

Mercer's Manor



Bobby R. Woodall

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by

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This book is dedicated to my wife, Laurie, for without her faith in me, this would not have been possible.

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ONE

Dark and ominous rain clouds were beginning to build in the western sky, illuminated by the ever increasing lightning streaking across the horizon.

Lightning suddenly flashed. A few moments later, the sound of thunder reached his ears like the booming of heavy artillery shells. Like the waves of an angry tempest-tossed sea, the knee-high grass weaved on the prairie. It was early summer and storms were almost an everyday occurrence on the plains. The day was hot and the night was cold. The temperature was fast dropping, causing the breath of the rider and his mount to appear as smoke in the cold evening air.

Rabbits scurried to their burrows, deer raced to the safety of the forests and the birds busily tucked their heads under their wings. Everything and everyone was getting ready for the approaching storm. The animals could sense when a storm was brewing. Leaves turned in the trees, which were bowing as if in obeisance to the lone horseman, their limbs lowering humbly.

Dan Mercer, ex-union captain, galloped his horse furiously on the plains to beat the advancing storm. The former cavalry officer slapped the reins on the horse's withers and worked his heels into the side of the animal to urge more speed. He did not want to be caught on the open prairie. The brim of his campaign hat flattened against his forehead as the gold-colored tassels lay back against the crown. Wind assailed his face, whipping his long black hair around it. His salt and peeper handlebar mustache tickled his nose as the wind whipped the loose hairs into his nostrils.

The officer held onto his horse, his muscular legs tightening on the animal's side. A bandana tugged at his neck, the ends slapping the side of his face. His buckskin jacket drew tightly against his chest. A holstered .44 Colt slapped at his hip. The flap on the holster was securely snapped closed. In the boot of the saddle rested a Henry .44 rifle in a ragged leather scabbard. The bowie knife at his waist was encased in a shabby leather sheath and strapped around his chest was a bandoleer full of cartridges for his rifle and pistol. A gleaming short saber tied to the front of the saddle helped to complete his armament.

Hardtack and other foodstuffs were packed tightly in his war bag, along with paper cartridges for his pistol. His .44 Colt gun-cleaning material and two loaded cylinders were nestled safely in his saddlebags. These articles were tightly wrapped in an oilskin pouch to keep them protected from the elements. Bedroll, poncho and a short piece of tarpaulin were strapped to the back of his western-style saddle. A small cotton sack tied with leather thongs dangled from the left side, while a canteen hung from the right. The latter was held securely to the saddle's pommel by another leather thong. He looked not only like an itinerant traveler, which he was, but also like a wanderer.

The cowboy spurred his chestnut gelding across the plains of the Indian Territory. The sky was getting as black as his mood and the wind was becoming more brisk. Brush and debris flew overhead and an occasional small animal would go whisking by in the airborne turbulence while small pieces of sagebrush were borne aloft in the tumultuous air.

He skidded his horse to a halt on a small knoll, trying hard to remain in the saddle as the horse pranced about nervously in anticipation of the imminent storm. Gripping the reins in his teeth, he placed his right hand on his hat, while with the other hand he tightened his chinstrap more securely. He was barely able to see through the resulting dust brought up from the ground by the wind, for little dust devils obscured his vision. He tried to hold the reins in a steady hand. It seemed wherever there happened to be dust stirring, there were also small whirlwinds

of dirt.

Mercer surveyed his surroundings. Blue eyes topped by black bushy eyebrows took in the muddy Cimarron River as it churned to his right, inundating its banks to cover the low-lying land in the immediate area. Off in the distance to his left, he could barely make out the beginnings of the Wichita Mountains. In front of him was another expanse of plains followed by rolling hills. A blue haze covered the base of the mountains to his south. The mist made the mountains seem foreboding, yet as inviting as the arms of an alluring woman.

I'd figured on making those mountains during the daylight hours. He struggled with his horse. *Or at least by tomorrow.*

Mercer had left the hills separating Arkansas from the Indian Territory that morning. He was twenty-one today, the 21st day of June, in the year of our Lord, 1865. The war had been finished for a little more than two months. Getting released from that hellhole, Andersonville Prison, had been a good birthday present.

I'm free!

Robert E. Lee had surrendered to Ulysses Simpson Grant two weeks before his release. The surrender took place on April 9, 1865, at Appomattox Court House in the parlor of Welmer McLean's house. The quiet of the central Virginia countryside was only matched by the solemn attitude of the participants. Lee had signed the terms of surrender with only his secretary present, while Grant had eight officers with him. Both men were somber, deep in their own thoughts.

"I'm grateful that my men could keep their mounts," Lee had said, gazing wistfully at the serene countryside. "I know the fondness of the men towards their horses."

"The war's over," Grant replied. "Maybe peace will prevail after all."

Both prayed to God Almighty that peace would once again rule the land. Each thought of the death and destruction that had been visited on their homeland.

"Hopefully, the end of the conflict is now over," Grant stated. "Now for the reconstruction of this great land."

Thank God Grant let his men keep their horses and firearms, Lee prayed silently. *They'll need them to supply their larder.*

The peace was almost shattered when an assassin sent a bullet crashing through the skull of Abraham Lincoln as he sat in his box at the Ford Theater in Washington, D.C., on April 13th. The injured President was rushed to a house across the street, where he held onto life by a thin thread until the wee hours of the morning. On April 14, 1865, Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth president of the United States of America, succumbed to the grim specter of death.

Lincoln Assassinated!

Newspapers heralded the news, making the South uneasy, as was the North. Ragtag newsboys hawked their bundles of papers from the street corners. It seemed as if the gaslights that dotted the street momentarily dimmed. The stars in the heavens seemed to lose their luster.

"Lincoln Shot!" "Possible Conspiracy!" "Government Up in Arms!"

These were the terse messages issued back and forth on the telegraph. Stores were already placing black bunting and crepe paper on their windows. Everyone walked around with somber looks on their faces. Some were saddened, while others refused to believe it; they seemed not to

be able to comprehend the news.

People were starting to look warily at one other. No one could be trusted. There was no faith left. But cool heads prevailed; the nation would be united once again.

It was later determined that a noted Shakespearean actor, John Wilkes Booth, was the lone assassin. He was caught hiding in a barn in Bowling Green, Virginia. Federal troops surrounded the barn and set fire to it. As Booth was trying to escape the fire, he was mortally wounded.

Mercer remembered all these happenings as he rode throughout the day, passing many Indian villages. Skirting the sparsely populated towns, he avoided people, at least until his mind was no longer in turmoil. He was weary, as was his mount. The muscles in his right leg were becoming tighter. Mercer recognized fatigue when it threatened to overcome him, as it was about to do now.

An old war wound caused his knee to jerk spasmodically. It throbbed when the weather started to change, which it was doing at this moment.

I've a barometer built in my leg.

He rubbed his leg more briskly.

Mercer had received this wound in the first battle of Bull Run, named after the river that ran pleasantly through the serene countryside to the North. Some southerners referred to the river as Manassas, named after the junction it served so close to Washington, D.C.

Mercer grimaced as he remembered that battle and how he had nearly lost his right leg. The stench in that field hospital was almost overbearing. Blood gave its scent to the hot afternoon. The smell of gangrene, entrails decomposing, and filth were ever-present.

A surgeon had homemade garters holding up the sleeves of his dirty shirt and boots caked with mud. Bloodstains, some dried, others still fresh, covered everything - the tent, the soldiers and orderlies. When asked if he remembered anything, Mercer could only look up at the bearded face. The doctor pulled a cheroot from a filthy coat pocket and clamped it between his lips. Not lighting the stubby tobacco, he proceeded to hastily pull out a pair of forceps from a dirty box. Turning back to Mercer, he looked grimly down at his patient.

"Well, son," the doctor said, while readjusting his stance beside the makeshift bed where Mercer lay. "What do you think happened to you?"

Through blood caked lips, Mercer explained what he thought had happened. A piece of shrapnel from a Confederate shell bursting close to him had entered his thigh. The shrapnel took a downward plunge, burrowing farther into his leg, almost taking it off at the kneecap.

He would never forget that field hospital and the stench that hovered there. And, of course, the ever-present blowflies that seemed to hover over the wounded. Pieces of flesh were thrown by the side of the tent to lie there and rot.

Mercer had grimaced in pain as he shouted to the field surgeon not to remove his injured leg.

Finally, after much haranguing to the doctor, he was left with his leg intact, though it burned horribly. Now it was a dull throb, which he wished desperately would stop.

His horse raised its head, perked its ears forward and sniffed the air. Mercer knew the storm was almost upon them. He looked over his shoulder and saw the tempest headed his way. Like a locomotive, it was bearing down on him, the wind shrieking like a banshee.

The sky was getting blacker than the insides of Henry Thomas's tobacco barn. He pulled his hat tighter on his head.

He urged his horse forward, while busily scanning the countryside. Mercer could almost feel

the wrath of the oncoming danger. Then he stopped and looked around more closely.

He knew he'd better seek refuge soon. He felt his horse quiver underneath him. He needed to get a shelter built for him and his mount. After a good night's rest, he'd head out to California and the Pacific Ocean... might even go to Australia. They were hunting for men who could oversee operations there; he had overheard someone say at a local tavern. Mercer had overseen a battalion of men during the war, so he knew he was well enough qualified.

Americans or Australians. Men were the same the world over. There were leaders and there were followers. But then he remembered that to be a good leader, one must also be a good follower.

"And it looks like a golden opportunity for me," he murmured under his breath. "Maybe I can start a new life out there."

He would not miss California. People said that San Francisco was fast becoming a booming city since the gold rush of '49. Hordes of immigrants invaded the once peaceful solitude of the Spanish settlers. Shopkeepers, attorneys, prostitutes, the good, bad and grotesque all descended on California like ugly on an ape. The American Dream was on everyone's mind and lips. The mere thought of riches was in itself comforting.

Wish it were me that found the gold at Sutter's mill. Oh well, if wishes were horseshoes, I wouldn't have enough to shoe an old dilapidated mare with three legs.

He smiled sadly at his own misfortune.

Mercer glanced to his right and saw a welcoming sight - a hillside with a grove of cottonwood trees at the base. He was drawn to the grove as iron is attracted to a magnet. Wheeling his horse, he clicked his tongue and rode to this haven, taking care to navigate around the many prairie dog holes that dotted the landscape.

Once in the grove, Mercer pulled up his horse and dismounted. Quickly, he pulled off the bridle and saddle from the weary animal and placed them by a cottonwood tree. Bending down, he winced from the pain in his leg as he removed the sack and poncho from the saddle and moved them to the side. A group of boulders a little way from the tree gave him an idea. Mercer smiled as he went toward the rocks.

Grimacing with the effort, he moved the biggest rock he could manage a small distance from the tree. Next, he took a lariat and wrapped one end around the trunk of the tree. The other end he placed around the boulder. Mercer made this rope taut and pitched his tarpaulin over it. Gathering small rocks, he placed them at the sides to make a homemade tent. He then glanced up to the sky and saw the storm seemed to hover some distance in the west. It was as if the disturbance had run into a stone wall, just waiting for some signal to move forward. Mercer was afraid the storm would get the signal before he was ready. The wind was still brisk, but the sky had darkened to a deeper color of purple.

"I'd better get ready," he said as he smiled ruefully and looked to the sky. "It's moving quicker than I thought."

Mercer began to pick up twigs; when he had enough gathered, he attempted to make a small fire. The wind would not let him get one started, so he gave up the idea and went to his saddlebags.

He rummaged for a cold meal and removed the contents. Foodstuffs, a dented coffee pot, a cast iron skillet and a piece of flint wrapped in an oilskin pouch completed his inventory. He felt a twinge of remorse as he remembered where he'd got them.

TWO

Early that morning, Mercer had ridden upon a partially burnt-out farmhouse at the border of Arkansas and the Indian Territory. The farm had been the abode of the swollen bodies now decomposing in the hot morning sun. The cadavers lay scattered about the farm like so many overturned wooden chess pieces.

A mother and daughter were lying by the front of the clapboard house with their throats slit and their bodices pulled down. Their legs were all bloody. A father and his son lay in the yard near the barn, their bodies riddled with bullet holes.

The men were close to the barn entrance. He looked with shock at the scene before him. So close to safety, yet so very far away.

A worn flintlock lay by the outstretched arms of the father and the youngster had a pitchfork clenched in his right hand. All of them were shoeless. And the men were missing their pants.

Livestock lay in the corral by the barn with their carcasses bloated. The buzz of flies broke the still air. Outside the barn, a boar and two sows with their litters lay sprawled in the pig wallow with bullet holes in their heads. The remains of a brace of mules were also by the barn where they had been butchered.

Mercer looked around warily and pulled his rifle from its scabbard. He worked the lever; seeing no one, he cautiously dismounted. The horse paced around anxiously. The smell of blood hung heavily in the air.

Smoke spiraled upwards from the burned barn only to dissipate in the clear morning sky, which was now full of revolving vultures. They had been making lazy circles in the sky in anticipation of an early morning feast. Their plans were thwarted by the arrival of Mercer, though a few had the impertinence to swoop low in the sky. These hyenas of the heavens squawked loudly as Mercer shooed them away from their oncoming feast by waving his hat at them furiously.

“Such needless killing,” he murmured aloud.

They’d not even had the decency to butcher the cattle or pigs for food, though the killers appeared to like mule meat, since they were the only livestock that showed any signs of being butchered. The rest of the killing was committed mindlessly – it was pure *savagery*!

Mercer quickly scanned the immediate surroundings again to make sure no one was lurking in the near vicinity. He went into a shed, found a shovel, rake, and an old hoe with a broken handle resting against the side of the wood shed.

Might have to check this shed out more fully. But right now, I have to bury these people.

He took the shovel and dug a shallow grave for the victims. Mercer solemnly dragged the men and gently carried the women to this makeshift grave near the rear of the shambles of the smoldering structure of the barn.

After burying the people, he gathered small stones and placed them on top of the graves to ward off scavengers. Pieces of clapboard that he made into crosses were then readied as markers on the graves. Not knowing the day of their births, he wrote down the day of their death, June 21, 1865.

“My *birthday*!” he said, as he resignedly looked at the small graves. “Some day this is turning out to be.”

Mercer began tamping the moist earth around the graves. He took a rock and pounded the crosses into the soft ground. When he was finished with this chore, he looked around and spied a bunch of wildflowers at the side of the barn. Mercer gathered a handful of the flowers and

placed them on the graves. Removing his hat and bowing his head, he muttered a small prayer for these unfortunate victims.

He placed the shovel against the shed and returned to the house. Then he wiped the soil from his hands against the legs of his breeches as he ascending the steps to the front door. The screen door was lying askew on its hinges. Looking around cautiously once more, he rushed up the steps.

A moving target's that much harder to hit, he said to himself, not wanting to stay outside the safety of the house too much longer. Mercer planned on making a more thorough inspection of the vacant structure now that he had finished his sacred duty to the victims.

Once inside, he found himself in a large living room. To the left of the doorway was a bay window. An old pipe organ was the centerpiece of the room with foot pedals and a bellows on the side. The ivory keyboard, now yellowed with age, was missing a few keys. The organ bench was lying on its side and the top of the bench was broken, held together by one leather hinge, and this one was badly torn. Hymnals and other music were scattered on the floor.

He guessed they must of have lived there for a long time. Oval pictures of the family were hung on one wall. In the middle of the room, a sofa was lying on its side. The stuffing from the rents in the horsehair fabric stuck out at all angles. Bloodstains were everywhere; the walls, the chairs and the furniture were covered with dried brown blotches. A trail of blood led out of the room and into the hallway. Mercer looked at this utter destruction with disgust.

Suddenly, he heard a noise coming from the top of the stairs. He quickly crouched and pulled his gun. Narrowing his eyes, he slowly swung the pistol around and surveyed the area.

"Nothing."

Cautiously, he started up the stairs. He stopped when he heard the sound again. It was a high-pitched wail. He tilted his head to one side and started up the stairs again, pausing at the top. Listening intently, he pulled back the hammer of his gun.

Click. Click.

The noise seemed to shatter the ominous silence of the house. One could not mistake the sound as a warning for others to be aware of the danger.

He paused long enough to quickly glance out a window. The wind wasn't blowing that hard. There was a gentle breeze, but not enough to make the shutters move. So he ruled out the wind. But a baby crying?

Shaking his head, Mercer started down the hallway toward the bedrooms. There were three; one to his left and two to the right. The ones on the right were open, but the one on the opposite side was partially closed. He placed the muzzle of his gun against the door and pushed it farther open.

Empty.

Warily, he walked into the room. Mercer looked around and quickly found the source of this eerie noise. A wicker rocker was slowly rocking due to the slight draft that came into the room through the open window. The cotton curtains swayed in the gentle breeze. A wire had been attached to the back of the rocker to hold the knitting yarn of the lady of the house. The wire had been bent and was now scrapping against the pane of the window. This constant rubbing to and fro caused the high-pitched sound Mercer had heard downstairs.

A baby crying?

Mercer chided himself for being so leery but decided it was better to be safe than sorry.

"Son, you always be prepared," he recalled his mother saying. "Never know when the good Lord has a surprise waiting for you, be it good or be it evil."

Relief flooded him as he went down the stairs. There, Mercer replaced his gun, making sure to close the holster flap and turned right toward the kitchen.

He went down a hallway with oval lithographs on the wall. It was similar to walking a gauntlet as he passed pictures of glassy-eyed men and women. Even the children seemed to glare at him relentlessly. A scene from a hunting expedition depicting a wild boar surrounded by yapping dogs was on a quilt beside the pictures. He could almost hear the barking of the Blue Tic hounds as they surrounded the boar.

At the far end of the hallway, the kitchen door was ajar. Mercer stopped, listening for any unusual noise. Hearing nothing out of the ordinary, he went toward the kitchen door and drew his pistol, checking through the slit in the door to make sure no one was behind it. He gently placed his boot against the door and shoved it open slowly. Nothing happened. Satisfied, he entered the large kitchen.

He holstered his pistol and quickly scanned the room. A cast iron stove with four burners was sitting like a giant squatting toad against the far wall. Wide windows were situated on either side of the black behemoth. An open fireplace was at the opposite end of the spacious room. The back door was to the far left-hand corner. A large counter neatly separated the stove from the fireplace.

The counter that had once been tidy was now dirty with all kinds of debris scattered haphazardly on top. An enormous gash was in the middle of the counter as if someone had struck down with force an axe or saber. Splinters of wood were lying on the counter, the floor and a nearby portion of the table was covered with pieces of wood.

The wooden table and cane chairs were thoughtlessly thrown around the room. The broken chair legs stood upright as if they were spears, just waiting to impale someone.

"I'd hate to fall on them babies," he mumbled, as he continued his inspection.

Drawers of the cupboard had been hurriedly pulled out, their contents strewn on the floor. Mercer made his way through this mess gingerly.

Sacks of flour, coffee and spices were all slashed open. These remnants were splattered on the wall, along with jars of fruits and vegetables. Someone had deliberately thrown the cupboard against the wall. The liquids of the jars had mingled as they flowed down the wall to create a pool of ochre, vermillion and green at the baseboards. This puddle reminded Mercer of an artist's palette. However, this palette was as not nearly as organized as the artist's.

Mercer found a cast iron skillet, a dented coffee pot and foodstuffs in the kitchen pantry. A sack of flour, a small piece of flint and a container of coffee completed his search. Reaching into his pocket, he removed a stinker. Flicking the head of the match with his forefinger, he lit the wick of a coal oil lantern so he could see in the dim kitchen. He saw nothing else that would come in handy.

It was then that Mercer happened to look out the kitchen window. He saw the shed where he had found the shovel that he used to perform the grisly task of burying the people. Like a lone sentinel, this tool stood straight and tall next to the shed a short distance from the smoldering barn.

Might see if there's anything in there for me.

He turned in the kitchen and placed the lantern on the corner of the counter and went out the back door. In the yard was a swing hanging by ropes from an oak tree. He could see where someone had placed a pair of iron stakes, probably for a horseshoe game.

He returned his gaze to the shed and continued his stride to it. As he walked, he noticed laundry hanging on a clothesline. Making a detour, he went to the clothes. Women's dresses,

men's work shirts, a pinafore and towels were hung to dry.

"They won't need these items anymore," he stated with finality. He checked the men's clothes and was disappointed to find they would not fit him.

When he reached the shed, he stopped and looked around. Observing nothing out of the ordinary, he pulled on the door, only to have it fall off in his hands. Mercer looked closer and saw the hinges had been shot nearly to pieces. Trusty hinges having survived the elements, only to fall prey to bullets, had finally given up the struggle.

"Don't rightly know what kept this hinge on, but at least it's done the job," he said as he looked closely at the interior of the shed.

A dim light came through the one window to his left, revealing the contents. Rakes, hoes, shovels and pruning shears lined one wall. A garden cultivator rested at the back of the shed. Pieces of rope hung from the rafters, as did leather reins. These reins helped shoulder the burden of the buggy equipment hanging on wooden pegs placed on the wall across from the window. Little dust particles danced and pirouetted like tiny ballerinas in the beam of light that filtered in from the shattered window.

As Mercer was leaving the shed, his eyes fell on three catalog boxes stacked in a corner. He retraced his footsteps and picked up the boxes. Taking the boxes outside where the light was better, he dropped the articles on the ground. Squatting, he examined them more closely.

One box had a pair of boots. The other held two pairs of pants; the box that was left contained two men's flannel shirts. Like a child on Christmas morning, Mercer eagerly held up the shirts and pants. He found the shirts would not fit, so he laid them aside.

"Maybe someone else will have a use for them," he remarked as he squatted to continue his inspection.

He sat on the grass and tried on the boots. Pleasure washed over him; the boots were a good fit!

"They're a might tight, but definitely will stretch, given enough time," he said as he threw his old ones sideways in the grass, for they had holes in the soles and sides.

Mercer returned to the house and retrieved a cotton bag from the pantry. He placed his newfound booty in this receptacle. As he was turning to place his treasure in the hallway, he heard creaking boards and hurried footsteps. Someone was rushing at him!

Mercer whirled around to face a man in a dirty gray tunic. The wild-eyed phantom made a lunge at him with a rusty saber.

Mercer wondered whether this was one of the men who had slaughtered the poor farm family as he nimbly jumped to the side, letting his attacker rush by him.

The attacker's saber got stuck in the side of the counter. Mercer's adversary tried to wrench the blade from the wooden shelf, without success. Realizing he was temporarily beaten, he relinquished his hold on the sword and drew back.

Quickly, Mercer crouched and moved to pull his pistol out of its holster. Before he could do so, the man kicked the weapon from his hand and the gun skidded across the floor. Mercer hurriedly stood and clasped his arms around his assailant's neck. They scuffled around the kitchen doing a lockstep.

Mercer reached out and grasped the handle of an old coffee mill. With a deadly back swing, he brought the grinder crashing down on his foe's head, knocking him to the floor. Thinking it was over, Mercer moved toward his pistol, which was lying amidst the broken table and chairs.

Before he could reclaim it, the man had jumped on his back, bringing Mercer to his knees. Reaching over his shoulder, Mercer grasped his opponent by the collar of the tunic and quickly

heaved the enemy over his shoulder. The man landed among the chairs, gave a loud scream, and then fell silent.

Mercer stood over his adversary, expecting another attack – until he noticed that the man's head was laying at a rather unusual angle.

He's dead.

Mercer looked at his adversary, wondering if he should bury him too. Then he smelled the smoke. Sometime during their brief fight, they had inadvertently knocked the lantern over. At first the wood smoldered, but soon bright tongues of flame were licking the wall by the window. Wallpaper began to turn brown and curl as the paper reached the burning point. In just a moment, the cotton curtains burst into flames. Before long, the entire wall was feeding a hungry fire. The ravenous fire hurried along the walls in its search for more articles to fill its empty stomach.

Quickly, Mercer made a dash for the hallway, stopping long enough to grab his sack of goodies and hurry to the front of the house. He crashed through the front door and ran down the steps to his horse, quickly tying the sack to the leather thong on the saddle.

Mercer leaped upon his horse and swinging around in the front yard, whipped the reins on both sides of the creature, and without a backward glance, rode from the scene of the massacre. Mercer journeyed to the crest of a hill, where he stopped his mount and looked back at the raging inferno in the distance. Wisps of smoke were curling their way to the heavens.

He hoped the victims' souls were riding the trails of smoke to their new mansions in the sky. These people needed all the comfort God would allow them.

Mercer wheeled his horse and gave the animal free rein. The man and his mount ran full tilt in the countryside. It was at this time he gave a vent to the rage built up in him; Mercer cried.

He rode relentlessly until his horse could no longer run. Mercer could feel the animal shaking from the exertion. The sides of the creature were moving in and out at an alarming rate; specks of foam were at the mouth and sweat glistened on the poor animal. He reined in, slid off, and taking the reins, walked the poor thing a short distance to cool him down.

Mercer advanced cautiously, all the time glancing at his surroundings warily. His hand was constantly hovering like a hawk over his weapon. The rifle in the boot of the saddle gave him added comfort.

Leastways, I've got firepower.

He touched his weapons more to reassure himself. The knife in the sheath at his waist and the short saber tied to the side of the saddle made him feel more secure.

Mercer did not believe in taking any undue chances, especially after seeing the bloodbath at the farmhouse. For all he knew, there were more of them in the area.

He took careful notice of his immediate surroundings. He looked toward the woods to take note of all possible means of escape. He believed in being prepared for anything.

"Caution is a virtue after all," he said, smiling at his horse. "It doesn't hurt to be too careful."

Then swinging up into the saddle, he spurred the horse and rode westward. He was calmer now. A quiet anger replaced the bereavement he felt. Sorrowfully, he shook his head as he continued more surely. He felt bad at the treatment he had meted out to the horse.

"I ought to be horsewhipped," Mercer castigated himself. "I was not raised to treat a careless brute that way. When we get to town," he spoke softly while reaching down and gently patting his horse's neck, "I'll get you a nice stall with plenty of oats and water. That and a good rubdown will soon get you back in shape."

Mercer smiled, thinking of the pleasure of being able to take care of his horse properly. He

was a good horseman, so he leaned forward and patted the horse on the neck again. Clicking his tongue, he urged the mount forward at a much slower pace.

Seemingly at peace with the world, he observed the countryside more closely. Chestnut and ash trees were at the edge of the high prairie grass. This grass swayed in the gentle breeze. A trace of honeysuckle was on the air.

THREE

By nightfall, he was trying to outrun the storm. Mercer made a campfire after the wind had died down. He had let the reins fall to the ground and started to crawl into the crude lean-to he had constructed, but changed his mind. Mercer grew up liking storms. His mother and father instilled in him the respect of the God and nature, so he decided to sit out side for a while and watch as the storm developed.

Watching, he was once again reminded of how powerful God was. The storm was heading straight at him. He sighed and clambered into his homemade shanty.

Flashes of light, booms of thunder and the first drops of rain announced its arrival a few moments later. The rain beat a tattoo on his tarpaulin. Driven by the wind it gathered at the edge and quickly fell to form a puddle of his haven.

A bolt of lightning struck a tree near him, cleaving the tree down to its base. The sudden noise made him wince, but he liked the smell it left behind. The air seemed cleaner and almost palpable, as if he could taste it.

Mercer laced his fingers behind his head as he watched the windstorm unfold. The gale unleashed its fury on the land. He prayed his rope would hold, although he could see it being pulled taut between the rock and the tree.

Within an hour, the gale had worked its havoc and left whimpering like a small child. It was moving East. Everything was calmer, almost pleasant.

Secure in his abode, he slowly drifted off to sleep. Tonight, he did not have any dreams.

His eyes shot open at the sound of an unexpected noise. He carefully rolled onto his back and blinked to clear his eyes. He made his eyelids into slits and peered into the darkness. His horse was becoming skittish. He thought he saw someone or something near his mount... a coyote maybe, or a wolf.

Slowly, Mercer inched his hand toward the cold hard steel of his gun that he had placed near his head. He was reassured when he felt the walnut grip of his pistol. He let his fingers curl around the handle grip more securely before pulling the weapon from its holster. In a fluid motion, he pulled back the hammer and pointed the gun at his intruder.

"Hold it right there," he shouted. "You're covered!"

Mercer grinned. His nighttime visitor was only a stray dog – part wolf, part coyote, with a smattering of mongrel thrown in for good measure. The black-colored apparition snarled at him. Lips curled back to reveal teeth that would do a wolverine justice. Goosebumps raced up and down Mercer's spine. He gulped audibly as he called the dog to him. The dog advanced, still snarling. Mercer could see the raised hair on the dog's back, his eyes glowing in the moonlight. Its tail was definitely not wagging.

Mercer slowly reached into his saddlebags and removed a piece of hardtack. He offered it to the dog. The shadow of the dog cast by the fading campfire light made it look huge and awesome.

"That's all right, boy," Mercer said softly. "I won't hurt you."

The dog sniffed him and the hardtack. Quickly, it snapped the meat from the outstretched hand, ran a few feet away and swallowed the food in one gulp.

Every time Mercer made a move toward the dog, it growled. Finally, the animal trotted off into the night.

Mercer shrugged his shoulders and lay down again. It wasn't long before he started to snore. This time he did dream, tossing and turning in his slumber.

He was out on patrol with his men, and they were thirsty. No matter how hard they tried, they could not get water. The faces of the men were gaunt. His throat felt parched. When he thought he would never get a drink, he awoke, bathed in a cold sweat. The dream had been too real. His mouth felt as dry as the wadding in his cartridges.

Mercer pulled on his boots, strapped on the gun belt and went to check on his horse. He had only ground-tied the animal due to the storm. Plenty of grass and water was nearby. Seeing his horse was all right, Mercer turned back to his bedroll.

The sound of rushing water intensified his need to quench his dry throat. He made a small curve and walked to the edge of the river. The only light afforded to him was the full moon, but he could see that the water was black. There was an agitation caused by submerged rocks and an occasional sandbar. The river was swollen like a pregnant woman. It seemed to lash out at everything and everybody. And like the weighty woman, it did not want to be disturbed.

Mercer went to the edge of the river. As he squatted, he lost his balance. Slipping and sliding, he fell into the raging current. Coughing and spluttering, Mercer fought the strong torrent, causing him to be swept more downstream. In his fight to keep his head above the water, he spotted a tree trunk jutting out before him. Using his legs, he swam within grasping distance of a limb.

Mercer grasped the branch and held on for dear life. He pulled at the branch to secure a better handhold to pull himself up. Finally, he reached the log. From there it was a short jump to the bank.

Once on the bank, he rolled over on his back, gulping great amounts of air. When he had caught his breath, he arose and started back toward his campfire. He hadn't realized how far down the stream he'd gone. His boots were making sloshing sounds with each step he took. He glanced down to his holster and was surprised to see that it was empty. The flap to the holster had come unsnapped.

He must have lost his gun in his joy ride down the river. At least he had a spare one in his saddlebags.

When he got back to the campsite, he sat on a rock and tugged on his wet boots, emptying them water. Next, he removed his wet breeches, socks and long underwear. After wringing the water from them, he placed them on a rock by the fire to dry by morning.

Then he lay in his bedroll looking up at the stars, which were shining brightly now. The storm had passed. Mercer began to dream of heading farther west and away from civilization.

There were too many people around these days. Too many to be accountable for. That's what had started the war. Too many people with too much time on their hands who were all too eager to stick their noses into each other's business.

Sighing, he closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep. This time, there were no more disturbing dreams. He rolled over twice and twisted himself to find a more comfortable place on the bare earth.

Mercer's recently confinement had honed his senses; he awoke to the sound of someone making a furtive move toward his horse.

He had his knife, but that would only be good for close- fighting; he still felt defenseless. He stretched out his hand and felt the hardness of a stone; he grasped it tightly.

With pangs of remorse, he remembered that his spare gun, along with his rifle and saber, were securely tucked away on the other side of the fire. Well, the knife and stone were better than nothing. He tensed his muscles for action.

The intruder made a lunge for the horse, which brought him closer to Mercer. He grabbed at

the receding shadow with one hand, bringing the rock crashing down on the trespasser's skull with the other.

Mercer dragged the unconscious form toward the campfire to make a closer inspection. As he stirred the coals for bit more light, his eyes widened in surprise. His quarry was a woman.

His relief soon turned to worry when he noticed his shallow breathing. It was a wonder she wasn't dead from that blow to the head.

He took a closer look. The face underneath the dirt had high cheekbones, a pert, upturned nose and fiery red hair, which was tied into a ponytail with a strip of grass. But it was her jade green eyes – glazed and unseeing – that held his attention.

One breast had been revealed where her blouse had been torn in the scuffle. As he gently covered her, he noticed it was bruised, as if it had been severely mishandled.

The only thing that marred her features was the long laceration on the side of her skull. The cut was bleeding profusely. Mercer admonishing himself; he should've noticed the would-be horse thief was smaller than a man.

Blood was running down the side of her head to form a small puddle on the barren ground. Quickly, he went to his saddlebags and found a bandana. He looked around for a source of water. A fallen log lying nearby, which had collected water from the recent downpour, provided some. He dipped his bandana in the water, wrung it out and hurried back to the woman. He gently applied the bandana to the side of her head; the pressure helped to staunch the flow.

Moments later, Mercer sighed with relief as she began to stir. Her eyelids fluttered, her breathing became more regular and the color returned to her face. Suddenly, her little arms and legs thrashed the night air. She was regaining consciousness.

She caught him in the right eye with her elbow. Quickly, he pinned her arms to the side. He spoke softly; she cried out, either from pain or fear, he couldn't tell. He placed his hand over her mouth; he did not want another encounter with anyone else who might be lurking about. She bit his hand; when he removed it, she screamed again. He tried again, with the same result. Mercer was beginning to think it was time to hit her again when her eyes focused more clearly.

He continued to speak softly; eventually, she quit struggling and became still. He rolled off her and moved away, after first checking the area to make sure there was nothing she could use as a weapon. He stoked the embers to shed more light.

"Listen," he said, wincing where she had bitten his hand, "I'm deeply sorry for having hit you, ma'am, but a man's horse is his life out here on the plains."

She didn't reply. He decided it couldn't hurt to tell her a little bit about himself. He began with how he had been a prisoner of the Confederacy, ending with his release at the end of the war, and why he was heading west to California.

"All I want," he said, "is some peace and quiet. I don't want to bother anyone, and I don't want anyone to bother me. I've seen enough violence and bloodshed to last me a lifetime."

Mercer was surprised at the need to talk so much, but it seemed to be doing the trick. The woman sat up, straightened her clothes, pulled a strand of hair out of her eyes and patted her hair into place. Then she looked up at him with those green eyes and spoke for the first time.

"Mine's Glory B. Stahl," she said, hesitatingly, looking at him while rubbing the bruise on the side of her head.

"Glory B.?" He thought that he had hit her too hard; she didn't sound coherent.

"My momma named me. He took one look at me cradled in my mother's arms and exclaimed, 'Glory Be!'" She smiled shyly.

“My momma had three boys. She had always dreamed of having a girl; someone to help her on the farm. Glory B. was as good a name as any, she said. So here I am.”

Mercer nodded his head in understanding.

Glory stood shakily; he reached out to steady her. “Are you alright?”

She pushed him away, but not unkindly. Wearily, she moved to the campfire. “I’m still a little woozy. Think I’ll lay back down for a while.” She began to gently massage her temples to relieve the pain. “See if I can recover after being hit so hard.” She smiled to show that there were no hard feelings.

“Sorry about that,” Mercer said. He spread his legs, crossed his arms and looked solemnly down at her. “But you *did* try to steal my horse, didn’t you?”

She nodded yes and lay back on his bedroll. As she looked up at him, she started to smile. It suddenly dawned on him that he was as naked as the day he was born. Quickly, he pulled his poncho out to cover himself. “Oh my. I am sorry about that, miss.”

“No need in that.” She laughed. “After being raised on a farm, I’ve seen about everything. Besides, I’ve three brothers, so I’ve seen it all.”

Mercer wasn’t as worried about offending her as he was about the effect she was having on him. He had not had a woman in more than two years, and that had only been a camp follower. One of Hooker’s girls. Already, he was feeling a faint stirring in his loins. He quickly pulled on his damp breeches, hoping to divert her gaze from his manhood.

Glory sat and looked at the glowing embers in the fire. She was remembering the recent occurrences. Looking up at Mercer, she smiled and gathered the blanket he had given her closer around her shoulders. She cleared her throat once again.

“How about I tell you a bit more about myself. Would you like to hear about the calamitous event that led me to your horse?”

FOUR

At first her voice trembled, but as Glory began to speak, it became firm and confident.

"I was raised on a small farm in Missouri," she began. "One night, a group of Confederate soldiers paid us a late night. They rode into the farm and pounded on the front door, demanding admittance.

"My father pulled the piece of napkin from his collar—he had been eating—and picked up his shotgun, pulling back the hammers. He held his finger to his lips and motioned for all of us to be quiet. He went to the door and grasped the door latch. Flinging the door open, he peered into the dark.

"A bullet came crashing through the open doorway, throwing him backwards. I rushed to him. He had been hit in the head. My father was dead.

"The band kicked the door open and entered the house, as there was no one left to defend us. Two of the men went to my brother's bedroom and shot them as they huddled in the corner. My youngest brother was shot as he tried to escape through the window. The slug tore out the back of his skull, sending bits of gore to splatter on the windowsill. He was left lying, hanging partially out the window. Laughing, the killers returned to the living room."

Tears were running down Glory's face as she spoke; she barely noticed them.

"Two of the soldiers grabbed me and my mother and dragged us outside, where they tied us to one of the wheels of a buggy. Then they returned to the house.

"They... were not done with my father and brothers. When they were finished with their gruesome dead, they came back outside. One stopped to wipe his bloody saber on my mother's quilt, which was drying on a wooden rack by the front door.

"Then," Glory shuddered at the memory, "they came for mother and I."

She did not have the nerve to finish. She could not tell Mercer that when they men got through with their bedlam, they took turns at ravaging her and her mother. Like rutting hogs, all five of them sweated and grunted atop of them.

Mercer could see the anguish in her eyes. She had started to pace to and fro in front of the fire, stopping every now and then to peer forlornly off into the western sky. As Mercer started to move to go to her, she whirled around, her hand up as if to stop him from coming closer. He knew she was asking him to let her finish.

"Those slimy, smelly and sweating pigs!" she spit into the fire in disgust. "When they finally got tired of using my mother..." She took a deep breath, "The leader forced her to her knees... he placed his pistol behind her ear... and fired. The explosion was... deafening. My mother... my mother was... is dead.

"I struggled with my bonds. The man who shot my mother looked at me with a sneer. Then he told them to take me inside and... tie me up.

"It seemed they were tired of raping me outside. I remember him laughing over the thought of doing it on my parents' bed.

"One of the other men took me into the house and tied me to a kitchen chair and left me there. They left me... near the mutilated body of my... father... for what seemed like forever.

"By that time, someone had found a full jug of moonshine in a shed by the barn. I heard someone say, 'Whooee, that's some mighty powerful white lightning.'

"They fought over the moonshine, but their leader, Jeb, they called him, took it all for himself. I heard gunshots by the barn – they were killing the pigs.

Eventually, though, they all passed out, leaving me on the bed where they'd tied me to...

where they'd tied me."

