forest. Sunlight dappled the path, falling in golden patches through the canopy above. Jesse watched as Daniel’s shoulders gradually relaxed, his gaze darting from side to side, taking in every detail of their new surroundings.

“The island has changed since the war,” Mr. Lawrence remarked, seeming to feel that Mrs. Whitmore expected conversation. “Many old plantations lie abandoned or have been sold off in parcels. Hampton, Cannon’s Point, and Retreat are shadows of what they were. But the village survives, and some new enterprises have taken root.”

“I understand there’s ongoing construction of a lighthouse?” Jesse ventured, recalling a detail from the island newspaper she had obtained before deciding on Saint Simons.

Mr. Lawrence nodded. “BluffLight, yes. Been in progress for some time now. Funding comes and goes, but the work continues. It stands on the eastern bluff, not far from your cottage, in fact. “Mr. Jonas Miller oversees the project—he’s the son of the original keeper, Henry Miller, who passed away before seeing it completed.

Jesse’s chest tightened. A lighthouse meant visibility—people watching, paths illuminated. She chose this island to disappear and not be seen.

As they traveled deeper into the island, the forest occasionally gave way to stretches of former plantation fields, some returning to wild scrub, others showing signs of new, smaller-scale cultivation. Jesse spotted a group of freedmen working a plot of land, their backs bent beneath the spring sun.

“Contracted labor,” Miss Haskins explained, following Jesse’s gaze. “Some former slaves have stayed on, working the land they once worked in bondage, but now for wages. Others have claimed plots of their own. The arrangements vary.”

Moss swayed from the branches like silver-green lace, filtering sunlight into soft flickers across the dirt road. Somewhere nearby, a woodpecker tapped steadily on pine bark, the rhythmic staccato joining the buzzing of cicadas in late-morning song.

Jesse felt as though the forest was breathing with them, ancient and aware. Even in its silence, the island spoke.

The road curved, and suddenly, they were passing the ruins of what must have been a grand house. Only the foundation and parts of two walls remained, blackened by fire and partially reclaimed by creeping vines.

“Retreat Plantation,” Mr. Lawrence said. “Burned during the war. The Union troops were thorough in their destruction, though they spared the church and a few other structures.”

Jesse said nothing but felt Daniel’s gaze on her face, questioning. He remembered little of their life before Richmond, before his father’s return from the war had changed everything. But he was old enough to understand that they had once been people of means, that the South’s defeat had altered their fortunes even before his father’s demons had demolished what remained.

The wagon continued, eventually turning onto a narrower track that wound closer to the eastern shore. The trees thinned, and Jesse caught glimpses of the Atlantic between their trunks, a vast expanse of blue stretching to the horizon. The sea air grew stronger, carrying the tang of salt and the distant roar of surf.

“There,” Miss Haskins said, pointing ahead where the track widened into a small clearing. “Marsh Cottage.”

Jesse’s first impression was one of relief. The cottage was indeed modest, but it appeared sound, with a small porch facing east toward the sea. Built of tabby—that distinctive coastal mixture of lime, sand, oyster shells, and water—its walls gleamed pale in the afternoon sun. A brick chimney rose from the cedar-shingled roof, and several windows, small but numerous, suggested that the interior would be well-lit. Behind the cottage, a stand of pine and oak offered shelter from westerly winds while the land sloped gently down toward the east, where a stretch of salt marsh separated the property from the dunes beyond.

“It was built before the war as a caretaker’s cottage for one of the plantations,” Mr. Lawrence explained as he brought the wagon to a halt. “Never suffered damage during the occupation. The property includes the cottage, the small barn there, and about five acres stretching from the marsh to where the forest thickens.” The air carried the scent of warm pine needles, salt, and something wild Jesse couldn’t quite name — a living, breathing smell that wrapped itself around her like a whisper of welcome. “Is it very isolated?” Jesse asked, her tone carefully neutral.

Miss Haskins gave her a shrewd look. “Nearest neighbor is half a mile south—the Widow Patterson. Village is three miles beyond that. The lighthouse construction site is about a quarter-mile north along the bluff. You’re on your own here, but not entirely cut off.”

That suited Jesse perfectly. Close enough to seek help if needed, far enough to avoid casual scrutiny.

Daniel jumped down from the wagon first, then turned to help Eliza descend. Jesse followed, feeling the give of sandy soil beneath her shoes. As her feet touched the ground of what was to be their home, she felt a curious mixture of dread and hope unfurl within her chest.

“Shall we see you settled?” Miss Haskins asked, her tone practical but not unkind.

The interior was simple but clean. The main room served as both a parlor and a kitchen, with a large hearth on one wall and windows letting in abundant light. A narrow ladder led to a loft divided into two small bedrooms. The furniture was sparse but serviceable—a table with four chairs, a small settee, a rocking chair by the hearth, beds, and basic storage in the loft.