Glory stared into the fire, seeing the young boy named Beau who had waited so eagerly to take his turn at her. All had been quiet for quite some time when Sly came back into the room. From the look in his red, bloodshot eyes, he was quite drunk. She started struggling with her bonds. As he fumbled with his buttons, he lost his balance and fell across the bed. He had fallen hard against the brass railing of the bed, striking the metal head stead and knocking himself unconscious.

He lay there with a large gash in his forehead. Glory watched the wound bleed, praying he'd die, but soon the bleeding stopped. For once she was grateful for her Pappy's corn squeezings.

She renewed her struggles with the ropes and was at last able to loosen them enough to wrench herself free. She rubbed her wrists to relieve them of their numbness, almost rubbing the skin raw. Then she began to massage her legs. Finally, she stood up shakily. Once her tremors had ceased, she moved to the window and looked out.

There were bodies scattered about the farm. Some were at the entrance of the barn; one was draped over a wheel of the buggy. She counted two at the barn entrance and one by the buggy, and Sly on the floor beside the bed.

"That's four," she thought, as she looked around the farm yard again. "But there were *five*! Where could the other one be? No matter."

Quickly, she pulled her blouse together to cover herself, wincing at the soreness between her legs. Glory ran her tongue around the inside of her mouth. She tasted the dried blood and the foul taste of the men.

Legs quivering, she walked to the side of the bed and stood over her captor. Resisting the impulse to spit on him, she swallowed and took little time in picking up her torn blouse. Glory grabbed a shawl off the end of a chair, which she wrapped around her shoulders. She took a deep breath and hurried to the front door.

Glory stepped cautiously out on the front porch, turned and quietly shut the screen. She started down the steps, treading very lightly, taking her time, hoping the steps did not squeak.

She made it to the bottom step and was about to run when she spied the woods at the far edge of the family's property.

"I'll be safe there," she thought, as she started for safety.

Suddenly, a hand shot and grabbed her wrist. "Now, just where'd *you* be going?" the man named Beau asked, twisting Glory around on the bottom step.

She looked up at him without fear. He reeked of moonshine and was weaving drunkenly. His filthy tunic was partially open and his trousers were unbuttoned. She shuddered.

"I was almost caught." Glory suddenly remembered where she was. Mercer had not moved, waiting patiently for her to continue.

"But I glimpsed a pitchfork lying beside the porch steps. Pa must have left it there when he came in for dinner.

"I took my free hand and grabbed the fork and... whirled it at the man with all I had. The tines... they sliced into his face like a hot knife cuts butter.

"I ran down the steps and ran for the woods.

"By daylight, I was miles from home, but I didn't stop until I came upon an old abandoned mill by a dry stream."

The building had once been the home of a thriving flourmill. The stream had gone dry and required the closure of the mill. A large stone wheel had gone around in circles making the large ruts in the earthen floor. The wheel had been placed to pivot on an oak stanchion set in

the middle of the hardened dirt.

Farmers had thrown their wheat shucks in front of the wheel and it crushed them easily as it relentlessly turned on its axis. Water from the stream drove the apparatus as it flowed over the baffles of a large paddlewheel. The walls of the mill were crumbling and missing many rocks, allowing the creatures of the forest easy access. Now cobwebs hung from the ceiling and rats made tracks in the dust as they scurried across the floor.

"I slept there until well into the morning. Then I left; I had to get as far away from those men as possible. I had no doubt they would search for me, as I could identify all five of them. So I rested by day and ran throughout the night."

The only time she slowed was when she had to cross a stretch of water. Small streams she could safely wade, but the rivers were something else. She usually would find a shallow place in the river and ford it without any trouble. Not bothering raising her skirt, she quickly plodded across the water.

Once, when she had crossed a shallow stream, she had grasped a bush for help in steadying herself. A searing pain raced from her hand up her arm! She had made a mistake by grabbing a nettle bush. Thinking quickly, Glory looked around and spied a silver leaf weed.

"God, in His benevolence, always has a way for man to help himself out," she remembered her mother telling her. "No matter what poisonous plant you happen upon, an antidote is close at hand."

Glory recalled this and hurriedly grabbed the weed with her uninjured hand. Crushing the leaf of the weed between her fingers, she applied the soothing balm to her hand and arm. In a moment, the refreshing remedy worked its wonder and her pain had lessened considerably.

"The nights were the worst. Strange noises, slithering things; I kept thinking every sound I heard was those men, that they had found me.

"Then I came upon your camp. I saw you approach the cottonwoods. So I hid.

"I watched you go to the river. I was about to come out of hiding when I saw you return. You were wet – you had fallen in." She smiled for the first time since he'd met her.

"I saw you get out of your damp clothing and into your bedroll. I waited until you were asleep and made my move. The rest you know."

As Glory related the events to Mercer, he remembered the fate of the poor victims he found this morning in Arkansas; he was sure it was her family he had buried.

Glory suddenly threw off the blanket and started to stir the fire, making the coals seem alive with light. Picking up the coffee pot, she started to the river.

"Be careful you don't fall in!" Mercer shouted after her. He remembered his latest run in with the turbulent river and the close call he had received.

"I won't," Glory replied, adding, "What'd you take me for, a *dummy*?" She spun around on her heels and headed for the river. He watched her receding back until the night swallowed her up. Smiling, he lay back on his bedroll.

"No." Mercer smiled. "*I'm* the dummy."

Shrugging his shoulders, he rose to roll a cigarette. Lighting it with a stick from the fire, he sucked in and slowly exhaled the smoke upwards, taking aim at the stars.

After she returned from the river, Glory placed the pot on a bed of hot coals. In a moment, the pot started to boil. She threw in a handful of coffee. When the coffee had boiled long enough to her reckoning, she removed it carefully from the fire, using the hem of her nightgown as a makeshift potholder. She poured each a cup of the steaming liquid, squatted on her haunches and slowly started to sip.

"Sounds to me like those men were Jayhawkers," he said, after thanking her for his cup. He blew on his and started to sip the hot liquid. "They're the outcasts of the Confederate Army, or as some would say, the scum of the earth."

"Oh?" Glory took a stick and poked at the fire, making it glow brighter. She moved quickly to the side to avoid a spark. Then she moved back and looked at Mercer. He continued as if the spark had ignited some long forgotten memory.

"During the war, they were the guerrilla band that terrorized the North." Mercer looked into the embers of the fire, avoiding her gaze. "After the war was over, these misfits took to pillaging, looting and raping like the scum they were before the war. Quantrill was one of them. The worst in my opinion. Anyway, his bloody band massacred one hundred and fifty people in Lawrence, Kansas, in 1863. But I hear he'd been shot and killed over in Louisville, Kentucky. It was right before the war ended, I think. Good riddance to bad rubbish is all I can say."

"So tell me something about you," Glory said, wanting to take her mind off her family. She got no response.

She sighed and poured herself another cup of coffee. Glory glanced at him with questions in her eyes. He did not seem to pay her any mind, as he continued to stare into the campfire.

He turned from the fire to stare into the darkness. Every so often, his brows would wrinkle and his mouth turn down in distaste, as if he had remembered something dreadful or even painful.

Shrugging her shoulders and replenished his coffee. Then she sat back and watched her rescuer, feeling a strange sense of safety for the first time in weeks.

Mercer was wondering if his family was still alive. He hoped they had made it through the terrible War Between the States. Much later, he was to learn that his family perished in a mysterious fire at the old homestead in Indiana. No one could ever explain the happenings at the Mercer farm. He pushed all thoughts of his family from his mind. He hated the war to start with, but now his hate intensified.

The Civil War. Hrump! He grimaced. "There's nothing civil about it." It was a war that pitted brother against brother, fathers against sons, and everyone against each other. The conflict had torn entire families apart. Maybe time will heal all wounds. Then he remembered Andersonville.

Andersonville prison was located in southwestern Georgia, about equal distance from Alabama to the west and Florida to the south. He had been one of more than thirty thousand prisoners incarcerated there. Thinking back on the atrocities committed there made him involuntarily shudder.

The squalor of Andersonville was in itself subhuman. The dampness and the unbearable hot temperatures caused the clothes of the prisoners to rot off their backs. At one time in early '64, there were more than eighty-five hundred men confined to approximately twenty-six acres of land. It evened out to about six hundred and fifty men per acre. Later, there were more than fifteen thousand men. Thirteen thousand Union soldiers had died and were buried there. These graves on the pitiful portion of Georgia landscape would forever mar the tranquil and beautiful countryside.

The prisoners had three main concerns. The first was of hygiene. A small stream coursed through the middle of the compound. The stream was the depository of all fecal matter and dirty soap water. It was the place for any general cleaning the prisoners were allowed. Most of the time, the stream was less than a foot in depth and maybe two feet wide. The stream came in the north wall of the stockade, trickled across the ground to disappear under the southwest wall.

Medicine was almost nonexistent. Two doctors, three male nurses and a few orderlies tried to provide some semblance of hygiene, but were thwarted by the lack of supplies.

Their second concern was breathing space. It was so crowded that men would often go to sleep standing in an upright position. Many a fight broke out because a prisoner had inadvertently touched another as he went to sleep standing up. Losing his balance as he slept, the hapless one would fall against another prisoner, causing a shoving match to follow. Shoving led to shouting and shouting led to violence. Fists would lash out, men would rush together and before long, someone would brandish a homemade knife and the contest would begin in earnest, no holds barred. The victor got more breathing space and the loser got a free trip to the graveyard.

The third concern was of food; not when, but how much and in what manner the prisoners would receive their meager portions. Their diet consisted of mostly vegetables, raw meat and weevil-infested cornmeal.

"You get free meat with every meal," the guards had said laughingly as they spooned out more of the foul-smelling allowance to the ragtag lot of shuffling prisoners.

The prisoners achieved great delight in catching a rat, stray animal, or one of the many venomous snakes that called Andersonville their habitat. Once caught, it wasn't very long until the unsuspecting quarry was gracing a prisoner's steaming pot of vittles. Dysentery ran rampant because the medicine was in short supply.

The futility of not knowing whether you were going to greet the sunrise took its deadly toll among the prisoners. The fear caused many a man to lose his sanity, but not Dan Mercer. He was able to keep his wits about him by looking at the stars at night and the clouds during the day. That is, if the weather permitted.

Others were kept alive by the myriad promises of the guards; of an imminent exchange of the prisoners. There was talk in '64 of Major General William Tecumseh Sherman freeing the prisoners in his famous March to the Sea. But the closest his troops came to Andersonville was fifty miles. Again, the prisoner's hopes were dashed to the ground, broken and smashed like a child's toy thrown against the wall. Eyes that were momentarily brightened were now dull and lifeless.

A few tried suicide, while others walked across the deadline. The deadline consisted of a line of poles that were placed to run parallel to the barricades twenty feet from the prison walls. To step over this was to invite immediate death. No ifs, ands, or buts about it. Mercer often thought that lead ball crashing through his skull was an easy way out of his chains. But he still held onto the belief that the war would be over soon.

"A matter of days," he would whisper to the other prisoners as a form of encouragement. "We'll all be free once again."

When the complaining was brought to the attention of the prison commandant, Captain Wirz, he would smile. He would sit back in his camp chair, hook his fingers in his suspenders and smile evilly.

"If the prisoners start to complain too much," he said, laughingly. "Then I'll sic the dogs on 'em."

The dogs were part mongrel and part pit bull terriers. They were known as plantation dogs. All were vicious, seventy-five pounds of whirling, snapping, snarling dervishes. The dogs caught the last escapee after a long chase that encompassed three miles. He had his ear unmercifully torn off. He died later as gangrene set in to do its insidious work. The dog's owner was Benjamin F. Dunham.

FIVE

Benjamin F. Dunham was famous in the South for his utter cruelty and lack of concern at his treatment of the prisoners assigned to him. Knowing he had the power, he would think of the most inhumane forms of humiliation imaginable for the prisoners. The need to be cruel and sadistic had its roots buried deep within him. He would put the Marquis de Sade to shame; he could quite possibly even teach the Marquis a thing or two.

When he was a child, the locals would often taunt Dunham for his cowardice. They would corner the frail looking boy in a back alley, surround him and rain blows on his body. After he was almost unconscious, each would take turns at kicking him into oblivion.

Now I'm in charge. It's my turn.

He smacked his lips and cracked a grin.

Dunham was determined to make the most of this sudden turn of events. He would show the others what it truly meant to be feared. The sadistic soldier would often be seen rubbing his hands in glee over the ill-fated plight of the prisoners.

"Ah, the gods must be thinking of me," he said of his good fortune to the underlings gathered about him, his power instantly going to his head. He often thought of himself as being a Roman god of long ago. Infallible was his motto, torture was his creed, and remorse...he had none.

"You know," Dunham once said to the commandant, as they were sitting in front of his tent smoking quirries. "My smartness sometimes scares me."

"Me too," Captain Wirz said, testily. "Me too."

"That Dunham is a real legend in his own mind," the commandant would tell the other officers. All would laugh and secretly hope that the commandant wouldn't think of them as being of that ilk.

Dunham lay awake at nights thinking of the various ways he could torment the prisoners. One night, while wrinkling his brow, he came up with the most ingenious method of torture and degradation.

"This'll be my crowning accomplishment." He grinned, slapping himself on the knee.

His grin, mouth open to reveal two broken teeth and four rotten ones, was hideous. Combined with the gray stubble on his face, he gave the appearance of something dead, something that should be buried. It would make a vulture think twice about devouring his meal.

He leaped from his bed, pulled on his boots and grabbed his forage cap. He was about to tell his men to start when he noticed it was almost daylight. He stopped and sat on his cot.

"I'll tell everyone at breakfast," he said to himself. "No sense in getting my bowels in an uproar. My plan will wait. The prisoners aren't going anywhere. They've nothing on their itinerary but to wait to see what I have for them next."

Dunham's scheme was to make the prisoners line up, remove what scanty clothing they had and squat like a duck. The prisoners would waddle around while Dunham and his cohorts would laugh uproariously.

Then one of the guards had an idea. While these prisoners waddled around, wouldn't it be great fun to see them do it with a bucket of hot coal oil on their heads. The hotter, the better.

Dunham was a little put out because he had not thought of the suggestion beforehand. But his sadistic streak made his eyes gleam with anticipation. He smiled and started to rub his hands together more briskly.

The guards would admonish the prisoners not to spill any. A few complied, but others did

not fare as well. The hot liquid spilled down the sides of their heads burned them horribly. Large blisters would form quickly. Later the men would look like some grotesque symbols out of a drunk's sodden nightmare.

These burn victims would be taken to the infirmary where a doctor put a foul-smelling ointment on the wounds. Then the doctors would bandage the burns with filthy rags. After seeing to the men's health, they would send the men back to more shameful treatment with the rats and other vermin within the stockade. Many of the vermin walked on two legs. These were the people in charge of the prisoner's welfare.

Mercer remembered his term of imprisonment as he stared at the burning embers of the campfire. One of the coals suddenly burst, sending sparks shooting out into the night. Mercer quickly put out the offending firebrands and looked at Glory. He smiled. Shaking his head to clear it, he cast his gaze on Glory.

"Hungry?"

"Am I?" She rubbed her belly and looked at him hopefully. "My stomach thinks my throat's been cut. No food down there in a long time!"

Mercer stood, walked to his saddlebags and removed a bag of foodstuffs. He turned back to Glory and pitched her the bag. She caught the small parcel and eagerly opened it.

"There's some stuff to help us out," he said, while returning to his saddlebags and searching again. He could not find what he was searching for, so he sat down across the campfire from her.

Glory took the sack and started to rummage. She found a slab of bacon, a half loaf of bread and two small, darkly colored eggs. The bread and bacon had mold on it, but she figured on slicing the mold off.

"It's not too bad," she said. "Maybe not the best victuals, but at least it was something."

"Here. Use this to scramble those eggs," he said, handing her his knife. "Forks, knives and spoons are not only in short supply, they're nonexistent."

After slicing the mold from the bacon and bread, she fried the bacon. Then she broke the eggs into the skillet. As the eggs sizzled, she couldn't help but notice their strange color and the smell that wafted up to her nostrils.

She checked the frying pan.

Oh well. They may look and smell funny, but I'm awfully hungry. Besides, they won't kill me. But to be on the safe side, I'll make sure that he'll eat some too.

While they took turns at using the knife, he smiled at her again. She didn't return the smile; she was too hungry. Forgetting her lack of manners, she took a piece of the bread and sopped the grease in the skillet. She used her fingers to stuff the tasty morsel into her mouth. Only then did she smile at him, grease dripping down the corners of her mouth.

When they were through eating, she cleaned the skillet with a clump of grass. Looking with a critical eye at the cast iron object, she bent and filled the skillet with sand to scour it clean. The skillet finally passed her inspection. Then she poured each a cup of coffee. She sat back to slowly sip and enjoy hers.

"I must tell you them eggs are about spoiled. Not that I'm complaining any, you hear, but they sure did have a distinct taste to them. What kind of hen laid them eggs?"

Mercer grinned, then rolled a smoke and got a stick from the fire to light it. He did not say anything for a moment. He lay back on his saddle and pulled the smoke into his lungs, exhaled, then blew the blue plume skyward.

"It wasn't any chicken that laid them eggs," he said softly, through a haze of smoke. "Those

were snake eggs.”

“Snake eggs!” she sputtered, her stomach starting to heave, bile rushing up her throat. She gulped to control her stomach, her eyes widening in alarm as her throat muscles convulsed.

“Yep. Snake eggs,” he said, still grinning. “Besides, that may be the only meal we’ll be having in a long time. That’s the last of my victuals.”

Noticing him say we caused her to have mixed emotions. She was elated at having someone to talk with, causing her to momentarily forget her loneliness. And it was good to have a man to help stave off any attackers. But no man was ever going to use her again.

Her mouth turned down in distaste. The mere thought of a man was making her feel queasy. Her skin began to crawl and itch as if it was covered with fine spider webs.

Glory looked with many a sideways glance the man who called himself Mercer. She saw a man with a mop of black hair tinged with specks of gray. His face was unshaven, but underneath his beard, he seemed to have a straight jaw. He also had a stern mouth, which did not smile often; and yet he had smiled frequently at her. His eyes were the color of blue steel, hard looking, but at the same time, compassionate. Those eyes have seen a lot and seemed as if they wanted to forget those memories.

Awfully skinny though. Just needs fattening up a bit.

“Here you go,” Mercer said, throwing her his blanket, which she had replaced on his bedroll after she had warmed up a bit. “You take this. I’ll use my poncho.”

Glory decided she’d let him help her. But once she didn’t need him anymore, she was gone. But for now... she felt like a broken doll, used up and discarded. From now on, she’d use men the way they’d used her. Her Christian upbringing would do her no more good than she ever thought that it would.

So men beware, Glory B. Stahl will hurt you!

She arose and helped Mercer to bank the fire. A smile formed at the corners of her mouth. She turned her back to him and smiled wider into the night.

“Tomorrow’s another day,” she said as she shoved more dirt and gathered small rocks to place by the edge of the fire. “Things could not get any worse. Hell, my mother used to say, was a place of torment. I think – no, I know – I’ve been through Hell and there is no other way but *up* for me!”

“Get a good night’s sleep,” Mercer said, as he finished banking the campfire. After he saw to the fire, Mercer turned and looked at her. “Tomorrow, we light out for points farther west.”

“Good night.” Her eyes followed him as he crawled into his poncho. Suppressing a grin, she watched with amusement as he tried to get out of his clammy clothes under the poncho. Finally, she saw a pair of wet breeches come flying out of his covers to settle on a boulder nearby. Smiling, she rolled on her back and was fast asleep in a moment.

Everything got quiet that night, except for the lonesome sound of a coyote howling in the distance. The land seemed to rest, awaiting the coming of the new day. The flowers closed their petals. It seemed as if the raging river finally calmed down and flowed peacefully. A gentle sound came from the waters slowly lapping at the bank of the river and reached Mercer’s ears. Mother Earth seemed to sigh and all became quiet. Sighing quietly to himself, he rolled on his side and went to sleep.

The next morning, Mercer awakened early. The campfire was extinguished, the gear loaded onto the horse when Mercer gazed wistfully westward. He was busy saddling his mount when he noticed that Glory was awake. She had rolled over in her sleep and the blanket had fallen to her waist to reveal two firm breasts; her blouse had become unbuttoned during the night.

Seeing him look, then quickly look away, she hastily buttoned her blouse.

"C'mon, sleepy head. We have to be mounted and away from here," Mercer said over his shoulder. "I don't want to lose time dilly dallying all day long."

Mercer grabbed hold of the pommel and swung into the saddle. He looked down at her and motioned for her to give him her hand. Grasping her extended hand, he swung her up behind him. "You don't weigh more than a tinker's mite."

They rode westward through the tall grass on the plain. "Put your arms around my waist and hold on tight," Mercer said as his horse broke into a mile-eating lope.

She placed her small arms around his waist and squeezed tightly. Closing her eyes for a moment, she knew how lucky she was to find anyone to help her out. She also thought of the various ways that she could come out ahead.

After riding for a while, he smiled. It was hard to do, as he hadn't had anything to smile about in a long time. Before long, his smile got wider and wider, as the tightening in his groin got stronger. He was enjoying the feel of the young woman's body as she laid her head against his shoulders, the feel of her arms wrapped around his waist.

The steady motion of the animal combined with the gentle rocking had lulled Glory to sleep. Her arms had lost their tightness. They began to fall down his side. Reaching behind with his right arm, he was able to tighten his hold on to her lithe body.

Mercer slowed his horse down to a canter.

No sense in having her fall off and break a leg. Might have to shoot her and end her misery. Then I'll have to stop, dig a grave and bury her. Time wasted. Although, I don't have any pressing need to be anywhere, just away from here. California is beckoning me.

He reined in, then swung his leg over the pommel of the saddle. He jumped down, turned and quickly caught her as she fell, still sleeping soundly. Gently, he laid her down in the flower-covered meadow. He gazed at her peaceful face as he lay beside her. Mercer wasn't sleepy. But he would rest for a moment or two. His horse contentedly grazed on the tall grass.

Mercer laced his fingers behind his head and peered earnestly at the azure sky. The white puffy clouds seemed so soft, like the feather pillows on his bed back home. As he stared at the white puffy clouds in the seemingly endless turquoise sky, he thought of the time when he was a child.

Back then, he would lie with his friends in a meadow similar to this one and daydream. Later, they would share their various dreams over a cold jug of buttermilk. The dreams were special to the young adolescent boys. Each of the youngsters would tell of their stories and dreams beyond one's wildest imagination.

One would tell of seeing wild horses cavorting in a meadow covered with clover. Another would see the outline of an Indian chief, resplendent in feathers and a buffalo robe. Mercer would dream of a knight's castle complete with a moat around it. Tall stone walls, parapets and other forms of defense were all present. Knights rescuing fair damsels in distress completed his dream. There were kings, queens, dukes, barons and wizards. Vivid imaginings to the young Northerner.

Mercer's daydreams were the direct result of him being lent a book by the local schoolmarm entitled *Knights of the Roundtable* by Alfred, Lord Tennyson. The daring-do of men and women long ago made him smile. Reading the book had taken him all winter by the fireplace. But, as a determined youth, he finished the chore. He beamed with pride as the schoolmarm openly praised him in front of his classmates for accomplishing the Herculean task.

He often wondered if any of his classmates had found their dreams. Mercer had kept up with

their lives. One was a Federal judge, one a sheriff and still another was a mercantile owner. All were upstanding citizens and pillars of their communities. But he was a wanderer, important only to himself. Three out of four were not bad odds.

He turned his gaze back to the white and bibulous clouds. Mercer saw a family of rabbits cavorting in the meadow. Birds were chirping, bees a buzzing, and the breeze flowed gently through the grass of the glade. Quails, chipmunks and a deer were contentedly having their mealtime snack. The scene completed the panoramic scope of the idyllic spot.

SIX

The quiet moment was shattered by the sound of a shotgun blast. Birds took to the wing, rabbits scurried into their burrows and the deer jumped fleetingly into the adjoining woods. Mercer quickly reached out and grasped Glory by the shoulder.

"What?" Glory asked, bewildered, as Mercer grabbed her and forced her to safety behind the nearby rocks.

He quickly held his finger up to his lips and shoved her farther back into the security of the rocks. When he was sure that she was safely tucked in a recess, he scrambled back to his position to look for the cause of the danger.

He peered around the corner of a rock and spied a young boy carrying a shotgun in his arms. It was pointed in their direction. Wisps of smoke snaked their way upward from the barrel of the recently fired weapon.

"Don't move a hair on your heads!" the youth said as he pointed the scattergun at them.

The boy was around ten years old. He was dressed in a straw hat, poplin breeches, clodhopper boots and a flour print shirt. He approached them apprehensively, ready at a moment's notice to fire. Then he stopped to rest his shotgun against his side. Making his mind up, he hefted his weapon and walked to them. He still had the greener pointed at them.

"All right, you can get up," he said as he came closer to his two captives.

Glory and Mercer stood up. Instinctively, Glory grabbed Mercer's hand and received a reassuring squeeze in return. They watched the boy advance. He was coming at them slowly, eyes were never wavering, a determined look on his features. His mouth was a grim line.

"Don't make any sudden moves," Mercer whispered out of the corner of his mouth as he held Glory's hand tighter. "The boy's as nervous as a one-arm fan dancer and about as skittish as a newborn colt."

"What're you two doing out here?" the boy asked, nervously holding the shotgun away from them, but ready to point at them again. The barrel of the weapon seemed about as long as the boy was tall. Mercer could see the strain etched on the boy's face as he tried his best at holding the enormous weapon at the ready.

"Nothing, son," Mercer replied, thinking how ironic it would be if he survived the cruelty of Andersonville only to be shot by a young boy.

"Then what are you doing in my field?" the boy questioned, raising the shotgun, but keeping the barrel pointed at an angle away from Mercer and Glory. One could see the whiteness of the youngster's knuckles. Mercer prayed the shotgun did not have a hair trigger.

As he explained how Glory and he came to be in the field, Mercer moved Glory to stand behind him. He could feel the fear in her shaking arms as his own stomach muscles were starting to get tighter.

The boy peered closer and swallowed audibly. He then lowered the shotgun, placed it by his side and pushed the crown of his hat up farther on his head. Then with a wide grin, the youngster stuck out his hand.

"Oh! Excuse me, my name is Larry Abernathy," he said with pride.

He tipped his hat to Glory, who was taken aback. She had a brother the same age and size as the one standing before her. She felt a sudden twinge as she remembered the loss of her family.

Mercer was pleasantly surprised at the firmness of the boy's handshake. He could judge people by their handshakes. Some shook your hand so weakly that it felt like they had a dead fish attached to the end of the arm, a limp wrist. Others shook so violently that one would have

thought that you were a well gone dry. The boy's handshake was firm. Mercer immediately liked the gangling youth.

Mercer introduced Glory and himself. Before he could say anything else, Larry started to talk nonstop. Mercer couldn't get a word in edgewise. Nodding now and then, the ex-Union cavalry captain continued to let the boy talk without any interruptions.

Larry explained that he was the man of the house. His father, Abner, had died of milk poisoning the year before. He had two squealing pigs, a mooing cow, a brace of cantankerous mules, a barking dog and a barn lot full of clucking chickens.

"I'm ten years old, well, nine, really," he said, trying to stand taller than he was. My birthday's in a little more than two weeks, July fourteenth."

"Indeed," Mercer said, trying to hide his smile behind his hand. "That's all you got? Animals?"

"Oh, yeah!" the boy said, grinning sheepishly. He reached up and pulled his hat down lower. "I've got two little sisters and a Maw!"

The mention of his mother gave the boy cause to worry. She always had cautioned him not to talk to strangers, even one so pretty as the lady standing before him. Even if she smiled at him and the man with her shook his hand.

"Well, Larry," Mercer asked, his tension easing. "What now?"

"Hungry?" Larry asked, looking at them hopefully. He also knew his mother wouldn't be mad if he had guests with him. Counting on this, Larry prayed silently that he was right.

"We wouldn't want to put your people out any," Mercer replied, getting a nudge in the back and a sour look from Glory as she moved to his side.

She remembered the snake eggs. Her stomach once again went into spasms. The mere thought of having a good home-cooked meal looked appetizing to her now... a chance to sit at a real table and talk to nice people for a change. Not that Dan Mercer wasn't nice. It was just the opportunity to talk to someone else.

"You're not. 'Sides, it's the least I can do," Larry said, crooking the shotgun in his left arm. "After all, I almost shot you, didn't I?"

"That you did, son," Mercer stated, smiling at the innocence of the boy. "But almost doesn't count, except in horseshoes."

The trio headed to the farmhouse. Larry was full of questions: why are you here; what are you going to do; where are you headed? Mercer could readily see that the youngster had no male figure in his short life. He was envious of the boy because of his youth and exuberance.

Mercer explained they were here because they were headed west. He was going to be doing as little as possible, just enough to get by on. Mercer did not mention Glory in his plans, because he didn't know about her yet. Plans would take care of themselves all in due time.

"You never have too many friends," his father used to say, while smoking his pipe in a philosophical mood. "Only too many enemies."

So far, the boy proved he was friendly. Mercer smiled as he looked around the countryside. There was enough grass for a small spread, water was plentiful and the trees would provide any wood needed. No fences to keep a man from expanding.

What he liked the best was that the area was sparsely populated. Mercer had seen no neighbors, or, for that matter, nothing but animals for the last five miles or so...a wonderful place to put down roots. His wandering may be over quicker than he had figured.

At the top of the hill, Mercer saw the farm. It had a rundown look to it, as if no one cared about the prospect of improving the farm or the surrounding area, including the present

occupants. A look of despair seemed to have settled over the farmstead. The sun going behind a cloud only added to the gloominess.

It was a large farmhouse, with an old dilapidated barn and a wood shed next to it; a smokehouse stood at the rear of the barn. A split rail fence that traversed from the front of the house to the lane was broken in parts. Rails were askew and weeds had established their presence by taking over the fence. The house itself was missing a few shingles and a far upstairs bedroom window was broken. Mercer could see the caulking missing from the windows and the house needed a new coat of whitewash as well as the barn.

Everything could use some sprucing up. He gave a former plantation owner's critical view of the farmstead.

Quietly sighing, Mercer followed Larry to the farm. He thought of all the things he could do for a place like the farm. In his head, he began to conjure up all sorts of possibilities.

So, it needed repairing. He was good with his hands. All it would take is a little time and time's what he was long on.

Grinning inwardly, he straightened his shoulders. Head held high, Mercer advanced more determinedly. He had a plan.

Larry was sticking blades of grass in his mouth. Glory was busy picking wildflowers and skipping along, seemingly at peace with the world. Mercer strode forward, deep in thought. He was thinking of his good fortune in finding the place. A single chicken hawk was making lazy circles in the turquoise sky, hunting for an unwary rabbit to feast upon.

Upon reaching the farmhouse, the trio was greeted by a yapping dog, two little girls and a worried mother, not necessarily in that order. Larry hurried ahead and tried his best to stop the dog's barking. His mother held one little girl on her hip as the other had a death grip on her mother's dress.

Mercer could not tell the woman's age, as time had worked havoc on her features. Her slack body was clothed in a tattered dress covered with patches. The front had the flour imprints of her palms, showing she had wiped her hands on the material before coming out to see what was causing the commotion. On her feet was a pair of clodhoppers with rips in the side. Her eyes were lined with wrinkles, sorrowful ones... not happy ones. Gray hair tied in a bun adorned her head.

The little girls were twins, Heather and Tammy. Their dresses were also in patches. Their faces were covered with freckles. Golden hair was tied in pigtails by strips of cloth, one blue, the other green.

Mercer surmised one girl was feisty, while the other was calmer. They were as different as night and day, but both mischievous. He could tell by the sparkle in their eyes. Mercer tied his horse to a fencepost. Larry ran quickly to his mother and told her what had happened. The woman hurriedly rushed to Glory, concern evidently in her face.

"You poor dear," she said, as she gave Larry a stern look. "Did my boy shoot you?"

Placing the small girl on the ground, she hurried to Glory. The little girl moved quickly behind her sister. She was not used to strangers.

"No, ma'am," Glory answered, with a devilish grin at Mercer. "I fell on a rock last night."

She was having fun at Mercer's expense. Turning to face Mrs. Abernathy, Glory executed a small curtsy. "Here's some flowers I picked for your home."

"Please come into the house," Mrs. Abernathy said, compassion taking precedence over the no strangers rule. Placing the flowers in one hand, she wrapped the other around Glory's shoulders. The two women started to the house, paying no mind to the others.

“Both of you look like you can use some food,” Mrs. Abernathy said. Then she looked back over her shoulder at Mercer. “Especially you. Nothing fancy, just meat and potatoes, but it’ll put meat on your poor bones.”

Leaving Mercer and Larry to themselves, Mrs. Abernathy led Glory into the farmhouse with the twins trailing after them. The girls cast a shy look over their shoulders at Mercer. Then, giggling, they followed the women into the farmhouse. Larry accompanied Mercer to the farmhouse.

Seating Glory at the table, Mrs. Abernathy went to the sink and began pumping the hand pump furiously, quickly filling a washbasin. She placed the basin on the table, dipped a rag into the water and wrung it out. Then she started to dab at Glory’s head wound. When she was finished with that, she proceeded to bandage the cut.

“Oh, dear. Oh, dear.” Mrs. Abernathy muttered while doing her nursing duty.

Mercer and Larry entered the farmhouse. Mercer took a chair beside the fireplace, while Larry went to his mother and asked if there was anything he could do. His mother motioned to the potato bin. Larry took out a few potatoes, pulled out a chair by Mercer and sat. Then Larry started to peel the potatoes.

Mercer looked at the two women and grinned. He pulled out a chair and sat. Pulling out his knife, he began to peel potatoes as well.

He never thought he’d be doing this again, at least not so soon. Just goes to show you, a man must do what he must do.

That night, they feasted on pinto beans, fried potatoes and sowbelly. Mercer couldn’t remember having had a better meal.

Mrs. Abernathy looked at Mercer and Glory and said, “I hope I didn’t bother you people with my rants, ravings and caring ons, but I’m so happy to have some adults to talk to for a while. Of course, my Larry is the man of the house now.” Then she looked at Glory. “Still, I need to talk to a woman sometimes.”

Mrs. Abernathy talked about her late husband. Everything had once been prosperous, but now it seemed to be on a downhill slide. As she talked, her eyes took on a wistful look. Her eyes were starting to get misty and she dabbed at them with a corner of her apron.

“The fences need mending,” she softly spoke with resignation. Like her son, she talked endlessly. Mercer grinned, realizing that lonely people loved to talk. Sometimes he even talked to himself, although he did not always like the answers he gave himself.

Mercer carefully explained his observations as to what needed to be done to the farm. He did not want to offend her hospitality any, but at the same time, he felt that she should be made aware of the offhanded inspection he had performed.

“Oh, I know, but I can’t afford to hire a man to help us do the work. We’re barely able to keep our heads above water. My poor Larry is working himself to the bone, the girls are worn to a frazzle and I seem to be tired all the time.”

Mrs. Abernathy sighed as she leaned back in her chair and looked at the two visitors thoughtfully. She arose from her chair and started to clear the table.

“Here, ma’am,” Glory said, rising from the table. “Let me do that for you. You just sit and let me do this. You rest for a while. After all, you did refuse my help earlier in fixing the meal, didn’t you? It’s only right I do it.”

“Your head?” Mrs. Abernathy asked.

Glory laughed. “I’ve had bigger cuts on my nose and never did stop breathing. No. You just sit. Enjoy someone else doing the dishes for a change.”

"I sure do appreciate your offer, but I'll dry for you," Mrs. Abernathy said, getting a dishcloth. "No. Not another word." Then she turned to her young son. "Larry, get your sisters ready for bed. I'll be up later to hear their prayers. Now scoot!"

Mercer excused himself and went outside for a smoke. He sat on the front stoop and rolled a cigarette. Leaning back against the porch railing, he began to think.

Talk about troubles. These people have it in spades; no money, no help and no way to see themselves clearly. Sure was nice and peaceful here, no neighbors around... an ideal place for him. All the open space could help him think things through.

Now, Glory presented a problem for him. He knew that he didn't have any obligations to her, but at the same time, he couldn't help but feel responsible for her. She was a grown woman, but still a child in the ways of the world. He decided he'd cross that bridge when he got to it and not before.

His smoke finished, he field-stripped his cigarette and went inside. He found Glory and Mrs. Abernathy finishing the dishes. Mrs. Abernathy had taken an old rag to wipe the table of crumbs, while Glory threw the old dishwater out the back door.

After Glory finished, she placed the wooden tub by the sink. Then she turned and asked Mrs. Abernathy a question that had been praying on her mind since they met. "Might I be the one who hears the girl's prayers? I miss my family something fierce. Need to get my mind off my sorrow and onto something more pleasant for a while."

"Of course, my dear," Mrs. Abernathy answered cheerfully. "They'll be happy to have someone outside of their old mother. Go right ahead, with my blessings."

Glory bounded up the stairs, humming to herself. She seemed to have a sparkle in her eyes. When she left the room, Mrs. Abernathy turned to Mercer.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"That'd be right nice, ma'am," Mercer answered, pulling his chair closer to the table.

"Must tell you, though," she said, with an apologetic look, "it'll have a whole lot of chicory in it to make it go farther."

"That's the way my mother made it back home," he said as he smiled at her. Mercer did not mention that he was used to drinking the worst coffee imaginable, but that was neither here nor there, so he said nothing.

She was beaming as she made the coffee. When it was ready, she poured him a cup of the steaming brew. Mrs. Abernathy watched Mercer as he blew on the coffee, sipped it and smiled.

"Ah, that's the way my mother made it," he said, taking another sip of the steaming cup of java.

Grinning, she sat at the table beside him and reached for a saucer. Then, she poured part of her coffee into the saucer and slowly sipped it.

"Ma'am, you mentioned earlier that you couldn't afford the expense of hiring someone to help you with the duties the place seems to demand."

"Pshaw! I was only rambling. Don't you worry about the ravings of an old woman." She raised her hand. "I do believe that we'll make it, however long it takes. We will survive. I don't want you to worry yourself sick over the matter. We'll get by someday."

Mercer looked at the woman who was both humble and proud. He saw the gray hair and her worn out features combined with her look of fierce determination. She was certainly resolved to face the world and all its problems head-on.

"I've all the faith in the world you will," he said, smiling. "But what I want to say is that you, no doubt, have put all your life into the fa... ranch."

"That's all right if you want to call the place a farm." She chuckled. "However, for Larry's sake, we had better say it is a ranch. The boy wants so much for it to be so. It's the only legacy his father, God blessed his dear departed soul, left him... that, his name, and a whole passel of bills."

"Fine with me, ma'am," Mercer said. "In fact, if everything goes the way I've planned, it'll not only be a ranch, but the biggest and best in these parts."

"Maybe so. Who knows?" Mrs. Abernathy got up and moved to the stove. "Want another cup?"

"Yes, ma'am. As I was saying, I've been hoping to find a nice quiet place with as few neighbors as possible. A place I could put down some roots and think things out. What'd you say if I went to work for you?" He saw the look of concern that washed over her features. "Pardon me. I wouldn't want any pay. Just room and board should take care of my needs. I'm also a fair trader when I get the opportunity, if I do say so myself. Of course, I feel awkward at tooting my own horn. But as they say, if I don't do it, then who will?"

"Lands sake alive!" she said as the tears started to meander down her cheeks. She quickly dabbed her eyes with a corner of her apron. "There isn't any reason for you to do that... and me here blubbering. But let me tell you one thing, Mr. Mercer. I think the dear Lord has answered my prayers after all."

"Another thing, ma'am," Mercer said with a grin on his face. "I'd take it right kindly if you called me by my Christian name. It's Dan."

"Only if you call me Marg," she said with a twinkle in her eyes. "After all, I'm not that old yet."

Laughing together, they agreed to do that very thing. Glory came down the stairs and went to sit with them. Mercer told Mrs. Abernathy that he was going outside for a smoke and motioned for Glory to accompany him.

They went to the front porch, where Dan sat on the stoop. Glory chose an old wicker rocker by the open window of the parlor. They could hear Marg quietly sobbing inside. Glory tilted her head, listened for a moment, then looked down at Dan.

"Wonder what's the matter with her?"

"Nothing, I hope," Dan replied, reaching in his shirt pocket for his makings and busily started to roll a cigarette. He reached into his pants pocket and removed a lucifer. Dragging this across the porch, he applied the flame to the end of his cigarette. Taking a long drag, he blew a puff of smoke to the heavens.

The two sat on the porch quietly. Each seemed lost in thought. After a while, Dan told Glory about the offer he made to Marg. Then with a sideways look, he said, "You're more than welcome to stay here with me."

She'd known the man for only a short while, but already she seemed drawn to him. For a brief moment, she felt alive again; like she could one day trust a man again.

A gentle breeze was softly caressing Glory's hair. The full moon shone brightly and the stars came out to speckle the sky. The night was calm.

Glory glanced at Dan lovingly. Mercer was sitting with his arms folded, waiting patiently for her to speak. Suddenly she wished he would enfold her in those strong arms – maybe even kiss her. He had a firm body that could use more weight to it. It was a body she could envision making love to her. She surprised herself by thinking this way, but she didn't stop it.

This man's seen enough torment in his life. My rescuer needs the solitude this place can give him.

She shook her head and reached out to lay her hand on his arm, squeezing it gently. He turned and looked at her.

“It's not that I don't want to belong, Dan, but I can't stay here with you. The Lord knows, I want it to be so, but there's a big wide world out there for me to see. And, by George, I aim to see it!”

Dan could only shake his head. Here he was worried sick about how she would take his announcement of wanting to be a successful rancher. He was ready to give up his elusive dream and stop wandering. He had hoped she would too. She even seemed to be a bit relieved at his decision to remain here on the farm.

Sighing, he helped Glory to her feet. She reached out for him and placed her arms around his neck. Her kiss was slow and soft; a gentle kiss at first, but it soon became more passionate. Dan tightened his arms around her waist. When they were finished, she looked fondly at him and gave him one of her convincing smiles. Turning, she started to the house.

Mercer would try his best at changing her mind. He opened the door and followed her into the house.

Once inside, they Glory said her goodnights to Marg. Mercer watched her go up the stairs.

“I love you. Sleep tight,” he said silently as he headed to the kitchen for another cup of coffee.

SEVEN

Dan sat on a wooden keg by the barn door, pleasantly tired after a hard day's work. His thoughts returned to Glory, as they often did at times like this. He remembered her departure seven years ago as if it were yesterday.

He remembered the softness of her hair and her sudden smile when caught in a bit of tomfoolery. The softness of her body when they made love always amazed him. How her jade eyes could melt you by their twinkle or pierce you when she was angry. Such times, Dan would shudder. One minute, she could be nice, the next her eyes would pierce him with a glare meant to kill him as she'd tromp off mad as all get out.

But those times only last two wonderful weeks, until that fateful day he had arose to find her gone. He had gone to Glory's bedroom door, knocked and called out for her, as always. No answer. He opened the door and walked into the room she occupied with Marg. No Glory. Then, he went to the twins' room – still no Glory. She was not in any of the rooms upstairs.

Hurrying down the stairs, he asked Marg if she had seen Glory. She started to say something, but he left the room abruptly before she could reply. He went to where the twins were playing by the front door and questioned them, to no avail. Next, he headed to the barn where he had seen Larry busy pitching hay to the cows. Dan rushed up to Larry and plied the same question he had the others.

"Yes, Dan, I've seen her," Larry said, while motioning to the side of the stall. "Please sit and I'll tell you what Miss Glory told me."

Dan sat and picked up a piece of straw, clamping it between his teeth.

"She left earlier this morning. She doesn't want anyone to follow her, especially you. She had packed her possessions and said good-bye to my mom and then asked me to drive her to the train depot. She said only that she was going East."

She was gone. Without any good-bye, kiss my fanny, or anything. Just *gone*!

"How'd she have the money to pay for the ticket?" Dan asked, perplexed. He knew she was as poor as Job's turkey and that he had not given her any money.

"You'd better take that up with my mother. All I know is Miss Glory asked me to do her a favor and I did it." Larry dared Mercer to scold him for acting so boldly. Dan looked at the earnestness in the young man's eyes and smiled inwardly. He knew Larry was smitten with Glory.

Who could blame him? Glory was a fine-looking woman. When he was ten... no, that would have been eleven?

He remembered he had felt the same emotions toward a neighbor when he was Larry's age. Her name was Victoria Browning. She had been a little girl in blonde pigtails and blue eyes, with a bright smile. He was taken with her and mooned many a night for who he thought was his true love.

He guessed out here in the West, a person grew up quickly.

Dan sighed, arose from the side of the stall and walked heavily to the house.

Dan went inside and saw Marg busy at the woodstove. He told her what Larry had said. Before he could go farther, she motioned to a kitchen chair.

"Sit. I'll fix you a cup of coffee," she said, while drying her hands on a nearby towel.

Mercer was bewildered. First Larry. Now Marg. Looks as if he was all the time sitting.

"I'll tell you what Glory told me," she said, brushing a lock of her hair out of her eyes. "I'll also apologize for not telling you sooner, but when I started to tell, you rushed out of here like a

whirlwind.”

Dan pulled a chair out for Marg. She poured them a cup of coffee.

“Glory came downstairs for a cup of coffee. She told me what you offered her. I told her that it was obvious that you loved her.” Marg sighed, staring off into the distance. “Sort of like the love Abner and I shared.”

“She told me, ‘I do believe Dan would’ve offered me the moon if he could have, but I can’t take it now.’ “

Clearing her throat, she continued. “And like a fool, I gave her the money I’ve been holding back for a rainy day. Looks like it’s more like a flood.

“I made her some sandwiches. She took them and was about to leave when she stopped and turned to me. It was then that she asked me not to ask her any questions; that this way was for the best for all of us. Then she asked me if I’d let Larry take her to the train station.”

Seeing the forlorn look on Dan’s face, Marg reached across the wooden table and grasped his hand in hers.

“For what it’s worth. I’m truly sorry, Dan.”

EIGHT

Christmas had arrived, sending the temperature on its downward plunge. Icicles were forming on the eaves of the house, barn and shed. Snow covered everything, casting a white mantle over the countryside. Everywhere one looked was as white as the wool on a newborn lamb.

For the most part, Dan had been content for the past seven years. But now, a dark cloud loomed on the horizon. Christmas was almost here and he did not have a present for Marg... a small thing in itself, but a large one to him.

Evenings, after spending all day at backbreaking work on the ranch, he would go into the hills. Dan had found an abandoned line shack built by cowboys the year before. Its wooden sides were barely supporting a roof with holes in many spots. Inside was a cast iron potbellied stove and two makeshift beds made of rope strung across to make a more comfortable bed. These ropes were frayed and broken in various places. A layer of dust covered everything.

The cowboys would rest here as they rode the fence hunting for strays or breaks in the wire. Sometimes, there even was an occasional cow to rescue from a mud wallow or snowdrift. But often, they would just lie around the shack and tell yarns of days past. When the snow cleared and the wind died down, they would trudge through the snow to saddle their mounts.

It took him a month to clean things up and bring some order to the chaos. Dan used the old shack to make various things for the Abernathy family like doll cradles for the twins, using the wood of a small sapling he had cut down after finding them on the nearby hillside. He had cut these trees before the first snow had fallen.

His task of transporting the trees to the shack was hampered by the stubbornness of a mule. The animal had balked at carrying such a load. Finally, through patient cajoling, he was able to reach the cabin with his load of timber.

Tammy and Heather were full of energy, as were all ten-year-old children. Tammy was quiet, loved being alone, and minded her own business. Heather was the exact opposite; jolly, restless and forever getting into mischief. He was sure that the girls would love the doll cradles he had hand made for them.

Dan knew that Larry, who was by now a young man of seventeen, would appreciate the scabbard. A piece of leather Dan had got at the general store in town had provided the makings for it.

Dan had spent many hours rubbing the leather with saddle soap to soften it. But though the soap softened the leather, it did not insure durability. Care called for that. Knowing Larry, Dan was assured the scabbard was going to be afforded lots of tender loving care.

“But for Marg, I have nothing!”

He had wracked his brain for untold hours on end, to no avail. He was hesitant when it came to buying dresses and cloth at the general store.

Candy for the girls, men's articles for Larry, and household items for Marg were all right, but dresses? No way!

He had these things on his mind as he rode his horse into the ranch. The lights were glowing brightly in the house. Riding to the hitch rail, he dismounted and tied the horse to it. He would take him to the barn later, he decided, as he walked to the door.

He was reaching for the doorknob when it opened before him. Larry was standing with his Mackinaw in his hands, a scarf wrapped partially around his head to protect his ears.

“Glad you're here,” Larry said, shutting the door as he stepped outside. “We need to go out

and help the animals.” Buttoning up his jacket, he started for the barn.

Dan followed Larry. It was their job to break the ice on the many farm ponds that dotted the area. Once broken, the cattle could get a drink. On the way to the barn, Dan asked Larry if there was anything he could think of to get Marg for Christmas.

“Can’t think of anything,” Larry replied, shifting the lantern in his hand. “My mother’s comfortable, contented and cared about. There’s nothing I can think of off hand that she is willing to die for, now that you’ve keep us safe and sound. You’ve given her the will to live and for that I thank you.”

Dan was not used to being complimented. Clearing his throat, he opened the barn door wider. He paused and motioned for Larry to hand him the lantern, raising the globe and lighting the wick. In the lantern’s dim glow, he could see their way to the horses.

“Well, I don’t mind telling you,” Dan said, tugging his mount out of the stall to saddle it, “I’m a might put out for not being able to come up with a single thing for your mother.”

Dan saddled his horse and mounted. Wheeling his animal, he started out of the barn. Larry followed on his own horse to the nearest farm pond.

“I wouldn’t let that bother you any,” Larry said, as he rode beside Dan through the snow-covered countryside. Everything seemed to glisten with the sun’s glare off the new fallen snow. “Besides, if it weren’t for you, we wouldn’t be here for any presents anyway,”

Dan knew Larry was referring to last summer, when the family had come down with diphtheria. The twins were hit the hardest and Heather the worst. Tammy seemed to weather the storm better. The once energetic little girl lay in her bed listlessly. Marg would sit by the bed and look down on her fallen angel. When she got tired, Dan would come in and relieve her. Then he would pick up the frail little body and carry the girl, pacing, about the room. All the time, he placed his large hands on the small back of his burden, patting her, telling her softly how much he loved her.

Larry would lie in his bed and moan softly. Once his fever broke, he was able to offer the much needed help to Marg and Dan. Marg would retire to her bedroom while Dan would rest by the fireplace.

Tammy, ever the loner, tried her best at getting anything she needed by herself. The small girl would offer to help shoulder their burden for Heather, but was graciously declined by the adults. She loved her sister so very much, even though the sickness had not left her as bad off as Heather.

Dan stubbornly continued his treatment of tearing old bedding into strips, soaking them in turpentine and sugar and swabbing everyone’s throats. At first, the twins tried to push his hand away. He would gently but firmly remove their tiny hands as he applied the strange concoction to their necks.

“Something I learned in the war,” he said. “At the first outbreak of diphtheria, the doctors would swab everyone’s throat, be they Confederates or Union people, prisoners or guards. Everyone got doctored.”

In less than a month, the twins were back to their favorite tricks, Marg was taking care of the house, and Larry was helping with the chores. Even the barn animals seemed to be more alive. The hens were clucking, the rooster crowing, pigs playfully wallowing in the mud, the ducks quacking.

Mother Earth seemed to awaken from her long slumber. The sky turned a robin’s nest blue and off in the distance a flock of geese honked. The deer looked about as if in amazement, while the bears came out from their caves after their hibernation.

Dan was trading with the Indians –

cattle, homemade preserves, and Marg's handwoven quilts. He had already built the meager herd from one cow to a herd of fifty cows, twenty calves and three bulls. Dan had a knack for trading. He was shrewd but honest. Through his acumen, the ranch had prospered.

Larry and Dan rode to the ice-covered pond and dismounted. Each took a lariat, tied it to the saddle pommel and slowly started onto the ice. The pond they had picked was one of the smaller ones, but the cattle were ringed about it. Even the presence of men caused the cattle to become still. They were either too thirsty or just bitter cold. Anyways, they did not move.

"Be careful, son," Dan cautioned, as he raised a pick and started to chop the ice.

"Don't worry. I will be," Larry replied, imitating Dan's chopping action.

They continued to chop into a small hole had formed in the ice. At first it was a minuscule crack, but it did not take long before it became longer and wider. Dan had to do some fancy maneuvering to stay ahead of it. The crack raced toward him like a locomotive. He looked back over his shoulder and saw the bluish-gray water that the crack had exposed.

"Whew!" Dan exclaimed. "That almost got me."

"Yep," Larry said, laughingly. "But as you always say, almost doesn't count, lessen it's horseshoes."

"True, but it still scares a person. Come on, I'll race you to the barn."

As they spurred their horses through the snow, Larry took the lead. Dan smiled, deciding to let the youth beat him. To heighten Larry's victory, Dan would tell everyone how bad it is to be beat, but it was doubly embarrassing to be beat by a youngster.

Dan smiled as he approached the house. A curl of smoke made its way to the heavens from the chimney. The front yard was covered with snow and had seemed almost clean, but Dan knew about the debris located there anyway.

He'd have to cut more firewood tomorrow. Little did he know seven years ago how everything was going to work out. He hadn't planned on staying for seven years. He still thought of Glory, wondering briefly if she was well.

He saw Larry come from the house and patiently wait for Dan to ride up. Reining in his horse, Dan dismounted. He turned to Larry, who was nervous, and asked what was the problem.

"No problem," Larry replied, reaching for the horse's reins. "I guess I'm just excited about the holidays. Here, give me the reins and I'll put the horse in the barn. Go ahead into the house."

"Don't forget to rub her down good. Give her plenty of oats as she's been ridden pretty hard today," Dan said over his shoulder on the way to the house.

At the front door, he pulled off his Mackinaw, shook the snow from it, and hung the coat on a peg. He sat on a bench and removed his boots, which he placed on a boot rack inside the closet. Then he turned and padded into the living room.

Dan was elated with the way Marg had transformed the house. She had placed the Christmas tree in the far corner by the fireplace. The pine was decorated with strings of popcorn, lighted candles and an angel at the peak of the branches. Marg had made the figurine out of a paste of flour. She had placed it in the oven to harden and the twins had helped by decorating it with tiny beads for eyes and wings made of gossamer silk.

On top of the sideboard were two pecan pies slowly cooling. To their left sat a bowl filled to the brim with candied yams. A bowl of mashed potatoes and boiled greens along with a pot of split-pea soup sat to the right. It reminded Dan of earlier times when he was home with his

family and the cook had everything prepared and sitting on a sideboard. A veritable feast!

The smell permeating the house came from the turkey in the cast-iron stove, slowly basting in its own juices. The fowl had been caught, plucked and cleaned by Larry. He had gone to the forest yesterday, determined to come home with the bird. It took him most of the day, but he finally came dragging in with his trophy slung over his shoulder.

Dan lumbered through the archway and was pleasantly surprised to seeing everyone smiling like the cat who swallowed the proverbial bird. The twins were shaking with excitement and gently humming to themselves. Marg smiled at the good fortune of having her family together.

"We've got a surprise for you!" Heather said, trying to stifle a giggle. The little girl turned and stuck her tongue out at her sister as if to say, "There. I've already beat you at telling him." Her sister glanced at her and shrugged her shoulders as if to say, "So what."

"Not now!" Marg exclaimed. "You two girls set the table." Larry had just come in the back door and was busy stomping the snow off his boots. "Larry, will you please be so kind as to place another log on the fire? Dan, please sit at the head of the table."

Dan sat as the girls set the table and Larry placed another log on the fire. Everyone but Marg had sat in their places. In just a moment, Marg returned from the kitchen carrying a large cooker.

"Now, for Mr. Tom!"

Placing the bird in the middle of the table, she sat and looked at Dan and asked him to say the blessing. Everyone bowed their heads and waited. Dan seemed to be at a loss for words. The twins started to twitter and nudge each other.

"I'll tell you what," Marg said, clasping her hands and looking hard at the twins. "Let's all hold hands. We'll say our own grace to ourselves." She gave the girls another stern look. She would tend to them later.

"No, that wouldn't be right," Dan said. "A prayer is just someone talking to God. I guess I can talk to Him well enough. Okay, here goes. Bow your heads again, please."

The last was directed to the twins, who were staring at Dan with open mouths. Their astonishment was reflected in the faces of Larry and Marg, as they had never heard Dan say any blessings. They never thought that he knew about God, or whether there was One.

"Our heavenly Father, we thank you for allowing us to be here. We thank You for our many blessings. We pray for everyone, especially Glory. Father, we ask You to be with all of us. This prayer, I ask, in Your Son's name, Jesus Christ. Amen."

"You didn't ask to bless the food," Heather tittered, glancing at her sister and smiling.

"Hush!" Marg admonished the little girl. Tammy chose not to be included, so she just smiled. Larry was offended by the girls' behavior and shot looks of disapproval at the twins.

"I'm sure God knows you meant well," Marg said in her soft voice, while giving the girls another reproving look. "You may have forgotten the food, but it's all right. After all, He knows everything."

They ate their meal in subdued tones until the girls could keep quiet no longer. They started to snicker. Dan smiled, as did Marg and Larry. Finally, to break the mood and ease the tension, Dan guffawed out loud. Then, everyone laughed. Tears streamed down everyone's faces.

"I guess," Dan said, "I need to talk to Him more. Seems like I never have the time, what with the work around here. So, I'll just make time."

"Oh, Dan," Heather said, in her small voice, "I'm sure God would love to talk to you. Tonight, when I say my prayers, I'll ask Him to be extra gentle with you."

"You do that, doll," Dan said tenderly. "Lord knows, I surely need it." His heart was full for

her – for the whole family.

After the meal, they gathered around and sang Christmas carols. The twin's high-pitched voices, Marg's soprano, Larry's tenor and Dan's bass all made the mood brighter. Dan had not sung since before the War. And then, it was only a ditty he had picked up at a gambling house.

"That's some very good singing, if I say so myself," Dan said, after they had finished singing the last song. "But I had a dear friend that told me, that to self-brag is a half scandal."

The twins squealed with delight as they hurried to sit by the tree. Their little faces were upturned in anticipation. They were excited, but after receiving a glance from Marg, they calmed down to sit by the tree quietly, each trying to move close to where they supposed Dan would sit on his return from upstairs.

Dan went to his room for the presents. He rummaged in his closet and under his bed. He got the doll cradles from the closet and dragged the leather scabbard from under the bed. After making sure his door was closed, he went down the stairs. Once at the bottom, he went to the tree and passed out the presents to the children. But, he still did not have a present for Marg.

The twins were ooohing and ahing over their presents. Larry was reverently rubbing the scabbard. Marg was sitting at the side with tears glistening at the corner of her eyes. She smiled at the children and at Dan.

"Ma'am," Dan said apologetically. "I'm truly sorry for not having a present for you. But one of these days I'm going to get you a present to beat all presents. I promise you that."

"Dan," she said, tears welling in her eyes again, "if it weren't for you, we wouldn't have a Christmas, let alone a happy one. It's the thought that counts. I know you would've got me one if only you could. I and the family are thankful for having you here with us."

"Mama, have you told him yet?" Tammy asked, her eyes twinkling as her little body fidgeted with excitement.

"No, I haven't," Marg said, moving her wicker rocker closer to the fireplace. "You girls sit and I will."

The twins hurried and tried to sit in the chair next to Dan. Heather won out. Tammy sat in Dan's lap, stuck her tongue out at her sister and placed her small hands in his. Larry pulled a stool closer to his mother and sat. He was grinning ear to ear like the Cheshire cat in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*.

"Dan Mercer," Marg solemnly said. "I, or should I say, we..." She looked knowingly at her children. "We've all noticed and admired your hard work and long hours you have put in on the ranch. So, we've a Christmas present for you."

She leaned to the side and removed a piece of parchment from her sewing kit. Marg handed the paper to Dan. Then she smiled and looked at her children.

"Merry Christmas!" they said in unison.

Dan gingerly unrolled the document and started to read it. The certificate was a deed to the ranch. The article made him a part owner with Larry. He looked up in disbelief. It seemed as if everyone took that time to be suddenly busy. Marg had taken up her knitting, Larry was staring intently at the ceiling and the girls were hurriedly cutting slices of pie.

Dan stood and walked to the firebox. He took a log and placed it on the roaring fire. Then he read the document again. Finally, he sighed and pulled his chair closer to the fire. He sat in the chair and stared intensely at the glowing embers. He leaned forward and picked up a poker; he started to stir the logs on the andiron. Sparks shot from the logs and joined the smoke as it traveled up the chimney. In a bit, the fire seemed to settle down as Dan replaced the iron poker. He read the document again, then looked into the fire, his eyes returning to the document again.

and again.

A short time passed; everyone tried their best not to look at each another. Finally, Marg gazed at Dan and cleared her throat. Dan looked up from his reading, placed the paper on his lap and gazed at her.

"We're certainly proud of what you've done for the ranch," she said. Then she glanced at her children fondly. "Us too."

"But Marg," Dan started to say, but quickly became quiet when she put her hand up to silence him.

"No buts about it," she said, giving him a look that brooked no compromise. "There, now it's settled. I'll help the girls clean up the mess."

Dan excused himself and went outside for a smoke. He always went outside or to the barn to smoke because of Tammy's asthma. Marg told Dan that Tammy's condition was greatly improved and he could smoke inside the house anyway, but he preferred the outdoors. Being outside always helped him think, and tonight he needed the cool night air to clear his mind.

He smiled as he sat in a rocker on the porch. *This's sure a good piece of luck. I'm going to make this ranch the best spread in the territory!*

"What'd you think?" Larry asked, sitting on the porch bench behind him. He began to idly play with his new pocket watch given to him last summer on his birthday.

"I want you to know," Dan said somberly, "that the deed is the best present I've ever received."

"Look at it this way," Larry said, busily winding his timepiece. "One, no man has worked as hard as you've worked. Two, I don't have any brothers. Three, my sisters are going to grow up, get married and move away. Four, my mother's health is failing. She figured the ranch would be more than one man could handle. I, or my mother and I, need someone who is strong enough to help me run it. So you're the one. A good choice. I don't believe we could have done any better."

"Your mother's health?" Dan asked, his voice tinged with concern. "Is it bad?"

"Old Doc Deckard thinks that she has heart trouble. He gives her a year or two. Maybe longer. Or, to hear him say it, she could outlast us all. Outside of the good Lord, who knows?"

Dan recollected the times Marg would silently wince during while she was working. She would look around worriedly, hoping no one had seen her. He had always attributed this to the quirks of growing old.

He'd best watch it himself. She was only eight years older than him.

Dan stubbed out his cigarette, took one last look at the stars, stood and nodded to Larry before going inside. The women were almost finished with the cleaning. He dragged his rocker by the fire and sat down.

"Got a minute?" Dan asked Marg as she bustled about the kitchen.

"Sure thing," she said, hustling the girls to the stairs. "But first let me get the girls settled and to bed. I'll be down in a moment."

"Yes, ma'am," Dan said, leaning to stoke the fire.

He turned to Larry and suggested they bring in more firewood. The temperature was starting to get colder and he noticed that the snow was falling heavily now. It would be knee high to a small giraffe come morning.

He moved toward the hallway. The two pulled on their boots, donned their coats and went in the direction of the barn. They looked like two shadowy ghosts as they trudged through the snow to the stable, leaving a trail of footprints that were quickly covered by the whirling snow.

The firewood was stacked in a corner of the wooden building. Axes, log splinters and mauls were safely stored in a small shed next to it. The men took an armload and started back to the house. Once inside, they deposited their burdens in the wood box next to the fireplace.

"I'll brush our coats and hang them up," Dan said. "In the meantime, why don't you fix us a cup of coffee?"

By the time Dan had brushed the coats and hung them on the wall pegs, Larry had returned with two steaming cups of brew. Dan took his cup and motioned for Larry to join him by the fireplace.

Marg entered the room and pulled her rocker close to the fireplace. She reached into her yarn basket, got out a roll and started to knit. Thanking Larry for her coffee, she looked at Dan as he stood by the fireplace. He stooped and stirred the embers, causing the flames to leap from the logs.

"Now, what were you going to say?" Marg asked as she began to click her knitting needles together.

NINE

"I'm going to accept partnership with Larry," Dan said. "But I feel as if I need to do some explaining first."

"You don't owe us any explanations," Larry said, placing another log on the fire. "Right, Mother?"

"Let's just say I feel that I do. You get comfortable. It is a long story." He waited until everyone sat down. "First off, in the nearly eight years I've been here at the ranch, not at any time have you questioned me about my past. I'm thankful for that. I'm certainly glad the girls are in bed, as I don't think they ought to hear the description. Ten years old is a bit young to be faced with this kind of story."

He started with when he was a captain in the Army of the Potomac under General Irving McDowell. "On July 21, 1861, we fought gallantly at Bull Run, but we lost.

"My troops had been my sole companions for more than two years. We slept, caroused and fought bravely together. My fellow soldiers were the best people on earth; factory workers, stevedores, townsmen and even some tradesmen. I called them friends, even though I was... *am*, an aristocrat by birth.

"Then I was captured and sent to a prison in Richmond. That was in the latter part of '63. At the beginning of '64, fifteen hundred prisoners, of which I had the honor of being part of, were sent to Fort Sumter, Georgia, commonly known as *Andersonville*. At that time, there were only seven thousand, five hundred men, but at the war's end, it had enlarged to more than thirty-two thousand. A little more than thirteen thousand prisoners died during the fourteen months that the prison was in existence. "

Dan went on to tell them of the horrors he had suffered at the prison, mentioning especially Sergeant Dunham's depravity. It was a horrific story of man's inhumane treatment to man. He endured ten months and eighteen days in that hellhole. Release came on May 29, 1865.

"I was in that hellhole for ten months and eighteen days, until I was released on May 29th, 1865. I do believe I could give you the exact hours and minutes as well."

Marg had sat silently, aghast, watching the tormented man before her as he told his tale. She could only shake her head and wonder he had turned out so well. The good Lord knows he needs it. She knew in her heart that her and Larry had made the right decision concerning Dan's partnership at the ranch.

Dan was spent, but he knew he had to go on. These people had accepted him for what he was, not what they wanted him to become, or what he'd been in the past.

He stoked the fire once more before turning himself to face them.

His gaze could not hide the love in his eyes as he continued with his story. As soon as he was released, he headed west. That's when he found the burnt-out farmhouse. Dan explained how he scavenged the ruins looking for anything useful. He did not mention killing the crazed rebel.

He stretched his feet to the fire for the warmth. "I was in a state of shock at first," Dan said, softly and slowly. "Of course, after having witnessed everything I've seen in the war, I'm not squeamish. But I don't mind telling you - those killings were senseless. Such butchery! I did not believe people were capable of doing that, but I know differently now."

He never once mentioned Glory. It was as if she never existed. Marg knew Dan hid a lot behind his facade. She also knew that he cared a lot more than anyone would ever know. Her heart was breaking at the knowledge of this chink in his armor.

She hoped she could help him. While she knitted, gazed thoughtfully at the rancher.

"That's some story!" Larry exclaimed, hugging his ankles.

"Yes, it was," Marg said, rising from her chair. "Thanks for sharing with us, Dan. It makes me proud and more secure to know that you'll be joining in the supervision of the ranch."

Dan smiled, more relieved than he would admit to himself. "I think I'll call it a night." He started upstairs, then stopped and turned to them. "I want to thank you for being so understanding. Good night."

Marg suggested they go to bed as well. Larry leaned over the chair and kissed his mother. Then, he too, went upstairs. Marg took a hard look at her knitting and decided it could wait until tomorrow. She blew out the lamps and climbed the stairs to her room.

* * *

"*Indians! Indians!*" Dan was sleeping soundly when he heard the shout, causing him to sit up in bed. The sound of gunfire brought him awake instantly. They were under attack! Dan glanced at the window and saw that it was daybreak.

He was usually up by now. He threw back the covers and quickly rolled out of bed, hurriedly pulling on his breeches and boots. He hastily strapped his gun belt on, spinning the chambers to make sure the pistol was loaded before he rushed to the door.

Taking the steps two at a time, he reached the bottom and turned right to the kitchen where he had heard gunfire. At the kitchen, he saw Marg aim her rifle out the window and fire. He hurried to her side.

"What's going on?" He was trying to look over her shoulder through the kitchen window.

"We seem to have a whole passel of Indians out there," she answered, pulling back the hammer of her rifle and firing again. The smoke from the rifle partially obscured her face.

He was wondering where Larry was when he heard the sound of the boy's rifle bark from the hayloft. Smiling at Marg, he told her to keep them busy – he was going to help Larry. Dan ran to a pantry and quickly pulled aside a rug on the floor to reveal a trapdoor into the root cellar.

Dan quickly descended the ladder to the wooden floor. He fumbled around in the dark before he could strike a match and illuminate his surroundings. In the dim light, he could see where Larry had helped him scatter the potatoes in one corner to dry. Preserves were stacked on a shelf opposite the potatoes. An oil lamp rested on a peg next to the ladder. Dan took the lamp off the peg and blew the dust off the globe. Then, raising the globe, he adjusted the wick a bit and lit it. He was certainly glad Marg had thought to keep the lamp full of oil.

The light gave off an unearthly glow in the cellar. Figures seemed to dance in the shadows as the light was cast on the walls. Dan went to the far wall and pulled aside an old rug hanging there. Cool air washed his body. He peered into the dark abyss – it was the mouth of a tunnel.

The tunnel had been dug by Marg's son and her late husband. The corridor was the family's passage to safety should something like this happen. This arduous task took most of two months to finish. The tunnel went under the front yard and traveled fifty feet before it came out in a back stall of the barn.

This morning it was going to finally prove its worth. Mercer started into the blackness.

Dan had to make his way through cobwebs and roots that seemed to deny him entrance. Like an invader going forth to conquer his enemies, he waved his hand before him like a sword to brush the cobwebs aside. He could barely discern a faint glow at the end of the tunnel. Rushing

as fast as possible, stopping now and then as his progress was impeded, he hurried to the light. At the end of the tunnel was another ladder leading up to the stall.

Brushing cobwebs from his face, he looked up the ladder into a shaft of light from above. Cautiously, he placed his foot on the rungs; it had not been used for a long time. It supported his weight. He took his time; he would not do anyone any good if he fell now.

Once at the top, Dan put out his hands and felt the coarseness of a blanket covered with hay and a large section of chicken coop wire. This was the entrance to the back of the stall. He shoved hard and was able to push the obstacle aside while he wiggled his way through the opening. A horse moved silently in another stall, its hoofbeats falling faintly on the straw. It raised its head and snorted before it resumed eating. Dan quickly blew out the lantern, plunging everything into darkness. He sat with his back to the wall until his eyes became adjusted to the dimness. Suddenly, he saw a dark shadow start up the ladder to the loft.

Larry! Dan crabbed sideways across the floor of the barn until he was right under the ladder. As he started up, the figure above stopped and looked down toward him. Dan tried to make himself appear smaller by hugging the ladder more closely in the dark. He succeeded. The phantom moved away from the ladder. Dan scurried up after him to where he could see Larry's silhouette against the harsh glare of the loft opening. The ghostly figure was creeping up on the boy. Dan moved crept behind the Indian.

The glint of sunlight off the Indian's knife gave Dan the impetus to move swiftly and grab the upraised arm. He swung the Indian around and brought his knee up into the man's groin. As the Indian doubled over in pain, Dan brought his bowie knife out and plunged it into the man's back... once ... twice. The inert form collapsed in Dan's arms.

Larry turned, saw the limp form of the Indian and smiled before turning back to the window to fire once again.

Dan went to Larry's side and looked out. There were two bodies lying by the front porch; one almost buried in the snow underneath the kitchen window and another body at the entrance to the barn.

The rancher took aim at an Indian on horseback, followed him his rifle sights, and squeezed the trigger. When the smoke cleared, Dan saw the Indian whoop before turning a somersault in the saddle and falling backwards across the animal's rump. He got his foot caught in the stirrup. His skittish horse dragged his grisly burden behind the barn.

"Good shot, Dan," Larry said as he fired again.

"You too, son." Dan fired again; this time he missed. "Larry, there's two on the roof by the chimney. You take the one to the right and I'll go for the other."

They took aim and fired simultaneously. Their victims clutched their chests and fell off the roof, hitting the ground and sending showers of snow into the air. One staggered to his feet, teetered and fell back to the earth beside his companion.

Dan slapped Larry's back in congratulations. "You can handle it from here, son." Marg and the girls were alone in the house and most likely running low on ammo; he figured that Larry was a good shot and wouldn't need any more help from him.

The distance between the barn and house was too great to cover in the short time he figured Marg needed. *Think, Dan! Think!*

There was a rope stretched between the house and the barn; it gave him an idea. The rope was used during bad weather to ferry coffee back and forth for the men during the cold weather. If it could carry coffee, why not a man? It was worth the try.

"Listen, Larry," he said, moving to the rope. "I'm going to try to slide down the rope to where it goes by the upstairs window. I'm almost certain that I can jump into the bedroom

window from there. It's worth a try. Give me five minutes and then come out a shootin'."

Dan grasped the rope and uttered a small prayer as he started to slide toward the house. He could see the Indians below; they were stalking the house. With grim determination, he jumped. Safely through the bedroom window, Dan walked silently across the floor and opened the door. No one was in sight. He moved down the hall, stopping at the head of the stairs, where he looked over the side. Again, he could see no one.

Before he started down the stairs, he heard a sound coming from the girl's bedroom. He pulled his gun from the holster and went to their door, pushing it open silently. The twins were huddled in a corner behind a bed. Their eyes lit up with happiness as they ran toward him. Dan held his fingers to his lips.

"Girls," he whispered. "You've got to be very quiet. You have to stay here while I go downstairs to help your mother."

He gave the twins a reassuring hug and left after he made sure the door was secure. Dan turned and started to go down the steps quietly. One of the steps creaked as he stood upon it. *I'm definitely going to have to fix that step once this is all over.*

At the bottom, he glanced around swiftly before going to the kitchen door. Suddenly, bright lights played havoc with his head as a crushing blow sent him into sweet oblivion.

When he regained consciousness, he felt something wet, soft and warm on his head. As it cleared, he looked up to see Marg bathing his head with an old dishcloth. The last thing he remembered was her struggling with an Indian.

"What . . ." Dan asked, trying to sit up. He was held down firmly by Marg and Larry.

"Just lie there," Marg said. "Larry shot the one who clubbed you. Then he wrestled with the remaining one. As the two rolled on the floor, I was able to bring my old cast-iron skillet into play and hit the rascal. Sure thought you were dead!"

"I might just end that way," Dan said, brushing her hand from his brow. "If you don't quit rubbing my head so hard."

"Oh! I'm sorry. But all of the fighting makes me nervous."

"It doesn't make me feel too great either." He rubbed the back of his neck. "The others?"

"They lit a shuck out of here when they saw they weren't going to have an easy victory." Larry laughed as he worked the lever to his rifle, ejecting a spent round onto the kitchen floor. He quickly bent and scooped up the shell and placed it in his pocket.

"I'd like to know why they attacked us, being as the Indians around here are all supposed to be friendly," Dan said, slowly rising to his feet. He picked up his crumpled hat and pushed out the dented felt. As he gently replaced it on his injured head, he winced.

"And what do we do with him?" Larry asked, pointing to the Indian that was still tied to a chair.

Dan went to their captive. He guessed the man was in his twenties. The veins stood out on his arms due to the tightness of the ropes. His blackened and broken teeth attested to the care he had provided them. He was dressed in a buckskin top, woolen leggings and a bear-tooth necklace. On his feet were threadbare moccasins with holes in the toes. Dan remembered the others outside in the snow.

A ragtag lot.

As he pulled his chair closer to begin his interrogation, the brave struggled with his bonds; the more he struggled, the tighter the ropes became.

Having learned a smattering of the language, as he had traded with the Indians before, Dan began to question the prisoner. At first, the captive did not say anything, but under Dan's repeated questioning, finally started to speak. He was part a band of ten Comanche renegades

who had rebelled against their tribe, the Penateica. They had gotten drunk on a trader's whiskey late the night before. Then early this morning, after sobering up somewhat, one of the band had the bright idea to massacre all the white settlers in the area.

"We're the first family to be hit," Dan said, turning to Marg and Larry. "That's good, because we're going to be the *last* family. These upstarts sustained more damage than they'd thought. I sincerely doubt they expected to find anyone so well armed and ready on a moment's notice like we happened to be."

Dan turned to the Indian and drew his gun. After untying the Indian, he marched their prisoner outside.

"We showed 'em they were totally mistaken," Larry said, grinning with pride. He was thankful for the many hours Dan and his mother had hammered how important it was to be ready.

Was this not the modern age? Larry had thought at the time. *Wasn't everyone peaceful now?* Now he knew better.

"I think there's no further cause for alarm," Dan said over his shoulder. "What I aim to do is turn the renegade over to his own people. They'll give him more justice than the white authorities, and I imagine a much harsher discipline."

Dan took the Indian to the horses and placed him on the back of an animal. He checked to make sure the ropes were secure, then mounted his horse and started toward the Indian camp.

"Whatever you think best, Dan," Marg said. "I must rescue the girls from their bedroom. They'll probably think we're all dead by now."

"I left them safely in their bedroom," Dan said, laughing. He could see the relief wash over Marg's features.

"I'll clean up the mess," Larry said as he started for the door, pausing to grab an extra pair of gloves. Dan heard the latch click as the door shut behind him.

"Guess I'll return this brave to his camp, then," Dan said. "I figure he'll be meted out some pretty firm discipline."

TEN

Dan marched his prisoner toward the horses. After making sure the ropes were secure, he started toward the Indian camp. He took the rope of the captive's horse and wrapped it around the pommel of his saddle. A light snow had begun to fall. Dan pulled the collar of his Mackinaw up higher and wondered if the cold was bothering his prisoner; the brave had on only a threadbare jacket. But the Indian showed no response to the coolness of the air, staring straight ahead without expression. In a moment, the snow had stopped and the wind settled, but the cold was bitter. Dan shrugged his shoulders and continued on.