“The well is just outside the back door,” Miss Haskins explained. “Good, sweet water. There’s an outhouse behind the barn and a kitchen garden plot that’s been turned over for planting.”

Eliza had already claimed the rocking chair, setting it in motion with delighted giggles. Daniel stood by the window, looking out toward the distant sea.

“It’s perfect,” Jesse said and meant it. Not for its comfort or charm, though it possessed a measure of both, but for what it represented—the absence of fear. Freedom from the shadow that had loomed over her for so long.

Mr. Lawrence cleared his throat. “Your arrangements are paid through September, as agreed. By then, you’ll have had time to settle and determine if the island suits your needs. Miss Haskins can direct you to opportunities for income should you decide to stay longer.”

Jesse nodded. “Thank you. Both of you have been most kind.”

“I’ll call again tomorrow,” Miss Haskins said. “Show you the path to the village, introduce you to Widow Patterson. She takes in sewing if you’re in need.”

After a few more practical instructions about the cottage’s peculiarities—the chimney that needed cleaning before first use, the north window that swelled shut in humid weather—Mr. Lawrence and Miss Haskins took their leave. The boatman had already departed with the skiff, having been paid for his services. Jesse stood in the doorway of Marsh Cottage, watching the wagon disappear down the sandy track, feeling the weight of solitude settle upon her shoulders.

Behind her, she heard Eliza’s voice, bright with excitement: “Daniel! Come see! There are shells in the walls!”

Jesse turned to find her daughter tracing the embedded oyster shells in the tabby wall with one small finger, her face alight with

discovery. Daniel examined the hearth like someone twice his age, already shaped by the burden of becoming the man of the house far too soon.

“We should unpack, Mama,” he said thoughtfully. “And I can gather kindling for a fire before dark.”

Jesse crossed to her son and placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Yes, we should settle in. But first...”

She walked to the center of the room and slowly turned in a complete circle, taking in their new home—this space that belonged to no one but them, where no angry footsteps would echo in the night, where no fists would pound on tables, walls, or flesh.

“First,” she said, her voice gaining strength, “let us be grateful for our safe arrival.”

She held out her hands to her children, who came to stand beside her in the pool of sunlight that streamed through a window. Together, they formed a small circle in the heart of Marsh Cottage.

“Dear Lord,” Jesse began, her voice soft but steady, “we thank You for guiding us to this place of refuge. We ask for your continued protection and blessing as we begin anew. Please help us to find peace here, to heal what has been broken, and to build what will endure. Amen.”

“Amen,” echoed Daniel solemnly.

“Amen!” Eliza repeated, more enthusiastic than reverent.

Jesse squeezed their hands once before releasing them. “Now, let’s make this our home.” It wasn’t much, this crooked cottage with its peeling shutters and patchwork floorboards, but for now it was theirs. And Jesse would see it through.

The late afternoon light slanted through the western window, washing the worn floorboards in gold. Outside, the first evening frogs struck up their slow, rhythmic chorus, the sound swelling and falling like breath.

The door banged open with a rush of damp air and small feet.

“Mama! Look what I found!” Eliza shouted, cupping her hands around something wriggling inside.

Daniel recoiled instantly, knocking over a three-legged stool with a crash. “If it’s a snake, I’m moving out!”

“It’s not a snake,” Eliza said, full of injured dignity. She opened her palms to reveal a squat green frog, blinking solemnly up at them.

Daniel let out a high-pitched wail and scrambled onto the stool he had just toppled.

Jesse bit the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing. She had seen braver men than Daniel flee smaller creatures.

“This is Ferdinand,” Eliza announced proudly. “He’s going to live with us now. He likes damp places and eating bugs. I read it in a book.”

“We already have Daniel for that,” Jesse said dryly.

Eliza beamed as she nestled Ferdinand carefully into a chipped teacup she had scavenged from the hearth. She packed damp moss and tiny twigs around him like a throne fit for a marsh king.

For a moment — a fleeting, precious moment — Jesse let herself believe that maybe, just maybe, they could build a life here.

The frog croaked once, deep and contented. Eliza clapped her hands with delight.

Jesse smiled and gathered the children close, anchoring herself to this small, unpromised joy. Tomorrow would bring its own troubles. Tonight, they had hope.

As Daniel went to bring in their trunk and Eliza explored the corners of the cottage, Jesse moved to the window and gazed out toward the sea. Her past lay somewhere out there, beyond the marsh and dunes, beyond the vast expanse of water. She had put an ocean between herself and Richmond, between her children and their father. Whether it would be enough, only time would tell.

Her eyes caught a distant shape rising above the trees to the north—the skeletal frame of the unfinished lighthouse. BluffLight, they called it—a beacon not yet illuminated. Jesse felt a curious kinship with the structure, half-built and waiting to fulfill its purpose.

“Let your light so shine,” she whispered, the familiar verse from Matthew coming to mind unbidden. She had hidden long enough in darkness. Perhaps here, on this island at the edge of the world, she might finally step into the light.

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