The Comanche looked at them with wonder in their eyes at first as the two men rode into camp. Then, recognizing Dan, they resumed their duties. Kindling was placed by the campfires, children ran about chasing each other, and the old women continued to gather more bundles of sticks for the fires. A few braves sat around a roaring campfire to ward off the chill in the air.

Dan rode to a large tepee with his prisoner in tow. An old woman sitting outside the tepee looked up, raised the tepee covering and hurried inside. In a moment, a tall Comanche stood gazing intently at the arrivals.

The brave had on a Comanche chief's headdress; wearing just a loincloth and moccasins, he was oblivious to the temperature. A small amulet made of bear claws hung around his neck. The chief's bearing was regal as he strode toward Mercer, his hand outstretched.

"Dan Mercer!" he said, dazzling everyone with his smile. He was not like the rest, for he had taken care of his teeth, more to the chagrin of the other braves. It seemed as if all the young women batted their eyes, cooed to him and placed many offerings in front of his tepee.

"Tawas!" Dan said, hurrying down from his mount as a brave held the horse in check. "I've not seen you in, let's see... a coon's age. You've changed a lot too." Dan hugged the chieftain and slapped him on the back.

"Ah yes, it has been a long time. Many moons and much water have gone under the bridge. Excuse me, Dan Mercer, welcome to my humble abode. Since my poor Pater has gone to the happy hunting grounds, I've been the chief of the Penateica. A tiring job, but someone has to do it."

The chief was proud of the proper English that he had gleaned from the few books at the missionary school. Every time he had the opportunity to use it, he did so, often to his peoples' dismay. He spent most of the time spouting words that the others could not comprehend. They would just look at him, nod their heads and smile quizzically. When they thought that they had heard enough and showed proper respect, they continued what they were doing.

"Enter, my friend," Tawas said, holding the flap open for Dan. Tawas noticed the prisoner and raised his eyebrows, questioning.

"I've a present for you," Dan said as he turned and pulled the Indian from the horse to lie at their feet. The brave right himself with great difficulty and glared venomously at them.

Dan and Tawas proceeded into the tepee. The captive was led by another brave, still bound, into the interior of the tepee. He was roughly thrown into a corner, where he lay in a heap, constantly scowling. The Indian who had led him into the tepee promptly left.

Dan sat and began to relate the attack and the subsequent capture of the brave lying in the corner. While he was talking, he noticed the obsidian eyes of the chief narrow and grow wary; the contempt aimed at the prisoner was almost palpable. Tawas knew the Comanche lay great store in not bothering others, but the outcast had brought shame upon his people with his actions.

Tawas gruffly called in two braves and instructed them to take the prisoner to the far reaches

of the camp and tie him to a rock. As the felon was led out, Tawas spat at him. Dan seemed amused at the antics of the chief, but shrugged his shoulders and said nothing.

"I appreciate this, my friend," Tawas said, nodding to Dan. "For not taking him to the white man or to mete out justice yourselves. *We* will see to him – and the others too, when we catch them."

Tawas asked Dan to stay for their evening meal – *baked dogs*. Smacking his lips, he smiled at Dan. Mercer quickly swallowed the bile in his throat and explained that he could not linger.

"The snow's covered the pass into the valley," Dan said, pulling on his gloves. "I need to clear it or the cattle will starve. I figure that Larry and I'll sort of hunker down to it. It will take us about three days to get the job done right."

"Ho, Dan, my brother," Tawas said, rising and going to the opening. He raised the flap and shouted to the Indians sitting around a campfire.

"Let me make it up to you. The unwarranted attack on your domicile. I'll send five men with you. Do what you will to them and I'll be eternally grateful."

"No, thank you, Tawas," Dan said, rising to his feet as well. "I'm sure Larry and I'll be able to do the job ourselves. I'd best be going as the sun does not wait for me. We need all the daylight available for our work."

"Maybe so," Tawas replied. Then he looked shrewdly at Dan. "Of course, if you do that, then perhaps I'll be forced into taking my business somewhere else. I know of other ranchers who would certainly appreciate my business."

Dan could see there was no sense in trying to talk the chief out of helping them. Tawas grinned like a possum caught eating eggs in the hen house. His smile was contagious.

"All right, you win, you wily old rascal," Dan shrugged his shoulders and raised his hand in mock despair. He knew the Indians placed great store in being called wise.

Chief Tawas walked Dan to his horse. After Dan mounted, the chief turned and motioned for his braves to follow the rancher. As the small group started through the snow to the ranch, the Comanche were silent, making Dan think that he was alone. But he knew that a man could not be safer than he was with them, like a small child watched over by its parents.

The Comanche were a nomadic tribe, being the only ones of their mothers' tribe, the Shoshone, to leave their favorite haunts of the Rocky Mountains in Wyoming. They were docile and enjoyed herding their cattle, but he knew that they were also reputed to have slain more white men than the other nomadic tribes of North America.

The Comanche settled on the plains of Oklahoma and were considered the most proficient of all Indians in their equestrian skills. Their high morals, their hospitality, and their desire for friendship set them apart from the other Indians.

Dan knew that Tawas was from the tribe of Penateica of the Comanche Nation, called the Honey Eaters by others. He shared their love of honey and often traded with them for it. The young braves would wait at the crotch of a tree until almost all the bees had left their hive in search of pollen. Then they would quickly thrust their hands into the bee's home and pull out great amounts of honeycomb. Heedless to the stings, they would laughingly cart their treasure home. Many a youngster had swollen limbs after their excursion to the bees' home. Their mothers often used mud, herbs and other means at their disposal in helping heal these young braves' injuries.

Dan liked to flavor his coffee with honey whenever possible. There was always a small pot of the nectar on the table at the ranch. Even Marg and Larry had made it a habit of adding honey to their java.

Marg and Larry – he was certainly going to put them to the test of *their* hospitality. Dan

urged his mount onward. He noticed that the sun was coming out and starting to melt the snow. The brightness of the sun seemed to bolster his spirits more. It wasn't long before he began to smile.

Dan rode to the front of the house, where he dismounted and strode to the door. He noticed the bodies of the Indians were gone. Once he was at the front door, it was hurled open and the twins assailed him with questions.

"You really take that Injun back to his hideout?" Heather asked breathlessly.

"You scalp him too?" Tammy asked, trying to get in front of her sister. She was breathing hard too, having run with her sister from their upstairs bedroom. She was put out with her sister, but in the excitement of Dan's arrival, it was quickly forgotten.

"Whoa! Just a minute," Dan said, taking off his Mackinaw and hanging it on the hall peg to the right of the door.

"Girls!" Marg admonished. "Give the man a chance to catch his breath. C'mon and sit at the table, Dan. I'll get you a cup of coffee."

"Yes," Larry said, brushing the snow from Dan's coat. "You girls give us *men* a chance to catch our breath. I'll take a cup too, Mother."

"Well, la de da," Heather snipped while tossing her head about. "Aren't we putting on airs?"

Marg, wanting to head off any further commotion, told the girls to go to their room and don their new dresses. She moved about in the kitchen, preparing the coffee. As she went about the chores, she turned and placed her hands on her hips and spoke to the departing girls' backs.

"Once you're done," she said sternly, her voice tempered by gentleness, "sit on the bench and be very quiet. I just may have a surprise for you."

The twins scampered up the stairs in a rush and slammed their door with a vengeance. The sound reverberated throughout the house, causing the dishes on the kitchen shelves to rattle.

Marg looked at Dan and sighed. "You two get ready to go. I've a surprise for you also, but first I want you to tell me all about the Indian camp. Did they receive your prisoner all right? Did they punish him? And how will that affect your trading?"

Dan stopping only long enough to sip his coffee. "Their chief was glad we returned the brave to camp. He has his own way of dealing with them. And of course he wants to continue dealing with us."

Marg got herself a cup of coffee. Sitting down in her favorite rocker, she leaned and picked up her knitting. Mercer waited expectantly.

He didn't have long to wait. Marg cocked her head and looked up in alarm.

"What is all that racket outside?" She placed her knitting down and hurried to the kitchen window. Her breath caught in her throat as her hand went to cover her mouth. She whirled toward Dan and Larry. "*Indians!*" she sputtered.

Dan laughed. Quickly, he explained the chief's offer to send five men to help clear the pass of snow. He had asked them to come inside for something hot, coffee or tea, but they had declined.

"Suppose it's a good thing," Dan said, grinning at Marg and Larry's expressions. "Besides, I don't know if we have enough flour."

"Flour?" Marg asked.

Dan explained that the Indians like to put flour in their coffee. Something about making the bitter brews more palatable.

"We use cream, or in my case, honey," Dan said. "They use flour. To each their own."

When the Indians had first approached the ranch, the leader of the braves asked where the shovels were and Dan pointed to the place where they were stored. The Comanche smiled at

Dan and went to the barn.

Dan had told them to wait a minute; that he and Larry would help. The leader of the Indians refused any help, saying that they could work better without any white men along. The Indians placed the shovels and picks on the backs of their horses and plodded northward to the pass.

"You mean that you didn't take them up on their gracious offer of a free meal?" Larry said with sarcasm in his voice. "Spoil sport!"

Dan chuckled. "So tell me, what big surprise do you have in mind for me?" Dan gave Larry a lopsided grin and pulled his chair around to face Marg.

"It's nothing much. I just thought," Marg said as she cast her eyes heavenward, "that we've worked so hard on the ranch that we need a bit of relief. I think we ought to go into town. Course, if you two want to stay here, I'll understand. After all, you can tell each other how well you fought off the Indians, so me and the girls could go into town without you. Naturally, we would miss your shining faces, but I think we can survive."

"Town!" Larry shouted. "Of course, we want to go!"

"I guess I could use some more tobacco, leather for the horse's bridles, and maybe a new hat." Dan rubbed his chin. "Perhaps even a new razor, too."

The girls came bounding down the stairs and primly took up positions on the hallway bench. They had on matching dresses, beaver hats and patent leather shoes. Placing their hands in their laps, they glanced demurely down the hall at their mother.

Marg smiled proudly at them. "Now that you're more presentable, girls, are you ready for your surprise?"

They looked happily at each other and hurried into the room, curtsied and sat back down on the bench. When Marg told them of the plans to go to town, they squirmed with pleasure.

"See," Heather said, turning to Tammy, "I told you so." Then looking at Dan, she said, "My sister doesn't know a thing."

Dan and Larry left the girls arguing and went to hitch the team up to the sleigh. When they got to the barn, Dan moved a dapple gray out of its stall while Larry got the other one. The horses hitched, Dan picked up the reins and flicked them.

"Giddy up," he commanded, slipping the brake on the sleigh and making sure that he had a firm grip on the leather reins. The sleigh seemed to float forward.

It was starting to snow so hard that the men were covered with a fine layer of the white stuff by the time they pulled up to the front door. Larry got down fast and shouted to the women.

"C'mon, let's get a move on it."

"Hold your horses," Marg said, as she busily rounded up the girls and ushered them to the sleigh. After they were all seated, Marg placed a blanket over their legs. Sitting back, she nodded to Dan.

Dan took the reins, made sure everyone was situated, and snapped the leather straps. They took off to town, the sled gliding smoothly over the new fallen snow, the tracks of the sleigh quickly disappearing behind them.

Marg pulled another blanket that had fallen to the floor of the sled and placed it over the one on their laps. The girls started to sing songs, the adults soon joining in. The joyful sound washed over the countryside. Deer raised their heads and perked forth their ears. Squirrels stopped their mad dash across the barren tree limbs and sat back on their haunches. The few cattle in the field looked up with puzzled features as the sleigh slid gracefully across the snow.

ELEVEN

The town of Mud Flats was aptly named. During the spring rains, it became a slimy mess of mud. Now it was the dead of winter and it was still just as slimy.

"A veritable hog heaven," one of the townsmen once said in jest.

There was a general store, a saloon and a barbershop on the south side of the morass in the street, while on the north side, there were was a two-story hotel, the marshal's office, and a bank. The town also boasted of an undertaker and a new boutique. A doctor's office was at the west end of town, as a fair-sized livery was situated at the east end. Miss Kramer's rooming house was to the north of the doctor's office with the Washita River churning furiously behind the wooden structure.

The river was the principal tributary of the Red River farther to the south. The refreshing water had its start in the panhandle of Texas. Traveling across the Indian Territory, it merged with the Red River and finally ended its journey in the Gulf of Mexico via the Mississippi River.

The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe depots were at the west end also. Its railroad tracks, ran north and south like tiny black ribbons. Cone Cattle Company was near the tracks. The dwellings of the people in Mud Flats were scattered behind the businesses.

The stores on the main drag were weather-beaten. The hotel, along with the saloon, was the only one that had any resemblance of prosperity. Like an aged madam, the hotel seemed to have retained her glorious youth. A coat of whitewash covered any blemishes, while her windows shone brightly with the light as it was reflected off the snow cast upon them.

A funeral home issued forth a somber note, as the demeanor of its owner overshadowed the business conducted there. Iron lightning rods were at the two ends of its gabled roof. The front window had black crepe paper strung across it.

The saloon was the exact opposite. Gaiety spilled out into the street like gushing water from a waterfall. The sounds that emitted were raucous, from laughter to piano music and the occasional loud shouts. Swinging doors, which were well oiled, did not squeak as they were swung in and out by the many customers going to do their drinking, card playing or general hellraising.

Two barred windows graced the front of the marshal's office. One could see the bars of the jail casting shadows on the windows. The jail was as dark as midnight and as empty as a harlot's promise.

The general store's false front belied a feeling of good times; from its windows shone items from faraway places along with a display of the latest farming equipment, catalogs, and a mannequin dressed in a yellow crinoline.

Dan pulled the team of horses to a halt at the store. He got out and turned to help Marg alight from the sleigh. Larry did the same for the twins. Once down, the girls took off shrieking to the boutique across the street from the general store. Marg looked at Dan helplessly, shrugged and took after them.

Dan and Larry got back in the sled and drove to the livery. The sign over the large doors was printed in large black letters:

Big Olaf Kronstad & J. P. Snicklefritz - Owners

Dan pulled up to the large doors, stopped and held the reins tightly in his gloved hand. Larry jumped out of the sleigh, went to the front of the rig and placed his hands on the horses' cheek

straps to hold the reins. Dan got down and looked around the seemingly deserted place. "Anyone hereabouts?"

"Ya," a large man replied, wiping his humongous hands on his leather apron as he came from the side of the stable. Goliath was of Swedish descent; his hands were like small Virginia hams, his feet encased in small banana boats. His apron was tied around an equally immense chest. "Keep an eye on your animals?"

"How much?" Dan asked, watching the gargantuan take the reins out of Larry's hands. Larry stood there and gulped. He looked at Dan, saw him smile and smiled back.

"Two bits for a day or two," Big Olaf said, grinning as he reached for the horses' reins. "Up to a week, it's still two bits a day. After that, I sell them."

He took their horses without further comment and led them to the back of the stable. They could hear him unhitching the horses and the sound of the gates on the stalls being closed. In a moment, the livery owner came out of the barn entrance, nodded and went into his office at the front of the stable.

"How do you argue with someone like him?" Larry asked.

"You don't," Dan replied, pushing his hat back farther on his head.

"What do you suppose he does around here, outside of the stable?"

"Anything he wants to do." The men laughed quietly.

"Let's go to the general store." Larry nodded in agreement. They walked down the street, stopping every now and then so Larry could gawk at the businesses. Dan enjoyed watching the youngster act like he had never been off the ranch. Then Dan would catch himself and remember how naive he had been when he saw the big metropolises for the first time himself. Mud Flats was by no means a metropolis, but it was bigger than the ranch.

"How do they get so many people in the town anyway?" Larry asked in a hushed voice. "There must be a million here!"

Larry looked at the many people congregated on the boardwalks, some rushing by to disappear into the various businesses. A few sauntered by the two and one young lady looked sideways at Larry, who blushed bright red, though he remembered his manners and tipped his hat to her. She started to blush back when her mother grabbed her by the arm and ushered her forward.

"Fine-looking lady," Dan said as he reached out and took Larry by the arm, turning him forward to the store.

"Yes, she is." Larry looked thoughtfully at the receding backs of the two women. "I surely do think she is."

"Let's go see what's inside of the establishment."

Dan, hoping to save Larry from any farther embarrassment, motioned to the door of the hardware. The two cowboys started forward, but stopped and gave the store the once-over first.

The store was a white-fronted wooden building with two large, bay windows. A large sign hanging over the structure proclaimed in bold letters:

EADS EMPORIUM

Ernest Eads, Prop.

Mud Flats, Indian Nations

Assayer, Surveyor

Land Speculator

Attorney-at-Law

The signs in the windows boasted of the latest fashions from New York, Boston, Paris and London.

"How in the world was he able to get everything he boasted of in that small store?" Larry said in astonishment.

"Son, you can quit gawking." Dan didn't want to admit he was as impressed as Larry. "Let's go in and see the wonders he's hawking to the world."

They went inside and were greeted by a nervous store clerk busily twisting the strings of his apron. Dan looked at the clerk while he was busy scrapping the snow and mud from his boots on a boot scraper by the door.

The clerk was in his early twenties. He had a little peach fuzz on his upper lip though.

He finished scraping his boots and turned to him. "Yes, sir?" the clerk asked, nervously playing with the strings of his apron. "What may I help you with?"

"Oh," Dan said over his shoulder as he headed to the side of the store where the clothes were located. He had seen that Larry was looking at the new clothes.

The clerk followed the two men to the clothes rack. They were a couple of pig farmers, but cleaner than most, probably sod-busters. Who knew? Anyway, it was told to him that he was to be nice to everyone. After all, their money could be spent as well as anyone else's.

Dan bought a pair of trousers, some gun-cleaning material, pieces of leather and a bowie knife, because his old knife had been worn down to a frazzle by his constant use of a whetstone. Dan tried on various hats, all to no avail. *Guess I'll keep this old one awhile longer.* He replaced his hat.

The clerk gulped audibly when he saw the wad of bills Dan drew out of his Mackinaw. That was more money than he made in a half a year. Brightening up, the clerk hastily went behind the counter.

"Will that be all, sir?" the clerk asked, busily wrapping the items in paper and securing the articles with a piece of twine that came off a spool hanging over their heads. He desperately hoped they'd buy more, especially the new items that were shipped from New York last week.

"Yes," Dan replied. "Actually, no. I need a new razor and a good leather strop. Then give me two of them peppermint candy canes, one of your bright scarves, a tin of tobacco and makings. Also, I might as well try out one of your pipes. Cigarettes are beginning to make me cough something terrible."

The clerk hastily showed Dan the pipes, making sure to extol the virtues of the new meerschaum. He quickly placed the pipe on the counter. "This pipe's the latest in cool smokes. Of course," he said, going into his salesman's mode, "you expect a cooler smoke. You'll have to pay for it. This little baby is the utmost in pipes the world over. I guarantee it!"

Dan looked at the clerk, amused. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, the youngster had never been farther from Mud Flats than Oklahoma Station. Maybe as far as Guthrie or Kingfisher, but that in itself was doubtful.

"You have me sold, son," Dan said. Time was pressing; they needed to see to the women.

The clerk grinned and placed the pipe with the other articles the two had placed on the counter. Then he reached behind him and brought out a new razor and strop. Dan and Larry paid for their purchases and left the store. They walked down the boardwalk and came abreast of the saloon's swinging doors. Dan was going to pass it up, when Larry grabbed his arm.

"Can we go in for a minute?" Larry asked hopefully.

Dan hesitated. He saw the look in the youth's eyes and remembered when he was young – was it really so long ago? Dan knew that Larry was burning with desire to see what the world had to offer with its pomp and pride. He smiled and nodded yes.

The two went to the swinging doors of the saloon and were about to enter when Dan stopped. He placed his hand on the youth's shoulder. "Are you sure?" he asked.

"What could be the harm?" Larry reached up to brush Dan's hand away.

A bit of forewarning nagged at the back of his mind. They were just going inside and intended to mind their own business. Yes, sir, and no, ma'am. 'Sides, he made a promise to Marg to watch out for the youngster, and by George, he aimed to do just that very thing.

"Just to be on the safe side, son," Dan said, "We'll place our purchases out here by the front door. Don't want anything to happen to my new pipe, at least until I'd the opportunity of testing it out fully."

Dan placed their new items by the door and started toward the swinging, wooden doors of the establishment, foreboding in his heart. The doors opened to the joyful sounds made by the patrons within.

A long bar stood to their right. Behind it was an equally long mirror with a Seth-Thomas clock hanging over it. A brass foot rail, with spittoons every three feet, was in front of the bar. A pool table was by the stairs that led up to the working and living quarters of the barmaids and the owner of the bar. Tables and chairs were scattered around the establishment

A piano player was pounding out tunes on a piano that had lost a great part of its ivory keys. The ones left were discolored yellow with age. Card games were in progress at two of the tables. Dan could see cowboys were drawn at one end of the bar; sodbusters, farmers and shepherders were at the other end. The middle of the bar was vacant, a no-man's land, as though one had drawn an invisible line separating the two principles.

Through the haze of cigarette, cigar and pipe smoke hovering head-high, Dan could see a barmaid approach them. She was in her early twenties, but already the ravages of time had chiseled her features into a hard mask. Her black hair was drawn up on one side and mascara was applied heavily to her eyelashes. Lipstick was smeared over her full lips carelessly, resembling a wound that had not healed properly. A large mole was on her left cheek. She did have pretty legs and a more than ample bosom that strained at her bodice.

"Hello, boys," she said as she sidled up to Larry and placed her arm around his waist. "Name's Susan Baldwin."

"Ma'am," Larry said, removing his hat. He shuffled his feet, and with downcast eyes, started to blush. His ears reddened.

"Ma'am," Dan said, placing his right hand to his hat brim.

Susan was flabbergasted. She had come west with her gambler husband a little over a year ago, only to be dropped off here in this God-forsaken country and left with no one. She did not remember the last time she had been treated with respect by anyone.

The saloon was where the rougher crowd in the territory congregated: cowboys, miners, gunslingers and traders it called home. She had been here a little over a year; fourteen months, six days, eight hours and ten minutes, to be precise.

Susan had given up wondering if she'd ever see another clean person or one with manners. Now, there was not only one standing in front of her, but two! One was young, but the other was sort of good-looking. Might even give him a tumble in the hay, so to speak? He seemed to have a firm, but wiry looking body. She'd just bet, she thought as she idly began to pat her hair, *this* one knows how to treat a lady.

Dan saw her step back, glance at Larry check him from head to toe. He had not had a woman look at him this way since the war. It was as if she took notice of every line on his face and the hard muscles lying underneath his clothes.

Seeing her smile and slowly slide her tongue over her lips caused a pang of longing in his

loins. It had been a very long time since Glory. He unconsciously hitched his trousers higher. He had to put such thoughts from his mind, although he was sure that the barmaid had seen the longing in his eyes.

"What's your fancy?" Susan asked, while playfully pushing the men to the bar and nodding to the bartender.

"Depends," Dan said, returning her bold look by slowly inspecting her body also. "My young friend here wants a drink. But I told him we'd see."

"Well, if he can see over the bar, he's big enough to get one." Susan gave the apron a wink. "Ansel, give the young man a drink of the house specialty."

Dan had seen the wink and smiled inwardly; he knew the house specialty was sarsaparilla. At least he wouldn't be drinking the hard stuff. Dan would keep his word to Marg.

"None of the demon rum," Marg had said as she got out of the sleigh with the girls.

"You got my word on that," Dan said as he nodded and went with Larry across the street.

TWELVE

A loud crash from the far end of the bar caught everyone's attention. One of the cowboys playing cards at a back table had shoved his chair back. He stood in front of the overturned chair, quivering with rage. A second cowboy quickly vacated his seat and stood beside him for support.

"Mister," the irate cowboy said, maliciously, "you're cheating!"

The man in question, dressed in black with a shiny gold watch chain draped across the front of his dark vest over a ruffled white shirt, looked up and smiled. A low, black, flat-brimmed hat sat atop his sallow face. His handlebar mustache, recently waxed, started to quiver as a grim smile creased the gambler's features. He then took the lucifer from his mouth, placed it on the table and scooted his chair backwards.

"Being as it's the Christmas season," the gambler said with a slow southern drawl, "I'll let that pass, son."

"Pass!" the cowboy roared. "You cheated me and I aim to take my losses out of your miserable hide!"

The enraged cowboy swiftly pulled the table to the side as he lunged for the gambler. Just as quickly, he stopped, for he was staring down the barrel of a small .32 Reid derringer that had suddenly materialized in the gambler's hand. The gambler had not moved from his seat as the click of the hammer being pulled back echoed in the now silent saloon.

The bartender reached under the counter for his *equalizer*, a sawed-off ten-gauge shotgun. He often used the weapon to keep rowdy cowboys or others who wanted to upset the applecart in line. Ansel believed in being prepared for any emergency should the need so arise.

"No, my friend," the gambler said, his steel gray eyes not wavering, "You will *not*, I repeat *not*, attempt to lay one finger on me. For if you attempt to do such a foolish thing, I'll be forced to blow what little is left of your brains all over the floor. Now, pick up your winnings and slowly back out of the establishment."

"C'mon, Clay," the cowboy's friend said, placing his hand on his shoulder. "Pick up the money and let's go."

Clay shrugged off the restraining hand and bent to scrape up his winnings. He glared evilly at the gambler. The gambler didn't flinch. Clay stopped to glance at the gambler inside the swinging doors.

"It's not over with yet," Clay said maliciously. "I've a long memory."

"So do I," the gambler responded. "So do I."

Clay and his friend hurried from the bar. The slats on the batwing doors shuddered against the wall. The saloon front windows quivered with the sudden onslaught of the rushing air. The men shoved the doors hard against the wall.

Ansel released his hold on the greener and started back to the end of the room. He had to get another keg from the back room. He tied his apron tight about his waist and threw his bar rag in a nearby sink.

"Let's go," Dan ordered as Larry moved to the front doors.

"You see that?" Larry asked breathlessly, his eyes wide with excitement. This was better than when he watched the fight at the last barn raising. Then, it had only been fists, feet and heads bruised, but now there seemed to be a life hanging in the balance.

Dan only nodded as he took Larry by the arm and started for the front door. He knew that it would only be a matter of time before there was more trouble, and he didn't want to break the promise he made to Marg. Pushing through the crowded bar, the two ranchers started outside.

When they were almost out the door, a gravelly voice stopped them.

“Where’re you sodbusters going?” The slightly drunk cowboy who had spoken was leaning back against the bar, his elbows holding him up precariously. He had his hat shoved up on his forehead and he had assumed a spread-legged stance.

Dan turned around. The cowboy’s filthy Stetson hat was shoved up over a dirty face. A shock of blonde hair peeked out from under the hat brim. Faded Levis, scuffed boots, a raggedy old shirt and filthy vest were the cowboy’s claim to clothing. A .44 Colt was resting comfortably in a tied down holster. It was the weapon Dan took in to count first. His stint in the army provided the need to properly assess the enemy’s firepower.

“Know your enemy and his weaknesses,” he was carefully instructed by his superiors. This cowboy was evidently drunk, which made him very dangerous. He reminded Dan of a schoolyard bully. Dan had often cautioned his men, “If you remember nothing else, do not to fight a coward. The coward is like a cornered rat—he can kill you simply trying to escape—so be careful.”

“We’re going to pick up our supplies and womenfolk,” Dan said slowly as he pushed Larry to the door.

“Hold on!” the cowboy ordered. “I just might be wanting you sodbusters to stay awhile. You know what I mean?”

Dan knew exactly what he meant. The cowboy and his ilk would do their best at hazing them. He also knew that they would not stand a snowball’s chance in Hades against that six-gun. By himself, he believed he could have come out all right.

He edged Larry to the door. After all, he’d fought and killed before. And more importantly, he was prepared to die. He wondered if the cowboy was so inclined.

Dan placed his hands on Larry’s shoulders. “Like I said, mister, the young man and I are going to be moving along. Thanks for your concern.” Dan wished they were some place else instead of here right now.

He continued to guide Larry forward, steering him through the swinging wooden doors of the saloon.

Everything would have turned out fine, if one of the barmaids hadn’t started to snicker. The cowboy started angrily toward them, grabbing Dan by the shoulder. Tables and chairs were heard to scrape the floor as everyone moved to get out of the way.

The gambler never moved from his vantage point. He knew that the drunk did not have any quarrel with him. And he figured the sodbuster could hold his own. The drunk liked to pick on unarmed people. The gambler continued smiling and shuffled his cards in anticipation of another game. This time he had picked on the wrong person.

“Think that I’ll just make you sodbusters learn to respect us *men* more,” the cowboy hollered, squeezing Dan’s shoulder in an attempt to spin the rancher around. “What’ve you got to say to that, you dirt-eating little pigs?”

Dan shoved the man’s hand off his shoulder. Now he was facing the cowboy. The sudden move angered the cowboy. He swung his fist at Dan; he ducked the blow, letting it graze the top of his head and knocking his hat to the floor. Dan quickly brought his knee up into the man’s groin. As his assailant was bending over, he unleashed a blow directed to the man’s jaw. The cowboy’s eyes started to glaze as he fell forward to crash into the bar, sending stools clattering to the floor and overturning a spittoon.

Bottles and glasses shattered as the melee started. Someone threw a bottle, causing a long crack to appear in the saloon mirror. Screams from the barmaids and shouts from the men all added to the resulting chaos. What had started out as a test of strength was turning into a

barroom brawl.

Two cowboys jumped on Dan's back; as if this was a signal, the other cowboys started hitting the sodbusters, and anyone else that they could manage to lash out at. Before long, tables were overturned and spittoons were flying through the air. People were thrown through the window, hurled on top of the piano and shoved down the length of the bar.

Still, the gambler sat.

The bartender, in an effort to reach his greener, had been hit over the head with a flying chair. Ansel now lay unconscious behind the bar, where a hapless drunk happened to find him after crawling behind it for cover. The drunk shoved the bartender to the side and merrily started to sample the hidden hooch stacked on the bar's shelves. He would have finished all the liquor had not Ansel come back to consciousness. With a roar, he quickly picked the drunk up by the shoulders and hurled him over the bar to land amidst the fracas before moving toward his shotgun, which he kept on the lower shelf in the middle of the bar.

Dan was able to dislodge the two from his back. He sent one flying through the air to smash against the wall. Whirling, he landed a solid right punch to the nose of his remaining attacker. The cowboy's nose ruptured like a sun-ripened tomato, sending rivulets of blood gushing onto Dan's fist. The scarlet mingling with the cowboy's white pasty coloring made him look like a circus clown. Only the clown did not laugh; he screamed as he backed away.

Dan looked about and spied Larry at the front of the bar. He was sandwiched between two cowboys who were taking turns hitting him. The boy was weaving back and forth between the two; soon, his eyes began to take on a glassy look.

Dan rushed to Larry's side and punched one cowboy in the back near his right kidney. The cowboy dropped to his knees. He grabbed the second and threw him over the bar to land amidst the debris gathered there. He grasped Larry by the collar and quickly dragged him safety outside.

The two weary and bruised men sat on the boardwalk in front of the saloon, letting their boots trail down in the snow. They could still hear the battle waged inside the bar. A figure came crashing out one of the windows to land in a heap beside the two ranchers. Shards of glass showered on top of them. The booming sound of the greener being fired made them grimace. Then it got quiet.

"I'm too tuckered to move," Dan said as he looked sideways at Larry.

"Me too." Larry breathed out a rush of air. "Besides, I do believe my fanny is stuck to these here boards."

Dan started to laugh, but the pain in his face would only allow him to grimace. His eyes were already starting to swell, his teeth felt loosened and his knuckles were badly bruised and swollen. Both of them had blood on their faces and clothes. Dan was missing a shirtsleeve. Larry was minus a collar.

Dan leaned back and gathered their purchases. He looked at Larry with understanding in his eyes. He did not forget that he was once a younger hell-raiser himself.

"Well, son, you wanted to see what the world was like. There it is." He motioned with his thumb to the saloon. "You, my young gladiator, are welcome to it!"

Dan heaved to his feet and took Larry by the arm as they headed for the stable. They had almost made it across the street when Marg and the girls came out of the women's store. Marg took one look at the men and gasped. She quickly ushered the girls across the street as she hurried to the injured men.

"Are you all right?"

"Right as rain," Larry said. Turning to Dan he said, "We showed them, didn't we?"

"That's right, son," Dan would've smiled, but he looked at Marg's glare. He knew he had let her down. All he could do was to shrug his shoulders and grimace as he pulled his hat lower over his battered head.

They got their rig from Big Olaf, loaded their supplies, and started the long journey back to the ranch. Marg drove the team hard through the snow. Dan was afraid to say anything to her in her present mood. Best leave well enough alone, he thought. But he could not prevent a slight groan from slipping out as the sled bounced of its own volition over the rocks buried in the snow.

The twins were bundled up and sleeping soundly. Larry had dozed off to sleep and Dan felt obliged to do the same, but to no avail. He winced every time the sleigh bumped over a large rock in the snow.

When they arrived at the ranch, Dan hurried out of the sled and turned to help Marg. Spurning his offer, Marg nimbly alighted from the sleigh and stormed into the house. Dan grinned sheepishly at Larry and the girls. He entered the house carefully, wondering if he could get through the door because of the size of his swollen head.

Dan and Larry went into the kitchen to find Marg standing with an old sheet in her hand and a look of consternation on her face. Then Larry remembered that this was the time for his haircut... for both Dan and him. Larry didn't know about him, but if Dan felt half as bad as he did, he pitied the poor man.

Marg pointed to a tall stool and Larry meekly crawled upon the wooden bench. Slinging the sheet over his shoulders, she placed a bowl on his head and proceeded to cut. Scissors flew about his head as tiny bits of hair floated to the floor.

Larry patiently endured the form of punishment with a silly, lopsided grin on his face. He knew better than to brace his mother with the call to be gentle. His eyes were almost swollen shut, a large bruise was on his right cheek, and a front tooth held on for dear life.

"Your turn," Marg said to Dan as she finished with Larry. She shook the sheet to free it of any loose hairs.

"Now, ma'am," Dan started to say, only to shut his trap once he saw the stern set of her mouth. Humbly, he sat on the stool. She wasn't being any gentler with him either, but he also knew better than to complain. Dan stolidly suffered her misplaced ministrations. After awhile, the twins tiptoed away, afraid some of her wrath might spill onto them.

"Girls!" Marg thundered, taking the sheet from Dan's shoulders, shaking it out and folding it up. She took the sheet to a shelf over the sink and placed it carefully by the hand towels. "You get to bed right this minute!"

The twins stood stock still, their little bodies shaking with mirth. Tammy turned to the wall while Heather busily tugged at her hair and shuffled her feet. Seeing their mother stand with her hands on her hips with the two bedraggled men looking like chickens with their heads cut off caused the girls to lose what decorum they might have had. They laughed uproariously.

The tension was broken, Marg smiled. Larry stood with his ears sticking out and a white line where his hair used to be and grinned. Dan broke out in a large guffaw despite the pain in his swollen mouth.

The girls started to their rooms upstairs as Larry went to his own. Dan looked at Marg, ready to apologize profusely. But Marg had begun to look pale. He hurried to her side and helped her into a chair by the fireplace.

"Larry!" he shouted over his shoulder, "Come quick!"

Heather and Tammy hurried down the stairs and fluttered over their mother, worried expressions on their faces. Larry had rushed to his mother's side and glanced at Dan for

guidance. Dan looked up and saw two anxious girls and one worried boy. Not one to lose his head, Dan ordered the girls to bed and told Larry to fetch a pail of water plus some rags.

Dan knelt beside Marg. "Are you alright, ma'am?"

She smiled wearily. "Oh, I'm just tired, that's all."

By that time, Larry had returned with the water and rags. Taking a damp rag, Dan squeezed it and applied the cloth to her forehead. Then he picked Marg up and carried her to the daybed beside the fireplace and laid her gently upon it.

"Ma'am?" Dan looked at her eyes and felt her forehead for any change in temperature.

"This is fine," she replied, sighing heavily. "But I do feel a bit cold."

Larry had brought a comforter over and placed it gently over his mother. Dan noticed the change in Marg's temperature, so he took Larry aside and whispered that he must go and get the doctor right away. As Larry quickly went out the front door, Marg looked at Dan with a question in her eyes.

Dan told her not to worry. Larry had gone for the doctor and everything would be fine. She clicked her tongue and said it wasn't necessary, but Dan was adamant. He placed the wet rag on her brow. The color started to come back to her features and she began to breathe more easily. The eyelids she had closed momentarily started to flutter. She started to arise from the bed, but Dan gently pushed her back.

"Marg?"

"I'm okay." Then stiffened and started to quiver. Her forehead broke out in a cold sweat. She clenched her hand and began to speak, but passed out before the words would come.

Dan reached into the pail and got another rag to wipe her forehead. That done, he rearranged the pillow behind her head and pulled the covers up to her neck.

"What'd I do now?" He was not used to feeling this helpless. "C'mon, Dan!" he told himself. "Be calm, settle down."

Dan arose and went quickly to the front door. He opened it and looked out, hoping to spy Larry and the doctor. Seeing no one, he closed the door and went back to his vigil beside the stricken woman. He gazed down at the worn-out face, lay his head in his arms on the table and drifted off to sleep.

Two hours later, Larry and the doctor arrived. Dan did not awaken from his post at first. The doctor motioned for Larry to leave him while they gently picked Marg up and carried her upstairs to her room.

After laying Marg in her bed, the doctor looked and saw an easy chair in the corner. He checked on Marg once more and saw that she was resting comfortably. He bent over the supine form and softly brushed her hair from her forehead.

"Larry," Doc said, "Go down and wake Dan. On second thought," the doctor said as Larry reached for the doorknob, "let the poor man sleep. Why don't you try to get some sleep too, son? I'll be here by her side. If anything should happen, I'll come and wake you. Now, go to bed and get some sleep. This may be a long night and we'll need to rest."

Larry went down the stairs softly... and bumped into Dan. Wordlessly, the two waited for the Doc to return.

After making sure that Marg was sleeping peacefully, Doc closed his black bag and placed his derby on his head.

"My poor old body is not getting any younger," he thought, wincing as he slowly descended the stairs.

Doc spied the flickering light of the fireplace; he was not surprised the men were waiting for him. Slowly, he approached the inviting glow of the hearth. He motioned for the men

to remain seated and walked purposely toward the fire. Swiveling, he place his hands behind him and rocked slowly on his heels. He looked at the two men.

“First, let me tell you right off the bat that Marg is going to be fine.” The men let out an audible sigh of relief. “She has suffered a mild heart attack, but knowing her the way I do, I see it as nothing more than a slight hindrance to her. She is still young and has the determination to withstand this little drawback.”

He then went on to explain that Marg’s condition will improve quickly as long as she has complete bed rest for the next two weeks, maybe longer. “Of course, I will drop by often to check on her,” he said as he turned to get his coat. “I think that I’d better get these tired bones to bed, or I will end up like Marg.”

While the doctor was downstairs talking to the men of the house, the twins had crept quietly into their mother’s room and were now stationed either side of her bed. Slowly, they knelt beside the still woman and grasped their mother’s hand firmly. Their lips could be seen to move as they prayed.

As the doctor drove away in his buggy, he captured the feeling of love and peace that enveloped the farmstead. He knew that Marg would come through this just fine, and was glad.

THIRTEEN

The marshal trudged through the snow toward his office. He opened the door to be greeted by a blast of warm air. *Must have left the stove turned up too high.* As he walked to the potbellied stove and adjusted the damper, he looked at the front window; moisture had started to form due to the extremes in temperature.

Dal sat at his desk and leafed through the Wanted posters. Being a bachelor, he was in no rush to battle the cold.

His home was on the outskirts of town; a small bungalow with one bedroom, a kitchen and a parlor. There was also a front porch where he would spend the summer nights, smoking and gazing at the stars from his porch swing. He loved the solitude the place afforded him.

"Nothing fancy," he will tell others, "but it's adequate."

The wind howled as the door opened suddenly. The stranger who arrived shook his hat of snow and turned toward the marshal to speak. Both men stared at one another incredulously.

It was like looking at himself in a mirror. The visitor had the same set of jaw, the same hairline and stature. They even seemed to be the same age. They could've been identical twins except for the black patch over the stranger's left eye.

The marshal stood as the man approached him. Confusion was mirrored in both their faces before they stood before one another and smiled.

"I'm beside myself," the stranger said, as he pulled his muffler off and removed his hat. "You're my spitting image."

"Only you're by far the better-looking one," the marshal responded.

"Steven D. Shipley," he said. "Pleased to meet you."

He prayed his quest would soon be completed. Shipley was counting on enjoying what was left of his time away from his office and starting back home to Boston. He envisioned a glass of sherry with his friends as they gathered about a crackling fire in his fireplace.

"Dallas Eugene Walker, U. S. Deputy Marshal out of the Tahlequah office. But please call me Dal." The men shook hands.

The man caught Shipley completely off guard with his easygoing demeanor, quick wit and down-home hospitality.

"Of course, sir. Dal it is. But you must call me Steve in return."

Shipley could sense the marshal's inner strength. He wondered what lay underneath the hardness in those cold blue eyes. Steve knew this man had seen sights only a worldly man has seen—seen them and overcome them. He was no country bumpkin, this Marshal Walker.

"Done. Now how about a cup of coffee to take off the chill?" Dal motioned for him to sit in the chair opposite his desk.

Steve nodded and sat. The marshal went to the potbellied stove and poured two cups, placing them on his desk. As he sat, he gave Shipley a questioning look. It was time to explain why he was here.

"I'm on an investigative mission." Shipley reached in his vest pocket and removed a card with an official seal printed across the top. It read:

*United States of America
Steven D. Shipley
Treasury Department
Secret Service*

"What in tarnation is the Secret Service?" the marshal asked. "And who are you going to investigate? Or is that a secret too?"

"The Secret Service was started during the War Between the States. In 1864, counterfeits were rampant; one third of all paper currency was not worth the paper it was printed on. By '65, Hugh McCullough, the Secretary of the Treasury, formed the Secret Service. In less than two years, it has been responsible for raiding more than two hundred counterfeiting plants and placing the culprits behind bars. We also provide protection for the President and the First Family."

"That's all well and good, but now to my second question: who're you here to investigate?"

"We've a delicate situation here, marshal. We know there's someone here who, for a lack of a better word, is a friend of our suspect."

"Who?" He knew everyone in these parts, as he had been stationed in Mud Flats for at least five years.

He had first-hand dealings with the federal government; he wasn't sure he trusted them as far as he could throw them.

Right after the war had started, Dallas had tried to join the Union Army. He was told that he was too old. It didn't matter that he could outride and out-shoot any man half his age. When the government appointed him as Deputy U.S. Marshal to the Tahlequah office, he was sure it was to mollify him. Still, it wasn't a bad post. He reported only to the Chief Marshal in Denver and that wasn't very often. He was a law to himself. The U. S. Constitution was solely interpreted by him. So far, these laws had been obeyed. Heaven help those who didn't bother to heed the marshal's word.

"You know a Dan Mercer?" Shipley asked.

"Dan Mercer?" Dal sat up straighter in his chair.

"That's the name."

"Of course, I know Dan Mercer. He's as fine a person as anyone I know, and believe me, I know quite a few."

Dal explained how Mercer had arrived in town without a penny to his name and rescued the Abernathys from almost total ruin; how he had built up their herd and traded with the Indians; and how Mercer had, without any help, pulled the Abernathy's through their bout with dreaded diphtheria.

Shipley smiled behind his hand. The next thing the marshal would tell him is Mercer could walk on water. He must have been the man's personal relations man.

"Tell you a secret," the marshal said in a low voice, leaning forward in his chair. "If word ever comes back here I told you . . ."

"Oh no, I won't tell a living soul," Shipley said, raising his hands in mock surrender. "By the way, what is it I'm not to tell?"

"I heard on the grapevine that Mrs. Abernathy has just made Dan Mercer a full partner on her ranch."

"Hmm. That does present a fly in the ointment, but not one that is insurmountable."

"Oh?"

"Yes," Shipley replied, taking another sip of coffee. "A man who's just been given a good piece of property can't be expected to abandon it and traipse off to help me or the federal government."

"What kind of help are you talking about?" Dal asked as he opened the potbellied stove to add more firewood. After making sure the fire was doing all right, he returned to his desk.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not at liberty to say. You certainly can sympathize with my dilemma,

can't you?"

Dal nodded and sat back in his chair. He'd like to help Shipley, but Dan was a good friend of his. He looked at the Secret Service man closely and quickly reached a decision.

"When can I see the man?" Shipley asked, getting up to warm himself by the stove.

"Tell you what. It's getting late and I know there's no place for you at the *proverbial inn*. But there's room for you at my place. I've got no wife or kids to worry about. We get a good night's rest, and in the morning, you and I will ride out to Abernathy's to talk with Dan. But mind you, that's all we're going to do... talk."

"Sounds just fine," Shipley replied. "By the way, I'm also a bachelor, so I know what you mean by being a loner. Nights can be the worst for such as us."

Shipley and Dal talked about old criminal stories until the wee hours of the morning, each man trying to out-do one another with their various exploits. When the two men reached a lull in their conversation, Dal suggested that they both retire for the night. Shipley stood and stretched his arms above his head and nodded in agreement. Dal turned the lights out in his office, waited for Shipley to go out and pulled the door tightly shut. The marshal then turned and locked the office door. Pocketing his key, he motioned for Shipley to follow him.

The two lawmen trudged across the newly fallen snow toward the marshal's house. Their footsteps crunching in the snow was the only sound to be heard in the still of the night.

At first light, Shipley awoke to the sound of coals being stirred in the potbellied stove. He wondered when the marshal slept.

"Feel like breakfast?" Dal asked, poking the logs in the stove to take the chill from the air.

"Sounds good to me." Shipley swung his feet out of bed and pulled on his boots, stomping his feet to make the boots more secure. He glanced at Dal and made up his mind. "I'll tell you what. What do you think of us going to a café; I'll treat you to breakfast. Or rather, the government will. After all, it's your money as much as mine. Taxes, I mean."

"Why, I thank you," Dal said, shutting the door on the stove. "It gets quite boring doing all the cooking yourself. I imagine a nice warm meal will start my day off just fine."

They went across the street to the hotel cafe and had a hearty breakfast of eggs and fried potatoes along with a large steaming pot of coffee. While they ate, Shipley regaled the marshal with his escapades. He spoke so softly the marshal had to listen very closely.

As Shipley spoke, he had to stop every so often to raise his patch and wipe his eye. Shipley noticed the marshal's curious stare.

"No place for my tears to go." He did not elaborate and the marshal was polite enough not to ask.

After they had finished breakfast, they went to the livery. Dal hollered for someone to get his horse and one for his guest. It took a while for J.P., the owner, to answer the call.

"Ah marshal, I was finally havin a good night's sleep. With Big Olaf gone, I figured on a good night's rest. Now you two yahoos are robbing me of it."

Dal and Shipley left the owner scratching his head and bemoaning his fate to all who would hear. They mounted their horses and started to the Abernathy spread.

Shipley understood why the marshal was tagging along. Mercer was his friend.

"I'm certainly sorry for upsetting that gentleman," Shipley said, shaking the reins of his horse, trotting up beside the marshal.

"Ah, he'd complain if he was hung with a new rope instead of an old one." The marshal chuckled while urging his mount into a canter through the light snow.

"Hung is hung, marshal. You're still dead, to my thinking."

"Oh, but if it's there's a possibility of an old rope breaking, the felon would have to be let

go, whereas a new rope would never break.”

The snow had quit falling. Chipmunks were busy clucking at each other. Dal could see winter wrens chirping to one another and a flock of Canadian geese flying in formation in the bright blue sky. The landscape had taken on a pristine look; everything was white with an occasional speck of dark where fence posts protruded through the snow. The wind had died down, except for an occasional, sporadic gust.

The marshal pulled his bandana over his face. Shipley did the same with his muffler. They rode on silently.

Dal would hate for anything to happen to Dan Mercer. He wondered where all this would lead. But time would tell. Or as his mother always said, “All things will work out for the better.”

Dal clicked his tongue and touched his spurs to the flanks of his horse.

Shipley was busy thinking about the countryside. As a Secret Service man, he was taught to be observant. He took in everything, from the quietness of the countryside to the ice-covered ponds. He'd often thought of retiring. The serenity of the place had almost made his mind up for him. It seemed so nice and peaceful out here in the West.

Shipley noticed that the marshal was slowly pulling ahead of him, so he urged his horse to keep up with the marshal. Then he remembered not to get too close. He followed in the marshal's trail.

The two men rode at a small canter until they hit deeper snowdrifts. There, they slowed their mounts to a gentle walk. The snow was dry, not wet like Shipley was used to back east. For a brief moment, he had the insane thought of stopping his mount and getting off to make a snowman. *I must be loosing my mind, thinking like a youngster at a time like this.* Smiling to himself, he plodded onward in the marshal's wake.

FOURTEEN

Dan and Larry had shoveled their way to the barn to get the hay arranged. Dan was pitching the hay down, while Larry scattered some on the barn floor; the rest went into the cribs of the stalls.

Dan was lost in thought, dreaming of ways to make the spread the biggest and best ranch in the area. His first step was to make a trip to St. Louis to look at the new breed of cattle he had heard touted so much; Herefords, they were called. These cattle allegedly did not require much caring for while producing the best beef. He was partial to the Black Angus himself.

And he knew that the Comanche raised a few of them. Chief Tawas was constantly extolling the virtues of the breed.

Black Angus. He would have to talk to a cattle buyer the next time he saw him. And he'd check out the new catalogs on display at the Emporium. That should help him make up his mind.

Lately he had dwelled too often on faraway places and things, stirring up an inner battle between wanting to be successful as a rancher – and wondering if he had it in him to be so – and needing a change. He needed to learn how to be more content with what he had. So he promptly ushered his doubts out his mind.

Larry could not stop thinking about his mother. He wondered about the responsibility that would be thrust upon him should something happen to her. Mercer might be in charge of the ranch, but he still had his little sisters to worry about.

How could he raise them alone? Sure, Dan was here, but he'd seen the faraway look in the older man's eyes lately. Yep, it wouldn't be much longer 'til Dan rode off into the sunset, he was pretty sure. He wouldn't much blame him, though.

Dan knew Larry was a good boy and should be counting himself a man. A boy, nothing – Larry was seventeen.

He smiled as he remembered the fight in town where Larry had proved himself a man. It was hard to think of Larry as the house of the house, but he had to bow to the inevitable.

Marshal Walker and Shipley crested a small hill a few miles distant from the ranch. This knoll was the border between the road on one side and the train tracks on the other. Dal reined on his mount and motioned for Shipley to do the same. The two lawmen pulled their mounts to a halt.

The marshal raised his bandana to wipe the sweat from his forehead, though the air was quite cold. *I guess I'm not getting any younger*, Dal chuckled to himself as he shifted in his saddle.

Shipley groaned as he shifted his own weight on the animal; he was not used to riding. The horses contentedly nibbled the sparse grass poking its way through the snow in spots where the ground was barren.

"Let's rest for a moment, shall we, marshal?" Shipley reached down to rub his legs. "I'm not much used to so much riding, especially on such a cantankerous horse as this's turning out to be. Look at it shaking. The best thing that could happen to this animal is for its owner to shoot it and put it out of its misery."

"Pshaw!" Dal said, but was glad for the rest. He didn't think his poor old body could take much more punishment.

The ranch was almost five miles from Mud Flats. On a fine spring day, this journey would be a piece of cake, but with so much snow the horses had to plod through, it was a different matter.

The two horsemen dismounted and stretched their legs. Shipley placed his hands behind his back and gently rocked back and forth. Dal winced as he stepped around the back of his mount and handed Shipley a canteen.

After drinking some, Shipley handed the canteen back to the marshal. The marshal capped it and remounted his horse. Watching Shipley struggling to get mounted, the marshal suppressed a smile. *We not only look alike, but seem to have the same aches and pains.*

“Old Snicklefritz would have some conniption fit if he heard you downgrade his horse like that.” Dal chuckled, moving about to get more comfortable in his saddle.

The marshal was glad he had a good mount. His was a dun gelding. Horse and man went back a ways; they had been in many a scrape together. Dal had spent countless days out on the range hunting outlaws with no one to converse with, leastways human. He talked to his horse like a man would with his closest friend.

Come to think of it, this horse is my closest friend. I might just name him some day.

Dal reached out to stroke the horse's mane.

“Well, anyways,” Shipley said, while rearranging his body on the creature, “when I get through with this assignment, I think I’ll retire. I’m certainly old enough – and tired enough – to call the job quits. I’ve only been out here once in the spring, a long time ago, and that was passing through on the railroad. I like the way the flowers grow, the tallness of the grass and the gentle breeze as it rushes through your hair. The well water here is so sparkling and fresh to the taste buds. Yes siree, Bob, I may just retire here.”

“You aren’t being paid by the mayor to make such glowing remarks, are you?” Dal asked as he wheeled his mount around and pointed it downhill.

Shipley chuckled. “Let’s go and see our man.” Motioning his horse to follow the marshal, Shipley started his descent.

“Riders coming,” Larry said with a worried frown as he put aside the pitchfork by the door to the barn.

Dan hurried down from the hayloft and dashed across the barn floor toward his holster, which he had placed on a wall peg. Hurriedly, he took it down and strapped the holster around his waist and checked his ammo. Larry reached out and removed his shotgun from its resting place beside the door and did the same. Satisfied, he snapped the shotgun back up. Larry nodded at Dan. He was prepared to do battle.

The men stood warily in the front door of the barn and watched the approaching riders. They had not forgotten the recent attack by the Indians and they were still on edge. Larry remembered Dan’s warning to expect the unexpected.

The twins were in the front yard playing in the snow. A large snowman stood patiently by the door of the ranch waiting for its hat. Smoke was curling its way into the bright indigo sky. Marg was fast asleep in her bed, taking it easy as per doc’s orders.

“Go into the house, son,” Dan said, as he checked his weapon again. “That way, we can at least catch them in a crossfire.”

Larry hurried to the house, stopping only long enough to usher the twins ahead of him. Dan could hear the large wooden brace falling into place on the door. He grinned as he heard the shutters slam on the windows. Dan was proud; he had taught Larry well.

“We’ll not be caught off guard this time,” he muttered.

Dan placed his hand over his forehead to cut down the glare from the snow. He was relieved when he recognized one of the riders - his good friend, Marshall Walker.

He squinted to see who was coming up behind Dal but the sun was behind him.

As Dal and Shipley rode into the yard, Dan strode from his hiding place in the barn and Larry came from the house. The twins rushed out of the house like a whirlwind, Heather was in the lead.

"Marshal Walker! Marshal Walker!"

Larry tried his best at hushing the girls. Dan was trying to silence the dog and the horsemen were trying to calm down their mounts. A virtual bedlam.

"Mornin'," Dan said, looking up at Dal with a grin as he placed his hand on the cheek strap of the horse.

"Here, you two," Larry said, also reaching for the reins of Shipley's mount. If Dan trusted this man, so did he. "Let me take your horses. I'll join you later."

Dan and his guests went into the house with the girls, who were trying to hang onto Dal. They removed their coats and shook the snow from them before hanging the damp articles on a wall peg. Then they pulled their boots off and placed them to dry by the door. The three men padded in their stocking feet to the fireplace. After warming themselves by the fire, Dan motioned for them to sit.

Shipley settled in his chair like a tired walrus and sighed. He raised his feet to feel the warmth of the roaring fire. Dal followed suit. Both men wiggled their toes and rubbed circulation back into their legs.

Dan reached for the coffee pot swinging by the fireplace. Pouring each man a cup, he replaced the pot and sat in a rope-webbed chair. He placed his feet upon a small footstool and wiggled his own toes. It was a manly thing to do, the wiggling of toes. The trio sat that way for a moment.

Heather and Tammy sat by the fireplace, their little legs tucked under their dresses. Each was staring at the visitors intently. They knew the marshal, but were intrigued by the other man with the patch.

"He's a pirate," Tammy whispered to her sister.

"Oh?" Heather whispered back. "And just how many pirates have you seen?"

Tammy arose in a huff and went to sit by Dan. He looked down at her and smiled. Reaching out, he placed his hand softly on her hair, smiling gently.

The room was twenty feet wide, running the length of the house, with a large bay window in the middle of one side. Deer, elk, antelope and buffalo heads killed by Marg's late husband adorned the walls, their glassy eyes seem to staring at the company with vacant looks. Large wooden beams ran across the knotty-pine ceiling.

The fireplace was the focal point of the room; four feet long and made of fieldstone. Hanging over the mantle was an 1866 Winchester .44 carbine. To the right was Marg's spinning wheel; to the left, a firebox. A large, handmade rug with pictures of bears fighting a blue-tick hound lay in front of the fireplace hearth. The homey scene seemed to invite comfort and conversation.

Dan sighed contentedly. "Excuse me, friend," Dan aimed his remark at Shipley, "but I never did get your name."

"My fault, Dan," Dal said. "This here's Mr. Steven Shipley."

"I must say, before we began," Shipley said with feeling as he shook Dan's hand, "It's Steve, not Steven. Please do not call me Mr. Shipley."

The twins were at first wary with the stranger. They kept staring at his patch. He looked very

mysterious. Heather thought he was dark and dangerous. Tammy believed he was sneaky and sinister. She did not know what sinister meant, but she had heard Dan say it of a man in town and it sounded good to her.

Shipley had noticed the attention he was receiving from the girls, especially when he raised his patch to wipe his eye. It seemed as if every time he would make a move, the twins would nudge each other and giggle.

Dan gave the girls a hard stare. Unfortunately, it did not seem to faze them.

"Say, girls," Shipley said to break the tension, "I bet you're wondering what I've under the patch. Want to see?"

The girls nodded yes and moved closer to him. At first, they were hesitant about being so close to the stranger, but curiosity soon overcame their fear. They sat and stared raptly at him.

Shipley raised the patch and revealed an empty eye socket. The air seemed to clear. At first the girls looked hard at Shipley. Then they started to redden.

"Gross," Tammy said. She stood and motioned for her sister to join her. Heather did not hesitate; she joined her sister as they raced upstairs to their room.

"I'm sorry, Steve," Dan said.

"Don't worry about a thing," Shipley laughed as he returned the patch to his eye. "I'm used to being stared at. To tell you the truth, if folks did not stare, I'd think there is probably something amiss.

"His name was Bill Walker. He was a notorious criminal. We got into a shootout; that's when I lost my eye. But that was five years ago; water under the bridge."

"No relation I hope, Marshal?" Shipley said, raising his eyebrows.

"Not that I know of." Dal Walker laughed. "But could be. I've got some rather debatable characters on my family tree. But go on with your story, Steve."

"It took me over a year to get back any depth perception. I kept spilling things – coffee, water, milk. But I made the necessary adjustments. On the positive side, whenever I had to fire a weapon, I didn't have to close one eye.

"Now I'm a better marksman than I was before my little accident."

The men nodded, each lost in his own thoughts.

What are these two doing out his way? I hope there's no trouble hereabouts; we've had our fair share of that lately. I hope it's not about the ruckus at the saloon awhile back. Marg would definitely not be happy with me. Dan grimaced.

"By the way, how's Marg doing?" Dal asked.

He was counting on seeing her on the trip to the ranch. It seemed a lot of his friends were succumbing to heart attacks. *Makes one wonder if I'll be next.*

"To be truthful, Dal," Dan replied. "The doc says it was a small heart attack, but she doesn't seem to have much energy left. She's taking it easy for a while."

Dal and Shipley expressed their condolences.

It was these long faces Marg saw as she came into the room. She was tired of laying in bed acting like her life was over. Plus, she had things to do; the housework was going to do itself, and those girls weren't good for much other than sitting around and bickering with one another. It was time to join the land of the living.

"Don't want to be the one that breaks up the wake," Marg said, smiling at the astonished looks on the men's faces. She walked slowly but confidently into the room. "I'm not dead by a long way. So don't rush out to buy me lilies just yet."

The men stood quickly while Dan rushed to help Marg to a seat by the fire. Dal and Shipley poised nearby to offer any help. Marg waved for them to sit. She looked around and noticed the

stranger in her midst. Her first thought was for Larry.

"Where's my son?"

"He's out in the barn, ma'am," Dal replied. "Taking care of our horses."

Marg allowed herself a small sigh of relief; her heart stopped racing. "And you, sir, are—"

"Ma'am, this here is Mr. Steven Shipley. He's come to speak with Mercer." Shipley immediately got to his feet, took her hand in his and executed a small bow from the waist, kissing her hand like a gentleman at a ball. Marg reddened; she had never had this done to her before.

"Madam, we hope we're not intruding on you at this time of... uh . . ." For once in his life, Shipley was at a loss for words.

"It was only a small heart attack, hardly worth mentioning," Marg said with conviction. "Now, I've said it, so you men don't have to go pussy-footing around here like I was already dead. I may have one foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel, but until Mr. Snerd kicks the last clod of dirt on my face, I'll survive."

Dan chuckled, easing the tension. Everyone began to laugh. It was this laughter that greeted Larry as he came inside from the barn.

"What'd I miss?" Larry asked, padding to sit at his mother's feet.

They told him and he looked up at his mother. She winked and smiled. Larry let himself stop worrying for the moment.

"Oh, my heavens," she said, sitting in her rocker, straightening and looking about in dismay.

"What?" Dan immediately rose from his chair. "Marg, what is it?"

"Here we have company, and I haven't even offered anyone something to eat. Such bad manners I've acquired lately."

Dan and Larry insisted that she sit while they got everyone something to eat. Dal and Shipley chipped in to help set the table.

Over coffee and cake, Shipley had mentioned his upcoming plans on retirement and the prospect of moving here to Mud Flats. The marshal told them of the capture of two horse thieves. Dan and Larry were enthralled to learn of Shipley's plans on moving to the area. They were excited about having Shipley for a neighbor. Dan had finally accepted the fact of the area growing more and besides he liked the man.

Dal was enjoying the pleasant company so much, he let loose a polite belch. Then silence settled over the room. The others looked with amusement at Dal. His face turned red as a beet.

"Excuse *me*," Dal said, turning a light shed of red.

"As my father used to say," Shipley said, "it's better to suffer the shame than to suffer the pain!" Everyone laughed.

When they had finished with their dessert, the men retired outside for a smoke and to catch a bit of fresh air. Larry helped his mother up the stairs to her room, insisting she take a nap before trying to do any housework. Then he joined the men on the porch.

FIFTEEN

"Now," Mercer asked, "What brings you two out here? If it's about that little fracas Larry and I got involved with at the saloon..."

"No, Dan," the marshal said. "We all know what that fight was over. There was no law broken that I know of. So as the saying goes, 'let sleeping dogs lie'."

"But then what *are* you doing here?"

"The marshal's here with me, actually. I'm the one who needed to see you," Shipley said. "I don't know how to phrase this..."

"Fire away." Dan pulled a chair closer to the end of the porch so he could prop his feet against the rail. The others sat on a wooden bench. The marshal reached into his pocket for his makings and started to roll a cigarette.

"I need your help."

"Help?" Mercer was intrigued. What else could he possibly do to help the federal government other than fight their wars for them?

"Yes, sir. We've found out that a woman you used to know is in trouble with the authorities. We need your help in apprehending her."

"What woman?" Dan asked. He had known quite a few women in his lifetime, some better than others.

"Do you know a woman named Glory B. Stahl?"

"*Glory!*?" Mercer stood up.

Shipley peered at the rancher more closely.

Dan cleared his throat, suddenly uncomfortably with their scrutiny. "I'd not thought of Glory in a long time. What's it been now, at least three years? When she left more than seven years ago, I was... it was unexpected."

That wasn't the half of it. He was heartbroken. He had thrown himself into his work at the ranch in an effort to forget her. It took him a very long time to do so. Even now, he remembered her presence too vividly.

"Funny how time doesn't always heal old wounds." The men nodded, understanding.

In a rush, it came back to him; the long walks they took, and the even longer talks. He would tell her of his plans for the ranch. She would go on about her need to see bright lights and city people. And their lovemaking ... but that was all gone now.

He remembered one time in particular she had returned from town. She had been browsing through catalogs, newspapers and magazines at the Emporium and got all sorts of newfangled notions into her head.

Why hadn't he connected that day to the reason she left? It seemed so obvious now how restless she was. She was so vibrant and alive when she spoke about the city.

She had even so much as told him she was leaving, but he didn't figure she'd actually do it. "Dan, you're so down-to-earth. You seem content here. But I need a change of scenery. You know – go places, see people, do things. You do understand, don't you?" He had nodded.

The next morning, he had gone to her room to find it empty.

He had rushed to the barn, where Larry confirmed his worst fear – she was gone. After that morning, he never spoke Glory's name again.

He had saddled his horse and taken off into the hills, not coming back until late one evening two weeks later. He had not shaved or bathed. His sudden, bedraggled appearance had scared the twins. He was not proud of that day.

Marg had taken one look at him and said, "Welcome home, Dan. I'll draw your bath water."

He nodded to her and went to his room. He was astonished to see the face staring back at him in the mirror. He had a two-week growth of a beard, which was to be expected, but his hair was all matted and hanging down to his collar. Dan took a whiff and grimaced. He knew he smelled like a polecat.

Later, Larry told him that Marg had said that he looked like death warmed over. The family never mentioned the incident again.

The next day, Dan saddled his mount and started to ride fences like nothing had happened. There was too much to worry about without trying to figure out all the *what ifs*. So he put his mind into his work. Often he did not go to bed until it was too dark to see. Even then, he spent endless nights tossing and turning. Each day would be the same – work until exhausted, go to bed, spend the night dreaming about Glory.

For the next seven years, he never spoke of her, but she was always lurking far in the back of his mind.

“Pardon me,” Dal asked, rising from his seat. “But do you think we ought to go back inside? I mean, to join the others?” What he didn’t say was that he wanted to make sure Marg was alright.

“Sure, let’s.” Dan motioned for the others to go on ahead of him.

Dal and Shipley took chairs to the right of the fireplace. Dan pulled his chair from a corner while Larry went to check on his mother.

Marg wasn’t sleeping. She had heard the men return inside. “Larry? Is everything all right?”

“I believe so, mother. It seems Mr. Shipley wants Dan to help the government out on something.”

“Oh?”

Larry did not feel that it was his job to comment any farther, so he mumbled a reply. Marg looked questioningly at her son, but held her piece. She knew that he would eventually tell her, but for now he said nothing.

“Help me get up, son.” When he glanced at her with a question in his eyes, she smiled. “Everything will be alright.”

Shrugging his shoulders, Larry helped his mother from her bed and they went downstairs together. When he looked at the men and saw their raised eyebrows, Larry hurriedly explained that his mother was all right while he helped her to her chair beside the fireplace. He then made himself comfortable at her feet.

It was time to talk about Glory.

“As I’m sure you’ve figured out, I knew Glory – intimately.”

“I don’t believe it,” Marg said. Her face whitened and she placed a hand to her throat. “I knew you two were close, but—” Her voice trailed off. *So that’s why he never spoke of her again.*

Dan grimaced; he should’ve told her long ago. “But as to her whereabouts, you’ve got me. It’s been more than seven years since she graced the spread with her presence.”

Larry wasn’t surprised at Dan’s news. There was a certain look a man gave a woman that could not always be hidden. He had often caught the occasional meaningful glance between them as Glory roamed about the ranch. But now this ... he had cared about Glory almost like a sister, so he did not like the thought of the government being after her.

“So what is it you want from me?” Dan went to the fireplace and took his new meerschaum down from the mantle; anything to keep his hands busy. All this talk about Glory was stirring feelings inside that he did not care to deal with. He filled the pipe with tobacco and bent to take

a burning ember from the fire. Lighting his pipe, he drew the smoke in and gently let it escape his lips.

He returned to his chair and placed his feet upon a stole, the image of a man without a care in the world. A haze of blue smoke enveloped his head like storm clouds hovering around a mountain.

"You two met approximately seven years ago, correct?" Shipley did not wait for an answer, but continued from memory, "When she left, she traveled to St. Louis, where she fell in with some rather rough characters. She went to prison for five years, and when she got out, she returned to St. Louis with a substantial amount of money... and she invested it wisely."

Dan smoked his pipe in silence while Marg and Larry looked on in interest.

"We've received word through some rather dubious channels," Shipley continued, taking out his pipe and lighting it with an ember from the fireplace, "that Miss Stahl was the owner of a gambling establishment called *The Wayfarer*, where she made most of her money. But she seems to be spending much more than she's earning. It appears she's been counterfeiting; the quality of the work is rather impressive. We don't know for sure whether she's aware of this counterfeit operation or not. She may simply be the means of distributing it. Either way, we have some interesting questions for Miss Stahl.

"The Secret Service has been able to infiltrate the organization. One of the agents, a woman, is presently employed by *The Wayfarer* as a professional card dealer. We need you to get close to Glory to find out how deeply she's involved.

"If you decide to take the job, then I'll tell you the agent's name. If you don't, then you do not need to know. We take care of our own."

Dan swallowed hard. He turned to Marg with a question in his eyes. He wanted to prove Glory innocent – he could not bear to think of her locked up in a prison cell again. But he knew the Abernathys didn't want to see him hurt; never mind that he would be leaving his responsibilities for the ranch behind.

Could he put himself through this all over again?

"Of course," Shipley said, leaning over the fireplace and tapping his pipe to clear it of the dottle, "you don't have to give me an answer this very minute. Tomorrow I'll be at the marshal's office until around noon, and then I'll be headed for home. That is, if your stagecoach is ready. If you show up, fine. If you don't, well, fine again. I imagine that the federal government will survive."

Dal moved to the door. "Agent Shipley, why don't we leave these good people? I'm sure they have much to think about."

"You can spend the night here," Marg said, surprising herself.

"I hate to intrude," Shipley got to his feet and stretched his arms over his head.

"Oh, it'll be no intrusion," Marg replied. "Then tomorrow, after a good night's sleep and a good breakfast, you can leave... together."

"I must apologize," Dan said sheepishly. "My mind was elsewhere. Naturally, you two must stay."

Dal was happy enough with the offer, as he knew Marg's breakfasts were worth bragging about. And he had spotted a blueberry pie cooling on the sideboard. The mere thought of the pie was making his mouth water.

And these old bones could do with a rest. A featherbed sounded wonderful.

"Then it's settled," Marg said, beaming. "Larry will show you to your room. We even have indoor plumbing." She smiled at the look of disbelief on the marshal's face. "No more having to wash up outside, thanks to Dan and Larry, who spent many a day and night working hard last

summer to get the plumbing into the house.”

As Larry was leading the men to their room, Marg motioned Dan to stay. After saying their good nights, everyone left but Marg and Dan. He stood quietly by the fireplace, while she took a seat in her chair. She reached down for her knitting.

“I do my best thinking here in the chair with my knitting needles clicking away for me,” she had once said to Dan. She would often sit and rock slowly, letting the flames of the fire slowly mesmerize her as she worked her knitting needles.

“Ma'am?” Dan asked, motioning to the coffee pot. Seeing her nod yes, he fetched the pot and poured her a cup of the hot liquid. Mercer took one cup to her and placed the other on the mantle of the fireplace. They sat in quiet solitude, comfortable with one another. She blew on her coffee, sipped it and placed it beside her. Dan held his mug with both hands wrapped around the bottom. They looked solemnly at each other.

“Go right ahead, Marg,” he said, adding another log to the fire and stocking the coals to glow bright red. “Tell me what you've on your mind.” He replaced the poker in its resting place. He knew she would not rest until she had her say.

“Dan,” she asked, her fingers busy knitting so she didn't have to look up at him, “you know I'm not one to make another's mind up... but do you think this is wise?”

“Wise?” He placed his cup on the mantle and turned toward her with his arms crossed.

“Yes, wise. You and I know that Glory hurt you very badly. She may've taken advantage of us, but you . . .”

“I know that above anyone else,” Dan said, taking down his pipe again. He sat in his chair and propped his feet on a footstool. He smoked his pipe while contemplating his options. Spirals of smoke made their lazy way to the ceiling. His head became obscured in its blue haze. He seemed miles away.

Marg looked at him and sighed. Neither of them would find answers tonight. She put her knitting supplies away in her wicker basket and tiptoed out the room.

Halfway up the stairs, she stopped and looked over the handrail. By now, Dan's pipe smoke had completely shrouded him. He looked like a lost child. She continued silently up the stairs.

SIXTEEN

A rooster crowed to herald in the new day. The horses meandered to the watering trough in the corral while the cattle patiently started to chew their cud. The sun was just starting to peek over the rim of the surrounding hills like an errant child, not knowing whether to appear or not. Finally having made up its mind, the sun rose majestically to greet the new day.

Large puddles were forming in the yard; drops of water started to descend down the roof. A large wooden barrel beneath an eave of the roof was about to overflow.

In the house, Marg was bustling happily in the kitchen, fixing breakfast. Dal and Shipley were getting dressed. Larry was in the barn milking a cow for their morning's milk. The twins were still asleep. Dan came into the house with an armload of wood. Marg smiled. It was good to have a full house again.

"Here!" Dan said, quickly depositing the firewood and hurrying to Marg. She was carrying a platter of eggs to the table. "Let me do that. You're to take it easy."

"Dan Mercer," Marg said with her hands on her hips. "I'll have you to know I was changing dirty diapers a long time before you were even thought of."

Realizing what she said, she blushed. "Well, you know what I meant. I'm a grown woman and I don't want to slow any. It seems you go slow, and the next thing you know, you're pushing up daisies."

"You're right. But I'm only following the doctor's orders. I do not want to place flowers on your grave before the first snow falls next winter. And if you keep up this pace, I may just end up doing that very thing."

Their argument was cut short when Dal and Shipley entered the room. Dan busied himself arranging plates for everyone while Marg stirred the gravy in a big cast-iron skillet. Potatoes were frying on the back burner of the large wood stove and biscuits were being kept warm in the large oven. The kitchen was full of heavenly aromas.

"Little Miss Homemaker, I see," Dal quipped at Dan. The fire leaped in Dan's eyes.

"You ought to try it sometime."

"I try it all the time," Dal replied. "You seem to forget, I'm a confirmed bachelor. But I would never pass up a home-cooked meal, especially if this lady's doing the cooking."

"Tell you, ma'am," Shipley said. "Everything not only smells wonderful, but looks quite good too." He pulled a chair from the table and sat, placing a napkin across his lap.

Marg beamed at the men gratefully. At least someone appreciated all her hard work around here. She turned back to stir the gravy, happy to be in charge of her kitchen once again. She did not want to admit to herself that she got winded too easily.

Larry came in carrying two pails of milk, which he swung on the counter. He used a piece of cheesecloth to strain the milk into the glasses. When he was finished, he placed the pail back on the counter and started to place the glasses and mugs around the table.

The twins bounced into the room and went straight to their mother for a kiss. "Girls, help your mother and start passing out the plates." Heather ladled the gravy into bowls, Marg scooped the potatoes, and Tammy brought the large coffee pot. Marg finished her chore and glanced around the table at everyone. She beamed with pleasure.

Dan sat one end of the table, while Dal positioned himself at the other. The twins sat on either side of Dan. Marg sat across from Shipley with Larry at her side. Then bowing their heads, Dan said grace.

The meal over, Shipley felt it was time for the verdict. "So Dan, have you thought about my offer?"

Dan sat back and gazed thoughtfully at Shipley. Buying some time, he went to the mantle to get his pipe.

"I've thought about it." He took his time filling the pipe bowl with tobacco, tamping it down to suit him, and lighting it. Marg filled Shipley's coffee cup to the brim and looked at Dan.

"Thank you, ma'am. And?" Shipley held his breath. He prayed Dan decided to help them. In less than a week, he'd be back home. His mission was nearly complete.

Everyone busied themselves with the remains of their plates. They each had their own reasons for wanting to hear Dan's decision. Larry he loved both Dan and Glory, but he could not decide which prospect would be worse right now – him going to help her or staying with them at the ranch. Marg was worried about the harm finding Glory might do to Dan. The twins, though oblivious to the life-changing decision that was about to take place, felt they should keep quiet.

Off in the distance, a lone coyote wailed. A dog nearby answered the coyote's call, its mournful bray chiming in with the sorrowful sound emitted by its cousin in the wild.

As if coming out of a trance, Dan spoke. "I've decided." He looked at each of his listeners in turn, calmly smoking his pipe until he had their complete attention. "I'll accept your offer. But I must tell you, once I help you out with Glory, I'm coming back home. A man has to set his priorities."

Everyone came around the table and congratulated him. In the excitement, he hadn't noticed Marg leave. He found her on the porch a few moments later. She turned quickly as he approached, wiping her tears on her apron.

"Marg?" Dan placed his arms around her shoulders. "Did I make the wrong decision?"

"Yes and no," Marg softly answered. "I think it's the wrong decision, but you're a grown man. You have to do what you have to do. I know you love all of us, but you're wrong to think me, or my family, would stand in your way of finding happiness." She turned to him. "I want you to remember one thing: you'll always have a place here with us, anytime you need one. Don't forget that you are an equal partner with Larry. And, an added inducement, Larry and I have decided on a name for the ranch; a name that would make us all proud."

"Oh?"

"Yes, we have," Marg said, busy wiping her eyes on her apron again. "We're calling it Mercer's Manor."

Dan was thunderstruck. His throat became tight and his eyes became misty-eyed. He felt both proud and humbled at the same time. Hastily, he reached up to wipe his eyes with the back of his hand.

He cleared his throat uncomfortably. "I sincerely thank you... and Larry. And I promise I'll not be gone longer than necessary. I wouldn't leave now but for the fact that the government needs me. I fought for this great country once; it seems she needs me again. You know that I'm not one for shirking my duty. And more importantly, I'll be able to finally lay to rest any feelings I've toward Glory. If I'm able to bring her back here with me, then fine. If not, I guess I'll have to cross that bridge when I get there. Now, I want you to dry your eyes and come back inside with me."

They went inside to find Dal and Shipley still at the table. Shipley was busy pouring another cup of coffee, while Dal partook of another piece of pie. Larry refilled his cup. He looked at his mother and saw the smile; he grinned and sat down, waiting patiently to hear Dan's decision. He was confident that everything would work out as it should.

"Sure's good, ma'am," Shipley said, blowing on his coffee. Then he poured Marg a cup and replaced the coffee pot on the stove.

"And the pie's not one to shake a stick at," Dal said, taking a napkin and wiping his mouth of the crumbs that had gathered there. He slid her cup over to her and reached for more pie.

"Thank you, gentlemen," Marg said.

"Dan and I have talked. We decided it would be the most prudent thing for him to do this." Shipley let out a sigh of relief. He was about to shake Dan's hand when Marg put hers up to stop him. "My son and I have also decided to change the name of the ranch. Abernathy Acres. . ." she glanced at Larry with pride and fondness, "will be called Mercer's Manor from this day forward." The men clapped politely. Dan sat up a bit straighter.

"Dal," Marg continued. "Will I be able to call on you for any help needed? You know, to sort of take Dan's place while he's helping Steve. You'd be of great relief by helping Larry with the livestock."

"Why, certainly," Dal answered. "Especially if you offer to make more of them pies for me, Marg. I'll consider it an honor and privilege for you to call on me anytime day or night."

Dan suddenly noticed the sly look that passed between Marg and the marshal. She was a widower and he was a bachelor. Maybe there was more here than met the eye. And Shipley, also a bachelor, wanted to retire out here. Maybe Cupid's arrows would ricochet. Who can tell?

A few hours later, packed and ready, Dan was saying his good-byes. The twins were crying openly; they had thought of Dan as their surrogate father since their own had died. Marg was trying her best to hide her tears. Larry was busy shuffling his boots in the dust, trying to look happy for him.

Dan hugged the twins, shook hands with Larry and placed his arm around Marg's shoulders. He gave her a squeeze. "Dal is a good man. I have no doubt he will be there for, Marg. And don't forget to let him stay for dinner now and then." Marg blushed, stealing a quick glance at the marshal.

Smiling, he approached the new man of the house. He hesitated only a moment before putting his arms around Larry. "Even grown men can hug each other in times like these, son" Larry hugged him in return, wiping his own eyes of their tears. Then Dan reached up with a callused hand and wiped his own cheeks as well. He had no idea he would feel this way about leaving them.

"You're the man in charge now, Larry," Dan said while busily looking at the ranch house for maybe the last time. "I don't envy you a bit for having to put up with your sisters' tomfoolery." Larry smiled at him gratefully.

Dan turned and swung into the saddle. Raising his hand in a good-bye, he clicked his tongue and followed Dal and the marshal out of the yard, in the direction of town. He paused to turn for one last look. He couldn't help but beam with pride as he took in the ranch before him. But his smile was tempered when he remembered the saying in the Bible, "Pride goeth before a fall."

As he rode, Dan smiled. He hoped that Marg would find happiness in one of her two suitors.

The trio rode silently from the ranch toward Mud Flats, each lost in his own thoughts.

As Marg watched them go, she felt something she hadn't felt in years. She smiled as she remembered how Dal and Shipley had treated her. She was beginning to feel like a schoolgirl again. Such attention; the devoted looks and admiring glances she received caused her to blush. Then she thought of Dan and his pursuit of Glory.

That woman had hurt Dan, a man she loved as a brother. Marg silently prayed everything

would work out for him.

Larry placed his arm around his mother and watched the men leave. He hoped Dan would find Glory and bring her back. Dan was like the brother he never had; he hated the thought of seeing him hurt.

And Glory. Sure, he had had a crush on her when she first came to the ranch. But over time, those feelings had turned to those of a brother for a sister. Besides, he had Libby; a young woman he had met recently who lived down the road.

Dal would have to start calling here more often. Marg was looking wonderful; he couldn't understand what Dan was so worried about. Of course, as a marshal, it was his duty to protect her, but he would've wanted to anyway. Perhaps he'd even stop and pick some flowers for her table the next time around. He smiled at his good fortune.

The weather was starting to clear some. The snow was almost gone. Maybe it would be an early spring. He welcomed the appearance of warmer weather. He smiled to himself, squeezed his knees tight and picked up the pace to town.

Shipley was glad to be returning; he wanted to go home. He had done his job and found Mercer and was bringing him with him. Now it was time to settle his affairs and retire. And that Mrs. Abernathy sure was a fine looking woman. He'd bring her some flowers when he visited here again. Wouldn't do for her to think of him as a man without honor, now, would it?

Before Dan found Glory, he'd have to do a lot of soul-searching. People change over time. He knew *he* had; he imagined Glory had as well. Maybe she didn't want to see him again; then again, maybe she did. Damned if he did and damned if he didn't. Either way, he'd be able to lay his painful longing for her to rest.

SEVENTEEN

The train would take five days to get from Mud Flats to St. Louis, with a day's layover in Oklahoma Station. Dan needed to sleep, but the wooden coach seat was highly uncomfortable. He tried counting sheep – even practiced the silent chanting the Indians had taught him – but all in vain. Miles and miles of sagebrush, boulders and an occasional jerkwater stop was the only thing to see. He would've thought the boredom alone would put him to sleep. What he wouldn't do for something exciting.

Sighing, he tried to sit up straighter in the hard seat. He still could not get comfortable. He could slide the window down, but the smoke from the engine would filter in and cover everyone with soot. It was getting warmer outside, but there was still a slight chill to the air.

It was getting hotter and stuffier in the car. The other passengers used various things to cool off with; homemade fans, pieces of rolled newspaper, hats. The men opened their collars and the women dabbed at their bosoms with tiny handkerchiefs. It was either die of the oppressive heat in the car or freeze to death from the outside air. He kept the window closed.

A Junoesque woman and a small man were seated directly in front of him. The large woman dwarfed the man, who sat scrunched in the seat of the coach. She was wearing a hat with a large feather stuck in the hatband. Dan could not see forward because of the protrusion, try as he might.

"Pardon me, ma'am," Dan said, leaning forward. "Could you please remove your hat?"

The woman glared at Dan for a moment before turning back in her seat. She reached up and turned the feather on her humongous hat, making his view even more limited. The feather swayed as she talked to her companion; the feather was now brushing against his face as she moved. He reached up and swatted the feather out of his face.

"Hrump!" she said, touching her hat with great affection and rearranging the feather. She still did not remove her hat. She seemed to sit straighter in the seat.

"Madame?" Dan asked, more forcefully. "Could you please take your hat off?" She ignored him.

An enclosed space like this was not a place to ruffle the feather of a woman like this, so he sat quietly, patiently waiting for a more opportune time to broach the subject again. It was a long way to St. Louis; he did not want to spend the entire trip worrying about her and her shield of feathers.

The man next to her turned and saw the glare in Dan's eyes. He rolled his eyes upward toward her hat and looked with reproach at his wife.

"Sadie, that man's right," he said. "If I had to look at that monstrosity all the way to Oklahoma Station, I might be tempted to do more than ask you politely to remove your hat." And with that, he swept the offending article off his wife's head.

"I will not remove my hat, Archibald," Sadie said as she grabbed her hat from her husband and replaced it on her head, heedless of the stares from the passengers. When the coughs and *ahems* continued from behind her, she removed it. But after a moment's thought, she once again thrust it back on top of her head. Glaring at her husband, she arose, giving Dan and Archibald a look of scorn. She marched in a huff to the front of the car, waddling like a duck, setting her aim on an unoccupied seat on the opposite side of the two weary men. She lurched into the seat, settling herself down like a fat hen on her nest.

"Thank you, sir," Dan said, sitting back in his seat.

"You're perfectly welcome, friend." Archibald chuckled, looking over the seat at Dan. "I've been waiting to see if someone would complain about that dumb thing she calls a hat. I keep

telling her that it would make a buzzard puke. I think she got it at a funeral parlor running a sale on used clothing.”

Dan started to laugh. Archibald laughed with him. His wife looked back at them and quickly turned around in a sniff. The men laughed so hard that one of the passengers looked across the aisle curiously.

“Let me introduce myself, friend,” Archibald said, mirth still at the corners of his eyes. “I’m Archibald P. Elroyd, Archie to my friends.”

Dan reached over the back of the seat and shook hands with Archie. “I’m Dan. Dan Mercer. Nice to meet you.”

“Where you headed, friend?”

“St. Louis.”

“So am I!” Archie sat up straighter in his seat. “Let me tell you about our trip so far. That’s if I’m not boring you any?”

“Of course not,” Dan replied, thanking his lucky stars for any kind of diversion. “In fact, why don’t you come and join me. No need to get a crick in your neck.”

Archie complied and moved to sit beside Dan. Once settled, he launched into the itinerary of their trip. Dan was so happy to have someone to relieve his boredom that he gladly listened.

A few minutes later, Archie sighed. “It’s not been easy traveling with the Missus, as I’m sure you can guess, but what are you going to do?”

“May I ask what you’re visiting St. Louis for?”

After Dan gave a bit of an explanation about Glory – not going into details, of course – Archie sighed again.

“I only wish that I could go with you. Give me a chance to be rid of Sadie for a while. She can be awfully tiring at times. And she never used to put on airs like she does now.”

Archie went on to tell Dan that he was a schoolteacher turned prospector who had discovered a major vein of silver in Arizona.

“Sometimes I wish I hadn’t found the silver,” he said wistfully. “Life would have been so much simpler. Now it’s all parties and whether or not she’s dressed good enough for the other folks. She seems aimed to prove to everyone just how rich we are. I never for a minute comprehended just how lucky I was at the time, before discovering the vein.” Archie turned his head toward the window with a resigned shrug.

As the train was starting to slow for the next water tank, he spotted a group of horsemen, but paid them no heed. Cowboys were cowboys.

Dan looked out the window on the opposite side of the train; it was stopping to take on water for the locomotive’s boiler.

He really did need to get some sleep, but nature was calling and he needed a breath of fresh air. He excused himself and rose, grabbing his rifle.

“Here,” Archie said. “Leave that with me. I’ve never seen a gun that large. What is it, an elephant gun?”

“Hardly,” Dan said, smiling. “Though I imagine it would bring an elephant to his knees. It’s a buffalo gun.”

“Impressive.” Archie scrunched his face up. “I might just want to shoot that old battle-ax for lack of something better to do. No, on second thought, she loves me. But you can still leave the rifle with me. I’ll keep an eagle eye on it for you.”

“You win, sir.” Laughing, Dan passed it to him gingerly. “Just be sure, whatever you do, do it in self-defense. And I do not believe wife-shooting is self-defense.”

Archie chuckled and nodded in understanding. He then turned and pulled the window down

to let in the air; as long as the train wasn't moving forward, the soot didn't pass through to them. He breathed heavily. "I could sit here all day and smell this sweet aroma."

If he calls the smell of manure, smoke from the engine and the awful smell of passenger perspiration a sweet aroma, he can have it. Dan grinned at Archie. Far be it from him to say differently.

Dan shrugged his shoulders and started to walk down the aisle to the exit. He looked back over his shoulder once and saw Archie lovingly stroking the barrel of the rifle.

To each his own. His wife probably doesn't let him carry a firearm. He smiled.

He stretched his lanky frame and started down the passenger steps of the railroad car at the back of the car; the air was fresher back here. It would be at least an hour before he had to take his seat again. Gratefully, he swung down the steps, arching his back to remove the kinks. He was walking around the back of the car when he heard shots. Someone screamed. He hurried toward the engine car. Three men on horseback were robbing the train! Dan could see the bodies of a brakeman and a conductor lying on the tracks.

Well, Dan, you wished for some excitement, and sure as shooting, you've got your wish.

Quickly, he scooted up the steps into the caboose. He knew at once he was not armed as well as he wanted to be. He took quick stock of his armaments; a .45 Colt single-action Peacemaker and a bowie knife resting in its leather sheath at his side. *My Sharps rifle is in the car with Archie!*

Dan rushed between cars in an effort to reach Archie and his rifle. The next car was a baggage car, piled high with various articles, trunks, suitcases and an occasional burlap sack. Stacks of lumber were on one side, while on the other were farm tools, hoes, rakes and shovels. He charged through the car.

When he came upon a partially empty cattle car, he stopped. Not wanting to wade through a pile of manure, he began to climb the ladder. Once on top, he went forward cautiously. He looked at the long metal runway on the car and cautiously stepped forward, watching each step as he walked toward the middle. Specks of ice and snow still stuck to the metal runway.

The robbers were on the ground two cars up from the one he was on. He started to crab sideways, remembering to keep a firm foothold on the walkway. The logo on the side of the car ahead of him proclaimed the car was carrying the U. S. mail. The car also had a small safe. Cattle buyers, ore companies and banks used the safe to transport their valuables.

He was sure it was the treasure that the robbers were after. Dan carefully stepped forward, praying he wouldn't be detected before he reached his goal.

Dan got down on his knees and peered over the side. One man was holding the reins of two horses, carefully watching the tracks. He did not look up. Dan positioned himself above him, his gun at the ready...

Gunshots were heard coming from the car below him. The time to act was now. When the other two men came into view, he stood up and took careful aim before showing himself.

"Hold it right there. Grab a piece of sky and drop your guns!"

The outlaw holding the reins either didn't hear him right, or was just plain stupid. He fired at Dan.

He could feel the rush of air as the bullet came close to his head. Instinctively, he fired back, his gun bucking in his hand.

The bullet punched a hole in the outlaw's face, entering at the nose and exiting at the back of his head. The outlaw fell from his horse without a sound and lay supine near the tracks. His mount neighed, reared up on its haunches, and quickly ran away.

The other two took that as a signal to open fire. The bullets caused pieces of metal to fly up

beside him as they ricocheted off the top of the car walkway.

A piece of metal struck Dan on the cheek, causing blood to flow freely down his face into the collar of his shirt. He was heedless to the pain; if anything, it gave him even more of a rush, sharpening his astuteness and eyesight.

Dan held his gun with both hands, took a deep breath, and squeezed off a shot. The bullet hit the second outlaw in the middle of his chest. He slumped over in his saddle. Dan turned to aim at the third man, but he had already turned tailed; he was heading into the mountains.

A loud boom came from one of the windows of a railroad car. A moment later, the retreating outlaw threw his hands up in the air and somersaulted off the rear of his horse. He raised a fine mist of snow as his body hit the ground and rolled down the hill like a paper doll as his mount galloped on.

Dan stood in shock, forgetting that he was bleeding and that he should get off the rail car before he fell off. That man was at least a good three hundred yards away. Only an expert sharpshooter would have been able to accomplish such a feat.

Dan lowered himself to the ground and walked toward the car where the shot came from. He came abreast of the outlaw he had shot in the face. Rolling the body over on its back, he stooped to do a more thorough investigation.

Passengers began to stream from the safety of the railroad cars like ants from an anthill. Far from being frightened, they seemed to take pleasure in the kill, swooping down on the bodies of the outlaws. A small man in a derby hat was starting to go through the pockets of one of the robbers. A woman in a prim and proper dress with two little girls in tow was warily approaching another body.

Dan was surprised at the looks on their faces. It was not fright he was seeing, as he would imagine, but avarice. Greed was taking precedence over their fear of the dead. He could only look on with dismay. He cleared his throat and the man in the derby hastily scrambled away from the body. He glared at the other passengers and gave them a withering look. Some smiled back sheepishly, while others looked away. They stopped their scavenging and milled around like lost sheep. Dan stared at them, shrugged his shoulders and started forward.

As he arrived at the car in which he was a former passenger, Archie alighted from the car steps clutching Dan's rifle tightly in his arms. Beaming to beat the band, he handed the rifle to Dan.

"Not bad shooting, if I say so myself. Thought for a minute that rascal was going to make the hills; but no, your rifle did the trick. By the way, it shoots a tad to the left." Dan shook his head and smiled.

Now that the buzzards had departed, Dan and Archie went to check on the bodies of the outlaws more closely. They glanced up as a conductor ran up to them.

"My word," the conductor said, looking around nervously. "They shot poor ole Charley and Henry right through the head. Do you think we got 'em all?"

"Yep," Archie answered, "I do believe that we got every one of those miscreants."

Dan bent and examined the pockets of the outlaw he had killed. The man in the derby had quickly run off to the safety of his own car. As Dan squatted, Archie tried to reassure the conductor that there would be no more trouble. Dan found only a jackknife, a poker chip, a plug of tobacco and a small ball of twine. Come to think of it, all three of them were dressed in Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes; not exactly the garb of a professional outlaw.

As Dan rose from his squatted position, he heard a shrill scream and down the steps of the passengers' car marched Mrs. Elroyd, minus her outrageous hat. Like a hen checking her chicks, she descended upon Archie. Dan was amazed that she could move her bulk with that

much agility.

"Oh, Archie, my dear," she asked. "You all right?"

"I'm in tiptop shape," he replied, quickly doffing his hat. He stepped back a few paces and thought that she was going to commend him for his fine shooting. Archie looked around and beamed. He was waiting for his wife to congratulate him.

She disappointed him by hurriedly berating him in front of the others. Dan was glad she wasn't *his* wife. He did not think he could handle her outburst and remain a man. In fact, knowing himself, he would just walk away before he did something not worthy of a gentleman.

Archie patiently stood there, shuffling his feet and holding his hat in his hands. Then he looked at her and sighed. When she was through, she stepped back, folded her arms on her chest and looked smugly at him.

"Dear," Archie said, squinting his eyes at her. "Why don't you do yourself and everyone else a favor and shut that trap of yours before a fly decides to make a home in there?"

The worm has turned. It's about time that someone told her what or what not to do.

Dan's respect for Archie took a leap upward. He was proud of the little man.

"Archibald P. Elroyd, do you know whom you are talking to in that tone of voice?" Mrs. Elroyd said, looking sternly like a schoolmarm, crossing her arms again and tapping her foot.

"Mrs. Archibald P. Elroyd," Archie said with much exasperation.

Sadie looked at Archie while the passengers held their breath. To everyone's surprise, especially Archie's, she threw her arms around him and gave him a big wet kiss. Dan wondered if they were ever going to come up for air. The other passengers stood as if they were rooted to the earth, their mouths hanging open in astonishment.

"Why, Sadie," was all Archie managed to say once the kiss was over. He blushed slightly and stood a bit taller.

The couple moved to the side of the car to talk. Archie did most of the most talking while Sadie nodded. Occasionally she would look at Dan and smile. Eventually, they returned, Mrs. Elroyd's arm tucked inside of her husband's. They were acting like schoolchildren with a first crush.

They strolled up to where Dan and the other passengers stood discussing the need for armed protection on the railroad.

"Sir," she said to Dan, "Please accept my apologies. I've been such a boor."

"Apology accepted, ma'am," Dan tipped his hat and bowed slightly.

"Sadie," Archie said, "The gentleman standing before you is none other than Captain Daniel Lafayette Mercer. Lately of the U. S. Army, I might add.

"He's going to St. Louis to do some undercover work," Archie whispered, taking a deep breath and looking around to make sure no one else could hear him.

Undercover work. If it was undercover, then how does he know about it? He remembered telling Archie of his recent stint in the army. But undercover? And how does he know my full name?

"Oh, Captain!" Sadie said, "Wouldn't the other girls be envious of me?"

"Yes," Archie said. "If it wasn't for the captain and his rifle, we would have been at the mercy of the outlaws. Why, the Captain almost single-handily saved all of us from the hands of those fiends. No telling what those scallywags would have done to you fair ladies. The Captain here rescued all of us from a most certain death. I shudder to think of it."

Why is he laying this on so thick? In a moment, he found out. Archie had told his wife that Dan needed his help. They were to accompany him to St. Louis and provide him a good cover story. He would pretend to be Dan's long lost brother; that Mercer had rescued him from a

trumped up murder charge.

“Now, Archie,” Dan said, wanting to set the facts straight. “I... we . . .” He saw the look of entreaty on Archie's face and stumbled, “Don't want to get the proverbial cart in front of the horse.”

“See?” Archie asked. “He's being too protective of me. Naturally, he doesn't want me in any danger. I told him that you and I'd be the only ones who knew the truth. So don't breathe a word, Sadie. Only *you* will know differently.”

Sadie looked askance at Archie. She knew he wasn't telling her the truth, but he looked so strong right now, so confident. She liked this side of him.

Who knows? Maybe we both need a vacation from each other. Let him have his fantasy – to go off and help the captain... if he's even a captain.

With these thoughts in mind, she smiled and turned to Dan with a small curtsy. Archie had her full approval. Smiling broadly, Archie grabbed Dan aside and began making plans. Sadie gathered her skirts and went back to the railroad car, casting an imperious look at her fellow passengers. *No need to let them think my husband has got the best of me, after all.* Already she was trying to figure out how she could lord this new friendship over those of lesser station.

EIGHTEEN

Everyone settled back in their seats as the train got underway. Dan and Archie had helped the conductor move the bodies of his men into the manure car. They left the outlaws where they lay. They were pretty confident that there wouldn't be any more incidents on this trip.

The Elroyds were holding hands and whispering to one another like long lost lovers. Dan pulled the brim of his hat down over his eyes and tried to get comfortable. Maybe he could finally get some needed shut-eye.

But the hard wooden seats would not let sleep overtake him. With a sigh, Dan raised his hat and let his eyes wander over his fellow travelers. A farmer and his wife were in a seat at the front of the car. The man wore bib overalls, clodhoppers and a shirt buttoned to the top. A peaked cap with the earflaps tied to the top set atop a thatch of straw-colored hair. He had hands that were heavily callused. This was a man who did not believe in shirking his duty.

He would've loved to have more men like under his command at Shiloh. Dan smiled to himself. His men may not have been trained to be soldiers, but they were all fighters, from the bespeckled store clerks to the muleskinners. They had all proved their valor on the field of battle.

The farmer's wife wore a flower print blouse underneath a cotton jacket. *She must be sweltering.* She smiled at her husband often and once uncapped a water bottle that was covered with wet burlap. Dan was thankful that she had on a sensible hat.

Behind and across from the farming couple sat a traveling drummer. *Don't see many of those around anymore.* His plaid suit, bowler, and scruffy looking high-button shoes was the usual attire of a salesman. His wares were packed tightly in a large suitcase at his feet. The side of the suitcase had been torn and was patched with a large piece of cloth. A piece of rope was tied around the suitcase to hold the patch more securely.

Two spinsters faced the drummer. Mother Hubbard's dresses draped their thin bodies. Gray hair was pulled tightly into a bun and held securely by long hatpins. Pince-nez glasses were perched on their noses. The spectacles were attached to the old maids' ears like small gossamer webs spun by spiders. Their black clothing and severe manners bespoke of their calling in life. Like magpies, they were forever chirping. They only stopped their constant chatter long enough to stare in open disdain at the drummer.

Every time the man would reach into his satchel and pull out a whiskey flask, the Vestal Virgins would glance heavenward and snort. One would hold her dainty handkerchief to her nose. The other looked severely down her nose at the drummer. She must have thought that by gesture, that she could control his actions.

The drummer evidently took great pleasure in their disdain. He would take a long swig, belch loudly, and slam the cork back home in the flask. Then he would make a big show of replacing the flask in his satchel. Every now and then, he would openly wink lasciviously at the two ladies. The spinsters would look aghast at the drummer and quickly avert their gaze.

Dan chuckled to himself. He could tell by the amount left in the flask that the drummer wasn't drinking that much. But the two women did not know this.

After the last drink, the drummer looked at Dan, smiled and winked. Dan smiled back. Shaking his head no to the offer of a drink, Dan moved back in his seat. He listened to the clickety-clack of the train's iron wheels on the tracks and let his mind wander back to the day he left Mud Flats.

The weather had been nice for a change. The marshal, Shipley and Dan had leisurely plodded through the melting snow into town. The shops were just opening as they arrived.

Shopkeepers were busily sweeping what was left of the snow from in front of their shops; some were placing items for sale in front of their stores, while others were breaking the ice and filing the watering troughs.

"I'll see you later," Shipley said as he reined up in front of the telegraph office. He tied his horse and went into the building to send a wire to his employers, notifying them of the completion of his job and his expected arrival in Washington, D.C. in two days. He figured that he could wait until he got back to ask for an early retirement. No sense in placing all his eggs in one basket. He went out the door humming.

Dal Walker continued to his house, tied his horse to a hitch rail and went inside to lay on his bed and think about Marg Abernathy. Smiling to himself, he rearranged his lanky form and drifted off to sleep.

* * *

Dan went to the livery to stable his horse. After brushing him down and making sure he had enough oats, he strolled to the railroad station. He wanted to stamp the memory of the town in his mind. He didn't know when he would be back this way; he would miss it.

Some boys were gathered in a circle playing a game of mumble-peg. Dan smiled and stopped to watch. He gazed on in admiration as the older boys balanced their knives on forefingers and flipped them up to do a somersault before they stuck in the soft dirt. They would work the knife from fingers to elbow, then finally end at their shoulders. Dan remembered playing the game himself as child, only his brothers would end up balancing the knife off the tops of their heads. Many a time, the knife slipped and caused a small laceration on their foreheads.

Ah, those were the days. He smiled.

Sighing, Dan went to the railroad station and purchased a ticket to St. Louis using Shipley's money. He sat on a bench to wait. As he looked up at the large Regulator wall clock, he became mesmerized with its swinging pendulum. It was eleven-thirty. There were no other passengers in the depot.

Lunch. He still had time to run over to the saloon for their free meal. The train didn't get here until one-thirty; he had two hours to kill. He was definitely not going to sit here and twiddle his thumbs.

Dan left the train station and walked across the street to the saloon. He started up the steps to the batwing doors when he noticed Steve Shipley approaching the saloon from the opposite direction.

"Fancy seeing you here," Dan said, holding the swinging doors open for Shipley.

"Thank you, sir." Shipley walked ahead of him into the saloon. "I thought it best that I stay here awhile longer. You know, to check out the prices of land hereabouts. I also want to check on employment opportunities for an old retiree. I forgot to mention that I'm a quite the amateur gunsmith. And of course, I'll check on Marg – Mrs. Abernathy – again before I go."

"Naturally," Dan said, smiling. Knowing the marshal was also intending on calling on Marg made him happy. *It's about time Marg had two eligible bachelors fighting for her hand.* He felt more secure leaving Marg in their hands.

He went to get a quick sandwich from a side table.

"Now," Shipley asked, pulling out a chair and sitting across from Dan. "Got my instructions down pat?"

"Yes, believe I do." Dan pulled out a piece of paper out of his jacket pocket and glanced at

it. "I've it all written down here just as you gave it to me."

Dan was to go to St. Louis by rail, via Oklahoma Station. There, he would switch to a smaller railroad and go northeast to Edmond, in Indian Territory, where he would take a Butterfield stagecoach to Tulsa, Oklahoma. At Tulsa, he would board another train for St. Louis. When he arrived in St. Louis, he was to stand near the depot ticket office with the current Police Gazette under his right arm. When the Secret Service agent saw the paper, he would be approached with further instructions.

"Sounds like you're ready. Nervous?" Shipley said.

"Not really. But who is this mysterious woman that works at Glory's?" Dan asked.

"That's where we seem to have a problem. While I was at the telegraph office, the agent gave me a wire that he was getting ready to have delivered to your ranch. It seems that our agent is temporally missing. May be foul play. We don't know for sure, but there is always the possibility. Anyway, her name is Linda Bockmiller. She's very good at dealing cards at the *Wayfarer*."

Dan cleared his throat nervously. There was obviously more going on then he had originally thought.

"Don't worry, Dan. The government is doing all it could to find Miss Bockmiller. You just stick to the plan and everything will be fine. Someone will meet you at the station and take you to your hotel, where you will be filled in from there."

"How am I to convince Glory to let me help her?" Dan asked. "You thought of that yet?"

"Knowing what little I do of you," Steve said confidently, "I'm sure that you can get that little chore done properly."

"This'll have to take a little thinking." Dan looked off into the distance and rubbed his chin. In a moment, he brightened and looked at Shipley.

"I can tell those who ask that I'm in St. Louis to check into buying some Herefords for my ranch," Dan responded, reaching for his carpetbag on the floor. "I'll not be lying, because I'm most definitely looking into that possibility."

"See." Steve chortled. "I knew that you could do it, once you set your mind on it long enough. Once you have the evidence on Glory, we will take it from there."

Shipley didn't worry about how Miss Stahl would figure into Dan's cattle-buying scheme; he knew he could count on him to handle any emergency, should it arise. Then, when the time came, the government would step in and make the apprehension.

"Sounds too easy to me," Dan said. "But I've a question. What's to stop me from lighting a shuck out of there – from grabbing Glory and hightailing it to parts unknown?"

"Don't worry about that." Steve laughed. "We've done a background check on you. And we have people stationed to watch your every move. You do anything out of the ordinary and we step in. The government knows how to track people down. We found you didn't, didn't we?"

"But I'm not worried. I believe you want to get this unpleasant business finished and get back to your ranch. Now, don't tell me I was wrong. If I'm proven wrong, my faith in humanity has taken a downhill turn for the worse."

"I gave you my word and my word is my bond. I'll give it my best shot."

"That's all anyone can ask for... their best," Shipley said. "Now you had better get to the depot; I think I can hear the train whistle blowing."

The men stood and shook hands. Steve watched Dan exit the saloon and start across the street. He hoped he was not being taken for a fool.

Dan strode more purposely to the depot. Everyone's faith in him made him stand taller. This might be fun after all. *And dangerous*. He smiled. He'd looked danger in the eye and spit on her

before. He could do it again. He tingled with excitement. Head held high, he continued on toward the depot.

A few hours later, the train stopped in Tulsa to pick up passengers. Grateful there were no incidents of foul play, Dan let himself think about his plans for the future. He was certain that the ranch was all he wanted at this time in his life. After the horrors of war, he needed to find a place to put down roots. He was twenty-eight years old. And if he wanted to see twenty-nine, he had best be upfront with Shipley. Besides, he wanted to be able to look himself in the mirror each morning, knowing he had made the right decision about Glory.

Glory. To see, hear and feel her after all this time... it would make this all worthwhile.

"Pardon me, sir?" a female voice broke into his reverie.

Dan looked up to see a young woman attired in a blue calico dress, dainty white shoes and a straw hat with a daisy in the hatband. The daisy looked wilted from the heat. She was carrying a wicker basket in one hand, while the other was clutching the strap of a brown valise.

The woman looked down at Dan with exasperation as she attempted to get past him to sit on the seat by the window. He moved quickly to let her pass.

The car had filled considerably while he was daydreaming. Two more families had taken up residence on the forward seats and their children were now busy running up and down the aisle of the car, not bothering to say "excuse me" to any passengers they bumped.

The young woman slid past him to sit on the seat opposite. She sighed while she watched the children's antics.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Dan said, getting to his feet and removing his hat. "I was daydreaming."

"I thought as much," she said. "I often do that very thing. Daydream, that is."

Her voice had softness to it, but he could detect a slight timbre. He took her for a seamstress, or perhaps a schoolmarm, the way she tolerated the children.

"Pardon me, Miss. But I'm rather curious as to why you didn't take a seat more to the front. There are several empties up there."

She looked off into the distance and mumbled something he could not hear. He leaned forward, cleared his throat and asked, "Ma'am?"

"I said, sir, that there's a cowboy up there that I most assuredly don't want to be near. You look like a gentleman, even though you have a gun on your hip and a rifle by your side. Besides, I'm a very good judge of men. In my business, it pays off rather handsomely to be a good judge of people, especially men."

"Oh?"

"I deal in pasteboards." At Dan's blank stare, she smiled demurely. "I'm a gambler."

"Of course, I don't work around here." She laughed softly at the surprised look on his face. "I came out here to see my sick mother. Just hope that I've a job when I get back. I left quite suddenly, not telling anyone of my whereabouts. I only paused long enough to get my valise. No one knows of my disappearance."

"Oh?" Dan asked, starting to like her more. He especially liked the sound of her voice; it had a decided lilt to it. *Boston, maybe, or New Jersey.* It had an Eastern lilt to it, with a hint of a brogue in it. Irish-Catholic. Boston, he was sure.

"You must excuse me, sir," she said, turning to face him more squarely. "I haven't introduced myself." She took his hand and pumped it confidently. "Name's Linda Bockmiller. I work at the *Wayfarer* in St. Louis. You'll have to come and see me sometime."

The missing agent. Wouldn't she be surprised to learn they were going to be doing the same job? But he was not told he could let her know his true intentions.

"Nice to meet you, ma'am. I'm Aloysius S. Percival. Call me Al for short." He gave himself a deep southern accent. Linda raised her handkerchief to hide her smile; she was, if anything, very prim and proper.

"What do you do, Sir?" she asked, placing her hat on the seat in front of her. She leaned back and scrutinized him closely.

"I'm a cattle buyer. I'm headed to the stockyards in St. Louis to look at some Herefords. Of course, I'm going to take in the sights the large city as well."

"My friend, Archie," Dan said, pointing him out to her. "He's going with me. We may do a little gambling as well."

"Good. You two will have to come by the *Wayfarer* and let me see if I can give your money a permanent home in my handbag."

"I may just do that very thing. But don't be alarmed if some of your money finds a home in my back pocket." They both chuckled.

"Pardon me, Miss," Dan said, rising from his seat. "I've to go outside to smoke. My pipe smoke, according to some people, doesn't smell that great. Don't go away. I'll be right back."

Dan went down the aisle. He touched Archie on the shoulder, pointed to the door and continued forward. As he approached the doorway, he took a look at the cowboy Linda had mentioned.

He wore a checkered shirt with a yellow bandana around his neck, boots that had seen better days, dirty Levis and an even filthier vest. He was gazing intently out the window at the passing scenery. An old .36 caliber Navy Colt was attached to his leg by a leather thong. The handle grips of the weapon were shiny, showing much use. A string of tobacco makings dangled from his right shirt pocket. Instinctively, he didn't like him any more than Miss Bockmiller did.

Once outside, Dan told Archie about Linda and his new alias. "You need to tell Sadie to start calling me Al." Archie nodded excitedly; he was enjoying this cloak and dagger stuff immensely.

Who knows; maybe it was a stroke of luck having Archie tag along after all. He liked him more each time they spoke. And it didn't hurt to have someone you trust watch your back. *He has proved to himself to be a good marksman as well.*

Dan told Archie that they were both livestock buyers who liked to gamble. "Sounds like a plan to me," Archie said. He was trembling with anticipation; he could barely wait until he was inside to tell Sadie what was happening. He knew she'd be just as excited about this as he was.

Dan let Archie go ahead while he finished his pipe. Finished, he knocked the dottle out against his hand and went inside. On the way to his seat, he laughed inwardly at the antics of Archie and his wife. As he came abreast of them, they gave him an exaggerated wink. He knew his secret was safe with them.

When he got to his seat, he was surprised to see Linda hurriedly placing something in her valise. He sat down, pretending not to notice.

"Enjoy your smoke?" she asked, placing her valise at her feet.

"Yes. Very much." He arranged himself once again in his seat.

"I can't seem to get comfortable in these hard seats. You?"

"Me either," he agreed, while scooting down and pulling his hat over his eyes. Then as an afterthought, he sat up. "If it will make you feel better, I don't think anyone can. But I'm going to try to take a snap, if you will pardon me."

He saw the look of puzzlement on her face and hurriedly explained. "A snap is a cross between a long snooze and a short nap."

"How interesting." She sat back and stared out the window while Dan pulled his hat brim back down over his eyes.

When he awoke, she was still staring outside. Now that she had her hat and duster off, he could see her more clearly. She had long black hair, almond-colored eyes, slender fingers, a strong aquiline nose and shapely pierced ears.

It was her earrings that intrigued him. They were miniature teardrops made out of turquoise stone; when the sunlight struck them, they caused tiny rainbows to dance in the space between her and the window. With or without the earrings, she was a rather attractive looking woman.

She turned her head suddenly. "Do I pass inspection, sir?" Smiling, she stood and pirouetted for him.

"Hmm," he said, his eyes traveling over her body. Stroking his chin with his hand, he gazed at her thoughtfully. "Good legs... a little long; ample bosom, clear eyes." He measured her like a livestock buyer would judge a prize bull. "A bit wide in the posterior, but you'll do."

"Well!" she said in a huff. "I never!"

"Look," he said, behind an upraised hand. "If you don't want to be inspected, don't give a man an opening line."

"I think that I may have read you wrong, sir."

"Nope, I don't think you did," he replied, grinning again. "You may have just given out the wrong signals."

She sat and glared at him. In a moment, she smiled ... then burst out laughing. The ice broken, he joined her. For the rest of the journey, they whispered their observations of their fellow riders to one another.

The spinster sisters were staring at them with contempt. They evidently did not like anyone but themselves.

The drummer had fallen to sleep with his mouth wide open. He had removed his jacket to reveal purple suspenders pulled tightly against his protruding belly. It looked like his buttons were being given a stress test, they were so taunt. His hat had fallen to the floor and he had loosened his high-water shoes. His nostrils were quivering as the air rushed in and out of them.

The train stealthily crept forth into the night. The sky turned a dark purple and a gentle breeze wafted across the plains. Gradually, everyone seemed to settle down for the night.

"If you don't mind, ma'am," Dan said, propping his feet on the seat across from them, "I think I'll try to get some more shuteye."

"I think that's a wonderful idea," Linda rejoined, her dress rustling as she moved. "I may do the same thing."

She moved across from Dan, tucked her feet under her and curled up into a small ball. Presently, she closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep, her hands firmly clasped on her bosom.

It never failed to amaze him at the way a person could contort one's self like that. If he drew himself up into a pretzel like she did, he would wake up stiff as a board.

Shaking his head, he removed his jacket and rolled it up like a pillow. Then he tilted his hat over his eyes and joined her in sleep.

NINETEEN

Glory was in her office counting the night's take. Tonight they took in an excess of ten thousand dollars; a slow night. On a good night, the *Wayfarer* could bring in more than fifty thousand.

She stood and idly closed the door of her office, shutting out the din from downstairs. She liked to keep it open while she counted her money. But now she wanted time to contemplate her next move.

She had been watching one of the poker players very closely. She was almost dead certain that he was cheating; proving it was another matter. She had to keep an eye on him.

The player in question was a railroad tycoon, to hear him tell. He was one of four players at a poker table in the back of the gaming establishment. Linda Bockmiller's table.

Speaking of Linda, she wondered where she was hiding. The two men she had sent to her boarding house had turned up with nothing as to her whereabouts. The landlady had told them that Linda had gotten into a carriage with a large suitcase and a small valise a few days ago. Another of her contacts had seen her leave on the night train to Tulsa. That is where her trail ran cold.

Glory considered the possibility that Linda had run off with the *Wayfarer's* money. That night, she had quickly got an accountant to tally the week's receipts. The audit counted the money down to the very penny. So she wasn't stealing. Still, she had a strange feeling in the pit of her stomach whenever she thought of her.

Perhaps she ran away with that dashing young man with the fiery red hair. He had been hovering around Linda like a moth drawn to a flame the last week or two before she had disappeared. The man had best watch it. Knowing Linda, she was sure the man didn't have a chance in hell.

Now that she thought about, she seriously doubted that Linda had run off with anyone. The woman seemed to be above temptation. No one was going to sweet talk that gal. No way, no how!

Glory had hired Linda on the recommendation of a local judge. The judge, having an exorbitant indebtedness to the *Wayfarer*, had overheard Glory's comment about being the only woman in town to play poker well. He offered, for certain considerations, to introduce Glory to a woman he knew. This woman was touted as one of the best poker players in the West.

"How come I haven't heard of her?" Glory asked the judge while leaning over the table and accepting a light for her cheroot.

"She goes by an alias, I assume," he answered as replaced the matches in his vest pocket. "Wouldn't you if you were an excellent poker player?"

"Suppose so," Glory replied. "What do you know about her?"

"Nothing. Only that she is supposed to be very adroit at playing cards. I've checked her out; the authorities aren't interested in her. Therefore, I assume she's not wanted by anyone."

"Well, we'll see," Glory said, standing to return to her office upstairs.

He *assumed*... a small smile formed at the corners of her lips. Any time one assumes, one risks making an ass of oneself. Only this time, no one was going to make an ass of Glory B. Stahl.

"Don't forget my offer," the judge said. "I'll personally introduce her to you, if you'll consider my indebtedness."

"Like I told you, Judge," Glory replied, her cheroot smoke trailing out her nostrils. "We'll see." She turned to start the stairs and paused for a moment. Turning back to the judge, she

said, "Don't forget, your Honor, I've a lot of markers on you."

The judge watched her ascend the stairs and thought of his predicament. He had hopes of improving his station in life; he did not want to be a local judge forever. That is why, when the Secret Service approached him with the offer, he had jumped at the opportunity to help the federal government. There might just be a good possibility that he would be appointed to a federal judgeship if everything worked out as he hoped.

A lifetime position, an increase in salary and the prestige he sought. Like a mule being taunted with a dangling carrot, the government dangled the possibility of him being a federal judge in front of him. And like the very same mule, the judge had docilely been taken in.

Glory had invited Linda into her office one day soon after her meeting with the judge. She was seated behind her large baize-covered desk. A small decanter of brandy sat to the side with two crystal glasses beside it. On the right lay a sheaf of papers noting the schedules of various paddlewheels, trains and stagecoaches. In the middle of the desk lay a large green ledger.

"Please sit, Miss Bockmiller," Glory said, busily pouring a small amount of brandy into a snifter. She looked over the table at Linda and raised her eyebrows in a question.

"No thank you, ma'am," Linda replied, sitting demurely in the chair beside the desk. She crossed her hands over the small clutch bag in her lap. Linda looked at Glory questionably, wondering what to expect.

Linda certainly prayed that she bought the story the judge had cooked up for her. She smiled inwardly, but just to make sure, she fingered her clutch purse. Inside lay a small Remington over-and-under .41 caliber derringer. She hoped that she wouldn't, but if the need arose, she was prepared to use it.

She weighed her options. It was known that the woman was friendly with the rougher element in town and would not hesitate one moment to put the agent away. Maybe not by herself... but there were other ways... ways she shuddered to think about.

Glory raised the glass, swirled the amber liquid about, and breathed in the heady aroma. Nodding with satisfaction, she leaned back and slowly sipped her drink. As the smooth liquor trickled down her throat, she looked at Linda closely.

Linda was in her early twenties, black hair, almond-colored eyes and an aristocratic nose. She was most definitely of Irish heritage. Her nose was upturned at the end, giving forth an air of confidence. She wore her clothes like she knew who she was, and how to attract a man. Glory was somewhat envious of her.

She hired Linda on the spot, warning her of various customers who frequented the establishment.

"I can take care of myself, ma'am," Linda assured her.

"I imagine you can." Glory had dismissed her with a wave of her hand.

A month later, she was standing by her window, wondering what had happened to her employee. *Maybe she has to find herself, much like I did when I first got here*, she thought.

Once, on a whim, she had attended a tent revival of the Church of Christ. She had hidden her face behind a veil of dark lace and wore a long black dress that came down to her knees. It wouldn't have been good for business if she was seen at one of these functions, though she did see a lot of her customers. She sat next to a rather large lady who sweated buckets; every so often, she would dab at her bosom with a piece of cloth.

Glory listened attentively to the Bible-thumping preacher. Every now and then, he would pause and reach in his back pocket for a handkerchief, which he used to wipe the sweat from his brow. To this day, she could remember the three questions he had asked his audience:

“Who are you? Where do you come from? And, most importantly, where are you going?” The preacher had pointed his skinny forefinger right at them as if it was a pistol going to be discharged.

She had pondered her own answer to these questions as she smiled to herself. *My name is Glory. I come from a farm family in Missouri. My family was butchered by a band of renegade Confederate soldiers.* She shuddered every time she remembered that horrible night.

As far as the last question, where was she going, she had made a vow that day in the ruins of the farmhouse that she was going to escape – and succeed.

And she did. First, she had traveled to the Indian Nations. Once there, she met a man; a man who had thought the world of her. What she would do to meet him again. Only, she sought a different lifestyle. He wanted to be a rancher; she couldn’t stand the thought of living her life as a farmer’s wife. She felt bad for leaving him the way she did; she didn’t even say good-bye. But she had to think of herself, didn’t she?

She smiled to herself when she thought of the Abernathy family. Larry must be a young man by now. He was sweet on me. And those darling twins, Heather and Tammy.

Then there was Marg.

If it weren’t for that woman, she never would have had the money to leave. Though the lack of money would not have deterred her. She was bound and determined to seek out her destiny.

One did not get ahead in the world today unless one was willing to take chances. She often spoke in this manner to her patrons as she lived among the tables of her gambling establishment. “Take a chance, sir,” she said before moving to another table. “You’ll definitely not win anything unless you are willing to take a chance.”

Then she met Dexter Averil, a small-time gambler. It was Dexter who offered her the dreams and riches she always dreamed off; before she knew it, he had swept her off her feet. But the dreams vanished as quickly as smoke rising when she was apprehended by the authorities for something she hadn’t done. After a rather speedy trial, she was found guilty and sent to prison. She shuddered at the memory.

“Funny,” she mused aloud, “how Dexter was nowhere to be found. But Mr. Dexter Cornelius Averil will get his comeuppance. As sure as I’m Glory B. Stahl, he’ll pay for my pain and anguish. Oh, will he ever *pay!*”

TWENTY

Sung Kim was treading softly as he mounted the stairs to Glory's office. The Asian bounded the stairs with the agility of a lion, muscles rippling in his arms. At the top, he turned to the left. He paused for a moment to ponder his next decision. He took a deep breath and raised his hand to knock on the door with gold lettering emblazoned on the front proclaiming:

OWNER

Glory B. Stahl

Glory had just filled a glass with brandy from the decanter on her desk. She leaned back in her chair and swirled the amber-colored liquor. The knock on the door gave her a start; she straightened up quickly in her chair, almost knocking her glass over in the process.

She quickly drained the glass and composed herself. She ignored the intrusion, leaning over to peer at her ledger. She hated to be disturbed when she was working on her books.

There was a more strident knock. She might as well answer it.

"Enter!"

Sung Kim walked into the room. The woman before him sat behind a mammoth desk. Not looking up, she motioned for him to sit while she continued writing in her ledger. He waited.

When the man did not speak, she looked up. She was taken back by the sheer size of the man who had perched himself precariously on the edge of a small coffee chair. He had on the work clothes of a coolie: a gray suit, slipshod sandals and a straw hat. His beady black eyes, shaven skull and sheer size made her immediately nervous, though she refused to show it.

The Korean handed her a note, made a motion to his mouth, and shook his head. With downcast eyes, he stared intently at the floor. His dark eyes seemed to bore holes in the carpet. She let us out a silent sigh of relief.

The note was from another magistrate she had under her thumb. *So, the man is mute.* And if she hired him, the magistrate would be very grateful.

Hmm... I wonder how grateful? Can't talk? He would certainly never speak out of school.

Glory chuckled to herself as she arose from the desk and walked to a wall safe. She spun the combination and opened it. Reaching in, she retrieved a sheaf of bills and counted the cache in her hands. She turned around to face the Asian and smiled. The way he looked up at her gave her the heebie-jeebies. He seemed to stare right through to her very soul. But she was not about to be intimidated. She straightened her shoulders and walked back to her desk. She had surreptitiously opened her desk drawer to reveal her insurance – a Colt .41 caliber one-shot derringer lying on a sheath of papers. No sense in being unwary.

"I'll hire you." Glory gazed intently at the Oriental as he stood. "Your duty will be to protect me." She looked him over like a prize piece of cattle. "I don't envision any trouble in that area due to your size, but... if I sense any danger, you're to come to my aid immediately."

She noticed the way his eyes were constantly moving.

Good, that way he doesn't miss a thing.

"Here's some start-up money; use it for clothes, food, whatever. Go downstairs and see the bartender. Give him the note and I'll be down later to explain more about your duties. And as I said earlier, *your only duty* is to provide me with protection. Do you understand me?"

Kim looked up and slowly nodded. He would gladly protect the little lady. He had only met the man who had recommended him fleetingly, but he was very appreciative of his help. The lady was also taking a chance that he wouldn't place his fingers around her delicate throat and

squeeze the lifeblood from her. He respected her for that.

He would protect her with his life.

Glory handed the note she had written to Kim. Dismissing Kim with a nod, she promptly placed everything from her mind and went back to poring over her ledger.

Kim nodded and started to the door, closing it softly behind him. As he started down the stairs, he paused for a moment, taking in the gambling room below him.

The gaming establishment was a large, two-story wooden structure built at the edge of the red-light district. A garishly colored false front with a wooden porch and boardwalk completed the display. An outside stairway led to the second floor, providing access to the patrons not wanting anyone to know of their nocturnal visits. The less others knew of these visits, the better for all around.

Inside the opulent building, everything was red, from the lighter ruby velour covering the walls to the deep crimson of the drapes hanging from the two bay windows. Scarlet plush carpeting lay on the floors. Two mahogany straight-backed chairs were placed on either side of the stairway. Gambling tables were scattered about in a haphazard fashion on his left. The dance floor was square, approximately ten by ten feet. The long mahogany bar was highly polished; it traveled the length of the spacious room. A large mirror that caught the light from a hanging chandelier spanned the wall behind the bar. The long stairway was made of walnut. It was also highly polished.

Across from the stairway, a fieldstone fireplace with cast-iron andirons holding an ample supply of hickory occupied half the wall. The remaining walls were decorated with the paintings of various tradesmen: a group of coolies; Irishmen and surveyors working on a stretch of railroad tracks; a horserace.

The painting that caught Kim's eyes was in the middle of the hall, at the center of the stairway's apex. A person would have to look at the painting every time they ascended the stairs.

It was Glory at her best. Little tendrils of bright red hair framed an exquisite face. A dark brown mole on her left cheek was the only thing to mar an otherwise unblemished beauty. The pert nose and sensuous mouth were painted to perfection. But the eyes – they drew a person in, giving the painting its depth. These had green eyes took him in and held him for a moment, as if he were under their hypnotic spell.

But those eyes held suspicion; they were without any warmth or gentleness. They were cruel, cold and calculating eyes. Men would die for them, women would be envious of them and small children would be afraid of them.

In the picture, Glory wore a light blue shawl, which was draped over her shoulders and across her bosom. The shawl had a large ruby broach holding it together.

Kim reflected on how far he was from Denver. A part of him was homesick, until he remembered he was an outcast from the Denver railroad cars, and from his people.

Sung Kim was the son of Korean immigrants who had helped build the railroad through the Rocky Mountains... until he got into trouble with the Irish in the Denver freight yards. They might still be looking for him for killing their labor control officer.

He had made his way from Denver to St. Louis without mishap. Upon his arrival, he happened onto a fight between a judge and a gang of ruffians. Kim saw that the judge was outnumbered three to one. At first, not wanting to get involved, he started to move away. He then remembered he didn't have any money either.

Kim quickly grabbed a piece of discarded lumber and swung it at the back of one of the hooligans, striking him between the shoulder blades. The man went careening into some barrels

stacked at the side of the road. The man holding the jurist by the throat turned and swung at Kim; he grabbed the man's fist in his enormous paws and squeezed it. The sound of bones being crushed carried to the others. The hooligans, seeing the fight was not going the way they had planned, quickly ran off. Kim had not acted out of benevolence; he was planning on robbing the judge himself.

But before Kim could carry out his planned robbery, the judge began to thank him profusely. He removed a fat wallet from his jacket pocket and gave Kim a sheaf of bills. Kim wasn't sure he should take the paltry amount when he could simply have it all.

But he also remembered the shoguns in Japan. When they were befriended, they would bestow a lifetime of help to the person who had provided assistance. Kim unclenched his fist and bowed humbly before the judge.

The magistrate was taken back by this behavior. He felt a bond form between him and the Titan. Then he remembered Glory saying she was in need of a protector. He also remembered the government's offer.

The magistrate asked Kim if he was new in these parts. Kim shook his head yes, then motioned to his mouth. The judge nodded in understanding the man was mute. Therefore, he took out a piece of paper and hurriedly inscribed a note on it. Handing the message to Kim, the jurist smiled.

"You take this note," the judge said. He explained to Kim the contents and gave him directions to the *Wayfarer*. "The lady will see to your welfare, of that I'm certain."

I must remember to act very meek to my new employer.

Kim smiled at his benefactor as the judge walked away into the night.

Kim walked slowly but purposefully down the street. He exuded an air of confidence; people would take one look at him and quickly move aside.

TWENTY-ONE

The train pulled into the depot amid squealing brakes and great plumes of steam. It lay berthed on the tracks beside the station like a giant behemoth. Dan and Archie were already swinging down from the car as it shuddered to a final stop.

Dan had told Linda that he was going to Tulsa by stagecoach. She was also planning on going to Tulsa to visit a friend. But she would arrive back in Tulsa with time to spare to catch the train to St. Louis.

"Maybe we can finish our card game on the train?" Linda asked, looking at Dan with more than respect in her eyes. She was beginning to feel something for the man and was glad she'd have some time away from him to sort out her thoughts.

"Why not? I have to get my money back, after all," Dan replied, hoisting his rifle to his shoulder. He reached and picked up his carpetbag. Turning toward Linda, he waved good-bye. Then he strode from the train to the stage line.

Dan walked a few feet, then stopped and turned back. Linda smiled, waved, reached for her reticule and started in the opposite direction.

Archie left his wife in a tearful farewell. Sadie had told him to go on ahead, as she was getting tired of riding and needed a respite. Besides, she wanted to get in some shopping. She knew that Archie wasn't interested in visiting or shopping. She would rest a day or two, then continue on to Tulsa to visit her sister.

She went over her plans with Archie as they were departing the train. Sadie could almost see the relief flooding over him as she said good-bye.

Dan and Archie started to the stage line. "Take care you two," she shouted to their departing backs. Sadie waved in hopes that Archie would turn around. He did. Smiling, he returned her gesture. Then he turned back to follow Dan into the stage line office.

The office was an oblong structure with the ticket booth on one side, while the other held a bench for the passengers. There was one window open to let in the breeze. Handheld fans were situated about the room.

The clerk was a gentleman in his seventies, over six feet tall and skinny as a rail, reminding Dan of Ichabod Crane. A faded red and black striped shirt hung loosely on his lanky frame. The shirt was tucked into a pair of whipcord trousers held up by large red suspenders. He had rheumy eyes, a long nose and a receding chin and hairline.

"Maybe he needs help in wiping his eyes?" Archie muttered to Dan.

A good Samaritan, that Archie. Dan chuckled to himself as he placed his carpetbag on the floor in front of the counter. "Two tickets to Tulsa, please," Dan said, pushing his hat up on his head.

"Yes, sir." The man bent to get the tickets from a drawer underneath the counter.

"Can't seem to make out that schedule," Archie said, squinting to peer at the bulletin tacked to the far wall. He figured the clerk could not see any better either. Maybe they would get a break on the purchase of the tickets.

"Well, sonny," the ticketmaster said, straightening to place the tickets on the counter, "I, Scott Durnal, have all the information you'd want right up here in the ole noggin."

"When's the next train to Tulsa?"

"One hour."

"Two tickets, please."

It was now six o'clock. It would take all night to reach Tulsa. And the stage wouldn't provide no food for its passengers.

"We'd best be getting some victuals," Dan said, picking up his carpetbag and heading for the door. As he started out, he bumped into a lady carrying a load of packages, which quickly flew in all sorts of directions. Dan bent down automatically to retrieve them for her.

"So sorry, ma'am." As he handed her the parcel, their eyes locked. The lady standing before him was dressed in a severely tailored white dress, pink with white piping at the sleeves. A hat with an ostrich feather in the crown sat askew on her head. She carried a white parasol over her left arm while a pink clutch purse was in her right hand. How she managed to carry anything at all was a wonder. Dan bent to get more parcels from the sidewalk.

"Oh dear," she said, bending to get some of the packages herself. Her long dress made this action rather awkward. She was trying to gather packages while holding on to her parasol. "I need tentacles like an octopus!" she exclaimed in a loud voice.

Archie had come out of the ticket office and was now busy trying to round up as many packages as he could to help Dan out. Some of the parcels had fallen into the busy street; a passing buggy crushed one to smithereens with the sound of tinkling glass. The noise caused the woman to whirl at Dan.

"My dishes!" she wailed. "I just bought them from Hagen's House of Fashion. It was to be a wedding gift for my sister!"

Dan and Archie were staring at the woman as a large crowd assembled. Men were laughing; women were placing their hands to their throats. The agent came out of the ticket office to see what the commotion was about.

"Miss Darlene?" the ticketmaster said. "Are you all right?"

"I'm not hurt, thank you," she said as she straightened her hat and smoothed down her dress. "But I'm embarrassed to death."

"Thank you, kind sir," she said, batting her dark eyelashes at him as he handed her the last package.

"You're perfectly welcome, Madame."

"I'm Miss Darlene Ann Foote," she said as she straightened and placed one hand on her big straw hat to keep the wind from making it follow the fate of her packages. In a flash, she was going up the street, packages precariously perched on her arms, her dress swirling about her legs.

The people on the boardwalk gave her a wide berth so she could pass more easily, though no one offered any assistance.

"That Miss Darlene is something else," Dan said to no one in particular. He had seen the admiring glances she received from the men of the town and the envious looks from the women.

"That she is," Archie replied as he watched her walk, held head high, parasol jaunting at a playful angle. Occasionally, she would look back at Dan as if to invite him to walk with her.

"Miss Darlene Foote comes from the South," Scott said, as if he was the town historian. "Virginia, I believe. Her father owns the town. And what he doesn't own, no one wants. She lives in the big white mansion at the end of town. The stage will go right by it on the way out."

"You two can stand around here working your gums overtime all you want," Archie stated, heading for the saloon, "But I've a hankering for something wet."

Dan turned and looked at his friend wearily, hands on hips.

"I know how you feel about drinking, Dan, but my stomach is queasy, and I think a drink would help it out. Purely medicinal, of course."

Dan gave the receding back of Miss Darlene one more look, turned on his heels and followed in Archie's wake.

Dodging wagons, buggies and horsemen, the men walked across the dusty street to the saloon and nimbly mounted the boardwalk.

The words *Wheel Inn* were painted on a sign hanging from the false front of the wooden building that called itself a saloon. Large, green glass windows were situated on either side of the swinging doors. Inside, one could hear the tinkling of a piano and raucous laughter.

Dan thought back to the last time he was in a saloon with Larry. They ended up sitting in the snow. He hoped this visit would not be a repeat of his last. It seemed every time he went into a saloon, a fight invariably broke out.

Archie barreled through the swinging doors and immediately headed toward the bar. Dan stopped to let his eyes become adjusted to the bright light and let his eyes roam the interior.

Nothing out of the ordinary. He sighed in relief.

The saloon was hopping. All walks of life could be seen, including patrons, miners, cowboys, sheep and cattlemen. A banker, silversmith, lawyer and a cowboy were involved in a game of poker near the back. A bluish cloud of mingled pipe, cigarette and cigar smoke hovered above their heads. The tinkling of glasses being filled added to the overall gaiety.

Archie pushed his hat up, sauntered to the bar, placed his boot upon the foot rail, and ordered a beer. He pushed his derby higher on his head, allowing the few strands of brown hair to get air.

Dan followed Archie, where he had wedged himself between two burly miners. Dan waited patiently. When one of the miners moved for a second, Dan quickly took his place.

“What’ll be?” the bartender asked, polishing the bar with a damp rag.

“A cold beer,” Archie said with gusto, looking at Dan with a grin as he tipped his hat to one of the barmaids. She walked past them with a swing in her hips, balancing a tray of full beer mugs and popcorn.

The bartender went to a spigot and pulled down a lever, quickly filling a mug with the frothy liquid and drew a wooden ladle across the top of the mug to remove any excess foam. Then he took the beer to Archie and slid it across the counter as he looked questionably at Dan.

Dan knew it wasn’t the smartest idea to do this, but he was starting to feel queasy as well. Maybe it was the rocking of the train, but his stomach was starting to cramp.

Looking the bartender straight in the eye, he said, “Milk, please.” He got the expected results.

“Oh, oh,” Archie whispered to Dan. “Here it comes, as sure as God made little green apples.”

The bar got as quiet as a tomb. He could hear the drip from a leaky bar spigot. Miners stopped talking, gamblers quit gambling and dancers quit shuffling their feet.

“Milk?” the bartender asked in a louder voice than Dan thought necessary. He stopped polishing the counter and glared at Dan. When he nodded, the bartender shrugged his shoulders and started down the bar, all the time muttering to himself.

Everyone’s attention was on him now. One of the gamblers looked amused; a few of the bar girls snickered. Archie simply stared at him in disbelief.

One of the miners walked over to Dan and tapped him on the shoulder.

“Look, friend,” Dan replied softly, not turning around. “I want a glass of milk. If your tap means you want one too, fine and dandy. If it doesn’t . . .”

The miner clamped his hand down hard on Dan’s shoulder, swung him around and took aim at his head. Ducking the blow intended for his jaw, he swung low and planted his fist firmly into the miner’s belly.

“Awfully soft for a miner.”

A pair of hands grabbed Dan by the throat from the side. A glance into the bar mirror revealed a giant of a man. The smells emitting from him didn't make Dan's stomach feel any better. *Must be a muleskinner.*

Dan placed his feet firmly on the floor and gave himself a great shove backwards. The sudden move caught the muleskinner to be caught off guard; he loosened his hold on Dan's throat. Dan quickly spun around and swung his fist, landing it squarely on the unprotected nose of his foe. The Titan quickly placed his hands over his nose; blood flowed freely between his fingers. He took a few steps backwards. This gave Dan the opportunity to move in closer. He immediately began hammering blows into the man's immense belly. This had the desired effect; the man crumbled crashed to the floor like a towering fir tree. The impact caused the sawdust on the floor to rise and to stir the air. The odious odor caused by the fallen muleskinner wafted up to Dan's nostrils.

Wrinkling his nose at the smell, Dan looked about for Archie. The barmaids had joined in the fray. One had her hand caught in the hair of another as her opponent tried to rake her fingernails down her face. The women fell to wallow in the sawdust.

About that time, Dan caught a fist to the jaw that caused him to see stars. Shaking his head to clear it, he spied Archie in the middle of the dance floor. He was lock-stepping with another miner; the two were furiously slugging it out. In the split second that his opponent took a breath, Archie made his move. He jumped onto the back of a miner. Twisting and turning, the miner tried to dislodge Archie from his back. Finally, the miner's movement caused Archie to fly off and go skidding across the floor on his knees. He came to a halt in front of the bar.

Archie groped about with his right hand and felt the hardness of a spittoon. Picking up the metal object, Archie swung the container at his attacker. The receptacle smacked the miner full in the face, spilling its filthy contents on another miner sitting at a nearby table.

With a roar, the miner jumped up, sending his chair over backwards, and swung a glacier-size fist at Archie. The fist connected with a bung starter; the bartender was swinging at anyone in the near vicinity. The miner's fist and the bung starter met with a resounding crash.

The miner turned to the bartender and roared, clutching his injured hand, and advanced on him with murder in his eyes. The hapless bartender quickly reached under the bar and brought up a sawed-off shotgun. Within seconds, he had pulled both hammers into firing position.

The miner took one look at the shotgun, turned and staggered from the bar.

"Smart move on his part," Dan said softly.

The sudden appearance of the greener and the ominous sound of its hammers being pulled back caused everyone to stop in their tracks. Fists were quickly unfurled, chairs were quickly overturned, and the piano player began his musical ensemble again.

Dan and Archie stumbled outside. At least they had made it out alive, where they found a bench to sit on.

Dan had one eye closed, a bleeding lip and bruised knuckles. Archie ended with two black eyes, and his nose was turned up at an awkward angle. The knees of his trousers were torn where he had skidded across the floor. Together, they were a sorry looking sight.

"That bartender saved our lives," Archie said, rubbing his jaw while opening and shutting his mouth. He reached and pulled the flaps of his trousers together.

"That he did." Dan moved his tongue to check on which teeth might be missing.

"Now's the time I truly need Sadie." Dan nodded, feeling sheepish.

Just then, the stage pulled to a screeching halt in front of the ticket office. Dan grabbed Archie by the arm; the two of them hurried across the street to the waiting stage.

TWENTY-TWO

Glory sat at a green felt-top table with three men in the *Wayfarer* in an empty room next to her office. She nodded to the men as she shuffled the cards. The game was draw poker.

“Nothing wild,” she said, dealing. “Except maybe the dealer.” The men smiled.

They were all eager to play Glory. They had heard that she was the best woman's poker player in the West, so of course, each intended to walk away with her money in their pockets.

Like vultures, their watchful eyes never left her face. All three were poised to pounce upon her the moment she made a mistake. It was the name of the game – survival of the fittest.

Glory wasn't worried. Sung Kim stood behind her. His coal black eyes never wavered from her three opponents for an instant. His ominous presence reassured Glory of her safety. She was no longer afraid when she took her daily strolls through the roughest parts of town. Kim had only to send people a piercing glance from his ebony eyes and immediately a safe path would open to them.

To the left of Glory sat a railroad executive, followed clockwise by a banker and a druggist. The executive had a three-piece suit, as did the banker. All three had watch fobs at their vest pockets.

The druggist had his fob fastened to a pocket watch and a small vial of opium. When the betting got heavy, he would turn his head to the wall, pull out the vial and take a quick snort, replacing the vial as if nothing had happened. The others would smile condescendingly and resume their game. Each had their own little vices.

TWENTY-THREE

"I, for one, aim to get me some shuteye," Archie said as he tried his best to get more comfortable on the lurching stagecoach.

"Me too," Dan responded, moving around on the seat of the jolting coach. He wondered where Linda Bockmiller had gotten off to, seeing as she was not a passenger. That gal was pretty, in a way. He smiled as he thought about her. Then Glory's image would appear and blow away any thoughts of Linda. He had to get over that woman someday.

Since they were the only occupants of the stage, Dan placed his boots on Archie's seat. Archie did the same while pulling down the shades to keep the dust at bay. They pulled their hats down over their eyes and dozed off, their sonorous snoring working in harmony with the cadence of the horses.

The Jehu leaned back in his perch at the top of the stagecoach and let his muscles relax. The reins of the horses dangled loosely in his hands. These cayuses had been over the trail so much that they probably could navigate it in their sleep.

He was glad that the weather had turned out nice after all. Gone were the snow and mud; the road was returning to normal, dry and dusty. The stagecoach driver gently flicked the reins, causing the horses to pick up the pace and stir more dust. Grinning, he pulled his bandana up, covering his mouth.

After an uneventful trip, the stagecoach pulled into the Tulsa depot. The last quarter of a mile, the Jehu cracked his long bull-hide whip over the horses' heads. He always put on a show for the townspeople. The charging steeds, nostrils flaring, sweat glistening from their bodies, came to a shuddering halt. As the coach swayed on the leather straps, swirls of dust settled on horses and passengers. Everything else within a fifty-foot radius was also covered with a fine layer of powder, resembling a patina covering antiquities.

As Dan and Archie alighted from the coach, the Jehu handed down a strongbox and a bag of mail to the waiting hands of the ticket agent. The two weary passengers walked across the street to the railroad station.

Tulsa was a booming town. Anything bigger than Mud Flats was an improvement to Dan. It was fast becoming a place with all the facilities of a modern city; fire and police protection, water, haberdasheries and restaurants. The red-light district included saloons and gambling establishments, which lined either side of the street. Houses of ill repute, catering to the jaded desires of some of the townspeople, were also in evidence.

Dan watched with amusement as Archie openly stared at the sights of the city. They walked for a block before Archie spied a food vendor.

"Here," Archie said, pointing to the sidewalk merchant, "Let's grab a quick bite to eat."

"I don't know, Archie." Dan was thinking of their last meal and the resulting fight in the saloon. "You remember the last time?"

"Sure do," Archie said. "This time, it'll be different. I don't care if my stomach gets to hurting something awfully bad. I'm most definitely not going into another saloon for a long time." Dan chuckled.

After doing their business with the food vendor, the men turned back toward the train station. Archie ran beside Dan, putting forth his best effort to keep up while the contents of his sandwich dripped from his mouth.

The depot was on the outskirts of the thriving metropolis. Mule-driven wagons, hansoms and other means of conveyance were parked at the curb in front of the railroad station. Farming tools, including plows, hay rakes and spools of the new barbed wire were situated at one end of

the loading platform. Men selling confectioner wares, newsboys hawking the paper, and the general mass of humanity added to the din that greeted the two men as they arrived at the depot.

"There's the train we're supposed to catch," Dan shouted, grabbing Archie by the arm and making a mad dash toward the train.

"It looks like it's leaving!" Archie yelled to Dan's back breathlessly.

The two men hurried toward the train, artfully dodging the passengers in the throng. Dan jumped on the caboose steps and turned to hold out his hand for Archie. With great effort, Dan pulled Archie aboard.

"Almost didn't make it," Archie breathed hoarsely, trying to catch his breath. He reached down and pulled his suitcase onto the platform to a more secure position.

"Yeah," Dan replied, breathlessly. "But we did!"

The two straightened and started for the door. Suddenly a shot rang out. Dan quickly dropped to his knees and whirled while pulling his gun from the holster. Archie dove for the safety of the handrail at the end of the caboose.

"What . . ." Dan looked toward the direction of the sound. He saw a crowd of people hiding behind any cover they could find. All were looking at the railroad station where there seemed to be a commotion.

In just a moment, men in blue uniforms, tall black hats with stars emblazoned on the front, emerged from the station. Their prisoner was handcuffed. The man looked as if he were lost. Two of the policemen rushed their prisoner down the ramp to a waiting paddy wagon. Once they had him securely locked in the wagon, it took off with bells clanging. The wagon quickly disappeared around the corner.

Dan and Archie watched as the train noisily chugged away from the station, cutting their view off abruptly.

"That fella didn't look right to me," Dan said, replacing his gun. "He had a faraway look in his eyes."

"Or, like we say back home," Archie said, glad that Dan was there with him, "he is one brick shy of a full load."

Dan shook his head and started into the railroad car. Archie followed, pausing long enough to quickly glance around the interior for some empty seats. He wanted to rest his weary bones for a while.

They saw at once that the car was almost full. Two cattlemen, judging by their boots and wide-brimmed Stetson hats, were busy discussing the current prices of cattle. A farmer in bib overalls, clodhoppers and buttoned up blue cotton shirt sat at the end of the car. A drummer with his wares situated at his feet was unaware of the commotion around him. A group of foreigners from India with their white turbans occupied the near end of the car.

Dan placed his carpetbag by his feet as he slid into an empty seat. Archie sat beside him after placing his suitcase in the overhead rack, shoving a few papers to the side.

Letting his breath out fast, Dan slumped in his hardwood seat and placed his boots on the seat across from them. Archie followed suit.

"I'll tell you," Dan said. "I think I'll rest for a while. I'm still sore from the saloon fight."

"Me too," Archie said. "I think I'm too old for this kind of horseplay. My back feels as if it is twisted like some old gnarled oak tree. I've muscles hurting so badly that I never knew existed."

Dan was envious of the way some people could drop off to sleep on a moment's notice, as Linda had done previously. Moving around a little, he was finally able to start his slumber easily. He smiled at the thought of seeing Glory again.

TWENTY-FOUR

The men were watching Glory through a haze of bluish smoke, hovering like a cloud as she dealt. The only furniture was a table, mahogany sideboard and a long brown sofa.

"It's hot and stuffy in here," Mort said. He moved toward the window and tried to open it. It wouldn't budge. Mort turned to the others and raised his shoulders in a shrug of defeat. David and Cletus went to help. The three of them could not raise it.

"Kim," Glory asked, removing her shawl from her creamy white shoulders and laying it over the back of the sofa, "would you please be a dear and open that window?"

Kim looked at Glory with worship in his eyes. He went to the window and raised the sash with very little effort, his muscles rippling on his arms and legs.

Cool air from the street flowed into the stuffy room. When he turned around, Kim noticed one of the players hurriedly turn back to the table.

He was the one Miss Glory had said was a drug addict. Even now, Kim could see the start of a glassy look in the man's eyes.

Glory was elated with the looks on the men's faces as they watched the display of Kim's strength.

Mort loosened his tie and opened the collar of his shirt. Reaching into his jacket pocket, he pulled out a black cigar, rolling with his hands while savoring the rich smell of Havana tobacco. Then he took a small penknife and cut off the end of the cigar. It was a ritual enjoyed only by a few. When he had the end of it glowing to his satisfaction, he proceeded to draw in the smoke and blew great plumes of the bluish vapors into the air.

Cletus poured himself a glass of whiskey from the sideboard. He gestured to the others, offering to get them as drink, but they shook their heads.

Kim was now standing behind Glory with his arms crossed over his mighty chest, oblivious to the sweat trickling down his massive neck to form circles underneath his bulging arms.

The four had been playing poker for most of the night. So far, David was ahead by ten thousand dollars. He'd made in three hours what it would have taken him a year to amass. He smiled inwardly at his good fortune; it would do him no good to gloat in this company.

"Well?" David asked, grinning at everyone and moving his chair closer to the table. "Are we ready to play some more poker?"

"I'm ready," Mort said, feeling more confident now that he had surreptitiously seen the druggist's opium supply had grown smaller. He was going to win the hand. All the opium in the world was not going to help the little pharmacist any.

"Me too," Cletus replied, growing reckless. This time he'd have to study the people more closely. He replenished his drink.

"Just a moment," Glory responded, wiping her throat of perspiration. "Let's make this the last hand. I'm tired; I'm sure all of you are too."

She looked at her opponents. Mort nodded in agreement. Cletus, who was figuring on winning heavily, nodded yes. David, visions of wealth dancing like sugarplums in his head, also acquiesced.

"Before the cards are dealt," Glory said, looking at each man slowly. "I've an announcement to make."

She sat back and accepted Mort's offer of a light for her cheroot. After taking a lungful of the smoke, she slowly exhaled. Then she reached up and brushed a lock of her red hair from her eyes.

Glory had learned that it is best to keep men waiting. The wait seemed to bear her out; the

men were looking worried.

“As you all know,” Glory said, smoke from her cheroot mingling with the other smoke in the room. “I’ve been feeling poorly lately. I’ve decided to sweeten the pot. But before I explain, I’ve a question for you, Cletus.”

His interest was piqued. The banker glanced at her and nodded.

“How much would you say the *Wayfarer* is worth?”

“Offhand, quite a bundle. Why?”

“I’m thinking about selling it, but you all know how I love to take chances,” she said, as she leaned back in her chair and took another cheroot from a nearby humidior. Mort aptly struck a lucifer and lit it for her again. Through the haze of smoke generated by the cheroot, she looked shrewdly at Cletus. “Well?”

Mort always wanted a place like this... a chance to get away from the railroad and be his own boss. Of course, having free reign to play poker any time he liked would be an added bonus.

David believed that he would no longer be tied to a habit if he could get his hands on this place. Visions of wealth began to do a small dance in his head.

“If I was appraising the *Wayfarer*,” Cletus replied, leaning back in his chair and making a steeple with his hands on the table. “I’m quite sure my bank would offer at least two hundred thousand dollars. Certainly nothing less.”

Each sat up straighter in their chairs. Mort knew the *Wayfarer* was a moneymaker, but he had no idea it was this good.

Glory slowly looked at her fellow players. “I don’t want anyone to think I’m trying to buy the pot, but I do want to sweeten it some. Therefore, I’m placing the deed to the *Wayfarer* in it. Winner take all!”

TWENTY-FIVE

The “friend” Linda Bockmiller had scheduled to meet was another Secret Service agent. They had planned to get together on the outskirts of Tulsa. She had received a telegram informing her of the meeting place – in a grove of cottonwood trees. When she rented the horse, the livery owner gave her directions.

“You can't miss it,” the owner had said, pointing to the north. “It's near the railroad tracks. Just stay in sight of the tracks for two miles; the cottonwood grove is off to the right side, by a gully.”

Linda waved to him as she rode her horse at a canter from the stable. It was getting late. She hoped to be able to see the grove before it got too dark. Knowing time was of the essence, she applied her heels to the mount.

As Linda approached the grove, she noticed a buggy parked underneath a tree, the horse was contentedly munching grass near the tree. She rode up to the buggy and dismounted. She could now spot a shadowy figure outlined in the moonlight amidst the trees. Tying her reins to the back wheel of the buggy, she advanced.

“Pardon me; are you the person I was supposed to meet?” No movement. Cautiously, Linda reached into her purse and pulled her derringer out.

“Get your hands up!” she exclaimed as she swung around to the side of the buggy.

Then she noticed the knife, the hilt of it protruding from the middle of the man's chest. His eyes were widened in surprise, his mouth set in a grimace of pain.

Quickly, she felt for a pulse. Finding none, she replaced her derringer in her purse before reaching inside of the victim's coat pocket to retrieve his wallet. She found a card that read:

*United States of America
Jeffrey A. Welker
Treasury Department
Secret Service*

He must have been close to something important or else why would he have been killed?

Checking the buggy for evidence, she found a satchel containing numerous papers and documents. All were of the mundane variety; nothing to tie into her case. She hoisted herself into the buggy and began a cursory check, finding nothing. She glanced at the ground and saw three cigarette butts lying next to the buggy and three broken lucifers. These matches had been broken precisely in the middle. The killer and his victim knew each other. Evidently, they had sat in the buggy long enough for the killer to have smoked three cigarettes.

What had they been discussing?

Linda looked around the murder site, dropping on her knees and running her palms over the grass, feeling for any tracks the killer or killers made.

“More than one,” she reasoned, as she found the tracks of two horses.

The light was quickly waning, so she ran to her horse, mounted and headed for town, urging the animal into a gallop. *Maybe I can still catch the train in time.*

Her horse weaved in and out of the nearby woods. Finally, she saw a straight stretch of road and gave the mount its head. Up ahead, she could see the water tower of the train station.

Linda left her mount at the livery and dashed across the street to the train depot, dodging a fast-moving paddy wagon in an effort to catch the train. She arrived just in time to see the caboose of the train vanish around a bend in the road.

Thinking fast, she ran back to the livery and rented another horse. Two minutes later, she was riding after the disappearing train. She gave the horse its head; she just might make it to the next train junction in time to board. The wind whistled through her black hair as she hurtled down the deserted country road.

* * *

Dan and Archie reached St. Louis in the late afternoon. They got off the train at opposite ends. Dan had explained to Archie that he had to meet someone alone when they arrived. Archie readily agreed. He told Dan of a good hotel, not far from the depot, where he was sure that he could get them accommodations.

Dan was now standing with a current copy of the Police Gazette under his arm that he had bought off a young boy at the depot.

He stood patiently for over an hour, with no results. Sighing, he took off in search of Archie. His friend had mentioned the name of the hotel; Dan headed in that direction.

As he started across the street, a ruddy looking man watched him with an air of interest. The man was dressed in a shabby brown topcoat, high-water shoes and a derby hat, all torn in so many places one would wonder why he wore it. His appearance was shoddy, but his meerschaum pipe spoke of gentry. He began to shadow Dan.

The mystery man followed Dan, a trail of smoke from his pipe wafting behind him. Whenever Dan would turn around, he'd quickly hide in doorways so as not to be seen.

Dan went to the hotel's front desk and asked the clerk about Archie. While he was waiting, he noticed a man hidden in the shadows smoking a pipe. Dan told the clerk he was going to go to the coffee shop and be sure to tell Archie of his whereabouts. Not wanting to alert his stalker, Dan strolled leisurely toward the coffee shop.

When he arrived, he looked for a table by the window that also had a good view of the doorway. He found one and sat. Placing his carpetbag by his feet, he took the papers he had picked up at the front desk and spread them on the table. Then he picked up a menu and started to read it. In a moment, he lowered the menu a bit to take a peek at the person who was so interested in him.

Archie sauntered into the coffee shop, looked about, and saw Dan. He walked to the table and pulled out a chair opposite his friend.

"Dan," Archie breathed heavily, moving his elbows amidst the papers. "I'm glad I caught you before . . ."

"Be quiet," Dan whispered, holding the paper up so their observer could not see him talking. "Not now!"

"Well, excuse the devil out of me." When he tried to speak again, Dan silenced him with a withering look.

"I seem to have found a watchdog," Dan said in a whisper from behind his menu. Archie jumped slightly in his seat, tensing. "Don't look around. He might see you. When I get up from the table, I want you to look around and see if you can spot him. Right now, he is hiding behind that potted plant by the door."

"How'd you spot him?" Archie was trying his best to look nonchalant as he glanced around the room.

"It's still somewhat warm outside," Dan said. "I thought it rather peculiar for a man to be wearing a heavy coat in this weather. I think my little friend has been following me from the train station. At least, that is where I first picked up the smell of his pipe."

“Odd,” Archie replied. He was beginning to like this cloak and dagger business more all the time. Dan had not told him about any spies; only that it would be dangerous. Archie assumed there would be spies. He was up to it. He puffed up his chest and tried very hard not to be noticed.

“Archie,” Dan said, putting his menu down and rising, “here I go. Be sure to keep your eyes peeled out for our adversary.”

He hoped Archie was up to the task. Dan arose from his chair and started toward the stairs. He ascended them in a hurry. He didn't cotton to any surprises right about now. All he wanted was to finish this business and hurry back to his ranch... the quicker the better.

Archie watched as their phantom left his position behind the plant and started up the stairs.

Archie followed the man to the stairway. He looked up in time to see him disappear around a corner at the top of the stairs. He moved forward rapidly in hopes of catching up with Dan and his pursuer. He chuckled at the thought of the hunter becoming the hunted.

At the top of the stairs, Archie stood, perplexed. He glanced quickly up and down the empty hallway. He could see the window clearly at the end of the hallway.

There was no one there.

TWENTY-SIX

"Ready, gentlemen?" Glory asked, seemingly in no rush. She had poured a snifter of brandy and set it down at the edge of the table. A humidor holding her favorite cheroots was to her left.

"The deed?" David looked at the others for support.

"Yes, my dear, we need to see the deed," Cletus enjoined, avarice overtaking his features.

Glory looked at her opponents and smiled, amused. Cletus was outright hungry and David looked flushed. Mort looked at her resignedly and shrugged his shoulders.

She arose from her chair and went to the wall safe, twirled the combination, and reached in to retrieve a piece of paper. Shutting the safe, she returned and placed the paper in the middle of the table, nodding thanks to Kim for pulling her chair out for her.

"There's the deed, gentlemen," she said as she moved her chair closer to the table. "Are we ready to play now?"

The men nodded yes and pulled their chairs closer to the table. Mort got a glass of whiskey and returned the decanter to the sideboard. Cletus looked at Mort over the rim of his glass.

"I propose a toast. Here's to Miss Glory. May she always be understanding to us poor men!"

"Here! Here!" There was a clinking of glasses. Mort slowly sipped his drink; David drank half of his, while Cletus threw back his head and swallowed it all.

Glory shuffled the pasteboards and dealt the cards with one fluid motion of her dainty but agile hands.

The game was five-card stud: four cards up and one down, the hole card. The deal started with a jack of spades down for a hole card to Mort, three of diamonds up. The hole card for Cletus was a seven of clubs and the ten of hearts up. David drew a four of spades down, with the queen of hearts up. For herself, Glory dealt a jack of diamonds down, with seven of diamonds facing up.

"Queen beats," Glory said, looking at David.

"I bet one thousand dollars," David said, placing one blue chip in the middle of the table. He had eyes only for the white piece of paper in the pot. "This is to keep the little boys out. Pardon me, Miss Glory, I didn't mean you."

He quickly turned, retrieved his vial and took the last snort of his powdery opiate. Breathing heavily, David turned back to the table and smiled. He was ready for anything, come what may. The others just looked at him with some sort of apprehension.

"David," Glory replied, arching her eyebrows. "I'll see you and I'll bump you another five hundred." She smiled as she placed a red chip beside her blue one in the pot.

"And another five hundred dollars," Cletus said, throwing another blue chip to join his other in the growing pot. He twiddled with his empty glass; considered refilling it.

"I'll add another five hundred and call," Mort boomed as he sat back and raised his glass to finish off his drink.

The other players threw in their chips. The pot now stood at ten thousand dollars. David's eyes were starting to gleam. Cletus sat back with an amused look on his face. Mort blew a smoke ring into the air.

"Excuse me," Mort said. He poured himself another drink. He noticed Cletus's empty glass. "Anyone else?"

The men nodded. Mort replenished their drinks and returned the decanter to the sideboard. Turning to the table, he pulled out his chair and sat down. He looked down at his cards and smiled to himself. Then he placed his cigar in his mouth and started to puff heavily on it. A great deal of smoke filled the room.

"All bets in?" Glory asked, waving her hand to make the smoke whirl away from her side of the table. "Mort, please?"

"Oh, my dear, I'm truly sorry," Mort said, extinguishing his cigar and helping Glory to fan the air of the noxious smoke.

"Thank you," she said, flashing a genuine smile at him. Mort always treated her like the daughter he never had. At times it was nice, but tonight was different. Be that as it may. She glanced one more time at her hole card and picked the cards up to deal them. She planned on winning tonight.

The bets were made. Glory began to deal. Mort received a jack of hearts. Cletus got a two of spades, David, a four of hearts. She dealt herself a ten of diamonds.

"Looks like you got the bet, Mort," Glory said while sipping her snifter of brandy.

Mort, seeing his hole card, smiled at the others and promptly bet five hundred dollars. Cletus's hole card was nothing to get excited about, but he stayed in the game. David had a pair of fours, one hidden. He shrugged his shoulders and placed a chip in the pot. Glory had a possible straight flush going, so she increased the ante another five hundred.

"You people," Mort said, clearing his throat. He was sure that he was going to win the pot, but he wanted to throw the others off their game. "I'm aware of your ploy, but it'll not do you any good this time."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Mort," Cletus retorted hotly as he tugged at his shirt collar. He was starting to feel a tad guilty about having a good hand. In just a moment, he would walk away a winner.

"Me neither," David quipped, trying to hide the excitement building up in him at the prospect of winning the final game. He could already see himself as the victor. He smiled at his opponents.

"I do." Glory was talking to the others, but she looked hard at Mort. "He thinks that we're trying to sucker him into the pot in hopes of him folding. I'll tell you the truth, Mort; no one here is trying to make you extend yourself more than humanly possible. Right, gentlemen?"

Cletus and David nodded in agreement. Glory noticed that David's face was more flushed.

She wondered if it was the opium kicking in. He was starting to bet recklessly, heedless of his cards. Either that, or he had a better hand than she'd first thought.

Glory quickly dealt the cards one more time. Mort got another jack. He now had three. Cletus watched as another club fell in front of him, this time a ten. He now had two tens... a strong possibility of two pair, or maybe another ten, for three tens. David saw a third four settle on his cards. He had three fours to bet. Glory dealt herself an eight of diamonds. Together, with the seven and ten and the jack hiding, a straight flush seemed to loom on the horizon.

Mort thought three jacks were not something to scoff at. And two were one-eyed – a spade and a heart. He was extremely proud of his hand.

Cletus groaned inwardly at not bettering his hand, but there still was a chance for him. He may be able to squeeze another ten, or possibly a seven or two. That'd make him two pair... nothing shaggy about that.

David was elated at having another four. He fidgeted as he envisioned wealth, stature and longevity. *I can just see myself now. People will be falling all over themselves in an effort to please me.*

Glory successfully hid her elation as she looked at the cards in her hand. She was more in line for a straight flush. She quickly willed her hands to stop trembling. She never bet on an inside straight, but this time felt different. She was starting to get an erotic feeling at the prospects of winning the last hand.

"Last card, gentlemen," Glory said. "Bet 'em like you got 'em."

"I bet one thousand dollars," Mort said, his face flushed. If he won it would be good-bye to his wife... and hello to having a life of his own.

"I see your thousand and raise you five hundred more," Cletus replied, small beads of perspiration forming on his brow. He knew he was taking a chance, but he hadn't gotten this far by not taking chances. Little drops of moisture started to slowly roll down the side of his neck.

"You're covered," David said, certain that he'd soon have a ready buyer for his shop. Everything was turning up roses. This hand would make him or break him.

"I'll call," Glory said softly. She was afraid the men would notice the flush on her cheeks.

She dealt Mort a three, which gave him a full house. He puffed on his cigar more voraciously, the end glowing like a red beacon. He was oblivious to the great cloud of smoke hanging in the air.

All it takes is guts, Cletus thought. He had them tonight for sure. The banker turned up his card; a seven. He had two pair. He had won bigger pots on a lot less.

David's face became more flushed as he looked at his own card; a queen. Full house. He felt a rush as if he had just taken a large amount of opium. His arms and legs began to tingle with excitement. Such a feeling should not be lost on anyone. David leered at Glory. *Now, I've got you!*

Glory had received a nine of diamonds. It made her hand complete. A straight flush, jack high! Only once before had she seen this hand dealt to someone, and that had been a long time ago, in a faraway place by the sea. Now she had the winning hand.

The four players looked at each other studiously. Mort's eyes were slits while he took another drink. Cletus was smiling smugly. David could barely contain himself. He felt like getting up and shouting to the world of his good fortune.

"Miss Glory," Mort said, hunching forward to lay his cards down on the table. "I'm sure the other gentlemen would agree that you can withdraw your last wager. After all, to bet everything you own is a bit much." He extinguished his cigar. Only a foolhardy person would bet their livelihood when it was not necessary. Then again, no one ever said Glory was a fool. He sat back in his chair to watch the scene unfold.

"Speak for yourself, Mort," Cletus snapped. "I say the bet stands as it's placed." He poured more whiskey into his glass. He'd seen deals fall through before. He even made deals fail himself. But this time, the offer was unbelievable. The woman either thought a lot of her hand or she was bluffing. So he'd just call her bluff!

"It's up to you, David," Mort intoned. "I'm sure that together we can override Cletus's objection."

"Well . . ." David leaned forward in his chair, almost spilling his drink. "I hate to seem uncivilized, but I do believe in equal payment. If Glory wants to bet with the big boys, then, by thunder, she should be able to pay up as the big boys do! She'd hold all of us accountable to any bargain we made with her."

The pharmacist sat back and looked at Glory with a smile. He was more in control of himself now. Even the pain in his finger from the boil was receding.

David wondered how often a man got a chance to come into more money than he has ever seen... a prime piece of real estate like the Wayfarer. Not often. *This's a rare opportunity. Besides, she may be bluffing.* He'd show her who the new man in town is. Hah! He may even let her bask in the glory of knowing him. What an irony – Glory basking in *his* glory."

"Isn't that right, Glory?" David looked at the woman with a strange gleam in his eyes. He wanted more than anything to see her humbled before him and the others. What luck! The high

and all-powerful Miss Glory B. Stahl would soon be graveling at his feet; or at the very least, she'd be brought down by someone as lowly as she viewed him.

Glory nodded. She looked calmly at her opponents and settled in her chair. She raised the humidor lid and extracted a cheroot. When Mort lit it for her, she thanked him as if her whole livelihood weren't hanging in the balance. Sitting back, she inhaled the smoke, letting some of it trickle from her nostrils. She blew the rest into the already heavy-laden air. Then she reached up and patted her red hair, for she felt a loose curl on the right side of her head.

She figured on Cletus being the hotheaded one. He looked like the first who would fold under pressure. He was a blustering old fool.

Mort, on the other hand, was secure in his position at the railroad. She had heard of his marital problems, but everyone who was married seemed to have those.

Who didn't have problems? *She* certainly did. Hers were big, but at least surmountable. The government was breathing heavily down her neck, but she believed things would work out all right. And if they didn't? Well, she'd been poor before, so it would be nothing new to her.

David disappointed her. She figured him to be sweet on her. At first, she had flirted back. But tonight he had shown his true colors.

What a fool she'd have been to pursue their relationship further. She could just envision herself tied to him. She shook her head to clear it of all unruly thoughts. Oh, well. *As they say, the day of reckoning is now at hand.*

"I believe David's right, gentlemen," Glory said as she started to spread her cards. Mort placed his hand over hers.

"Just a moment, my dear," he said solicitously, looking at the others with a gleam in his eye. "Are you completely sure you want to do this thing?"

Mort knew his hand was the winning one, but he had a fondness for Glory; a fondness his wife would never understand, let alone accept. He had no children with Helen, and Glory was like a daughter to him. He knew he should not be so overly protective of her, but he couldn't help himself.

Oh well, it'll all come out in the wash tomorrow.

Those at the table watched with interest as the scene unfolded before them. Cletus stared at them with greed on his eyes, but David was worse. He breathed heavily at the prospect of revealing his hand. In his mind, he was already spending his newfound wealth.

"Of course, Mort," Glory said softly as she laid her hand on top of his and gave it a gentle squeeze. "I'm a big girl now."

"Then please, my dear, go ahead," Mort winked at Glory and removed his hand.

Glory spread her hand to reveal a straight flush, jack of diamonds high. The look on the men's faces was something to behold. Glory sat back and took her time to watch.

"I've been hoodwinked... by a woman, no less!" Mort said with surprise and amusement. "Live and learn, I always say."

Cletus stared at her cards in disbelief. *His* hand was supposed to be the winning one. Then he grinned, took a last drink of his whiskey and slid back his chair. *You win some, you lose some.* He smiled and went to the sideboard to replenish his drink.

David looked twice to make sure he was seeing right. His dreams of becoming rich had gone up in smoke. No amount of opium would help now. He was slowly sinking into a pit of despair.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Linda Bockmiller reached the junction before the train did. Quickly, she jumped off her horse and ran to the small shack that housed the brakeman for the train. It was a little tarpaper building thrown up carelessly.

She hurriedly explained to the man her need to be on that train. When she mentioned the government, he was finally convinced. The brakeman pulled out a turnip pocket watch and flipped the cover open. He looked down at his timepiece, and looked at her skeptically.

"The trains usually don't slow or even stop. This is just a switch-off, where the train would stop and unhitch any unneeded cars. But you're in luck this time, Miss, for the train is scheduled to slow down, at least. It usually flies by here." The brakeman rubbed his chin. "I can't hold the train for you, but it may slow down enough that you can try to jump on her." As an afterthought, he added, "I'll tell you how to board her."

"Tell me how," she said, trying not to show her fear.

The man looked at her with a bit more respect. "Stand by the old water tank. When the train slows, jump on the caboose. There is a rocky ledge on a small knoll that you could use as sort of a springboard. Just don't fall, missy," he cautioned, getting up from his chair and walking to the door.

"I won't," she promised hopefully, following him out the door. For once Linda was glad that her father had taught her gymnastics. The many hours she had spent at the parallel bars were going to pay off. She was in tiptop shape. A sort of exhilaration coursed through her body; outside of making love, this was the closest thing to excitement she had experienced in years.

Linda was hesitant about seeking help from Dan and Archie. She did not know them well enough. Now, with the agent dead, she didn't know who to trust. Maybe *I shouldn't let them know I've boarded*, she thought. *I can always catch up with them later.*

She tensed as she heard the roaring of the train as it approached. She waited with baited breath for the train to slow at the junction. She had already removed her shoes and socks, tying them around her neck with a piece of old rope that she had found at the side of the trail. Then, looking around, she flexed her leg muscles and rubbed her legs briskly to prepare for the jump.

Finally, the train appeared. She had only one chance. As it slowed, she took a deep breath and started to run for the ledge. Her leg muscles seemed to be made of steel. As if her legs were coiled springs, she leaped upward.

Linda easily made it to the platform of the caboose. Heaving a sigh of relief, she slumped against the bulkhead of the car, gasping for breath. She was getting lightheaded.

Perhaps she wasn't in such good shape after all. She took a deep breath in, letting it out slowly. Soon, she was able to achieve a more modest decorum and a tenacious hold on the caboose's handrail. Her legs were wobbly as she stood shakily on the platform.

"Pardon me, miss?" the conductor asked, arising from a chair beside the window as she entered the car. "You're not allowed in here."

Linda explained her quest and showed her credentials to the conductor. When he wavered, she said, "I will not cause a disturbance on the train. I am traveling incognito." She batted her eyes at him.

He nodded in acquiescence. "I certainly believe in helping out Uncle Sam all that I can. There's a pot of coffee and some sandwiches there on the table. Help yourself while I make my rounds. When we pull into the station, I'll see to you getting off the train safely and quietly. Until then, I suggest you take it easy and enjoy the ride."

He touched the brim of his cap to her and went out the door, shutting it softly behind him.

Linda moved to the table and checked out the fare: corned beef sandwiches, a roll of cheese and a small bottle of something she could not identify. She sat and picked out a sandwich, munching as she watched the countryside speed by.

The rest of the ride to St. Louis was uninteresting. The rolling hills outside of Joplin, the long stretch between Springfield and St. Louis, and the never-ending gray of the sky, made for a boring trip. Linda settled herself in the caboose and sighed.

When the train chugged into the depot the next day, she was able to leave the caboose unobserved. Quickly, she ran to the telegraph station two blocks away. She knew that she could use the station's telegraph, but the need for secrecy was of utmost importance. Once in the office, she sent a wire to her superiors apprising them of the current situation.

While she was waiting for a reply, she looked out the window; Dan was walking in front of the telegraph office. She rushed to the door and started to shout, but stopped herself. He was being followed. Quickly, she stepped back into the office and pulled the curtains aside, peering out cautiously.

A man in a brown tweed topcoat was hard on Dan's heels. She decided to follow the two. The horde of people allowed her to blend into the crowd easily. The men did not notice her. She was as curious about where Dan was off to as she was about the man following him.

Hiding behind a pillar of an old hotel on the opposite side of the street, she watched Dan enter another hotel. The man in the brown topcoat quickly followed him inside.

Should I, or shouldn't I? She made up her mind. Leaving her concealment, she threw caution to the wind and followed the men into the hostelry. Once inside, she went into a small boutique on the hotel's ground floor. She began to browse, so as not to look conspicuous to others, killing time before she made her next move.

Archie walked warily down the hallway. A quick look at both sides of the hall revealed all the doors were shut. The room he had rented was at the far end of the hallway.

Maybe Dan is already in the room, Archie thought. But where was their suspect? Quietly, he pulled his gun out. He advanced slowly down the hallway, holding it in the air. The only light was coming from a window at the far end of the hallway. The window had been raised; he could see where the sash had been moved upward.

When Archie leaned over the sash to look outside and down the alley, he was struck from behind. He began to sink to the bottom of a dark abyss.

As he came back to consciousness, Archie became aware that he was lying in a big bed with a large pillow behind his head. He awoke to see Dan and the stranger standing by his bedside. Linda was gently stroking his forehead with a wet rag.

"What..." Archie said, trying to sit up, but Linda forced him back down firmly.

"I'm glad to see you coming around, friend," Dan said. He noticed Archie peering at the man in brown. "The stranger who's been following me is another Secret Service agent. It seems he's the one who was supposed to meet me at the train station. I'd better let him do the explaining. After all, he's the one who bonked you."

The man in brown stepped closer to Archie. "My name is Andrew J. Dalton, sir. But please, call me Andy."

Andrew was a shade less than six feet with a ruddy complexion and fiery bright red hair that looked like a bird's nest gone awry.

"Pleased to meet you, Andy," Archie stated, noticing his jacket draped on the back of a chair and his gun lying on a nearby table.

"It seems that Andy was supposed to meet me at the depot," Dan began. "He didn't contact me because he saw you. He thought you were an interloper, since he didn't see us get off together at the station. Surmising the worst, he decided to follow when I went upstairs. And when you went up behind me... well, you know the rest of the story."

"But he saw me talking to you at the coffee shop," Archie said, still a bit perplexed.

"He didn't see us talking, remember?" Dan said. "He only saw you sit at my table. For all he knew, you were a total stranger. The hotel was crowded and I spoke to you from behind my menu. When I went upstairs, he followed and hid in a water closet. He was only trying to figure out what you were up to."

"Let me finish for you, sir." Andy moved his chair closer to the bed. "My superiors advised me to be on the lookout for anyone suspicious. You certainly looked out of the ordinary to me. You did have your gun out, after all. I was just going to hit you lightly, whisk Dan up, and leave the building with no one the wiser. The less attention we draw to ourselves, the better for all concerned."

Archie nodded in understanding. So far, nothing had been seriously hurt, except maybe his pride. *Wouldn't Sadie love to see him now.*

He looked up gratefully as Linda again wiped his brow. "I thought you were under cover."

Linda sighed wearily. "I was... until my contact was killed. I think it might be time to retire." She looked askance at Dan, wondering if he thought lesser of her. He nodded in understanding. She smiled.

"I'll tell you what," Andy said, rising from his chair. "I happen to know of a fabulous place that serves a good steak dinner. Why don't I make it up to you? That is, if you're up to it."

"Up to it?" Archie exclaimed, swinging his body out of bed to stand on two wobbly legs. In a moment, his strength returned and he placed his hands on his hips to glare at the Secret Service man. "I'll still be going strong when they put you six feet under, sonny boy!"

Andy looked at Archie and smiled, placing his derby on his head. "Then let's go eat!"

TWENTY-EIGHT

They had been *suckered*. The thought of being taken to the cleaners by a woman was in itself hilarious. Mort and Cletus smiled, but David still looked crestfallen.

As Glory reached for her winnings, Mort said, "May I ask you something, Miss Glory?" He put the rest of his money back into his pocket. "If you never intended to lose the Wayfarer, then why the charade?"

"Simple, Mort; I wanted to win... . and win big!"

"But how were you sure that we'd all be available tonight?" Cletus asked. He was fast getting over the feeling of being bested at his own game.

David was still dumbfounded. Here he'd thought she was getting sweet on him, and all the time, she was playing on his weakness for women. As he looked at her, a hatred began to build up inside of him.

"I'll admit that's true, Mort," she said, looking at him directly. "I played up to your vanity. I wasn't sure all of you would show, but then again, I wouldn't have gotten to where I'm at now if I wasn't confident. I counted on your pride when I invited you to play poker with me. You've proven me right. I know for a fact that you all came here, assured that you'd win big. And, I'll admit, the ruse worked. I'd let it be known that I was feeling poorly and off my mark. I must tell you that you all fell for my playacting."

Glory sat at the table and accepted a light for her cheroot from Mort, nodding thanks. She took a drag and blew the smoke upwards to mix with Mort's cigar smoke. Then she sat back and looked at the men, her green eyes just twinkling. She'd waited a long time for this; she had finally had her vengeance against men. Too bad one was Mort, but that was life.

Mort puffed on his cigar. He reached up and loosened his tie. He was surprised, but he would get over it.

Cletus had refilled his glass. He was just happy not have to have as much as the others. Self-preservation was its best reward.

David was looking at Glory with fire in his eyes. He had lost everything—his money, his pride, and his grandiose plans for his future. Now that was all up in smoke!

"You came through just as I'd hoped," Glory said, wisps of her cheroot smoke joining Mort's cigar smoke in the air. "Of course, there were some surprises." Mort smiled indulgently at her.

"Cletus," Glory said. "You surprised me with your vindictiveness." Cletus did not reply.

Finally, she cast her gaze on David, took another drag from her cheroot, and spoke in a slow, well-modulated voice. "David, however you end, I thank my lucky stars that I had the opportunity to see you as you truly are... a mean, malevolent, puffed-up sort of man. Time does not permit me the leisure of telling you how much the absence of your presence means to me."

David stood suddenly and placed his arm around Glory's neck as he pressed a derringer into it. The others stood still, thunderstruck.

Kim whirled from the window and looked at him with death in his eyes.

"Don't move," David said, pressing the derringer harder into Glory's neck.

"Now, David." Glory did not struggle. "Everything will be all right, but first you have to release me."

As Kim tried to move forward, David pressed harder with his derringer, making Glory wince in pain.

"Don't move a muscle, you big ape!" David swung Glory around so he could point the derringer at Kim. As he started toward the door, Mort and Cletus advanced on him.

"Listen, David," Mort calmly, "you don't want to do this."

"I don't think you do," Cletus joined in. The two men continued to advance slowly at him. Mort was on his right, while Cletus stood on the left. Kim was between them.

David knew he could shoot Mort and Cletus before they got to him, but he did not think he had time to shoot the large Oriental too. The derringer was just a two-shot. He hoped the Oriental did not know weapons.

Quickly, he backed away, Glory held tightly in his right arm. The moment he got out the door, he slammed the door shut and flung Glory to the side. She hit the side of her desk and fell unconscious to the floor. David hurriedly shoved the sofa over to block the entrance, locking and bolting the door for good measure. Then he quickly ran to the other door and threw the bolt on it as well.

"Now," he muttered to the walls. "I have time to think."

He rushed to Glory's desk and started to rifle through the drawers. A derringer rested on top of some papers in the side drawer. David placed the weapon in his coat pocket. Then he went to the closet and rummaged through its contents. His eyes widened in delight when he discovered an old Navy revolver. It was not only loaded, but seemed well taken care. He felt more secure now. He now had two derringers and a revolver. Enough firepower to escape... but first he needed to think things out more clearly.

He went to the desk and pulled out a chair, placing the gun on the desk within easy reach. He sat heavily in Glory's velvet-covered chair.

Mort and Cletus lunged for the door, but were unsuccessful in breaking it down. Kim came and tried his strength against it. The veins popped out of the Oriental's large arms and back. His eyes were starting to bulge out of their sockets. This time, his strength escaped him. Glory had requisitioned a door that was meant to keep her safely inside.

Kim looked around a moment before starting toward the window. He raised it and leaned out for a look. A narrow ledge ran the length of the building. Kim sat down and removed his shoes and socks. Then he stepped out on the ledge in his bare feet. Gingerly, he moved forward an inch at a time. He chanced one look down; everyone looked very small from his lofty perch. He noticed a faint red glow in the sky, but paid it no heed to it as he carefully inched forward.

Finally, he was at the window to Glory's office. When he looked in, he saw Glory lying near the desk. She wasn't moving. David was sitting in her chair with his head buried in his hands.

Taking a deep breath, Kim crashed through the window, rolling across the room and standing quickly with murder in his eyes. Mindless to the broken glass under his bare feet, he advanced on David. *How dare he hurt Miss Glory?* As he started at David with outstretched hands, wanting to feel David's throat under his fingers, David scooped Glory from the floor and pressed the barrel of the Navy Colt into her neck.

Glory was in a daze. Her legs were rubbery. Reaching up to her forehead, she felt wetness. Groggily, she tried to struggle, but she was too weak. She lost consciousness again. David let the senseless woman fall to the floor and whirled to face Kim. He did not want to take any undue chances this time, so he fired. The first round spun Kim about and dropped him to his knees. Struggling back to his feet, Kim continued to advance, taking only a moment to see if his boss was alright.

David fired again. The bullet hit Kim in the knee, blowing off a sizable chunk of flesh. Still, the Oriental came forward, heedless of the pain in his leg. David took a dueler's stance, pulled the hammer of the weapon back, took careful aim and fired two more shots. The bullets struck Kim in the upper arm and in the left cheek. Knowing he had only one round left, David made sure his last shot would count.

Grasping the gun with both hands, he made himself relax. He took a deep breath and fired. The remaining shell hit its mark – dead in the center of Kim's massive forehead. Kim teetered, took one step forward, and crashed heavily to the floor.

David rushed to stand over Glory, looking down on her with loathing

There was a pounding at the door. Outside in the hallway, he could hear voices raised in alarm. David could not make out what they said. He saw the smoke as it crept under the door. Then, through the broken window, he heard the dreaded cry:

“Fire! Fire!”

Lucky for him. The fire would allow him to escape in the resulting bedlam. He would leave her to die behind her failsafe door.

David went to the door and opened it. The hallway was deserted. He ran to the head of the stairs, pausing only long enough in his headlong flight to look upon the oil painting of Glory. While he sneered at the woman before him, a burning beam fell directly on him. As he fell into the outstretched arms of death, the last thing he saw was the painting. Little tendrils of flame were licking at the canvass. Glory seemed to be smiling.

Cletus and Mort had fled to the stairs after they heard the shots. They looked at each other and shrugged, as if to say *we tried* and quickly started to descend the stairway. The stairway was already partially gone and flames were quickly engulfing the sides of the building. They did not stop as they rushed out of the blazing building.

Safely out, they joined the mass of humanity in the street. Many were fighting the fire. Mort and Cletus ran to a pumper to relieve the men there. Mort had thrown off his waistcoat and rolled his sleeves as he took a man's place at the pumper. Cletus had already taken a man's place and was furiously working the pumper handles up and down.

There were now three pumpers spraying water on the burning buildings. Each pumper had six men moving the wooden handles. Standing behind each man was a replacement; as one would tire, another would step in and take his place, never changing the rhythm of the other pumpers.

Mort and Cletus looked over the pumper at each other. Through the sweat and soot, they grinned. They knew how lucky they were.

I should've saw this coming, Mort said to himself. He thought about Glory's fate as sweat began to course down his face. *I knew that pipsqueak of a druggist was unstable*. Mort kicked himself mentally for not being any help to her.

Two hundred thousand dollars was going up in smoke. All Cletus could think of was the loss of the Wayfarer. The banker knew the board of directors would have been elated at latching onto the property. Then all thoughts of the Wayfarer left him as he got busy working the handles.

When the two men got tired, they were replaced. Out of breath, they staggered to the curb and slumped to the ground, sitting in water from the runoff. People were still milling around in the street; some looked aimlessly at the fire, while others stumbled about, dazed. It looked like everyone had made it out except for Glory, David and that Oriental.

Mort and Cletus looked like death warmed over. Mort's suit was now so filthy that no amount of cleaning would be able to restore it to its former luster. Cletus's attire was also in tatters; his vest missing buttons and his pants were shredded at the knees. Soot covered them both.

“Do you suppose?” Cletus asked, brushing a speck of dust from his sleeve, “that Miss Glory

made it out of that hellish place?”

“I certainly hope so,” Mort replied. “But I pray that David did not.”

“You’ve got that right,” Cletus said, glad Mort wasn’t his worst enemy. He had heard of Mort’s vindictiveness. *Just have to watch my back from now on*, he thought. He wearily got to his feet in an effort to go back and resume his turn at the pumper.

The two returned and began to work the handles more furiously than before. Soon, the engine pistons locked up, so someone started a bucket brigade.

As the men continued to work, they saw a cowboy run up to the scene.

Mort could not make out what the cowboy was shouting, so he turned back to the bucket brigade. Someone thrust an empty bucket into his hands. Mort started toward a horse trough in front of the hardware store. He began dipping his bucket when he looked up and saw Cletus doing the same. Together, they filled their buckets and handed them to the waiting outstretched arms of another volunteer. They turned back and started the process all over again.

TWENTY-NINE

Dan and his friends had placed their order with the waiter and were now listening raptly to Dan tell of his early days on the frontier after the Civil War; days of starving, Indian attacks and the ever-present danger of not being able to survive to meet the dawn, he had met head on.

"Weren't you frightened?" Linda was in awe of the man sitting beside her.

"You can just bet your... fanny. In fact, I many times I was downright scared out of my skin."

It was no small wonder he survived. Linda thought of how strong he had to be... and still was. She imagined Dan could survive about anything the world had to throw at him. He had a built-in reservoir of hidden energy. And he was humble, too. She sighed, wondering if there was any future in pursuing a relationship with him.

Andy looked at Dan with renewed interest. Maybe when this was all over, he could visit him at his ranch.

Archie was beaming at his good fortune. *The stories I can tell Sadie when I got back home! And I just may see about investing in some land in Mud Flats... that is, if Sadie hasn't spent it all. If she had, well, they'd just start all over again.*

Dan's story was interrupted by a hubbub of noise from outside. He turned in his chair to see a large group of people in the street. As he got up to take a look, the rest of his party did the same; not they could not see anything.

Dan noticed the innkeeper standing in the doorway, ring his hands. "What's happening there?" he asked him.

"There's a huge fire on the east side of town. And my family... my family lives there."

"I know how you must feel, friend," Dan spoke softly. "Don't worry about us. Go ahead and check on your family."

Dan did not have a family, but he did know how he felt about the Abernathy's. They were as much a family as his own had been. Dan turned and walked to where the others had their faces pressed against the window.

"Must be a humdinger," Archie stated.

Andy pointed up. "Look at that glow in the eastern sky."

"If that fire keeps up," Linda emphasized, craning her neck to look out the window, "it won't be long until the whole east end goes up in smoke."

Suddenly, Andy smacked his head with his hand. He looked at the others and sputtered.

"Faith and Begorra! I just remembered. That's where the Wayfarer's located!"

"Glory!" Dan ran out of the restaurant as if the devil himself were after him.

"Wait for me!" Archie hollered.

Linda and Andy exchanged a quick look and hurried behind the men.

THIRTY

Glory had regained consciousness and was trying to stand. She noticed immediately that the room felt hotter than normal, and there was smoke in the air. Quickly, she dropped to the floor and headed toward the door. As she groped along the carpeting, she bumped against Kim's body. *Oh no!* She tried to roll his immense body over, but gave up quickly; it was no use. She felt for a pulse. Nothing.

Poor Kim. She reached out and gently closed the Oriental's eyes.

She continued to crawl to the door. Upon reaching it, she was greeted by more smoke. She dragged her shawl from a nearby chair and wrapped it over her head; she could breathe more easily now. Finally, she was able to stand. Groggily, she moved to the doorway. Coughing and choking, relief flooded through her as she realized the door was open. Then she remembered the game... and David.

"That chicken," she muttered. "He's run out to save his dirty hide. Just wait until I get my hands on that weasel."

At the top of the stairs, Glory stopped. When she looked over the side, she could see David's body buried underneath a burning beam. The cloying smell of death wafted up to her and made her nauseous.

Can't say he'll be missed.

Succumbing to the smoke, Glory fell to the floor, rolled over on her side and vomited.

Fire engines clanged noisily past the restaurant, pulled by gray horses. Dan and his party ran down the street in the wake of the engines.

The fire horses slowed as they reached the site of the roaring fire. The volunteer firemen halted at the corner of the block where the Wayfarer was located. Dragging their hoses to a manhole and raising the lid, the firemen placed them down the cistern.

The fire chief shouted through a megaphone to the volunteers by the engine. Upon his command, one volunteer threw a lever, allowing the steam engine to start pumping water from the cistern. Men stationed a second pumper busily moved the wooden handles up and down; a few had formed a bucket brigade.

Soon the firemen were covered with soot, but after a while, even the buckets failed. The volunteers dropped from exhaustion.

"Let 'er burn!" shouted the fire chief, busy trying to pull more hose to a group of volunteers. "You men over by the horse trough... tear down the walls of the buildings nearest to you. Maybe we can contain the monster, at least!"

When Dan arrived, he quickly ran to the fire chief and pointed to the Wayfarer. "Anyone make it out of there?"

"To be truthful, son, I don't know." The fire chief took a piece of rag and wiped his sweating brow. "But I wouldn't go in there if I were you."

"But you *aren't* me, are you?" Dan yelled back as he rushed into the blazing inferno.

"I'm definitely not going to lose you to some fire, Glory" Dan shouted, as if by the sheer volume of his voice alone he could halt the advancing flames. "Especially after I've gone to such great lengths to find you."

The front of the wooden building was partially engulfed in flames. Window glass burst as tongues of flame streaked across the wooden porch. Like a hungry creature, they devoured everything in their path.

Dan ran up to the porch, pausing only long enough to took his bandana off and wet it in the

nearby horse trough. Placing the cloth over his nose and his coat over his head, he rapidly mounted the steps and entered the burning building. Skirting falling debris, he inched forward slowly.

“Glory! Glory!”

No answer. As he groped around, he thought he heard a faint cry coming from the stairs. Burning cinders showered down on him like shooting stars.

As he started toward the stairs, he noticed a man partially buried underneath a flaming beam nearby. *He must have gotten hit as he went down the stairs.* He wondered why the poor sod was grinning.

Dan ventured up the stairs slowly, listening for another cry. At the top of the stairway, he turned left and walked down the hall, stumbling over another body. He leaned down to take a look, hoping against hope... it was her! *Oh, Glory!* Quickly, he bent over and felt for a pulse. It was very faint, but it was there. *She's alive!*

He bent over the small form of the woman, gently picked her up and started down the stairs. He was almost at the bottom when two strong arms reached out to relieve him of his burden. Not wanting to let go, Dan allowed the person to help carry his beloved Glory from the building.

Dan helped the fireman lay Glory down on the green lawn across the street from the Wayfarer. He looked up as Archie and the two Secret Service agents descended upon him like a soothing cloud.

“Didn't think you were going to make it, Dan,” Archie said as he helped the agents beat out the lingering flames on Dan's coat.

“Me either,” Linda breathed hoarsely as she reached into her handbag for a handkerchief. She ran to the water trough and dipped it into the water, wrung it out and hurried back to hand it to Dan.

Grateful, he took the wet cloth and wiped Glory's forehead, brushing back her damp hair. In a few moments, her eyelids began to flutter and she thrashed at him, making him remember the first time they met.

“Glory. Glory, my love,” Dan spoke calmly. Tears of joy streamed down his cheeks. “It's all over. I have you now.” *If I'm dreaming don't ever let me wake up.*

Glory quit struggling. Her eyes flickered open and she looked up. *It was true; I wasn't dreaming.* She wrapped her arms around his neck and squeezed tightly, afraid to let go for an instant.

A large crowd had gathered around the couple. Archie had shooed most of them away and took up position, crossing his arms and spreading his legs in a protective stance. As he watched the two lovers, a smile formed at the corners of his mouth.

Dan placed his arms around Glory and squeezed gently. He tilted her head up, brushed the hair from her eyes, and leaned in to kiss her softly. At first, she hesitated to respond, but soon she slid her arms up, tightening them about his neck.

He whispered softly into Glory's ear, “I'm here to watch over you. Forever... if you'll let me.”